

A's News Clips, Wednesday, May 5, 2010

Ryan Sweeney provides much-needed power to lineup in A's 7-6 win over Texas Rangers

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Ryan Sweeney routinely gives the A's great defense in right field.

He also showed off his home run stroke Tuesday night, and that isn't seen quite as often.

Sweeney hit a two-run shot in the first inning and notched a career-high five RBIs to spark the A's to a 7-6 victory over the Texas Rangers in front of 10,135 fans at the Oakland Coliseum.

He grounded a two-run single up the middle in the second and drove home another run with a single in the fourth, enjoying the first five-RBI game for an Athletic this season.

But Sweeney's biggest contribution may have come in the top of the fifth, when he made a terrific catch in right-center to rob Michael Young of extra bases. The Rangers scored that inning to pull to within 7-5, but they could have done more damage if not for Sweeney's running grab.

"That was pretty much ridiculous," A's closer Andrew Bailey said. "That's what he's capable of. I don't know how many RBIs he had. And defensively, you can't replace him."

Sweeney drove a 1-1 pitch from Scott Feldman (1-3) over the right-field wall in his first at-bat, snapping a career-long 50-game homerless streak dating back to August of last season.

Sweeney, 25, came into Tuesday with just 12 homers in 1,043 career at-bats. He couldn't completely savor his rare home run trot.

"I didn't know that one was going to go," he said. "I was kind of jogging at first, then started running. So it felt good, but it didn't last long

enough."

That power is something the A's could use more, considering they entered Tuesday with just 17 homers, third fewest in the American League.

Sweeney is hitting .303 and has reached base in 25 of his 26 games. But A's manager Bob Geren pointed out the significance of Sweeney's catch.

"He's as good a right fielder as there is," Geren said. "You look at every ball and say, if he doesn't catch it, I don't know who would."

The Rangers advanced the tying run to third base with two outs in the ninth, but Bailey retired Young on a grounder to short to end the game. Bailey extended his scoreless streak to 192/3 innings and has converted 25 straight save opportunities dating back to last season.

A's starter Vin Mazzaro, called up from Triple-A Sacramento to fill in for the injured Justin Duchscherer, lasted just three-plus innings, forcing five relievers to finish things off.

Mazzaro was spotted a 5-0 lead after two innings. But he allowed Vladimir Guerrero's grand slam in the third to cut the A's lead to 5-4. He was lifted after walking David Murphy, his fourth free pass of the game, to lead off the fourth.

Mazzaro knows he got an audition to show he deserves more starts if Duchscherer remains out. And he expressed surprise to be lifted so early.

"It was a good chance for me, but it got cut short," Mazzaro said. "I wasn't really expecting coming out, but there's nothing you can do about it."

Said Geren: "Walks — I don't like walks. It was early in the game, but I felt like we had enough bullpen to win that game."

Michael Wuertz, activated from the DL on Monday, made his season debut and allowed two hits in 11/3 innings with one strikeout. Brad Ziegler (1-2) went 11/3 innings for the victory.

A's update: No date set for Mark Ellis to begin rehab assignment

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

No date set for Ellis to begin rehab assignment

Mark Ellis is eligible to come off the disabled list Thursday, but the A's will be without their second baseman a while longer.

Manager Bob Geren said Ellis is hitting off a tee but has yet to take live batting practice to test his strained left hamstring, which has sidelined him for all but one game since April 12.

Ellis is rehabbing in Phoenix, near his home in Scottsdale.

Once he can swing off the tee without pain, he'll graduate to batting practice and eventually go on a minor league rehab assignment, Geren said. The date for that hasn't been set.

"What bothered him last time was swinging at game speed," Geren said. "So he would have to be put through that test."

That means Adam Rosales will continue playing second base for the time being. Rosales came into Tuesday's game against Texas hitting .304. He hadn't committed an error in 21 games at second.

Middle infielder Steve Tolleson was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento to clear a roster spot for Vin Mazzaro. That leaves Rosales as the backup shortstop to Cliff Pennington. If he's needed there, Eric Patterson could play second.

Justin Duchscherer was scheduled to receive a cortisone shot for the inflammation in his left hip, but the appointment was postponed.

Duchscherer declined to meet with reporters to discuss the situation. Geren gave no reason for the postponement, saying only that "they will attempt to do it (today)."

The A's have yet to decide whether to place Duchscherer on the disabled list. His next turn in the rotation would be Tuesday, but with days off Thursday and Monday, the A's can rework the order to give him more rest.

Brett Anderson will try playing catch sometime early next week, Geren said, but the left-hander is expected to miss another three to four weeks with a forearm strain and elbow inflammation.

This is Anderson's first career DL stint — minors or majors — and he said he had mixed emotions when his injuries were diagnosed.

"Obviously it was good that I'm not going to have surgery," he said. "But it's also disappointing because I was pitching fairly well and the team was playing well."

Chin Music: Duchscherer's doctor appointment postponed, other A's pregame stuff

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 5/4/2010 5:23PM

UPDATE: Through a team spokesperson, Justin Duchscherer declined to address reporters about why his appointment to get a cortisone shot was postponed. Bob Geren said only that they would "attempt to do it tomorrow." The fact that it was postponed makes you wonder if the condition of his hip has worsened. Then again, there could be absolutely nothing newsworthy to this. Perhaps the doctor who was supposed to see him wasn't available.

The point is, when a player refuses to talk, it only leads to more speculation and curiosity about what's going on ...

Anyway, the fun will continue tomorrow ...

Sweeney, relievers lead A's over Rangers

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Ryan Sweeney took care of the A's offense almost by himself against Texas on Tuesday night at the Coliseum. The A's pitching needed an all-hands-on-deck approach.

Sweeney collected a career-high five RBIs, and five Oakland relievers combined to work six innings as the A's held off the Rangers 7-6.

Andrew Bailey recorded the final four outs to pick up his fourth save. With a man at third and two outs in the ninth, he got Michael Young to bounce to short to end the game.

Bailey's scoreless-innings streak reached 19 2/3 innings, and he has converted his past 25 save chances.

In Monday night's 4-2 loss, the A's didn't score until Kevin Kouzmanoff hit a two-run homer in the ninth inning. On Tuesday evening, they didn't wait nearly so long to get on the board.

They took the lead with one out in the first when Sweeney took Scott Feldman deep to right for a two-run shot. Not only was it Sweeney's first homer of the season, it ended a 50-game homerless streak for the Oakland right fielder.

Sweeney's previous home run had come against the Angels' Ervin Santana on Aug. 27.

Sweeney's next two RBIs came rather quickly, as in the next inning. With two outs and the bases loaded in the second, his sharp groundball was just out of the reach of shortstop Elvis Andrus. The single to center brought home two runs and made it a 4-0 game.

Kouzmanoff, who had three hits, followed Sweeney with a run-scoring single to center to make it 5-0, Oakland.

Vin Mazzaro gave up 80 percent of the lead in the third - and you could attribute that directly to his inability to locate the strike zone.

Recalled from Triple-A Sacramento to take the start of Justin Duchscherer (hip), Mazzaro walked three men in the inning. Then with the bases loaded and two outs, Vladimir Guerrero jumped all over Mazzaro's first pitch and deposited it over the 362 marker in left.

Guerrero's sixth career grand slam cut the A's edge to 5-4. Like Sweeney, Guerrero had a five-RBI evening.

Mazzaro's night ended after he issued a free pass to David Murphy to lead off the fourth inning.

The A's padded their advantage in the bottom of the fourth. Daric Barton's RBI triple preceded Sweeney's looping base hit to center. Barton (2-for-3, three runs) trotted home and Oakland was up 7-4.

Feldman, who went to Burlingame High and the College of San Mateo, allowed seven runs and 10 hits before retiring a man in the fourth. Somehow, he then set down the final 12 men he faced.

Sweeney made his mark with his glove - and his legs - in the fifth. He ranged halfway to Piedmont to flag down Young's drive to the gap in right-center.

Guerrero's RBI single off Michael Wuertz later in the fifth made it 7-5. It was 7-6 in the seventh when Brad Ziegler got Guerrero to bounce into an inning-ending, 4-6-3 double play. Ziegler (1-2) got credit for the win.

