

A's News Clips, Thursday, April 15, 2010

Oakland A's lose second in a row to Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich , Oakland Tribune

That wave of momentum the A's were riding looks more like a ripple right now.

All things considered, a 6-4 start to the season isn't too shabby as they return to the Oakland Coliseum to begin a 10-game homestand.

But the A's had more within their grasp before closing a six-game road trip with two losses to the Seattle Mariners, including Wednesday's 4-2 setback at Safeco Field.

The A's received contributions up and down their lineup in winning six of their first eight games. But their bats were silenced Tuesday and Wednesday.

They totaled just eight hits and two runs as Seattle took the final two games of a three-game series.

The A's were done in by a terrific pitching performance from Doug Fister on Tuesday. But manager Bob Geren thought his team could have generated more offense Wednesday.

"I thought we had some opportunities where we didn't hit pitches we should have hit," Geren said.

The A's took the lead on Jake Fox's two-run homer in the second inning. But they mustered just five hits total against three Mariners pitchers.

Seattle tied the game 2-2 on Milton Bradley's broken-bat two-run single that chased Gio Gonzalez in the fifth. Then the Mariners jumped in front in the sixth with run-scoring singles from Franklin Gutierrez and Jose Lopez off Chad Gaudin (0-1).

Gonzalez walked four and lasted just 42/3 innings, the shortest outing from an Oakland starter this season. But the left-hander has other concerns right now.

He pitched with the initials "VM" written on his cap, a tribute to his girlfriend, Valerie Mathias, who was injured in a car accident in Anaheim on Saturday night after the A's played the Angels.

She's in a San Diego hospital and has no memory of the accident, but Gonzalez said she's recovering.

"We've been praying big, asking God every day for her to recover fast," he said.

Gonzalez is still reeling from the loss of another friend, Raul Rodriguez, who was killed in a car accident in Hialeah, Fla., two weeks ago.

Fox drew the start over Eric Chavez at designated hitter against lefty Jason Vargas (1-1). Fox's homer snapped an 0-for-11 streak to start the season.

He stung a line drive in the fourth that found the mitt of Lopez at third base.

"I laughed that the only place I could get a hit was over the fence," Fox said.

It's no coincidence that as leadoff man Rajai Davis has cooled off, so have the A's. A catalyst with his hitting and speed over the first week, Davis went 0-for-12 in the Seattle series.

The A's were without second baseman Mark Ellis (strained hamstring) for a third straight game. Ryan Sweeney, whose nine-game hitting streak is the longest in the majors, was given a day off.

The A's will try to get back on track with a four-game series starting tonight against the Baltimore Orioles, who own the American League's worst record at 1-8.

But Oakland can't be too disappointed by starting 6-4, with all of their games coming against Seattle and the Los Angeles Angels, both division foes.

"It was similar to what we anticipated, close games," Geren said. "... We won six of them and we could have won a couple more."

TODAY:

Orioles (David Hernandez 0-1) at A's (Ben Sheets 0-0), 7:05 p.m. TV: CSNCA. Radio: 860-AM; 1640-AM

A's update: Eric Chavez OK platooning at DH with Jake Fox

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Chavez OK platooning with Fox in DH slot

SEATTLE — Eric Chavez was christened the A's everyday designated hitter by general manager Billy Beane and manager Bob Geren shortly before opening day.

But 10 games into the season, the DH situation is looking more like a platoon between the left-handed hitting Chavez and right-handed hitting Jake Fox.

That doesn't bother Chavez, off to a 5-for-25 start. He's started all six games against right-handed starters but has sat all four against lefties.

"We need to get Foxy some at-bats," Chavez said before Wednesday's game at Seattle. "Bob told me in advance what I'm going to be doing, what I'm not going to be doing. My goal is to be (healthy) at the end of the year. And the pace I've been going at really gives me a good chance to do that."

Fox was hitless in 11 at-bats entering Wednesday, but he cracked a two-run homer on the first pitch he saw from left-hander Jason Vargas in the second.

"I still don't consider it a platoon situation," Geren said. "I just put the (best) lineup out for that game."

The issue is whether a healthy Chavez, playing every day, offers the biggest payoff for the A's, or whether Fox will produce if given steady at-bats.

"Between us both, we need to start getting it going," Chavez said. "To be honest, this is the best way to do it so neither one of us is sitting out for too long."

There was lots of buzz surrounding catcher Kurt Suzuki's standout play in the seventh inning of Tuesday's loss. Suzuki lunged to his right to corral Brad Ziegler's errant pitch, then spun and fired an on-the-money throw to third to nail Chone Figgins, who tried advancing from second.

It ranked as the No. 2 "Web Gem" on ESPN that night.

"I don't know how I made it myself," Suzuki said. "At first I just tried to catch it. Honestly, I didn't try to throw it on the bag either."

Reliever Michael Wuertz (shoulder tendinitis) will begin a rehab assignment for Triple-A Sacramento on Friday. Two appearances could have him ready to come off the DL. Right-hander Trevor Cahill (left shoulder injury) will throw 60 pitches for Sacramento on Monday.

Chin Music: Postgame notes on Gio Gonzalez, and a Coco Crisp update

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 11:48PM 4/14/2010

I think the A's would have been happy were they told before the season that they'd go 6-4 out of the gate against the Seattle Mariners and Los Angeles Angels. But after they dropped the final two games of this road trip at Safeco Field, there's a feeling they could have accomplished bigger things.

"We won six of them and we could have won a couple more," manager Bob Geren said.

Some updates from the postgame locker room scene:

–You may have noticed Gio Gonzalez was pitching with the initials “VM” written on his cap. That was a tribute to his girlfriend, Valerie Mathias, who was seriously injured in a car accident Saturday night in Anaheim. She’s in a San Diego hospital right now. Although Gonzalez said she has no memory of the accident, she’s recovering.

As if that wasn’t enough, Gonzalez said he was still mourning the loss of another friend, Raul Rodriguez, who was killed in a car accident two weeks ago in Gonzalez’s hometown of Hialeah, Fla.

Who knew Gonzalez was dealing with this when he went to the mound tonight? It’s no wonder he wasn’t as sharp as in his first start. His 4 2/3 innings on Wednesday was the shortest outing of any A’s starter this season.

–I spoke with outfielder Coco Crisp after the game. He’s scheduled to have his fractured left pinkie examined Friday, and that could provide a more specific timetable for his return. “I’ll get X-rays and we’ll see how it’s coming along,” he said. As it stands, Crisp still believes he’ll miss anywhere from 3 to 8 weeks from the date of his injury, which was April 2.

Crisp is doing agility work and he’s throwing to keep his surgically repaired shoulder in shape. But he’s found another way to stay sharp. Since he can’t catch with his normal glove hand (the left), he’s borrowed one of Gonzalez’s gloves and is shagging flies with his right hand. I guess that makes him a “switch fielder.”

With that, I’m out ...

