

A's News Clips, Tuesday, September 29, 2009

Bullpen gives A's lots of relief

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Much attention has been paid to the A's young starting pitchers, viewed as the backbone of the team for seasons to come.

Oakland's relievers, by comparison, have gone about their work in anonymity. But the bullpen's performance has been the biggest bright spot of the A's season, and the unit should set up strong for 2010.

The A's lost 7-4 to the Los Angeles Angels on Sunday, trimming the Angels' magic number for clinching the American League West to two.

Yet the weekend series spotlighted how good the A's relief corps has been when pressed into heavy duty. Starter Dana Eveland lasted just 3 1/3 innings Saturday. But the bullpen held the Angels to two runs over the final 5 2/3 innings, allowing the A's to chip away at a seven-run deficit and win.

Oakland's relievers entered Sunday leading the American League in innings pitched (528 2/3), but boasted the league's lowest ERA (3.51). They've allowed the fewest homers (40), and began Sunday ranked second in opponents' batting average (.243).

"I think they've done a great job," A's manager Bob Geren said. "We talked about the bullpen being a real strength of the team (in spring training), and we were right."

But Geren couldn't have predicted the individuals who eventually became his go-to guys.

The loss of potential closer Joey Devine to season-ending elbow surgery in March spelled trouble. But converted starter Andrew Bailey earned an All-Star berth in the closer's role and is a strong candidate for American League Rookie of the Year.

The A's didn't know Michael Wuertz, obtained from the Chicago Cubs last winter, would become a dominant setup man. Wuertz entered Sunday leading AL relievers in strikeouts.

Wuertz struggled with his slider last season. But he identified and fixed a mechanical flaw in his delivery while watching video during spring training. A July report in the Wall Street Journal found Wuertz's slider to be the toughest pitch to hit in the majors in 2009, based on a 49.7 percent swing-and-miss rate.

He's the third reliever in Oakland history to reach 100 strikeouts, joining Hall of Famers Dennis Eckersley and Rollie Fingers.

"I always knew I was capable of pitching late in the game because I did pretty good in 2005 (with Chicago)," Wuertz said. "Just to finally get the chance again gave me a lot of confidence."

Wuertz, rumored to have garnered trade interest near the July 31 deadline, is arbitration-eligible but very much in the A's plans for 2010. Key relievers Bailey, Craig Breslow and Brad Ziegler have yet to reach their arbitration years, so the bullpen depth is solidified.

Others such as Jerry Blevins, Jeff Gray, Brad Kilby and Henry Rodriguez show promise. And if the A's look to swing any trades in the offseason to get offensive help, they have a surplus of relievers to deal from.

Oakland fell in a 5-0 hole Sunday and couldn't recover against the Angels, as starting pitcher Edgar Gonzalez (0-4) allowed a two-run homer to Kendry Morales in the third and a solo shot to Mike Napoli in the fourth.

Oakland still won the three-game series and hasn't lost a series since getting swept in Seattle on Aug. 24-26. The A's would need to win their final six games to avoid a third consecutive losing season.

Note: Rajai Davis' career-high 14-game hitting streak came to an end.

A's receive props, but not a win

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Before Sunday's finale at Angel Stadium, A's manager Bob Geren called starter Edgar Gonzalez the key.

That turned out to be the case - Gonzalez wasn't at his best in the Angels' 7-4 victory, which eradicated the A's hopes of finishing above .500. Oakland could still finish even, but would have to win all six remaining games to do so.

Oakland's victories in the first two games of the series and the team's overall impact on the division race in the past two weeks was duly noted in the Angels' clubhouse; the Angels realized after the A's took the first two that they'd better get down to business.

"They're playing good baseball, man," Angels pitcher John Lackey said. "Sometimes a team with nothing to lose is a little more dangerous. ... We've still got to play better."

In the first, Gonzalez gave up an RBI single to Vladimir Guerrero, then wild-pitched Guerrero into position to score on Kendry Morales' two-out single. He gave up a two-run homer to Morales on an 0-2 pitch in the third, and he allowed another homer in the fourth, to No. 8 hitter Mike Napoli leading off the inning.

Gonzalez described the first inning as a lot of grounders finding holes; he'd made good pitches, he felt. But he missed with the two home run balls - he was trying to go up and in on Morales and put it right down the middle, and the pitch to Napoli was away but caught too much of the zone.

Gonzalez also hit Juan Rivera twice, and the second time came after Morales' homer, when Rivera stood at the plate and glared at the mound for a few moments while home-plate umpire Ted Barrett paid Gonzalez a visit and told him to take it easy, the A's pitcher said. Gonzalez said he just missed with a two-seamer and it wasn't a big deal.

