



FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

Texas Rangers manager Ron Washington is a survivor
By JIM REEVES

We'll likely never know for sure how close Ron Washington was to being fired in 2008. Maybe Nolan Ryan doesn't even know, and he was at the heart of it all. All we have, 17 months later, is conjecture and speculation ... and a Rangers manager who is a candidate for American League Manager of the Year.

What we do know is that in April a year ago, Ron Washington was in serious trouble. The irony is that it's entirely possible that the same four-wheel ATV accident on a Panhandle ranch outside Amarillo that came way too close to taking Andrew Bivins' life may have also saved Washington's job.

Take a little trip with me down Memory Lane, for a moment, to get a feel for the situation then.

As the Rangers neared the end of April 2008, they were in the throes of their second consecutive horrific start under Washington. Ryan, in his first year on the job as the team's new president, watched uneasily as the Rangers lost 12 of 14 games in a two-week skid April 11-24. Tacked onto the end of that slump was a seven-game losing streak that dropped the Rangers seven games behind the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim in the AL West. The season was on the cusp of being over almost before it began.

Word leaking from numerous sources in the Rangers' front office was that Washington, in his second year on the job, was about to be fired just three weeks into the season.

The Rangers took two out of three from Minnesota heading into an off-day on April 28. Historically, off days can be dangerous when a team is going bad. They provide perfect opportunities for making changes.

On that same day, Bivins, married to Ryan's daughter, Wendy, found himself pinned beneath that ATV, alone for seven long hours in a desolate area of his Panhandle ranch near Palo Duro Canyon. Ryan's attention, as it should have, shifted elsewhere.

"I wasn't ready to write off the season," Ryan remembered Wednesday. "Fortunately, things turned around. If they hadn't, we would have looked at all our options to see what we could do to make it work.

"Was [Washington's] job at stake? No more than anybody else's, but we were looking at all the options."

By the time Ryan was free to fully focus on the Rangers again, Washington had things headed upward, winning six of eight as April changed to May and, at end of the first week in May, stitching together a five-game winning streak.

The crisis had passed.

That was then, this is now. Seventeen months later, Washington (along with the Angels' Mike Scioscia and the Yankees' Joe Girardi) is right there in the Manager of the Year talk. True, the Rangers will likely have to pull off some sort of miracle finish for Washington to win, but that's a long way to come in just 17 months.

How did he get from there to here?

By realizing that despite a lifetime in baseball, he still had much to learn about managing a major league team. Much of it has been in how relationships changed when his job title changed.

"I've learned a ton," Washington said. "I had relationships with players before I became a manager. I found out that when you become a manager, players don't want that kind of relationship that they had as a coach. It's a different relationship, and that's something I had to learn to deal with."

The friendly third base coach Rangers players had come to like and respect when he wore an Oakland A's uniform now suddenly was in control of their professional lives. That put a different perspective on the relationship.

"I could confront a player when I was a teacher and a coach. When you confront them as a manager, sometimes there's a lot of backlash," Washington said. "The player backlash I don't care about, I can deal with that, but there's agents, because the players go run to them, or they run to GMs. Stuff just continues to flow. I had to adjust that.

"Don't get me wrong. If I need to get on [a player], I'm going to get on [him], that ain't going to stop. But I could always get players' attention when I was a coach. Now sometimes it's tough."

Instead of being direct with a player, as he'd always been, Washington found that he had to use diplomacy and send his message through a coach or another player. That he has learned to do that, along with all the other nuances that come with managing, speaks to Washington's work ethic and willingness to do what it takes to survive.

"At some level I think there are a few different things going on," general manager Jon Daniels, probably Washington's biggest supporter, said. "One, he's had some time now to implement some things he wanted to do. He's been talking about improving our defense from Day 1 and this off-season I think we were able to go out and do that, both from personnel and him executing what he wants to do.

"He hadn't managed in 13 or 14 years before we hired him. He'd not had people report to him, or delegate authority and build a consensus, and he's gotten much better at that."

From an on-field aspect, it didn't hurt that the Rangers brought in a new bench coach and a new pitching coach, too. Jackie Moore, a former big league manager himself and a longtime coach, came aboard as Washington's bench coach, and the Rangers lured Mike Maddux away from Milwaukee to handle the pitching staff. Both were huge additions.