Chin Music: Pregame update for A’s-Mariners series finale

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 6:33PM, 4/14/2010

Your lineups for tonight’s series finale at Safeco Field:

A’s

Davis CF
Barton 1B
Suzuki C
Kouzmanoff 3B
Fox DH
Rosales 2B
Gross RF
Patterson LF
Pennington SS
Gonzalez LHP

Mariners

Ichiro RF
Figgins 2B
Gutierrez CF
Lopez 3B
Bradley DH
Byrnes LF
Tuiasosopo 1B
Moore C
Wilson SS
Vargas LHP

–Mark Ellis continues to make progress from his strained left hamstring, according to manager Bob Geren, but he’s still not game-ready. Michael Wuertz is making his first rehab appearance Friday for Triple-A Sacramento, and he could be activated after two games there, depending on how his shoulder responds. Trevor Cahill will make a 60-pitch start for Sacramento on Monday, but as I mentioned before, I’d expect him to stay in the minors when he’s activated from the DL, unless there’s an injury in the big league rotation.

–There was quite a bit of buzz over catcher Kurt Suzuki’s seventh-inning play last night, where he made a spinning catch of a wayward pitch, then fired a perfect throw to third to nail Chone Figgins. It ranked No. 2 on ESPN’s “Web Gems” for the day. I wandered over to the Mariners’ clubhouse today to get Figgins’ thoughts. He said he didn’t want to talk because it was getting close to game time, but he also had the look of a guy who had heard plenty about it already. “He made a great play, a great read,” Figgins said.

–Eric Chavez sits against another lefty tonight, with Jake Fox getting the call at DH. Interestingly, Geren says he doesn't consider the situation a platoon, but it's starting to look that way. Chavez says he's fine with the plan, adding it's important for both him and Fox to get at-bats and find their strokes. You'll read more from Chavez in tomorrow's notebook ...

Patterson gets the nod over Travis Buck in left field. Both hit left-handed, but Geren prefers Patterson with a lefty on the mound.

MARINERS 4, A'S 2

Personal tragedy can't halt pitcher, but Seattle does

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Considering the circumstances, Gio Gonzalez did a remarkable job of pitching Wednesday night, allowing two runs in the A's 4-2 loss to the Mariners.

It has been a difficult time for the A's starter. His girlfriend, Valerie Mathias, was in a car accident Saturday night with her family, and she remains in a hospital in San Diego with a serious head injury.

And two weeks ago, Gonzalez lost a close friend, Raul Rodriguez, 23, who was killed in a car accident in South Florida.

On Wednesday, Gonzalez wore Mathias' initials on his hat, and he said he meant no disrespect to anyone by it, but he wanted to honor her.

"Everyone is pulling for her," he said. "I have been praying big-time, asking God for her to recover."

Gonzalez hopes that he can visit Mathias on the team's off day on Monday.

For the second night in a row, it was onetime Oakland outfielder Milton Bradley who delivered for his new club. He had busted out of his slump to beat the A's with a three-run blast Tuesday, and on Wednesday, he hit a broken-bat single with the bases loaded and two outs to tie the game 2-2 in the fifth inning.

"It was a changeup I left up and he was out in front of it," Gonzalez said. "You tip your hat. To hit that, there's nothing you can do about that."

That erased the advantage that Jake Fox's first A's hit, a homer, had provided. The following inning, Seattle got two more runs against reliever Chad Gaudin, and Oakland dropped a series for the first time this season. The A's finished the season-opening stretch against the AL West 6-4.

"It was similar to what we anticipated," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Close games, coming down to one big pitch, one big hit."

Gonzalez exited after Bradley's single, and, Geren said, "Overall, it was a decent performance when you think about it. He gave us a chance to win and other than Jake Fox's home run, we didn't get much offense tonight."

Fox had been in an 0-for-29 funk dating back to last season when he lifted a two-run homer to center off Seattle left-hander Jason Vargas in the second.

"It was nice to get that weight off my back," Fox said. "I felt like I was pressing to get that first hit."

Fox is in what appears to be a platoon at designated hitter with Eric Chavez, who has sat three times in the past four games with the A's facing left-handed starters.

"It's been good with me," said Chavez, who is batting .200 with one RBI. "Bob has been up front and honest with me.

"Trust me, this is perfect. Jake needs to get at-bats, too. And it's early still. We both need to start hitting."

Oakland could stand to get center fielder Rajai Davis going again, too. The team's leadoff man is hitting .227 and is 1 for his past 20.

Wuertz could return soon

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Michael Wuertz, one of the A's most important pitchers, will be back with the team sometime next week if all goes well with his rehab appearance.

Wuertz will work an inning for Triple-A Sacramento on Friday, and he's likely to have one more outing after that with the River Cats after missing the first two weeks of the season with rotator-cuff tendinitis. He was one of the league's top setup men last year, and he led AL relievers in strikeouts with 102.

Trevor Cahill, last year's No. 5 starter, will start a rehab assignment with Sacramento on Monday, and he is scheduled to throw 60 pitches. Cahill had a sore left (non-throwing) shoulder, the result of a stress reaction in his shoulder blade, and he didn't throw for a week. He is likely to remain with Sacramento after his rehab stint because Oakland's rotation is full.

More on Suzuki's play: **Kurt Suzuki's** remarkable play in the seventh inning Tuesday - he somehow lunged for an outside slider from **Brad Ziegler** and then threw **Chone Figgins** out at third - was still a hot topic Wednesday.

"Best I've ever seen," said A's broadcaster **Ray Fosse**, twice an All-Star catcher. "Top of the list. That was an impossible play."

Said Suzuki: "I don't know how I did that. I was anticipating Ziegler's Frisbee, and when I looked up, I saw Figgins taking off, so I stepped real quick and made the throw. It happened so fast."

Third baseman **Kevin Kouzmanoff** said the throw was in the exact right spot even though Suzuki's momentum was heading the opposite direction.

"He was off balance but that throw could not have been any more perfect," he said. "All I had to do was put my glove there and Figgins slid into it."

Briefly: **Mark Ellis** remained out with tendinitis in his lower left hamstring. He is day-to-day. ... Saturday is **Roy Steele** Bobblehead Day.

A's leading off

Thursday, April 15, 2010

Buck, the trends: Travis Buck has odd career numbers: He is a .195 hitter in April, his lowest in any month, but he has 21 RBIs, his most for any month.

Drumbeat: Gonzalez's gritty outing under tough circumstances

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Seattle 10:57PM

Many people asked what the initials "VM" were on Gio Gonzalez's hat tonight, and he told us after the game that his girlfriend, Valerie Mathias, was in a car accident with her family on Saturday night and she remains in a San Diego hospital with a serious head injury.

Gonzalez said he lost a close friend, Raul Rodriguez, 23, in a car accident in South Florida two weeks ago, so this has been an enormously difficult time for him. He said he is praying for Mathias and he hopes he can visit her on Monday, the team's offday.

