

A's News Clips, Friday, October 2, 2009

Is A's hot month omen or mirage?

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

In the A's ideal world, their terrific stretch of play in September won't go to waste.

It will serve as a springboard into next season.

The A's lost 4-2 to the Seattle Mariners on Thursday, completing a three-game sweep by the home team. But there's encouragement to be found in the 17-10 mark the A's posted in September, the second-best record in the American League for the month.

It's not unusual for a noncontending team such as Oakland to catch fire late in the season. But opinions vary on how much stock should be put into a team's September performance, and whether it has a carry-over effect into the following season.

"You can't rely on everything you see in a month because it's the end of the season, and strange things happen at the end of the season," A's second baseman Mark Ellis said. "Whether or not it sustains itself for a whole season, I'm not sure yet."

There's a skepticism around the majors regarding September stats. Rosters expand, unproven young players are being used, and lineups often look much different from how they did in May or June.

"I take September like I do spring training," a major league scout said. "I think you get fooled in spring training, and I think you get fooled in September."

A look back through the years doesn't offer any hint on what could be in store for the A's.

Last year, the Kansas City Royals finished 12 games below .500 but had an 18-8 September. This season, Kansas City had stumbled to a 65-94 record entering Thursday.

The Atlanta Braves enjoyed a worst-to-first season in 1991. But they went 12-16 during the previous September, so there was no indication of the good times ahead.

Considering rosters can change so much from season to season, perhaps September records should be downplayed anyway.

But the A's will return much of this year's roster in 2010.

Oakland GM Billy Beane points to the caliber of teams the A's have beaten in recent weeks. The A's went 10-5 in September against the White Sox, Twins, Rangers and Angels — all teams that were in postseason contention.

"I think you have to give some credibility to it, because the teams we're playing are playing for something," Beane said.

The A's are 44-41 since June 29 and entered Thursday having scored the third-most runs in the majors since the All-Star break. So their stretch of improved play extends back about three months.

But their numbers jumped considerably in September. How excited should the A's be, for example, that Cliff Pennington has hit .333 over his past 24 games?

In September 2007, A's first baseman Daric Barton hit .347 in his first 18 major league games. Handed the starting job in 2008, Barton slumped miserably and hit .226.

Opponents eventually got a detailed scouting report on Barton. So you can argue his .310 average this September is more impressive than his 2007 numbers.

Ex-major leaguer Mike Blowers, now a Mariners broadcaster, thinks there's substance behind the A's play in recent weeks.

"For the younger guys, getting an opportunity to play against a team that's still in it, or feels like they're in it, and playing well against them is a good thing," Blowers said.

Note: Brett Anderson (11-11) pitched five innings Thursday and just one of the four runs he allowed was earned. ... The A's finished their 2009 road schedule 35-46. ... Oakland concludes the season with a three-game home series against Anaheim.

Anderson done in by error

[Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

In 2006, the A's used the Mariners as a springboard to the division title, taking 17 of 19 games between the teams.

Since then, Seattle has turned the tables, going 37-20 against the A's, including taking eight of nine at Safeco Field this year. Adam Kennedy gave the Mariners a hand Thursday with an error that led to three unearned runs in the fifth inning of Seattle's 4-2 victory.

Brett Anderson, the budding star among Oakland's rookie starters, finished up his season with an 11-11 mark, with his four-game winning streak coming to an end. Thursday's loss was no ordinary loss, however - he allowed only one earned run, on a homer by Adrian Beltre in the second, in five innings.

"He's going to be one of the elite pitchers in the league, without a doubt," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Anderson gave up eight hits and a walk Thursday, and struck out five. He finished the season with a 4.06 ERA, whittling the mark well down from the 5.77 mark he had in mid-June after allowing six earned runs at San Francisco.

Kennedy's error with two on and two outs in the fifth - he bobbled a grounder by Jose Lopez and couldn't recover in time to get the runner at third - cost Anderson more pitches; he finished with 92 total.

"It's tough anytime you think you're out of the inning," Anderson said. "You relax a little bit, and I couldn't lock back in after the error."

After the error, Mike Sweeney, who played in Oakland last year, knocked a double to center to drive in two runs. Then Beltre made Anderson work even harder in a 10-pitch at-bat, fouling off five two-strike pitches before hitting an RBI single to left.