Cahill plans to dial it down a bit

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Trevor Cahill gets the start for the A's in this afternoon's series finale. He figures being a little less excited will translate into being a lot more successful.

He made his 2010 debut with Oakland in Friday's 10-2 loss at Toronto. Cahill gave up eight runs (six earned), including three homers, in five innings.

The right-hander began this season on the disabled list (left shoulder blade). He made two starts for Triple-A Sacramento before getting recalled to take the spot in the A's rotation that became available when **Brett Anderson** went on the DL.

Cahill believes his struggles against the Jays resulted from trying too hard.

"When you get called back up," he said, "you want to make a good impression, show them that you should never have got sent down in the first place. I think I was just amped up a little too much."

As a rookie last season, Cahill went 3-1 with a 2.45 ERA in four starts against Texas. He spent all of 2009 in the big leagues. His stint with the River Cats reminded him how much better the travel is in the majors.

"Here, they make sure you're comfortable," is how Cahill put it.

Like father: To make room on the roster for Tuesday night's starter, **Vin Mazzaro**, the A's optioned infielder **Steve Tolleson** to Sacramento.

Manager **Bob Geren** played with Tolleson's father, **Wayne**, for three seasons (1988-90) with the Yankees.

Managing the son of a former teammate made Geren, 48, feel a little old.

Said Geren: "That's the first time I've ever had to say, 'I played with your dad.' ... It felt a little different to say that. It's kind of fun, though, really. It's kind of neat."

Wayne Tolleson also was an infielder, and Geren said the younger Tolleson, 26, has similar characteristics to his father.

"He's really fundamentally sound, a gutsy guy, tough," Geren said of Steve Tolleson, who went 1-for-4 in three games with Oakland.

Briefly: **Justin Duchscherer** was supposed to have a cortisone shot in his left hip Tuesday, but the procedure was postponed until today. Duchscherer declined to speak with reporters and Geren gave no reason as to why the procedure was

delayed. ... **Eric Chavez** and A's owner **Lew Wolff** teamed with "Feed The Children" to provide approximately 4,000 families with food and other assistance Tuesday in the Coliseum parking lot.

A's leading off

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Safely at home: With his first-inning homer, Ryan Sweeney has reached base safely in his past 37 home games, tying Carney Lansford (1987). Reggie Jackson's 40-gamer in 1969 is the tops in Oakland team history.

Drumbeat: Tolleson to Triple-A

Steve Kroner checks in from the Coliseum:

The A's have optioned infielder Steve Tolleson to Triple-A Sacramento to open a roster spot for pitcher Vin Mazzaro, who's starting tonight in place of Justin Duchscherer (hip). Tolleson spent a week with Oakland and went 1-for-4 in three games.

Putting the hurt on the roster

Ray Ratto, San Francisco Chronicle

If it didn't come so dangerously close to being a park improvement, the A's would have erected a wooden sign above the home team dugout that reads simply, "4 Days Without A Workplace Accident."

The numbers would have hung from a peg so they could be replaced each day, like you would find at any old-time cement factory, and quickly turned back to zero as the need arose. You know, like nearly any day the A's actually played.

Before this runs too close to what the Warriors were trying to sell this year ("If we weren't so injured, we could have ..."), understand that nobody is going to be allowed to make that case here. Just as the Warriors were nowhere close to a playoff berth had they been fully healthy every night, the A's have not been robbed of anything by filling up the disabled list.

Still, when even ushers point out hanging jerseys in a nearby souvenir stand and say, "Look ... Buck, Suzuki, Ellis ... they're all hurt," you know you've got some serious gimp working here.

"I know we've had some bad years here for that," general manager Billy Beane, who is in disgustingly good health, said, "but this is the worst I think we've ever had."

So bad, in fact, that they had to delay putting Justin Duchscherer on the disabled list because he couldn't get the scheduled cortisone shot for his hip until today. There he'll join Coco Crisp, Mark Ellis, Travis Buck, Brett Anderson and Kurt Suzuki on what has been the longest disabled list in the major leagues - 10.

Ten, that is, if you include Joey Devine, Jon Meloan and Josh Outman from spring training, and Michael Wuertz, who just came off the list Monday. If not, it's actually only the six since the start of the regular season, which means that at the present attrition rate they will empty Sacramento of players by the time rosters were supposed to expand on Sept. 1.

Of the injuries, the most potentially damaging is Anderson's forearm strain/elbow inflammation combo plate, since he is the team's understated response to Lincecumania, but the one that may have the most lasting effect is Duchscherer's left hip inflammation, which is similar to the right-hip injury he incurred in 2007 that necessitated two operations.

Duchscherer has had such an unsettling last three years that one more blow to go atop the first hip problem, his battle with depression, his divorce and his absences from his 6-year-old son, the elbow surgery and the endless rehabilitation sessions that some people wonder how much more he wants to endure the whole baseball thing.

It would be a sad end to a promising career, but it is in keeping with the A's peculiar form of crud luck, even more so than their occasionally risky roster construction techniques. Of the 10 disablements, only the Crisp and Devine injuries came with histories from other teams, and the two players most expected to have broken down based on their medical forms, pitcher Ben Sheets and designated hitter/momentary first baseman Eric Chavez, are healthy.

Nevertheless, every play of every game causes A's fans and employees to wince involuntarily, as though something bad is bound to happen at any minute. In the first inning of Tuesday's 7-6 win over Texas, Adam Rosales had to contort his torso to evade a high fastball from Scott Feldman, and was saved from an outraged sternum only by the bat that deflected the ball. You may rest assured that the chances of him turning up at the ballpark today with a hinky back are no worse than 30-70.

In fact, never mind Rosales. Ryan Sweeney drove in a career-high five runs in his first three at-bats and hit his first home run in 51 games, and closer Andrew Bailey extended his scoreless streak to the equivalent of two full games. Those are the guys I'd figure next to get the "Days Since" sign reset to zero, because that's just the way it works here at Oakland Not Quite Children's Hospital. Stick your head up, and someone will shear it right off.

Oakland's team isn't getting an A in attendance

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Moments before the A's played the Texas Rangers on Monday night in Oakland, owner Lew Wolff looked at a mostly empty Coliseum and quipped, "Maybe they're delaying the game until the crowd gets bigger."

No dice.

The A's tiniest crowd in seven years, announced at 8,874 but appearing much smaller, exemplified the decline of the team, which once was the preferred choice for Bay Area baseball fans but has fallen on hard times.

Attendance dropped last year to the worst in the majors. The team hasn't been in playoff contention since 2006. Ownership is pursuing a move to San Jose, inspiring fans to hold up signs disparaging Wolff, the managing general partner. One of the A's pitchers contended, via Twitter, that fans were boycotting the team.

With a Major League Baseball committee in its 14th month examining possible sites for the A's, fans question the team's direction: Have the A's done enough to stay in Oakland? Or have they done just little enough to ensure a move?

Steve Douglas is a fifth-generation Oakland native, season-ticket holder for 25 years and proprietor of Oakland's Douglas Parking. He said he's friends with several A's executives but, "I believe more could've been done by the A's and the city of Oakland to work toward keeping the A's here. It seems like the commitment on both sides should have been better for the last several years, not just the last year."

The A's failed to sell out Opening Night despite having the smallest capacity - 35,067 - in the majors. On April 16, they were outdrawn by their top minor-league team, the Sacramento River Cats, 14,014 to 12,225.

When the champion New York Yankees visited Oakland four days later, fewer than 20,000 fans attended the series opener. For some A's-Yankees games in the early 2000s, more than 55,000 packed the Coliseum.

"I'm an old Oakland boy, so it's painful. It hurts," said former A's great Reggie Jackson, now a Yankees employee. "I want to see them do well here. ... It's hard for an old-timer to see this."

Radio executive Bob Agnew, who briefly consulted before the season at the A's station (KTRB), accused A's management of wanting to ditch Oakland all along.

"From my perspective, the game plan was to get the hell out of there and do it bare bones," said Agnew, who for 16 years was the program director at KNBR, the Giants' radio home. "The A's never had a cohesive plan to market. Always using the excuses, 'We're small. We're second in the area.' That's baloney."

A's Oakland effort

While Wolff is ownership's front man, the majority owner is John Fisher. Fisher, son of the Gap's founders, is one of baseball's eight billionaire owners, according to Forbes, but fans direct their abuse at Wolff.