Anyone who has doubts about Gonzalez's maturity level now need only look at tonight's results: While dealing with worry and sorrow, he allowed two runs in 4 2/3 innings and he kept the A's in the game. He has circles under his eyes and I doubt he's had much sleep, but he had some strong moments tonight, especially with men in scoring position, until Milton Bradley's broken-bat two-run single on a changeup that he was actually out in front of.

I'm sure everyone will join in with the A's media corps in pulling for Mathias to make a full and rapid recovery. Gonzalez said that the rest of her family is all OK.

Drumbeat: No Ellis, Chavez, Sweeney tonight; Wuertz, Cahill to head out

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Seattle 5:43PM

Mark Ellis isn't quite ready to play yet because of that tendinitis in his lower left hamstring; he's possible this weekend against Baltimore, but manager Bob Geren said it's very much a day-to-day thing.

Eric Chavez is not DHing tonight against left-hander Jason Vargas, but Geren still won't call this a platoon, even though he said Chavez will start the next three games - coincidentally, all against right-handed starters. Jake Fox is DHing tonight, and as Chavez told me before the game, the team really needs to get both men going, Chavez and Fox. The DH spot as a whole has not been a strength so far; all Oakland DH's are batting a combined .189 with three RBIs.

Ryan Sweeney is just getting a night off, which Geren had mentioned two days ago would be a possibility soon. Eric Patterson is in left, and Gabe Gross is in right.

Here's the lineup: Davis cf, Barton 1b, Suzuki c, Kouz 3b, Fox dh, Rosales 2b, Gross rf, Patterson lf, Pennington ss. Gonzalez p

Geren said that Michael Wuertz (rotator-cuff tendinitis) will throw at inning in a rehab assignment at Triple-A Sacramento on Friday, the River Cats' opener. It hasn't been decided if Wuertz will start the game, which the A's often have rehabbing relievers do, or if he'll come in in relief. He's likely to get two outings in Sacramento.

Trevor Cahill will throw 60 pitches for Sacramento on Monday. Cahill, who has soreness behind his left (non-throwing) shoulder that has been termed a "scapular stress reaction," might wind up staying in Sacramento for awhile once his rehab stint is up - there's not room in the rotation for him right now and there doesn't seem to be any talk about him being a long reliever. That makes sense: He'd help the team most being stretched out as a starter and ready if Oakland needs him.

Speaking of which, Vin Mazzaro has been terrific at Sacramento so far. When he got sent out this spring, he said he'd go down and prove that he should be here in Oakland, and he's put that into action. He hasn't allowed a run in two starts, a total of 10 1/3 innings. He's allowed five hits and three walks in that span - and struck out 12.

Gonzalez's short start leads to A's loss

Grieving southpaw surrenders two runs in 4 2/3 innings

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- On a brisk Wednesday night at Safeco Field, Gio Gonzalez turned in this season's shortest outing from an Oakland starter.

The A's lefty battled all night, particularly in the fifth, when he exited with two outs following a two-run, game-tying double off the bat of Milton Bradley, triggering a late Mariners comeback in a 4-2 A's loss.

Afterward, Gonzalez appeared noticeably detached, not anything like his upbeat, fast-talking self he's come to display every five days. He kept his words to a minimum, simply saying he had to tip his cap to a patient Mariners lineup, one that quickly tagged him for 99 pitches.

"I tried to calm things down, tried to slow things down a bit," Gonzalez said of his fifth-inning attempts.

A somber A's pitcher revealed just minutes later that he's currently trying to do the same off the field. Four days ago, Gonzalez learned that his girlfriend of eight months, Valerie Mathias, was seriously injured in a car accident following Saturday night's game in Anaheim. She's on the mend in a San Diego hospital, and Gonzalez wanted to support her healing process by wearing her initials on his cap Wednesday.

"That 'V.M.' meant a lot to me," he said. "It was a sentimental moment. It wasn't out of disrespect in any way. It was just a dedication to a special person I almost lost."

To make a grueling matter even worse, he's still recovering from the loss of hometown friend Raul Rodriguez, who passed away in a car accident less than two weeks ago.

"It's a tough pill to swallow," he said. "I've been trying to bounce back. ... It's too much to deal with in a matter of two weeks."

The fact that Gonzalez managed to throw up zeroes for four consecutive innings was enough for manager Bob Geren, who described his starter's outing as "an overall decent performance."

"He gave us a chance to win," the A's skipper said of Gonzalez, who gave up six hits and four walks while fanning five. "We just didn't get much offense."

About the only form of offense received came from Jake Fox's first hit in green and gold -- a two-run shot off Seattle starter Jason Vargas in the second that barely got over the center-field wall. The A's designated hitter had entered the game in a 0-for-29 slump dating back to September before the long ball.

"It's always nice to get that off your back," Fox said. "I think you always put pressure on yourself to get that first one, and I have to say after I got that hit, I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulder. At this point, after that first one, you're ready to go. You've found the barrel."

Fox was hitless in his other three at-bats on the night and now carries a dismal .067 average, but Geren isn't too worried.

"He had four good at-bats today," he said. "Even on his strikeout, he had real good swings. He looks good. I'm excited about the way he's swinging, that's for sure."

Not much else was going on for the rest of the A's lineup, which tallied five hits just one night after collecting three. Only once did they have a runner in scoring position, and six of Oakland's nine struck out at least once.

Meanwhile, Gonzalez's performance was followed by a rather shaky effort from Chad Gaudin, who took the loss after surrendering the lead in the sixth by giving up run-scoring hits to Franklin Gutierrez and Jose Lopez.

Vargas tallied his first win of the season after tossing six frames of five-hit ball with six strikeouts -- an effort that handed a 6-4 Oakland team its first back-to-back losses this season. It also marked an end to a 10-day tour that had the A's pitted up against division foes.

"It was similar to what we anticipated -- close games," Geren said. "A lot of games came down to one big pitch or one big hit, and we won a couple of them. We could have won a couple more, but we'll gladly take it."

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O's and A's Sheets both look for turnaround

By Bailey Stephens / MLB.com

In Thursday's series opener between the Orioles and Athletics on Jackie Robinson Day, both teams will do battle with starting pitchers who are relatively unfamiliar to their opponents.

David Hernandez, who will take the ball for the Orioles, has started against the Athletics only once in his career and holds a 1-0 record with a 1.93 ERA in two career games.

Ben Sheets has faced the Orioles only once, in 2003, a start in which he allowed five runs on two homers in six innings. And Sheets isn't the same pitcher he was in '03 in many respects.

For the Orioles and for Sheets, perhaps a fresh start will be just what the doctor ordered. The Orioles head to the West Coast after dropping their sixth consecutive game on Wednesday, a 9-1 contest to the Rays.

For Sheets and his comeback bid with the Athletics, a fresh start is what the 2010 season is all about.

After taking two no-decisions to start the season, Sheets is still hoping the life returns to his fastball -- an issue that plagued him in his last start against the Angels. The veteran technically turned in a quality start, allowing just three runs, but he scattered 10 hits and worked in and out of trouble the entire game.

