

A's News Clips, Friday, April 9, 2010

Brett Anderson sharp as A's beat Mariners again to win season-opening series

By Curtis Pashelka, Oakland Tribune

Starting pitcher Brett Anderson continued the momentum he created during the last few weeks of the 2009 season. So did the rest of his team.

Anderson allowed only three hits in six shutout innings and the A's picked up 11 hits in support to beat the Seattle Mariners 6-2 on Thursday at the Oakland Coliseum and win their season-opening series.

First baseman Daric Barton went 3-for-4, including a two-run single in the eighth inning, and finished with a career-high four RBIs as the A's took three of four games from the Mariners to move two games above .500 for the first time since July 2008.

"Early in the season, you're just trying to get some rhythm," said A's shortstop Cliff Pennington, who went 2-for-4 with two runs scored and an RBI. "To win three of four in the first series is a great start."

Oakland had 39 hits in the series, watched Anderson and Dallas Braden throw well in their first starts of the season and saw their bullpen allow no earned runs until the ninth inning of Thursday's game.

"I thought they outplayed us this series, flat out," Mariners manager Don Wakamatsu said. "We knew coming in their style of play. They were just effective and efficient in what they did."

The series had a familiar look to the ones the A's played late last year, when they went 31-24 in August and September to give their fans a glimmer of hope for this season.

"You do have guys trying to find their way a little bit. But they're more confident, they know they're here and they know they're going to be here," A's second baseman Mark Ellis said. "I think guys are just more comfortable."

Anderson went 4-1 in his last five starts of 2009 and looked like a sage veteran in his 2010 debut. Backed by stellar defensive plays from outfielder Rajai Davis and catcher Kurt Suzuki, Anderson allowed just one hit from the second to the sixth inning and retired 10 straight before Seattle second baseman Chone Figgins led off the seventh with a single up the middle.

"He controlled his fastball, his breaking ball and changeup on both sides of the plate, which he didn't do early last year," A's manager Bob Geren said. "That part of his game came on in the second half, and he showed it out there in his first start."

Anderson threw 97 pitches, 60 for strikes, and was greeted with a warm ovation as he walked off the field. And with runners on first and second and no outs, Chad Gaudin came on in relief and retired the side to preserve the shutout.

Davis robbed Mariners outfielder Milton Bradley of extra bases in the top of the second inning with a leaping catch at the center field wall. Suzuki slid in foul territory near the Seattle dugout to retire third baseman Jose Lopez in the fifth.

The Mariners brought the tying run to the plate in the bottom of the ninth before closer Andrew Bailey got Casey Kotchman to ground into a game-ending 6-4-3 double play. The A's picked up their first series win over the Mariners since May of last year and now embark on a six-game road trip, starting with three against the Los Angeles Angels.

"We get to see how we stack up against some of the teams in the (American League) West right off the bat with the Mariners and Angels," Anderson said. "It's good to start off on a high note with this series."

A's update: Tyson Ross' major league debut is impressive, and not just to his friends

By Curtis Pashelka, Oakland Tribune

Ross' debut impressive, and not just to his friends

In the hours after his impressive major league debut, pitcher Tyson Ross' phone was filled with text messages and voice mails from longtime friends.

But the novelty will start to wear off if Ross continues to pitch the way he did Wednesday, when he threw 2 1/3 scoreless innings to help the A's earn a 6-5 comeback win over the Seattle Mariners.

Ross's most memorable moment came against Ken Griffey Jr., when he threw a two-seam fastball to strike out the Hall of Fame-bound outfielder. Ross threw mainly four-seam fastballs during his college days at Cal, but he developed a better feel for the two-seamer last year at Double-A Midland and Single-A Stockton.

"I really got to use my two-seamer a lot (in the minors), kind of get a feel for it, get the right arm angle and hand placement," Ross said. "It's really come a long ways since college."

A's manager Bob Geren said Ross' role in the bullpen is still evolving but said the Bishop O'Dowd High graduate can come in and work two or three innings. Ross started 27 games last year between Single-A Stockton and Double-A Midland.

"I also like that he can come in and strike out somebody at will," Geren said. "I'll be flexible with his role. The big thing will be to make sure we monitor the so-called conversion from starter to reliever to make sure he has ample time between outings to recover."

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the car crash that claimed the life of Los Angeles Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt, Courtney Stewart and Henry Pearson.

But the condition of Jon Wilhite, the lone survivor in the car with Adenhardt, Stewart and Pearson, keeps improving, A's catcher Kurt Suzuki said.

Since the April 9, 2009, accident, Suzuki and wife Renee have helped to raise over \$61,000 for the Jon Wilhite Recovery Fund. Wilhite visited with Suzuki, his former Cal State Fullerton teammate, during spring training.

"He's doing great," Suzuki said. "Everything's looking good, he's been working out. He looks great."

The A's claimed outfielder Jai Miller off waivers from the Marlins and optioned him to Sacramento. To clear space on the 40-man roster, the A's transferred pitcher Josh Outman to the 60-day disabled list. Miller, a former wide receiver who in 2003 signed a letter of intent to play football at Stanford, hit .289 with Triple-A New Orleans last year. He was designated for assignment by Florida on Saturday. "... Geren said Joey Devine's throwing session on Wednesday went well, as Devine threw 30 pitches off a mound. Geren said Devine will do the same thing two or three days from now, but he is still about a month away from beginning a rehab assignment.

A's report for series at Los Angeles Angels

By Curtis Pashelka, Oakland Tribune

A's at Los Angeles Angels

Site: Angel Stadium

About the Angels: Hideki Matsui played left field Thursday for the first time this season, and he may play there again Sunday. He homered for Los Angeles opening night. ... Utility player Maicer Izturis also played for the first time this season Thursday, at third base. But according to the Orange County Register, the Angels will give infielders Howie Kendrick, Erick Aybar and Brandon Wood time to establish themselves at their positions. ... Ervin Santana will not pitch in the series. He is a combined 4-1 with a 1.25 ERA against the A's since the start of the 2007 season. ... The Angels won the 2009 season series with the A's 12-7, and have not lost a season series to Oakland since 2003.

PITCHING MATCHUPS

Today: Gio Gonzalez (6-7, 5.75 ERA in '09) vs. Matt Palmer (11-2, 3.93 in '09), 7:05 p.m. CSNCA

Saturday: Ben Sheets (0-0, 3.60) vs. Jered Weaver (1-0, 4.50), 6:05 p.m. CSNCA

Sunday: Dallas Braden (0-0, 1.29) vs. Joe Saunders (0-1, 9.00), 12:35 a.m. CSNCA

Radio: KTRB (860 AM); KDIA (1640 AM) and KDYA (1190 AM) for broadcast in Spanish

Peterson: Daric Barton enjoys a day in the sun, but A's first baseman knows the flip side

By Gary Peterson, Oakland Tribune columnist

Daric Barton woke up Thursday morning with a .125 batting average. There are worse ways to greet the new dawn, but not many.

His day didn't improve appreciably during the first three innings of the A's game against Seattle. In his first at-bat, the A's first baseman grounded out, dropping his average to .111.

