

RAYS CLIPS



May 7, 2010

Tampa Bay Rays beat Seattle Mariners 8-0

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

Jeff Niemann struggles for a bit but straightens himself out to earn his second win of the year.

SEATTLE - Add the Mariners to the list of teams that were no match for the rolling Rays.

Now we'll see how they do against history.

The Rays swept out of Seattle late Thursday with an 8-0 win that extended their major-league-best record to 21-7 and their amazing road start to 12-1.

But their next two stops might be a bit more interesting as they head to Oakland and then to Anaheim, where they have a dismal combined 29-70 record over their first 12 seasons.

Thursday's game was the product of the Rays' now-standard formula: strong starting pitching, clutch hitting and sturdy defense. Plus some good timing, such as Willy Aybar, starting ahead of Pat Burrell at designated hitter, knocking in two of the runs.

"The starting pitching has obviously been fabulous, there's no other way to describe it," manager Joe Maddon said. "Offensively, we get really hungry when the situation arises, when we get some runners out there the quality of the at-bat just gets better. And defensively, we keep catching it.

"We're playing well on all cylinders right now. ... I believe we can play to this standard for a long time."

And with good reason.

"We feel like we're playing our game and winning the way we want to win," Carl Crawford said. "I know it looks like we're off to a fast start but we honestly feel like we can continue to do this because this is just the way we play. Nobody's really doing anything extra."

There also was a small dose of history as Carlos Peña walked twice to tie Fred McGriff's team record of 305 (and later snapped his 0-for-24 slump) and Evan Longoria extended his hitting streak to a career-high tying 12 games.

By the end of the cold night, the Rays had matched the second-best road start of the expansion era (going back to 1961), trailing only the 1984 Tigers, who won their first 17. And their run differential of plus-83 (a major-league most 168 for, an American League-low 85 allowed) equalled the Tigers for the best 28-game mark of the era.

"At some point during the year, you're going to go through some tough stretches," Maddon said. "But for now, you want to ride this as long as you can."

Jeff Niemann, despite a second-inning stretch of 11 consecutive balls, worked seven shutout innings for his second win, allowing four hits and striking out six. He lowered his ERA to 2.23, joining teammates Matt Garza (2.09) and David Price (2.34) among the AL top 10, and Wade Davis (2.79) making it four in the top 12.

Crawford had three hits, including a two-run homer, to pace the 12-hit attack as eight starters had hits and six knocked in runs, including Bunting Ben Zobrist, who executed a safety squeeze to key a three-run fifth inning that broke the game open.

"It's been a great team effort," Peña said. "I'm so proud and so pleased with how we're playing ball."

"It's awesome to be a part of right now," Niemann said.

Niemann deserved to have more than one win for how well he pitched over his previous four starts, but he had to work through a rough stretch Thursday to record his second.

He zipped through the first five hitters and was a strike away from making it six in a row before an 0-and-2 count on Jose Lopez turned into a full-count single.

And then Niemann suddenly couldn't find the plate, throwing 11 consecutive balls, drawing cheers from the Safeco Field crowd of 17,617 on another cold night, with a first-pitch temperature of 56 degrees.

Niemann walked Ryan Langerhans and Josh Wilson to load the bases and was behind 3-and-0 to Rob Johnson, on the verge of giving away the 2-0 lead his Rays mates had just given him.

But Niemann just as quickly rebounded, getting Johnson to look at three consecutive strikes to end the threat.

Then he rolled from there, allowing only three more baserunners.

Maddon said the problem was that Niemann was overthrowing his fastball. "I thought he was trying to get too much out of his fastball," Maddon said. "Normally he just lets it eat - he just throws it up there and lets it move like it wants to."

So Maddon told Niemann and rookie catcher John Jaso to use more of his repertoire and he did. He came away with the added confidence of being able to fix what was wrong and still come out on top.

"It's just one of things that happens," Niemann said. "We were able to come back and get back in the zone and that really was the big thing we can take away from tonight."

Among other things.

May 6, 2010

Rays' mantra: GTMI

By John Romano, Times Sports Columnist

ST. PETERSBURG - They were not searching for inspiration that early spring morning. And, looking back, that probably explains why it arrived so easily.

For it was just another mundane drill. The same message hitting coach Derek Shelton had preached since being hired a few months earlier. Rays hitters, Shelton insisted, were going to be more consistent about making contact with a runner on third and fewer than two outs.

Surveying the scene, and anticipating Shelton's spiel, leftfielder Carl Crawford summed it up thusly:

"Is this the get-the-(man)-in drill?"

Just like that, a slogan was born.

(Well, maybe not just like that. Crawford's version had a more colorful M-word to describe the baserunner. Either version works.)

Get the man in. Or G.T.M.I. for short.

That's what the T-shirts ordered by clubhouse manager Chris Westmoreland say. That's what the players in the dugout shout during game situations. And that's what the Rays have been doing better than any other American League team.

"Whatever makes it stick in your mind," Crawford said.

After struggling for years to be even average with runners on third base and fewer than two outs, the Rays are now getting the man in more frequently than any team in the AL. They have gone from a 49 percent success rate in 2008 to 58 percent heading into Thursday night.