"To me, he's developed into a good manager," Moore said. "And as long as I've been around and the people I've worked with, I'm a pretty good judge of that.

"I've seen growth in all areas. I'm very impressed with how he manages the clubhouse. Most people know how to bunt and little in-game things like that. But if you can get your club to play hard for you, like these guys have played for him, to me that's the most important thing."

That doesn't mean Washington is always easy on the players. He's not. First and foremost, he's still a teacher.

"He's a player's manager, but if something happens on the field, he's the first one to talk to them, to let them know they missed something," Moore said. "If there's something to be attended to, he does not let things slide. He's very honest with them and he's honest with [the media]. He doesn't miss anything."

Learning to be a better communicator and a delegator wasn't easy for Washington, who had been a very hands-on instructor as a coach. He often has to curb his natural instinct to do everything himself.

"The players' improvement has made it much easier for me," Washington said. "The message that we've been trying to send since I've been here — play fundamental baseball, pitch and catch the ball — has gotten better to this point. That makes it easier, too.

"That the players have recognized the things that we've been preaching and how they can result in success has helped, too."

Washington, like anyone, would love the validation that would come should he be named the league's Manager of the Year. But he also understands that it wouldn't be an individual honor so much as a team award.

"Players are the ones who determine if I'm the manager of the year or not," he said. "As a manager, you're always tied to your players. If they do good, you're awesome. If they don't do good, you're worthless.

"It doesn't matter how much you know or don't know. You're always tied to your players. For me to become manager of the year, my players have to finish up good and strong and make a statement. If they don't ..."

That doesn't mean the Rangers necessarily have to win the West, but they definitely at least need to make the Angels sweat a little.

"If we finish good down the stretch and make a run, even if we don't make the playoffs, it's a possibility," Washington said. "If we don't, it's not."

Either way, Washington can live with it. Whatever happens, he has helped guide the Rangers to their first winning season in five years. He's a far better manager now than he was two years ago and, best of all, he knows it.

Just as important, the boss knows it, too.

"This is his third year and the experience he's gained has made a difference," Ryan said. "As a whole, it's just the way he manages the game, from his lineup from night to night, depending on who we're facing, to how they handle the pitchers.

"I think he's just been getting a comfort level of knowing his personnel and feeling comfortable with the decisions he needs to make."

Seventeen months ago a four-wheel ATV turned over on a desolate stretch of ranch land near Palo Duro Canyon. Maybe its impact was felt 300 miles away in Arlington, maybe it wasn't. The good news is that both Bivins and Washington each eventually walked away from his respective crisis.

That's what survivors do.

Whether he's the American League Manager of the Year or not, Washington is still the Rangers' manager, and that'll do for now.

Rangers stave off A's **By JEFF WILSON**

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Texas Rangers aren't living in a dream world as the games tick away on the 2009 schedule.

They know it will take one of the most remarkable stretches in baseball history if they are to make the playoffs for the first time in 10 years.

Maybe their performance Wednesday night was the start. If nothing else, it helped the Rangers keep hope alive.

Hank Blalock drove in four runs and hit his 25th homer, and Marlon Byrd delivered the key hit as the Rangers outlasted Oakland for a 9-8 victory.

The Rangers made up a game in the American League West standings on first-place Los Angeles, and now trail the Angels by 6 1/2 games with 11 remaining.

Four are at Angel Stadium next week.

"It's going to take a miracle," Byrd said. "We need to start winning every single game we play. The more wins we can get, the closer we can get going into Anaheim."

The Rangers scored five unearned runs, including all four in the fifth to counter an Oakland rally the previous inning.

Tommy Hunter was staked to a 4-0 lead entering the bottom of the fourth, thanks to a David Murphy sacrifice fly, and an RBI double and a two-run homer by Blalock.

Hunter had been un-hittable, retiring the first 10 batters. But the A's collected five straight hits after Adam Kennedy made the first out in the fourth, and all five scored.

But the Rangers weren't down long. A two-out error in the fifth, followed by a walk to Murphy and a double steal opened the door to the four-run inning.

Byrd delivered a soft single to center to score both runners, and he came home on Blalock's second double of the game to make it 7-5. Blalock scored on an infield single by Nelson Cruz to cap the rally.