In the top of the third, he failed to make contact with a catchable pop foul off the bat of Seattle's Matt Tuiasosopo (it was ruled no play). Moments later, Tuiasosopo lifted another pop foul off first base. Barton dropped this one, giving him twice as many errors (two) as hits (one) on the young season. The modest midweek crowd responded with scattered boos. Barton stood in the bright sunshine, hands on hips.

In the A's half of the third inning, he drew a walk, his fifth in four games.

"Controlling the strike zone, having a good idea of what pitch to swing at, is something that really never slumps," manager Bob Geren would say later, after the A's had defeated Seattle 6-2 for their third consecutive victory. "Sometimes you don't get hits, but you always get in good counts. (Barton) came into the game (with) a nice on-base percentage. He hadn't had a lot of hits yet, but he was controlling what he needed to do."

There's no way of knowing whether Barton, at that point, shared his manager's sunny assessment. But we do know this:

His third time up, Barton singled to center to drive in a run.

His fourth time up, he singled to center to drive in another run.

His fifth time up, he whacked another single to center to drive in two runs for a 6-0 Oakland lead. The three hits boosted his average to .333. The four RBIs represented a career high.

In other words, Thursday ended a lot better than it began for Barton, whose reaction to this happy turn of events fell somewhat short of euphoric.

"The biggest thing for me is seeing a lot of pitches," he said. "A lot of times I don't start off hot, but that's part of the game. When (pitchers) do make a mistake you've got to capitalize, and luckily today I did that."

To hear Barton talk, you'd guess he has spent a lot of time discussing the fine art of hitting. And why not? It's been his ticket to the big leagues. It got him drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals when he was 17. It got him traded to Oakland in the Mark Mulder deal. It earned him a spot on the A's 2008 opening day roster when he was just 22.

Hitting has been more problematic for Barton the past couple years. He batted .226 with the A's in '08 and split his time between Oakland and Triple-A Sacramento last summer. He finished the season with flair, batting .306 in 28 games in September and October. Still, he went into the offseason committed to changing his approach to the game.

For starters, he had laser surgery on his eyes. Then he went to work on the mental side.

"Optimism," he said. "The biggest thing with me is I've got to think positively. It hasn't been easy, but it's a game I love to play, and that's the main thing for me, going out there and having fun."

Those were sober thoughts in the wake of a fun-filled afternoon. But if Barton didn't exactly sound like a guy sitting on top of the world, it's probably because he's come to understand that in baseball, you only rent there. You don't buy.

"It's tough to fail," he said. "You know you're going to fail in this game, it's a game of failure. But you've got to have a positive outlook, and you've got to have faith in yourself."

It's still earlier than early where the 2010 season is concerned. But Barton should be encouraged. He led the Cactus League in walks during spring training, and Rickey Henderson used to say that hits follow walks, because drawing walks means you're seeing the ball well.

"People have different views of that," Barton said. "A lot of times you walk because you miss a couple pitches."

Perhaps. But he woke up today knowing he hadn't missed many pitches Thursday, that his batting average had more than doubled and that his team is on a roll. Hey, there's nothing wrong with allowing yourself a night on top of the world, as long as you understand that checkout almost always arrives sooner than you'd like.

From A's prospect to priesthood

By Mark Emmons, San Jose Mercury News, 4/9/2010

For as long as Grant Desme can remember, his life revolved around baseball. As one of the Oakland A's top young prospects, he seemed to have a future waiting for him as a major league outfielder.

And yet this week he had to be reminded that the season was starting.

"I didn't even realize it was Opening Day," Desme said.

That's because in January, the Bakersfield native accepted a different calling.

Desme, 24, stunned the sports world by retiring from baseball to pursue the Catholic priesthood. In August, he will enter St. Michael's Abbey in Orange County, taking the Norbertine monastic order's vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and leaving behind the life of fame and fortune that baseball might have provided.

How could he just walk away?

Simply put: After 18 months of contemplation, Desme decided he would rather play for the angels than for the A's.

"I know it's hard for some people to understand, and I don't think there's any perfect way to explain it because it's such a personal choice," he said. "All I can say is that when God speaks to you, it gets your attention."

As he became emotional while speaking to a San Jose Catholic professional group Thursday about his decision, one thing was clear: He doesn't miss baseball.

The A's, though, know exactly what they're missing.

"With his speed and power, he was a throwback to the days of Jose Canseco — but without the steroids," said A's director of player development Keith Lieppman, referring to the former Oakland star. "This kid was legit with all the tools. That's how good he could have been."

Desme was raised in a devout Catholic home where the rosary was said every night and Mass was attended every Sunday. But he also found time for baseball.

"We had weekend tournaments and some Sundays I would miss games or show up in the fourth inning because of Mass, which I wasn't very fond of," Desme said. "Baseball was always how I defined myself."

Desme blossomed into a star at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, playing so well that even his mother asked: "What's going on? Because you're not this good."

The A's thought he was, making him a second-round draft pick in 2007 and giving him a \$432,000 signing bonus. But when he was sidelined most of his first two seasons with wrist and shoulder injuries, Desme rediscovered his faith. He visited the Vatican and began seriously thinking about the priesthood.

He decided to give baseball one more year. And what a year it was. The 6-foot-2-inch, 205-pound Desme developed into the complete package of speed, power-hitting ability and defensive skills.

Playing for Class A Kane County and Stockton, he was the only minor-leaguer to hit more than 30 home runs (31) and steal 40 bases. He followed that by being named most valuable player in the Arizona Fall League — which is stockpiled with top young talent — as he hit .315 with a league-leading 11 home runs and 27 RBI in 27 games.

"I can honestly say I don't know what I was doing because I'm really not that good," Desme said. "But I just felt like I was playing a video game."

The A's were thrilled. The plan was to invite him to spring training camp, and Lieppman envisioned Desme opening the season at Triple-A Sacramento.

Then came the curveball.

In January, Desme called A's general manager Billy Beane to tell him he was retiring. He was exchanging his baseball uniform for a white habit.

"He was a bit shocked, to say the least," Desme said.

So was everyone else as the news became an Internet sensation. But Beane, who declined to be interviewed for this story, and A's management made no attempt to talk Desme out of his decision.

As Lieppman said with a chuckle: "When he tells you that it was revealed by God that this is what he wanted him to do, it's hard to say, 'Why don't you try to play one more year?'"

Desme said he considered doing that. And his parents voiced concerns to Desme's religious mentor, Monsignor Craig Harrison, that he might be rushing into the decision.

"They said, 'You need to talk to Grant because he still needs a couple of years to really think about it,' " Harrison recalled. "But when God calls, he calls."

Desme says he was conflicted when he accepted the St. Michael's invitation. "I saw everything that I might do in baseball pass before my eyes," he said. But he came to view his baseball success as a final test — this is what you will be giving up.

It wasn't the only test.

"Once you start considering the priesthood, the most beautiful Catholic women start showing up," Desme said. "That made my decision interesting."

St. Michael's is a community of 70 members who live like monks. The process of becoming an ordained priest in the order takes about 10 years.

When he arrives, Desme will give up all the trappings of modern life. He won't be allowed to use a cell phone or the Internet, watch television, listen to the radio, read a newspaper or go home during the first two years.

He will join the other abbey members as they spend about three hours a day singing their prayers in Gregorian chant.