"It's not just the guy at the plate," manager Joe Maddon said. "It's also happening in the dugout during these moments. Everybody is really involved in this now. I know the hitter can actually feel it in the dugout. We have covered it so much, and Derek continues to cover it on a consistent basis; I want it to become part of our culture."

Shelton likes to dismiss his role in the evolution, but situational hitting was one of the things Maddon wanted him to focus on in the spring. The Rays already were a strong offensive club. They hit for power. They drew a lot of walks. They took extra bases.

But the Rays were not particularly efficient. They were terrible on bunts. They had too many strikeouts. And they did not do a very good job of getting runners home from third base with fewer than two outs.

So Shelton worked on changing the focus in those at-bats. To make the hitters more cognizant of pitch selection and making contact. The early results? The Rays were ninth in the league in success rate last season, and they are now first. (By the way, the Indians, where Shelton was the hitting coach last season, have gone from seventh to 14th without him.)

"The players deserve all the credit in the world for this. They've taken something we emphasized, and they've run with it," Shelton said. "They've made it a focus. And when they don't get it done, it bothers them. And when they do get it done, not just one of them is happy, but everyone is happy. The thing we've stressed is this is a team stat. This is not, 'Hey you got the RBI.' No, this is a team stat."

Shelton has not necessarily changed mechanics. His emphasis has been on the strategic approach. With runners in scoring position, a pitcher is more likely to stick with his best stuff, so a hitter has to adjust accordingly. The idea is not to find a pitch that you can hit a mile but to look for a pitch that you can handle well enough to get the runner in from third base.

"Runner on third base with less than two outs, runner on second base with two outs, I think our mind-set is more about just driving in one run," Maddon said. "They're not trying to hit the ball over the wall and getting all of these runs in. I think they are more aware of making contact and not just being big with their swings. Those are all good thoughts."

"There are situations where a strikeout, to me, is acceptable. Two outs and nobody on? A double is better, so I'm good with that. A runner on first base with two outs and you're trying to drive him in with a double, I'm good with that. But if you have a runner on third base with less than two outs, a strikeout is a really bad play. If you have a runner on second base with two outs, a strikeout is a bad play. There are times when a strikeout is an okay play, and there are times when it is a bad play."

The mental approach seems to be bleeding over into these other situations. The Rays not only lead the league in getting the runner home from third with fewer than two outs, they also have been the AL's best team with runners in scoring position.

Going into Thursday's late game in Seattle, Tampa Bay had an absurdly efficient .319 batting average with runners in scoring position. Considering that the typical AL team was hitting .251, it's hard to imagine the Rays continuing at that pace for much longer.

Still, no matter where the numbers end up, the approach should not change. The emphasis is still the same.

Just get the (man) in.

May 6, 2010

Turns out Rays manager Joe Maddon likes some bunts

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

SEATTLE - Of all the things that happened in Wednesday's 8-3 win over the Mariners, Rays manager **Joe Maddon** seemed to make the biggest deal about RF **Ben Zobrist**'s bunt single that sparked the key eighth-inning rally.

That's because Maddon - the same Maddon who disdains the sacrifice - wants the bunt to become a bigger part of the Rays' offense. The way he sees it, there are two distinct benefits: the hits they get by bunting and the hits they get when the defense is compromised by concern about the bunt.

"By bunting, you can adjust the defense. And by adjusting the defense, that enhances your chances of hitting a ball by somebody," he said. "And furthermore, if you're good at it and (the defense is) playing back, it's a knock."

The Rays have several players who could use the bunt to their advantage, Maddon said, specifically SS **Jason Bartlett**, LF **Carl Crawford**, CF **B.J. Upton** and Zobrist, who did it again Thursday, reaching on a well-executed safety squeeze.

"I am not adverse to the bunt at any time," Maddon said. "People get confused with that. I really don't like to sacrifice bunt as much as I like the bunt for a hit."

So as unusual as it might seem for a No. 3 hitter to drop down a bunt in a key situation, Maddon said he couldn't have been more pleased with Zobrist's decision.

"He was playing baseball (Wednesday) night," Maddon said. "And all our guys know I will never be upset with them for making a decision on their own like that as a good baseball play."

"Had it not worked out, I'd have just patted him on the back and said, 'Good try, great thought.' But it worked. "

WALKING INTO HISTORY: With walks in the second and seventh, 1B **Carlos Peña** tied **Fred McGriff's** team record of 305. "That's kinda cool," Pena said. "I didn't even know I was close." In the ninth, Pena doubled to end an 0-for-24 skid, hit first hit since April.

NEW SCENE: LHP **David Price** faces the A's for the first time tonight, and the unknown should be a good thing for him, pitching coach **Jim Hickey** said.

"I think any time the hitters are unfamiliar with the pitchers, it works to the pitchers' advantage, and I think even more so with him," Hickey said. "First of all, because he's left-handed, he has a little more height (6 feet 6) than normal, and of course the velocity. If he was throwing 89-91 (mph), it would be a little bit easier, but you just don't see a lot of left-handers throwing in the mid 90s like that."