Wolff seethes over accusations he hasn't tried to make it work in Oakland and questions whether cynics are informed of the facts - including fans such as Jorge Leon, who recently held up signs at the Coliseum reading "Lew Wolff Hates Oakland" and "Wolff Lied. He Never Tried."

In a two-hour interview with The Chronicle on Monday, Wolff provided access to a 227-page book that details his efforts to build a ballpark in Oakland. He said he looked exclusively in Oakland from 2003 - when he worked for previous A's ownership as vice president of venue development; he bought the team in 2005 - to 2006, when he announced a Fremont plan that ultimately failed.

"I did nothing except focus on Oakland sites," Wolff said. "The only thought in my mind was trying to do it in Oakland. I thought we'd be under construction in Oakland four years ago. I tried as hard as I could. We covered every base we could think of. It wasn't a matter of weeks or months. It was a matter of three years. So if someone puts up a sign that Lew's a liar and didn't do any work, that's his opinion."

Wolff said he considered at least a half-dozen Oakland sites, each pursuit ending with a major roadblock that made building unrealistic. His book was made available to the committee formed by baseball Commissioner Bud Selig to examine the A's ballpark situation.

"I'm not privy to what the committee is doing right now," Wolff said, "but if they've got some plan I don't know of, I'd be shocked."

Antiquated stadium

The A's are handicapped at the antiquated Coliseum, their home since they came to Oakland in 1968. But while they have posted annual profits, thanks to baseball's revenue-sharing program (the A's received \$32 million last year), they haven't exactly taken a positive approach to wooing fans.

Wolff's reviews of the Coliseum haven't improved since he called it "despicable" in a December 2005 interview with The Chronicle's editorial board, insisting co-tenancy with the Raiders couldn't work. He began tarping over the seats in the upper deck in 2006, intending to make the seating more intimate and cost-effective, but also assuring that attendance would be limited.

In March 2009, after city officials asked Selig to work with Oakland in pursuing a new ballpark, Wolff immediately distributed a news release, saying, "We have fully exhausted our time and resources" and "have no interest in covering old ground again."

The A's hope Selig's committee will agree the only option is San Jose.

Where is everybody?

Back in the A's good ol' days, they outdrew the Giants by 1 million in 1990. More recently, they slipped from an acceptable 17th (out of 30) in attendance in 2003 to last in 2009.

A's President Mike Crowley gave several reasons for dwindling attendance.

"Certainly, the economy is not helping the matter," he said. "The fact we haven't won the last couple of years has played into it. The venue is an issue for us, and the fact we're kind of in limbo has created a bit of a problem."

And the marketing efforts aren't working. The A's cut some of their popular community-building programs, including FanFest, an offseason event that typically drew more than 20,000 fans who bought more than 100,000 single-game tickets. They've replaced it with a Fan Appreciation Tailgate, held on the Coliseum parking lot.

"Even though FanFest was in January, it gave you an appetite for baseball," said A's fan Lance Haug, a truck driver living in Fremont. "I miss it. Now they do it two days before the season. It's kind of sad, actually."

Cheaper beer

Jim Leahey, vice president of sales and marketing, said the problems aren't because of a lack of effort. He noted that the A's for this season cut ticket prices 10 percent on average, stopped charging for parking for Tuesday games and lowered domestic beer prices from \$5.50 for 12 ounces to \$4.99 for 16 ounces.

But the cuts in tickets and beer prices went largely unnoticed - in comparison with national headlines prompted when Anaheim's Angels slashed the cost of tickets and beer.

Regarding the idea that the A's are setting themselves up for attendance failure, Leahey said, "We're not doing this with any secret plan to take something away. We try to do what will get people interested in the product. We're advertising all over TV and on billboards. We're here, and we'll be here next year and the year after, and we want people here."

Wolff added, "This idea we're trying to discourage people from coming is a bunch of crap. Every Wednesday, we have almost 9,000 \$2 tickets. ... It should be embarrassing to all of us that we can't draw people at \$2."

Not only did the A's have the majors' lowest attendance last year, they had the worst radio rating despite playing in the nation's fourth-largest market. By comparison, the Giants' rating was sixth highest in the majors.

While both Bay Area teams are shown on Comcast cable stations, the Giants ranked 17th in baseball last season in local TV ratings while the A's ranked ahead of only the Washington Nationals.

Pitcher's tweet

Reliever Brad Ziegler suggested ownership's desire to move to San Jose has prompted fans to "boycott" games. He made his point on Twitter while referring to a push in Arizona to boycott Diamondbacks game in reaction to the state's immigration bill.

"It's not much fun to play in front of an empty stadium in your home park," Ziegler tweeted. "We're going through that when A's fans boycott our games (because) ownership has threatened to move the team. The lack of fans gives them all the more reason to seek other alternatives for a new home city."

At the Fan Appreciation Tailgate, players signed autographs and answered questions, and former players posed with World Series trophies, among other activities. A booth was set up to sell tickets, but when a saleswoman was asked how many were sold, she said only, "I've got some leads."

Not many, apparently. While the Giants list the equivalent of 21,000 full season-ticket holders, the A's have fewer than 5,000.

Sweeney drives in five as A's hold on for win

Right fielder sets career high in RBIs, backing six hurlers

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Ryan Sweeney's quiet nature doesn't hide the fact that he's his own toughest critic.

The A's right fielder entered Tuesday's contest against the visiting Rangers having reached base in 24 of his 25 games this year -- his consistent at-bats leaving manager Bob Geren singing his praises.

But Sweeney hasn't exactly been feeling the harmony. Rather, he's felt something was off. Case in point: On Monday, the outfielder compiled a 1-for-4 night, but he didn't feel comfortable at the plate.

"Last night, I felt like I didn't know how to hit," he admitted.

So he watched video and tweaked his swing. Then he went to the plate Tuesday and posted a career night of sorts in a 7-6 A's victory.

"I've started to feel better at the plate," Sweeney said after the win, which knotted the three-game set at one apiece heading into Wednesday afternoon's rubber match.

He really didn't need to say it, though. The 10,000-plus fans in attendance actually saw it in the form of three hits and five RBIs -- two of which came as a result of a homer in the first.

The long ball, which snapped a career-long 51-game homerless streak for Sweeney, jump-started a marathon against Texas starter Scott Feldman, who surrendered seven runs in the first four frames against a feisty A's lineup.

Sweeney led the pack by adding an RBI single in the second before bringing in two more runs in the fourth with another base hit that scored Cliff Pennington and Daric Barton. The latter went 2-for-3 with a triple in the game.

"It's great when you're getting contributions up and down the lineup," Sweeney said. "A lot of the guys got hits tonight, and when the guys in front of you, and behind you, are getting on base, that only helps you."

Possibly more than anyone, it helped out A's starter Vin Mazzaro, who brought with him a familiar friend to the mound Tuesday on a night he received a no-decision.

Well, more like a familiar foe.

The Oakland right-hander, called up Tuesday from Triple-A to make a spot start for the injured Justin Duchscherer, retired six of Texas' first seven batters, bringing to mind the Mazzaro who tallied a career-opening scoreless streak of 17 2/3 innings last season.

"The first two innings were as crisp and clean as I've seen from him," Geren said.

But then the other Mazzaro showed up in the third -- the same one who went 0-8 with a 7.22 ERA over his 10 final starts last year. The righty walked three in the frame and, ultimately, offered up a first-pitch grand slam to Vladimir Guerrero.

"I was up in the zone there," Mazzaro said. "I lost it a little bit."

He lost it enough to convince Geren to pull him following a leadoff walk in the fourth. Mazzaro threw just 62 pitches. And while the hurler thought he pitched "pretty good," aside from the four-run third, the A's skipper didn't sugarcoat his reasoning for handing a 5-4 game over to the bullpen.

"Walks," Geren said. "I don't like walks."

"Even though it was early in the game, I felt like we had enough bullpen to win. I wasn't going to lose the lead with someone who looked like he had lost his command."

The right-hander, who was 1-1 with a 2.59 ERA in five games with Sacramento upon his promotion, said he was "a little bit" surprised at his early exit, but "it happens, I guess."

"I was one pitch away from getting a double play," he said. "I thought I had a good chance today of proving what I could do here, but it got cut short, and there's nothing you can do about it."