"I'm just trying to learn how to read music now," said Desme, conceding he doesn't have much of a singing voice.

And after a Christmas Eve ceremony, where he will be given his religious garments, he won't be called Grant anymore. He will receive a new first name of a saint as well as the title of "frater," or brother.

"It's a very countercultural life, but it's also a beautiful life," said Father Ambrose Criste, the novice master at St. Michael's. "Once the young men live that separation from the world, they don't see it as a sacrifice at all. Really, you're not giving up anything when you stop watching television."

Many discover the quiet, cloistered life is not for them. Only about half ultimately become priests.

Criste said St. Michael's has welcomed the media attention that has accompanied Desme's decision because it's a positive story of faith at a time when the Catholic Church has been battered by charges of sexual abuse by clergy.

"He's just a good example that our lives are much more important than simply this world," Criste said. "He's devoting his life to a much bigger reality than something as small as baseball — as important as that can be to fans."

Desme said most people have been supportive of his decision. But he also knows many still wonder why he's doing this.

"Our culture idolizes athletes," he said. "It's very hard not to fall into that trap, and I think I did a little bit. I can only imagine what it's like for the guys in the big leagues. But I chose a different path."

\$20M land deal could help San Jose assemble final pieces for A's ballpark

By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News, 4/9/2010

Banking on millions of dollars from a pair of land sales, San Jose is closing in on its quest to buy the final pieces of property for a downtown baseball stadium — even before Major League Baseball decides whether the A's can move to the South Bay.

The city's Redevelopment Agency plans to stash \$20 million in proceeds from a pending deal to sell two parking lots in its piggy bank to attract the A's, San Jose's Redevelopment Agency Chief Harry Mavrogenes said Thursday. The RDA is also negotiating to sell Adobe Systems the land beneath one of the tech company's downtown towers in a deal that could add millions more to the ballpark effort.

San Jose has been cobbling together 14 acres between Diridon Station and the HP Pavilion for a ballpark but is two parcels short of completing the puzzle. Mavrogenes said the agency would also kick in millions of dollars more for demolition to prepare the site for a \$461 million ballpark built and financed by the A's.

The land-dealing comes at a critical point in the A's search for a future home: While A's owner Lew Wolff has expressed his desire to relocate the team, a high-level Major League committee must clear the way for a move to the South Bay because the San Francisco Giants plan to protect the territorial rights to Santa Clara County that were given to the team by MLB.

"We have disclosed to MLB that we have acquired most of the site, but that there are two parcels left," Mavrogenes said. "They understand

that they may not be purchased immediately, but that we have the funds to buy the land."

Mayor Chuck Reed was quick to defend the plan as a sound investment for economic development — not a senseless subsidy for a wealthy professional sports owner. Even though San Jose faces layoffs and massive service cuts and a \$116 million hole in its general fund, proceeds from any RDA land deals can only be spent on redevelopment projects, not everyday city services, Mavrogenes stressed.

"The strategy for funding the ballpark is land for land," Reed said. "That's how we got land over at the ballpark in the first place — we can sell land to buy land."

Buying the rest of the ballpark site makes sense even if Major League Baseball blocks any efforts by the A's to move to San Jose, Reed said, because of plans for high-speed rail, BART and other development in the area.

"We started acquiring the land before a possible ballpark deal and we would continue buying land over there because it's excellent for development," he said.

The RDA has been busy assembling the land parcels in the past four years and has spent \$26 million so far for nine pieces of the site. The last two — a 4-acre parcel owned by AT&T and sixth-tenths of an acre owned by the Havens family — are currently under negotiations, Mavrogenes said.

Nailing down the final two parcels for the ballpark site will not be automatic. AT&T spokesman John Britton told the Mercury News on Thursday their land is not for sale, although he did acknowledge discussions with the city.

On April 20, city council members will discuss the sale of the parking lots that will help fuel the city's run at the A's: The Sobrato Organization has agreed to buy the two downtown lots for \$20 million that the RDA bought over the years for a combined \$4.3 million. One lot is at 285 S. Market St., across from the Sainte Claire Hotel. The other is at 8 E. San Fernando St., across from the Gordon Biersch brewery restaurant.

The agency began purchasing downtown properties in the 1960s and continued through the early 1980s — part of an eight-block area the RDA has developed over the years and now includes the Fairmont Hotel, the San Jose Repertory Theatre, government buildings and housing.

Like many other redevelopment agencies in the state, San Jose's remains challenged by the recession and by the state budget raids that have forced it to scale back its mission and lay off staff. While the RDA has leeway to spend redevelopment dollars on a host of programs — from freshening up facades on small businesses to attracting companies through subsidies to San Jose — the city council is making the ballpark and the city's flagging convention center a priority.

Brian Mundy doesn't disagree. RDA money helped beautify the facade of his family's business, Schurra's Fine Confections on The Alameda, and he knows other businesses could benefit from such programs, too.

Still, he said the RDA's plan for the \$20 million will eventually help small businesses like his. "If it does prove successful in getting the baseball stadium, I think it will be an almost slam dunk in recruiting companies like Adobe downtown."

Anderson, defense lead A's past Mariners

Southpaw pitches six scoreless; Davis, Suzuki shine

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Brett Anderson boasts an unassuming presence.

His stuff, not so much.

The A's lefty, who turned the tender age of 22 less than three months ago, has quietly turned into the club's most steady rotation presence after just one full season in the big leagues.

Ever since he made his Major League debut against Seattle on April 10 last year, Anderson has left many around the baseball community wondering if he owns the staff's best stuff.

On Thursday, a day that fell just two days short of his one-year big league anniversary, Anderson yet again sent many to the water cooler after tossing six shutout innings in a 6-2 win over the Mariners.

"He was probably our most consistent guy all spring, and he took that into this afternoon's game," manager Bob Geren said. "I thought the game a year ago from today, you can see the improvement he's made. He was young and talented and good, but now he's really adding more weapons to his game.

"He's controlling his fastball, his breaking ball and his changeup on both sides of the plate, which he didn't do early last year. That part of his game came in the second half, and he showed it in his first start today."

Anderson mowed down the Mariners' lineup with the same ease he carried through his final 17 starts last year -- during which he compiled an 8-4 mark and a 2.96 ERA after going 3-7 with a 5.74 ERA in his first 13 starts.

Just don't count on the pitcher to tell you how good he's gotten. The scary part about Anderson's talent, Geren said, is that he doesn't realize that it's there most of the time. Cue in Thursday's less than mild reaction.

"The results were good," Anderson said, "but my stuff was just OK. I didn't panic and when I did fall behind, I was able to make my pitches and get some ground balls."

The left-hander's modest ways couldn't take away from the numbers that earned him a standing ovation upon his exit in the seventh inning, when right-handed reliever Chad Gaudin made his 2010 debut and erased what Anderson deemed "that big mess I made out there" -- otherwise known as runners on first and second with no out.

Gaudin retired the next three batters in order to preserve Anderson's first win of the season and reward a productive A's offense for their own efforts in the series finale.

Daric Barton led the way with three hits and a career-high four RBIs while Ryan Sweeney and Cliff Pennington also drove in runs courtesy of doubles. The latter, along with Rajai Davis and Mark Ellis, collected two hits in the game as the A's tallied 11 total -- six of which came off Seattle starter Doug Fister in the first four frames.