Price wasn't as sure but figured the hitters have to adjust to more from what they see on video than the other way around: "I think I would have the advantage."

ODD SCENE: As the Rays were waiting to go out for batting practice Thursday, the Red Sox-Angels game was on the clubhouse TV. There was a bit more interest and chatter than usual because ex-Ray **Scott Kazmir** was pitching for the Angels. (He is scheduled to start against the Rays on Tuesday.)

And among the players sitting on the couch watching was INF **Sean Rodriguez**, the top player the Rays got from the Angels in the Aug. 28 trade.

A little weird?

"I don't see it that way," Rodriguez said. "It might have been if it was right after the deal, but I'm here now."

MINOR MATTERS: Triple-A Durham INF **Hank Blalock** went 2-for-5 with a three-run homer Thursday, raising his average to .378. ... OF **Justin Ruggiano** was placed on the 15-day DL due to a biceps problem. ... RHP **Mike Ekstrom** got the win and has worked 62/3 scoreless innings since his demotion.

MISCELLANY: 3B **Evan Longoria** extended his hitting streak to a career-high matching 12 games, with a .428 average (21-for-49) during what is the longest active streak in the majors. He is also tied for the major-league lead with 27 runs scored. ... The Rays swept the Mariners for just the second time, first since 2005. ... It will be a busy weekend for a number of Rays players from Northern California. C John Jaso expects many friends and relatives in Oakland for the A's series to see him play in the big leagues for the first time.

May 6, 2010

Tampa Bay Rays news and notes

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

College flashback of the day

Back in the day, **Pat Burrell** played third base for the University of Miami and led the 'Canes to three College World Series berths (1996-98). Thursday, he was among 28 players named to the CWS Legends Team. "That was a fun time. Unfortunately, we couldn't find a way to win," Burrell said. "Obviously, it's a pretty cool honor to be mentioned. It doesn't seem that long ago."

Chart of the day

The Rays have one of the best road starts since the expansion era began in 1961:

Year Team12 13

gamegame

1984Tigers12-013-0

1976Phillies11-112-1

1981 A's11-112-1

2010 Rays11-112-1

1977Dodgers11-111-2

1994 Braves11-111-2

2003 Yankees 11-111-2

The dish

Rays at A's

When/where: 10:07 tonight; Oakland Coliseum

TV/radio: Sun Sports; 620-AM, 680-AM (Spanish)

Probable pitchers:

Rays:

LHP David Price (3-1, 2.34)

A's:

LHP Gio Gonzalez (3-1, 3.45)

Watch for

Price check: Price's last start, coming off his April 25 complete game, lasted six innings. So he is determined to go deep tonight. The A's are one of two American League teams Price hasn't faced. The Mariners are the other.

Gio's sphere: Gonzalez is striking out an average nine a game, which is good, but also walking an average 4.5, which is bad. He is 1-0, 5.59 in three appearances vs. the Rays.

Key matchups

A's vs. Price

None have faced.

Rays vs. Gonzalez

Jason Bartlett 4-for-4

Carlos Peña 1-for-5

B.J. Upton 1-for-5

On deck

Saturday: at A's, 4:07, no TV. Rays - Wade Davis (3-1, 2.79); A's - Ben Sheets (1-3, 7.12)

Sunday: at A's, 4:07, Sun Sports. Rays - James Shields (4-0, 3.15); A's - Dallas Braden (3-2, 4.14)

Monday: at Angels, 10:05, Sun Sports. Rays - Matt Garza (5-1, 2.09); Angels - Joel Pineiro (2-4, 5.30)

Music flashback of the day

Manager **Joe Maddon** cranked up best-of-1975 music in his office pregame and had fun when team president **Matt Silverman** (born in 1976) came in. "There was some (music) that he was hip to and some others that he was not," Maddon said. "He was aware of **David Bowie** and the **Doobie Brothers**. He did not get the **Sex-O-Lettes**."

May 6, 2010

Robin Roberts, an icon in Philadelphia and bay area, dies at 83

By Greg Auman, Times Staff Writer

Robin Roberts earned national fame in Philadelphia. But after the majors, he became a bay area mainstay.

TAMPA - Robin Roberts, the rubber-armed Hall of Fame pitcher who dominated batters of the 1950s for the Phillies, died Thursday at age 83.

And while he will be sorely missed in Philadelphia, where he spent 14 of his 19 major-league seasons, for the past 33 years he called Temple Terrace home. He moved there to be baseball coach at USF in 1977 and stayed in the same house, 2 miles from campus and just off the 13th fairway at Temple Terrace Golf & Country Club.

"He loved it here," said his son, Jim, who played four years for his father at USF and helped it to its first NCAA Tournament appearance in 1982.

Mr. Roberts is best known as a right-handed pitcher who won 286 games and exhibited durability, completing 305 of his 609 starts. But those who met him after his playing days - he coached the Bulls from 1977-85 - remember a humble man, rare to tout his exploits but eager to pass along his knowledge and love of baseball.

"He was one of the finest men I've ever met, period," said Eddie Cardieri, who spent three seasons as Mr. Roberts' top assistant at USF before succeeding him as coach. "I was blessed, so blessed to have those years on his staff. A great baseball man, totally first class, very humble and very baseball bright."

