

A's News Clips, Thursday, October 15, 2009

Making the grade: Starting pitching

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

"Making the Grade" is a four-part series analyzing the performances of various units of the 2009 Oakland A's. Today: starting pitching, followed by bullpen (Friday), offense (next Wednesday) and defense (next Friday).

OAKLAND -- Though unannounced, it was clear heading into the 2009 season that Phase I of the rebuilding project, to which A's general manager Billy Beane has publicly committed, focused on pitching.

Even the additions of established offensive stars Matt Holliday, Jason Giambi, Orlando Cabrera and Nomar Garciaparra came with the development of the organization's deep stable of talent on the mound -- starters, in particular -- in mind.

The thinking: give the kids a little room for error by giving them ample run support.

It didn't quite work out as planned; none of the aforementioned veterans ended up making a significant impact, and only Garciaparra remained with the team throughout the year. But that didn't prevent the young pitchers from developing at a pace with which the team and its fans should be pleased.

Oakland's rotation, anchored by a pair of 21-year-olds, was the youngest in the Majors, and while it certainly encountered the inevitable highs and lows that come with inexperience at the game's highest level, it survived and -- in many cases -- thrived.

(Note: Starting pitchers not under club control for 2010 are not included, which rules out veterans Brett Tomko and Edgar Gonzalez, who combined to make 12 starts in '09. Among those under club control next season, only those who made at least five starts are listed below.)

Overall: B-

Left-hander Dallas Braden, who turned 26 in August, grades out the highest with an "A-." Having bounced back and forth between Oakland's bullpen and rotation, while bouncing back and forth between the big league club and Triple-A Sacramento prior to 2009, he entered Spring Training as merely a candidate to start. He ended up earning the honor of starting on Opening Night and becoming the vocal and spiritual leader of the staff. His 8-9 record doesn't jump off the page, but he was victimized by horrendous run support for much of the season's first half, and his 3.89 ERA was tops among A's starters who answered the bell at least 20 times; his season ended after 22 starts because of a foot rash that devolved into a medical nightmare and left him with nerve damage. He's no superstar, but his guts, guile and gumption earned him respect from all corners of the clubhouse.

Rookie lefty Brett Anderson, who won't turn 22 until February, merits a "B+" despite fairly pedestrian overall numbers of 11-11 with a 4.06 ERA. More significant, given his age and developmental stage, are his 6-4 record with a 3.48 in 14 starts after the All-Star break, and his 4-1 record with a 2.20 ERA in his final five starts. The two-hit shutout that Anderson threw at Fenway Park was no fluke; the kid absolutely has superstar potential, and the progress and adjustments he made along the way suggest that his ascension to the elite ranks will come sooner rather than later.

Rookie righty Trevor Cahill, who turns 22 in March, checks in with a "B" -- again, skewing positive based on his age. He didn't make the dramatic strides that Anderson did, but he did make strides, particularly in terms of keeping the ball down in the strike zone during the latter stages of the season. Armed with what has the potential to be one of the best sinkers in baseball, Cahill (10-13, 4.63 ERA) struggled with the long ball specifically -- he allowed an Oakland-rookie-record 27 homers -- and command in general at times, but opponents raved about his ability and frequently offered unsolicited endorsements of Cahill as a future front-line starter.

Rookie righty Vin Mazzaro, who turned 23 after his season was cut short with a shoulder injury in August, grades out with a "C-." After lighting it up as a June callup, posting a 0.00 ERA while winning his first two starts, Mazzaro (5-9, 5.32) lost eight consecutive decisions and was far worse after the All-Star break than he'd been before it. Frequently mentioned in the same breath as Anderson and Cahill in terms of talent, Mazzaro didn't appear nearly as poised or polished, frequently letting rallies or subpar outings snowball. His 1.74 WHIP -- his walks-to-strikeouts ratio was an even 1-to-1 in six August starts -- needs to come down dramatically if he's to be counted on in 2010.

Rookie lefty Gio Gonzalez, who turned 24 in September, has to get his WHIP (1.71) crackin', too, but his command was significantly better late in the season, as evidenced by his 82 strikeouts against 42 walks in 14 starts after the All-Star break, so he picks up a "C+." Gonzalez (6-7, 5.75) has one of the better curveballs in the game when he stays on top of it, and when he does, his low-90's fastball does what it did for Barry Zito in Zito's heyday -- it turns him into a power pitcher without classic power stuff. Gonzalez has some growing up to do; he's the first to admit that composure on the mound

needs to be a focus going forward. But as they did with Cahill, opposing hitters often went out of their way to say that Gonzalez could be a monster with improved command and poise.

