

A's News Clips, Wednesday, September 30, 2009

Power outage has A's in dark

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's acquired Jason Giambi and Matt Holliday last winter hoping to boost their sagging power numbers from 2008. But instead of landing more knockout punches, the A's have found success jabbing opponents into submission.

They entered Tuesday night's game, a 6-4 loss to the Seattle Mariners at Safeco Field, ranked 27th out of 30 teams in home runs (134) but ranked fourth in stolen bases (130).

They also were hitting .285 since the All-Star break and had scored the third-most runs in the major leagues over that span — with Holliday having been traded July 24 and Giambi released shortly after.

It brings up the issue: Do the last-place A's continue building around their speed and baserunning prowess or renew their search for power hitters this offseason?

"In this year's case, (manager) Bob (Geren) has a little more speed, and he's utilized it," A's general manager Billy Beane said. "But ultimately we want to create a balance between the two and have a number of ways with which to score runs."

Tuesday's loss left the A's 75-82, clinching their third straight losing season and guaranteeing they would finish last in the American League West.

Stolen bases alone don't explain the A's offensive revival since the All-Star break. They've simply hit better as a team.

They still have the fourth fewest extra-base hits in the American League. But they entered Tuesday leading the majors in doubles since the break with 159.

The point remains, however, that Oakland's current roster has certain strengths. And those strengths don't include swinging for the fences.

That needs to change at least to some degree, Beane believes. Among A's regulars, only Jack Cust — with a team-leading 24 homers — would be considered by most a true power hitter.

And the A's must decide whether to retain Cust, who is arbitration-eligible and figures to command more than this season's \$2.8 million salary.

Owner Lew Wolff has said publicly he's not crazy about the A's signing more long-in-the-tooth power hitters — think Mike Piazza, Giambi — because they haven't brought results.

Although the A's should have a degree of payroll flexibility by shedding contracts of free agents-to-be such as Bobby Crosby, Beane said he doesn't know yet what type of budget he'll have to pursue hitters on the open market.

Beane didn't rule out bringing in any free-agent bats but also offered, "Ultimately, we're going to be served best by continuing to go with younger players and giving them a chance to develop."

That suggests first baseman Chris Carter and third baseman Brett Wallace — the A's top minor league hitting prospects — could be given early chances next season if they show promise in spring training. Both are considered middle-of-the-lineup talents.

Beane was asked about the possibility of going the trade route to bring in offensive help.

"I think we're going to be pretty stingy when it comes to some of our own young players and whether we consider moving them," he said. "... I doubt that we'll be looking to trade away long-term potential for short-term potential."

Beane also thinks players on this year's roster are capable of developing more power. He cited the 15 homers that catcher Kurt Suzuki has hit this season, and the impressive second half that outfielder Ryan Sweeney has enjoyed.

"As (Sweeney) gets older and understands what pitchers are doing to him, you can see some development there" in terms of power, Beane said.

Note: Right-hander Trevor Cahill gave up six earned runs in 42/3 innings Tuesday. Ken Griffey Jr. hit a three-run homer in Seattle's five-run fifth. ... Seattle's Felix Hernandez notched his 18th win.

Mariners throttle Cahill, A's

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland's hopes of a non-losing season and finishing higher than last place evaporated on the same night.

The A's needed to win each of their final six games to remain at .500 for the season, and they had to sweep Seattle to have a shot at third place, but Trevor Cahill had his first real off night in seven weeks in Oakland's 6-4 loss to the Mariners and Cy Young Award candidate Felix Hernandez. Oakland will finish with its third losing season in a row.

In his final appearance of the season, Cahill gave up eight hits and six runs in 42/3 innings, the first time the rookie right-hander had allowed more than three runs in a start since Aug. 6.

He said he was struggling with his best pitch, his sinker, most of the night.

"I got away with that early, but that's one of those things that catch up to you," Cahill said. "Maybe I was trying to overthrow, knowing it was my last start, trying to leave it out there. That's not really my game, trying to blow people away."

Cahill had allowed only one homer in his previous eight starts; he'd given up at least one homer in each of the nine consecutive appearances before that, and 15 overall in that span. On Tuesday, Ken Griffey Jr. crushed a three-run homer to right in the fifth inning, giving the Mariners a 5-1 lead.