Another player on that 1982 team was current USF softball coach Ken Eriksen, who was reminded of Mr. Roberts' humility whenever he would look up from a softball game and see his old coach in the stands behind third base, just like any other fan.

"Robin was very unassuming. The guy could hold a conversation with anyone in any walk of life," said Eriksen, who called USF's 1982 season a "magical year."

Eriksen said Mr. Roberts routinely brought other former major-leaguers to talk to his USF teams, including Hall of Famer Richie Ashburn and Eddie Sawyer, who managed the 1950 Phillies, known as the "Whiz Kids," to a World Series berth.

"Most of the guys on the team, we knew every player for the last 20 years. So to meet these guys, you just said, 'Oh, my God,' " Eriksen said. "He would call upon his days as a player, and he always was a big proponent of making sure you kept your nose clean, told you that you were always representing your family and the University of South Florida."

Mr. Roberts was a fan of the Rays, attending some games and making appearances at the Trop.

"He was very complimentary to us," manager Joe Maddon said. "He would come in and sit in my office and just talk about us and how much he enjoyed watching us. ... Wonderful gentleman, real easy to talk to, bright man, educated, kind of an academic type, which is really unusual for that era of baseball."

There was a moment of silence prior to the Rays-Mariners game, as was the case in most ballparks Thursday, to honor Mr. Roberts.

As a pitcher, Mr. Roberts was known for his tireless arm - he threw 28 consecutive complete games at one point and once went 17 innings in a single outing. Last year, only two players threw more than four complete games, but Jim Roberts said his father understood the game had changed in the past 40 years.

"He didn't begrudge anyone for making so much money, and he never complained about pitchers not throwing complete games," the son said. "He knew the game had evolved."

"He was a special guy, I can't say how many times I refer to his career accomplishments as the epitome of what a pitcher should strive to be," Hall of Fame third baseman and former Phillies great Mike Schmidt said.

Golf had been his passion since he retired from coaching. Every time he shot his age, he gave the scorecard to his granddaughter, Jennifer. She has more than 80 of them. In the fall, she starts classes at Michigan State, the same school her grandfather attended on a basketball scholarship 65 years ago.

The Roberts family - he is survived by four children and seven grandchildren - spent part of Thursday watching the Phillies, who paid tribute to Mr. Roberts by hanging his retired No. 36 jersey in the dugout and flying the NL pennant commemorating their 1950 World Series trip at half-staff. A statue of him outside the first-base gate at Citizens Bank Park was adorned with a wreath, and Phillies players will wear No. 36 on their sleeves, starting today.

Five years ago on Father's Day weekend, Mr. Roberts lost his wife of 56 years, Mary. And in the years since, "half of him was gone," his son said. To lose their father just days before Mother's Day, Jim said, was a reminder that his parents are reunited.

"I told my kids that he was just tired of celebrating Mother's Day without her," he said.

Rays shut out Mariners, raise road record to 12-1

By [ROGER MOONEY](#) | The Tampa Tribune

And so it continues. Another road game, another win for the Tampa Bay Rays.

And another night when a member of the PR staff scans the record books for a historical perspective to what's going on with the Big Ray Machine.

The Rays beat the Seattle Mariners 8-0 on Thursday at Safeco Field to complete a three-game sweep and improve the Rays' record away from Tropicana Field to 12-1.

Since 1961, only four teams started the year with 12 wins in their first 13 road games with the 1981 A's the last before these Rays came along.

The only team to have a better start to their road schedule during the expansion era was the 1984 Tigers, who won their first 17 games away from Detroit.

And this from a team that finished 17 games under .500 on the road in 2009.

"Before, we would distinguish we're on the road or at home," first baseman Carlos Peña said. "I think we've reached the point where a game is a game wherever we play it at. That's awesome."

The Rays improved their major league-best record to 21-7 and added a half-game to their lead over the Yankees in the American League East.

"Of course at some points during the year you're going to go through some tough stretches, but right now we're going to ride this as long as we can," manager Joe Maddon said. "Starting pitching, obviously, has been fabulous, there's no other way to describe it."

"Offensively, we get really hungry when the situation arises. When we get some runners out there the quality of the at-bats rises. Defensively, we keep catching the ball. We're playing well on all cylinders right now."

Of course, it helps when four members of the rotation are in the top-12 in the American League in ERA, which is where Matt Garza (seventh, 2.09), Jeff Niemann (eighth, 2.23), David Price (ninth, 2.34) and Wade Davis (12th, 2.79) find themselves today.

Niemann climbed into the top 10 after seven shutout innings Thursday. The right-hander improved to 2-0 on the season and continued the hot streak by the Rays starters, which is at eight wins with three no-decisions since April 23.

"I'm just trying to keep up with those guys," Niemann said.

Niemann struggled in one inning, the second, when he lost control of his fastball. After striking out the first two batters, he allowed a single then threw 11 straight balls to load the bases and fall behind 3-0 to Mariners catcher Rob Johnson. But Niemann found the strike zone again and threw three fastballs past Johnson, who looked at each.