"If I'd throw a slider in the dirt, he would have swung through it, but I was kind of tired and didn't get on top of it enough," said Anderson, who said he felt fatigued Thursday for the first time all year.

Sweeney was thrown out to end the inning when Kennedy cut off the relay to the plate and went to shortstop Cliff Pennington, manning the third-base bag.

Kennedy, a second baseman for the first 10 years of his big-league career, has made 13 errors at third and a team-high 20 errors overall, the third most in the league.

"I don't give a (hoot) if I have 100 errors, I just don't like it when it affects the pitchers," said Kennedy, who explained that he has been having trouble judging balls hit right at him at third, not always knowing how hard they're hit. He said

he'd be OK with playing third base full time again, though. His first year at second was just as rough, and he believes he's capable of making the proper adjustments.

Oakland had few opportunities against Seattle starter Doug Fister, and capitalized on the best. Kurt Suzuki tripled to lead off the fourth and scored on Daric Barton's one-out double. Jack Cust homered to lead off the ninth against David Aardsma, Cust's team-high 25th homer of the season.

Beltre, the Mariners' all-around hero on the night, made the defensive play of the game, leaping at third for a rocket by Travis Buck to end the seventh.

Ryan Sweeney remained out with knee tendinitis. Geren acknowledged that the outfielder might miss the remaining three games.

A's leading off

[Susan Slusser](#), San Francisco Chronicle

Last chance: The A's haven't quite managed to earn a winning season or remain out of the cellar, but they do still have a shot at taking the season series from the AL West champion Angels if they sweep this weekend. The Angels are 4-1 in Oakland this year.

Kennedy's error costs A's in loss

Anderson has hard luck in season-ending defeat

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- In his final start of the year on Thursday, A's rookie left-hander Brett Anderson suffered his first loss since Aug. 30.

There was no head-hanging for the gifted 21-year-old in the postgame clubhouse at Safeco Field, though.

He knew he deserved better, whether he said the words or not.

Third baseman Adam Kennedy's two-out error in the fifth inning allowed the Mariners to score three unearned runs on the way to a 4-2 victory that closed out a three-game sweep.

Without the error, which forced Anderson to throw a dozen more pitches in the inning, he might have been allowed to go deeper into the game.

Instead, he was stopped after five frames and 92 pitches, pinned with the loss despite allowing one earned run -- on a solo homer by Adrian Beltre in the second inning -- for the second consecutive start.

"It's tough," said Anderson, who gave up eight hits and walked one while striking out five. "Any time you feel like you're out of the inning, you relax a little bit. ... I made some bad pitches after that."

With runners at first base and second, Jose Lopez hit a hard ground ball that Kennedy tried to smother but bobbled, then was late in his attempt to hustle to the bag for a forceout at third.

That loaded the bases for former A's designated hitter Mike Sweeney, who drilled a two-run single to right, and Beltre followed with an RBI single to left.

"It was an in-between hop," Kennedy said, gamely standing at his locker in full-accountability mode. "I thought I could still get over there and get him."

Acquired in May to fill in for then-injured Mark Ellis at second base, Kennedy was moved to the hot corner when Ellis came off the 60-day disabled list on June 28. He's made 13 errors at third base, including six in his past 10 games.

"I've just been having a hard time with the depth [perception] on balls hit right at me," he explained. "You don't have that in the middle infield, where you can move to take the ball where you want it."

Kennedy has gone through long stretches of excellent defensive play, and his consistent bat has been a boon to Oakland's offensive resurgence; his batting average has hovered in the .280-.300 range all year, and he batted .351 in September.

But the errors -- including seven at second base, giving him a career-high 20 -- have come in bunches, and in a variety of ways: high throws, low throws, wide throws, bobbles and boots.

"If it was one particular thing," A's manager Bob Geren said, "maybe you'd be able to put your finger on it."

Asked if the recent spate of E's has crept into his head, Kennedy shook his head with a weary smile.

"I don't give a spit if I make 100 errors," he said. "I just don't like it when it affects the pitchers and their wins and losses."

This one did. It left Anderson with a record of 11-11.

"We made one mistake in the field and they capitalized on it, big-time," Geren said. "That was the difference."