"There's no telling what happens in that game if I don't get that hit," said Byrd, who had a team-high 81 RBI. "It got the momentum back in our favor and gave Tommy a chance to settle down and go back out there."

Oakland got one run back in their half of the fifth, and the teams exchanged runs in the sixth. Hunter got the first two outs and nearly got out of the inning unscathed, but a diving Murphy just missed a bloop double by Mark Ellis.

Daric Barton singled home Ellis to make it 9-7, and Hunter was replaced by Dustin Nippert. Hunter (9-4) threw only 79 pitches but allowed nine hits and seven runs, both season-highs.

"I started throwing fastballs, and they kept hitting fastballs," he said. "I knew they were going to do that, and I just kept throwing fastballs. I didn't have a very good pitch selection."

The A's tacked on another run in the seventh against Darren O'Day, but C.J. Wilson managed to hold Oakland scoreless over 1 2/3 innings of relief. He got a nice play to end the eighth from Blalock, who was guarding the first-base line and dove to stop a grounder from Kennedy.

It was another good all-around game from Blalock, who was inserted back into the starting lineup over the weekend and has gone 8-for-20 with eight RBI.

Frank Francisco pitched a perfect ninth to close out the Rangers' 83rd victory of the season and to keep hope alive.

"I'm just trying to do whatever it takes to win as many games as possible to finish the season," Blalock said. "We've got to have the attitude that anything can happen."

How Rangers hitters fared: Marlon Byrd had a key two-out, two-run single to reclaim the lead for the Rangers in the fifth. Hank Blalock doubled, homered and doubled in his first three at-bats to drive in four runs. Byrd and David Murphy had two RBI apiece.

How Rangers pitchers fared: Half good, half not so good for Tommy Hunter, who retired the first 10 hitters before allowing hits to nine of the next 15. Seven of them scored in 5 2/3 innings. C.J. Wilson threw 38 pitches in 1 2/3 scoreless innings to get the game in Frank Francisco's hands. He recorded his 24th save.

Consistency will be key in 2010 for Texas Rangers' Ian Kinsler **By JEFF WILSON**

OAKLAND, Calif. — Ian Kinsler didn't duck when asked if joining the 30-30 club is on his mind.

Sure, it is. Only a select group of players have hit 30 homers and stolen 30 bases in the same season. Kinsler is one shy in each category from joining the elite group.

But, no, he isn't swinging for the fences in each at-bat. He isn't pressing to reach base so that he can start running toward a 30th stolen base.

Kinsler is simply stuck in another slump during an up-and-down 2009 campaign — one marked by plenty of production and plenty of inconsistency.

He believes he can be consistent while still being a run producer. That's the goal for next season as he shoots for a strong finish over the final 11 games of 2009.

"I think that it could have been a lot better year for me, personally," said Kinsler, who had his first day off Wednesday since Aug. 15. "I feel like I contributed a lot to this team this year. There's still a lot to build on."

Coming off an All-Star season, Kinsler started fast by hitting .322 with seven homers in April. But he was hitting only .250 at the All-Star break and was passed over for the Midsummer Classic in St. Louis.

Some of the decline was linked to fatigue as he sat only twice in the first 85 games. He then suffered a pulled left hamstring and missed 16 games.

Kinsler had played in 36 straight before Wednesday's rest day while the Rangers played Oakland. He was riding an 0-for-10 skid as part of a larger 3-for-30 slump. He hasn't homered in a season-high 19 games.

That cool stretch is part of the inconsistency he hopes to remedy in 2010. He can draw on his 2008 season, when he was among the top hitters in the American League before suffering a season-ending sports hernia in August, as a jumping-off point.

"If you combine this year and last year, I still have a lot to work for," said Kinsler, who leads the Rangers with 80 RBI. "Last year, I was very consistent the whole year. You learn something new every year, and the game humbles you fast."

One of the most consistent offensive players in the game lockers next to Kinsler at home games, and he hopes to apply what he has seen and discussed with third baseman Michael Young this season.

Manager Ron Washington said the key to Kinsler's success is pitch selection. Kinsler is a very good low-ball hitter, said Washington, and will get better overall once he dictates how pitchers throw to him.

"His problem is not his swing. It's his pitch selection," Washington said. "When he forces them to get that ball down, he can hit it. That's something at the end of this season we'll continue to work on."