"My fastball just didn't have that little extra," Sheets said. "It was kind of so-so. I had a lot of baserunners from time to time, but I battled to keep them off the board."

Manager Bob Geren is seeing progress though, a trend that the Athletics hope will continue against the Orioles.

"He definitely put us in a position to win," Geren said last week. "Today was a significant step from his last start, and I think we'll probably talk about this a lot at the beginning of the year from start to start. I think he's getting better every start."

The Orioles also saw progress out of their young hurler in his first start, but after dropping six straight, they need a win.

If manager Dave Trembley's analysis after Hernandez's last start proves true, the O's may break their streak Thursday night.

"I'll take the way Hernandez pitched," Trembley said. "We'll win some games if he pitches like that."

Athletics: Relentless schedule continues

The Athletics are one of the few teams in baseball that haven't seen their early schedule littered with off-days. Through the Baltimore series, Oakland will have played 14 straight days to start the season, their longest such stretch since 16 consecutive playing days to begin the 1991 season. The A's first scheduled off-day will come Monday -- by when, for

comparison, most of the other Major League teams will have had three byes. But it all evens out -- their American League West foe Angels, for instance, began a stretch of 16 straight games with their series in Yankee Stadium.

Orioles: Pie proves to be productive

Felix Pie didn't start Wednesday as Trembley wanted to give him a rest against Rays left-hander David Price. The outfielder eventually entered the game, though, and singled in his only at-bat. In all five games in which he has played, he has recorded a hit -- turning in an 8-for-17 mark so far.

Worth Noting

The Athletics and Orioles will join the rest of Major League Baseball in celebrating Jackie Robinson Day on Thursday. Players, coaches and umpires will sport the No. 42 to honor Robinson. Nearly 500 Bay Area elementary and middle school students, teachers and parents will attend Thursday's game as guests of the A's for their recent participation in the Jackie Robinson "Breaking Barriers Essay Contest," which is co-sponsored by Major League Baseball. ... The Orioles are struggling with men in scoring position. On Wednesday, they went 0-for-3 with runners in scoring position and are only 10-for-66 (.152) through the first part of this season. ... Trembley said Wednesday that closer Michael Gonzalez -- who was placed on the 15-day disabled list with a strained left shoulder -- will have an MRI, and hopefully that will tell the Orioles something. The pitcher told the manager that the shoulder has been bothering him only for a few days.

Wuertz, Cahill set to make rehab appearances

Pitchers will work their way back at Triple-A Sacramento

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 4/15/2010

SEATTLE -- In an effort to soon reclaim two of their most valuable pitchers from last season, the A's in the next week will send Michael Wuertz and Trevor Cahill to Triple-A Sacramento for rehab assignments.

Wuertz will pitch one inning during Sacramento's home opener Friday and will likely appear in a minimum of two games before being removed from the disabled list, manager Bob Geren said.

The A's right-handed reliever, who is on the DL for the first time in his six-year career, is rehabbing from shoulder tendinitis that allowed him to make just two spring outings. The soreness may very well be a result of the workload handed his way last year -- a team-leading 74 appearances.

Meanwhile, Cahill will throw one more bullpen session in Oakland at the end of this week before starting the River Cats' game Monday on a 60-pitch count. The right-handed starter, placed on the DL just two days before Opening Day with a left scapula stress reaction, made 32 starts as a rookie last season.

He won't have an easy time cracking Oakland's rotation at the moment, as A's starters entered Wednesday's rubber match against the Mariners with a 2.62 ERA -- good for second in the American League next to Texas, which boasts a remarkable 1.85 ERA.

Ellis, Chavez, Sweeney out of lineup

SEATTLE -- The A's on Wednesday resorted to their sixth different starting lineup in 10 games for the club's three-game road series finale against the Mariners.

Mark Ellis, who has been sidelined with a sore left hamstring, was missing from the mix for the third straight day. Manager Bob Geren noted that the A's second baseman could be back by the weekend, while the A's are in the middle of a four-game set against the Orioles, but it's really a "day-to-day" type of situation.

"Each day, he's felt better, so that's very encouraging," Geren said. "When it gets worse or stays stagnant, that's when it becomes a concern."

Fellow veteran Eric Chavez was also on the bench, while Jake Fox slid into the designated hitter role at the No. 6 spot to face Seattle lefty Jason Vargas. Chavez, who went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts in Tuesday night's 3-0 loss, has started six of the A's nine games at DH this season and is likely to be back in the lineup Thursday.

Each time Chavez has sat this season, his club has been up against a southpaw, but Geren insists he still doesn't consider it a platoon situation.

"It's not always about who's pitching," the A's manager said. "Who is going to help us win that night is the most important part."

Either way, both Chavez and Fox have come out of the gates struggling at the plate. Chavez has collected five hits in 25 at-bats, while the latter DH option was hitless through 11 at-bats entering Wednesday night's contest.

"Jake's at-bats have been better," Geren said. "He's had a better strike zone. He's hit a lot of balls hard recently, they're just resulting in outs."

With 32-year-old veterans Ellis and Chavez on the bench Wednesday, the A's boasted a starting lineup -- including pitcher Gio Gonzalez -- which has an average age of 26.6.

Sweeney sits as Gross starts

SEATTLE -- On the same day Ryan Sweeney received his first day of rest, Gabe Gross was handed his second start in three days.

Gross, who had been given just two at-bats before making his first start of the season Monday, was slated in the No. 7 spot for Oakland's rubber game against the Mariners.

The 30-year-old Gross, acquired late in the offseason as a free agent, was joined by fellow backup outfielder Eric Patterson, as Travis Buck also sat Wednesday. Buck is just 4-for-23 (.174) to start the season, and manager Bob Geren said he's liked what he's seen from the small sample size provided by Gross.

"Gabe's been swinging the bat really well," the A's skipper said. "His at-bats have been tremendous."

Meanwhile, Sweeney's benching was nothing more than an opportunity to give Oakland's current most consistent hitter a break. The A's right fielder started each of Oakland's first nine games, during a time in which he was the only player on the team to hit safely in each contest.

Lee's Leftovers: Meet Ben, y'all ...

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 4/14/2010 8:14PM

Ever since the season started, I haven't been around the blogosphere as often as I'd like. In fact, I'll admit that my presence has pretty much been close to nonexistent. And for that, I apologize. But by visiting the A's site every day like I'm sure you all do, you've probably noticed I've kept busy enough. Still, through all the craziness that is the 162-game baseball season, I'd like this to be a space where you can visit often for leftovers you can't find in any game story or the like.

The A's are making this thing fun right now, and you can tell they're having a good time doing it. They're real big supporters of each other, and perhaps the biggest of them all is Mr. Ben Sheets. On Wednesday, he was given the option to fly ahead of his teammates back to Oakland to ensure a good night's sleep before his start at home against the Orioles tomorrow. His response: "Why would I take an early flight when I have a front row seat for the best game of the day?" He was, of course, referring to the rubber match game between his A's and the Mariners. Suffice to say, it was an easy decision, one he didn't

even have to think twice about -- which says plenty about the kind of teammate he is.