As much as the 23-year-old Mazzaro's short-lived outing proved to be slightly disappointing, it paved the way for Oakland's bullpen to showcase six strong innings of two-run ball. Five members of the A's relief corps took to the mound on Tuesday -- among them Michael Wuertz, who tossed out 1 1/3 shutout innings in his season debut after being reinstated from the disabled list Monday.

"It was definitely good to be out there," the right-handed reliever said. "It's nice to get back in the realm of things and get out there and be part of win."

"It wasn't as good as I wanted it to be, obviously, but that's going to come. This is only my seventh appearance in the past two months, so it's going to take a little bit of time, but I feel like I'm getting to where I want to be."

Wuertz was followed by Brad Ziegler, who gave up a run in 1 1/3 innings but walked away with his first win of the season. Meanwhile, Andrew Bailey pitched an effective 1 1/3 innings of two-hit ball to notch his fourth save of the year, handing his club a win for just the second time in its last eight games.

"It was a big team win today," the A's closer said. "The offense put us in a great position to get that victory today, and we definitely needed it. We've been struggling here with injuries, pitching and offense, but today, we were able to put it all together."

Ellis progressing from strained hamstring

By Jane Lee and Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Mark Ellis is just two days away from his scheduled activation from the disabled list, but the A's second baseman won't be returning to the field when that time comes.

Ellis, 32, is in the middle of a gradual rehab program put together by A's strength and conditioning coach Bob Alejo. The veteran infielder, who is rehabbing a strained left hamstring in Phoenix, has begun hitting off a tee but has yet to face pitchers.

Once past that step, Ellis will likely be given a Minor League rehab assignment, but there is currently no timetable for his return.

"The good news is that he's doing better every day and is now doing baseball activity," manager Bob Geren said Tuesday. "He'll need to make sure he can swing at game speed, so he would have to be put to that test before he's ready."

Ellis is currently in the midst of his fifth career stint on the DL, where he was placed April 21 after leaving the previous day's game following just five innings of work. He had missed seven games with the injury from April 12-18.

A's recall Mazzaro to start against Rangers

OAKLAND -- As expected, the A's on Tuesday recalled right-hander Vin Mazzaro from Triple-A Sacramento to make his season debut against the visiting Rangers in place of the injured Justin Duchscherer.

In order to make room for Mazzaro, the club optioned infielder Steve Tolleson to Sacramento, from which he was recalled on April 27. He made his Major League debut the following day and singled Friday in Toronto for his first big league hit.

Mazzaro, meanwhile, was 1-1 with a 2.59 ERA in five games -- four of them starts -- with the River Cats. The 23-year-old did not allow a run in three of his five outings and began the season with a 12 1/3 inning scoreless streak.

The young pitcher is no stranger to Oakland, though. Mazzaro made his Major League debut with the A's last June and went 4-9 with a 5.32 ERA in 17 starts before being shut down in September with right shoulder tendinitis.

The A's are hoping they witness the Mazzaro that lit up as a June callup, the one who didn't allow an earned run while winning his first two starts. He proved to be far less effective after the All-Star break, going 2-4 with a 7.21 ERA. Furthermore, the club is counting on a lower WHIP, which stood at 1.74 upon his exit last year.

"He feels good," manager Bob Geren said. "He feels confident, and he's been throwing the ball well."

In five games (two starts) with the A's this spring, Mazzaro was 1-0 with a 6.28 ERA. He surrendered 15 hits and eight walks through 14 1/3 innings while building up his arm strength.

"He's back in the strike zone, his stuff is back and his velocity is back," Geren said. "We're looking forward to seeing him."

Duchscherer's cortisone shot postponed

OAKLAND -- A's right-hander Justin Duchscherer's scheduled cortisone procedure was postponed a day, manager Bob Geren announced Tuesday.

"They'll attempt to do it tomorrow," the A's skipper said.

The right-handed Duchscherer, scratched from his Tuesday start due to left hip inflammation that surfaced in his most recent outing, declined to talk to media about the situation.

On Monday, Duchscherer visited Nashville-based physician Dr. Thomas Byrd, who discovered the inflammation in the pitcher's hip. All things considered, that's slightly good news for Duchscherer, who admitted that the pain "feels identical" to what experienced in his surgically repaired right hip.

The Oakland starter left Thursday's game in Toronto in the fourth inning and, if all goes well, will likely resume throwing a few days following the cortisone shot.

Sacramento woman named Honorary Bat Girl

OAKLAND -- Major League Baseball will do its part to promote breast cancer awareness this weekend, when it will feature a number of activities throughout its ballparks.

On Tuesday, MLB and Susan G. Komen for the Cure announced the winners for the 2010 Honorary Bat Girl Contest. After receiving nearly 1,000 testimonials of inspirational breast cancer survivors, advocates and supporters of the cause, a panel of celebrity judges and more than four million online votes determined the winner for each team.

Home teams will recognize their Honorary Bat Girl on Sunday, Mother's Day, while road teams will designate a later date to celebrate their honorary bat girls.

Raquel de la Torre, of Sacramento, Calif., will serve as the A's Honorary Bat Girl when they host the Tampa Bay Rays on Sunday. De la Torre will take part in pre-game ceremonies, be honored during the game, receive pink MLB merchandise and a pair of tickets to Sunday's game.

Hundreds of players will also be swinging pink bats, which will be auctioned off later to raise more money for Komen for the Cure. Players will also wear pink ribbons and wristbands as symbolic reminders of the cause.

Since its inception in 1982, Komen for the Cure has become the world's largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists and has raised nearly \$1.5 billion to promote awareness.

Worth noting

OAKLAND -- Left-hander Brett Anderson, on the disabled list with a medial forearm strain and elbow irritation, will begin playing catch this weekend, manager Bob Geren said. ... Coco Crisp, who began the season on the DL with a fractured pinkie finger, will undergo his next X-ray on Thursday to determine what type of baseball activity he can resume.

A's help thousands make ends meet

Chavez, Wolff, teammates join forces with Feed The Children

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Kneeling beneath the warm California sun, a mere stone's throw away from the Oakland Coliseum, Aaron Belloue recounted hard times he thought he'd never face.

As his two sons, Austin and Wyatt, ages 2 and 4, ripped apart boxes at his feet, revealing food and health products, Belloue told an all too familiar American story.

"I took it for granted that I was always going to work," Belloue said.

Like so many others, Belloue's company was hit hard by the recession, downsizing from 370 employees to 40. He's been out of work for eight months, the longest such span in his adult life.

"I've had a lot of moments that I've broken down and cried," Belloue said.

The Belloues received a bit of help on Tuesday, though, and were one of 4,000 families that picked up a week's worth of food and health supplies as part of Feed The Children's Americans Feeding American Caravans.

"Simply put, it's a blessing," said Belloue's wife, Tammy, holding their youngest child, Morgan. "One less thing to worry about for right now."

Though he said he always had food on his table, A's third baseman Chavez said he knows what it's like to stretch out life's necessities. Growing up with two parents who worked for a school district, Chavez said the last week of the month was usually rough while his parents waited for their paychecks.

"We made it work," Chavez said. "We struggled. My parents didn't make too much money."

Chavez and his wife have been active members of the local community for the last few years. On Tuesday, Chavez covered the cost of one of 10 semi-trucks filled with supplies; his contribution was matched by A's owner Lew Wolff. Each truck carried supplies for 400 families.

A father of three, Chavez said Feed The Children, the organization behind Tuesday's event, struck a chord with him.

"Especially with the economy, the way it's turned the past two years, the need for help and the people that need help has just grown so much," Chavez said. "With children being near to our heart, providing for people who need the food was pretty much a no-brainer."

Chavez and Wolff were just two members of the A's organization to help pass out packages to families on Tuesday. Andrew Bailey, Gio Gonzalez, bench coach Tye Waller and Chavez's brother, Casey, the team's bullpen catcher, also pitched in.

Whether a smile, a tear, a laugh, or even a fist pump, there were plenty of emotions on display Tuesday.

In 2010 alone, Feed The Children's American Feeding Americans Caravan has visited 16 cities across the nation, helping 34,400 families along the way. By year's end, the organization hopes to help 200,000 families.

"It's wonderful that we're able to do this," Wolff said. "But I wish we lived in a country where we didn't have to do this."