But there can be a balance between the Kinsler who hit .319 with a .375 on-base percentage and 18 homers last year, and the one who is hitting .249 with a .320 OBP.

He doesn't have to be one or the other.

"I think I'm both," said Kinsler, who has scored a team-best 89 runs. "Some days I can give you a 1-for-4 with a three-run home run, and other days I can do a 3-for-4 with three singles and two stolen bases.

"I just try to be a spark plug. I just try to be someone who can provide some energy in the lineup, whether it be a home run, a double or a stolen base. That's my goal every time up."

Drop in velocity for Rangers rookie Feliz could be fatigue, new role **By JEFF WILSON**

OAKLAND, Calif. — Neftali Feliz made his major-league debut at McAfee Coliseum on Aug. 3, and wowed what crowd there was by dialing up 100 mph on the in-house radar gun.

Seven weeks later, the rookie right-hander was throwing his fastball in the mid-90s, save for a 96-mph heater on his final pitch Tuesday night.

The Texas Rangers have been watching as Feliz's velocity has dropped, though the radar readings are still respectable. They aren't sure what's behind the decline, though they insist that there is no indication of injury.

It might be fatigue. It might be the effects of a new role. But Feliz continues to be the first arm the Rangers turn to in the middle innings as they did for two outs in the sixth inning Tuesday night.

"Velocity helps you get away with mistakes," pitching coach Mike Maddux said. "He came in last night and got the job done, did what we asked and left a runner stranded at second base."

Feliz has logged 105 2/3 innings this season between Triple A Oklahoma City and the Rangers. Fatigue could be setting in, especially as he has been asked to work out of the bullpen on one day's rest of late rather than the two days off he was given when he was first brought up.

Working as a reliever for the first time, and having to get ready sooner than when he was a starter, could also be contributing to the slower fastball.

"It could be him not having as much time as he wants to get loose as he wants," manager Ron Washington said. "He's loose enough [to pitch] but maybe not to where he can get up to where he wants."

Feliz might not have to worry about the bullpen next season. Some in the organization want him to open spring training as a starter, though Maddux said the decision will be dictated by the needs of the team.

"I think he's definitely a multi-inning guy," Maddux said.

Andrus quite a thief

Elvis Andrus stole second and third base in the fifth inning Wednesday, giving him a team-high 31 steals and making him only the seventh American League rookie shortstop to swipe 30 bases in a season.

He has been caught only four times, and the 88.6 percent success rate is seventh best by any major league rookie with at least 20 steals since 1950.

Hamilton update

Josh Hamilton took batting practice and ran some passing routes before Wednesday's game, and the center fielder said he is nearing a return to the lineup.

He hasn't played since leaving a Sept. 2 game against Toronto with a pinched nerve in his back. After three cortisone shots into the nerve, he also felt a muscle strain in his lower back that has improved this week.

"It keeps progressing," he said. "Hopefully, I'll be DH'ing by the weekend."

Winter ball, anyone?

Ron Washington said that five players — Neftali Feliz, Chris Davis, Julio Borbon, Taylor Teagarden and Jarrod Saltalamacchia — could be headed toward assignments in winter ball.

McCarthy still trying to prove himself to Rangers

Brandon McCarthy finds himself in a similar spot to the one he was in a year ago, when he came back from a long injury layoff with something to prove heading into the next season.

Neither he nor the Rangers' coaching staff viewed his effort over 5 1/3 innings Tuesday night as an audition for the 2010 rotation. But as he closes out 2009, he is aware that he has to constantly prove himself.

The best way to do that is to give the Rangers a chance to win, which he did by allowing three runs (two earned) before Oakland pulled away to a 9-1 victory.

"It's always a running thing," said McCarthy, 2-2 with a 4.71 ERA since coming off the 60-day disabled list after having a stress fracture in his shoulder blade.

"If I can get some work in now, it can make me better for next year. You can always look at the future with a goal in mind, but I have to be good right here right now."

Manager Ron Washington liked how McCarthy, who will likely start two more times this season, used his off-speed pitches and was able to locate his fastball.

The right-hander also competed, which he will be doing against several others in the spring as he tries to secure a spot in the 2010 rotation.