Rookie lefty Josh Outman, who turned 25 in September, appeared to be on his way to a breakout year, going 4-1 with a 3.48 ERA in 14 games (12 starts) before his season was cut short by Tommy John surgery in June. Based on what he did while healthy, he's an "A," but he missed midterms and finals, so it's more of an "INC." A hard thrower with solid secondary stuff and excellent command (1.16 WHIP), Outman isn't expected back until midseason 2010, but when he returns, he'll almost certainly have a spot in the rotation waiting for him.

Rookie righty Clayton Mortensen, who will turn 25 next April, was acquired in the Holliday deal with the Cardinals and made six starts for the A's, so anything less than an "INC" probably would be unfair. He showed flashes of brilliance, most notably in a six-inning stints that beat the American League Central champion Twins in Minnesota on Sept. 11, but Mortensen (2-4, 7.63) issued 12 walks and struck out 11 for the year (with a 1.79 WHIP) and will have to show improved command -- both in and out of the strike zone -- and develop better secondary stuff to complement his solid two-seam fastball to challenge for a rotation spot next spring.

Oakland A's MLN: Instructs Wrapping Up

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Oct 13, 2009

The Oakland A's 2009 Instructional League camp is in its final week. We recently caught-up with A's Director of Player Development Keith Lieppman to find out how it was going...

The Oakland A's US Instructional League is winding down, with the final day of camp coming on Saturday. According to A's Director of Player Development Keith Lieppman, camp has gone well. The organization isn't keep statistics for the games being played in camp, as they are more focused on individual skill development than results. The A's will hand out awards for top performers in Instructs later this week, but Lieppman shared some of the notable performers.

According to Lieppman, outfielder Rashun Dixon has been the "leading hitter for most of the program."

"Dixon has made a nice adjustment with the bat," Lieppman said.

The 19-year-old hit only .214 with a 581 OPS in 57 games with the Vancouver Canadians this season, but he posted an 853 OPS with the A's Rookie League team last season and much is expected in the future from the five-tool prospect from Mississippi.

Lieppman also had praise for another one of the A's youngest prospects, catcher Max Stassi, who was taken in the fourth round by Oakland in this year's draft and signed an above-slot deal with the A's on deadline day. Stassi has received praise for his bat in his limited professional experience (he hit .286 in 49 at-bats with Vancouver this season), but Lieppman has been impressed with the 18-year-old's work behind the plate.

"Stassi has looked exceptionally adept at receiving and throwing. A very impressive defender for a high school player," Lieppman said.

Lieppman also mentioned that fellow 2009 top-10 round draft picks Stephen Parker (5th round) and Ian Krol (7th round) have performed well in camp.

"Parker continues to show an improved swing from the time he signed," Lieppman said.

"[While] Krol has shown maturity and good stuff as a high school player in this camp."

Utilityman Conner Crumbliss, who put together an impressive first pro season by hitting .290 with an 831 OPS in 71 games for Vancouver and Kane County, has impressed the A's coaching staff with his hustle and determination both at the plate and in the field, according to Lieppman.

Injuries have been a factor in camp. Outfielder Jeremy Barfield left camp this week, as he is dealing with minor injuries in both knees. Barfield told OaklandClubhouse.com earlier this month that he is planning on having a minor knee procedure this off-season. Outfielder Chris Berroa was also sent home early with an injury. He was struck in the face with a fly ball and lost a tooth. Catcher Josh Leyland, a 16th round pick by Oakland this season, had his camp cut short by a leg injury that he sustained during the Rookie ball season that lingered into Instructs.

Lieppman indicated that top pitching prospect Michael Ynoa is progressing well from a strained right elbow that kept him out of the A's Rookie League season. Ynoa is expected to pitch in game action during the A's Dominican Instructional League

that takes place later this month.

In large part because of injuries, shortstop Tyler Ladendorf has seen time at a number of different positions during Instructs, namely shortstop, second base, right-field and left-field. Ladendorf was acquired by the A's from the Minnesota Twins organization for Orlando Cabrera in late July. A 2008 second-round pick, Ladendorf hit only .231 in 35 games with Kane County after the trade, but he finished strong, batting .391 with a .982 OPS in six September games. Ladendorf is very athletic, having stolen 31 bases and hit 16 homeruns in only 53 games during his final season at Howard Community College.