There's a lot to like about Sheets. His career stats speak for themselves, so there's no denying his status as something special as a pitcher. And even though we haven't seen him post All-Star numbers yet this season, it's early, and I firmly believe he'll get better with each start. But I don't want to talk about Sheets the pitcher. You know enough about that guy thanks to all the statistics floating around on a million different websites. I want to talk about Ben the person -- because the person is just as special as the pitcher, and that much is evident the minute you meet him.

You won't meet Ben without meeting his Southern drawl, which finds a way to deal out at least one "y'all" about every 15 words -- something I, along with pretty much everyone else lucky enough to be around him on a daily basis, have come to embrace. "Reckon" squeezes its way into the mix every once in awhile, too, as does "ain't." And oh is he loud. He's probably got one of the smallest statures on the club but there's no doubt he's got the largest voice. He's not afraid to use it, either. Ben will talk to just about anyone, and he'll also lend a high five in most cases.

He loves talking baseball, but he also likes talking some good fried chicken and mac and cheese, too. Ben's Southern upbringing hasn't exactly molded him into the healthiest of eaters. "Look at me," he usually says. "Do I look like I eat carrots and crap?" He enjoys his Starbucks almost as much as the fried stuff, so it's easy to assume he's enjoying his current stay in the Starbucks capital of the world.

The Sheets file will have to abruptly be closed for now, as the Mariners are closing in on their second straight win over the A's at the moment. But I urge you to head out to the Coliseum tomorrow to root this Southern boy on as he looks to garner his first win in green and gold. He knows the A's don't get a ton of fans, but he mentioned he really likes the ones that do come out. "They're hardcore," he said. "That's what I like to see."

Lee's Leftovers: A's lineup gets a new look for series finale

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 12:15PM

ANAHEIM -- Manager Bob Geren gave his lineup quite a makeover Sunday morning in a combining effort to give a handful of his starters some rest while putting out a team he believes can lock up a winning three-game set against left-handed starter Joe Saunders and the Angels.

The A's entered the game 1-1 against Los Angeles, who received a walkoff hit from Hideki Matsui in the bottom of the ninth inning Saturday evening to shatter Oakland's four-game winning streak.

As expected, catcher Kurt Suzuki received his first day of rest after manning the plate six consecutive days. He was replaced in the lineup by Jake Fox, who had only appeared in one game as designated hitter before Sunday.

"He needed a day off in my opinion," Geren said of Suzuki. "He's a manager's favorite type of player because he wants to play every day. You have to admire that. He's caught six straight, including a day after night game. That's pretty hard on him, so he needed this."

Geren placed Fox in the sixth spot behind Mark Ellis, who was elected to DH for just the third time in his career -- the last coming five years ago -- to "give half his body rest," the A's skipper said.

Adam Rosales got his first starting nod at second base, one of five positions Geren feels comfortable placing him. He made his A's debut Friday night, entering the contest as a defensive replacement for Ellis in the bottom of the ninth inning while representing the last Oakland player on the Opening Day roster to appear in a game.

Also getting a rare start in left field was Eric Patterson, who has tallied three appearances this season as a pinch runner in late innings, including Tuesday night when he scored the winning run in the 10th frame against Seattle. Geren felt the need to rest Buck while at the same time giving Patterson a chance to knock around Saunders, against whom he's 4-for-5 in his career.

"He's our most successful outfielder against Saunders," Geren said. "It's a small sample size, but he brings a lot to the team and hits for a high average.

"He was pretty much our most productive player in the Minors last year and achieved everything he could at that level, so he just needs an opportunity at this level."

Patterson batted .284 with four doubles and two triples in a team-leading 27 games this spring while appearing 17 times in center field, 10 at second base and four in left field. His solid versatility left the A's no choice but to lend him his first Opening Day roster spot.

"It makes it a little more difficult when you're always switching positions like he was doing," Geren said, "but he's aggressive and doesn't lay back. That's a good thing."

Meanwhile, Gabe Gross will have to wait for his first outfield start while Rajai Davis and Ryan Sweeney continue to put up consistent numbers at the plate, where they have combined to rack up 16 of the club's American League-leading 59 hits.

"Raj is playing real well and Sweeney has been very consistent, so it's hard to take someone out of the lineup who's swinging the bat well," Geren said. "[Gross] is a good worker and has a good attitude. It's a long season, so his time will come."

Bradley leads Mariners to win against A's

Oakland has scored two total runs in past two games, both losses

By TIM BOOTH, ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — This was the kind of 1-2 pitching punch the Seattle Mariners expected.

Just not from guys named Fister and Vargas.

Jason Vargas threw six innings for Seattle, and Milton Bradley and Franklin Gutierrez came through with bat-shattering run scoring hits in the Mariners 4-2 win over the Oakland Athletics on Wednesday night.

A day after Doug Fister tossed eight scoreless innings, Vargas did his part as the back of the Mariners rotation gave Seattle its first series victory of the young season.

"He's got great poise on that mound," Seattle manager Don Wakamatsu said. "He makes one mistake early giving up a home run to center field, but he battled and fought back."

Vargas (1-1) might be a placeholder until Cliff Lee returns from the disabled list and gives Seattle arguably the best Nos. 1 and 2 starters in the American League with Felix Hernandez.

Until then, though, Vargas and Fister have so far been just fine.

Vargas' only mistake was a middle-of-the-zone fastball that Jake Fox hit for a two-run homer to center in the second inning — a ball Gutierrez felt he could have robbed if he hadn't been playing so shallow. The homer was Fox's first of the season, snapping an 0 for 11 streak.

Otherwise, Vargas scattered five hits, struck out six and walked none. He set down nine of the final 10 batters he faced, and Seattle starters have now gone 14 innings without allowing a walk.

Vargas started using a cut fastball again on Wednesday, a pitch he shelved last year as he recovered from hip surgery in favor of gaining better control of his breaking ball.

"For me to be able to go back to it didn't take a whole lot of time," Vargas said. "A couple of bullpen sessions with it and tonight was really the first time we used it."

Seattle reliever Brandon League worked a scoreless seventh and eighth innings and David Aardsma converted his fourth save — he's closed all of Seattle's wins — with a perfect ninth. Aardsma has converted 14 straight saves since last August.

Oakland got just one baserunner after the fourth inning.

"Last night I thought (Fister) really located well, pitched well," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "Today, I thought we had some opportunities where we didn't hit the pitches we should have hit."

As well as Vargas threw, he was left looking for a little offensive help until the Mariners bats started coming up with clutch, two-out hits.

Bradley was first. Down 2-0 in the fifth, he dumped the first pitch from Oakland starter Gio Gonzalez into left field, sending his bat barrel nearly to third base. The hit scored two and Gutierrez's hit an inning later scored Adam Moore with the go-ahead run.