"Mac is an established pitcher," Washington said. "Everyone that comes into spring training is going to be competing for a job. But that's not where we are. We are trying to win ballgames."

— Jeff Wilson

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**Blalock plates four as Texas gains ground
Rangers outlast A's to trim AL West deficit to 6 1/2 games
By T.R. Sullivan / MLB.com**

OAKLAND -- Five days ago, Rangers manager Ron Washington decided to put Hank Blalock back in the lineup.

Blalock, reduced to a reserve role since Chris Davis was recalled from Triple-A Oklahoma City on Aug. 25, was asked to breathe some life into the Rangers' slumbering offense with Josh Hamilton and Michael Young still unable to play.

Blalock has done that.

He had two doubles, a home run, two runs scored and four RBIs to lead the Rangers to a 9-8 victory over the Athletics at the Coliseum on Wednesday. The win, combined with the Angels' loss to the Yankees, moved Texas to within 6 1/2 games of first place in the American League West.

The Rangers have scored 28 runs in five games since Blalock went back into the lineup. They scored just one run in five games before that.

"I'm not taking credit for that," Washington said. "We just needed him. It looks like Hank is becoming Mr. September. He did this for us last year in September. We definitely needed him with Michael and Hamilton out of the lineup, and he's coming through for us. We needed some presence in the lineup, and Hank has presence."

The Rangers are now 6 1/2 games behind the Angels with 11 games to play. Four of those are with the Angels next week in Anaheim.

"Yeah, we're still alive," outfielder Marlon Byrd said. "It's going to take a miracle, we know that. We need to start winning every game. Wash is managing every game like it's the seventh game of the World Series and that's the way we're going to play."

The Rangers almost killed off all playoff hope when their offense went into the tank on the last homestand. But Blalock, starting at first with Davis moving to third, has helped revive it.

Blalock had an RBI double in the first off Oakland righty Clay Mortensen, a two-run home run in the fourth and another RBI double in the Rangers' four-run fifth. He is now 8-for-20 with five runs, two homers and eight RBIs in the past five games.

"I'm just trying to do whatever it takes to win games," Blalock said. "We just have to get as many wins as possible right now."

The Rangers had gone 31 innings without a home run when Blalock hit a two-run shot in the bottom of the fourth. Blalock had the Rangers' last home run on Saturday against the Angels, and he has their only two in their past seven games.

Blalock also had the Rangers' only extra base hits on the night, and they have just 16 in their last 10 games and 12 doubles, a triple and three home runs.

Tommy Hunter picked up the victory despite allowing a season-high seven runs in 5 2/3 innings. He is now 9-4 with a 3.67 ERA on the season. Rangers starters are 10-10 with a 5.31 ERA in 21 games in September.

"You've got to be happy with a win," Hunter said. "I'm just glad we won. A win's a win. I just need to not give up so many runs."

Hunter retired the first 10 batters he faced before running into a brick wall with one out in the fourth. The Athletics broke through by mixing three singles and three doubles in the course of seven at-bats to take a 5-4 lead.

"I kept throwing fastballs, and they kept hitting them," Hunter said. "I didn't have very good pitch selection. I didn't vary it. I know what I should have done, and I didn't do it."

A two-out, two-run single by Pennington put the Athletics ahead, but the rally was stopped short when Blalock cut off a throw to the plate from right fielder Nelson Cruz and nailed Pennington trying to go to second.

"That was the right play right there, definitely," Washington said. "The man is right in front of you, take the out."

The Rangers struck back with four unearned runs in the top of the fifth. They had two out and nobody on when Pennington, the Athletics' shortstop, couldn't come up with Elvis Andrus' grounder. David Murphy walked, the Rangers worked a double steal, and Byrd singled to right-center to drive home two.

Blalock then doubled home Byrd and scored on a single by Cruz to give the Rangers a 9-6 lead.

Blalock had one more big play on the night, this one with his glove. The Athletics, down 9-8, had runners at second and first, and two outs in the bottom of the eighth when Adam Kennedy hit a sharp grounder right down the first-base line. Blalock dove to his left to make the stop, then scrambled to first to snuff out the Athletics' last threat.

"That ball had a lot of top spin, and I was just trying to stay on it or at least keep it in the infield and keep the tying run from scoring," Blalock said.

"An excellent play," Washington said.