Who knows? Without the error, maybe Jack Cust's leadoff homer to left-center field off Mariners closer David Aardsma in the ninth would have been a game-winner.

Instead, it was reduced to a footnote milestone. Cust reached the 25-homer mark for a third consecutive season.

"On a personal level, it feels good," Cust said. "I'd have liked to have a better year, but it's a nice accomplishment."

Beltre had opened the scoring by opening the second inning with a first-pitch blast to just right of center field, but Daric Barton followed Kurt Suzuki's leadoff triple in the fourth off righty Doug Fister with a game-tying double.

Fister, however, spent his night bending without breaking, and the A's never came up with the big hits that came so freely for them while putting together a 16-4 run before arriving in the Emerald City.

"This Oakland team came in swinging awfully effective," said Mariners manager Don Wakamatsu, whose club can claim a tie for second place in the American League West with a weekend sweep of the Rangers.

"They had some great games against Anaheim and Texas before this series, and I'm awfully proud of the pitching performances to negate that. [Brandon] Morrow yesterday, Felix [Hernandez] the first day and tonight with Fister."

Anderson, who went 4-0 with a 2.28 ERA in four September starts, provided the A's with some of their best pitching performances of the year.

He posted a 3.48 ERA in 14 starts after the All-Star break, lost only three times after July 24 and set an Oakland single-season strikeout record for rookies. He finished with 150 strikeouts over 175 1/3 innings.

"He's going to be one of the elite pitchers in the league, without a doubt," Geren said. "He's a special young man."

After noting his two-hit shutout at Fenway Park as the personal highlight of his first season and the double he gave up to Giants pitcher Matt Cain as one of the lowlights, Anderson said he was generally happy with his year as a whole.

"There's always going to be highs and lows, so you've just got to roll with it," he said. "But I'm pretty pleased. To get 11 wins and set a rookie strikeouts record, you can't be too unhappy with that."

A's can take season series from Halos

Oakland (75-84) vs. Los Angeles (94-65), 7:05 p.m. PT

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- It won't count for much of anything, but at this point in the season, non-contenders are usually looking for any and all forms of motivation to sprint all the way through the finish-line tape.

When the A's take on the American League West champion Angels in a season-ending -- for Oakland, anyway -- three-game series that starts Friday at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, they'll have a chance at winning the season series with their rivals from Orange County.

The Halos hold the season-series edge, 9-7, so it'll take a sweep to give the last-place A's the overall edge, and it's an edge in which manager Bob Geren said his club would take a measure of pride.

"Sure," said Geren, who'll start left-hander Gio Gonzalez in the opener. "They're the division winners, and they're in a position to have a good run in the playoffs. But it seems like we always play them tough."

An informal poll of a small group of veteran A's revealed something less than a burning intensity to secure the season series against the Angels. The general consensus: "It won't change that we're in last place and they're going to the playoffs."

That doesn't mean, however, that there isn't plenty of motivation heading into the final weekend of the season.

"Every time you take the field, you're motivated to win that day," said designated hitter Jack Cust. "Angels, Royals, Yankees, whatever. And it'd be nice to finish up playing the way we've played the past couple months. We've had a pretty good run at the end, and you want to take that feeling into the offseason with you."

[Pitching matchup](#)

OAK: LHP Gio Gonzalez (6-6, 5.73 ERA)

Gonzalez, 24, shook off his previous two shaky outings to throw 6 1/3 scoreless innings against the high-powered Halos on Friday at Angel Stadium to get his sixth win of the season. A frequent victim of his own command problems but armed with a killer noon-to-6 curveball, Gonzalez also struck out seven batters and walked just one. He's 1-0 with a 3.86 ERA in two starts against the Angels in his career.



LAA: RHP Jered Weaver (15-8, 3.84 ERA)

Weaver, enduring a hard-luck stretch, yielded only two earned runs in six innings against the Athletics on Friday night at home but dropped his third straight start for the first time in his career. A leadoff walk in the fifth cost him a run on a two-out single, and another two-out hit delivered the second A's run in the sixth. Weaver gave up six hits and three walks, striking out one man. Weaver is 0-1 with a 4.02 ERA in three starts against the A's this season and 2-3 with a 2.93 ERA in 10 career outings.