Barton's .337 mark when facing Seattle is his best against any team, and he proved not only to the A's community, but to himself on Thursday that he can hit just as well as he can walk.

"He had great at-bats all spring," Geren said of Barton, who broke camp batting .265 in 21 games while leading the Majors with 22 walks. "He had a very good strike zone, and the key to hitting -- no matter if you have a good swing or a mediocre swing -- is pitch selection. Daric's always been real good at that.

"Controlling the strike zone and having an idea of what pitches to swing at is something that really never slumps. You may not always get hits, but you always get in good counts and can draw some walks. He came into the game with a high on-base percentage but not many hits. You knew the hits would come, and they were all big ones today."

Meanwhile, Oakland's defense proved to be just as impressive. Davis robbed Milton Bradley of a possible home run at the center-field wall in the second frame before Kurt Suzuki added another A's gem in the fifth by chasing down a foul ball off the bat of Jose Lopez in Seattle's dugout.

"I've seen Eric Chavez make that play from third base," Geren said, "but then to take a guy and do it with catcher's gear on at the catcher's position puts it right up there with some of Chavez's Gold Glove plays. It would be really hard for anybody to try to pick a catcher in baseball that can make that play."

Said Anderson: "I think only he and Paul Lo Duca can make plays like that."

Both proved to be icing on the team's 3-1 series victory over Seattle -- a mark that represents the A's best start since 2004 and one that Geren only hopes will continue.

"I think we had a real nice run in the second half last year for awhile, and that was one of the first things I tried to talk to the team about -- trying to build on how we finished," the A's skipper said. "That stretch was a really good feeling, and it came with an aggressive style of play, and it looks like that's where we're at right now.

"Now, we have to go out on the road and do it, which is always more difficult, but we're looking forward to it."

The A's head to Anaheim for a three-game set against the Angels beginning Friday before flying to Seattle for another three against the Mariners as part of a six-game road trip.

Cust clears waivers; heads to Triple-A

Slugger was dropped from A's roster after tough spring

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Jack Cust, designated for assignment by the A's right before Opening Day in a move that took the slugger by surprise, cleared waivers and was assigned to Triple-A Sacramento, according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

The paper reported that as of late Thursday night, the A's had not heard if Cust accepted the assignment. The club has not confirmed this report. If he turns it down, he will be a free agent and would not be paid the \$2.65 million he re-signed for in the offseason.

"I'll probably stick around," Cust said after being designated. "There's not much out there right now, so there's a good chance I'll [clear waivers]."

Cust, 31, hit .240 with 25 home runs and 70 RBIs last year and hit 33 homers in 2008 and 26 in 2007, becoming the A's biggest home run threat. But he had a rough spring this year, striking out 20 times in 51 at-bats and hitting .216, and veteran Eric Chavez proved to be healthy and won the DH job.

Injuries mean opportunities for Gonzalez, Palmer

Doug Miller / MLB.com

If it weren't for injuries to teammates, it's possible and maybe even probable that Gio Gonzalez of the A's and Matt Palmer of the Angels wouldn't be starting against each other Friday night.

But injuries are a huge part of baseball and Gonzalez and Palmer are huge parts of their teams. And in the opener of a three-game set between these American League West rivals, the pitchers will be counted on to get momentum going early.

Gonzalez, a left-hander, had to wait until the end of Spring Training to be officially named the club's fifth starter, joining Ben Sheets, Dallas Braden, Justin Duchscherer and Thursday's winner over Seattle, Brett Anderson, in the rotation. Gonzalez might have lost out to righty Trevor Cahill for that final spot, but Cahill went on the disabled list with a left scapula stress reaction, opening the door of opportunity.

"It's the first time I get to open the season with the A's, and it's going to be an exciting year trying to get some wins," Gonzalez said.

Palmer is experiencing a similar combination of privilege and responsibility. The veteran righty, who went 11-2 with a 3.93 ERA for the Angels last year, is filling in for injured lefty Scott Kazmir and got a two-inning tuneup against Minnesota on Tuesday night in preparation for the Friday night start.

"It was a good workout for him, two good innings," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "Matt showed last year he has the ability to start and also come out of the bullpen with length. He's got good movement and is confident he can pitch in the big leagues. We're excited to give him a start. He's going to be valuable."

The Angels also need their offense to get in gear. So far, Torii Hunter, Hideki Matsui and Howard Kendrick are leading the charge. The club set a record last year with runs scored, second in Major Leagues to the Yankees.

"Some guys have been probably trying to swing their way to a good start rather than just playing the game," Scioscia said. "We have some young players trying to get comfortable in the batter's box. We haven't attacked the ball the way we can. We'll settle in and score some runs."

Oakland is 3-1 entering Friday's matchup. The Angels are 1-3 after Thursday's 10-1 loss to the Twins.

A's: Club claims Miller off waivers

The A's on Thursday claimed outfielder Jai Miller off waivers from the Marlins and immediately optioned him to Triple-A Sacramento. The 25-year-old Miller hit .107 in eight games with Florida this spring before being optioned to Triple-A New Orleans on March 19 and subsequently designated for assignment April 3. ... Gonzalez is 1-1 with a 4.70 ERA in three starts against the Angels, striking out 21 in 15 1/3 innings.

Angels: Former coach Clear passes

Former Angels coach Bob Clear succumbed to a heart condition at age 82. From 1976-87, Clear was a presence in the Angels' clubhouse. He was a Minor League infielder, pitcher and manager, and was the coach who suggested former catcher Troy Percival convert into a relief pitcher. Percival went on to save Game 7 of the 2002 World Series, sealing the only title in franchise history. ... Palmer made five appearances against the A's -- all in relief -- in 2009. He didn't record a decision and gave up three runs in seven innings. ... Scioscia (AL Manager of the Year) and Hunter (2009 Silver Slugger) were presented awards before Thursday night's finale.

Worth noting

A's reliever Joey Devine, who missed all of last season after undergoing Tommy John surgery last April, and suffered a setback of tendinitis in his elbow in Spring Training, threw 30 pitches off a mound in Arizona on Wednesday and is now back

on schedule to throw a bullpen session every three days, according to A's manager Bob Geren. ... Matsui made his first start as an Angel in the outfield Thursday, when he began the game against the Twins in left.

They're not trendy pick, but A's win again

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

The Mariners were the chic pick in the American League West, the focus of a Sports Illustrated spread because of their dynamic defense, a team to be reckoned with after acquiring Cliff Lee, Chone Figgins, Casey Kotchman and Milton Bradley.

The A's reckoned with them, all right, and the scoreboard proved it. Capped by Thursday's 6-2 victory, the A's won three of four games, collected 40 hits to the Mariners' 26 and overcame an Opening Night error-fest to open a season 3-1 for the first time since 2004.

"Can't play too much better than this," starter Brett Anderson said after scattering three hits and issuing one walk in six scoreless innings. "Can't have a better team win."

With a mere 158 games remaining, was the four-game series - which left the A's in first place for the first time since May 12, 2008 - a tease? Or a statement?

