



SEATTLE MARINERS NEWS CLIPS

April 6, 2010



Aardsma ready to begin closing again

Mariners: After cutting his teeth as Seattle's closer and saving 38 games in 2009, hard-throwing reliever set for second go-round

LARRY LARUE; Staff writer

The Tacoma News Tribune

Published: 04/06/10 12:05 am

OAKLAND - A year ago, David Aardsma opened his first season with the Seattle Mariners as a setup man - a reliever who'd never saved a big-league game.

On Monday, he opened 2010 as the Mariners' closer. And said it didn't feel much different, in part because he wouldn't let it.

"I can't think about the job any differently, because it really hasn't changed," Aardsma said. "I have to focus on throwing strikes, no matter what my role is.

"You can lose games in the seventh inning as well as the ninth."

Aardsma has done both, though he saved 38 games last season after replacing Brandon Morrow in the ninth inning in early May.

"I know hitters and they know me, and they're probably not going to see a much different look from me this year," he said. "I've got the same pitches, so it's a matter of executing what I want to do."

In 71 innings last season - a career-high 73 appearances - Aardsma struck out 80 batters and walked 34. He finished with an ERA of 2.52.

On Monday, his biggest pregame challenge was a nasty cough, the remnants of a spring chest cold. It was so persistent, in fact, that it appeared Aardsma couldn't possibly pitch if needed.

"Adrenaline kicks in when you throw your first pitch in the bullpen," he said. "I'll be fine. I won't be coughing much on the mound, and if I am, I won't notice it."

Aardsma then earned his first save of 2010, working the ninth inning of 5-3 win over Oakland.

Lee passes latest test

Cliff Lee threw again on flat ground Monday and on Friday will take the mound in the Texas bullpen for his first such session since straining an abdominal muscle last month.

"I've felt so good the last four or five days, it's like it's behind me," Lee said. "I have to be smart and not push," Lee said. "Now it's a matter of building my strength, getting some innings. I usually feel like throwing more than they want me to.

"At some point, I'll probably need a couple of starts. You can't replicate games, facing hitters."

Manager Don Wakamatsu said he was pleased, and said Lee remained ahead of schedule.

Short hops

The plan behind the plate early in the season is to divide time between **Rob Johnson** and rookie **Adam Moore** evenly. "We want to give Rob time to work into game-shape after the hip surgeries, and doing it that way we can pick-and-choose which pitchers Adam faces," Wakamatsu said. ... **Milton Bradley** tested his right quad muscle early in the afternoon, and said he was ready to play left field. The Mariners put him through some tests

to make sure, then put him in the lineup. ... **Felix Hernandez** made his third opening day start Monday. Only **Randy Johnson** (6) and **Jamie Moyer** (4) made more.

On tap

The Mariners and Oakland play a 7:07 p.m. game today to be televised by FSN. Probable starters are Seattle's **Ian Snell** vs. **Dallas Braden**.

Off and Running

Opening Day: Figgins ignites offense, defense as Mariners edge A's, 5-3

LARRY LARUE; Staff writer

The Tacoma News Tribune

Published: 04/06/10 12:05 am

OAKLAND - Chone Figgins was a prize offseason acquisition for the Seattle Mariners - an impact player who had helped make the Angels go, and it took him one night to remind the team what he could do.

Figgins stole two bases, scored two runs and then hustled to keep a ninth-inning threat alive Monday, setting up Casey Kotchman's two-out, two-run, tiebreaking single and pushing Seattle to a 5-3 victory over Oakland.

"That's what Ichiro (Suzuki) and I are going to do all season: get on base, run and create havoc," Figgins said. "That's the plan, anyway."

There were other opening-night story lines - a gritty start from Felix Hernandez, an infield defense that turned four double plays and David Aardsma's save - but Figgins was the man who showed why these aren't your father's Mariners.

As they opened their 34th season, the Mariners proved what Don Wakamatsu hinted at all spring. This Seattle team has speed at the top of its lineup, and is more than willing to let it loose.

"We're going to push the envelope, and we're going to get caught at times," Wakamatsu said. "But we are going to be aggressive. We are going to push the defense."

In the previous 33 opening day games, the Mariners stole nine bases, and no player had ever swiped more than one of those. That record lasted until the third inning, by which time Figgins turned a pair of walks into two steals - and two runs.

Figgins drew a walk from Ben Sheets in the first inning, then again in the third, and each time stole second base, continuing on to third each time on catcher Kurt Suzuki's throwing errors.

Both times, No. 3 hitter Kotchman - who talked his way into that spot in the batting order - got Figgins home.

In the first inning, Oakland brought its infield in with Figgins at third base and one out, and Kotchman doubled to the wall in right-center field. In the third inning, Kotchman's fly ball to left proved just deep enough when Figgins slid around Kurt Suzuki's tag attempt at the plate.

And Figgins wasn't the only Mariner running. Ichiro led off the third inning with a single and stole second base. With Figgins at the plate and no one out, Ichiro tried to steal third - and was thrown out.

"Ichiro didn't get the best jump, but we're going to take our chances with he and Figgy running," Wakamatsu said.

In between those speed-inspired runs, the Mariners got a more traditional score - Rob Johnson's home run on his first at-bat since undergoing surgery on both hips last winter.

Hernandez, meanwhile, was a portrait of efficiency early, using only 37 pitches in the first three innings, 62 through five. In the same span, Oakland's Sheets threw 94 pitches and was pulled out of the game.

Efficient as he was, Hernandez wasn't perfect - but his infield defense behind him was.

Three times that infield got him out of trouble by turning double plays, two of them started by second baseman Figgins, another by third baseman Jose Lopez. That last one came in the sixth inning, when Oakland had one run in and two men on with only one out.

Hernandez got a chopper to third from Kevin Kouzmanoff and Lopez took it on the run, stepped on third for a force and threw across the infield to Kotchman, who made a nice catch-and-tag to complete the double play.

In the seventh inning, with two out and his pitch count climbing, Hernandez went to 3-1 counts on Mark Ellis, then Travis Buck - and walked both. After watching his ace throw 101 pitches, Wakamatsu went to his bullpen and Sean White, asking him to get the game and that two-run lead to the eighth inning.

Chad Pennington singled home Oakland's second run, Rajai Davis singled in the Athletics' third run and it was tied. There would be no opening-night win for Hernandez, who allowed only three hits - but six walks - in 6²/₃ innings. Two of the runs he allowed were scored by batters he walked.

"I felt fine, but that's too many walks," Hernandez said. "That's the one thing I wasn't happy about."

With the game tied, the Mariners dodged an Oakland threat in the eighth inning when reliever Brandon League had to get not one but two double play ground balls to shut the Athletics out.

Shortstop Jack Wilson booted the first one, but League came back and got the next hitter, Kouzmanoff again, to ground into a double play, then got a grounder to Wilson for the third out.

The Mariners had a point-blank shot to take the lead in the eighth inning, when Ken Griffey Jr. doubled against left-handed reliever Craig Breslow with two outs. Oakland brought in righty Brad Ziegler to face Lopez, and Lopez flied out.

Seattle had another two-out opportunity in the ninth inning. Ziegler walked two batters, one of them intentionally. Closer Andrew Bailey came in and got Figgins to ground to third base - but Kouzmanoff's throw to first was high for an error that loaded them up, with Figgins zipping by under the tag.

Given another chance to prove he's a No. 3 hitter, Kotchman delivered again.

Recap: Oakland vs. Seattle

By Sports Network; The Sports Network

Published: 04/05/10 10:43 pm | Updated: 04/06/10 12:03 am

Casey Kotchman drove in four runs and delivered the go-ahead two-run single in the ninth inning as Seattle opened its season with a 5-3 victory over the Oakland Athletics.

Kotchman, who was acquired in the offseason, had a run-scoring double in the first inning, a sacrifice fly in the third, and got the go-ahead hit in the ninth off Andrew Bailey. Rob Johnson added a home run in the second inning.

Felix Hernandez, who won 19 games last year, allowed three hits and three runs, while walking six and fanning four over 6 ²/₃ innings in the start for the Mariners, who were coming off an 85-win season. They haven't made the playoffs since 2001, but their high hopes were tempered a bit this spring when lefty Cliff Lee went down with an abdominal injury.

Brandon League (1-0) picked up the victory by throwing a scoreless eighth inning and David Aardsma fanned two batters in a 1-2-3 ninth, fanning Mark Ellis and Travis Buck to end the game for the save.

"I liked the energy in the dugout, first and foremost," Mariners manager Don Wakamatsu said. "I think these guys are ready to play."

Brad Ziegler (0-1) took the loss for the Athletics, who received a five-inning start from Ben Sheets. The right-hander, who missed all of last season recovering from elbow surgery, surrendered four hits and three runs -- two earned.

"I've had some starts like this before," Sheets said. "I was actually pleased, but not really the result, but how I ended. I felt like I'm starting to get a little more rhythm. I think it's going to be a good year."

Ryan Sweeney, Cliff Pennington and Rajai Davis singled in runs for the Athletics, who were horrendous a year ago, as they had an American League-low 135 home runs, which translated into a 75-87 fourth-place finish in the AL West.

Hernandez surrendered back-to-back RBI hits to Pennington and Davis in the seventh inning to tie the game at 3-3. Pennington was out trying to advance to third on Davis' hit to left field, which ended the inning.

Kotchman hit a ball that short-hopped to Davis in center field in the eighth, although umpires ruled it a catch. Ken Griffey Jr. doubled later in the inning, but was left stranded.

The A's wasted a chance with two men on and nobody out in the bottom of the frame, but Kevin Kouzmanoff grounded into a double play. Daric Barton was left at third when Kurt Suzuki grounded out.

In the ninth, Ziegler walked Johnson, and with two outs gave Ichiro Suzuki an intentional pass. Bailey then came in to face Chone Figgins, who hit a ball to Kouzmanoff, but his throwing error loaded the bases. Kotchman then hit a 3-2 offering on a soft liner to center field. Ex-A's player Milton Bradley fanned to end the top of the ninth.

Oakland's Ryan Sweeney singled in Davis in the sixth inning for a 3-1 margin before the A's tied the game an inning later.

Originally published April 5, 2010 at 10:47 PM | Page modified April 5, 2010 at 10:47 PM

Pressure, not power, will drive Mariners

The Mariners didn't hit, but they won. They beat Oakland with their legs, not their lumber. They managed just six hits, but manufactured just enough runs. They won with pressure.

Steve Kelley

Seattle Times staff columnist

OAKLAND, Calif. - Pressure.

The kind that makes pitchers think too much, makes defenses do things they don't want to do.

Pressure.

The kind that makes catchers crazy. Makes a walk as good as a triple. The kind that can win games without knocking down walls.

In the ninth inning of an opening night that was slip-sliding away from the Mariners, Chone Figgins cued a ground ball to third that looked like a harmless third out.

But Figgins was digging. He was forcing Kevin Kouzmanoff to make a perfect throw to escape the inning, and Kouzmanoff's hurried throw sailed wide. Figgins ducked under Daric Barton's sweep tag.

Speed kills.

Casey Kotchman, who a day earlier convinced manager Don Wakamatsu to bat him third instead of sixth, followed Figgins' lightning with a thunderous two-run single in a 5-3 Mariners win Monday.

The Mariners didn't hit, but they won. They beat Oakland with their legs, not their lumber. They managed just six hits, but manufactured just enough runs. They won with pressure.

It started early.

In his first plate appearance as a Mariner, Figgins worked Oakland starter Ben Sheets for a six-pitch walk. He stole second and went to third on catcher Kurt Suzuki's throwing error.

Get used to this. It's how the Mariners will score runs. It's how they will have to score runs.

Kotchman, also making his Mariners debut, followed Figgins' first-to-third first-inning sprint with a double in the gap. And before Felix Hernandez had thrown a pitch, he had a run.

The Mariners had put the early squeeze on Oakland with speed and daring from the top of the order. Blueprint baseball.

If the M's are going to challenge in the American League West, Ichiro and Figgins are going to have to be the Mariners' Kenny Lofton and Roberto Alomar, or their Johnny Damon and Derek Jeter.

The Mariners have so many question marks in their batting order that runs aren't going to come easily. They aren't built for the three-run home run. These aren't the Phillies.

The M's need to outrun teams, and to do that they need Ichiro and Figgins to be the 1-2 guarantee at the top of the order.

"They can put a lot of pressure on opposing teams," Wakamatsu said.

Ichiro led off the third with a single up the middle. He stole second on a 2-1 pitch. But he got over-aggressive, tried to steal third and was thrown out on ball four to Figgins.

The Go-Go M's want to play baseball like basketball. They want to speed up the game, put bodies in motion. They want to run like a Jamaican relay team.

So after Ichiro was thrown out in the third, Figgins applied more pressure. He stole second and went to third when Suzuki, Oakland's beleaguered catcher, air-mailed his throw into center field.

Suzuki had two throwing errors. The A's had four. That's what pressure does to a defense.

Figgins, who is the first Mariner to steal two bases on opening day, made it 3-0, scoring on Kotchman's shallow fly to left. He didn't get a hit in the game, but his legs were responsible in some way for four of the Mariners' five runs.

This win was an example of how important the top of the order will be for the power-starved Mariners.

In the past, the Mariners have had some dangerous 1-2 hitters - Harold Reynolds and Edgar Martinez; Reynolds and Ken Griffey Jr.; Joey Cora and Alex Rodriguez; Ichiro and Mike Cameron.

But Ichiro and Figgins might be the deadliest. And the most fun. And the most important. They have to work together for the Mariners to work.

They spent the spring learning each other's likes and dislikes. It was a hurry-up chemistry class that could be the difference between winning and losing for the Mariners this season.

Before Hernandez's first pitch, second baseman Figgins turned to right fielder Ichiro and the two exchanged bows. It was almost as if they were acknowledging that the success of the season depends on their communication.

Steve Kelley: 206-464-2176 or skelley@seattletimes.com <<mailto:skelley@seattletimes.com>>.

Originally published April 5, 2010 at 10:13 PM | Page modified April 5, 2010 at 10:17 PM

Mariners beat Oakland A's in opener, 5-3

Casey Kotchman drove in four runs in his Mariners debut, helping Seattle to a 5-3 win over Oakland.

By Geoff Baker

Seattle Times staff reporter

OAKLAND, Calif. - This wasn't exactly the blueprint drawn up by the Mariners for how their season was supposed to go.

Their staff ace, Felix Hernandez, was in the dugout shaking his head in the seventh inning of Monday night's season opener, having tied his career high with six walks issued. Out on the mound, reliever Sean White was

blowing the first save opportunity of the year for a Mariners bullpen that needs to be at its best for this team to contend.

But a few things did go Seattle's way, especially in the ninth inning, when a fourth error by the Oakland Athletics enabled Casey Kotchman to bat with the bases loaded and two out. Kotchman delivered his second hit of the night, a two-run single to center, to help deliver a 5-3 win for the Mariners in a season opener that became a lot more nerve-wracking than it should have been.

A crowd of 30,686 fans at the Coliseum saw Kotchman drive in four runs, having been given a vote of confidence by his manager and installed in the No. 3 spot in the batting order. David Aardsma closed out the ninth to earn the victory for reliever Brandon League, who'd used a double-play grounder to escape a two-on, none out jam.

Hernandez looked his vintage Cy Young contender self at times, not allowing the A's to hit a ball in the air off him in carrying a 3-0 lead through the first five innings. Instead, three double-plays and a plethora of additional ground ball outs helped Hernandez nearly make it through the seventh inning despite all the free passes that kept piling up.

But Oakland finally hit one in the air in the sixth, when Cliff Pennington lined a single to right. He'd eventually score on the third and final hit given up by Hernandez, a Ryan Sweeney single to center that cut Seattle's lead to 3-1.

Despite the run, Hernandez was almost out of the seventh inning after getting two quick outs. But then the walks started again and, two free-passes later, Mariners manager Don Wakamatsu pulled him after 101 pitches in favor of White.