Dribblers ...

As expected, outfielder Ryan Sweeney was out of the lineup Thursday for the finale of a three-game series against the Mariners. He has a small tear in the patella tendon in his left knee, and his right knee has been sore for some time, too. Asked why Sweeney isn't shut down for the year, like Scott Hairston (hip, back), Geren said, "It looks like that might be a possibility," but he added, "If [Sweeney] feels like he can go, I'll put him in there." ... The Angels and A's have occupied first and last place, respectively, in the AL West for the past 153 days. ... Oakland is 11-10-4 in home series this season, 9-13-5 on the road. ... Dropping the series in Seattle this week marked the end of a nine-series streak in which the A's had won five and split four. ... Oakland's team ERA in September was 3.68, second-best in the AL.

[Up next](#)

- Saturday: Athletics (Dana Eveland, 2-3, 7.09) vs. Angels (Scott Kazmir, 9-9, 5.06), 1:05 p.m. PT 
- Sunday: Athletics (Edgar Gonzalez, 0-4, 5.51) vs. Angels (Joe Saunders, 15-7, 4.62), 1:05 p.m. PT 

Skaalen gets credit for offensive surge

A's hitting coach guiding team to turnaround at plate

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- In addition to batting .297 in September, the second-best mark in the Majors behind the Yankees' .299, the A's led the Major in runs (167), doubles (66) and stolen bases (28), ranked second in hits (284) and third in extra-base hits (96) and slugging percentage (.455) for the month.

Oakland's offense hasn't been a one-month wonder, though.

It's shown dramatic improvement in the second half of the season, as evidenced by the club's .282 batting average since the All-Star break heading into Thursday's finale of a three-game series at Safeco Field.

It stands to reason that first-year hitting coach Jim Skaalen, formerly of the big-hitting Brewers, deserves a great deal of credit for the advancements. Skaalen, however, deflects praise toward the players.

"Their work ethic has been absolutely unbelievable to me, and I had an awful lot of hard workers in Milwaukee," he said before batting practice Thursday. "You look into the [indoor] cage most days, and at various times you've got three-fourths of the team in there doing stuff, with passion. ... At 2:30 today, [Kurt] Suzuki, [Travis] Buck and [Adam] Kennedy were all in there, and every guy kind of has his own time slot when he gets in there and works on whatever their emphasis is for the time being.

"I'm so excited to watch this and see the improvements they've made. And give the organization credit; they're developing something pretty exciting here."

Asked to name some of the players who have made the greatest strides, Skaalen -- the players call him "Skee" -- tops his list with the obvious: Rajai Davis, who entered Thursday's game batting .325 since the beginning of June (fifth-best in the American League) and .327 since the All-Star break (seventh-best in the AL).

"Rajai, for sure," Skaalen said. "This kid is such a great worker. A great kid, period. He's made improvements across the board, and like a lot of the guys who've been hitting well here down the stretch, part of it is just getting out there.

"With consistent playing time comes better timing, better tempo, greater confidence. And confidence, of course, is such a big part of succeeding at this level."

Among the other players Skaalen mentioned, Daric Barton and Cliff Pennington have excelled with regular playing time.

Through Wednesday, Barton was batting .304 since being reinstated from the disabled list Aug. 21, including .329 with seven doubles, a triple, a home run, 15 RBIs and 18 runs scored over his past 21 games, to get his overall average up to .267.

Barton batted .226 -- the third-lowest mark in the AL and seventh-lowest in Oakland history -- as Oakland's starting first baseman last season, but Skaalen is high on his future.

"I see Daric as being a consistent high-average guy with gap power," Skaalen said. "I don't think he's ever going to be that prototypical power first baseman; he's not going to be a 30-homer guy. But he's got good power to the gaps, an excellent strike zone, and he's just a good hitter in general."

Pennington, recalled from Triple-A Sacramento on July 31 to take over the starting job at short in the wake of the trade that sent Orlando Cabrera to Minnesota, is batting .281 overall and was batting .345 with 10 multi-hit games, seven doubles, three triples, two home runs, 12 RBIs and 14 runs scored over his previous 23 games before Thursday.