"People think what they're going to think. We think we're a playoff team," said Daric Barton, who had three hits and a career-high four RBIs. "We have all the confidence in the world. No matter who's out there, we think we could give 'em a battle."

While the Mariners might be the majors' elite defensive team, the A's think they should be in the conversation. There would be no argument from anyone witnessing catches made by center fielder Rajai Davis and catcher Kurt Suzuki on Thursday.

Davis robbed Milton Bradley with a leaping, backhanded, crash-into-the-wall snag, and Bradley was so impressed that he tipped his helmet to Davis. "I guess it's an honor," said Davis, not aware of Bradley's gesture until a reporter told him.

Three innings later, Suzuki sprinted from behind the plate to the front of the Mariners' dugout to make a sliding grab of Jose Lopez's popup. When the earth settled, Suzuki was on his back, his legs were hanging over the steps and the ball was in his mitt.

"I've seen Eric Chavez make that play, but to do it with catcher's gear on, it's right up there with all the Gold Glove plays Eric made," manager Bob Geren said. "It's very difficult to pick out another catcher who could make that play."

Suzuki was asked if the A's are any less of a defensive team than the Mariners.

"We would like to think not," he said. "Don't get me wrong. They've got a great defensive team over there, but we'd like to compare ourselves. Our defense is right up there with the league's best. We can match up with anybody."

Chad Gaudin replaced Anderson two batters into the seventh and, in his first A's appearance since July 5, 2008, got five outs, three on strikeouts. Jerry Blevins surrendered two ninth-inning runs, but Andrew Bailey got Kotchman to hit into a game-ending double play.

"I'm excited about our team," said Mark Ellis, hitting .438. "I don't think you make a statement with four games, but the way we battled and played, people can respect that."

Ross' sharp debut deservedly comes in East Bay

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

How did reliever **Tyson Ross** celebrate after pitching 2 1/3 scoreless innings in his big-league debut Wednesday night? "I went home and packed for the trip," said Ross, who had to return to the Coliseum early Thursday for the series finale.

Ross' reward was meeting his family shortly after the game.

After talking with reporters and removing the ice pack from his arm, Ross walked down a clubhouse tunnel to see his parents, **Willie** and **Jean**, and little brother, **Joe**, all of whom watched Tyson retire seven of nine Mariners in a 6-5 A's win.

"My parents were so proud," he said. "I don't think they stopped smiling since I made the roster."

Ross, homegrown all the way - out of Oakland's Bishop O'Dowd High School and Cal - grew up rooting for the A's of **Jason Giambi** and **Miguel Tejada**. He saw plenty of **Ken Griffey Jr.** and felt he was living a dream when striking him out on a sinker.

Did he ever imagine such a thing? "In video games, maybe," he said.

Ross added, "I had to step off the mound for a minute there. That was pretty cool. I was pitching to one of my heroes. He was a superstar when I was in Little League."

Griffey was impressed with the kid, but seemed to warn the next time might be different. "Had a good sinker. Ranged from 89 to 95" mph, Griffey said. "The first time you see somebody, the pitcher has the advantage, and you're trying to figure it out."

Cust assigned: **Jack Cust** cleared waivers and was assigned to Triple-A Sacramento, but the A's haven't heard if the designated hitter has accepted the assignment. If Cust doesn't accept, he'd be a free agent and wouldn't receive his \$2,650,000 salary from the A's. Neither Cust, nor his agent, were available for comment.

Briefly: The A's claimed outfielder **Jai Miller** off waivers from Florida and assigned him to Sacramento. He was 3-for-28 this spring but hit .289 with 16 homers in Triple-A last year. ... **Joey Devine** threw 30 pitches in Arizona at 50 to 75 percent velocity.

A'S LEADING OFF

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle,

Challenging start: In the first week of the season, the A's play the teams that beat them the most last year. Oakland lost 14 of 19 to the Mariners and 12 of 19 to the Angels, who are next on the schedule. The A's had a winning record (11-8) against the other AL West team, Texas.

A's take 3-of-4 from Mariners

By JANIE McCAULEY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — The Athletics don't look like last season's AL West bottom-feeder anymore. They have a little winning streak already, a rarity for this club a year ago.

The A's delivered strong pitching, aggressive baserunning, timely hitting and two downright spectacular defensive plays in their latest impressive victory.

Brett Anderson pitched shutout ball into the seventh inning of a strong season debut, Daric Barton drove in a career-high four runs and the A's beat the Seattle Mariners 6-2 on Thursday to take three of the first four in the AL West rivalry.

"We're playing good," second baseman Mark Ellis said. "It's the way we're going to play, battle back, don't quit. It's a fun team."

So much for the fast start Seattle was looking for out of the gate in a year the Mariners hope to contend for their first division crown since 2001.

"Really, they did exactly what we came out to try to do," Seattle manager Don Wakamatsu said. "They rebounded after that first loss and played very effective baseball."

Cliff Pennington and Ryan Sweeney each added RBI doubles for the A's, off to a strong start after losing the season series to Seattle the past two years. The A's hope they can use this start for some momentum considering last year they began 2-1 but never were above .500 the rest of the way.

Anderson (1-0), an 11-game winner during his rookie season of 2009, allowed the first two batters to reach base in the seventh and was relieved by Chad Gaudin after 97 pitches. Gaudin then got three outs on nine pitches.

Anderson allowed three hits, struck out four and walked one.

Franklin Gutierrez drew that lone free pass to chase Anderson. The left-hander beat the Mariners this time after taking the loss in his major league debut against them last April 10.

Gaudin struck out three in 1½ innings in his first appearance since rejoining the A's following his March 25 release by the Yankees. Mike Sweeney singled in Seattle's first run with one out in the ninth off Jerry Blevins. Reigning AL Rookie of the Year Andrew Bailey entered and allowed Matt Tuiasosopo's RBI single before retiring pinch-hitter Casey Kotchman on a game-ending double play.

Barton hit a two-run single in the eighth after RBI singles in the fourth and sixth innings, helping the A's win the final three games of the series after losing Monday night's season opener 5-3.

The first three games were decided in the final at-bat. After the A's play this weekend against the Angels in Anaheim and Seattle visits Texas, these clubs will meet up again starting Monday at Safeco Field.

A's center fielder Rajai Davis stole a likely home run from Milton Bradley starting the second, with a leaping catch against the wall and his glove over the fence. The typically mercurial Bradley tipped his batting helmet to Davis in salute of the great play.

"I missed that one," Davis said of Bradley's respectful gesture. "I believed I'd catch it."

"I don't think I'd do that, no way," Ellis said of tipping his cap in that situation.

Three innings later, catcher Kurt Suzuki made a gutsy running and sliding catch just in front of Seattle's dugout on Jose Lopez's foul. Oakland is one of few ballparks he could pull it off considering the large area of foul territory.

Six-time Gold Glove third baseman Eric Chavez used to make similar catches for the A's.

"To take a guy in catcher's gear, that's right up there with Eric's Gold Glove plays," manager Bob Geren said. "And he was going into enemy territory."

Suzuki took off immediately — a reason he got there in time.

"I saw it go up and I got a pretty good beat on it," Suzuki said. "I know there's a lot of foul territory and you can never give up on a ball. I slid and felt it hit my glove and was like, 'Hey!'"