Unfortunately, stories like Belloue's have been on the rise during the recession. Feed The Children's director of communications, Tony Sellars, said his organization has helped many people who didn't need it before.

"The people we're dealing with now are what we term 'the new poor,'" Sellars said. "These are people that, a year ago, had good jobs, had their homes, were able to take care of their own responsibilities.

"A lot of them -- for the first time in their lives -- are finding out that they're having problems, and they really don't know how to ask for help."

Feed The Children also relies on a nationwide network of volunteers to help distribute its items at every stop. On Tuesday, about 200 people volunteered their time to pass out items and help move boxes to families' cars.

One of them, Albert Harris, a local pastor, said he was moved with the compassion on display.

"Whatever I can do to make a difference and help out," Harris said. "I want to be a part of something that's making a difference in the world today. I'm inspired by what's going on with Feed The Children."

For more information, including photos and video, visit **Americans Feeding Americans** and **Feed the Children**.

Sweeney drives in five to lead A's

Janie McCauley, AP, 5/5/2010

OAKLAND - Ryan Sweeney can hit for average and play a little defense. Now he's regaining his power stroke.

Sweeney drove in a career-high five runs on three hits, including a home run, and six Oakland pitchers held off the Texas Rangers in the Athletics' 7-6 victory Tuesday night.

"It's good to get that zero off the board," Sweeney said.

"It's even better to get the win. Last night, I felt like I didn't know how to hit. Today, I started to feel a little bit better. I watched some tape to try and get my swing back to what it was before." Kevin Kouzmanoff and Daric Barton also drove in runs for the A's, who won for just the second time in eight games. Brad Ziegler (1-2) got the win after pitching 1 1-3 innings in relief. Starter Vin Mazzaro lasted three-plus innings, allowing four runs on two hits.

"I filled the zone up the first two innings and then I lost the zone," Mazzaro said. "I thought I had battled back, but it was cut short. I didn't expect to be coming out." Vladimir Guerrero hit a grand slam and had five RBIs for the Rangers, who had a four-game winning streak snapped.

Rangers starter Scott Feldman (1-3) gave up seven runs on 10 hits over seven innings. He walked three and struck out four.

"I got out there in the beginning and was kind of erratic with my command," Feldman said. "I felt fine the whole time. It was just that my command was awful. For us to put up runs like that and see them go to waste is very disappointing." Feldman settled in to finish his outing on a good note, retiring the final 12 batters he faced.

"I think I just sort of went right after them a little better," he said. "I wasn't trying to reinvent myself. I think I just made better pitches." Andrew Bailey recorded four outs for his fourth save in as many chances. He's yet to allow a run this season and extended his scoreless streak to 19 2-3 innings dating to last Sept. 6. He also converted his 25th consecutive save opportunity.

Mazzaro started in place of two-time All-Star Justin Duchscherer, who has soreness in his left hip. Duchscherer postponed his scheduled appointment to receive a cortisone shot until Wednesday and issued a statement saying: "There's nothing new."

"The first two innings were as crisp as I've seen him," A's manager Bob Geren said of Mazzaro. "Then he seemed to lose command of his pitches. I don't like walks and I'm not going to lose a five-run lead by someone who looked like he lost command."

Sweeney ended a career-high 50-game homerless streak when he drove a pitch from Feldman into the right-field bleachers for a two-run shot. He added two more RBIs with a single in the second and singled home a run in the fourth.

"It seems like I'm always ending up in the third spot by the end of every season," Sweeney said. "To start there this year was comfortable. With guys like (Cliff) Pennington and (Daric) Barton ahead of me, I know they create more opportunities."

Sweeney also made a nice diving catch that helped end a threat by the Rangers.

"He's a great outfielder all the way around," Mazzaro said.

"He makes the good catches and the spectacular catches. It's nice to have a guy like that behind you." Guerrero's slam, the sixth of his career, made it 5-4 in the third. It was his first slam since May 1, 2007, and he added an RBI single in the fifth.

NOTES: Rangers C Max Ramirez is expected to start Wednesday. A's OF Coco Crisp will have his fractured left pinkie X-rayed again to determine his next course of rehabilitation. A's IF Mark Ellis (strained left hamstring) is hitting off a tee and will progress to batting practice. Rangers IF Michael Young singled in the first for his 1,692 career hit, tying him with Rafael Palmeiro for second on the Rangers' all-time list. Sweeney's 21 RBIs against the Rangers are his most against any team. Guerrero hit his 410th home run, breaking a tie with Jason Giambi for 43rd all-time.

Sweeney Key to A's Victory

Malaika Bobino, Oakland Post, 5/5/2010

Oakland, CA – The Oakland A's bullpen did what they had to do in defeating the Texas Rangers 7-6. But the key to the A's victory goes to right fielder Ryan Sweeney.

The A's controlled the game early with Darci Barton's single on a line drive right and Sweeney's home run off a 1-1 pitch that put Oakland up 2-0. Ryan has not hit a home run in the last fifty games and finally got the "monkey" off his back. He went 3-for-4 and totaled a career high five RBI's.

"Last night I felt like I didn't know how to hit," Sweeney said. "It's great when your getting contributions up and down the lineup." "A lot of guys got hits tonight, guys in front and behind are getting on base and that can only help you."

Manager Bob Geren kept the rotation in the bullpen going. A's starter Vin Mazzaro started off strong but lost his way bottom of the third inning after three walks and pitching a grand slam to Vladimir Guerrero.

"I don't like walks," Geren said. "It was too early in the game but I felt that we had enough in our bullpen to win the game." "I didn't want to lose our lead with someone who looked like he lost his command."

Mazzaro was recently called up from Triple-A on Tuesday and started in place of injured pitcher Justin Duchscherer. He threw 62 pitches, retired six of the Rangers first seven batters before being pulled in the fourth inning.

"I was a little surprised at my early exit," said Mazzaro. "I thought I had a good chance today of proving what I could do here." "But it got cut short and there was nothing I could about it."

Texas had an opportunity to get back into the game top of the third inning when Guerrero's grand slam made it a 5-4 game but Oakland scored two more runs off Scott Feldman bottom of the fourth inning bringing the A's ahead to a 7-4 lead.

The Rangers tried to rally in the ninth but closer Andrew Bailey pitched 1 1/3 innings to get his fourth save this season. Bailey has converted each of his last 24 save opportunities, which is the second longest streak in Oakland history.

"It was a big team win today," Bailey said. "The offense put us in a great position to get that victory today and we definitely needed it." "We've been struggling here with injuries, pitching and offense but today, we were able to put it all together."

Harden's Return Memorable

Malaika Bobino, Oakland Post, 5/4/2010

Oakland, CA – The ejection of Texas Rangers manager Ron Washington in the second inning was no surprise. The reversal call on pitcher Rich Harden's not tagging first base on Eric Chavez's single was shocking. It took all four umpires to gather and unanimously decide Chavez was safe due to Harden slightly missing the base.

"I wasn't happy with myself," Harden said. "Yes, I did barely make the base but I could see how the umpire would see that." "It was a mistake by me and it shouldn't have happened." "I kinda got mad and that got me going."

"Got going" is an understatement, the Rangers beat the Oakland A's 4-2 behind Harden's spectacular pitching. Returning to his former team wasn't easy but pitching seven scoreless frames of two-hit ball was exceptional. He had a season-high nine strikeouts, carried a no-hitter through five innings before giving up a double to Rajai Davis in the sixth with one out.

"He did a great job in pounding the zone," said Ranger's manager Ron Washington. "He threw strikes every which way and that's what he has to do." "This is a team that, if you don't throw strikes they can hurt you bad." "We made them earn what they got to night."

The A's rallied in the ninth inning when Kevin Kouzmanoff hit a homer off closer Frank Francisco. That brought Oakland within two before Eric Patterson was called on strikes to end the game. Oakland lost their sixth game out of seven and fall two games behind Texas in the west standings.

Dallas Braden had his second consecutive loss giving up three runs and three strikeouts. He combined a career-high 11 hits in the fourth and fifth innings. The A's now 13-14 and below .500 mark will look to change the direction of this ball club for game two of a three game series. Vin Mazzaro will be pitching for Oakland tomorrow.