"That's the biggest thing we take away from today, the ability to make those adjustments in the game and not let it hurt me too bad," Niemann said.

Niemann allowed four hits. He's allowed two runs or less in three of his last four starts.

The rest was up to the offense, which tied those 1984 Tigers for run-differential after 28 games with plus-83.

Willy Aybar, playing because the Mariners threw left-hander Ryan Roland-Smith, had two hits, including a double, and two RBIs.

Ben Zobrist, trying to execute a safety-squeeze, beat out the bunt and drove in another run.

Carl Crawford hit a two-run homer in the eighth.

Peña drew a pair of walks to tie Fred McGriff for the franchise lead with 305. He also drove a ninth-inning double to right field to

snap a 0-for-24 skid.

Evan Longoria's fifth-inning RBI double extended his hitting streak to 12 games. That tied his career best and he has the longest current hitting streak in the majors.

Now it's on to Oakland for the middle three games during this nine-game West Coast swing for the team that can't seem to lose on the road.

Thursday's win was the Rays fifth straight away from the Trop and completed their third sweep in four road series.

"We don't look at our record too much, because the propensity is to maybe rest and enjoy it too much," Pena said. "I think we've been really good whether we lose or win to enjoy or look at it and let it go. And that's part of the maturity that we have reached. I think we are wiser than we have ever been."

Rays notebook: Timing right for Zobrist

By ROGER MOONEY

The Tampa Tribune

Published: May 7, 2010

Updated: 05/07/2010 03:00 am

SEATTLE - RHP Matt Garza dominated the Mariners, but it was a bunt single by Ben Zobrist that turned Wednesday night's game in the Rays' favor.

With Carl Crawford on first base and one out during the top of the eighth inning, and the score tied at 2, Zobrist dropped a bunt up the third-base line that opened the door for a three-run inning and sent the Rays to an 8-3 victory.

"With Cliff Lee pitching as well as he was and us not getting a whole lot of guys in scoring position, it was just the right time of the game to do it," Zobrist said. "I just wanted to get C.C. in scoring position. If I get a hit, it kind of puts some pressure on them. (Evan Longoria) came up and got the big hit, and things took off from there."

Manager Joe Maddon called it the play of the game.

"He was playing baseball, and all our guys know I will never be upset with them for making a decision on their own that's a good baseball play," Maddon said. "Had it not worked out, I would have patted him on the back and said, 'Good try. Great thought.' But it worked. Our guys always have the freedom to make a good baseball play when it's presented to them."

That's why you'll see Crawford and even Carlos Pena drop down the occasional bunt. If the third baseman is playing deep enough, why not?

"I am not adverse to the bunt at any time," Maddon said. "People get confused with that. I don't really like to sacrifice bunt as much as I like the bunt for a hit."

Remembering Robin Roberts

A moment of silence was held before Thursday night's game for Robin Roberts, the Hall of Fame pitcher from Temple Terrace who passed away earlier in the day. Maddon was saddened by the news and has fond memories of Roberts, a big Rays fan.

"He was very complimentary to us," Maddon said. "He would come in and sit in my office and talk about us, and how much he enjoyed watching us play. He liked the way we played, the energy as a team."

Maddon sat next to Roberts in January during a cross-country flight to California.

"I did enjoy our conversations," Maddon said. "They were always upbeat, they were always pertinent. He always left you with some things to think about."

Old-school music

Songs from 1975 were heard playing from the laptop in Maddon's office before Thursday's game.

This is an example of how well the Rays are playing: Barry Manilow's "Mandy" sounded good as it filled the hall underneath Safeco Field.

"I just play the songs," Maddon said.

Odds and ends

LHP David Price faces the A's for the first time in his career tonight in Oakland. ... Longoria took an 11-game hitting streak into Thursday's game. It was the longest active streak in baseball. Longoria was batting .455 during the streak. ... Pena's first-inning walk Thursday was his 304th with the Rays, one behind Fred McGriff's team record.

Rays' Garza making move to join pitching elite

By ROGER MOONEY

Matt Garza has the most wins in the American League, and you know what that means?

"It don't mean a thing," Garza said after beating Seattle on Wednesday night at Safeco Field. "I had four wins by this time last year and I ended up 8-12. So I'm taking it one game at a time, one day at a time. That's all I can do. I can't look ahead."

Actually, Garza is looking ahead a little. He's looking forward to the day when his name is mentioned with the best pitchers in baseball and working toward getting to that point too.

Garza improved to 5-1 after allowing two runs in eight innings Wednesday. He outpitched Mariner lefty Cliff Lee, the 2008 American League Cy Young Award winner who helped the Phillies reach the World Series in October.

"To beat guys like that you have to pitch well," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "Of course you have to score some runs, but you have to pitch well, and we did that."

Garza survived a two-run fourth inning. It was the only inning in which he allowed more than two batters to reach base. The first was Casey Kotchman, who doubled with one out. The second was Franklin Gutierrez, who hit an opposite-field homer to give the Mariners a 2-0 lead.

It was the type of performance one could expect from one of the better pitchers in the game, and Garza seems to be moving toward that end of the pool.