"It was a little down but right down the middle," A's manager Bob Geren said. "First pitch, that's pretty much what any hitter is looking for."

Cahill's tally of 27 homers allowed is an Oakland rookie record, topping John Wasdin's mark of 24 in 1996.

Geren pointed out before the game that Cahill, 21, hasn't missed a start at any point, including spring training. He worked 1782/3 innings this season.

"He's had a heck of a year," Geren said. "He's going to build on that and be better and better and better."

It didn't help the A's quest to break even to have to face Hernandez (18-5), who has lost only one game in the past two months. Oakland had seven hits off Hernandez in 72/3 innings.

"He's one of the premier pitchers in the game and we had guys on base, guys in scoring position," Geren said. "Over his last four or five starts, we battled him better than anyone else did."

The A's scored one in the fourth on an RBI single by Mark Ellis. They added another in the eighth, when Travis Buck and Kurt Suzuki singled, Cust moved Suzuki to third with a fielder's choice and Daric Barton hit a sacrifice fly. Oakland left the bases loaded that inning, however, when Mark Lowe replaced Hernandez and struck out Cliff Pennington.

The A's added two in the ninth off David Aardsma when Adam Kennedy reached on catcher's interference, Rajai Davis walked and Suzuki singled - off the wall in left - to send home both runners.

"We're just trying to finish strong," said Eric Patterson, who had three hits. "Even with this loss, we were in there at the end, guys were battling."

Before the game, outfielder Scott Hairston said he does not believe he'll be able to play the rest of the season because of a sore left hip and right sacroiliac joint. Hairston hit .190 over his past 26 games and .236 overall since coming to Oakland in a trade from San Diego. He batted .299 for the Padres this year. With Hairston out, Patterson has come on strong, hitting .545 with six runs, four RBIs and seven walks in seven games.

"It's nice to come to the field and see my name in the lineup every day," Patterson said. "It helps me get comfortable. It helps with getting in a rhythm. If I feel good and I feel confident, I usually have good results, and it's nice to show that."

Patterson's speed and his versatility - he can play all three outfield spots and second base - make him a good bet for a roster spot next year.

"Your window of opportunity in this game is so little," Patterson said. "I've been fortunate enough to get a handful of opportunities, but you have to go out there and prove you belong."

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Give it a shot: Outfielder Ryan Sweeney said he won't require surgery on his sore knees, but he is going to receive platelet-rich plasma injections for his creaky patella tendons after the season and his left knee will be immobilized for three weeks. Sweeney is expected to be unavailable today.

Despite rough day, A's believe in Cahill

Final outing of season a shaky one for promising rookie

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- A's rookie Trevor Cahill got roughed up in his final start of the season Tuesday and fell to 10-13 with a 4.63 ERA.

Not exactly stats that jump off the page, are they? Nonetheless, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone associated with the A's who doesn't think Cahill had a successful first season.

After all, Cahill's counterpart Tuesday night in the opener of a three-game series at Safeco Field, Felix Hernandez of the Mariners, went 12-14 with a 4.52 ERA in his first full year in the Majors.

That was in 2006. Now King Felix is one of the favorites to win the 2009 American League Cy Young Award.

Granted, Hernandez made his debut at 19 years old (in 2005). Cahill is 21 -- still a pup, but at least allowed to legally buy a beer. And the two right-handers aren't exactly stylistic carbon copies.

Hernandez is a power pitcher with strong secondary stuff. Cahill kills with craftiness when he's at his best, baffling batters with a darting sinker, and he rarely roams into the mid- to high-90s neighborhood in which Felix's fastball resides.

But talent is talent. You saw it when Hernandez was breaking in, and you see it when Cahill takes the mound, results be damned.

"Oh, his talent level is tremendous," said Seattle skipper Don Wakamatsu, whose club was dominated in Cahill's second start of the season. "He's the real deal."

The results on Tuesday were not tremendous. Cahill couldn't get out of the fifth inning and allowed six runs on eight hits and two walks over 4 2/3 innings of a 6-4 loss in the opener of a three-game series at Safeco Field.