He batted .320 in his first 14 games after being called up but went into a 19-game, .161 funk before his resurgence.

"Cliff's consistency, to be honest, has surprised me," Skaalen said. "I saw him a little in Spring Training, and he's made a few tweaks that have really eliminated some of the highs and lows."

Eric Patterson, called up Aug. 28 after an MVP-caliber year at Sacramento, hasn't played nearly as much as Barton and Pennington, but injuries to Scott Hairston and Ryan Sweeney have opened the door to more at-bats, and he was on a 12-for-24 tear with five multi-hit contests over his previous eight games through Wednesday.

"Again, regular playing time is a factor there, too," Skaalen said. "You don't do what Eric did at the Triple-A level [.307, 29 doubles, 11 triples, 12 homers, 56 RBIs, a .376 on-base percentage and 43 stolen bases] without being extremely talented."

Skaalen also mentioned Mark Ellis, Ryan Sweeney and Suzuki by name, but he qualified their inclusion on his list of standouts by noting that they were fairly polished hitters heading into the season.

A's manager Bob Geren suggested that no matter how much credit Skaalen gives to the players, they'd give it right back.

"I'm very happy with what he's done," Geren said. "He puts in a lot of hours, and the players genuinely appreciate it. The game starts, and he's worn out [from everything he's done to prepare for the game]. Ultimately, the hitter has to go up and hit, but [Skaalen] has them as prepared as possible."

Sweeney makes amends for error with key hit

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — Mike Sweeney followed a two-out error with a tiebreaking two-run single in the fifth inning, and the Seattle Mariners beat the A's, 4-2, Thursday night.

Doug Fister (3-4) went seven innings, allowing five hits and a run for his first win since Sept. 1.

David Aardsma gave up a solo home run to Jack Cust in the ninth, his 25th, but finished for his 37th save in 41 opportunities. He tied Kazuhiro Sasaki for third on the club's single-season saves list.

Adrian Beltre hit his eighth home run, on Brett Anderson's first pitch of the second. It carried 428 feet into the center-field seats. In each of his past seven seasons, Beltre did not hit fewer than 19 home runs, but he missed 51 games this season with injuries.

Anderson (11-11) had not lost since Aug. 30. He was 4-0 in September with a 2.28 ERA and was 8-3 with a 3.02 ERA over his previous 16 starts.

The Mariners scored three runs in the fifth after third baseman Adam Kennedy's error.

With the score tied at 1, Adam Moore opened with a single and stole second, his first big league steal. Franklin Gutierrez walked with two outs then Jose Lopez hit a high hopper that Kennedy took off his chest. He scrambled to retrieve it but not before Moore slid safely into third.

Sweeney then stroked a two-run single to right-center. Beltre added another run with a single to left, scoring Lopez from second but Sweeney was thrown out trying to take third.

Over his last 23 games, Sweeney is hitting .386 with four home runs and 15 RBIs.

Even in bad economy, sports fans love their games

By EDDIE PELLIS, AP National Writer

Sports fans are familiar with pain that's supposed to end their love affair with the game. There are the labor spats between billionaire team owners and millionaire athletes. The off-field antics that land players in handcuffs. The losing seasons.

Now, the Great Recession has sapped our wealth and ushered in an era of high unemployment and consumer frugality. It's put an end to many unnecessary luxuries and made people more cautious about spending on everyday items, too.

Yet sports fans — as they always do — are still coming back to the ballpark.

The worst recession since World War II has dented but not ended America's passion for sports. Much of the hit has been to skyboxes and the most expensive seats. For the most part, fans are still opening their wallets and going to games.

Exhibit A: the new NFL season. Led by the Dallas Cowboys, who put 105,000-plus in their new, \$1.15 billion stadium on opening night, the league sold out 45 of the first 48 games of 2009.

Baseball? Attendance is down about 7 percent, but still nearly even with 2005, when the economy was booming.

Tennis' U.S. Open drew record crowds in New York last month.

And those who don't attend the games still look for ways to take part: CBS Sports.com reports about a 15 percent increase in fantasy football sign-ups, with many players paying \$20 or more for a season's worth of interactive fun.

It's all in keeping with a trend that has endured through decades of strikes, lockouts and economic turndowns.