The latter promptly served up run-scoring singles to Pennington and Rajai Davis. All of a sudden, a game that seemed in the bag only an inning or two earlier was now back to square one.

This was Hernandez's first outing since he finished runner-up to Zack Greinke of the Kansas City Royals in last season's American League Cy Young race. Hernandez is already topping many preseason lists as a favorite to take home the prize this time around and the Mariners will need him at his very best in an opening month that sees them without top starter Cliff Lee and only a six-man bullpen.

And the Mariners' ace looked every bit as he'd been billed in the early stages of the contest. He struck out three batters the first three innings, walked only one and yielded only an infield single to go with all the ground ball outs he kept getting.

But the walks became more frequent in the innings that followed: one apiece in the fourth, fifth and sixth and then the critical two in the seventh.

Seattle had been coasting most of the game, having jumped on A's starter Ben Sheets for a run in the first, another in the second on a Rob Johnson homer to left field and then an unearned marker in the fourth. There were times when the Mariners seemed destined to add more runs to their tally, only to be thwarted by Milton Bradley getting caught stealing in the first inning and Ichiro being nabbed trying to swipe third base in the third.

But for the most part, the missed chances seemed incidental on a night Hernandez appeared to be in control. Until, of course, he no longer was.

Hernandez sat in the dugout shaking his head as White allowed the second and third runs, both charged to the starter.

It's likely Hernandez was making the gesture at his own inability to get through a seventh inning he'd appeared well in control of with the bottom third of the Oakland order due up.

The rest of the Mariners had to be shaking their heads an inning later when normally sure-gloved shortstop Jack Wilson muffed a routine grounder to put two on with nobody out. But League got Kevin Kouzmanoff to ground into the A's fourth double-play of the night to begin his escape.

Kurt Suzuki then grounded out to send the tie game to the ninth.

Last updated April 5, 2010 10:09 p.m. PT

Mariners take opener from A's 5-3

By JANIE MCCAULEY
AP BASEBALL WRITER

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Casey Kotchman hit a go-ahead two-run single with two outs in the ninth inning to go along with two earlier RBIs in an impressive Seattle debut, lifting the Mariners to a 5-3 season-opening victory against the Oakland Athletics on Monday night.

Kotchman hit an RBI double in the first and a third-inning sacrifice fly that staked ace Felix Hernandez to a 3-0 lead Seattle couldn't keep to get him the win.

Brandon League (1-0) pitched the eighth for the victory and David Aardsma finished with a 1-2-3 ninth for his first save.

Milton Bradley shattered his bat into several splinters after pounding it to the ground in frustration following a strikeout to end the ninth. He was booed all night by his former fans. Bradley spent the 2006 season and part of '07 with Oakland.

Brad Ziegler (0-1) took the loss after allowing a pair of unearned runs and no hits.

Hernandez looked strong until running into trouble in the seventh inning of a solid 2010 debut. He allowed three hits and three runs, struck out four and walked six in 6 2-3 innings.

Hernandez, a 19-game winner who hopes to challenge for the AL Cy Young Award again this season, took the mound for the first time since "King Felix" was rewarded with a new \$78 million, five-year contract in January.

He was done after allowing consecutive two-out walks in the seventh, when the A's tied it at 3 on back-to-back RBI singles by Cliff Pennington and Rajai Davis.

New A's \$10 million ace Ben Sheets labored through five rough innings in his first start since late 2008, having already reached 80 pitches through four.

Chone Figgins - Seattle's speedy new No. 2 hitter - stole two bases and scored twice for the Mariners, who are expected to contend for the division crown in manager Don Wakamatsu's second season.

This marked the first of seven meetings between the AL West rivals in the first 10 games of the season.

Sheets pitched in a major league game for the first time since Sept. 27, 2008, while with Milwaukee. The 31-year-old right-hander missed all of last season while recovering from elbow surgery on his throwing arm - and Oakland general manager Billy Beane took a big gamble that the four-time All-Star can return to top form this year. He struggled with his command during spring training.

Seattle provided an early glimpse of the potential of the Mariners' remade lineup featuring Figgins at the top of the order batting behind leadoff man Ichiro Suzuki.

"It's like having two leadoff guys," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Figgins stole second in each of the first two innings, advancing to third on catcher Kurt Suzuki's errors both times before scoring on Kotchman's RBIs.

Ken Griffey Jr., the 40-year-old designated hitter in his 22nd season, had an eighth-inning double.

Before the game, Griffey acted like an excited rookie in the very stadium where he produced his first major league hit back in 1989.

"A double to left," he said with a grin while recalling that hit off Dave Stewart.

Suzuki sneaked up on the slugger at a clubhouse table before batting practice and the two stars pulled off an elaborate fist-bumping routine that ended with Griffey pounding his chest as they both giggled.

Eric Chavez went 0 for 4 in his return to the A's as the team's regular designated hitter. The former six-time Gold Glove third baseman played in only eight games last season and has undergone five operations since Sept. 5, 2007.

He is in the final season of a \$66 million, six-year contract extension he signed in March 2004 that includes a 2011 club option.

Four A's-clad fans among the 30,686 in attendance carried two banners: "Lew Wolff Hates Oakland" and "Keep Our A's in Oakland" while two others banged drums as they took their message about the team's owner through the stands.

NOTES: AL Rookie of the Year Andrew Bailey of the A's was presented with his award before the game. ... Mickey McConnell of the Sweet 16 Saint Mary's team - with Omar Samhan and other teammates and coaches watching from around the mound - threw out the ceremonial first pitch. The players were cheered and congratulated as they made their way through the stands to the field. "This is awesome," athletic director Mark Orr said. "What's cool is in the stands they're yelling 'Saint Mary's!'" McConnell's throw was high and outside - not as spot-on as his 3-pointer.

Last updated April 5, 2010 6:29 p.m. PT

Lee progressing enough to throw bullpen Friday

By JANIE MCCAULEY
AP BASEBALL WRITER

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Cliff Lee had planned to play long toss Friday as part of his recovery from a strained abdominal muscle. He's feeling so good, he will throw a regular bullpen session instead.

That's big news for the Seattle Mariners, who can't wait to get their new co-ace on the mound in a game that counts. Lee, the 2008 AL Cy Young Award winner acquired in the offseason, is on the disabled list to start the season.

Lee played catch Monday for the second straight day without any trouble, though he knows it's still a matter of building up arm strength before he's fully ready to return.

"It's pretty good," the left-hander said. "I felt absolutely nothing. It's behind me. I've just got to build up."

Lee has a hearing April 14 to appeal a five-game suspension and fine he received from the league for throwing over the head of Arizona's Chris Snyder on March 15. Lee had collided with Snyder earlier in the game while backing up the plate on a scoring play.

The collision resulted in Lee's current injury.

The bullpen session will be a significant first step to him getting back to make his delayed Mariners debut.

"It's real encouraging," manager Don Wakamatsu said. "He doesn't feel it but now is a time to baby it a little bit. As we get toward Friday and next week, we'll push him more."

As of now, Lee is pain-free. That all can change once he increases his effort level from flat ground to throw off a mound.

Wakamatsu said Lee would toss lightly from the mound Wednesday.

"He feels great. He feels no pain at all," Wakamatsu said. "This is kind of a critical week for us to make sure he doesn't have a setback. It's good news."

Fellow rehabilitating starter Erik Bedard experienced no problems following his bullpen session Sunday in San Francisco. The lefty is recovering from August shoulder surgery to repair a torn labrum.

The Mariners hope Bedard will be ready to pitch again in June, yet he is progressing more quickly than the team expected. Bedard was re-signed to a \$1.75 million, one-year contract this winter.

"Erik Bedard feels great. He's way ahead of schedule," Wakamatsu said. "He threw all of his pitches yesterday and feels good. Same thing with him, we'll keep progressing these guys."

A's, Mariners hurlers seek fresh start

Doug Miller/MLB.com

Within a two-day span in late July of last year, one American League West pitcher's season ended while another's began with a new team in a new league. And on Tuesday, the two hurlers meet with a chance to prove that sometimes success in the big leagues is all about making the most of opportunities.

When the Mariners visit the Oakland A's for the second installment in the season-opening four-game set at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, Seattle will pitch right-hander Ian Snell, who arrived last July 29 in a Trade Deadline deal with Pittsburgh. The A's will counter with righty Dallas Braden, who suffered a season-curtailling foot injury two days later.

The opportunities abound.

Snell makes his first start of 2010 after being promoted to No. 2 in the rotation following the abdominal injury sustained by Cliff Lee during Spring Training. Snell needs to harness his command and maximize the effectiveness of what scouts still consider to be an elite-level arm. He saw in his last two Spring Training starts what can happen when he's unable to locate all four of his pitches.

"When you are stuck with two pitches, you are going to get hurt," he said recently. "I am not [staff ace] Felix [Hernandez]. ... I have been working on a lot of stuff and am still working on stuff. I am not quite where I should be, but I am almost there. I just need to keep working on my curveball [and slider]."

On the A's side, the success story of Braden can continue with a strong beginning to the 2010 campaign. Braden, who hasn't garnered as much publicity as the rest of the A's talented young staff, went 8-9 with a 3.89 ERA in 22 starts before left foot numbness abruptly ended things. Braden has yet to regain feeling in the foot and, according to a neurologist, probably never will, but he has overcome the problem on the mound and turned in an impressive spring.

"I knew in my heart of hearts that I probably wouldn't ever have feeling in [the foot] again," Braden said recently. "As long as I have a uniform on, I'm going to be out there competing. I'm going to give 100 percent and do everything in my power to help this ballclub."

Mariners

Snell shined in two starts vs. the A's after joining the Mariners last year, going 2-0 with a 2.45 ERA. ... The only newcomer on the Mariners' 25-man roster who didn't play Monday, reliever Kanekoa Texeira, could do so in Tuesday's game, which also will be his big league debut. ... Lee reported no pain after throwing off flat ground and is slated to throw off a mound Wednesday. It will be the first time he's done so in three weeks.

Athletics

Strangely enough, since these two teams play each other 19 times each season, Braden has only made one career start against the Mariners. He's 1-0 against Seattle with a 3.86 ERA. ... The A's begin this season with six players (Joey Devine, Trevor Cahill, Coco Crisp, John Meloan, Josh Outman, Michael Wuertz) on the disabled list, the most since six A's started the 1998 season on the DL. ... First baseman Daric Barton's patient eye continued to bear fruit. He walked three times on Opening Day following a spring in which he led the Majors with 22 free passes.

Worth noting

Designated hitter Ken Griffey Jr. made his 13th Opening Day start as a Mariner, which ranks second in team history to Edgar Martinez's 15. Griffey doubled to take over the franchise lead in Opening Day hits from Martinez with 14. ... The A's have a rotating left-field situation. Travis Buck was the 11th different starting left fielder for Oakland on Opening Day in the last 11 years.

Kotchman, Mariners prevail in ninth

Hernandez walks six A's, doesn't figure in decision

By Jim Street / MLB.com

04/06/10 1:00 AM ET

OAKLAND -- First baseman Casey Kotchman capped a four-RBI game with a tie-breaking two-run single into left-center field in the ninth inning, lifting the Mariners to a 5-3 Opening Night victory over the Athletics before 30,686 at the Oakland Coliseum.

Kotchman's go-ahead drive off Athletics closer Andrew Bailey was set up by a two-out throwing error by Oakland third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff.

The Mariners won despite an uncharacteristic performance by ace right-hander Felix Hernandez.

His fifth and sixth walks of the game triggered a two-run rally in the seventh inning that erased what had been a three-run Mariners lead.

It was the first time since Aug. 7 that the 19-game winner and runnerup in the American League Cy Young Award race walked as many as six batters in a game, something he did only once in 2009.

Catcher Rob Johnson hit a solo home run, first baseman Kotchman drove in two runs and Chone Figgins stole two bases, becoming the first player in franchise history to swipe more than one base on Opening Day.

Johnson, who hit two home runs in 258 at-bats last season, pranced around the bases in the second inning after sending a 3-and-1 fastball from Athletics starter Ben Sheets into the seats in left-center field.

[Jim Street <mailto:jim.street@mlb.com>](mailto:jim.street@mlb.com) is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Lee plans to throw off mound Wednesday

Injured Mariners lefty aiming to debut by end of April

By Jim Street / MLB.com

04/05/10 8:30 PM ET

OAKLAND -- The next major step in left-hander Cliff Lee's recovery from a strained abdominal muscle could come this week, when he throws from a mound for the first time in almost three weeks.

Lee played catch on flat ground again on Monday afternoon without any pain.

"He looks good and he says he feels good and that is very encouraging," said general manager Jack Zduriencik, who watched the throwing session held in shallow right field at the Oakland Coliseum. "As we have said all along, I would rather be a day late than a day early, but we're certainly feeling good about this."

Lee will have a light bullpen session on Wednesday in Oakland and if that goes well, he will have a more vigorous bullpen on Friday prior to the Mariners' series opener against the Rangers in Arlington.

"This is kind of a critical week for us, just to make sure he doesn't have a setback," manager Don Wakamatsu said. "We'll start pushing it on Friday to see how he reacts to that."

Lee continues to get more upbeat by the day.

"If I feel good after I get on the mound," he said, "then I would feel pretty safe to say that now it's a matter of building up the number of pitches and innings so I can get back to joining everybody else."

The former American League Cy Young Award winner, acquired from the Phillies last December for three players, said it is extremely frustrating that the regular season started on Monday night and all he could do was be a spectator. He had hoped to be preparing himself for Tuesday night's game against the Athletics, which would have been his Seattle debut.

"I want to be out there helping my team," he said, "but now I have to stay positive and focus on what I have to do to get back."

And it appears that could happen before the end of this month.

Lee is eligible to come off the 15-day disabled list on April 10, but that won't happen because he needs to get his arm back into game shape. He also has to deal with a five-game suspension for throwing a pitch over the head of D-backs catcher Chris Snyder.

A once-delayed conference call hearing has been rescheduled for April 14.

But the big thing is how well Lee is feeling.

"I think you have to tip your hat to Dr. [Ed] Kahlfayan and [head athletic trainer] Rick Griffin," Zduriencik said. "They have done a great job. It has been a very nice recovery."

When the time comes, Lee probably would be sent to the Minor Leagues for at least two rehab assignments to get his pitch count close to 100 pitches.

"Fortunately, I was able to get three or four weeks of Spring Training in before [the injury]," Lee said, "so it's not exactly like starting over. But I have to be smart and build back up."

"After not being on the mound for a couple of weeks, I don't want to go out there and throw 100 pitches. I obviously have to build it up. When I come back, I want to do what a starting pitcher does, throw 100-some pitches and go deep into the game."

[Jim Street <mailto:jim.street@mlb.com>](mailto:jim.street@mlb.com) is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Mariners hope to preserve bullpen

Wakamatsu wants starters to go deep early in season

By Jim Street / MLB.com

04/05/10 9:15 PM ET

OAKLAND -- A Mariners bullpen that begins the regular season one man short and with no left-handers in sight will get a lot of early season attention from manager Don Wakamatsu.

"We're going to need as many innings as possible from our starters," Wakamatsu said, "and I'm going to manage games to keep the bullpen fresh. That may mean leaving a guy in who's getting knocked around in the second inning. We just can't burn up our bullpen in the first two weeks."

Therefore, the onus is on ace right-hander Felix Hernandez, Ian Snell, Ryan Rowland-Smith, Doug Fister and Jason Vargas to consistently get their games at least into the fifth inning and preferably a little longer.

"I think the [major] concern for me is looking at what our biggest strength was last year, which was how deep our starting pitching was," Wakamatsu said. "And that's our focus."

The Mariners used 12 pitchers in starting roles last season, and they posted a league-best 3.89 ERA. Hernandez was the staff leader in quality starts (three or fewer runs in six innings) with 29.

With former AL Cy Young Award winner Cliff Lee beginning the season on the 15-day disabled list with a strained abdominal muscle, those following Hernandez in the rotation need to step up.

