

A's News Clips, Monday, November 9, 2009

Plenty of fireworks at Rising Stars Game

Tilt full of energy, glimpse of future, despite Strasburg's absence

By Tom Singer / MLB.com

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- The event was set up as Stephen Strasburg's coming-out party. That didn't happen, but the injury-forced absence of the nation's No. 1 Draft pick and prospect did not keep a record crowd from coming out to glimpse the future.

By the time the turnstiles stopped turning, there were 4,550 in Surprise Stadium for the Rising Stars Game, about 10 times the typical Arizona Fall League crowd and the largest in the all-star game's four-year history.

The festive fans' need for action didn't go unanswered, as the West Division pulled out an 8-7 victory over the East on Matt McBride's two-run homer in the bottom of the eighth off Drew Storen.

This was an all-star showcase that featured four homers among 24 hits, four other extra-base knocks, nine walks -- and just enough clutch pitches by the 17 hurlers used to keep it competitive.

"The idea is to try to get as many pitchers as we can in the game," said West manager Kevin Bradshaw, "and our bullpen did a heck of a job."

Strasburg was kept from his East start by a strained neck muscle. At least, that was the official explanation.

Perhaps the Nationals' future just sensed that the early game forecast called for steady showers of hits, with occasional bolts of lightning. Not a good climate for pitchers.

The game got off to a loud start when left-hander Mike Minor dug a 7-0 hole for the West in the top of the first, and pitchers were dodging potholes the rest of the night.

The West landed a couple of big early counterpunches on Chris Heisey's two-run homer in the bottom of the first and a four-run third keyed by Yonder Alonso's two-run double, then finally broke on top on McBride's towering drive.

"I tried to put a good swing on it," McBride, an Indians prospect, said of Storen's fastball, "and make something happen.

"This is a great bunch of guys. We weren't going to give up until the last out. We inched our way back."

Then McBride hit one a mile.

Minor, one of five first-round picks in June's First-Year Player Draft and among the total of 18 first-rounders on the Rising Stars rosters, allowed seven hits and one unearned run among the seven he allowed in two-thirds of an inning.

Bradshaw didn't want to subject the Braves prospect to the humility of a first-inning hook, but was left with no choice after Jose Tabata's second single drove in a seventh run.

"That was about it," Bradshaw said. "He made some decent pitches and gave up some broken-bat hits. And there were a couple of other balls we should've handled in the infield. But then we had no choice."

The big blow was by a name already familiar to local fans -- Brandon Allen, the D-backs' primary first baseman the final five weeks of the season, drilled a three-run homer to dead center. Allen hit a 1-0 slider from Minor.

Lest anyone be tempted to shrug off the performers and performances in this game, consider some of the names included in last October's box score:

Gordon Beckham, Matt Wieters, Phil Hughes, Brian Matusz, Tommy Hanson.

All made Major League impacts this season, with the latter right-hander being a favorite for National League Rookie of the Year honors after going 11-4 with a 2.89 ERA for the Braves.

No wonder this Rising Stars Game is informally referred to in baseball inner circles as a "finishing school."

No previous "class" had as much electricity as this one -- even without Strasburg.

Not only was the attendance exceptional, but the game was carried on MLB Network and streamed live on MLB.TV.

"A lot of fun. Nice crowd, television ... couldn't have been a better night," Bradshaw said.

While all 30 Major League organizations were represented among the 50 players on the two rosters, four teams shared the honor of two starters each: the Orioles (first baseman Brandon Snyder and third baseman Josh Bell), the A's (left fielder Grant Desme and second baseman Jemile Weeks), the Mariners (center fielder Dustin Ackley and shortstop Carlos Triunfel) and the Reds (left fielder Heisey and first baseman Alonso).

Interestingly, there were two Castros in the starting lineups. East shortstop Starlin Castro hails from the Dominican Republic, and West catcher Jason Castro is from a place evidently named for him -- Castro Valley, Calif.

AFL's Rising Stars set to shine tonight

League's top prospects will face off on MLB.com, Network

By Jonathan Mayo / MLB.com

On any given day in the Arizona Fall League, you can see what amounts to a Minor League All-Star Game.

The Rising Stars Showcase takes it to another level, truly representing the best of the best. The showcase game, which will take place on Saturday at 6:15 p.m. MT/8:15 ET, features current AFL participants selected by scouting and Minor League directors from every organization, along with input from AFL executive director Steve Cobb. The 50 players chosen to represent their organizations and AFL clubs will come together Saturday night at Surprise Stadium.