Bradley, on his eighth big league team, finally made a mark with the Mariners on Tuesday night with a game-winning three-run homer in the eighth inning. But he was drawing the ire of fans after just one at-bat on Wednesday.

Bradley rounded third too far after Moore's infield hit in the second and was tagged out during a rundown between third and home for the Mariners' second base-running blunder of the inning.

The cheers were back a few innings later. Seattle loaded the bases on an infield single by Ichiro Suzuki and walks to Chone Figgins and Gutierrez. Jose Lopez fouled out behind third, but Bradley muscled Gonzalez's first offering into left.

An inning later, Moore led off with a single and moved to second on Figgins' two-out walk off reliever Chad Gaudin (0-1).

Gutierrez's single to left was picked clean by Eric Patterson, but he bobbled getting the ball from his glove and the lumbering Moore beat the throw home. Lopez then followed with another single to score Figgins.

"These guys are playing hard and the key was after those two baserunning mistakes they didn't give up and kept playing hard and played a good ball game," Wakamatsu said.

NOTES

Suzuki snapped an 0 for 13 skid with a 45-foot dribbler up the first-base line in the fifth inning. ... Seattle swapped starters for the weekend, pushing RHP Ian Snell back to Sunday and moving LHP Ryan Rowland-Smith to Saturday. Snell has been out of town after a death in his family. ... Oakland INF Mark Ellis missed his third straight game with a strained hamstring, but Geren said he is improving. ... The crowd of 15,978 was second-smallest in Safeco Field history.

The Suzuki revolution (Kurt, that is), and players who changed baseball

Larry Stone, Seattle Times, 4/15/2010

First, a quick **Kurt Suzuki** story. Our computers at the Seattle Times used to be programmed to automatically change "Suzuki" to "**Ichiro**" in box scores, since we had settled on using "Ichiro" in all references to the Mariners outfielder.

That worked fine for several seasons, until a few years ago, when a rookie catcher named **Kurt Suzuki** joined the A's. Sure enough, the box scores in our paper from his early games showed that Oakland's catcher was, yes, **Ichiro**. That caused some confusion, but the bug was quickly fixed.

Suzuki has gone on to become one of the better catchers in the league, and yesterday made an outstanding play against the Mariners that sort of got lost amidst **Milton Bradley's** home run and **Doug Fister's** pitching.

In the seventh inning, A's submariner **Brad Ziegler** threw a very wide pitch to **Franklin Gutierrez** with **Chone Figgins** on third. Suzuki made a leaping backhanded grab of the pitch, and then was able to fire a strike to third to nail Figgins trying to advance (shown above).

After the game, I went to the Oakland clubhouse, and A's manager **Bob Geren** was raving about the play.

"From my angle, I don't think there's another catcher in baseball who makes that play," Geren said. "He literally dove for a ball that, 99 percent out of the time, is going toward the backstop. And then he recovered to throw a perfect strike to get Figgins. That was flat-out amazing.

"If we win the game, that was the game-winning play. But we didn't score any runs, so I don't know if you see that play in a highlight film or not, but it certainly should be."

Geren compared it to a play Suzuki made last week when he caught a **Jose Lopez** pop fly while careening into the visiting dugout.

"He continues to do amazing things athletically, acrobatically," Geren said. "He's revolutionizing that position. Guys don't do that. He's athletic as a catcher can get. It's really fun to watch."

The last part of that statement by Geren caught my attention and made me think. How many players have truly revolutionized a position? (I'll reserve judgment on Suzuki's lasting impact, with all due respect). I've come up with a few examples, but I'd love to hear what you think.

Historically, you'd have to go with pitcher **Candy Cummings**, who is credited with inventing the curve ball in the late 1800s. Cummings even made the Hall of Fame on that achievement, though there is some dispute among historians if he is indeed the curve-ball pioneer. But whomever was the first pitcher to put a wrinkle on the ball definitely revolutionized the game, just as **Bruce Sutter** would do in more recent times with his forkball/split-fingered fastball. With **Roger Craig** as the tutor, the split became the pitch d'jour in the 1980s and 1990s.

According to the Bill James Historical Abstract, the first recognizable relief pitcher was **Doc Crandall** of the New York Giants, who played from 1908-18. But when I think of revolutionizing that position, I think of the way **Tony La Russa** used **Dennis Eckersley** exclusively in the ninth inning on those great Oakland teams in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That dictated how managers have used closers ever since. La Russa wasn't the first to save his closer for the ninth -- **Dick Williams** used three setup men to get to Rollie Fingers on his great Oakland teams in the early 1970s -- but La Russa's Eckersley model has definitely become the industry standard.

Back to catching, long before Suzuki, **Johnny Bench** pioneered the art of one-handed catching (the other hand was tucked behind his back or off to the side, the better to protect it from injury) when he popularized the hinged catcher's mitt (which **Randy Hundley** of the Cubs is credited with introducing). **Benito Santiago** was known for throwing out runners from his knees, and also introduced the unorthodox stance a lot of catcher's use with the bases empty, with their right leg extended wide to reduce the strain on their knees.

Certainly, **Cal Ripken Jr.** revolutionized the shortstop position, showing that big, powerful guys could play a position that used to be populated by fast little guys like **Maury Wills** and **Luis Aparicio**. **Alex Rodriguez** took that to another level, with **Nomar Garciaparra** and **Derek Jeter** also contributing, and now it's not unusual for shortstops to also be power hitters.

Amongst outfielders, I think of **Willie Mays** and his basket catch, which was imitated by an entire generation, despite the protestations of coaches everywhere (just as the high leg kick of his Giants teammate, **Juan Marichal**, was replicated by a whole generation of Little League pitchers in the 1960s). And there was **Paul Blair** of the Orioles, who played a very shallow center field, daring hitters to knock it over his head -- and then running it down if they did. A lot of center fielders have tried that method over the years. On a more specific level, **Carl Yastrzemski** wrote the book on playing the ball off the Green Monster at Fenway Park, and now every left fielder tries to play the caroms like Yaz did.

Can you think of any other players that revolutionized a position, keeping in mind there's a difference between playing it very well, and actually changing the way it's played.

Rookie Profile: Tyson Ross

by John Sickels, Minor League Baseball,

6 days ago: Oakland Athletics' Tyson Ross works against the Seattle Mariners during the sixth inning of a baseball game Wednesday, April 7, 2010, in Oakland, Calif. This was Ross' major league debut. (AP Photo/Ben Margot)

Prospect Profile: Tyson Ross

Tyson Ross unexpectedly earned a spot in the Oakland Athletics bullpen this spring, and is off to a good start so far. Let's review his status as a prospect.

Ross was a second round pick from the University of California in 2008. He was considered a first round candidate at one point due to his hard sinking fastball and effective slider, but fell a round due to an erratic junior season (7-4, 4.25 with a 66/33 K/BB in 78 innings) along with concerns about control issues, health, and durability. He made four starts in the Class A Midwest League after signing, posting a 4.66 ERA with a 16/5 K/BB in 19 innings for Kane County. I gave him a conservative Grade C+ in the 2009 book, noting his long-term potential but wanting to get more data from higher levels, and concerned that he might have injury problems due to his mechanics.