Snell was dependable at the end of last season, notching quality starts in three of his last four outings and surrendering three or fewer runs in eight of his final nine starts, and Rowland-Smith was just as solid with six quality starts during an eight-start stretch that began on Aug. 30.

Fister and Vargas contributed five and three quality starts, respectively, in 24 starts combined.

Worth noting

Left-hander Erik Bedard continues to take big steps forward. He came out of a strenuous bullpen session on Sunday at AT&T Park in San Francisco feeling good. "He is way ahead of schedule," manager Don Wakamatsu said. "He threw all of his pitches and feels good. Again, we will keep progressing with him." ... Rookie catcher Adam Moore has a different number on the back of his uniform. He's now No. 10 on your scorecard, after wearing No. 50 during Spring Training and last September after being promoted from Triple-A Tacoma. He becomes the first catcher to wear No. 10 since Pat Borders in 2002-04, the same number Dave Valle wore from 1987-93.

[Jim Street <mailto:jim.street@mlb.com>](mailto:jim.street@mlb.com) is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Mariners' bench could be juggling act

Wakamatsu hopes to keep reserve players in mix

By Jim Street / MLB.com

04/05/10 9:15 PM ET

OAKLAND -- The Mariners' 25-man roster includes a five-player bench, and giving all of them enough work to stay fresh could become a juggling act for manager Don Wakamatsu.

"I think the biggest challenge we have is going to make sure we can get the most production out [Eric] Byrnes, [Mike] Sweeney and [Milton] Bradley and keep them healthy," Wakamatsu said.

Bradley figures to play five games a week, either in left field or designated hitter. Sweeney figures to get most of his playing time as the DH against right-handers, and Byrnes will primarily play left field.

Left-handed-hitter Ryan Langerhans also plays left field, as does Matt Tuiasosopo -- along with six other positions.

"With Tui being the lone utility guy," Wakamatsu said, "it could be a little tough [getting him playing time]." "I can see Tui playing now and then at short and maybe at first.

"The challenge will be with Tui and how much playing time he can get."

[Jim Street <mailto:jim.street@mlb.com>](mailto:jim.street@mlb.com) is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Ackley highlights Jaxx roster

By MATT VINES • mvines1@jacksonsun.com • April 6, 2010

The West Tenn Diamond Jaxx announced the 2010 roster Monday, three days before the Jaxx begin the season Thursday in Jacksonville.

The most interesting addition to the 2010 squad could be former North Carolina star Dustin Ackley, picked as the No. 1 prospect in the Mariners' organization by Baseball America.

Ackley, the No. 2 overall selection in the 2009 Major League Baseball draft, will begin his Double-A season at first base after producing a .315 batting average with 13 runs and 12 RBIs in the Arizona Fall League.

Ackley led North Carolina to three consecutive College World Series appearances and set Tar Heels' career records in batting average (.412), hits (346), runs (227) and total bases (544) in three seasons.

He should have plenty of help from teammates. Nine of the Mariners' top 20 prospects are with West Tenn, according to Baseball America.

First baseman Johan Limonta and outfielder Mike Wilson are the top two returning hitters from last season.

Limonta hit .297 while Wilson hit five home runs in 26 games before struggling in Triple-A Tacoma.

Shortstop Carlos Triunfel (No. 6 Mariners prospect) returns after breaking his leg in the second game of the 2009 season.

Third baseman Alex Liddi (No. 5 Mariners prospect) set career highs in nearly every offensive category in High-A High Desert, sharing the California League batting title and had a .345 average.

The left side of the infield will need to boost a Jaxx lineup losing Southern League batting champion Ezequiel Carrera (.337 average) as well as top RBI producers Marshall Hubbard (70) and Matt Mangini (67).

Shortstop Jeffrey Dominguez and second baseman Leury Bonilla round out the infield.

Outfielder Joe Dunigan tied an organizational high with 104 RBIs and was second in home runs with 30 in High Desert in 2009.

Teammate Carlos Peguero hit a Mariners' minor-league-high 31 home runs in High Desert and joins Dunigan in the Jaxx outfield along with Kuo Hui Lo.

On the mound, fans should recognize most of the 2010 staff with seven of the 12 pitchers spending at least part of 2009 with the club.

Four pitchers are ranked in the top 20 Mariners' prospects, including No. 7 Michael Pineda, No. 11 Dan Cortes, No. 14 Nick Hill, No. 16 Josh Fields and No. 17 Steven Hensley.

Hill (5-6, 3.10 ERA) was named West Tenn's Most Valuable Pitcher this past season after splitting time between a reliever and a starter.

Cortes (6-6, 3.92 ERA) and Fields (2-2, 6.48 ERA) struggled in West Tenn in 2009.

Pineda earned the Mariners' 2008 Minor League Pitcher of the Year award but played just 10 games in 2009 because of a right elbow strain.

Hensley led all farmhands with 135 strikeouts and his 13 wins and 3.95 ERA ranked in Seattle's top 10 as a High Desert pitcher this past season.

Other returners include Southern League All-Star Anthony Vavaro (4-3, eight saves), reliever Mumba Rivera (6-6, 4.50 ERA) and left-handers Robert Rohrbaugh (3-3, 3.40 ERA) and Edward Paredes (12 ERA in three innings with the Jaxx).

West Tenn will welcome a new coaching staff with manager Tim Laker, hitting coach Andy Fox and pitching coach Lance Painter.

The Jaxx's first home series begins April 14 against the Mississippi Braves as West Tenn attempts to return to the playoffs after missing out in 2009 with an overall record of 62-78.

-Matt Vines, 425-9634

Published: Monday, April 5, 2010

AquaSox unveil new logos

By Nick Patterson
Herald writer

EVERETT - The Everett AquaSox are getting a makeover.

The local minor-league baseball team unveiled a new look Monday night during a season-ticket-holders event at Tulalip Casino. Prior to viewing the Seattle Mariners' season opener at Oakland, Sox officials introduced two new logos as well as their new uniforms for the upcoming Northwest League season.

Everett's primary logo, the widely popular frog design, remains largely intact and will remain in use. The color scheme also remains the same. However, two new logos have been added to the mix, including one linking the AquaSox with their parent club, the Mariners.

"We're really excited about it," AquaSox executive vice president Tom Backemeyer said. "The frog is always going to be a part of the team. That's unique. But the two additional logos are part of us moving forward. We want it to be a part of AquaSox history."

Everett has been the short-season Class A affiliate of the Mariners since 1995, and the first of those new logos harkens back to a piece of Mariners history. In the Mariners' early days they had a logo that featured a trident in the shape of an "M." The AquaSox played off that by turning the trident 90 degrees so that it's in the shape of an "E."

The second new logo plays off the Sox part of the AquaSox name. It features a pair of aqua-colored socks in a pose similar to the one used by the Boston Red Sox.

"It's an extension of the brand," Backemeyer said. "It's an enhanced look and a tie-in with the Mariners. The Mariners helped through the process."

The AquaSox's 2010 Northwest League season begins June 18 at Salem-Keizer. The first opportunity to see the new uniforms at Everett Memorial Stadium is June 21 in a game against Yakima.

April 5, 2010 at 4:18 PM

Jumping to conclusions: Snap judgments from Opening Day

Posted by Larry Stone
Seattle Times Blog

What did we ever do before gamecasts? Jumping back and forth between games on the computer and TV, it was hard to get any work done today. On the other hand, that IS my work. Lucky me.

Here are some quick thoughts on the games that have already been played, in which I totally ignore the concept of "small sample size":

Braves 16, Cubs 5: It was hard not to be moved by Jason Heyward's three-run home run in his first major-league at-bat (the picture above shows him being congratulated by teammate Brian McCann) It was very reminiscent of Ken Griffey Jr. homering on the first pitch he saw in Seattle at the Kingdome, off Chicago's Eric King (after doubling off Dave Stewart in Oakland in his first major-league at-bat).

Special players rise to the moment. I'm not going to go too crazy off one game and one spring, but this guy looks every bit like an elite player. It's going to be fun watching him blossom.

I can only imagine how grumpy Lou Piniella was after this game.

Phillies 11, Nationals 1: President Obama, who threw out the first pitch, might have done a better job than Nationals starter and fellow lefty John Lannan. A few more games like this, and the clamor to bring up Stephen Strasburg is going to be loud and steady in the D.C. Meanwhile, Roy Halladay with the Phillies' lineup behind him is going to be a great marriage.

Oh, yeah: Miguel Batista's Nationals debut: 1 2/3 innings, three hits, four walks, five earned runs.

Cardinals 11, Reds 6: Apparently, new Cardinals hitting coach Mark McGwire has done wonders with this Pujols kid, who went 4-for-5 and hit two homers.

One ominous sign for the Cards: Ryan Franklin giving up three hits and two runs in a ragged ninth. Of course, nursing an 11-4 lead, he probably was just concerned with throwing strikes.

Mets 7, Marlins 1: Just goes to show you that a team can be filled with turmoil and trouble, but if they have a pitcher like Johan Santana on the mound, all is well. For one game, at least.

Nice debut for Jason Bay, who had two hits, including a triple. David Wright hit a homer after having only five at home all last year. And you've got to love this: During pre-game introductions, the crowd at Citi Field booed the Mets' training staff.

Pirates 11, Dodgers 5. I'm still not exactly sure why Joe Torre selected Vicente Padilla to be his Opening Day starter. It's not a good reflection on the strength of the Dodger staff.

Pirates' fans, here's your buzz kill: The Buccos beat the Cardinals on Opening Day last year, propelling them to...99 losses. Still, it must have been good to be Garrett Jones today. Jones homered in his first two at-bats. It might be time to start paying a little closer attention to this guy, who hit all of his 21 homers last year after July 1. He's one of only two players to have zero homers on July 1 and wind up with 20 or more.

In the ex-Mariner department, Jeff Clement started at first and went 1-for-3 with a run scored, and Ronny Cedeno was at shortstop, going 2-for-4 with an RBI.

Rockies 5, Brewers 3: Ubaldo Jimenez seems primed for a really big year, and he got off to a nice start in that pursuit (six innings, one run, six strikeouts). It was a good day for Carloses: Carlos Gonzalez went 4-for-5 for Colorado, while Carlos Gomez went 4-for-5 for Milwaukee. Both can go to sleep tonight with .800 batting averages.

Diamondbacks 6, Padres 3: OK, time to start the Adrian Gonzalez watch: 2-for-4 with a home run.

Last year, when Florida's Emilio Bonifacio hit an inside-the-park homer on Opening Day, it was the first time that had happened in 41 years. Stephen Drew did it today for Arizona. Baseball's funny that way.

White Sox 6, Indians 0. Cleveland starter Jake Westbrook was one of three American League starters on Opening Day who didn't throw a pitch last season (Ben Sheets and Shaun Marcum were the others). Westbrook gave up five runs in four innings, and threw four wild pitches.

The way Mark Buehrle was dealing, you knew it had to be a fast game. Sure enough: two hours and 24 minutes -- or about six innings worth of Yankees-Red Sox. Best sign for the Chisox: A homer and diving catch by Alex Rios, who is a huge key to their success.

Rangers 5, Blue Jays 4: Maybe the best game of the day so far. The aforementioned Marcum, who like Westbrook was rehabbing from elbow surgery last year, took a no-hitter into the seventh. Bob Feller is the only pitcher to throw a no-hitter on Opening Day, and that remained the case when Vlad Guerrero singled with one out in the seventh, after a walk by Josh Hamilton. And then, boom, a three-run homer by Nelson Cruz, and the game was tied, 3-3. I'd love to see a study on how pitchers do after losing their no-hitter in the seventh inning or later. I have a sense that the letdown factor is huge. It just seems like they get shelled by subsequent hitters.

Anyway, the Rangers ended up winning it by scoring two in the bottom of the ninth, with the decisive hit being a single by Jarrod Saltalamacchia. (Bonus points and my undying admiration to anyone who can come up with an acronym for Saltalamacchia, the longest last name in major-league history).

Oh, yeah: Ryan Garko: 0-for-1 as a pinch-hitter.

Tigers 8, Royals 4: I was really looking forward to the Zack Greinke-Justin Verlander matchup. Greinke out-pitched Verlander, but when you're a Royal, with that bullpen behind you, it doesn't mean much. Greinke gave up one earned run in six innings -- one more ER than he gave up in his first four starts last year.

Yuniesky Betancourt homered for the Royals, which will probably embolden him to forget everything the KC coaches have been trying to drum into him all spring about selectivity at the plate.

April 5, 2010 at 6:31 AM

10 great things about Opening Day

Posted by Larry Stone

Seattle Times Blog

- 1, Everyone is 0-0, .000, 0.00 - a tabula rasa, the whole world of possibilities awaiting
- 2, The pomp and circumstance - dignitaries, celebrity anthem singers, flyovers, bunting (but I could have done without Neil Diamond last night at Fenway).
- 3, The pre-game introductions of the entire team, even the equipment managers
- 4, The excitement in the eyes of the rookies doing it all for the first time, as they stand on the base line
- 5, The stats count - for your fantasy team, too
- 6, When someone homers, you get to say, "He's on pace for 162," and it's funny every year.
- 7, You know there's 161 more games ahead, the six-month soap opera and reality show about to commence
- 8, At least 161 more. Eternal hope, and the sense that anything is possible. Pirates fans can dream of contention and Cubs fans can believe this will finally be the year. Mariners fans, too.
- 9, Even people who don't care about baseball are paying attention today.
- 10, Baseball is back. For real.

April 5, 2010 at 9:56 PM

Mariners 5, A's 3: Seattle dodges a bullet on four RBI night for Casey Kotchman

Posted by Geoff Baker

The Mariners nearly let this very winnable game get away from them, thanks to a lack of timely hitting earlier on, six walks by Felix Hernandez and a blown save from Sean White. They also ran themselves out of a couple of potentially big rallies early on, when it seemed like that 3-0 lead might be all they'd need.

But they hung in there, largely due to the glovework of their infield and four double-plays turned.

By the way, we asked Wakamatsu about his choice of White in that seventh inning and the manager said he liked the matchups that frame -- more so with second batter, righty Rajai Davis, than the first one, switch-hitting Cliff Pennington. But Wakamatsu felt Hernandez was getting emotional after the walks, wanted him out of there after 100 or so pitches and also noted that White hadn't thrown in a few days and he wanted him fresh.

Same with Brandon League. The one thing about managers is, they don't always manage every game like there's a championship on the line. So, while you or I might figure the best matchup would be somebody else, Wakamatsu said he'd made it a priority -- in this first game of 162 -- to get White and Brandon League in there if he could.

Like I said, White has to get those guys out.

Casey Kotchman more than justified his manager's faith in keeping him in the No. 3 spot in the order. He delivered a two-run single off Brad Ziegler in the ninth after a fourth error on the night by Oakland kept the M's alive in that frame.

"As players, you just make the most out of opportunities that you get," Kotchman said.

Kotchman said that manager Don Wakamatsu asked him some questions about hitting sixth and that they had "an open dialogue" about it.

"I don't really know what kind of case I made. I don't think I really made one. Like I said, you've just got to try to make the most out of the opportunities that you get."

Four RBI tonight for Kotchman. If he keeps doing this, he can stay in the No. 3 spot all year.

David Aardsma looked great. Brandon League did an excellent job of escaping that jam in the eighth.

League told me he didn't waver after that error by Jack Wilson put two on with none out in the eighth.

"We had a team meeting before the game and Mike Sweeney gave a talk about how we have to pick each other up," League said. "That's what I tried to do. I'm a sinkerball pitcher and I know they can handle ground balls. They play into my strength."

The rest of the pitching was somewhat disappointing, including the way Hernandez finished an excellent start.

"I made my pitches when I was in trouble," Hernandez said. "The only thing that I didn't like about my performance today was the walks."