Oakland had erased a seven-run deficit the night before and come back twice to win 15-10. But Sunday, the A's were unable to storm back after falling behind 5-0. The A's did pick up three runs against starter Joe Saunders in the seventh, a rally that featured four singles, two walks and a run-scoring wild pitch by Saunders. Matt Carson drove in Oakland's first run with a bases-loaded hit to left and Landon Powell also singled in a run.

Rajai Davis' career-high 14-game hitting streak came to an end, as he went 0-for-4 and hit into an inning-ending double play in the seventh with the bases loaded. Earlier in the game, with men at second and third, Davis grounded to third and Eric Patterson, going from third, was thrown out at the plate.

Adam Kennedy's sacrifice fly in the eighth cut the Angels' lead to one, but in the bottom of the inning, Maicer Izturis hit a two-run double off Brad Ziegler.

With one more win, the A's would have a better season than last year, when they finished 75-86. They were 76-86 in 2007, Geren's first season as manager.

The Angels' magic number to clinch the division is three after Texas lost Sunday; the A's have gone 7-3 against the two teams this month.

"We're not in the race and it's a totally different ballgame when you're the team everyone is gunning for," A's designated hitter Jack Cust said. "It's a good experience for us, but it's September baseball - even when you're out of it, young guys are trying to make an impression for next year and putting it all on the line. It's a different mind-set."

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A's LEADING OFF

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Dress up: There were 14 rookies in costume on rookie hazing day, including starters Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Clayton Mortensen as Teletubbies. "I think I'm Laa-Laa," Gonzalez said. "I feel like Laa-Laa." The less said about Landon Powell in lingerie the better.

A's run out of magic against Halos

Repeat performance of comeback comes up short

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

ANAHEIM -- A day after erasing a seven-run deficit in an impressive win against the Angels, the A's nearly made another unlikely comeback on Sunday.

Oakland almost came back from an early five-run hole, getting within one run of the Angels in the eighth inning, before coming up short in a 7-4 loss at Angel Stadium.

"We made some mistakes and didn't cash in on some opportunities, but on the positive side, we fought back and were right there," A's manager Bob Geren said. "So, it's a sign of the character of these guys."

But even with the loss, the A's still took two out of three against the first-place Angels and kept them from clinching a postseason berth over the weekend.

"They have a real good team over there," designated hitter Jack Cust said of the Angels. "They've been on top of the top of the division for a while. They're a better team [than they were last year]."

Just like the day before, the A's were quiet early before breaking out, as left-hander Joe Saunders kept them in check for the first six innings.

It was in the seventh inning when the A's had their big rally, as they loaded the bases with no outs against Saunders. Matt Carson and Landon Powell had RBI singles, with a run scored on a Saunders wild pitch sandwiched in between.

"I did my job for six, then it kind of snowballed on me," said Saunders, who allowed three runs on seven hits over six-plus innings to get his 15th win of the year. "The bullpen came through for us."

The A's, though, got within a run of the Angels after a sacrifice fly by Adam Kennedy scored Daric Barton with two outs in the eighth inning.

Cust then came in as a pinch-hitter with a runner on first, but he struck out against Kevin Jepsen, who allowed four runs the night before in Oakland's come-from-behind win.

"I was pumping fastball after fastball last night, and I didn't have my fastball today," Jepsen said. "I went to the cutter, and that worked for me."

The Angels then put the game out of reach with a two-run double by Maicer Izturis that went just under Barton's glove near the first-base bag in the bottom of the frame.

"The bullpen was almost perfect again, but we couldn't overcome those couple runs," Geren said. "It was a little ground ball inside the bag.

"If it's just a few feet over, it's a close ballgame."

The A's could've been even closer had they cashed in on a threat in the third inning, when they had runners at second and third with no outs, but Patterson was thrown out at home on a ground ball hit by Davis before Barton ended the frame by grounding into a double play.

Oakland was already down two runs at the point, as right-hander Edgar Gonzalez allowed two runs in the first on singles by Vladimir Guerrero and Kendry Morales that found holes through the infield.

"Those first couple runs just came on a few ground balls," Geren said. "They weren't bad pitches."

But Gonzalez admittedly made two bad pitches later in the game, when he allowed a two-run homer to Morales in the third and a solo home run to Napoli in the fourth that gave the Angels a 5-0 lead.

"I just missed two pitches on those homers," said Gonzalez, who fell to 0-4 after allowing five runs on seven hits over five innings. "In the first inning, it was a lot of ground balls, but they scored two runs. That's baseball."

The A's, however, can take solace in the fact that they still have the best record in the Majors this month and that they played the Angels tough in the three-game series in Anaheim.