For the first time, the Showcase will also be available to a national television audience. **MLB Network** will carry a live broadcast of the Rising Stars Game with Diamondbacks announcer Daron Sutton and MLB Network's Tony Clark in the broadcast booth with a live simulcast streamed on MLB.com.

The Rising Stars Showcase matches prospects from each Major League Baseball organization in an East Division against West Division format. Teams from the AFL's East Division feature prospects from the Angels, Athletics, Blue Jays, Cubs, Diamondbacks, Giants, Marlins, Nationals, Orioles, Phillies, Pirates, Rays, Red Sox, Rockies and Twins. Players on the West squad will come from the Astros, Braves, Brewers, Cardinals, Dodgers, Indians, Mariners, Mets, Padres, Rangers, Reds, Royals, Tigers, White Sox and Yankees. All 30 organizations will be represented in the game.

"It's a great opportunity and should be a lot of fun," said A's prospect and Phoenix Desert Dogs outfielder Grant Desme, who leads the AFL in home runs and is tied for the lead in RBIs. "I'll get a chance to play with a bunch of talented guys."

The game was initially set up to feature a marquee pitching matchup of 2009 first-round Draft picks, with No. 1 overall pick Stephen Strasburg going for East and No. 7 pick Mike Minor taking the hill for the West. Strasburg, however, was scratched from the start with a strained muscle in his neck. Tommy Mendoza was chosen to replace Strasburg, both on the roster and as the starting pitcher. Cubs third base prospect Josh Vitters (replaced by Josh Bell) and Orioles pitcher Brandon Erbe (a replacement will be named later) have also been scratched.

"It makes you feel good that they believe I could start this game out of everyone here," said Minor, the Braves lefty who is 1-0 with a 2.31 in 11 2/3 AFL innings to date. "There are a lot of good guys here. I've seen all the pitchers who are in the game and the hitters I'll face. It'll be a lot of fun.

"That they think I'm a rising star makes me feel good. I'm looking forward to it. I've got a lot of buddies I'll be playing with or against in this game."

Minor and Strasburg were two of six 2009 first-round picks scheduled to be at the game, with Dustin Ackley, Mike Leake, Drew Storen and Rangers supplemental first-round pick Tanner Scheppers participating as well.

Including those who are now not going to play in the game, the Rising Stars rosters have six members of MLB.com's midseason Top 50 prospect list: Buster Posey (5), Yonder Alonso (18), Domonic Brown (24), Jason Castro (27), Mike Moustakas (29) and Vitters (31).

The Cincinnati Reds lead all organizations with four players on the West Division roster: Leake, Yonder Alonso, Zack Cozart and Chris Heisey. Several other organizations boast three players in the game.

"It should be a fun day ... a chance to play with some of the younger talent in this league," said Ike Davis, the lone Met on the roster. "I'm honored, it means just a little more that I'm getting there."

What it means beyond that is open to debate. The alumni list from the game, now in its fourth rendition, is impressive, including big leaguers such as Gordon Beckham, Ryan Braun, Jacoby Ellsbury, Tommy Hanson and Phil Hughes. In last year's Rising Stars game, Hanson continued his jaw-dropping AFL performance by going three hitless innings while striking out seven.

"I don't know if one game can make a big difference for you [attention-wise]," Davis said. "This whole league is filled with great young talent. It's been a real eye-opener."

It is just one game, and an exhibition at that, but many scouts will be in attendance to see how the best perform against the best. The Fall League is expecting a good crowd, adding a little more energy to the proceedings than a typical low-key AFL game.

"It's just a great opportunity," Desme said. "But it isn't a ticket to anywhere. I know I have to get better, that I'm not there yet."

Friday's Arizona Fall League roundup

Javelinas' Wells extends on-base streak to 35 games

By MLB.com

Javelinas 6, Saguaros 3

Tigers outfield prospect Casper Wells had two hits and two RBIs to extend his on-base streak to 35 games and lead the Javelinas to victory in the latest Battle of Peoria. Lorenzo Cain (Brewers) stroked three singles, drove in a run and notched three of the Javelinas' seven steals. Reds Minor Leaguer Chris Heisey blasted a two-run homer, his second in three games and fifth of the fall, in a losing cause for the Saguaros.