It wasn't that his pitches were getting away from him too much. A lot of it had to do with what he wouldn't talk about: the umpire's strike zone. He was getting squeezed, as we told you earlier. You have to adjust when that happens and he had trouble doing it as the zone got smaller and smaller towards the middle and latter innings.

We talked earlier about all the grounders he kept getting. And truly, they were what got him so deep into the game. He didn't give up a ball hit in the air until a single in the sixth. Of the 20 outs he recorded, four came on strikeouts and 16 on groundouts.

So, this one got a lot closer than it should have in the end.

But they don't count style points in the majors. This was a win. A bit of an ugly one, but that Texas victory over Toronto today was no beaut either. They all count.

April 5, 2010 at 9:20 PM

Mariners at Oakland Athletics: season opening game thread

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

All those walks caught up to Felix Hernandez in the seventh inning, when he was one out and none on away from getting through the frame. Instead, he walked a pair of batters -- his fifth and sixth of the game -- and was pulled.

Sean White came in and yielded consecutive RBI singles to Cliff Pennington and Rajai Davis and we've got a tie ballgame.

Disappointing finish to a pretty good night by Hernandez. Were back to Square One. Yeah, I'm surprised Don Wakamatsu pulled Hernandez. I know his thinking: Pennington had already singled off Hernandez in an earlier at-bat, he was at 101 pitches and had just walked consecutive guys.

But with the tying run at first base, I told Shannon Drayer -- sitting next to me -- that I'd let Hernandez keep dealing until that runner made it into scoring position. Wakamatsu didn't agree and he's made the right call more times than I have, so I'll defer.

Bottom line is, White has to get those hitters out. That's why he's here.

8:50 p.m.: Oakland finally hit a ball in the air off Felix Hernandez, then scored its first run in the sixth inning to cut Seattle's lead to 3-1. Hernandez is getting a little squeezed tonight and issued his fourth walk of the game in that frame. I doubt he goes the distance because of those. But he still escaped a two-on, one-out situation by getting Kevin Kouzmanoff to ground one to third baseman Jose Lopez, who stepped on his bag for the force and threw to first to cap the third double-play turned by the M's tonight.

For me, the story so far is Hernandez using the infield defense behind him to breeze through these first six innings relatively unscathed. One more inning and you can turn this lead over to the bullpen.

8:25 p.m.: Felix Hernandez just pitched through the fifth inning, still ahead 3-0. Not only has he yet to give up a ball hit beyond the infield, with just one infield single against him, but the A's haven't even hit a ball in the air tonight.

I'm serious.

Hernandez has four strikeouts and three walks issued in the game. But every other at-bat resulted in a groundout of some sort. That's dominance. It's also not something you see very often. You'd think at least one guy would pop a ball up in the infield. But nope. Nothing off the ground yet.

8:05 p.m.: Here's some information, courtesy of Jeff Evans from the Mariners PR staff. Turns out Chone Figgins just became the first player in Mariners history to log two stolen bases on opening day. In fact, the team record for steals on Day 1 had also been two, set back in 1985 by Spike Owen and Dave Henderson.

The team had only notched nine Opening Day steals in its entire history prior to the record-setting three so far tonight. Geez, I guess somebody forgot to tell the M's they allow those things? What gives with that? Legs too cold in April?

Felix Hernandez is dealing tonight and, with that 3-0 lead, you have to like his chances. Only one infield hit allowed so far. He's got three strikeouts in three innings as well.

7:53 p.m.: Seattle looked to have its Ichiro-Chone Figgins combo off and running in the third inning. Only problem was, a little too much running by Ichiro got him thrown out at third as he tried to steal on consecutive pitches.

The Mariners still upped their lead to 3-0 however, as Figgins managed to draw a walk on the pitch Ichiro was thrown out on. Figgins promptly stole second for the second time tonight and -- for the second time as well -- took third when a throw by catcher Kurt Suzuki went into center field. This time, the throw sailed way over the second baseman's head.

Figgins then scored on a flyball to medium left field by Casey Kotchman. The throw home was strong, but Figgins is fast and just slid under the tag.

So, Figgins now has two walks, two steals and two runs scored. Make that two RBI for Kotchman as well as we head to the bottom of the third. 7:37 p.m.: Just as the Mariners drew it up in their off-season blueprint, you had power-hitting catcher Rob Johnson taking Ben Sheets over the left field wall with two out in the second inning. That sound you just heard was the entire Seattle blogosphere hitting the floor after going into simultaneous shock. Make it 2-0 for the Mariners after an inning and a half.

Sheets was doing well, having fanned Jose Lopez and then gotten Franklin Gutierrez to ground out to third. But he fell behind 3-1 in the count to Johnson and that's a no-no at this level no matter who is at the plate. Johnson turned on the next pitch like a guy with two healthy hips and Felix Hernandez now has a two-run advantage.

7:34 p.m.: We saw some of that infield defense on display for the Mariners in the first inning. After Rajai Davis reached on a high chopper that went for an infield single, Daric Barton ripped a shot towards first base. The sharp grounder was snared by Casey Kotchman, who threw to covering shortstop Jack Wilson at second to get the lead runner. Looked like an easy play, but wasn't.

After that, Ryan Sweeney grounded one to Chone Figgins in between first and second base. Figgins reached out to tag Barton, who slowed up to avoid it. After Figgins appeared to tag Barton with the wrong hand, he threw on to first for the double-play. At least, that's what it was ruled. They gave Figgins the out on Barton, apparently. He might have broken his baseline, we don't know because we're up here in the pressbox. The A's went nuts. But it goes down as an inning ending DP in a 1-0 game.

7:20 p.m.: Chone Figgins made a whole lot happen all by himself in that first inning and the Mariners have a 1-0 lead over the Oakland A's. After Ichiro popped out on the second pitch of the game, Figgins fell behind 0-2 in the count to Ben Sheets, but then promptly took four straight balls to draw a walk.

Figgins then broke for second on a steal attempt and, when the ball bounced into shallow center field, headed for third. Casey Kotchman then came up and drove a ball to the gap in right center for a run-scoring double. Exactly what Kotchman has to do to be successful. He doesn't need home runs. But some extra base power by driving balls to the gap will be needed from the No. 3 hitter. So far, so good.

Sheets then walked Milton Bradley, with the fourth ball getting away from catcher Kurt Suzuki and allowing Kotchman to move to third with still only one out.

But the rally fizzled from there, with Ken Griffey Jr. up. Griffey fell behind 0-2 in the count and then Bradley broke for second on a steal attempt before Sheets -- making a pickoff move towards third -- had released the ball. Sheets turned and threw Bradley out at second and Griffey later grounded out to end the threat.

Good start, but could have amounted to more.

6:51 p.m.: Your new-look Mariners are warming up down on the field as we prepare for the pre-game ceremonies here. We spoke to manager Don Wakamatsu earlier about his decision to bat Casey Kotchman third in the order, one day after saying he wasn't going to do that because it might put too much pressure on the first baseman.

Well, Kotchman and Wakamatsu met yesterday, talked about it and the decision was reversed.

"A lot of it was the dialogue that we had individually, that I had with Kotch yesterday," Wakamatsu said. "I brought him in and talked about our thoughts. That I was thinking of hitting him sixth. He's welcoming this challenge, felt he deserved it in spring and I agreed with him after the discussion. As a manager, and this is the same discussion I had with him, what we care about is him getting off to a good start and him having a successful year.

"That was kind of the thought process behind it. He looked me in the eye and said 'I can handle that responsibility.' And so, we're going to give him that trust and go down that road. And he did have a good spring."

The lineups:

MARINERS

Ichiro RF
Chone Figgins 2B
Casey Kotchman 1B
Milton Bradley LF
Ken Griffey Jr. DH
3B Jose Lopez
CF Franklin Gutierrez
C Rob Johnson
SS Jack Wilson

RHP Felix Hernandez

OAKLAND

Rajai Davis CF
Daric Barton 1B
Ryan Sweeney RF
Kevin Kouzmanoff 3B
Kurt Suzuki C
Eric Chavez DH
Mark Ellis 2B
Travis Buck LF
Cliff Pennington SS

RHP Ben Sheets

April 5, 2010 at 4:18 PM

Cliff Lee plays catch successfully for second day in a row, will now throw bullpen session on Friday

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

Mariners pitcher Cliff Lee played catch without incident for a second straight day this afternoon. You can see him in the photo above, under the watchful eye of pitching coach Rick Adair. Afterwards, Lee said he feels as if his abdomen problems are behind him.

Lee said he'll throw on flat ground tomorrow, take two days off, then throw a bullpen session on Friday in Texas.

"It's pretty good," he said. "I felt absolutely nothing."

That's on flat ground playing catch. Lee realizes things could change in the bullpen session, given that it's off a raised mound. But for now, he's not feeling any discomfort and figures the worst is done.

"It's behind me," he said. "I've just got to build up."

Just how long that might take is anyone's guess. I asked Lee whether this rehabilitation process might be akin to starting spring training all over again.

"Kind of," he said. "But fortunately, I was able to get three or four weeks of spring training in there, so it's not like starting over. But at the same time, you've got to be smart."

Lee added: "It's one of those deals where it's still early. You've got to play it safe."

Mariners GM Jack Zduriencik sounded optimistic as he talked about Lee afterwards. But he also wouldn't commit to a timeframe, other than to say Lee will not come off the DL when eligible on April 10.

Clearly not, since he has to build up arm endurance.

"The thing is, he looks and feels good and that's encouraging," said Zduriencik, who was on the field watching Lee throw today.

Zduriencik said the team will discuss with Lee how he wants to proceed in regards to whether he'll go out on a minor league rehab assignment or merely throw simulated games with the major league squad. Lee said it's tough to replace live game situations and he figures the team will push to send him to the minors.

First, he's got to get through multiple bullpen sessions without a setback.

"He still has work to do," Zduriencik said. "But certainly, this was encouraging."

April 5, 2010 at 3:43 PM

Casey Kotchman to bat third tonight as Mariners open against Oakland

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

Up above in the photo, the Mariners' pitchers and catchers relax by throwing some footballs around on the outfield grass. The sun is out and that rain we thought might threaten tonight's game appears to be nowhere in sight.

Just got up from the clubhouse, where the first lineup of the season has been posted. A bit of a surprise, given all the talk yesterday about how Casey Kotchman wasn't going to hit third in the order, especially early on.

Guess who's batting third tonight? Yep.

MARINERS

Ichiro RF
Chone Figgins 2B
Casey Kotchman 1B
Milton Bradley LF
Ken Griffey Jr. DH
3B Jose Lopez
CF Franklin Gutierrez
C Rob Johnson
SS Jack Wilson

RHP Felix Hernandez

OAKLAND

Rajai Davis CF
Daric Barton 1B
Ryan Sweeney RF
Kevin Kouzmanoff 3B
Kurt Suzuki C
Eric Chavez DH
Mark Ellis 2B
Travis Buck LF
Cliff Pennington SS

RHP Ben Sheets

No word from manager Don Wakamatsu yet on why he went back with Kotchman at No. 3. We'll be chatting with him soon enough and I'm sure the topic will come up. We'd assumed most of the spring that Kotchman would be the No. 3 hitter against righties, Gutierrez against lefties. And that's what -- Wakamatsu's weekend comments notwithstanding -- it appears it will be to start the season.

First M's impressions: You're gonna love Figgins

Posted by Greg Johns at April 5, 2010 11:04 p.m.

Seattle PI.com Blog

First impressions from the Mariners' season-opening 5-3 victory at Oakland:

If you can't beat 'em, steal 'em: Seattle took down the A's in Monday night's debut, but you almost felt like this one was also a shot across the bow of the Los Angeles Angels with a pair of former Halos setting the tone.

After telling manager Don Wakamatsu he wanted to hit third, Casey Kotchman drove in four runs -- including a game-winning two-RBI single with two out in the top of the ninth -- to highlight a terrific debut.

And Chone Figgins? What's not to love about the little guy, who self-manufactured a pair of runs by walking, stealing second and moving to third twice in the early innings on bad throws by catcher Kurt Suzuki.

Figgins then was driven in both times by Kotchman, the first on a ringing double and the second a shallow sacrifice fly to left field that still allowed Figgins to hustle home.

Figgins thus scored twice even on an 0-for-3 night, proving once again that on-base percentage is far more important than batting average.

Yes, the Angels are going to miss their table setter. And the Mariners aren't going to let them forget it.

Goin' for a walk: The Mariners had a totally different approach at the plate from a year ago. Suddenly-patient Seattle -- the team with the worst on-base percentage in the AL last year -- drew eight walks and took enough pitches to force starter Ben Sheets to throw 94 pitches in just five innings of work.

This is exactly what Jack Zduriencik had in mind when he added disciplined hitters like Figgins, Kotchman and Milton Bradley to a lineup where it seemed as if Ken Griffey Jr. was the only guy working counts consistently a year ago.

Add in the speed racers at the top of the order and you've got a pretty clear picture of what the M's want to do this season. Figgins stole twice and Ichiro clearly isn't going to be outshone by his new compadre as he stole second in the third inning and then got thrown out on the next pitch trying to take third.

In years past, Ichiro played it overly safe on the bases, but hopefully he'll take the lead from Figgins this year and just keep charging.

The Kotch watch: It'll be interesting to see how Kotchman fares against left-handers as Wakamatsu has committed to letting him play every day.

He did all his damage Monday off right-handers and looked bad in striking out against lefty reliever Jerry Blevins in the sixth. There's a reason he's platooned most of his career.

But it's worth noting his career numbers against lefties and righties really aren't much different. He's had only 376 at-bats against lefties as opposed to 1,298 against right-handers, yet is hitting .277 with a .334 on-base and .378 slugging percentage against southpaws and .267/.337/.414 against opposite-handed hurlers.

The Mariners are counting on him getting comfortable and thriving in the full-time role, a la Russell Branyan without the home runs and back problems, presumably.

Kotchman has only had one season with more than 443 at-bats, that coming in 2008 when he was traded in midseason from the Angels to the Braves for Mark Teixeira and wound up with a combined 525 at-bats.

He put up 14 home runs, 74 RBIs that season, interestingly hitting .303 with a hefty .469 slugging percentage against left-handers. So there is reason for the Mariners to believe he'll be just fine in an everyday role.

It could have been better: Kotchman should have had one more hit -- and a chance to score the go-ahead run in the eighth -- but the umpires blew a call on a leadoff single that clearly bounced into the glove of sliding center fielder Rajai Davis.

Oddly, Wakamatsu didn't even come out of the dugout to protest what turned into a huge play when Ken Griffey Jr. roped a two-out double to right field that would have scored Kotchman in a 3-3 game.

Wak obviously isn't one to blow his top, but that seemed like a case where an argument was warranted.

The M's will do some emoting this season, however. Milton Bradley shattered his bat on the ground in frustration after striking out in the top of the ninth after Kotchman had hit his two-run single.

Bradley also glared into the crowd after a snatch-catch in the bottom of the ninth in left field, apparently miffed at the obviously vocal A's fans.

Yeah, it could get interesting. And, no, Bradley isn't going to change.

Last but not least: Felix Hernandez looked unhittable early, though he got squeezed at times on low strikes by home plate umpire Tim Tschida while walking six.

Hernandez deserved much better than a no-decision in this one, departing with a 3-1 lead after walking two in the seventh.

Wakamatsu went to Sean White instead of newcomer Brandon League and didn't get the desired result as White -- who had a 2.80 ERA last year -- wound up surrendering two run-scoring singles as well as Hernandez's lead.

I have a hunch Wakamatsu will use League in that situation in the future. League, acquired in the Brandon Morrow deal, came in for the eighth and wound up getting the win, but it would have been a heckuva lot easier on everyone had the M's slammed the door on the A's in the seventh instead and let Hernandez start his season off with a victory.

The bottom line: This was just one game and there's a loooooong way to go, but that was a fun way to start for the M's, with a taut win, a nice display from the newcomers, a fresh approach at the plate and a nice door-slam save by David Aardsma.