Seattle starter Doug Fister (0-1), on the opening day roster for the first time after making 11 appearances last season, gave up two runs and six hits in four innings, struck out two and walked three.

Ichiro Suzuki saw the end to his 23-game hitting streak against Oakland dating to Aug. 24, 2008.

NOTES: Mariners LHP Cliff Lee is set for a 25-pitch bullpen session Friday at Texas to test his strained abdominal muscle that landed the 2008 AL Cy Young Award winner on the DL to start the season. On Wednesday, Lee threw eight pitches from flat ground and eight off the mound. "I feel perfectly fine," Lee said. ... 1B Tuiasosopo earned his first start of the season. He struck out looking leading off the third on a 13-pitch at-bat and singled in the eighth. ... Speedy Seattle No. 2 hitter Chone Figgins stole his third base of the season but was caught stealing for the first time. ... Only six times in all of 2009 did the A's have a winning streak of three or more games.

Bay Area baseball pitches value **Giants and A's cut prices to lure fans**

Eric Young, San Francisco Business Times, 4/9/2010

As a new season begins this week, the Bay Area's baseball teams hope the economy does not throw them another change up.

Executives with both the **San Francisco Giants** and **Oakland A's** said they are optimistic that the local economy has rebounded enough that attendance — as well as spending on concessions and other items — will get a lift this year.

The Giants said ticket sales are up 10 percent so far this year and the club expects to sell at least 2 million tickets by the club's first game at AT&T Park on April 9. Across the bay, the A's said they think the club will draw more than last year's 1.4 million people, the lowest among **Major League Baseball's** 30 clubs.

An increase in attendance this season would help both teams turn around declines in attendance that have persisted since 2007 for the Giants and 2003 for the A's. Ticket sales are the single largest source of revenue for most baseball teams. For example, the Giants earned about 40 percent of the club's \$196 million in revenue from ticket sales, according to a Forbes magazine estimate for 2008, the most recent year available.

While team officials are more optimistic about 2010, they said the region's unemployment rate hovering at 10 percent and a lingering housing crisis continue to weigh on fans. With that in mind, both teams said fans likely will remain more frugal than in recent years.

The A's are emphasizing value and discounts — and hopes that the club improves on its 2009 record of 75-87 — to keep turnstiles clicking. The A's cut season ticket pricing by 10 percent; they'll allow free parking on Tuesdays and have designated the upper deck behind home plate as the "value" deck where fans pay \$12 for a ticket that includes a \$6 credit for food.

"That economic shock was so severe that I think consumers across the board got a little more focused on value," said Jim Leahey, the A's vice president of sales and marketing.

The Giants, too, are embracing lower prices to attract fans. The team this year became the first pro sports team in the country to use dynamic pricing on every seat. That means the face value of the ticket rises or falls based on demand — a formula the team hopes will lead to a boost in attendance.

The Giants hope dynamic pricing will lead to more people buying tickets earlier to lock in lower prices.

Under the new pricing model, “for 75 percent of our games, single game tickets will actually be less than the fixed price of 2009,” said chief operating officer Larry Baer. “It’s an opportunity for our fans to pick games amid an economy that is improving but still challenging ... in a very affordable way.”

The Giants decided to open up the 42,000-seat park to dynamic pricing after testing the concept on 2,000 seats in 2009.

The Giants are betting that even if the team takes in the same amount of ticket revenue as last year — or slightly less — the franchise can get an overall financial boost if more people are in the park buying beers, hot dogs and other items.

“If you get people into seats for a cheap price, you still charge for \$8 beers and merchandise and concession and parking and it all adds up,” said leisure activity analyst Dmitry Kopylovsky, with market research firm **IBISWorld**.

Q&A with A’s rookie Tyson Ross

By: Paula Lehman, oaklandnorth.net 4/8/2010

The Oakland Athletics season opening series is almost through and we’ve seen the good and the bad. (After suffering a 5-3 loss in the first game, and a 2-1 win Tuesday, the A’s broke the tie in the series with a 6-5 win last night.) OaklandNorth had an opportunity to speak to rookie pitcher Tyson Ross about the series, the look-ahead, and what it means to put on the A’s jersey.

OaklandNorth: What were the highlights of the last couple games?

Tyson Ross: Probably getting my name called lining up on the third baseline. It’s always been a dream of mine to play for the A’s. Also seeing [Mark] Ellis have that walk-off hit [Tuesday] night to get us the first win for the season.

ON: What have you been working on in the offseason?

TR: I’m always working on my fastball command and finishing hitters. It’s something I’m going to be working on throughout my career. I worked really hard on strength and conditioning. I was working out 4 days a week. I’m a tall lean guy and wasn’t strong enough to go through a full season.

ON: What does the team need to focus on this season?

TR: If everyone goes out there and plays solid baseball. We need to get outside of who we are. Everyone’s here for a reason and you have to play your game. It’ll be a team effort

ON: What’s the most important game of the season?

TR: Whichever time I get to pitch for the first time. [Ross pitched Wednesday night for the first time.]

ON: What does the coach say to you before a game?

TR: The pitching coach tells us, “Don’t worry about anything just play your game.” And that’s all you can do. If you focus on the exterior factors you’re not going to be able to focus. You have to keep it simple as possible.

ON: Which will be the most challenging games this season?

TR: Anyone in the AL West is going to be a big game. It’s going to be a tight race this year and I’m looking forward to it. Games in Boston and New York will be exciting for me because I’ve never been in those stadiums.

ON: What does the opening series mean for the team?

TR: It's just the first step down a long road. These are just the first four games out of 162. Of course we're going to try to come out of the gates strong.

*Note: Tyson Ross, in his first MLB appearance contributed to the 6-5 win last night against the Mariners, striking out two batters and allowing only one hit.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Mazzaro leads Cats to season opening win

By Nicholas Lozito / Sacramento River Cats

Landon Powell homered and Vin Mazzaro was unhittable as the Sacramento River Cats began their division title defense with a 6-2 victory Thursday night over the host Portland Beavers.

Mazzaro, the River Cats' Opening Night starter for the second consecutive season, pitched hitless baseball through 4.1 innings before being removed on a tight pitch count. The right-hander struck out seven and walked only two, showing the same elite form that earned him a call-up to Oakland last season.

Sacramento jumped out to an early 3-0 lead in the second inning when Josh Donaldson singled home Michael Taylor and Steve Tolleson doubled home Matt Carson and Donaldson. Taylor, a top outfield prospect making his River Cats debut, also tripled on the night for Sacramento.

Portland answered in the fifth with a solo home run from Dusty Ryan, and had the tying run at first base in the sixth inning with the bases full and one out. Reliever Michael Benacka entered for Sacramento and induced a 6-4-3, inning-ending double play.

Dallas McPherson extended the Cats' lead in the seventh with a triple to left-center that scored Tolleson and Chris Carter. Carter, the A's No. 1 overall prospect according to Baseball America, went 0-for-3 with a run in the season opener.

Portland scraped a single run off Elk Grove native Brad Kilby in the eighth, but never threatened as the River Cats improved to 7-4 in season opening games.