Solar Sox 11, Rafters 1

Marlins prospect Matt Dominguez doubled twice and drove in four runs to lead Mesa to its third consecutive win. Cuban defector Jose Iglesias (Red Sox) homered and collected five RBIs as part of the Solar Sox's 16-hit attack. Florida State League All-Star Steven Hirschfeld tossed three shutout innings for the win, while fellow Twins Minor Leaguer Spencer Steedley followed with two scoreless frames. Royals prospect Mike Moustakas, the second overall pick in the 2007 Draft, homered for Surprise.

Scorpions 8, Desert Dogs 4

Pirates left-hander Donnie Veal struck out five and allowed an unearned run on three hits over four innings to lower his league-leading ERA to 0.54 for Scottsdale. After Kenta Abe surrendered three runs without retiring a batter in the fifth, Giants prospects Daniel Turpen and Steve Edlefsen combined with two other relievers on five hitless frames. Wilin Rosario hit his third homer in two games for the Scorpions, while Carolina League MVP Brandon Waring (Orioles) went deep for Phoenix.

A's tied to Chone Figgins, Vladimir Guerrero in speculation

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group blog, 11/6/09

Can we expect the A's to make as big an offseason splash as they did last winter? That might be hard to top. But with the World Series wrapped up, the Hot Stove speculation can officially begin. The MLB Network's Jon Heyman discussed this winter's crop of free agents, and he mentioned the A's as potential suitors for third baseman Chone Figgins and outfielder/DH Vladimir Guerrero.

Juicy names, indeed. But I don't see the A's making a push for Figgins. Clearly, they need to sign someone at third. The odds are stacked against Eric Chavez remaining healthy, and it's asking a lot of prospect Brett Wallace to be ready Opening Day. That's why making the call on whether to re-sign Adam Kennedy is the A's first crucial decision of the winter.

Figgins would cost a bundle, with some speculating he could command \$10 million per season on a multi-year deal. Look at the A's offensive strength right now – it's tied to their speed and athleticism with guys like Rajai Davis and Cliff Pennington. They don't need another burner such as Figgins. They need someone who can drive in those speedy guys once they get on base.

Guerrero is intriguing, if only because his injury struggles in 2009 should drive his price down. But he's a huge gamble even at a bargain cost. I'm more intrigued by the A's pursuing someone like Jermaine Dye. His 2010 option was declined by the White Sox on Friday, making him a free agent. He'll turn 36 in January (making him a year older than Vlad), but he's coming off a far more healthy and productive season. Dye plays right field, where the A's have a terrific defender and still-developing hitter in Ryan Sweeney. But remember, Billy Beane acknowledged that the A's need more offense from the corner outfield spots, and that they could look to upgrade in left or right.

Team owner Lew Wolff wants the A's to abandon the philosophy of signing aging sluggers. But let's face it – the A's aren't going to outspend the big-budget teams to sign any superstars. And trading for an impact hitter in his prime will cost the A's some of their elite pitching prospects. I don't see them easily parting with those players (then again, I didn't see them trading for Matt Holliday last winter, either).

Just a few thoughts for you to ponder as the Hot Stove season starts heating up. Let's here what some of you think ...

Sneak peek: The 2010 MLB Power Poll

Chris Bahr, The Sporting News 11/6/09

Once the Yankees are done parading through the city streets this afternoon, they finally will be able to take a deep breath ... and start pondering roster decisions for 2010. After all, free agency begins in two weeks, and spring training is a little more than 14 weeks away.

As they polish that World Series trophy, the Yankees' brass can debate whether they have another \$423 million sitting around to throw at this offseason's premier free agents.

The Hot Stove League will result in plenty of free-agent signings and multiplayer trades, but here is an early look at Sporting News' 2010 Power Poll (with a comment on the biggest issue facing each team):

- 1. Yankees.** World Series MVP Hideki Matsui is a free agent, as are World Series heroes Johnny Damon and Andy Pettitte. Is it time to get younger?
- 2. Phillies.** Their biggest concerns are two players signed for 2010. Can closer Brad Lidge and lefthander Cole Hamels move past their 2009 struggles and return to 2008 form?
- 3. Red Sox.** Once again, they are looking up at their bitter rivals, and they are doing it with a big hole in left field and in their lineup. Will they re-sign Jason Bay or adequately replace his offense? And, no, recent acquisition Jeremy Hermida isn't that player.
- 4. Angels.** No playoff team faces a potentially more damaging offseason. The Angels re-signed right fielder Bobby Abreu on Thursday, but what about ace John Lackey, third baseman Chone Figgins and DH Vladimir Guerrero? Who else (if anyone) stays?