"When you're on the road and you see the matchups and you win two out of three, you have to be satisfied," Geren said. "But when you win the first two and the game was so close today, it's a little disappointing. It's hard to keep a 90-plus-win team down."

Athletics switch focus to Mariners

Oakland (75-81) at Seattle (80-75), 7:10 p.m. PT

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

ANAHEIM -- The A's are done tormenting both contending teams in the American League West -- at least for now.

After winning five of seven against Rangers and taking two out of three from the Angels over the past two weeks, the A's travel to Seattle for a three-game series starting Tuesday against Mariners, who, like the A's, are already eliminated from postseason contention.

But it doesn't mean the A's have nothing to play for, as they want to continue to finish their season on a high note with the team currently having the best record in the Majors this month at 17-8 after winning 11 of its last 14 games.

The A's also have a positive run differential this season that's even better than the first-place Tigers in the American League Central. So with a strong finish, it adds to hope for next season.

"There's not a lot to be excited about for the rest of this season, but we're just trying to play good baseball," second baseman Mark Ellis said. "We're just trying to play well to close the season and hopefully it'll carry into next year."

The A's also have an outside shot at avoiding a losing record on the season for the third straight year, but they have to win the last six games of the season to finish at 81-81.

But it'll be a tough challenge, especially with Mariners ace Felix Hernandez on the mound on Tuesday against A's rookie Trevor Cahill in the first game of the three-game series.

Hernandez, though, struggled in his one start against Oakland this season, giving up five runs in five innings way back on April 11. But since that start, Hernandez has gone 16-5 with a 2.38 ERA in 30 starts.

It's one of the reasons why A's manager Bob Geren said his team isn't focusing on finishing at least .500 this season. Instead, his team is holding on to the old adage of taking each game as it comes.

It certainly worked over the weekend when they won against the Angels in games started by Jered Weaver and John Lackey before falling to Joe Saunders on Sunday.

"[We're] not really focused on [finishing .500]," Geren said. "You look at the schedule and you have Weaver, Lackey, Saunders and Hernandez right in a row. We've faced some tough pitching, so we've trying not to focus on the games that are coming tomorrow. It's been like that every day, and we've been performing well."

The series against Seattle concludes a six-game road trip for Oakland before the team hosts the Angels for three more games next weekend to close the season.

Pitching matchup

OAK: RHP Trevor Cahill (10-12, 4.45 ERA)

Cahill, a 21-year-old rookie, has had his share of ups and downs this season but is on a strong finishing kick. He's 3-0 with a 3.05 ERA in four September starts, and his past two outings have been among his best. In consecutive starts against the Rangers, Cahill allowed one run on seven hits and four walks over 12 2/3 innings, including seven shutout innings of one-hit work in Texas. Armed with three pitches -- fastball, slider, changeup -- with excellent downward movement, Cahill has faced the Mariners three times this year and is 0-2 despite a 1.90 ERA and a .227 batting average against over 19 innings.




SEA: RHP Felix Hernandez (17-5, 2.49 ERA)

The staff ace continues his quest for the Cy Young Award, making the penultimate start of his breakout season. The right-hander is coming off his 27th quality start and surpassed the 200-strikeouts mark for the first time in his career with a season-high 11 against the Blue Jays. Hernandez is 4-0 with one no-decision in September, surrendering five earned runs in 40 innings. This will be his second start against the Athletics, with the other on April 11 at Oakland. He allowed five earned runs in five innings and received a no-decision in the Mariners' 8-5 win.

Dribblers ...

Third baseman Adam Kennedy, right fielder Ryan Sweeney and catcher Kurt Suzuki were held out of the starting lineup on Sunday. ... The A's are 5-11 against the Mariners this season. ... Oakland's off-day on Monday is the team's last of the season.

Up next

- Wednesday: Athletics (Clay Mortensen, 2-3, 6.07) at Mariners (Doug Fister, 2-4, 4.50), 7:10 p.m. PT 
- Thursday: Athletics (Brett Anderson, 11-10, 4.12) at Mariners (Ian Snell, 7-10, 4.86), 7:10 p.m. PT 
- Friday: Athletics (Gio Gonzalez, 6-6, 5.73) vs. Angels (TBD), 7:05 p.m. PT 

Geren prepared to finish without Hairston

A's skipper finds silver lining in Patterson's emergence

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

ANAHEIM -- A's outfielder Scott Hairston was held out of the lineup for the sixth straight game because of a swelling in his hip and a related back problem, causing manager Bob Geren to say it's "doubtful" that Hairston will play again this year.

Hairston last played on Monday against the Rangers but was removed in the fifth inning because of the pain in his back and hip. And with only six games left this season after Sunday's game with the Angels, it's unlikely Hairston will return.