Sacramento is looking to claim its fourth consecutive Pacific Coast League South Division title. Entering its 11th season, the River cats franchise has compiled eight division titles, four PCL championships and two Triple-A titles. Last season, Sacramento advanced to the Triple-A Championship series, where it lost to Memphis in three games.

Right-hander Graham Godfrey will start for Sacramento on Friday night against Portland right-hander Josh Geer. The River Cats open their home schedule April 16 against the Reno Aces.

All eyes on these Cats

Paul Gutierrez, Sacramento Bee

PHOENIX – They were on a side field at the A's Papago Park minor league complex, taking turns in the batting cage. Getting in their hacks and sending balls into the stratosphere.

But there was a decidedly different sound on contact. Daunting thuds not usually heard in minor league batting practice. At least, not for long.

Chris Carter and Michael Taylor were in the same hitting group, one batting after the other. Of course they were. It's been this way since they reported to Arizona for spring training and became fast teammates.

Joined at the hip? Yeah, something like that.

"We talk about it," Carter said. "We laugh about it."

About what, exactly?

"What a coincidence it is," Taylor said with a smile while making quotes with his fingers.

"It's a crazy thing. Our lockers are next to each other. He's (No.) 22, I'm (No.) 23. We hit back-to-back. We're both big, 6-5, 225 (-pound) black guys.

"So yeah, they're trying to groom us for that."

They don't have near the fanfare swirling about them as Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire did in the late-1980s. But there is a buzz surrounding the New Jack Bash Brothers, version 2010. And that's good news for River Cats fans, who get to see their development and maturation play out at Raley Field this season. At least until they thump Pacific Coast League pitching enough to get called up to The Show.

Carter, a first baseman who resembles a young, lanky Frank Thomas, has already played 13 games for Sacramento, hitting four home runs in the River Cats' 3-1 PCL playoff series victory over Tacoma.

"I like it there," the unassuming Carter said. "Especially coming from (Double-A) Midland, where there were no fans, to playing in front of 10,000 people."

Carter is the A's top prospect, per Baseball America, and was named the franchise's Organizational Player of the Year after the Texas League MVP batting a combined .329 with 28 home runs, 115 RBIs, a minor league-leading 179 hits and 108 runs scored in 138 games at Midland and Sacramento last season. He's already hit 118 homers in five minor league seasons.

The A's No. 2 prospect? Taylor, of course.

Heck, they're both Sagittarius – Taylor, officially listed at 6-foot-6, 260 pounds, was born Dec. 19, 1985; Carter, 6-5, 231, on Dec. 18, 1986 – and were sent down to the A's minor-league camp on the same day, March 27.

But that's where the similarities end.

"He's more of a power hitter," Taylor said. "He's got stupid pop. He's got 40-50 homer power."

Then Taylor, a corner outfielder whose more complete game is compared to that of Dave Winfield, caught himself and smiled again.

"He'll strike out more than me," he said of Carter, who is already on the A's 40-man roster. "I'll hit 20-25 (homers), steal some bases."

That neither is a homegrown "Moneyball" talent matters little to the A's. In fact, they celebrate their good fortune in landing each player.

Carter was originally a 15th-round draft pick of the Chicago White Sox out of Sierra Vista High School of Las Vegas in 2005. On Dec. 3, 2007, he was dealt to Arizona for Carlos Quentin. Eleven days later, Carter came to the A's in the Dan Haren trade.

Of course, Taylor has a similar odyssey. He was taken by Philadelphia out of Stanford in the fifth round of the 2007 draft. The Phillies sent him to Toronto on Dec. 16, 2009, in the three-team deal that saw Roy Halladay go to the Phillies and Cliff Lee to Seattle. Immediately, the Blue Jays shipped Taylor to the A's for fellow minor league uber-prospect Brett Wallace, who had been acquired in the Matt Holliday deal.

Since then, they've been conjoined twins, in reality and perception.

"They're both good kids," said A's designated hitter Eric Chavez, who made his big league debut when Carter was 11 years old. "It's just their size that jumps out at you. They're so physically imposing. You just know they're going to be up here sooner than later. It's going to be fun when they get here."

You'd need a different adjective to describe their Cactus League results this spring, though.

Carter batted just .160 with a tape-measure homer and two RBIs in 25 at-bats. Taylor hit .189 in 37 at-bats.

No matter. They each lived a dream, of sorts.

"I got to get an at-bat against Carlos Zambrano and I got to talk to Derrek Lee," said Taylor, who, despite his seemingly starry future, takes nothing for granted.

Taylor, who takes as many as six insulin shots a day for Type 1 diabetes, was a two-time Phillies minor league Player of the Year. He hit a combined .320 with 20 homers, 84 RBIs and 21 steals in 116 games at Double-A Reading and Triple-A Lehigh Valley in 2009.

But the bonus of being a top prospect means the potential is unlimited. And it's the raw, right-handed power of Carter and Taylor that is so craved and needed by the parent club.

"That's where Chris and Michael come in," said A's general manager Billy Beane. "The sooner they come, the better."

First, though, they have business to tend to at Raley Field, skills to refine.

"Some fans have already had some new Bash Brothers shirts made," Carter said with a nervous laugh. "It's going to be exciting, sure."

'Hounds Run Away On Opening Day

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

It was just the first of a 140-game season, but the defending Texas League champion RockHounds picked up right where they left off, blasting the Arkansas Travelers, 11-1, Thursday night at Citibank Ballpark.

The 'Hounds spotted the visitors a 1-0 lead in the third, then scored 11 unanswered runs in front of a spectacular opening night crowd of 5,046.

There are a lot of familiar names on this ballclub, with 16 members of the 2010 RockHounds team having played here last season ... 12 of them members of the club that captured the title in the Texas League playoffs.

Alex Valdez powered a two-run home run ... Archie Gilbert had a pair of doubles and two RBI ... Jemile Weeks had a single, double and triple and newcomer Steve Kleen had a 3-RBI game.

Travis Banwart went 5.0 strong innings, escaping a bases-loaded, one-out jam in the fifth after the 'Hounds had taken a 4-1 lead. "Banny" got a key pop out on a 2-0 pitch to Ryan Mount (who had singled and tripled to that point in the game), then combined with catcher Anthony Recker to throw out base-runner Alberto Rosario, who tried to score from third base on a pitch in the dirt. Recker blocked and retrieved the ball and back-handed a throw to Banwart for the inning-ending out. In the last of the inning, Valdez hit his two-run home run, building the lead to 6-1.

A trio of pitchers from the '09 RockHounds ... Arnold Leon, Mickey Storey and Justin Souza ... then combined for 4.0 scoreless innings of relief, as the RockHounds put the game away.

Next Game

Friday, April 9th vs Arkansas

Carlos Hernandez (LHP) vs. Jayson Miller (LHP)

RockHounds open defense of championship with blowout win

By Shawn Shroyer, Midland Reporter-Telegram, 4/9/2010

The Midland RockHounds' defense of their 2009 Texas League Championship began appropriately.

The RockHounds received contributions from several key members of last year's title team in a 11-1 victory against Arkansas in the 2010 season opener at Citibank Ballpark.