"What we're always finding out is that fans are going to consume sports in a passionate manner," says Wayne McDonnell, who teaches about sports and the economy at the New York University Tisch Center. "It might not be with the frequency they once did, but they are still going."

Major League Baseball, which bore the full brunt of the recession this season, can attribute at least part of its 7 percent attendance decline to both the New York Yankees and Mets moving into smaller ballparks.

Last month, an Associated Press-Knowledge Networks poll found 32 percent of baseball fans had attended an MLB game last year, compared with 27 percent this year. At the time, nearly a quarter of fans said it was somewhat or very likely they'd get to a ballpark before the end of the season.

Todd Tompkins of Pinckney, Mich., sat behind first base at Comerica Park on Tuesday, watching his Detroit Tigers start a critical series against the Minnesota Twins in a city ravaged by economic blows. Michigan's unemployment rate, the highest in the nation, is 15.2 percent.

"I'm not a season-ticket holder, but I'll be here all week, and that will be 32 games this season. The economy hasn't hurt me, but you can see it in the (smaller) crowds this year," the 34-year-old Tompkins says.

Fans want to see their teams in action for some of the same reasons movies also traditionally do well in tough economic times: People need a place to escape, to feel they're part of something.

The Cowboys drew 105,121 fans to the opening of their new stadium in September, all of whom can tell their kids and grandkids they were there for the beginning.

The U.S. Open still caters to a wealthier, see-and-be-seen crowd — and 721,059 attended over 15 days to see, be seen and watch a little tennis. Ticket prices at Flushing Meadows largely stayed the same as in 2008 — \$22 was the cheapest and \$800 for courtside — and no ticket price went down.

But many team owners who hoped to profit handsomely from premium seats and fine dining are finding less-than-expected demand for those luxuries in these hard times.

The Yankees sold about 95 percent of available seats at the team's new stadium, but most of the unsold tickets were the most expensive ones, according to Yankees President Randy Levine.

The team also took a PR hit when it charged \$2,500 for prime tickets. But like many franchises, it adjusted — slashing prices for the premium seats and announcing the price of about 6,500 seats will drop for the 2010 season.

Fans adjusted, too.

"Sports didn't do well at the beginning of this," McDonnell says. "We saw furloughs, massive layoffs. As the recession grew over the past few months, teams adapted their strategies, started doing things to try to win back fans by making it more affordable and economical."

The Oakland A's doubled the number of \$2 seats available for Wednesday games at the start of the 2009 season. The Tigers added more \$5 tickets and \$5 parking. The NBA, long worried that the average fan was being priced out of the game, saw the number of cheap seats — \$10 or less — double from an average of 500 to about 1,000.

Meanwhile, for the \$20 (or more) it can cost to join a league with their buddies, football fans can get a season's worth of entertainment without heading to the stadium. Fantasy football is a billion-dollar business that allows fans to build their own teams and compete against their friends.

"We've found people will continue to pay the price of a movie ticket for a quality fantasy sports experience," says CBS Sports.com senior vice president Jason Kint.

Of course, as the pain caused by the recession begins to fade, there still are ways that fans could be alienated.

Friction over the NFL's collective bargaining agreement, which expires at the end of next season, could lead to the first work stoppage since 1987 in America's most popular sport.

"You could see a lot of fans being jarred and alienated rather quickly," McDonnell says. "They could look back at an economic situation and say, 'I committed \$300 to going to a football game and what do I have to show for it?' It's millionaires fighting billionaires over percentage points on gross revenues."

But American fans have a history of returning from those setbacks, too.

MLB attendance dropped 20 percent the season after a strike washed out the World Series in 1994. It took 12 years and the addition of four new teams for the numbers to get back to those levels — but eventually, they did.

The NHL missed the 2004-05 season because of a lockout. The league has set an attendance record every season since.

Same story with the economy. In the early 1980s, then again in the early 1990s, baseball attendance remained relatively steady despite economic setbacks.

"Recession is over," says Minnesota Twins fan Matt Hepokoski, who drove two hours with his family to see a game at the soon-to-be-vacated Metrodome.

He figures he'll make the trip again next year, when the Twins start playing in new Target Field.

"They'll kind of have a free pass for a year or two for the new stadium," Hepokoski says.