Ross began '09 with Stockton in the California League, going 5-6, 4.17 with an 82/33 K/BB in 86 innings with 78 hits allowed. Promoted to Double-A Midland in July, he got knocked around in some starts (including one I saw in August) due to command issues, but finished 5-4, 3.96 with a 31/20 K/BB in 50 innings, with 40 hits allowed. In the book this year I gave him a Grade B-, writing that Ross' fastball could hit 95 MPH, his slider was nasty, and he occasionally showed a good changeup, but that I remained worried about his control and mechanics that appeared stressful to me. Here is the scouting report I wrote after seeing him in mid-August:

Positives: he's got great stuff, working consistently at 90-94 MPH in this game and showing good bite on his breaking ball. His fastball also has good sinking action in addition to the velocity. Negatives: he had no idea where the ball was going, showing poor command, especially in the first inning before settling down a bit in the second and third. I'm also not wild about his mechanics, though it looks like he's smoothed them out a bit since he was in college at the University of California. Ross has very good stuff but is still figuring out what to do with it.

Ross made huge strides with his control this spring, earning the spot in the Oakland bullpen, though in the long run it is more likely that he will be a starter. Ideally I would like to have him get more minor league time, but I say that about most pitchers and Oakland has been more willing to rush young ones lately. I do think it is a good idea for him to remain in relief for the time being, using the old-style Earl Weaver approach for pitcher development of which I'm very fond.

Ross reminds me of former Twins pitcher Scott Erickson. Tyson is two inches taller (6-6 rather than Erickson's 6-4), but their stuff (hard sinker with good velocity, hard slider) is similar. Erickson was more refined at the same stage of their careers, but if Ross can avoid injury and continue showing stronger control, he is capable of Erickson-like performance. Erickson went 142-136 over 2361 major league innings. Although his final career ERA+ was slightly below average at 98, he was a 20-game winner, threw a no-hitter, and had several very strong seasons. If Oakland gets something similar out of Ross, they should be very happy.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Donaldson homer sparks River Cats rally

By Lauren McCarthy / Sacramento River Cats

Sacramento used a two-out rally Wednesday night to overcome a late 2-0 deficit for a 5-2 victory against host Tacoma. River Cats catcher Josh Donaldson hit his second home run of the season, a solo shot, on a 3-1 pitch for the River Cats first run in the seventh. With two out, the River Cats had life. Third baseman Steve Tolleson followed with a double on a sharp

ground ball to left field, advancing Landon Powell to third base. Eric Sogard followed with a two-run single to center that scored Powell and Tolleson for a 3-2 Cats lead.

Luke French made an impressive start for the Rainiers, pitching 6.2 innings and allowing one run and six hits. French even snuck out of a bases-loaded, no-out crunch in the bottom of the third. French got right-hander got Corey Wimberly to strike out and Matt Carson to ground into an inning-ending double play, preserving a scoreless tie.

Sacramento starter Graham Godfrey started shaky, walking three batters in the second inning and allowing the first run to score on a sacrifice fly. The River Cats right-hander composed himself quickly and retired eight consecutive batters thereafter. He pitched a total of 5.2 innings, allowing the Rainiers' only two runs. Tacoma tacked on its second run in the sixth when Josh Bard hit a sacrifice fly to score Matt Carp.

After Donaldson's and Sogard's offensive showcase in the seventh, the River Cats entered the eighth anxious to increase the scoring gap. Chris Carter singled on a line drive to left fielder Michael Saunders, and Jack Cust followed suit with his first single of the night advancing Carter to second. Left fielder Michael Taylor then hit a monstrous triple just shy of leaving the park, driving home Carter and Cust for a 5-2 lead.

Sacramento reliever Sam Demel earned the victory, throwing an inning of scoreless relief for Sacramento. Matt Carson collected a hit for the River Cats, extending his season opening hitting streak to seven games.

The River Cats face the Rainiers again Thursday night at 7 in the final of this four-game series. Sacramento opens its home schedule Friday night at 7:05 p.m. against the Reno Aces.

'Hounds Go For Fourth Straight Against Travs

By Greg Bergman / Midland RockHounds

The RockHounds will begin their first road trip of the 2010 season on Thursday in Little Rock, Arkansas. The 'Hounds swept three from the Travs last weekend at Citibank Ballpark.

Carlos Hernandez will make his second start of the season for the 'Hounds after collecting a no decision in his first outing against the Travs last week. The California native was 6-1 with a 4.62 ERA for the RockHounds a year ago and was a member of the 2009 Texas League Championship squad.

The Travelers will send left hander Jayson Miller to the mound. Miller last just five innings and was handed the loss in last Friday's game at Citibank Ballpark.

The RockHounds will play three in Little Rock and then move on to Springfield for three more before returning home next Thursday. The 'Hounds are currently tied atop the South Division with Corpus Christi with a 4-2 record.

Pitching Probables at Arkansas

Thurs. - Carlos Hernandez (0-0, 6.23) vs. Jayson Miller (0-1, 7.20)

Fri. - Pedro Figueroa (0-0, 7.20) vs. Jeremy Thorne (0-0, 9.64)

Sat. - Anthony Capra (0-1, 3.86) vs. Michael Anton (1-0, 1.80)

Pitching Probables at Springfield

Sun. - Ben Hornbeck (0-0, 7.71) vs. David Kopp (0-0, 9.00)

Mon. - Travis Banwart (2-0, 2.53) vs. Shaun Garceau (0-2, 2.79)

Tues. - Carlos Hernandez (0-0, 6.23) vs. Nick Addition (0-0, 3.60)

PARKER'S BLASTS LIFT STOCKTON

By The Record

Stephen Parker gave the Stockton Ports all the offense it would get, or need on two swings.

Parker hit a pair of two-run home runs and lifted the Ports to a 4-1 win on Wednesday against the Bakersfield Blaze at Sam Lynn Ballpark. Shawn Haviland pitched six strong innings to get the victory for Stockton (4-2).

Parker hit his first home run of the season in the top of the fourth inning with one out after David Thomas doubled to lead off the inning, and Parker powered the ball over the right-field fence.

The Ports made the 2-0 lead hold up until the bottom of the sixth, when Jacob Kaase doubled and moved to third on a sacrifice bunt by Engel Beltre. Davis Stoneburner singled to center to score Kaase and cut the lead to one.

In the top of the eighth Jeremy Barfield walked for Stockton and Parker homered to left.

Parker Powers Ports Past Blaze 4-1

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - Wednesday night's final score: Stephen Parker-4, Bakersfield Blaze-1.

The Stockton Ports' third baseman exploded for not only his first, but also his second home run of the season-both two-run blasts-giving the Boys of Banner Island all four runs they'd need to overcome Bakersfield by a count of 4-1 and finish their season-opening road trip at a mark of 4-2.