Starter Travis Banwart picked up the win. Left fielder Archie Gilbert made a stellar defensive play and put the RockHounds ahead. Third baseman Alex Valdez gave the club some breathing room. And second baseman Jemile Weeks came a home run shy of the cycle.

"Archie had a great night and Jemile had a great night," RockHounds manager Darren Bush said. "Banny gave us five innings, strong. All in all, it was a good game."

It took a little while for the 'Hounds to pick up where they left off last season.

Through three innings, Arkansas starter Tim Kiely faced two over the minimum and the Travelers led 1-0. Banwart wasn't far off Kiely's pace, though.

Banwart faced just one over the minimum through two innings and he retired the first two batters of the third inning. However, Banwart walked Andrew Romine and Ryan Mount followed with a triple to drive in the first run of the game. That triple was Arkansas' only extra base hit of the game and the Travelers' never scored again.

Banwart went five innings, allowing the one run on four hits and three walks and three strikeouts.

"He made a very good adjustment in the way he pitched. It opened it up for him," Bush said. "He was commanding his pitches and using good sequences. He had a good curve, a good change and he was locating his fastball and using his pitches at the right time."

The damage in the third could have been much worse for Banwart if not for Gilbert making an acrobatic catch in left field. Arkansas' Alberto Rosario led off the inning with a drive to deep left, but Gilbert tracked it and made a lunging catch near the base of the wall as it flew over his head.

"The sun was in my face, so I couldn't see it very well, but I knew he hit it good," Gilbert said. "I'm not scared of the wall, so I just went for it."

After playing most of the last two seasons together, Banwart is used to getting a little support from Gilbert.

"With Archie, that catch was unbelievable," Banwart said. "It probably saved me 10 pitches. It's nice to turn around and see those guys out there and know I can just relax and pitch, and they're going to pick me up."

In the bottom of the fourth, the RockHounds finally got to Kiely and provided Banwart some run support.

With the bases loaded and one out, Gilbert put the RockHounds' first crooked number of the season on the scoreboard. Gilbert doubled to right-center field, plating Shane Peterson and Valdez. Steve Kleen followed Gilbert with a single to right to bring home Yung-Chi Chen and Gilbert.

"We just calmed down," Gilbert said. "We were taking anxious hacks and swinging out of the zone, but eventually we calmed down."

The next inning Valdez put the RockHounds up, 6-1, with a two-run blast to right field. The RockHounds then sent nine batters to the plate in a three-run seventh and tacked on two more runs in the ninth for good measure.

'HOUND BITES: Thursday marked Opening Day for the 115th season of Texas League baseball. The league began play in 1888 with only a few stoppages through the years. Thursday also represented the beginning of the 39th season of professional baseball in Midland since the Cubs came to town in 1972. This season is the 12th of the RockHounds' existence as an affiliate for the Oakland Athletics. ... RockHounds general manager Monty Hoppel was recognized before the game for his induction into the Midland Professional Baseball Hall of Fame. ... Travelers outfielder Clay Fuller has some West Texas and Texas League ties. His father and two of his brothers played football at Texas Tech and his brother Cody Fuller was drafted by the Angels out of Texas Tech and he, too, played for the Arkansas Travelers. ... RockHounds leadoff hitter Jemile Weeks came a home run away from a cycle with a single in the first inning, a triple in the third and a double in the seventh.

TODAY'S PROBABLE PITCHERS: Arkansas' Jayson Miller (LHP, 0-0, 0.00) vs. Midland's Carlos Hernandez (LHP, 0-0, 0.00)

PORTS 5, RAWHIDE 1

PORTS SOLID IN OPENER

By The Record

Almost everyone chipped in as the Stockton Ports opened the 2010 California League season with a victory in Visalia.

The first five batters in Stockton's lineup all scored, and four pitchers combined to hold down the Visalia Rawhide in a 5-1 victory before 2,669 fans at Recreation Park.

The Ports scored single runs in the fourth and fifth innings before putting the game away with three runs in the eighth. Jeremy Barfield hit a key two-run single in the inning that plated third baseman Stephen Parker and catcher Ryan Ortiz. Returning center fielder Jermaine Mitchell went 3 for 5 with a run scored from the leadoff spot for Stockton.

Reliever Trey Barham picked up the victory after starter Shawn Haviland lasted just 4 1/3 innings. Barham pitched 12/3 scoreless innings and struck out three. Four Stockton pitchers combined for 12 strikeouts, fanning Visalia leadoff man Rey Navarro three times.

Rawhide starter Wade Miley allowed four hits and one earned run in five innings, striking out five.

Stockton designated hitter Petey Paramore singled home Michael Spina for the first run of the game in the fourth, and Mitchell scored a run in the fifth on a throwing error by Navarro. Paul Goldschmidt scored Visalia's lone run in the eighth on a throwing error by shortstop Grant Green.

The teams will resume their four-game series at 7 tonight. The Ports will host the Rawhide in their home opener at Stockton Ballpark on April 15.

Ports Pitching Shines In 5-1 Opening Night Win

Stockton Ports, 4/8/2010

VISALIA, Calif. - On Opening Night 2010 at Recreation Park, Ports pitchers found a way to silence Visalia's capacity crowd. Ports pitchers combined to allow just one unearned run over nine innings as the Boys of Banner Island earned a 5-1 win over the Visalia Rawhide, starting off the new season on a positive note.

It was Stockton that scored the first run of 2010. Locked in a scoreless tie with two outs and the bases empty, Mike Spina and Ryan Ortiz worked back-to-back walks. Petey Paramore followed with an RBI single to right, scoring Spina and putting the Ports on top 1-0.

Stockton struck again in the fifth and again with two outs and the bases empty. Jermaine Mitchell started the rally with an infield single, and subsequently stole second. Grant Green followed and hit a grounder to short that got through the legs of Rey Navarro, allowing Mitchell to score and giving the Ports a 2-0 edge.

Both runs were charged to Rawhide starter Wade Miley (0-1) who went five innings and allowed two runs (one earned) on four hits while striking out one in a losing effort.

Ports starter Shawn Haviland, despite walking three batters over the first two innings, came through with a solid effort. Haviland, after recording the first out in the fifth, yielded back-to-back singles to Navarro and Brent Greer that spelled the end of his night. Haviland was relieved by Trey Barham (1-0), who escaped the jam by recording back-to-back strikeouts of Ryan Wheeler and Paul Goldschmidt.

Haviland received a no-decision, going 4.1 scoreless innings, allowing three hits while striking out five and walking three. Barham would be credited with the win, going 1.2 innings and retiring all five batters he faced, including three strikeouts.

Stockton's biggest inning came in the eighth of Rawhide reliever Justin Mace. With a 2-0 lead, the Ports widened the gap with an RBI single from Ryan Ortiz and a two-run single from Jeremy Barfield. Mace allowed three runs in his only frame of work.

Visalia scored their lone run in the eighth, an unearned run off Ports reliever Scott Hodsdon. Daniel Sattler tossed a scoreless ninth to seal the Ports victory.

The Ports and Rawhide will play the second game of their season-opening four-game set at Recreation Park on Friday night. Murphy Smith (0-0, 0.00 ERA) takes the hill for Stockton, opposed by right-hander Trevor Harden (0-0, 0.00) for Visalia. First pitch is set for 7 p.m. PDT.