"It's looking doubtful at this point," Geren said. "He hasn't improved in the last three days, so unless he drastically improves, he can't play. I'm hoping he can, obviously."

Hairston has been dealing with various injuries since July, including a left quad strain he's been battling since shortly after being traded to the club from the Padres on July 5.

The injuries have caused Hairston to struggle at the plate, as he's batting just .236 with seven homers and 35 RBIs in 60 games with Oakland this season.

But as Geren noted, the one positive that has come out of the situation has been the emergence of Eric Patterson, who has played well since Hairston's most recent injury

In the five games that Hairston has missed in the last week, Patterson is batting .500 (8-for-16) with a home run and four RBIs along with six walks and just one strikeout.

"It's giving Patterson a chance to play and he's playing extremely well," Geren said. "You always look for a positive and that's certainly a positive."

A's lose to Angels, who need just one more win for playoffs

Associated Press

ANAHEIM -- With a few timely hits and a few more timely outs by their bullpen Sunday, the Los Angeles Angels made certain they'll welcome the Texas Rangers on Monday with a simple formula to seal their playoff fate.

One win and they're in.

Kendry Morales homered and drove in three runs, and the Angels snapped their first four-game losing streak of the season with a 7-4 victory over the Oakland Athletics.

Morales had three hits and Mike Napoli also homered for the Angels (91-64), who blew most of an early five-run lead before hanging on for their first victory since last Monday, putting them on the brink of their fifth AL West title in six years.

While the Angels finished up with Brian Fuentes' 45th save, second-place Texas was simultaneously blowing a three-run lead in the ninth inning of a 7-6 loss to Tampa Bay. Those results reduced Los Angeles' magic number to two for clinching its third straight division title -- and probably a first-round matchup with Boston for the third straight season.

Texas opens a four-game series at Angel Stadium on Monday night with Tommy Hunter going against Los Angeles' Ervin Santana.

"We've never had an opportunity to clinch with the team that's right behind us on the field with us," said Joe Saunders, who won for the sixth time in seven starts. "It's going to be intense, that's for sure. We control our own destiny, and we know what's in front of us."

The Angels blew a seven-run lead during Saturday's 15-10 loss to the A's, but Los Angeles' bullpen escaped two big late-inning jams in this series finale. After Darren Oliver and Kevin Jepsen both wiggled out of trouble, Fuentes coolly reclaimed the major league saves lead.

"You want to take care of your own house, your own business, and it's something we haven't been doing a good job of this month," said Angels manager Mike Scioscia, who claimed not to know his club's magic number before the game. "It doesn't matter that the team coming in is chasing you. We still have to play like we did today."

Saunders (15-7) pitched six scoreless innings for Los Angeles before falling apart in the seventh, allowing the first five batters to reach base as Oakland trimmed the Angels' big lead to 5-3. The A's got within one run in the eighth on pinch-hitter Adam Kennedy's sacrifice fly, but Maicer Izturis hit a two-run double later in the inning for Los Angeles.

"They look strong to me," Kennedy said of his former team. "Everybody's playing pretty consistent, so I think it'll be a little different story this year. Their starting pitching is in line, and their offense is a little stronger and a little more mature."

Edgar Gonzalez (0-4) remained winless in six starts for the A's, yielding seven hits and five runs in five innings. Mark Ellis and Cliff Pennington had two hits apiece for last-place Oakland, which had won 13 of 16 as the majors' best team in September.

"We've got a little bit to go," said Jack Cust, who struck out against Jepsen to end the eighth. "They're a really good team over there, and they've been on top of the division for a while. But anytime you've got pitching like we have, with young guys who should be around here for a while ... we can make a push."

Morales followed an RBI single in the first with a two-run homer in the third, hitting an 0-2 pitch deep into right field for his 32nd homer. The Cuban first baseman has 102 RBIs in his first full major league season, becoming the first Angels first baseman to reach three digits since Mo Vaughn in 2000.

"When the season started, I kind of thought 25 (homers) and 80 (RBIs) would be good things to shoot for," Morales said through a translator. "I'm not going to complain about overshooting those goals."

Saunders yielded seven hits and didn't walk a batter until the seventh. He has been outstanding since returning from a brief stint on the disabled list to rest his left shoulder, muscling his way back into Los Angeles' playoff rotation.

Saunders was thoroughly in control during the first six innings, allowing just one runner to reach third base and retiring 10 straight before the seventh, when Ellis' single started a three-run rally. Saunders was chased by Landon Powell's RBI single, but Oliver escaped a bases-loaded jam by inducing Rajai Davis' double-play grounder.