It was Parker's first blast that broke the ice in the top of the fourth. David Thomas started the inning with a double to right. Two batters later, it was Parker who rocked a two-run shot over the right field fence to put the Ports on top 2-0.

The home run accounted for the only two runs surrendered by Blaze starter Wilfredo Boscan (1-1), who otherwise pitched very well. Boscan would wind up with the loss, going five innings and allowing just the two runs on four hits while striking out four. All four hits that Boscan gave up were extra-base hits.

In talking about Parker's night, one must not lose sight of the performance of Ports starter Shawn Haviland (1-0). Stockton's right-hander gave up a two-out single in the first, then went on to retire 13 of his next 14 to take him through the fifth.

Haviland showed terrific poise in the sixth with his back to the wall. After yielding a leadoff double to Jacob Kasse followed by a sac-bunt from Engel Beltre that moved Kasse to third, Davis Stoneburner knocked a single to center that scored Kasse and cut the Ports lead to 2-1. As Haviland pitched to Mitch Hilligoss, he was called for a balk that put Stoneburner, the possible tying run, at second. Haviland would bear down, however, getting Hilligoss to ground to first and Erik Morrison to ground to short to end the inning and Bakersfield's final threat.

Haviland earned the win, especially after battling through the sixth, going six full innings and allowing just one run on four hits while striking out two.

The Ports got some insurance in the eighth provided once again by Parker. With one out, Jeremy Barfield worked a walk out of Blaze reliever Adalberto Flores. Parker came up next and hit an opposite-field homer to left, giving the Ports a 4-1 cushion.

Stockton's bullpen would take it near perfectly down the home stretch. Paul Smyth pitched a perfect seventh and eighth, and Daniel Thomas yielded a leadoff walk in the ninth, but got a double-play ball and a strikeout to end the ballgame.

After taking four of the six games played on their opening road trip, the Ports return home for their home opener on Thursday night at Banner Island Ballpark. The Ports will welcome the Visalia Rawhide to town for a four-game series that

kicks off a seven-game homestand. Murphy Smith (1-0, 5.40 ERA) will head to the bump for Stockton, opposed by southpaw Taylor Sinclair (0-0, 3.60 ERA) for Visalia. First pitch is set for 7:15 p.m. PDT.

A'S EXTEND PORTS DEAL

By Jason Anderson, Stockton Record, 4/15/2010

STOCKTON - Those who were there remember how the stars aligned so nicely over Stockton the night the Ports opened their waterfront ballpark in 2005.

The Ports had a sparkling new \$22 million stadium, a new affiliation with the nearby Oakland Athletics and a young pitcher named Dallas Braden who started the season with the team he cheered while growing up in Stockton. The ballpark helped the Ports lure the A's away from Modesto and the A's assigned prospects of regional interest to Stockton, creating a partnership that felt right from the start.

The Ports will begin their sixth season at Stockton Ballpark when they play their home opener against the Visalia Rawhide at 7:05 p.m. today. During the game the Ports will announce they have reached an agreement to extend their player-development contract with the A's through the 2014 season.

Today's Game

Rawhide at Ports

First pitch: 7:05 p.m., Stockton Ballpark

Radio: 1280-AM, stocktonports.com

Events: Today — Magnet schedule giveaway; postgame fireworks; ceremonial first pitch by Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston.

Friday — First 1,000 fans receive Dallas Braden jersey T-shirt. **Saturday** — Aquafina Major League Baseball Pitch, Hit & Run Competition for kids 7-14, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.; Walk a Mile in her Shoes: The Men's March to Stop Rape, Sexual Assault and Gender Violence, 1-4:30 p.m.

"This is something we definitely think is going to add to the excitement of the night, and I think our fans will be really responsive to it," Ports general manager Pat Filippone said. "A lot of them are A's fans already, and a lot of them have become A's fans after seeing our guys make it up to Oakland."

Keith Lieppman, the A's director of player development, said Oakland is pleased to be affiliated with the Ports for several reasons. The ballpark provides first-class facilities for players, and the A's see obvious advantages in their proximity to Stockton, a Class-A affiliate, and the Sacramento River Cats, a Triple-A affiliate.

"This has been one of the better moves the organization has made in the history of all the (affiliate) franchises," Lieppman said. "It's close to Oakland and gives us a great place to put our younger players. We're real happy with everything about the situation. That's why we've agreed to extend this arrangement, and we look forward to a long, long relationship with the Stockton ball club."

Filippone said having a regional affiliate enhances the relationship between a minor league team and its fans.

"I've run clubs affiliated with various teams, and you always strive for the closest geographic fit for a lot of reasons, primarily from a player recognition perspective," Filippone said. "Fans enjoy saying I saw Andrew Bailey pitch for the Ports in 2007, and now he's the American League Rookie of the Year."

Lieppman added that having players assigned to nearby cities makes evaluation easier and may add incentive for prospects trying to reach the majors.

"It's great for the city of Stockton to watch players come through, but it's also great for our younger players to have a sense of how close they are to the big leagues," Lieppman said. "We take players over to see games in Oakland sometimes and a lot of their games are televised, so I think it gives them a sense that they're not that far away."

Thirty-five players have spent time with the Ports and A's since 2005, including five who started for the A's on Tuesday against the Seattle Mariners. The list includes Braden, Brett Anderson, Andrew Bailey, Kurt Suzuki, Daric Barton and Brad Ziegler.

The Ports have compiled a 348-352 record with three postseason appearances and one California League championship in five seasons as an A's affiliate. They set attendance records in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

"We're just so happy working with the A's," Filippone said. "I think for the most part they've provided us with competitive teams, and they make it fun for us to be proud of our major league affiliate."

Cougars Fall to Beloit in Opener **Kane County lets lead slip in 9th inning, snaps four-game win streak**

GENEVA, III. – The Kane County Cougars let a lead slip away in the ninth inning Wednesday night, as they blew a 5-3 advantage and fell, 6-5, against the Beloit Snappers at Elfstrom Stadium. The loss snapped the Cougars' winning streak at four and put them at 3-1 so far on their nine-game homestand.

Max Stassi gave the Cougars an early lead with a second-inning homer, and Kent Walton's RBI double in the third put the Cougars ahead, 2-1. After Beloit managed two runs in the sixth against starter Rob Gilliam, the Cougars rallied for three of their own in the bottom half. Franklin Hernandez, Tyreece House and Myrio Richard each drove in a run to make it 5-3. That surge put Gilliam in line for a win. The right-hander gave up three runs on four hits over six innings in an eventual no-decision.

After Josh Lansford tossed two scoreless innings in relief, Hector Garcia (0-1) struggled in the ninth and blew the save. He gave up three runs on two hits and walked three in the loss. Steve Blevins notched his second save, and Edgar Ibarra (1-1) picked up the win for Beloit.

The Cougars (4-3) and Snappers (3-4) continue the three-game set Thursday night at 6 CT. Dan Straily (1-0, 3.60) will face Miguel Munoz (0-0, 1.80).