A tough night, to be sure. But not so tough to obscure the work he's done all year, particularly over the past month.

Cahill had gone 4-0 with a 2.28 ERA over his previous five starts.

"What we've seen is improvement in all areas," said A's pitching coach Curt Young. "And what he should be the most proud of is the kind of confidence he's been taking out to the mound with him. That's a key for any pitcher, and he's really done a nice job of taking that out there these past five or six weeks.

"He's had some ups and downs, and there's always room for improvement even after a great game or a great year. But Trevor knows what he has to do, and he's on his way."

Hernandez is already there. In his penultimate start of the season, he improved to 18-5 with a 2.48 ERA while holding Oakland to two runs over 7 2/3 innings of seven-hit work.

It wasn't always pretty, though. Hernandez walked four and hit two batters, and the A's put plenty of pressure on him to be at his best.

"His command wasn't quite what we've seen in the past," A's manager Bob Geren said of Hernandez, who threw 120 pitches. "He's one of the premier pitchers in the game and we had runners on base in almost every inning. But he made pretty good pitches when he needed to."

The Mariners opened the scoring in the second after Cahill walked Ken Griffey Jr., who moved to third on a double by Adrian Beltre and scored on a groundout. Oakland evened the score in the fourth, with Jack Cust drawing a one-out walk, taking second on a wild pitch, moving to third on a groundout and scoring on a single by Mark Ellis.

Cahill, who'd already set the Oakland rookie record for home runs allowed, was done in by Griffey's three-run homer in the fifth. It preceded Franklin Gutierrez's sacrifice fly, was followed by an RBI double from Bill Hall and marked the 27th time this year that Cahill's been taken deep.

"Most of the homers Trevor has allowed," Young said, "have been on sinkers in fastball counts that he left up over the plate."

Cahill didn't disagree, responding to a question about what he's learned this year by first saying, "How important it is to stay down in the strike zone."

That was the primary problem Tuesday.

"I was leaving a lot of balls up all night," Cahill said. "My sinker wasn't really moving. ... Sooner or later, that's going to catch up with you."

The A's finally pushed Hernandez offstage with a chippy little rally in the eighth that featured singles by Travis Buck and Kurt Suzuki, a right-side grounder and a sacrifice fly by Daric Barton.

Hernandez left to a standing ovation and tipped his cap in acknowledgment after plunking Ellis and walking Eric Patterson to load the bases with two out, but righty Mark Lowe came on to end the threat by striking out Cliff Pennington.

Suzuki's two-run single with one out in the ninth added some drama to the proceedings, keeping alive Oakland's hope for a 6-0 finish that would allow them to finish at .500 for the year, but that hope died when Cust popped out and Barton flew out to end the game.

"The second half of the year has been outstanding," Geren said. "We have a lot of things to be pleased with going into the offseason ... and Trevor's development -- the way he's finished the year healthy, not missing any starts, pitching well -- is definitely one of them."

Calm Mortensen pitching for his 2010 fate

Oakland (75-82) at Seattle (81-76), 7:10 p.m. PT

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- The past few months have been a head-spinning experience for A's right-hander Clayton Mortensen, but you'd never know it from observing his clubhouse interactions.

A 24-year-old rookie, he is to hyper what former A's outfielder Eric Byrnes is to calm. There's an economy of movement about Mortensen, who was acquired in the four-player trade that sent Matt Holliday to St. Louis in July.

"Pretty mellow dude," A's catcher Kurt Suzuki said of Mortensen, who'll make his final start of the season Wednesday in the middle game of a three-game series against the host Mariners at Safeco Field. "All of our young guys are pretty mellow."

Maybe not all. Lefty Gio Gonzalez is the first to admit there's a little spaz in him. But Mortensen, who was recalled from Triple-A Sacramento on Sept. 4 for his second stint with the A's, fits right in with fellow even-keel rookies Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson.

Whether he'll fit in among them in the 2010 starting rotation is an issue that won't be resolved until next spring at the earliest, but he's been solid since the most recent recall, going 2-2 with a 3.97 ERA.

"Like a number of young guys this year, he's getting a nice opportunity to show what he can do at this level," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "We've seen him pitch very well, we've seen him struggle a little bit, and that's what you typically see with rookie pitchers. What's important is that the talent is there. That's obvious. The fact that we traded for him tells you what we think of him."