Yeah, Aardsma looked shaky in the spring. But it's a whole new ballgame now. These are the ones that count.

And already this looks like it could be a very interesting team indeed.

Guess who's hitting third in M's opening lineup?

Posted by Greg Johns at April 5, 2010 4:11 p.m.

Seattle PI.com Blog

After Mariners manager Don Wakamatsu said he was considering going with Franklin Gutierrez in the three spot in the batting order, the skipper instead backtracked to his original plans and will have first baseman Casey Kotchman there tonight in the season opener in Oakland.

With right-hander Ben Sheets starting for Oakland, Kotchman fits Wakamatsu's desire to have a lefty in the three-hole behind Ichiro and Chone Figgins.

Gutierrez is expected to fill that position against lefties, but Wakamatsu indicated Sunday he didn't want to throw Kotchman into that position quite so soon.

In 432 career starts, Kotchman has hit third only seven times. Obviously a limited sample size, but he's hit just .091 in that slot (3-for-33).

Kotchman has also started 27 games in the clean-up role (hitting .330 in 106 at-bats). Most of his career he's hit lower in the order, starting 90 games in the fifth hole, 155 at No. 6 and 101 at No. 7.

Apparently a night's sleep convinced Wakamatsu to give his new first baseman a shot, so we'll see how it goes when the M's step up to the plate at 7:07 p.m.

Here are the full lineups for Opening Day:

MARINERS

Ichiro Suzuki RF
Chone Figgins 2B
Casey Kotchman 1B
Milton Bradley LF
Ken Griffey Jr. DH
3B Jose Lopez
CF Franklin Gutierrez
C Rob Johnson
SS Jack Wilson

RHP Felix Hernandez

OAKLAND

Rajai Davis CF
Daric Barton 1B
Ryan Sweeney RF
Kevin Kouzmanoff 3B
Kurt Suzuki C
Eric Chavez DH
Mark Ellis 2B
Travis Buck LF
Cliff Pennington SS

RHP Ben Sheets

Report: Mariners payroll reduced this year

Posted by Todd Dybas at April 5, 2010 12:46 p.m.

Seattle PI.com Blog

USA Today put out its player salary database Monday morning and the Mariners were among 14 Major League teams to cut payroll at the start of the season.

The Mariners' \$86,510,000 payroll is 14th in the Major Leagues. That's down from the roughly \$99 million payroll the Mariners opened with last season.

Ichiro is the Mariners' highest-paid player. He'll cash in \$18 million this year, same as last season.

The only other Mariners salary more than \$10 million? Milton Bradley. He receives \$11 million this year. The Mariners also sent money to Chicago as part of the Bradley/Carlos Silva trade.

Rounding out the Mariners' top five salaries are Cliff Lee (\$9 million), Chone Figgins (\$8.5 million) and Felix Hernandez (\$7.2 million).

The Angels have the highest payroll in the American League West. Los Angeles will pay \$104,963,866. Texas (\$55,250,544) and Oakland (\$51,654,900) are among the lowest payrolls in the Majors. Only San Diego and Pittsburgh will be paying less than those two clubs.

The Yankees continue to lead the big leagues, dropping \$206,333,389 in payroll this season. According to the article, New York's infield makes more than 16 teams.

Alex Rodriguez will make \$33 million this season. The Pittsburgh Pirates' entire team will make \$34.9 million. The Pirates' highest-paid player, starter Paul Maholm, will make \$5 million in 2010.

What's your prediction on Mariners' record?

Posted by Greg Johns at April 5, 2010 10:00 a.m.

Seattle PI.com Blog

We've been hearing from all the experts for weeks on what to expect from the Seattle Mariners this season.

First the M's were the trendy pick to surprise everyone. Then Cliff Lee strained his stomach and most of the forecasters pulled muscles jumping off the bandwagon.

So is Jack Zduriencik still a genius? Or were the Mariners just lucky to win a bunch of close games last year, overachieved with an 85-77 record and now will naturally regress as is the common theme?

In today's 13 questions segment with fellow writer Todd Dybas, I predicted the Mariners would be a better club this year ... but still wind up with the same 85-win season.

But this is your chance to voice an opinion rather than listen to the rest of our bluster. So how many games do you see this Mariners' team winning?

Is this a better team than a year ago? Can they win with a defensive emphasis while lacking the big bopper? And what has to happen for this season to be a success in your mind?

An opening day lineup, and a bit more

Posted By Larry Larue on April 5, 2010 at 6:33 pm

The Tacoma News Tribune Blog

If you're wondering where this blog has been the last day and a half, that's easy - it's tough blogging in the Bay area when your computer power cord is still in New Mexico.

Oops.

Tonight, we're buddy-breathing with a kind Japanese writer whose new-fangled cord fits the oldest living laptop. So, I'll catch up while I still have a little juice left.

The Mariners lineup is up, and Casey Kotchman is batting third against Oakland's right-handed starter, Ben Sheets. Yesterday morning, manager Don Wakamatsu had pondered dropping him to sixth and putting Franklin Gutierrez third, thinking it would take pressure off first-year Mariner Kotchman.

What happened?

"We had a chat, and Casey said he'd welcomed the challenge of hitting third and thought he deserved the chance after a good spring," Wakamatsu said. "He looked me in the eye and said, 'I can handle it.'"

Good enough - for now, at least.

Then there's closer David Aardsma. Talked to him for five minutes today, and he coughed for three of those. The bad cold of last week is now 'just' a cough, but it's a major cough, so the ninth inning could be interesting if it's a close game.

Your opening day lineup:

- Ichiro, RF
- Chone Figgins, 2B
- Casey Kotchman, 1B
- Milton Bradley, LF
- Ken Griffey Jr., DH
- Jose Lopez, 3B
- Franklin Gutierrez, CF
- Rob Johnson, C
- Jack Wilson, SS
- Felix Hernandez, P

Updated Apr 6, 2010 - 1:14 am

Answers?

710 ESPN Seattle's Shannon Drayer

MyNorthwest.com Blog

So what do you think? What did you see? You must have had questions going into tonight's game, I know I did and I spent the last month and a half with them. I know it is just one game but for me, it really looked and felt different.

On the post game show Matt Pitman said that the biggest thing that he had questions about and was happy to see was Chone Figgins the Mariner looking like Chone Figgins the Angel. I thought this was funny. Of course he was still going to be the pest, the "gnat" as Bruce Bochy called him in spring training. He wasn't going to get to the Mariners and all of a sudden start stopping at first. No, I wasn't worried about him.

I did hold my breath every time a ball was hit to Jose Lopez. Not because I thought he might not make the play but because if he didn't I knew that we would hear a lot about it. There will be errors and there will be adjustments but let him settle in. He is still learning. Not everything is automatic for him over there but as you can see he is getting it and I would have to think that a lot of people who saw him there tonight for the first time are pleasantly surprised.

I was relieved to see David Aardsma 2010 look like David Aardsma 2009 after a rocky spring. And how about big hits from the six hitter, I mean the three hitter Casey Kotchman? Or the collective patience of the lineup that bounced Ben Sheets after five innings? Was I concerned about Felix? No. And he wasn't concerned either.

What about the skipper? What was the biggest hold your breath moment for him?

"League. I think it was important to get him into the ball game. There were a lot of things we were trying to establish looking at the long term. I think instead of going straight to Lowe in that situation it was important for League and even more important that he got out of it."

The biggest thing for me that stood out was that they scored five runs. I couldn't help but have the feeling that they would not score more than the three that they did early. Can you blame me after watching last years offense? Four runs last year pretty much guaranteed a win for that team but oh, were those four runs tough to get to. I much prefer five.

I know it is just one game out of 162 but it is always good to start out on a winning note especially when there were so many questions going into the season. So were any of yours answered?

Updated Apr 4, 2010 - 10:48 pm

The 2010 Mariners by Position

Mike Salk

MyNorthwest.com Blog

First of all, let's get this out of the way... I am SO excited for Opening Day! Yankees-Red Sox was ok, but only as a preview for the main event tomorrow in Oakland. It's hard to believe that it's now been a year since my wife and I drove across the country and made Seattle our home. But one of my favorite parts of this move has been the way the Mariners have grown on me. I came to Seattle without any real pre-conceived notions about the M's so it's been a lot of fun to get to know the players, the organization, the ballpark and the fans. So far, I have found all to be top-notch. And I'm looking forward to seeing how each can get even better with the lofty expectations of 2010!

So with that, let's take a look at the opening day roster...

Sweeney

The biggest surprise, of course, is that Mike Sweeney came from nowhere to make this team. When it first became clear that he would be on the major league roster, I wrote that it was a tale of two stories: a fantastic story of perseverance but also a potential complication for in-game decisions. Now that we know the Mariners decided to go with 11 pitchers (and Ryan Langerhans as a fifth outfielder), I think it's time to back off some of the Sweeney-bashing.

My biggest objection to Sweeney being on the roster was the fact that it would potentially force Milton Bradley to play more games in the outfield instead of at designated hitter. While that still may happen, the fact that both Eric Byrnes and Langerhans are on the team should mitigate some of that as both could get reps in left field. Basically, having Sweeney on this team does not mean he has to start many games as a designated hitter - and I think he could serve some value as a pinch hitter from the right side.

Bullpen

Of course, the decision to keep Langerhans means that there are only 11 pitchers instead of the 12 they kept for much of last year. That works for me! While I'm surprised that they won't start with a true swing man/long reliever (like Chris Jackabauskas last season), they have stretched out Shawn Kelley for multiple innings and I think Doug Fister can slide into that role when Cliff Lee returns. They also shouldn't need a long reliever as often with the way their starting staff is constructed and if they get into trouble with a few short outings early in the year, they can always bring up Garrett Olson to give someone a break.

David Aardsma was one of the great success stories of 2009 and one of the primary reasons the Mariners were able to win more games than their run differential would have predicted. And while we'd all love for him to continue to build on that, there are plenty of reasons to question if that's reasonable. After all, he has a history of injuries and relievers are notorious for having great years followed by lousy ones. But the M's are prepared for Aardsma to slide back to his career norm. Mark Lowe and/or Brandon League seem poised and ready to take over the ninth inning if Aardsma falters. That is smart bullpen construction!

Rotation

Obviously, the Mariners need their rotation to be strong if they want to challenge for the AL West title. Felix Hernandez put up Cy Young caliber numbers last year and there is no reason to expect that won't continue in 2010. But after that, there are plenty of question marks. When healthy, you could see Felix joined by lefties Lee, Erik Bedard and Ryan Rowland-Smith - a rotation that could be among the best in the league. But that's at least a few weeks away. Until then, Jason Vargas, Ian Snell and Doug Fister get to show that they belong as the fifth man on that staff. If the spring is any indication, Vargas has to be the favorite. He has been consistent, confident, and effective. Fister has battled injuries and though he has made adjustments, he struggled in Arizona. Snell is a wildcard. At times, he looked impressive (like against the Giants and Dodgers). Other times he looked disastrous (such as when he was roughed up by the White Sox Double-A lineup). A spring ERA over 7.00 is not what anyone wanted, but Snell did cut down on his walks and seems to be pitching with more confidence so he gets a few starts in April to see if he's turned a corner.

Infield

Defensively, the Mariners infield has a chance to be special. Jack Wilson and Casey Kotchman are Gold Glove-caliber and are both major upgrades over their counterparts on the 2009 Opening Day roster (Yuniesky Betancourt and Russell Branyan). But in order to become truly special, Chone Figgins and Jose Lopez need to adapt to their new spots on the diamond. Lopez seems committed to the hot corner, but doesn't exactly look natural there yet. And while everyone expects Figgins to be able to play anywhere, there is a reason he settled in at third for the last three years. And he has only played 113 games there in his eight seasons. It's also worth pointing out that it is the position where he has had the least positive impact (according to his Total Fielding Runs Above Average, Rtot).

Assuming this group is solid in the field, all four have question marks at the plate. Can Chone Figgins continue to be a pest out of the two-spot after so many years as a leadoff hitter? I think he can. Can Casey Kotchman provide some "doubles power" and bring some production to the lower third of the order? I'm not as sure about this one. Can Jose Lopez provide the same level of RBI production as he did last year? And can he do it while showing some patience? This new lineup may not project to score 1000 runs, but it should see more pitches than the 2009 version. Can Lopez play the team game? And can Jack Wilson stay healthy long enough to produce? Only time can answer these questions but they'll go a long way towards determining what kind of outcome we should expect.

Catcher

Of all the things to look forward to about this team, I may be most excited about the catching combination. From what I've seen and from everyone I've talked to, Adam Moore has a chance to be a special player. He was given the opportunity to win a major league job out of spring training and ran with it, hitting .386 with five doubles. Of course, the offense was almost secondary to the confidence, poise, and preparedness that so impressed Don Wakamatsu.

Obviously, there is a significant split between the Rob Johnson fans and his detractors. I understand both sides of the equation, but ultimately I am a fan. I hate to say this, but it helps to know him. He is a charismatic guy who works his tail off and earns the respect of his pitchers. And while that may not be a worthwhile skillset for a position player, it is incredibly important for a catcher. His defense may not wow you and his bat speed isn't the fastest, but some of that may improve after his offseason surgeries. We'll see. For more on these two catchers, [click here](#).

Outfield

I'm a huge fan of the Mariners' outfield. Ichiro is the team's best position player and I'd expect yet another incredible season from him complete with 225 hits. And stellar defense. But I'd also like to see him run a little more than last year when he only stole 26 bags. He and Figgins are the best offensive threats here and they need to run in order to maximize their effects.

If last year was the breakout season for Franklin Gutierrez, 2010 is the year he can show he is an elite player. He will get the opportunity to hit 3rd, right in front of Milton Bradley. If he can produce in that spot, this team could do some special things. Gutierrez should get RBI opportunities with the two "mosquitoes" in front of him - he needs to find ways to drive them in.

And while Bradley could probably merit his own blog post, I think it suffices to say that the M's need him to be healthy throughout the season: both mentally and physically. If he can stay on the field and in the game, he should be productive. 'Nuff said.

One little note: while there is some belief that Eric Byrnes will be a plus defender, there are those (including those within the Mariners organization) that worry about his defense. He has some speed, but is also known to take some "unusual" routes to the ball. Langerhans is the better defender, and may see some time as a late-game replacement in left for both Bradley and Byrnes.

DH

There is no doubt that Ken Griffey Junior means a tremendous amount to both this team and this city. He proved his worth in the M's clubhouse last year, telling CEO Howard Lincoln that he knew what was wrong with the chemistry in 2008 and even promising that he would fix it. Off the field, he delivered. But on the field, he struggled. Junior still has the flare for the dramatic and I'd expect some more "old time religion" moments from him again this year. But whereas the 2009 Mariners could afford to be patient while Junior hit just .214, the 2010 version has higher hopes. If Junior can seize the job by producing early, he deserves to keep it as long as he's effective. But if he doesn't hit, the M's need to put someone into that spot who will. We may need to revisit this discussion in a few weeks.

Updated Apr 5, 2010 - 7:32 pm

In the Clubhouse...

710 ESPN Seattle's Shannon Drayer

MyNorthwest.com Blog

So much for Guti hitting third...

Actually he will most likely hit third against lefties. Unless Wak changes his mind again. Turns out he had a conversation with Casey about moving him down in the lineup and taking some of the pressure off but Casey felt strongly about hitting third. At that point Wak felt it would be beneficial to keep him there and show that he has confidence in him. Nothing is set in stone of course, but that is what we have tonight.

Just got upstairs after spending the last few hours in the clubhouse and on the field. The clubhouse was strangely quiet. Not alarmingly so, different from last year. Jack Zduriencik walked through the room and managed to shake hands with every player and wish them well for the season. Don Wakamatsu held a team meeting to talk about well, team stuff. About continuing to come together and to be a team.

Junior took in the scene and told me that they have a good group. "We all care about each other. Twenty-five men and six coaches that are there for everyone else in this group. When Milton got hurt the other day just about everyone came in and checked on him at some point of the game."