Feldman seeks lucky 13th road win
Texas (83-68) at Oakland (72-80), 2:35 p.m. CT
By T.R. Sullivan / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Second baseman Ian Kinsler has an explanation for why Scott Feldman has pitched so well on the road this year.

"His nickname is 'The Swan,'" Kinsler said. "He can swim anywhere. He can fly anywhere he wants."

Sounds good.

Feldman will be back on the mound again on Thursday afternoon looking for his 13th road win of the season when he pitches against the Athletics at the Coliseum. Feldman, who grew up across the bay in San Mateo, is tied with Yankees pitcher CC Sabathia for the most road wins in the Majors this season.

Feldman has already set a Rangers club record for most victories on the road in a season. But he still has plenty of time to do more. Feldman has three starts remaining, and they are all on the road.

The last pitcher to win 13 games on the road was Jarrod Washburn with the Angels in 2002. Since World War II, there have been only 13 times in which a pitcher has won as many as 14 games on the road in a season. The last was Scott McGregor with the Orioles in 1983.

Only three pitchers have won as many as 15 games on the road in that time. Juan Marichal won 18 and Denny McLain won 17 in '68 and Don Newcombe won 15 in '56.

If Feldman can win all three of his remaining starts, he will also be the fourth 20-game winner in Rangers history and the first since Rick Helling in '98.

Pitching matchup

TEX: RHP Scott Feldman (17-5, 3.62 ERA)

Feldman won his 17th game in a 3-2 victory over the Angels on Saturday and has three more starts, giving him a chance to become the fourth 20-game winner in Rangers history. His 17 wins are the second most by a Rangers pitcher this decade behind 18 won by Kenny Rogers in 2004. Feldman, 26, is the third youngest pitcher in Rangers history to win 17 games in a season. He is 2-1 with a 4.91 ERA in three starts against the Athletics.

OAK: LHP Brett Anderson (10-10, 4.21 ERA)

Anderson, a 21-year-old rookie, is 3-0 with a 2.50 ERA in three starts in September and 5-3 with a 3.72 ERA in 12 starts since the All-Star break. Left-handed hitters are batting .306 off him this year while right-handers are hitting .247.

Opponents are hitting .307 off him with runners in scoring position. He is 4-5 with a 4.17 ERA at home this year. He is 0-1 with a 4.86 ERA in three starts against the Rangers this season.

Tidbits

Pitcher Guillermo Moscoso had two wild pitches and catcher Ivan Rodriguez had two passed balls in the eighth inning of Tuesday's game. The last time a Major League team allowed two wild pitches and two passed balls in an inning was on July 30, 2000, when Tampa Bay did it against Kansas City. ... The last time Rodriguez allowed two passed balls in an inning was on April 2, 2003, while with the Marlins. ... Oakland's Trevor Cahill and Seattle's Felix Hernandez are the only two pitchers who have beaten the Rangers three times this season. Cahill is one of seven rookie pitchers to beat the Rangers three times in his first season. Last time was Ryan Franklin with Seattle in 2001. Reliever Cy Acosta beat the Rangers four times as a rookie in 1973.

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Up next

- Friday: Rangers (Derek Holland, 7-12, 6.17) vs. Rays (James Shields, 10-11, 4.09), 7:05 p.m. CT
- Saturday: Rangers (Kevin Millwood, 11-10, 3.79) vs. Rays (Matt Garza, 8-10, 3.70), 7:05 p.m. CT
- Sunday: Rangers (Brandon McCarthy, 7-4, 4.87) vs. Rays (David Price, 9-7, 4.41), 2:05 p.m. CT

Maddux puzzled by Feliz's dip in velocity
Rangers pitching coach keeping close eye on rookie
By T.R. Sullivan / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Just about every ballpark has a radar gun to clock pitches and entertain fans. Readings vary from ballpark to ballpark.

Some guns are faster than others. A pitcher can throw the exact same pitch from one city to another and could still be clocked at three or four miles per hour slower.

But when the same radar gun clocks a pitcher five to seven miles per hour slower in a seven-week interval, that becomes noteworthy.

Neftali Feliz is being clocked much slower lately by the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum radar gun than he did back on Aug. 3 in his first appearance for the Rangers.