His 43 innings pitched and 1.13 ERA on the road are tops in the American League. His overall ERA of 2.09 is seventh.

He entered Wednesday's game fully aware he was facing off against one of the top pitchers in the game, a lefty capable of shutting down the Rays offense, and he was ready for the challenge.

"You know when those guys take the mound it can be a long night or it can be a really short one, so just make my pitches, make them, go toe-to-toe and last as long as he does," Garza said. "I did that."

Garza and James Shields (4-0, 3.15) have the most wins on a rotation that is the best in the American League. Wade Davis and David Price, who faces the A's tonight when this road trip moves to Oakland, each have three wins. Jeff Niemann, who faced the Mariners in Thursday night's finale, has one.

Together, they have an American League-low 2.94 ERA, which was the lowest ERA on May 6 by an American League team since the 2005 White Sox had the same mark.

In the seven games prior to Thursday, the starters had a 1.64 ERA. Also, Garza's outing with the sixth time a Rays starter pitched at least eight innings. That's the most by an American League staff and the second-most in the major leagues behind the Phillies, who have done it seven times.

"We're just playing," Shields said. "We're going out every night and playing hard. That's all you can ask. Right now we're in a groove and just running with it. We're not looking back. There's going to be a stretch when we hit a skid, but I think we have the bats and the defense to end it. We got a bullpen that's going to help us out. Our starters, like I said, we run a No. 1 out every night. That's what I like to see."

It was late Wednesday night and Garza said he was already looking toward his next start, which is Monday against the Angels in Anaheim.

Near the top of his preparation is finding a Popeyes Chicken near Angels Stadium.

That's part of Garza's pregame routine on the nights he pitches. Bring enough Popeyes for himself and the team.

He Googled Popeyes' locations to make sure there was one in Seattle.

"You'd be surprised," he said. "There a lot of Popeyes in a lot of places. I found that out last year. Wow, I didn't think there'd be a Popeyes up here, but I found one last year."

Robin Roberts was complete package as a pitcher and a man

By [JOE HENDERSON](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Something was bothering Robin Roberts. He had been enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame, the dream of everyone who ever played the game. Every time he thought about the plaque that marked his place in Cooperstown, though, it just didn't feel right.

It referred to the fact he won 286 games, mostly with the Philadelphia Phillies, despite pitching primarily for second-division teams. That phrase - second-division teams - stuck in his throat. It was technically true, of course, but Robin Roberts was never one to build himself up at the expense of others.

"Dad felt that was a slight to his teammates," Jim Roberts said.

Most guys would have shrugged it off in the euphoria of being selected, or maybe they never would have noticed in the first place. Robin was not "most" guys, though. He called people at the Hall of Fame and asked them to remove that second-division stuff.

They agreed, of course, and today his plaque refers to a "tireless worker who never missed a start in the decade of the fifties."

The tireless man died Thursday at his home in Temple Terrace. He was 83 and had suffered from pulmonary fibrosis - essentially hardening of the lungs, a malady that contributed to the death of his younger brother several years ago. Robin's declining health had kept him off the golf course for the last few months. Until then, he had been able to shoot his age.

He had watched his beloved Phillies on television Wednesday night, then stayed up late to catch the Tampa Bay Rays at Seattle. On his desk were minutes of the April meeting of the Baseball Assistance Team - a group dedicated to helping older players in need. Robin was active in that group, a giver to the end.

I last saw Robin in March at the Phillies' spring home in Clearwater. We talked that day about Roy Halladay, their marquee acquisition during the offseason. He talked about Halladay's precision in pitch location and how he pitches so deeply into games.

It figures Robin would appreciate that. He led the majors in complete games and innings pitched five times. He once threw 28 complete games in a row. The man was competitive, whether on the pitcher's mound or the golf course.

He didn't like to lose.

He is also one of the kindest, most self-effacing men I have ever met. When he talked about his 19-year career, more than likely he'd mention one of the games he lost. Although he was a regular at Hall of Fame events since his election in 1976, he wouldn't talk about his place in Cooperstown unless someone brought it up.

We had many talks over the years. One I remember particularly well came in late August 2002, a time of great labor unrest in baseball. The players union - which Roberts had helped form - had set a strike date.

The raw emotion he felt showed in his voice that day as he called it "sickening."

"Who represents the fans?" he wondered in pure frustration. "Nobody represents the fans."

He never made more than \$57,000 a year playing baseball, and although that's chickenfeed by today's standard, Robin Roberts kept giving to the game long after he threw his final pitch. If he wasn't being a champion of retired players in need, he was stopping by Tropicana Field or the Phillies' spring complex whenever he could.

There was no better ambassador for baseball.

There was no better man.

Just hours after Roberts' death was announced, the Phillies played the St. Louis Cardinals in Philadelphia. A uniform with his No. 36 hung in the Phillies' dugout, as it will for the rest of this season. The crowd gave him a moment of silence.

As if on cue, outfielder Jayson Werth - one of Robin's favorite Phillies - hit a three-run homer in the first inning. Halladay was pitching, and it was all the run support he needed as the Phils won 7-2.