The quiet was wrecked at one point. Ichiro picked up a towel and laid it out on the ground in the middle of the clubhouse. He was getting ready to stretch. My eyes immediately went to Jr. He caught the look and gave a wicked/gleeful smile. He then headed to where Ichiro was stretching on the ground and put his arms around him and started tickling. "Nooooooooo!" Ichiro laughed before yelling, "George!" Which apparently was the magic word. And there we had the first tickle.

Rob Johnson and Adam Moore sat together at Rob's locker quietly talking. At some point this season these two are going to compete for playing time and Rob is not handing any over willingly. It is great to see them working together. Being a rookie catcher and having to take on that leadership is not an easy thing and what Rob did in that department is the perfect blueprint for Adam. This will be an interesting dynamic. It is great to see them working together right now.

That's about it for now. Let's get this thing started.

Updated Apr 5, 2010 - 5:23 pm

Lee to throw bullpen Friday

By Matt Pitman

MyNorthwest.com Blog

Just spoke on the phone with Shannon, who is on the field and obviously has a lot going on in Oakland with opening day stuff going on. But she had a very encouraging report on Cliff Lee!

Lee threw again today in a session similar to his recent sessions playing catch. He reported no pain and is progressing so well that he will throw a flat ground session tomorrow, then throw a bullpen on Friday.

This is huge. Once he gets on a mound they can start building up his arm strength and then start mapping out a plan for his return. Lee told Shannon that he is not opposed to making a few minor league starts.

We will have much more on this during the pre game show which starts at 6:00pm sharp! Then it's Baseball!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Junior reflects on first Opening Day

Posted on April 5, 2010 at 6:56 PM

Jim Street

Mariners.com Blog

Ah, Opening Night at the Oakland Coliseum.

Before the game, a few of us scribes were chatting with Ken Griffey Jr., who made his Major League debut right here in 1989 and, and it took him all of one at-bat to get his first big-league hit.

It was a line-drive double into the left-center field gap off Athletics right-hander Dave Stewart.

"They are all special," he said of Opening Days. "It begins six months of baseball, and hopefully longer."

Junior said he was a combination of excited and nervous 21 years ago when he had such a good Spring Training as a 19-year-old that he not only earned a spot on the 25-man roster, but a place in the Mariners' starting lineup.

He batted second that night, behind Harold Reynolds and in front of Alvin Davis. "I tried to talk skip (manager Don Wakamatsu) into putting me there, but he didn't go for it."

Turning back to his first Opening Night game, he said, "I think I was tired after the first inning."

Not surprisingly, Griffey received a warm ovation during the pre-game introductions.

-- Jim Street

New menu items at Safeco Field

by KING5.com Staff

Posted on April 5, 2010 at 5:54 PM

Updated today at 5:54 PM

Beyond rooting for the Mariners, one of the reasons to enjoy Safeco Field is the food. This season, fans are getting to try some new menu items. The following is a press release from the Mariners:

Fans at Seattle Mariners games at Safeco Field this season will find a new line-up at concessions stands. In addition to long-time favorites, there will be an emphasis on fresh, local and healthy options, and a focus on affordability.

Not to worry, garlic fries, Ivar's clam chowder and hot dogs are still available, but for the more adventuresome palate, Centerplate, the exclusive caterer for Safeco Field, offers fans a variety of new offerings. Some of the highlights are:

- Philly cheese steaks with hand cut fries, beef and lamb gyros, Greek salad, prime rib nachos,
- Dungeness crab sandwich, blackened salmon sandwich, peel & eat shrimp bucket, gluten-free halibut & chips
- Seattle's own all natural, handmade Cucina Fresca pasta,
- An expanded vegetarian menu, featuring whole fresh fruit, gluten-free, vegan and organic selections including fruit smoothies,
- Deli option to build your own meals with grab-n-go sandwiches and sides of pasta, potato or coleslaw salads and chips,
- Hope's Country Fresh Cookies, house-made cupcakes and caramel apples, chocolate dipped Rice Krispies Treats.

Value Menu

A Value Menu will be available at all games and there will be rotating special offers throughout the season. The value selections will be available at the concession stand near Section 105, which is located close to the Center Field Bleachers and the Family Section at 103. The second location is near Section 319 on the Upper Concourse. The items available at the value locations include:

- 12 oz soda for \$2.50
- 12 oz Aquafina water for \$2.75
- Small hot dog for \$3.50
- 4 oz bag peanuts for \$2.50
- Small Cracker Jack for \$1.75
- Small Popcorn for \$2.50
- 16 oz beer for \$5.50
- 20 oz beer for \$6.50
- 130 oz popcorn tub with one free refill at all Rolling Roof stands

In addition to the value menu locations, fans can also get \$2 hot dogs at all 10 Value games during the season, which offer \$5 ticket discounts.

Blazing Bagels

Also joining the Safeco Field lineup is Blazing Bagels, which will operate a street level store near the flag-ship Seattle Mariners Team Store near the Left Field Gate. Blazing Bagels will offer a selection of deli sandwiches, bagel dogs, sides, assorted bagels and schmears. The Safeco Field store will be open Monday-Friday from 7am-3pm, during all Mariners games and for major events in the stadium district. Blazing Bagels, which bills itself as “The Best Bagels East of New York,” has two other locations in Redmond on 176th Ave. Northeast and in Bellevue at 108th Ave. Northeast.

Wonderful Pistachios

Grown in California, Wonderful Pistachios will be available at Rolling Roof stands and beverage portable stands throughout the ballpark. Wonderful Pistachios are roasted and lightly salted for a delicious all-natural, healthy snack.

Organic

The concession stand at Section 132 on the Main Concourse is being re-branded “The Natural,” and will feature a full selection of organic and vegetarian items. In addition to the Garden Burger and veggie dog, there will be a hummus platter, rotating vegan soup, fruit juice and whole fruit, gluten-free “Kind Plus” snack bars, organic gummy snacks, and organic smoothies in strawberry, Very Berry, mango and peach.

Local Connections

Seattle’s own Cucina Fresca pasta will be featured in four dishes at the Bistro stand at Section 216 of the Wells Fargo Terrace Club. The pasta bowls will come with a choice of toppings including vegetarian. Bread from Essential Baking Company will be featured in sandwiches such as the Dungeness crab sandwich, available at the Sound Seafood stand, which will be served on garlic artisan French bread. Essential Baking is an organic, artisan bakery with locations in Madison Valley and Wallingford.

The hand-cut French fries, available at the Fielder’s Choice stand at Section 136, are made with Kennebec potatoes grown by Bud-Rich Potatoes of Hermiston, OR. The potatoes have high starch content and are prized for their firm yet creamy consistency and slight nutty flavor. Kennebecs are multi-purpose potatoes, but are becoming the top choice in culinary circles for French frying.

Another new potato treat is Skinny Skins, house-made rustic potato chips served with sour cream, chives, cheese sauce and bacon bits. Skinny Skins will be available at the Bases Loaded concession stand at Section 212 in the Wells Fargo Terrace Club and at the Field Grill stand in the Bullpen Market.

Last updated April 6, 2010 12:41 a.m. PT

Play ball! Obama, Big Mac highlight opening day

By BEN WALKER
AP BASEBALL WRITER

Tim Lincecum hoped to avoid another hairy start. So the Giants ace with the long locks told himself this was just like any outing in June or July.

That worked, mostly.

"It wasn't that uncontrollable hype-ed-ness where I didn't know what was going on," the two-time Cy Young winner said after pitching seven shutout innings Monday to beat Houston. "I kind of had an idea what was going on. Obviously, opening day can be a little overwhelming, a little bit more exciting than a usual game."

A year after struggling in the opener, Lincecum did fine. Ditto for World Series MVP Hideki Matsui, Roy Halladay, Jason Bay, Vladimir Guerrero, Placido Polanco and other stars who made neat debuts for their new teams.

Albert Pujols launched two more home runs and President Barack Obama tossed another ball. Yet no one enjoyed the day as much as Jason Heyward.

Billed as the majors' next phenom, the Braves prospect bridged baseball's past and future Monday when he caught the ceremonial first pitch from Hank Aaron.

Then with the Atlanta crowd chanting his name, the 20-year-old Heyward mashed a three-run homer on his first swing in the big leagues.

"I had a blast," the rookie said.

Mark McGwire made a more quiet return. Back in baseball after admitting he took steroids, Big Mac drew little reaction in Cincinnati when he was introduced as the new hitting coach for the St. Louis Cardinals.

In New York, there were a few boos. After seeing their club crippled by injuries last season, Mets fans heckled - of all people - the team trainers. Tough crowd!

Cubs manager Lou Piniella didn't seem real pleased, either, when the umpires' call went against him on a dropped fly ball. After a postseason dotted with missed calls, there are sure to be more shouts this year for extra instant replay.

Milton Bradley was a bit perturbed, too. He broke his bat into several splinters after slamming it to the ground in frustration after a strikeout. Now with Seattle, the often volatile outfielder was jeered all game in Oakland by his former fans.

A day after Boston beat the World Series champion New York Yankees in the major league opener, most every team swung into action. Reds Hall of Famer Johnny Bench and NFL Hall of Famer Roger Staubach joined in opening-day festivities.

On a huge sports day in America - the NCAA men's basketball championship game, the Tiger Woods news conference - baseball delivered a full first serving.

For 40-year-old Ken Griffey Jr., it was time to enjoy an opener.

"They're always special, the start of six months of baseball," the Seattle star said.

There were 13 games on the schedule, plus a bid for history. Toronto pitcher Shaun Marcum took a no-hitter into the seventh inning at Texas before it got broken up by Guerrero.

All over, the weather held. Rather than the dreary, upper 30s temperatures that often dampen openers, it was a beautiful day to play ball. In Milwaukee, this was the earliest the Miller Park roof was open for a regular-season game in its 10-year history.

Obama drew a loud ovation when he continued a tradition that started 100 years ago with William Howard Taft - the presidential first pitch. He warmed up with some practice tosses at the White House but, really, the lefty could use a little more time in the bullpen.

Obama double-pumped, rocked on the mound a few times and made a high-and-wide flip to the plate that Washington third baseman Ryan Zimmerman snared. It probably helped that Zimmerman was coming off winning his first Gold Glove.

At least Obama, whose smooth stroke on the basketball court is well documented, put more oomph into it. Last year, he barely reached the plate at the All-Star game.

"If I had a whole inning, I'm telling you, I would have cleaned up," he said.

A White Sox fan, Obama waited until he got to the mound to put on a Chicago cap. The play of the day - of the year, perhaps - came from Obama's pal on the White Sox, pitcher Mark Buehrle.

Tracking down a ball that caromed off his leg into foul territory, the Gold Glove winner made a blind, between-the-legs flip with his glove to get the out at first base.

"You run over there saying, 'Do I slide and spin, or do I grab the ball and throw it?'" Buehrle said. "I think every thought went through my head. It just happened the way it did."

Last updated April 5, 2010 10:12 p.m. PT

Matsui gets 2 big hits in Angels' win over Twins

By GREG BEACHAM
AP SPORTS WRITER

ANAHEIM, Calif. -- Hideki Matsui drove in the go-ahead run in the fifth and added an eighth-inning homer in his dynamic Angels debut, and Jered Weaver pitched six strong innings in Los Angeles' 6-3 victory over the Minnesota Twins on Monday night.

Jeff Mathis and Kendry Morales also homered as the Angels opened their 50th season and their run at a fourth straight AL West title with their sixth victory in the last seven openers.

After an 0-for-2 start, Matsui quickly showed why the Angels chose last season's World Series MVP over slugger Vladimir Guerrero in free agency.

The Japanese star's two-out single to right scored Erick Aybar in the fifth, and the Angels' new cleanup hitter connected for a long shot to center off Jose Mijares in the eighth.

Last updated April 5, 2010 7:09 p.m. PT

Lincecum shuts down Astros in 5-2 Giants win

By KRISTIE RIEKEN
AP SPORTS WRITER

HOUSTON -- Tim Lincecum pitched seven scoreless innings and the San Francisco Giants beat the Houston Astros 5-2 Monday night.

Lincecum (1-0) allowed four hits and struck out seven with no walks to shut down a Houston offense that started the season with star slugger Lance Berkman on the disabled list.

The Giants got a boost from new left fielder Mark DeRosa, who scored in San Francisco's three-run second inning and added a solo homer in the eighth.

Houston starter Roy Oswalt (0-1) allowed seven hits and three runs in six innings as he extended his team record to eight straight opening day starts.

Sergio Romo allowed two hits in a scoreless eighth inning. Houston finally got on the board in the ninth when Carlos Lee singled and scored on a ground out by Pedro Feliz. J.R. Towles followed with an RBI double off Brandon Medders.

Brian Wilson came in for the last two outs and the save.

Lincecum retired the first five batters before Feliz singled in the second. Lincecum didn't allow another hit until a single by Lee with two outs in the fourth, before retiring Geoff Blum to end the inning.

About the only thing that slowed Lincecum was the mud that got stuck in his cleats with one out in the fifth. He walked off the mound and motioned to the umpire before a Giants trainer came out and handed him something, which he used to dig the chunks of mud out from in between the spikes.

He then returned to the mound and quickly retired the next two batters.

Houston's Michael Bourn got his first career hit against Lincecum with bullet single the pitcher had to duck to with one out in the sixth inning. Bourn was 0 for 10 against Lincecum before the hit.

Kaz Matsui gave Houston consecutive hits for the first time in the game with his single to right field. But Lincecum retired Hunter Pence and Lee to end the inning.

He pitched a 1-2-3 seventh inning, striking out Feliz and Towles.

The performance improved his record to 34-2 in 55 starts when the Giants score at least three runs.

Bengie Molina hit an RBI single in the second and John Bowker's run-scoring single pushed the lead to 2-0 and sent pitching coach Brad Arnsberg to the mound for a chat with Oswalt. Juan Uribe added one last run with his sacrifice fly to right field that scored Molina.

The Giants pushed their lead to 4-0 with Edgar Renteria's RBI double in the seventh inning off Chris Sampson. Oswalt allowed a single in each inning he pitched after the second and was helped in the third and fifth innings when Houston turned double plays.

NOTES: Former President George H.W. Bush and wife Barbara had front-row seats behind home plate. The Bushes, who have a home in Houston, often attend sporting events in the area. Barbara Bush was recently hospitalized after a mild relapse of Graves disease, a thyroid condition. ... Tommy Manzella became the first rookie to start for the Astros on opening day since 2005 when he started at shortstop on Monday.

Last updated April 5, 2010 5:05 p.m. PT

Play ball! Obama, Big Mac highlight opening day

By BEN WALKER
AP BASEBALL WRITER

Albert Pujols launched two home runs, Roy Halladay looked every bit an ace and Barack Obama pulled out a White Sox hat to make his presidential pitch.

Still, no one had a bigger blast on opening day than Jason Heyward.

Billed as the majors' next phenom, this Braves prospect bridged baseball's past and future Monday when he caught the ceremonial first ball from Hank Aaron.

Then with the Atlanta crowd chanting his name, the 20-year-old Heyward mashed a three-run homer on his first swing in the big leagues.

"I felt my legs, but I couldn't hear myself think," he said. "I think I'll remember that the most ... how loud it was."

Nice job, rook.

Mark McGwire made a more quiet return. Back in baseball after admitting he took steroids, Big Mac drew little reaction in Cincinnati when he was introduced as the new hitting coach for the St. Louis Cardinals.

In New York, there were a few boos. After seeing their club crippled by injuries last season, Mets fans heckled - of all people - the team trainers. Tough crowd!

Cubs manager Lou Piniella didn't seem real pleased, either, when the umpires' call went against him on a dropped fly ball. After a postseason dotted with missed calls, there are sure to be more shouts this year for extra instant replay.

A day after Boston beat the World Series champion New York Yankees in the major league opener, most everyone else swung into action.