"If you can tell me why, I would appreciate it," pitching coach Michael Maddux said. "Mechanically, he is repeating his delivery exactly as the last time. His mechanics are a minuscule second apart."

Feliz made his Major League debut on Aug 3 and pitched two scoreless innings against the Athletics. He struck out four of six batters. His fastball was clocked between 97-100 mph.

On Tuesday night, Feliz pitched two-thirds of an inning against the Athletics at the Coliseum. His fastball was 92-94 mph with only one reaching 96.

"When he first came up, the guy was very excited," Maddux said. "He was reaching back and maxing out on everything, doing it for the first time. Now we're at the time of the year where it's tough for all young players. They have never had a starting line in February and a finish line in October. But it's still in there inside of him."

Feliz has allowed seven hits, six walks and five runs in his last 6 1/3 innings over his last five appearances. In his first 22 games, he allowed one run on five hits and one walk.

"You can still be successful as long as you change speeds and command the fastball," Maddux said, noting the work of Oakland pitcher Trevor Cahill, who was the winning pitcher on Tuesday in the Athletics' 10-1 win.

"Velocity just allows you to get away with mistakes," Maddux said. "Trevor Cahill had the same velocity. You just have to pitch better."

Maddux said Feliz has not brought up any physical issues.

"None," Maddux said. "Zero. He is as healthy as a horse and is strong as a bull."

Feliz has pitched 105 1/3 innings this year. He pitched 127 innings in 2008. But this is his first season being used mainly in relief. He switched to the bullpen in July and manager Ron Washington said that may make a difference.

"It's a different role for the kid," Washington said. "He's usually used to take as much time as he needs to be ready. He may be getting loose enough to throw the ball but not loose enough to get it out there the way he wants it."

Velocity though is hardly the only thing that the Rangers like about Feliz. They are also thrilled with the way he has developed his breaking ball and changeup, but there is also his makeup.

"I would say his competitiveness," Maddux said. "He's not over-awed by the situation he's pitching in. He's out there to do the job. He's not out there because he's happy to be in the big leagues. He's got a good competitive nature at a young age."

On brink of 30-30, Kinsler takes breather
Rangers star sits one homer, one swipe shy of milestone
By T.R. Sullivan / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Ian Kinsler was given a day off on Wednesday as he stood one home run and one stolen base short of a well-known baseball milestone.

Kinsler needs one of each to reach a 30-30 season and become only the second player in Rangers history to accomplish the feat. But Kinsler also has just three hits in his last 30 at-bats, so manager Ron Washington decided to give him a day off.

"It's just a rest day," Washington said. "He just needs a break. When he came back from the hamstring injury, I thought he was starting to get his stroke back. It's been a battling season for him. But he's put up good numbers. He's scored runs, and he's driven them in."

Kinsler's bid for 30-30 shows that he has been productive on two fronts this season. He also went into Wednesday's game leading the Rangers with both 89 runs scored and 80 RBIs, even though he was on the disabled list from July 29-Aug. 13 with a strained left hamstring.

"Honestly, I think it could have been a lot better year personally," Kinsler said. "But as a team we have played very well. I missed 15 days for one stretch, but other than that, I have basically played every day and contributed a lot. There is still a lot to build on."

"Obviously my power numbers were there but ... I still think my best seasons are ahead of me and there is a lot to work for."

Kinsler was an All-Star in 2008, batting .318 with a .375 on-base percentage and a .517 slugging percentage. All those numbers are down this season. He is hitting .249 with a .320 on-base percentage and a .481 slugging percentage.

The drops in batting average and on-base percentage are significant.

"Last year, I was very consistent," Kinsler said. "I didn't have too many droughts ... maybe one after the All-Star break for four or five games, but that's it. This year has been up and down. I need to combine the two seasons into one."

"The game will humble you if you fail. I have Michael Young to watch. He's so consistent year in and year out. There's not too many guys better to learn from as far as offensive consistency."

Kinsler bristled at the suggestion that he might be coming power happy and sacrificing himself in other areas.

"You're only as good as your last game," Kinsler said. "That's what we're coming to: instant gratification. People forget about last year or the year before. Since I have a career-high in home runs, I guess I'm power happy, even though I'm not trying to do anything different."

"For the most part, this year I have been up and down. Obviously I have been inconsistent, but I have the same idea in batting practice and the same thoughts in the cage. I need to get better."