"What's going to happen next year? Who knows? But every time you take the mound in a Major League game is a chance to put yourself into the picture."

Mortensen, who played college ball at Gonzaga, isn't looking too far into the future. He was scheduled to pitch for the Phoenix Desert Dogs in the prestigious Arizona Fall League, but his workload late in the season prompted the A's to remove him from the roster.

"I'll take a little time off," Mortensen said. "But I'll be spending a lot of time in Phoenix [at Oakland's Minor League complex]. I have a lot of work to do."

Pitching matchup

OAK: RHP Clay Mortensen (2-3, 6.07 ERA)

Mortensen wasn't sharp his last time out, and neither was the defense behind him. Mortensen gave up seven runs on six hits and a walk over 4 2/3 innings, but only three of the runs were earned, because the A's made three errors, including two in the visiting Rangers' four-run fifth inning. Mortensen, who had won his previous two starts, will be making his seventh big league appearance and sixth start against the Mariners, who beat him with four earned runs on six hits and three walks over seven innings on Sept. 4.




SEA: RHP Brandon Morrow (1-4, 4.96 ERA)

Morrow makes his final start of the season, hoping to use it as a springboard into the offseason and beyond. He has shown flashes of being a top-of-the-rotation type of hurler at times since his return from the Minors, but he also loses his release point on occasion, leading to control lapses and head-scratching in the dugout. His overall performance has improved, however, and the organization believes the former first-round Draft choice eventually will be a quality starter.

Dribblers ...

Geren said Suzuki, who was off for most of Sunday and was off with the rest of the team Monday, likely will catch all three games in Seattle. He'll get one of the three games against the Angels off this weekend, either Friday or Saturday. ... Geren has been going big on pumping Andrew Bailey as the American League Rookie of the Year with reporters of late, and he was at it again Tuesday. ... Baseball players are fans, too: A sizable pack of Athletics killed time in the clubhouse before batting practice by watching the second game of the big doubleheader between AL Central title contenders Minnesota and Detroit. Most seemed to be pulling for the Twins -- a likely nod to shortstop Orlando Cabrera, who was traded from Oakland this summer. ... The A's have finished in last place in their division six times since moving to Oakland, most recently in 1998. Geren has yet to guide a team to a finish higher than third in three seasons at the helm.

Up next

- Thursday: Athletics (Brett Anderson, 11-10, 4.12) at Mariners (Doug Fister, 2-4, 4.50), 7:10 p.m. PT 
- Friday: Athletics (Gio Gonzalez, 6-6, 5.73) vs. Angels (Joe Saunders, 15-7, 4.62), 7:05 p.m. PT 
- Saturday: Athletics (Dana Eveland, 2-3, 7.09) vs. Angels (Ervin Santana, 8-8, 5.10), 1:05 p.m. PT 

Wuertz finishing season strong

Setup man increasing value heading into 2010

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- A's setup man Michael Wuertz entered the three-game series that opened Tuesday at Safeco Field three appearances shy of matching his career high of 75, but he's already passed his personal high in innings pitched as a big leaguer.

He's also pitching better than ever, having not allowed a run in his previous nine outings heading into the Mariners series, and his Friday night outing in Anaheim might have been the best of his career.

While working 1 2/3 innings of a victory over the host Angels, Wuertz struck out all five batters he retired, the final one with his signature slider to give him 100 strikeouts in 76 2/3 innings this season.

"He's been ridiculous," marveled rookie All-Star closer Andrew Bailey. "He's been pitching really well all year, but what he's doing at the end here, wow."

With a 1.01 ERA over his last 24 outings prior to Tuesday, Wuertz, a right-hander acquired in a trade with the Cubs last offseason, is closing the year even better than he started -- and he was certainly no slouch early on, posting a 2.13 ERA in 12 April appearances.

His only extended struggles this season came in July, when he had a 5.93 ERA in 12 games, but he bounced back with a 1.26 ERA in 14 August appearances and had a 0.73 ERA through his first 10 games in September.

"Knock on wood," Wuertz said before Tuesday's game. "I've always had that pride of finishing the season strong."