Notes – Coco Crisp was placed on the disabled List on April 3 with a fractured left pinky. Crisp is anxious to return but in the meantime makes sure he's getting to know his new team. He insists on traveling with the team to bond more and guesses he'll rehab in the minors for a few weeks before his return.

Why an essential part of the game's romance is gone

Tom Verducci, Sports Illustrated, 5/4/2010

One night last month while I watched the Oakland Athletics pitchers walk 10 New York Yankees, an idea occurred to me about what some people find "wrong" with baseball. It's not the time of games, the pace of games, the dilution of pitching because of expansion or the way hitters adjust their batting gloves and cup in between pitches -- the usual complaints that get attention.

Instead, we are missing an essential part of the game's allure and romance: the crack of the bat. You hear it less and less in today's game. Hitting and pitching have evolved in ways that mean the baseball is put into play less frequently than ever before.

In April, 28 percent of all major league plate appearances ended in a walk or a strikeout, continuing what has been virtually an unchecked increase in such non-contact plate appearances since the game was invented. Ten years ago, for instance, the rate of plate appearances without the ball being put into play was 26 percent; 20 years ago it was 24 percent; 30 years ago it was 21 percent . . . all the way back to 15 percent in 1920.

Baseball has become a game of catch between the pitcher and catcher more than ever before. That game between Oakland and New York, played April 20, was an extreme example of what is going on. Only 43 of the 79 hitters put the ball in play. There were 36 walks and strikeouts and only 13 hits.

Why is this happening? It's not because the "quality of play" has diminished or the "fundamentals" have gotten worse. It's actually the exact opposite. It's because players are better than ever, part of the natural evolution of teaching and training. Hitters are so good they can be more selective (and don't mind taking a full cut with two strikes), while pitchers must keep the ball out of the middle of the plate. The game is played on the margins of the strike zone, and not fully inside it, more than ever.

Consider these developments as part of that evolution:

- Major league pitching staffs averaged 7.1 strikeouts per nine innings in April, which would be the highest season rate of all time. The rate has increased steadily over history with only minor blips of regression, such as in the early 1980s. The strikeout rate has increased 25 percent in the past 20 years (from 5.7 to 7.1).
- The team walk rate of 3.7 per nine innings is the highest since 2000.
- When you combine strikeouts and walks, teams average 10.8 non-contact plate appearances per nine innings -- up 37 percent from 1980 and 24 percent even from 1968, in what famously became known as The Year of the Pitcher and helped convince baseball owners to lower the mound and adopt the designated hitter rule within the next five years.
- If you like hits -- not just the ball to be put into play -- there is less to like. Teams averaged 8.8 hits per nine innings in April, which would be the lowest rate for a season in 18 years.

Baseball has become a game of attrition -- a kind of passive/aggressive pursuit - and it's largely because of the way hitting is taught. Wait out the pitcher. Run up his pitch count. Swing early in the count only if the ball is in the middle of the plate. Take your walks. Teams don't swing at about 55 percent of all pitches. Some teams, such as the particularly influential Yankees and Red Sox, are especially patient. The Red Sox, for instance, in April chose not to swing at 41 percent of pitches that actually were in the strike zone. The popularization of the Culture of the Walk, for which the Athletics and Yankees of the late 1990s gained the most attention, has much to do with promulgating this game of attrition. Oakland manager **Bob Geren**, for instance, remembered a catcher in the Athletics' farm system named **Danny Ardoin**. "He got traded to Minnesota [in 2000], and in his first game there he didn't get a hit but he got on base three times with walks," said Geren of Ardoin's major league debut. "And after the game they told him, 'Better luck next game, kid. You'll snap out of it.' They thought he had a bad game. "Back then, a lot of teams didn't value walks like we did. Now, there's no team that doesn't value walks. It's how the game is played now." The Twins, in fact, led the major leagues in walks through the first month of this season. The rate of walks has increased for five straight years. Of course, maybe the pitchers, not just the hitters, have something to do with all these walks. "The cutter has a lot to do with it," said Yankees hitting coach **Kevin Long**. Indeed, what the splitter was in the 1980s and the changeup in the 1990s, the cut fastball has become in the 2000s and into this decade. As with pop music, football and junior high fashion, baseball has its own copycat culture, and in the case of pitching, so it is true when it comes to the influence of the best pitchers. Just as pitchers followed **Jack Morris**, **Bruce Sutter** and **Mike Scott** with the splitter, and then **Pedro Martinez**, **Greg Maddux** and **Tom Glavine** with the changeup, today's pitchers want to copy **Roy Halladay** and **Mariano Rivera**, the masters of the cut fastball. **Dan Haren**, **John Danks**, **Scott Feldman**, **Phil Hughes**, **Jon Garland**, **Cole Hamels**, **Josh Beckett** and **Clayton Richard** are just a few of the pitchers who in recent years have added the cutter. "Just about everybody is throwing a cutter now," Long said. "But not everybody can command it. A lot of guys have a hard time controlling the location and break on it. And I think that's why you're seeing more walks." Haren said he went to a cutter so that he could throw a pitch that looks like a strike and moves off the barrel of the bat -- an especially good pitch when behind in the count without just giving in to a hitter with a fastball. That sounds like a good pitch-to-contact approach, but the fact is that pitchers, even in this age of the cutter, are getting more strikeouts than ever. Again, that's an indication of the evolution in both hitting (do you think the powerful **Mark Reynolds**, the record-holder for most strikeouts in a season, has a two-strike approach to just put the ball in play?) and pitching. The layers of specialized pitching are another reason for this game of attrition. Starters don't concern themselves with completing games, so there is no shame in lasting only five or six innings with 100 pitches -- a mentality that encourages pitching off the margins of the plate. And the many specialists in the bullpen, who allow managers to create as many platoon advantages as possible, leads to more strikeouts. Pitching, in fact, has been one of the great growth industries in this recessionary economy. Major league teams used more pitchers in April than they did in the entire 1985 season. Last year teams used 664 pitchers -- 79 more than they needed only 10 years earlier and 157 more than they needed (with two fewer teams) in 1993. Like a mature industry, baseball continues to grow more specialized. And the increased availability and commodification of information (analysis, instruction, training techniques, etc.) has accelerated the rate at which the game specializes. I'm not sure much can or should be done to alter this evolution. It is interesting, however, that both a traditionalist and the modern marketing guru might actually agree on one change: calling a bigger strike zone, particularly when it comes to that pitch a catcher catches right in front of his mask that is regarded as too "high." Promoting strikes, swings and contact may be a good thing. Right now baseball is involved in one form of official "self-discovery," in which commissioner **Bud Selig** has assembled 14 people to serve on an "on-field matters" committee to suggest what might make the game better today and in the years to come. Much of the time has been spent on how the game is packaged: the All-Star Game, postseason format, pace of play, realignment, instant replay, etc. But maybe it's time to study how the game is actually played. Today baseball includes fewer hits, less contact and more walks and strikeouts. Baseball remains a beautiful, fascinating game that becomes even more interesting the more you know about it. But if you're the kind of fan who simply likes to see the ball put into play, there is less to like.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Error costs Sacramento in home loss to Bees

By Abbie Ellis / Sacramento River Cats

Sacramento returned to Raley Field looking to break a six-game home losing streak, but instead blew a six-run lead to bump the streak to seven.

The River Cats, who led the visiting Salt Lake Bees 7-1 through five innings, lost 9-8 after a costly error produced six of the team's seven unearned runs.

After pitching a scoreless first three innings, River Cats starter Clayton Mortensen had his no-hitter broken up by a Michael Ryan infield single. Mortensen threw 107 pitches, allowing six runs (only two earned).

An error on Bees center fielder Terry Evans in the first inning helped Corey Wimberly kick off the scoring for the River Cats. Wimberly, who led off the game with a single, scored all the way from first base after Evans misplayed an Eric Sogard single to center.

The River Cats appeared refreshed as they took a 7-1 lead with a four-run fourth inning, highlighted by Corey Brown and Chris Carter home runs. Carter's sixth home run of the season, a tall fly down the left-field line, scored Wimberly and Sogard.

Wimberly managed a stellar performance, going 3-for-5 with a double and two runs.

After Salt Lake scored two runs in the top of the sixth, the Cats fought back with a run in the bottom half when Jack Cust singled home Sogard.