Washington said it comes down to better pitch selection. Kinsler is a low-ball hitter, Washington said. If he can keep from chasing pitches up in the zone and make pitchers get the ball down, Washington said Kinsler will be fine.

"More than anything, it's not his swing but his pitch selection," Washington said. "He is always going to be a run producer but his consistency will come with pitch selection."

Kinsler said he views himself as a player with the combination of both speed and power, and he wants to be able to use both in a game.

"That's my game," Kinsler said. "Some days I can give you a 1-for-4 with a three-run home run and other days I'll go 3-for-4 with three singles a couple of stolen bases. I don't go into a game saying I'm going to be a power guy or a speed guy. A lot of it is dictated by the situation in the game when I come to bat and what the score is.

"I just try to be a spark, whether it's with a double, home run or stolen base. That's my thought at the plate."

DALLAS MORNING NEWS

\$12 million for Millwood makes sense for Texas Rangers

Column by TIM COWLISHAW

On a team that will never compete with the Yankees in the American League or the Angels in their own division when it comes to free-agent spending, I didn't think \$12 million for Kevin Millwood made any sense.

On a team that can only get better and become a real contender for a postseason bid by getting sold to a new ownership group this winter, I didn't think \$12 million for Kevin Millwood on the books looked like a deal-maker.

So when the Rangers skipped his turn in the rotation for last weekend's series with Los Angeles, I felt sure that the whole "taking time off to study film with pitching coach Mike Maddux" storyline on Millwood was a joke. Nothing more than a tall tale for a team determined to shut him down and prevent him from reaching the 180-inning plateau that triggered the \$12 million option.

I hate when good conspiracy theories get blown up like that.

But then, watching Millwood pitch a highly effective seven innings in Oakland on Monday, looking like the Millwood that was among the league's ERA leaders the first half of the season, I realized the method behind the apparent madness.

If you're general manager Jon Daniels or team president Nolan Ryan or manager Ron Washington and you're going to be judged next season by how much your team lives up to this overhyped notion that 2010 is the Rangers' year, you need Kevin Millwood on that wall.

Or that mound, anyway.

If you ask, "Could that \$12 million have been better spent?" the answer is yes. You might have been able to sign Millwood for half that and get center fielder Marlon Byrd under contract. You could have done all sorts of things with that \$12 million.

But that's meaningless.

The relevant question is: Would the Rangers have spent that \$12 million if they did not have to?

If Hicks remains the owner, we know the answer. It's no, because he doesn't have it.

If Hicks has sold the team before the winter meetings or free-agency period – highly unlikely at this point – the answer still could be no. It's certainly not a definite yes.

So by letting Millwood regain his pitching groove and reach the inning threshold that triggered the 2010 clause, Daniels, Ryan and company assured themselves of having a quality pitcher in their rotation who otherwise would have been long gone.

And if you look at the Rangers' young roster, there really is little danger of losing key components for next season. Byrd, with his somewhat unrecognized outfield play and 42 doubles and 79 RBIs, is at the top of the list. He, like Millwood, is one of those guys you love having in the clubhouse of a young team, too.

The team's best players are already under contract for 2010 or, at worst, limited to arbitration. It's not like Josh Hamilton is going to break the bank in that area after a 49-RBI season, either.

The pitchers who have prospered in the rotation this season (Scott Feldman and Tommy Hunter) and the one with the potential to hit that level in 2010 (Derek Holland) all benefit from having a 35-year-old Millwood in the top spot.

If he can pitch an entire season the way he did through June this year, the Rangers are true contenders. If he can simply repeat 2009, that's not bad, either.

And if he completely falls apart, then even in the club's worst-case scenario, it's money poorly spent that wasn't going to be spent otherwise.

If that's true, then there was no gamble at all played out in Oakland this week. Ryan and Daniels were just rolling with house money that was going to escape their pockets if it didn't get spent.

When he makes his last Arlington start of the year this weekend against Tampa Bay, Millwood deserves a hearty "welcome back" from Rangers fans.

It may be the kids already here and the prospects on the way that offer this franchise so much hope.

But bringing back Millwood for another 180 innings on a team more strapped for cash than its competitors has the look of an unexpected stroke of good fortune.