Asked how he's managed to stay effective despite the heavy workload, Wuertz, a 30-year-old Minnesota native who made his big league debut with the Cubs in 2004, cited reasons both mental and physical.

"You really have to concentrate on the amount of work you do and figure out the best way to stay in shape throughout the year," he offered. "Things like monitoring the amount of throwing you do, how much you do in the weight room, how you warm up before you go into a game. All of that's part of it. You don't want to do too much, you don't want to do too little. Some days you throw a little more, some days you throw a little less.

"It's a fine line, but I've found something that works for me."

And he's sharing it with his less-experienced buddies in the bullpen.

"It's something I've been trying to stress with some of the younger guys," he said. "It takes a while to figure out what works for you, and everybody's different, but we do talk [a lot]."

Bailey is among those who have benefited from the advice of the bullpen's oldest and most veteran member.

Wuertz's most significant message? Something along the lines of, There are plenty of heroes in the world. Don't try to be one of them.

"The most important thing [he tells us] is to just be honest with yourself," Bailey said. "Don't push it. Don't be afraid to ask for a day off if you need one. He's been great all year, talking to us about all sorts of things. He's a really valuable guy to have on a staff, and not just for what he does on the mound."

With his lights-out finishing kick, Wuertz's value is most certainly increasing. He's one of the premier setup men in the American League, and that should net him a significant raise for 2010.

Eligible for arbitration this offseason, he's making a reported \$1.1 million this year.

Mariners down A's, 6-4

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Ken Griffey Jr. started what might be his final homestand with career homer No. 628, and Felix Hernandez added another strong effort to his AL Cy Young Award resume in the Seattle Mariners 6-4 win over the A's on Tuesday night.

Griffey has been mostly evasive about his future plans following the end of the season, but the Mariners icon jolted the meager crowd that showed up on a chilly night with a three-run homer off Oakland starter Trevor Cahill in the fifth inning.

Cahill became the 406th different pitcher to give up a long ball to Griffey in his storied career. Cahill (10-13) was just 13 months old when Griffey smacked his first career homer off Eric King on April 10, 1989.

Griffey's homer gave Seattle a 5-1 lead and was more than enough run support for Hernandez, who bolstered the best season of his young career on a night he didn't have his best stuff.

Hernandez (18-5) struggled with his control, walking four and hitting two batters, but lasted 7½ innings and improved to 7-1 since Aug. 1. He gave up seven hits, struck out four and threw a season-high 120 pitches in his next-to-last start of 2009.

Mark Lowe struck out Cliff Pennington to end the eighth after Hernandez loaded the bases with two outs. Seattle closer David Aardsma gave up a two-run single to Kurt Suzuki in the ninth, before getting the final two outs.

Oakland missed its opportunity to capitalize on Hernandez's early struggles, failing to score with runners at first and second and no outs in the second, and with runners on second and third and two outs in the third.

Mark Ellis had an RBI single in the fourth, but the A's left runners at second and third.

Hernandez is among the favorites for the Cy Young in the American League. For wins, he trails only CC Sabathia, who has 19, and his 2.48 ERA is second to Kansas City's Zack Greinke (2.06).

Hernandez will start Sunday in the season finale against Texas.

The 21-year-old Cahill saw his four-game winning streak snapped. He matched Hernandez early but fell apart in the fifth. Josh Wilson started the inning with a double and scored on Franklin Gutierrez's sacrifice fly to deep center field for a 2-1 lead.

Jose Lopez then followed with a single, and after the A's infield met at the mound, Griffey turned on Cahill's first pitch for his 17th homer of the season.

Griffey indicated earlier this month he'd be open to playing in 2010 for Seattle if the situation worked for both sides, but has stayed silent.

"We actually went fishing yesterday, and he never brought it up," Seattle manager Don Wakamatsu said before Tuesday's game. "That's Junior's decision, that's (GM) Jack (Zduriencik's) decision. All I can speak of is my experience with him this year, and it's been an honor to have a player of that caliber."

The win assures Seattle (81-76) of at least a .500 record a season after losing 101 games. The loss means Oakland will finish last in the AL West for the first time since 1998.