- 5. Dodgers.** In addition to ownership drama, the team must hope left fielder Manny Ramirez returns to form. And after their rotation was exposed in the postseason, will the Dodgers find a No. 1 starter?
- 6. Cardinals.** Manager Tony La Russa and pitching coach Dave Duncan will be back, but what about free-agent left fielder Matt Holliday? The two sides reportedly are talking, but remember that agent Scott Boras is involved.
- 7. Rockies.** The young, improving Rockies should get a rotation boost from the return of lefthander Jeff Francis. But after a subpar second half (.240-9-27), is right fielder Brad Hawpe on the trading block?
- 8. Braves.** The team needs to add a run-producing bat to complement one of the majors' best rotations. To acquire that bat, Atlanta likely will have to dangle a starting pitcher. Which one will it be?
- 9. Rays.** With payroll a concern and holes in the bullpen, will Tampa Bay consider dealing a high-priced veteran like left fielder Carl Crawford (\$10 million in 2010)?
- 10. Giants.** One of the majors' worst offenses must add some pop, or it will risk wasting another season of superb pitching from Tim Lincecum and Matt Cain. Will the Giants make a run at Bay or Holliday?
- 11. Rangers.** The team's young arms made solid progress in 2009, but the offense took a step backward. Can new hitting coach Clint Hurdle improve the selectivity and patience of an offense that fell from third in on-base percentage to 24th?
- 12. Marlins.** Another strong season leads to the inevitable (and perennial) question: Whom won't Florida be able to afford this offseason (in addition to Hermida)? Second baseman Dan Uggla could be the next Marlin to go.
- 13. Twins.** The move to a new outdoor stadium and the their late-season surge to the postseason created plenty of momentum. But Minnesota fans remain on edge. Will catcher Joe Mauer sign an extension?
- 14. Mariners.** After a 24-game improvement this season, Seattle is headed in the right direction. But how much money should the Mariners throw at free-agent first baseman Russell Branyan after his career season?
- 15. Cubs.** The new ownership is promising World Series glory, and the team has its sights set on a leadoff hitter and a power-hitting outfielder. But that is on hold because of right fielder Milton Bradley. What can the Cubs get for him, and how much of his salary can they dump?
- 16. Tigers.** After their late-season meltdown, is there any relief? The bullpen finished in the bottom third in the majors in ERA and could lose closer Fernando Rodney to free agency.
- 17. Mets.** After a disastrous season during which countless All-Stars came up lame -- and that includes third baseman David Wright's anemic home-run stroke -- is their injury curse over?
- 18. Brewers.** Will the Brewers beef up their disappointing rotation and give new pitching coach Rick Peterson something with which to work?
- 19. White Sox.** DH Jim Thome was dealt in late August, and right fielder Jermaine Dye is expected to be the next to leave. How do they replace that offense? (The answer isn't Mark Teahen alone.)
- 20. A's.** The young arms showed plenty of promise as Oakland finished the season strong, but are the young bats ready to follow suit?
- 21. Reds.** They finished ninth in the majors in ERA but must improve an anemic offense that finished 29th in batting average. Will Cincinnati spend for a bat?
- 22. Blue Jays.** Can order be restored after the near mutiny, at least long enough for new general manager Alex Anthopoulos to trade ace Roy Halladay?
- 23. Astros.** New manager Brad Mills inherits a pitching staff with plenty of problems. Will they add a quality starter and/or replace free-agent closer Jose Valverde?
- 24. Diamondbacks.** The team is expected to exercise its \$8.5 million option on righthander Brandon Webb. But how much will the former Cy Young winner help?

25. Orioles. The offense is respectable, but will Baltimore make a move to bolster a pitching staff that lacks an ace and is heavy on young arms?

26. Padres. With several seasons of rebuilding ahead, will new general manager Jed Hoyer be able to resist the urge to trade first baseman Adrian Gonzalez for prospects?

27. Royals. DH Billy Butler is an emerging slugger, but will Kansas City add another bat in hopes of providing some run support for righthander Zack Greinke?

28. Nationals. With a reworked front office and a decent offense, there are signs of hope. But how soon will top overall draft pick Stephen Strasburg be ready to contribute?

29. Pirates. Without major roster upgrades -- and it will take more than second baseman Akinori Iwamura -- is an 18th consecutive losing season inevitable?

30. Indians. In full-blown rebuilding mode, how long will be it before Cleveland develops another ace who will start for another team in Game 1 of the World Series?