Robin would have been smiling at all that, just as we're smiling today at the memory of a gentleman who lived life richly and left us better for having known him.

Long-running drama: Yankees vs. Red Sox remains big draw

By Jorge L. Ortiz, USA TODAY

When the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox renew their rivalry with a three-game series starting Friday at Fenway Park, you can expect national TV coverage — the MLB Network, Fox and ESPN each will show a game — along with hyper-stoked crowds and glacially paced games.

And they're not even the best two teams in the American League East anymore.

The Tampa Bay Rays, the AL champions in 2008, have forced their way into that rarefied company and even belong in any discussion of the majors' best clubs.

Which raises the question of whether the rivalry still matters as much as it did in 2003, when Aaron Boone's 11th-inning homer launched New York to the World Series, capping a classic seven-game AL Championship Series also remembered for the Pedro Martinez-Don Zimmer throwdown.

Or in 2004, when the Red Sox mounted their epic comeback from a 3-0 ALCS deficit on the way to their first World Series crown in 86 years.

The clubs haven't met in the playoffs since then, and the Rays' emergence has altered the balance of power in the division, if not necessarily the rivalry. Boston goes into tonight's series opener 15-14, six games behind division-leading Tampa Bay and five back of second-place New York.

"Yankees-Red Sox is going to be Yankees-Red Sox regardless," says former Boston outfielder Coco Crisp, now with the Oakland Athletics, "but the Rays have brought somewhat of an isosceles triangle to the mix."

Two very familiar foes

Most of the longtime participants reject the notion that Yankees-Red Sox might have diminished in importance or fervor.

"We try to treat all of the games the same, but with those guys, it's just different," says catcher Jason Varitek, who joined the Red Sox in 1998. "The history. The intensity. ... With the Yankees, it's just a different feel."

However, the clubs have finished within six games of each other in the standings once in the last four years. And their last regular-season game that decided the division was in 2005, when they each had a 95-67 record. But New York won the title because of its superior head-to-head mark. Boston earned the wild-card spot.

In addition, the unbalanced schedule adopted in 2001 increased their season series from 12 or 13 games to 18 or 19.

"With the schedule now, it seems like we play them every other day. So you see more of them," says shortstop Derek Jeter, a Yankee since 1995. "Other than that, it's the same. I don't think the rivalry's changed because it's the fans who bring the atmosphere."

But at least one new Yankee anticipated a rougher reception when the teams opened the season last month in Boston. Outfielder Curtis Granderson, acquired in an offseason trade with the Detroit Tigers, was used to heated battles with the Cleveland Indians, an AL Central opponent also from a Rust Belt city.

He figured the competition between baseball's biggest spenders would be even more fierce, but he found the vibe no different from when he played at Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium as a Tiger.

"To and from the ballpark, I guess I expected a little more — people recognizing the team coming in, out there to shout this or shout that," says Granderson, now on the disabled list with a groin strain. "But it could be partly because those were the first games of the season."

Some players say the bragging is limited to the fans and doesn't carry over to the field.

"It's like a boxing match. The boxers don't hate each other. It's all the hype around them trying to sell the fight," says Philadelphia Phillies reliever J.C. Romero, a member of the Red Sox for two months in 2007. "There's a rivalry to win the division, but that's the same thing the Mets and Phillies have."

Members of the Yankees and Red Sox acknowledge their rivalry is fueled by the news media's wall-to-wall coverage, which comes at the expense of other stories and feuds.

"We kind of thrive on it," A's second baseman Mark Ellis says of the attention given to the Red Sox-Yankees series. "If nobody knows who we are, we couldn't care less. As long as we're on TV in October, that's good enough for us."

And San Francisco Giants first baseman Aubrey Huff, formerly of the Rays and Baltimore Orioles, says he thinks those clubs — perennial losers when he played for them — also got short shrift.

"When the Red Sox and Yankees played each other, it was like a whole 30-minute special on Baseball Tonight and then just clips for everybody else," Huff says. "I think sometimes we didn't even make the show."

Certainly, the broadcast networks benefit from the interest the Yankees and Red Sox generate, whether it's created artificially or not.

Since 2003, ESPN ratings for their games have been at least 50% higher than for all of its MLB games, sometimes almost twice as high.

In a USA TODAY/Gallup poll conducted Monday among 358 respondents who described themselves as baseball fans, the Yankees and Red Sox finished 1-2 among AL clubs in both the categories of teams fans love to root for (16% and 11%, respectively) and love to hate (31% and 12%). The poll had a maximum margin of error of 7%.

University of Nevada-Reno history professor Richard Davies, author of the recently published book *Rivals! The Ten Greatest American Sports Rivalries of the 20th Century*, ranks the Yankees-Red Sox in his top three.

"The 24-hour news cycle, the talk radio shows, the several ESPN channels, all those people are desperate for something to talk about, and they beat these rivalries to death — and people listen," Davies says.

Game lengths scrutinized

Does the ardent competition account for their seemingly interminable games? Maybe in part.