On a huge sports day in America - the NCAA men's basketball championship game, the Tiger Woods news conference - baseball delivered a full first day.

There were 13 games on the schedule, plus a bid for history. Toronto pitcher Shaun Marcum took a no-hitter into the seventh inning at Texas before it got broken up. His effort was even more remarkable because he missed the entire 2009 season with elbow trouble.

Too bad for the Blue Jays, they were beaten in the bottom of the ninth inning.

"What a way to start the season," Toronto manager Cito Gaston lamented. "We start with almost a no-hitter and it leads to a loss."

All over, the weather held. Rather than the dreary, upper 30s temperatures that often dampen openers, it was a beautiful day to play ball. In Milwaukee, this was the earliest the Miller Park roof was open for a regular-season game in its 10-year history.

Some four hours before first pitch between the Mariners and Athletics at the Oakland Coliseum, Seattle players warmed up by tossing around a football in right field. The black clouds had parted in the Bay Area and blue skies emerged.

For 40-year-old Ken Griffey Jr., it was time to enjoy another opening day.

"They're always special, the start of six months of baseball," the Mariners star said.

Obama drew a loud ovation when he continued a tradition that started 100 years ago with William Howard Taft - the presidential first pitch. He warmed up with some practice tosses at the White House but really, the lefty could use a little more time in the bullpen.

Obama double-pumped, rocked on the mound a few times and made a high-and-wide flip to the plate that Washington third baseman Ryan Zimmerman snared. It probably helped, too, that Zimmerman was coming off winning his first Gold Glove.

At least Obama, whose smooth stroke on the basketball court is well documented, put more oomph into it. Last year, he barely reached the plate at the All-Star game.

"If I had a whole inning, I'm telling you, I would have cleaned up," he said.

A White Sox fan, Obama waited until he got to the mound to pull on his Chicago cap.

"I said at one point when he had a Nationals jacket, 'I don't think I've ever been at a game when you didn't have a Sox jacket, and he said 'I've got something coming,' and sure enough out came the White Sox hat," commissioner Bud Selig said.

Last updated April 5, 2010 5:02 p.m. PT

Drew's inside-park HR helps D-backs beat Padres

By BOB BAUM
AP SPORTS WRITER

PHOENIX -- Stephen Drew hit an inside-the-park home run and Dan Haren held San Diego to three hits in seven innings in the Arizona Diamondbacks' 6-3 win over the Padres on Monday.

For the second year in a row, someone hit an inside-the-park homer on opening day - former Diamondbacks player Emilio Bonifacio did it for the Florida Marlins last year, which was the first one after 41 years.

Mark Reynolds hit a two-run homer, the only earned runs among the six given up by San Diego starter Jon Garland (0-1).

Haren (1-0) allowed one run and struck out four without a walk. He threw 20 of 24 first-pitch strikes and had a three-ball count against only one batter.

Adrian Gonzalez and Kyle Blanks hit consecutive two-out homers off Bob Howry in the ninth for San Diego. Haren retired 19 of the first 20 batters he faced, including 15 before Gonzalez doubled with one out in the seventh. Chase Headley's two-out RBI single ended the shutout.

Garland, in his first opening day start, gave up five hits in four innings, walking two and striking out four. A starter for Arizona last season before being traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers, he is 4-7 at Chase Field.

Drew's was the sixth inside-the-park home run in the franchise's 13-year history and the fifth by any player at Chase Field.

With two outs in the fourth, he hit Garland's 2-2 pitch high and deep. The ball caromed off the balcony over the right-center wall and far away from Padres' center fielder Tony Gwynn. By the time left fielder Kyle Banks chased down the ball and threw it to the infield, Drew was halfway between third and home.

Haren scored ahead of him from first after reaching on the third baseman Headley's error.

The Diamondbacks got two unearned in the first, thanks to shortstop Everth Cabrera's fielding error. Drew singled, then Justin Upton hit what should have been an ideal double-play bouncer just to the left of second base. But Cabrera bobbled the ball and both runners were safe. Reynolds walked to load the bases, then Miguel Montero lined a two-run single to right.

In the third, Upton singled with one out, then Adam LaRoche struck out swinging for the second time. That brought up Reynolds who, coming off a 44-home run season, hit the first pitch high and into the left field seats.

Matt Stairs appeared as a pinch hitter for the Padres in the eighth inning to tie a major league record by appearing for his 12th major league team.

NOTES: Recently retired Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner threw out the first pitch. ... The last inside-the-park homer for Arizona was by Kelly Stinnett on Aug. 29, 2005 at San Diego. The last one at Chase Field was by the Cubs' Derrek Lee on Aug. 26, 2007. ... The game was announced as a sellout of 49,192, although there was a smattering of empty seats in the upper deck.

Last updated April 5, 2010 4:33 p.m. PT

Tigers use six-run 7th to beat Greinke, Royals 8-4

By DOUG TUCKER
AP SPORTS WRITER

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Johnny Damon and Brandon Inge drove in two runs apiece in a six-run seventh inning against Kansas City's shaky bullpen and the Detroit Tigers rallied for an 8-4 win Monday.

Earlier on the wind-swept opening day, Yuniesky Betancourt's two-run home run and Billy Butler's bases-loaded single staked Cy Young Award winner Zack Greinke to a 4-2 lead over Justin Verlander in a duel between two of baseball's premier starters.

But when Greinke departed after allowing six hits and one earned run through six innings, the Tigers sent 10 men to the plate in the seventh and punished three relievers for six hits and six runs.

Robinson Tejeda (0-1) got just one out and allowed three runs. Joel Zumaya (1-0) went one inning and a batter, throwing 12 pitches.

Verlander, the major league leader with 269 strikeouts last season, gave up six hits and four runs in five innings. He walked one and struck out six in his first start since agreeing to a \$80 million, five-year contract with the Tigers.

In six innings, Greinke allowed six hits and two runs with four strikeouts and a walk. Only one run was earned, though.

Greinke did not give up an earned run until his fifth start last year, when he allowed none or one in 18 of 33 starts.

Luis Colon walked Scott Sizemore leading off the seventh and gave up a single to Ramon Santiago. Tejeda came in and Austin Jackson, making his major league debut, hit an RBI double. Damon, who signed a one-year free agent contract in February, followed with a two-run double. Inge added a two-run double off Juan Cruz.

Jose Guillen singled on a 100-mph fastball from Verlander in the second and Betancourt sent a 3-2 pitch over the fence in left field for a 2-1 lead.

The Royals loaded the bases in the fifth with two out on two singles and a walk and Butler hit an opposite-field double into right.

The Tigers scored an unearned run off Greinke in the first When Magglio Ordonez doubled and later scored from third when third baseman Willie Bloomquist dropped his infield popup in the gusty wind.

Miguel Cabrera's RBI single made it 4-2 in the sixth.

NOTES: The Royals did not have one player in their opening day lineup who played the same position on opening day last year. ... Tigers pitcher Jeremy Bonderman served a one-game suspension on Monday that was a carry-over from a fracas last season. ... Tigers 2B Sizemore also made his big league debut. ... The Royals' David DeJesus got a laugh from the crowd of 40,052 with an ungainly face-first slide into second. He did a bellyflop short of the base and sort of bounced to the bag, unaware that Detroit catcher Gerald Laird hadn't even made a throw.

Last updated April 5, 2010 4:16 p.m. PT

Heyward's 3-run homer helps Braves beat Cubs 16-5

By CHARLES ODUM
AP SPORTS WRITER

ATLANTA -- Jason Heyward hit like The Hammer in his Atlanta Braves debut.

Minutes after catching the ceremonial first pitch from Hank Aaron, Heyward hit a three-run homer in his first major league at-bat to spark the Braves to a 16-5 opening win Monday over Carlos Zambrano and the Chicago Cubs.

Heyward, who had a run-scoring single in the eighth, was 2-for-5 with four RBIs.

Yunel Escobar drove in a career-high five runs as Zambrano gave up eight runs in 1 1-3 innings, matching the shortest of 239 career starts.

With fans in the sellout crowd chanting "Let's go, Heyward," the rookie's first-inning homer into the Braves' bullpen behind the right-field wall gave Atlanta a 6-3 lead.

Marlon Byrd, playing his first game with the Cubs, hit a three-run homer in the first inning and Aramis Ramirez added a two-run drive in the third.

Derek Lowe (1-0) gave up five runs, five hits and three walks in six innings before a sellout crowd of 53,081, a record for a day game in Atlanta and was the fourth-largest overall in Atlanta history.

Brian McCann hit a homer in the second, when the Braves knocked out Zambrano (0-1).

The 20-year-old Heyward became the sixth Braves player to homer in his debut, the fourth to do so in his first plate appearance. Jordan Schafer connected in his initial at-bat last season.

The homer on a 2-0 count came on the first swing of Heyward's major league career. He answered cheers from the fans by tipping his cap at the edge of the dugout.

Heyward won the starting job in right field despite playing only 50 games above Class A in his quick rise through the minor leagues. He was selected baseball's top prospect by Baseball America after hitting .323 with 17 homers and 63 RBIs at three minor league stops in 2009, and was put on the major league roster by the Braves just last Saturday.

Atlanta sent 10 batters to the plate in both the first and seventh innings.

In the first, Chipper Jones drove in Melky Cabrera when his shallow fly ball fell between shortstop Ryan Theriot and Byrd in center for a single. Escobar added a two-run single before Heyward's line-drive homer.

Making his sixth straight opening day start for the Cubs, Zambrano gave up six hits and two walks with one strikeout.

Braves center fielder Nate McLouth made running catches of drives hit by Ramirez in the first and Derrek Lee in the fifth. McLouth was credited with a diving catch of a ball hit by Byrd in the left-center gap in the sixth, though a replay showed the ball popped out of McLouth's glove when he hit the ground.

As umpires called out Byrd, McLouth threw the ball back to Escobar, whose throw to first base forced out Ramirez.

Cubs manager Lou Piniella argued the ruling that McLouth made the catch. The umpires huddled but did not overturn the original call.

Escobar had a three-run double, and pinch-hitter Eric Hinske added a run-scoring triple off Jeff Samardzija in the seventh. Samardzija walked three batters in the six-run inning.

Right-hander Takashi Saito and left-handed closer Billy Wagner pitched perfect innings in their Atlanta debuts to end the game.

NOTES: McCann received his 2009 Silver Slugger award before the game. ... New Cubs owner Tom Ricketts and his brother, Todd, attended the game. ... Sean Marshall had five strikeouts in 2 2-3 perfect innings behind Zambrano. ... Zambrano also lasted only 1 1-3 innings against Pittsburgh on Sept. 4, 2006. ... The other Braves to homer in their first plate appearances were Joe Harrington (1895); Johnny Bates (1906) and Jermaine Dye (1996).

Last updated April 5, 2010 3:58 p.m. PT

AP Analysis: MLB salaries climb slightly

By RONALD BLUM
AP SPORTS WRITER

NEW YORK -- Opening-day baseball salaries grew despite the recession, although at a slower rate than in recent years.

The average salary went up 1.8 percent to \$3.3 million at the start of season, according to an analysis of rosters by The Associated Press. The increase was the lowest since a 2.7 percent drop in 2004 and down from a 2.7 rise at the start of last season.

"Revenues are flat, and salaries are virtually flat," baseball commissioner Bud Selig said Monday.

Baseball's average attendance dropped 6.7 percent last season as the economic downturn caused some fans to stay away from ballparks. Teams tried to hold down salaries as best they could during the offseason but the pressure to fill needs and multiyear contracts that already were in place led to the small rise in average pay.

Seventeen teams raised payrolls, including the World Series champion Yankees who led at \$206 million - nearly six times what Pittsburgh spent. The Boston Red Sox had the biggest rise, jumping \$40 million to second at \$162 million.

Minnesota, moving into new Target Field, went up \$32 million to \$97 million. NL champion Philadelphia rose \$28 million to fourth at nearly \$142 million, about \$4 million behind the Chicago Cubs under new owner Tom Ricketts.

"We've always said we're overpaid. There's no way Billy Wagner should ever be paid \$7 million. I mean, we're playing baseball, for God's sake," Atlanta Braves reliever Billy Wagner said. "It's hard to look at your father, who's making \$50,000, who has a chance to lose his job, and say, 'Yeah, I deserve this.'

"But if owners are crazy enough to pay you, what are you going to do? Turn it down?"

Among the big cutters compared with the start of the 2009 season were Cleveland (down \$20 million to \$61 million); Toronto (down \$18 million to about \$63 million); and Pittsburgh (down \$14 million to a major league-low \$35 million).

The Los Angeles Dodgers, whose owners are divorcing each other, dropped nearly \$6 million to about \$95 million.

Florida, as it promised in agreement with the commissioner's office and the players' association, raised payroll substantially, from a league low of about \$37 million at the start of last season to \$55 million.

Given that unemployment is high and some fans are struggling, players were thankful salaries went up.

"It means fans are coming to games. It means the union's doing a good job for us," Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton said. "The ballpark's a good place for people to unwind. They can forget about their problems for a few hours. It's a great stress relief."

The Yankees held the top four individual salary slots, led by Alex Rodriguez at \$33 million. He was the highest-paid player in the majors for the 10th straight year and makes just \$1.9 million less than the Pirates' entire roster. CC Sabathia is next at \$24.3 million, followed by Derek Jeter (\$22.6 million) and Mark Teixeira (\$20.6 million).

Mets pitcher Johan Santana was fifth at \$20.1 million, and Detroit first baseman Miguel Cabrera sixth at \$20 million.

The number of players making \$1 million or more was 433 - matching the figure at the start of last season and one fewer than the record set in 2008. There were 83 at \$10 million or more, down three from the mark set last year.

Forty-one players are at the \$400,000 minimum. The median salary, the point at which at equal numbers are above and below, dropped to \$1.1 million from a record \$1,125,000.

"A year ago, I had a lot of trepidation," Selig said. "We had reason to be concerned, and we ended up last year having a marvelous year, given everything. And I feel good this year, I really do. The sport has never been more popular."

Payrolls include 828 players on opening-day active rosters and disabled lists. Figures don't include termination pay to released players, or account for money included in trades, such as money Detroit is giving Florida for Nate Robertson, St. Louis is giving Baltimore for Julio Lugo and the Los Angeles Angels are giving the Mets for Gary Matthews Jr.

The average salary decreases throughout the season as veterans are released and replaced by younger players. It finished last season at \$2,996,106, according to the players' association, and \$2,882,336, according to Major League Baseball. The figures vary because of different methods of calculation.

For many teams, money dictates decisions.

"We unfortunately had to make trades for J.J. Hardy and let Mike Cameron go to free agency, who we liked very well, because we couldn't really put the money into pitching and keep those players," Milwaukee Brewers owner Mark Attanasio said.

AP Sports Writers Colin Fly in Milwaukee and Joseph White in Washington, D.C., and AP freelance writers Amy Jinkner-Lloyd in Atlanta and Ken Sins in Arlington, Texas, contributed to this report.

Last updated April 5, 2010 3:22 p.m. PT

Red Sox ace Josh Beckett is \$68 million man

By JIMMY GOLEN
AP SPORTS WRITER

BOSTON -- The Red Sox appear to have the top of their rotation set for the next five years. The rest of it is in pretty good shape, too.

The Red Sox agreed Monday to a \$68 million, four-year contract extension with No. 1 starter Josh Beckett, a deal that figures to keep him in Boston pitching alongside free agent acquisition John Lackey through 2014. Jon Lester and Clay Buchholz are also under the team's control for five more seasons.

"It's hard to have an elite organization without excellent starting pitching," Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein said. "When you have that starting pitching, you don't want to let it get away. It's hard to acquire in free agency. It's hard to acquire in trades. And it's hard to draft and develop this kind of starting pitching. ... That's the biggest building block on which we can go about finishing off the rest of the club."