It was the seventh inning when the Bees stole the game away from the River Cats defense. A throwing error by Adrian Cardenas, on what should have been the inning's final out, scored Brian Walker made the game 8-4. Cory Aldridge singled on a line drive to score Evans and Nate Sutton, and Mark Trumbo's three-run home run completed the improbable comeback. All six runs in the inning were unearned.

Affronti singled to left single field in the eighth, but the River Cats weren't able to turn it into a run.

Errors were detrimental to the Cats. In addition to Cardenas's throwing error, Chris Carter had a fielding error in the fourth that led to the Bees' first run.

The River Cats seek vengeance in Game 2 against Salt Lake on Wednesday afternoon at 11:35 a.m.

Ailene Voisin: Cust driven to return to bigs

Aileen Voisin, Sacramento Bee, 5/5/2010

Jack Cust still doesn't want to be here. Really doesn't want to be here. He refuses to rent an apartment, rarely socializes after hours, and as soon as the games end at Raley Field, he rushes to his car and into the traffic headed to the Bay Area.

The shortcuts. The quickest lanes over the bridge. The advantages of FasTrak.

Though a seasoned commuter, Cust does a slow burn the entire trip.

"I don't need to live here again," said the former A's designated hitter, who was assigned to the River Cats in April. "I'm really in the mind-set where I'm not going to be here the whole year. If I am, then I am, but I'm going at this with an edge.

"They (A's) told me it was a last-minute decision to send me down, but it's tough when it's your life."

Cust isn't naturally a grump. He reiterates his ongoing frustration with the A's for dumping him after what he believes were three productive seasons, but when he switches topics and talks about his family back home in Flemington, he looks and sounds like your average Joe from New Jersey.

His unkempt brown hair angles off in a million different directions. He packs 235 pounds on a burly 6-foot-1 frame, so his anxiety doesn't appear to affect his appetite. He speaks from the gut and enjoys revisiting his boyhood and baseball and fondness for the New York Yankees.

In Sacramento and Oakland, of course, Cust is known as the designated hitter with the three-tool portfolio, as a career .239 hitter who walks or homers or strikes out. Yet after laboring in places such as South Bend, El Paso, Tucson, Ottawa and Portland, he thought he was home. He led the A's in home runs for the past three seasons.

Approaching what he thought would be his fourth year with the club, Cust and his wife Jennifer, and their two toddlers, rented an apartment in a high rise in San Francisco's financial district.

"We wanted to experience the city," said Cust, seated near the corner of the River Cats' locker room. "The restaurants, the parks. We have a little view of the bay. I thought it was perfect. And it was only about a 30-minute drive (to the Coliseum)."

In a move last month that caught Cust completely by surprise, Billy Beane shifted his Gold Glove third baseman, Eric Chavez, to designated hitter and assigned his former DH to the River Cats. (In retrospect, it probably shouldn't have been a shock because of Cust's 20 strikeouts – in 51 spring at-bats – and Chavez's chronic injury history.)

Cust, 31, reluctantly accepted the assignment to collect his \$2.65 million salary, turning that 30-minute drive into a three-hour daily commute. And transforming his wife, Jennifer, into a bona fide baseball widow.

"She's going a little crazy," said Cust, frowning. "The minor league travel is brutal. We get one day off a month. But what are you going to do? I didn't want to ruin this for her, so we just decided to try commuting.

"I keep thinking ... I just hope I get a chance to get back up there and help the team. Or if nothing else, there have to be teams out there that could use some hitting. That's my mind-set right now. It fuels me."

Cust may not want to be here, but you wouldn't know it from his play. In his past 10 games, he is hitting .333, cutting down on his strikeouts (seven in 33 at-bats), drawing walks and accumulating RBIs. He is also impressing manager Tony DeFrancesco with his strength, his swing path and his attitude.

"Everybody wants to be in the big leagues," said DeFrancesco, "and he's had some success there, too, leading the team in homers for three years. But now he's with the River Cats, and the only way to get back up is to put up big numbers. And he's doing that."

Cust suggests that he is swinging the bat better than he has in months, maybe in years. "Mechanically, as good as I felt since 2007," he adds.

The numbers crunching has to work, though. The unspoken rule is one DH per team, and the A's gridlock is heightened by Daric Barton's strong spring. Meantime, Cust gets back on the road, puts the car in cruise control and waits for that call.

Taylor's Tales: 100 Down...

Michael Taylor, OaklandClubhouse.com

May 5, 2010

In this week's edition of Taylor's Tales, Michael Taylor touches on the challenges of playing a day game in a season schedule built around night games. He also answers fan questions and more inside...

Well we are definitely in the swing of things as each player starts to creep up on his first 100 at-bats. Now is a great time to see where you are and make some early season adjustments if need be.

As a team we are playing just under .500, at 12 and 14, but things are looking up as the past two games we have swung the bats better and our defense, although still shaky, is improving. We have all been working really hard to proverbially "right" the ship and we are moving in the right direction all the while keeping a firm grasp on the idea that we are only 26 games into a season that lasts for 144. Personally, it's been a bit of a struggle early on but while I struggle I am trying to stay focused on being productive in any way I can. Move a guy over, RBI groundout, make a good play on defense, really anything that helps us win and keeps my mind focused on positives.

I wanted to talk a little about the dreaded day game as it's fresh on my mind. One of the toughest parts about baseball is the 11:35 A.M. start or earlier. Talk about a routine killer, and I know most people in the everyday working world would like to say, "yeah we know" but what makes those morning starts so difficult is that they are randomly tossed into our schedule sometimes without rhyme or reason. Also, to play this game everyday it is crucial that you get into a routine.

Typically our day starts at noon and doesn't end until 1 or 2 in the morning. If you take into consideration a 7:05 P.M. start, three-hour plus game and then post-game treatment, stretching, sometimes workouts, food and then ultimately the unwind, you rarely fall asleep before 1 am. So that next morning, an 8 am wake up call with the expectation of squaring up a round ball with a round bat that's moving, sliding and sinking can be tough.

Nonetheless it is important that you do not just give those at-bats away, so every guy has his own method of getting himself going. I actually like to lift some light weights to get myself going. I credit that idea to Miguel Cairo, who last year would run into the weight room, ride the bike, do some lunges, some curls and a few push-ups to get his body energized. But every guy is a little different.

Now I will answer a few questions:

1) *What's one of the biggest misconceptions the general public has about major league prospects like yourself? David C.*

(Dallas, TX)

Well I do not know all of the conceptions out there, but I would say a misconception about most minor league players is that the lifestyle is easy. It involves a ton of travel, we make very little to speak of in the way of salary and there is a business side to this game that every player has to learn to deal with and play within. All things aren't necessarily apparent to the general public at first glance.

2) I remember when the A's played their opening regular season series at Cashman Field back in the '90s when they were building Mt. Davis. Do you think big league baseball would work in Las Vegas? Kyle P. San Francisco

Honestly, Kyle, no, I do not think baseball could work in Vegas. First off, there probably wouldn't be a very consistent fan base there. Second, without tradition, it is difficult to overcome all of the other extra curricular activities in Vegas. Lastly, and most importantly, the diehard baseball fans in Vegas already support a large market team, the Dodgers, and Major League baseball would only expand if the market is not only profitable to that location but also that club can not take any substantive share from an already thriving existing market.

RockHounds hold off Hooks, 4-2

By Oscar LeRoy, Midland Telegram Reporter 5/5/2010

Midland RockHounds starter Ben Hornbeck admitted he got into a world of trouble in the third inning of Tuesday's game against Corpus Christi. Hornbeck allowed two hits and walked a batter to load the bases with one out and his team clinging to a one-run lead.

But the tall lefthander not only worked his way out of the jam but gave his team a huge lift when he forced David Cook to hit into an inning-ending 6-4-3 double play.

"Any time you can get out of a bases loaded situation without letting anybody score is huge," Hornbeck said. "It could have been a big inning. Fortunately we were able to get out of there without allowing a run and we were able to roll from there."

Behind Hornbeck's solid outing on the mound and two RBI from Shane Peterson, the RockHounds held off the Hooks for a 4-2 victory at Citibank Ballpark.

The RockHounds' offense was able to give Hornbeck a first-inning 2-0 lead with both runs coming on two outs against Hooks starter Sergio Perez (2-2). Peterson had an RBI single to left field, and then two batters later, Steve Kleen singled up the middle to score Peterson.