The 29-year-old Beckett, earning \$12.1 million this season in the option year of an extension he signed in 2006, gets a \$5 million signing bonus and annual salaries of \$15.75 million. The former World Series MVP and Cy Young Award runner-up said he did not press for a fifth year like the Red Sox gave Lackey because he was happy to stay with a team that will be competitive.

"This is a special place. I think everybody that's had a chance to play here knows that," Beckett said Monday at Fenway Park news conference, a day after pitching the season opener against the New York Yankees.

"A lot of people look at what you lost. I look at what I gained. I look at four more years of stability, knowing I'm going to be on a winning team. The season gets old when you're losing 90 games. I know I'm going to have a chance to win every year here."

The MVP of the 2003 World Series for Florida and a key part of Boston's 2007 title, Beckett was tabbed to start Sunday night's major league opener against the New York Yankees. He allowed five runs and eight hits in 4 2-3 innings in Boston's 9-7 victory.

By announcing the deal after the season started, Beckett's extension isn't included in luxury tax calculations until 2011. If the Red Sox announced it before the opener, it would have raised his average annual pay when this year's payrolls are calculated, potentially increasing the team's 2010 luxury tax by \$882,000.

Beckett has a 106-68 record with a 3.81 ERA and 1,331 strikeouts in his career. In 14 career postseason starts, he is 7-3 with a 3.07 ERA and three shutouts - one behind Christy Mathewson for the most in major-league history.

The extension gives the Red Sox a long-term look at one of baseball's best rotations.

Lackey signed for five years and \$82.5 million over the offseason. Lester and Buchholz won't be eligible for free agency until the 2014 season ends. Daisuke Matsuzaka, who is starting the season on the disabled list, is under contract through 2012.

Epstein said he had no medical concerns about Beckett, who spent two stints on the disabled list in 2008.

"We have outstanding medical reports," he said. "The commitment we make today demonstrates that. There's not a medical reason why (his success) shouldn't continue."

Beckett was the World Series MVP in 2003, his second season in the majors, when he pitched a 2-0 complete game over the Yankees in Game 6 as the Marlins clinched the title. He went 15-8 with a 3.38 ERA for the Marlins in 2005 but was traded to Boston in the offseason along with third baseman and 2007 World Series MVP Mike Lowell when the Marlins needed to lower their payroll.

Beckett went 20-7 with a 3.28 ERA and made his first All-Star team in 2007, finishing second in the AL Cy Young voting to CC Sabathia, the left-hander Beckett faced Sunday night in the first game of the major league season. Beckett started the opening game of Boston's '07 Series sweep over Colorado, allowing one run in seven innings.

Beckett was 12-10 with a 4.03 ERA in 27 starts in 2008, when he missed the start of the season with a lower back strain then was sidelined in late August and early September with inflammation in his right elbow. Last year, he had a 17-6 record and 3.86 ERA in 32 starts.

In the last five seasons, only Sabathia, with 82 wins, and Roy Halladay, with 81, have more than Beckett's 80.

AP Sports Writers Howard Ulman and Ronald Blum contributed to this report.

Last updated April 5, 2010 3:01 p.m. PT

Buehrle sharp as White Sox beat Indians 6-0

By ANDREW SELIGMAN
AP SPORTS WRITER

CHICAGO -- Mark Buehrle pitched three-hit ball over seven innings, Paul Konerko homered and the Chicago White Sox opened with a 6-0 victory over the Cleveland Indians on Monday.

Konerko got his 12th season in Chicago off to a good start with a two-run drive in the first and Buehrle simply shut down the Indians, spoiling Cleveland manager Manny Acta's debut and Jake Westbrook's first start in nearly two years.

Alex Rios added a solo homer off Tony Sipp in the eighth and ended the game with a diving catch on Travis Hafner's line drive to center.

Buehrle, starting his club-record eighth opener, looked more like the four-time All-Star he is than the guy who won just twice after his perfect game against Tampa Bay on July 23.

He retired the last 10 batters he faced, struck out three and walked one, and drew loud cheers for a spectacular play in the fifth when a hard one-hopper by Lou Marson ricocheted off his left foot into foul territory along the first-base side. Buehrle raced over and - in one motion - shoveled the ball between his legs with his glove to Konerko to retire the runner, one of several highlights for a team that expects to contend in the AL Central after going 79-83.

J.J. Putz pitched the eighth and Matt Thornton retired the side in the ninth.

For Cleveland, the start of the new season looked awfully like the last one - a 65-win disaster that led to Eric Wedge's firing.

Westbrook - back from reconstructive elbow surgery - tied a club record with four wild pitches, hit Carlos Quentin twice, walked four and allowed five runs and five hits in his first start since May 28, 2008. He left trailing 4-0 after walking Konerko to load the bases with none out in the fifth, but the trouble began almost as soon as he took the mound.

Quentin doubled to the right-field corner with two out in the first and Konerko made it 2-0 when he sent the next pitch to the right-field bullpen, just beyond a leaping Shin-Soo Choo. He pumped his fist as he rounded first and took a curtain call as fans chanted "Paulie! Paulie!"

The White Sox got two more in the third after Konerko walked to load the bases, before Gordon Beckham scored on Mark Kotsay's grounder and Quentin came around on a wild pitch to Rios.

Rios, who batted .199 with the White Sox after they claimed him off waivers from Toronto in August, made it 6-0 when he connected off Sipp in the eighth.

NOTES: Sam McDowell (twice) and Steve Hargan previously threw four wild pitches in a game for Cleveland. ... Indians 2B Luis Valbuena sat out with a right hand bruise after being hit by a pitch in Saturday's exhibition finale. "He's just a little sore and we want to be on the conservative side," manager Manny Acta said. "Our medical staff is happy with the progress he's made." Asked if the left-handed-hitting Valbuena would platoon with right-handed Mark Grudzielanek, Acta said: "No. Valbuena's our second baseman." ... Billy Pierce is now second on the White Sox list with seven opening day starts. ... Quentin was hit by a pitch 35 times over the previous two years.

Last updated April 5, 2010 2:26 p.m. PT

Rangers no-hit into 7th, rally to beat Blue Jays

By STEPHEN HAWKINS
AP SPORTS WRITER

ARLINGTON, Texas -- Shaun Marcum took a no-hit bid into the seventh inning on opening day for Toronto before the Texas Rangers rallied for a 5-4 win Monday on Jarrod Saltalamacchia's RBI single in the bottom of the ninth.

Texas scored twice in the ninth off Blue Jays closer Jason Frasor (0-1).

Michael Young, the longest-tenured Texas player in his 10th season, had a leadoff double before Josh Hamilton took a called third strike. Vladimir Guerrero then had an infield single, though second baseman Aaron Hill made a diving stab deep behind the base to keep the tying run from scoring.

But Nelson Cruz hit an RBI double down the right-field line and Chris Davis was intentionally walked to load the bases. Saltalamacchia's flyball to right-center was well out of reach for the drawn-in outfield.

Marcum missed last season recovering from elbow surgery. The right-hander didn't allow a hit until Guerrero's one-out single in the seventh, after walking Hamilton. Cruz, who hit 33 home runs last season, followed with a three-run homer that tied the game at 3.

Marcum struck out six and walked one as the first Blue Jays pitcher since 2002 other than Roy Halladay to start the season opener. Halladay, a six-time All-Star who won an American League Cy Young Award in his 12 seasons with Toronto, was traded to Philadelphia over the winter.

The back-to-back hits in the seventh were the only ones allowed by Marcum. Scott Downs took over to start the eighth and threw a perfect inning.

Frank Francisco (1-0), the fourth Texas pitcher, struck out two in the ninth.

In what was a home opener for him, Vernon Wells had three hits for Toronto. He had a two-run homer in the first and an RBI single in the eighth for a 4-3 lead. Wells, the longest-tenured Blue Jays player beginning his 12th season, grew up in Arlington and still lives in the area.

Wells' go-ahead hit in the eighth came on a 98-mph pitch thrown by Rangers reliever Neftali Feliz, the 21-year-old fireballer who remained a setup reliever after being given a chance this spring to be in the rotation.

Scott Feldman, who started last season as a long reliever before moving into the Rangers rotation and winning 17 games, gave up three runs on a pair of home runs. The 27-year-old right-hander struck out three and walked none three days after getting a new contract through 2012 worth nearly \$14 million and including a team option for 2013.

Adam Lind hit a solo homer in the third that gave Toronto a 3-0 lead.

Lind went 3 for 3 with two runs scored. He had a two-out single before Wells' homer in the first, then was intentionally walked to load the bases in the eighth before Wells singled.

Lind, the 26-year-old designated hitter who hit .305 last season with 35 home runs and 114 RBIs, got an \$18 million, four-year contract over the weekend that includes three additional club-option years.

NOTES: Chuck Greenberg, head of the investment group buying the Texas Rangers from Tom Hicks, sat in the owner's front-row seats near the Rangers dugout. Hicks sat next to him for some of the game. ... The announced crowd was 50,299. ... Andres Blanco started at second base for Texas with Ian Kinsler on the DL. Blanco had an error in the first inning. Kinsler, recovering from a high right ankle sprain sustained March 12 during drills, described it as frustrating to have to miss the season opener. He hopes to play rehab games at Double-A Frisco later this week.

Last updated April 5, 2010 2:23 p.m. PT

Obama throws high and wide in historic first pitch

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON -- A hundred years after President William Howard Taft started a baseball tradition with a low ceremonial first pitch, President Barack Obama went in the other direction Monday, sailing a high, wide toss at the Washington Nationals' home opener against the Philadelphia Phillies.

Just as Taft's toss forced pitcher Walter Johnson to make an athletic play, Obama's required Nationals third baseman Ryan Zimmerman to lunge to prevent a wild pitch.

"I was a little disappointed with the pitch. It was high and outside," Obama said during a stint in the booth during the Nationals' television broadcast, joking that he was going for an intentional walk. "Fortunately, Zimmerman has a tall reach."

The president suggested his accuracy would have improved with a longer outing.

"If I had a whole inning, I'm telling you, I would have cleaned up," he said.

Zimmerman was more charitable, calling the pitch "OK. It was a little high and outside, but other than that, he got it there in the air."

He said that after the pitch, the president told him, "I wasn't going to bounce it."

Obama received a loud ovation from the packed crowd, with a few boos scattered in. Earlier, a video montage of presidential pitches in Washington elicited boos when it showed former President George W. Bush.

Obama sported khakis and a Nationals jacket, and when he got to the mound, he donned a cap from his favorite team, the Chicago White Sox.

"Bad touch there," Nationals manager Jim Riggleman said.

Commissioner Bud Selig saw the president before the cap came out.

"I said at one point when he had a Nationals jacket, 'I don't think I've ever been at a game when you didn't have a Sox jacket, and he said 'I've got something coming,' and sure enough out came the White Sox hat," Selig said.

The president has said that he didn't play organized baseball as a kid and some of the sport's moves don't come naturally to him. Obama prepared for the game by throwing practice pitches to aides at the White House, but he looked awkward in his delivery Monday. On the mound, he double-clutched several times before airing out the pitch.

"I said balk right away," quipped Phillies catcher Brian Schneider.

The president was clearly going to err on throwing it too far rather than too short. He might have been overcompensating for his opening toss at last year's All-Star game in St. Louis, when Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols saved him the embarrassment of a short hop by moving up to scoop a pitch inches off the ground.

Taft got the opening day tradition started on April 14, 1910, in a game that also pitted Washington against Philadelphia. But those were different teams and a different league - the old Nationals, aka original Senators, hosting the Athletics in the American League. Washington won the game, 3-0, behind Walter Johnson's 1-hitter.

From then on, every president through Richard Nixon made at least one opening day pitch in the nation's capital, until the expansion Senators left town after the 1971 season. Back then, presidents would make the toss from the stands, not the mound.

Obama saw Washington take a quick 1-0 lead, but the Phillies took control with a five-run fourth inning shortly after he left the ballpark. Philadelphia went on to win, 11-1.

AP Sports Writer Joseph White and Associated Press Writer Julie Pace contributed to this report.

Last updated April 5, 2010 12:06 p.m. PT

Pending owner Greenberg attends Rangers opener

By STEPHEN HAWKINS
AP SPORTS WRITER

ARLINGTON, Texas -- The last time Chuck Greenberg had been in the same ballpark as Nolan Ryan on opening day was 40 years ago.

On Monday, Greenberg was sitting in the front row next to Ryan at the Texas Rangers home opener and on the verge of joining the Hall of Fame pitcher and team president in owning the team.

"Opening day is the best day of the year. With what a long winter it's been, it makes it even more so," Greenberg said before the game against Toronto. "So I'm excited."

Greenberg, a Pittsburgh sports attorney, is heading the investment group including Ryan that is buying the Rangers from Tom Hicks.

While the Greenberg-Ryan group had hoped to have the sale completed before opening day, Greenberg now anticipates closing the deal the week of April 19. That means the new ownership group could be ready to take over when the Rangers open their second homestand of the season April 23.

"It's not a matter of what might have been, it's what will be, and good things are worth waiting for," Greenberg said. "It's been a long process and another few weeks really won't make any difference at all."

The transfer of ownership has complicated by the significant debt owed by Hicks' financially strapped Hicks Sports Group. Exclusive negotiations began nearly four months ago with Hicks, who is also working to sell his NHL team, the Dallas Stars.

Greenberg arrived about 2 1/2 hours before the game wearing black cowboy boots that were a gift from Ryan - the first boots he's had since getting Dingo boots endorsed by Joe Namath when he was a kid. When the game began, Greenberg was sitting in the owner's box directly between Ryan and Hicks.

Greenberg said opening day was always a school holiday for him growing up with his dad taking him to Pittsburgh Pirates home openers. That included the 1970 opener at Forbes Field when Ryan was with the New York Mets, though Tom Seaver started the game the Mets won 5-3 in 11 innings.

"One time my dad decided to play it straight and wrote a note to the principal that talked about opening day, fathers and sons and traditions," Greenberg said. "The principal wrote him a note back and said, 'Mr. Greenberg it was beautiful letter, I was truly inspired by it. It's still an unexcused absence and Chuck's going to have to serve detention.'"

No detention this time.

"It's been a productive 40 years ever since," Greenberg said.

Last updated April 5, 2010 11:13 a.m. PT

Brewers talks with Fielder on extension ongoing

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MILWAUKEE -- Brewers owner Mark Attanasio says the club is still talking to slugger Prince Fielder about a long-term extension.

But Attanasio says he and general manager Doug Melvin will not give day-to-day updates about negotiations with Fielder's agent, Scott Boras, because they don't want it to pose a distraction to the star first baseman.

Fielder signed a two-year contract that ends this season, but he won't be eligible for free agency until after the 2011 season. He hit .299 with 46 homers and 141 RBIs last year.

Melvin said Monday that the team has plenty of time to sign Fielder to a long-term deal.

Last updated April 5, 2010 10:37 a.m. PT

Average attendance at spring games rebounds

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK -- Major League Baseball's average attendance for spring training games rebounded 5.6 percent following a 7.7 percent drop last year, but the overall total dropped slightly.

The average of 7,596 was up from 7,190, the commissioner's office said Monday, but remained below the pre-recession average of 7,793 two years ago.

The total of 3,509,343 fans for 462 dates was down from 3,753,013 for 522 games last year.

The only other higher average was 7,709 in 1994, before a 7 1/2-month strike caused a steep drop.

Last updated April 5, 2010 10:11 a.m. PT

McGwire gets little reaction in Cincinnati

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CINCINNATI -- Mark McGwire got little reaction when he got back on the field.

The St. Louis Cardinals' new batting coach jogged onto the field wearing his old No. 25 for introductions before Monday's opener against Cincinnati.

Manager Tony La Russa and the Cardinals' nine starters were introduced by name - NL MVP Albert Pujols got the most boos. The rest of the Cardinals players and the coaches then jogged onto the field together and lined up without their names mentioned. There was little reaction from the fans.

McGwire acknowledged during the offseason that he used steroids and human growth hormone during his career, including 1998 when he broke the season home run record.