The only run Hornbeck allowed was unearned after Cook reached on a throwing error by catcher Yusuf Carter. Cook struck out, but because Carter did not get a hold of the third strike he had to throw to first to get the putout and the throw was high, which allowed Cook to reach safely. After a double by Jimmy Van Ostrand to get Cook to third, Cook scored on a groundout by Marcos Cabral.

The Hooks then threatened to not only tie but have a big third inning when Hornbeck got into that bases-loaded jam. Hornbeck (2-1) knew he had to step up and make a big pitch.

"I felt like I was kind of rushing the ball to the plate," said Hornbeck about his jam. "I just stepped off and I knew I had to make some good pitches to try get out of that inning. Fortunately I was able to get a groundball and the infield did a good job of turning the double play to get us back in the dugout."

Midland manager Darren Bush said he was proud of the way Hornbeck was able to step up.

"He made the big pitch with bases loaded," Bush said. "He did a good job today. He made big pitches when he needed to and battled. He had a nice outing."

Hornbeck went six innings, allowed one unearned run on six hits, walked two and struck out four.

"I feel like it's a good start," Hornbeck said. "I'm maintaining my strength deeper in games now which is helping my ability to pitch later in the game."

The RockHounds rewarded Hornbeck by giving him a two-run lead in the bottom of the third inning when Matt Sulentic singled and later scored on a double to left field by Peterson.

Bush said getting to Perez early was huge because the righthander settled down nicely after that third inning.

"He settled in in their place after we got to him early and he did it again tonight," Bush said. "It was nice to get those runs early."

After the Hooks cut it to 3-2 on an RBI triple by T.J. Steele in the top of the seventh, the RockHounds added an insurance run in the bottom of the frame when Young-Chi Chen doubled and later scored on a sacrifice fly by Jemile Weeks.

Beau Vaughan picked up his sixth save for the RockHounds as he gave up a double and struck out two in a scoreless ninth.

NOTEBOOK

'HOUND BITES: The RockHounds are now 6-5 at home this season after Tuesday's victory. ...Midland is also 4-1 against the Hooks this season. ...The two errors committed by the 'Hounds were a bit uncharacteristic as Midland leads the Texas League with a .979 fielding percentage. ...Texas League President Tom Kayser was in attendance for Tuesday's game.

GILBERT HONORED BY LEAGUE: RockHounds OF Archie Gilbert was named Texas League Player of the Week on Monday. Gilbert hit .407 with two home runs and six RBI to lead the RockHounds to a 5-2 record for the week of April 26 to May 2.

EARLY START: Today's game is an 11 a.m. start as the RockHounds will have their annual school day at Citibank Ballpark.

Lefthander Travis Banwart (3-0, 3.67 ERA) is expected to start for Midland, while lefthander Douglas Arguello (2-2, 3.07) is expected to start for the Hooks.

Ports pick-up first walk-off win, 8-7

STOCKTON, Calif. - The Stockton Ports (12-13) picked up their first walk-off victory of the year, coming back from a three-run deficit against the San Jose Giants (12-11) in the bottom of the ninth, to win 8-7. Outfielder Jeremy Barfield collected the game-winning RBI, his 16th of the season, on a sacrifice fly to right.

It was the first game the Ports have won after being behind after eight innings this season in addition to being the club's first walk-off of the year.

Right-handed pitcher Jose Pina collected the win for the Ports, while Jason Stoffel collected the blown save and loss for the Giants. Petey Paramore collected a three-run home run for the Ports, while six Ports batters each had two hits in the contest. Ports starter Justin Murray allowed four San Jose runs on seven hits (including two home runs) with five strikeouts.

The Ports were the first ones to get on the board, posting three runs in the bottom of the second. With two out, shortstop Josh Horton singled, and moved to second as second baseman Tyler Ladendorf singled to left field. Paramore stepped up the plate and crushed the ball to left field for his second home run of the year.

The Giants answered right back in the top of the third. Center fielder Francisco Peguero slammed a solo homer to the bullpens in left field to lead off the inning. First baseman Brandon Belt walked, and moved to third on a double by Drew Biery. Belt was thrown out as he attempted to go home, and tagged by Stephen Parker. Biery took third on the play. With a runner on third and one out, catcher Johnny Monell knocked a two-run homer to centerfield to tie the game. Murray then struck out the next two batters to get out of the jam.

The Ports got the lead back in the fourth inning, as Kala Ka'aihue knocked an RBI single to make it 4-3.

The 1,273 fans in the stands had a scare in the sixth inning, as home plate umpire Blake Davis suffered a head injury on a foul ball. Davis took a foul tip to the head while Horton was at-bat. Davis crumbled and fell backward upon impact. He lay on

the ground, and Monell waved both trainers over. Both Nate Brooks and L.J. Petra talked with Davis as he lay on the ground, and Davis eventually sat up and stood up. He watched a few warm-up pitches, and indicated that he was able to continue. Davis got an ovation, and continued the rest of the game without problems.

The Stockton lead lasted for a few innings, until San Jose tied it up in the sixth. Belt doubled to center field to kick start the San Jose offense. He moved to third as Biery took first on a fielding error by Michael Spina. The Ports then called on reliever Trey Barham to take the mound from Murray. Barham struck out Monell for the first out of the frame. Culberson singled to bring home Belt and tie the game at four runs. Left fielder Wendell Fairley grounded into a double play to end the inning.

San Jose extended their lead scoring a run in the eighth and two more in the ninth. The Ports were down 7-4 heading into the bottom of the ninth, with the bottom of the order due. Paramore got things started with a single up the middle. Giants pitcher Stoffel then issued a walk to the No. 9 batter, Ka'aihue. Center fielder Shane Keough then reached first safely on an error by left fielder Fairley, who bobbed the fly ball. That loaded the bases with no out for Grant Green.

Green worked a full count and fouled off a few pitches before striking out. Stephen Parker then stepped up to the plate and also worked a full count before walking. His walk scored Paramore to make it 7-5. Spina then slammed his second hit of the night, a double to right field to tie the game. With one out and two on, Jeremy Barfield came up to bat. He hit a long sacrifice fly to right field to bring home Parker and secure the win for the Ports.

Stockton will take on San Jose in Game 2 at 7:05 PM on Wednesday. RHP Shawn Haviland (2-0, 2.42) will start for the Ports, while RHP Craig Westcott (0-0, 0.00) will start for San Jose.

Cougars Beat Bees in 13 Innings

Kane County snaps four-game skid, continues to dominate Burlington

BURLINGTON, Iowa – The Kane County Cougars built a 2-0 lead, let it slip and then managed a run in the 13th inning to beat the Burlington Bees, 3-2, Tuesday night in the opener of a three-game set. Rob Gilliam pitched eight innings of one-run ball in a no-decision, Max Stassi had three hits, including a homer, and Max Peterson struck out the side in the 13th to get a save in his Cougars debut. The win snapped the Cougars' losing streak at four and took them to 4-0 against the Bees this year.

Stassi nailed a two-out solo homer in the second off John Lamb to make it 1-0, and Conner Crumbliss poked a sacrifice fly in the seventh to score Nino Leyja. Meanwhile Gilliam was cruising against the Bees. He got touched for a run in the bottom of the eighth but tossed the longest outing by a Cougar this year and his fourth quality start in six outings. He yielded five hits, walked one and fanned seven, leaving in line for a win but getting a no-decision after Jose Guzman gave up a run in the bottom of the ninth to make it 2-2.

In the top of the 13th, Rashun Dixon led off with a walk against Dusty Odenbach (1-2) and took second on a bunt by Leonardo Gil. After an infield single by Stassi, Mike Gilmartin smoked a single to center to score Dixon for a 3-2 game. That set up Peterson, who was called up earlier in the day from extended spring training and nailed down the save. Connor Hoehn (3-1) got the win with two shutout innings and four strikeouts.

The Cougars (12-14) and Bees (10-16) play Game 2 of their three-game set Wednesday night at 6:30 CT. Ian Krol (0-1, 3.43) is scheduled to face Kelvin Herrera (2-0, 2.30). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and online at www.kccougars.com, with pregame coverage starting at 6:15 p.m.