The first three games this year, in which the Yankees won two, lasted 3:46, 3:48 and 3:21, with the latter one going 10 innings. Both teams stress the value of hitters working counts, but that doesn't totally explain why their nine-inning games last year averaged 3:30, compared with the league standard of 2:52.

Earlier this season, veteran umpire Joe West decried the teams' slow pace, calling it "pathetic and embarrassing."

Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon says he doesn't understand the concern. Then again, he was fined last season for throwing excessive pitches in the bullpen after being summoned to the game, then tore up the letter of discipline in front of reporters.

"Have you ever gone to watch a movie and thought, 'Man, this movie is so good, I wish it would have never ended,' " Papelbon told reporters after West's comments. "That's like a Red Sox-Yankees game. Why would you want it to end? ... If you don't want to be there, don't be there."

Says Huff: "I remember playing in Toronto, and we started at the same time, 7:05. ... We were done, eating spread, watching their game, and it was in the bottom of the fifth."

Jeter and catcher Jorge Posada are among the Yankees who blame the long games on television, pointing out that nationally broadcast games include 45 minutes of commercials. They're not totally off the mark, but the difference between commercial breaks for local TV (2 minutes, 5 seconds per half inning) and the networks (2:25) adds less than a minute an inning.

In the last two seasons, Yankees-Red Sox games on ESPN averaged 19 minutes longer than other ESPN games. In 2007, that figure was 44 minutes.

Posada, who visited the mound to confer with pitcher CC Sabathia eight times in one inning during the 2009 World Series, says the game's pace shouldn't be legislated.

"You can't tell me you're going to limit the amount of times I can go talk to a pitcher about strategy, whether he doesn't know the signs," he says. "You can't limit matters related to the game."

In which case, Yankees-Red Sox games figure to go on as slow, drawn-out affairs, which they think is just fine.

"The last I checked, fans weren't complaining," Jeter says. "TV stations aren't complaining. They always put us on."

Up a creek with Creek

By Mike Holliday
Special to ESPNOutdoors.com
Thursday, May 6, 2010

GASPARILLA ISLAND, Fla. — When Doug Creek was a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals his favorite part of spring training was coming to St. Petersburg, Florida where he got to fish in saltwater.

Growing up in Martinsville, WV. Creek was an avid bass fisherman, a hobby that followed him to college at Georgia Tech. But it wasn't until he got a taste of saltwater game fish that he started to gravitate toward Florida waters.

"Once I caught my first redfish I was ruined," admits Creek, who now lives fulltime in Punta Gorda, Fla. "Saltwater fish are so much tougher than freshwater fish, and you never know what you're going to catch. There are not as many limitations."

"I got to play ball for 14 years. Now I'm retired from baseball with a wife and two little kids and I'm living the dream," said Creek. "I guide and also have a baseball academy where I teach baseball to little kids."

Tarpon season is Creek's busiest time of the year. He'll run a fishing trip until mid afternoon, come home, wash the boat and head over to the baseball academy to help kids work on their pitching motion. He says he's happy as can be in his little piece of beauty away from the crowds and big cities.

"Charlotte Harbor is so much different from Tampa Bay, even though it's only 75 miles north of here," Creek said. "This is old Florida here. There's so much backcountry in Charlotte Harbor, where Tampa Bay has a lot of development on it and a lot less habitat." The two big bay systems so close to each other compete for the game fish traveling up the west coast of Florida, and habitat isn't always the determining factor. Red tides, water temperature and the abundance of baitfish will attract or deter the fish from one area.

"When redfish come in during the spring, they decide they're either going to go in Tampa Bay or Charlotte Harbor. One location will have them when the other one won't."

Unlike a lot of the waterways in Florida where urban fishing around docks and bridges are the favored Snook haunts, Creek says he fishes a lot of pristine shorelines and wide expanses of grass flats. It's that natural beauty of the location that makes fishing in Charlotte Harbor a special place to catch a memory.

"A lot of my fishing here is deep water tight to the mangroves. I like to beat the bushes, but we'll also get big open flats where the redfish will get onto the potholes over the sand," said Creek.

"We caught some Snook and trout this morning along the drop-off on the edge of a sandbar in open water," Creek said. "We were on the West Wall where we have ten miles of sandy potholes and drop-offs."

Creek said the six Snook they caught on the first day of the tournament all came from open water that had no relative pattern to it. The fact that the fish are sitting in arbitrary locations makes it harder to target them on the flats.

"Usually they'll sit in potholes or along the mangroves or where there's a strong current moving around an island shoreline. Today, they were just out in open water in the middle of nowhere," Creek said.

Going into the second day of the Raymond James Boca Grande Classic Creek plans to target some of the first tarpon to arrive in the area this spring. If he can catch a fish or two early, then he'll be back on the flats of Charlotte Harbor chasing Snook, sea trout and redfish and living the dream.

Inside Baseball: Tampa starters just as impressive as Cardinals

Five Tampa Bay pitchers have carried team to best record in the majors

By Rob Rains

Thursday, May 6, 2010

See if this sounds familiar:

The team has the best record in the league. Both the starting rotation and the overall pitching staff has the best ERA in the league. There is some concern about the depth of the bullpen. The team has a new hitting coach who is earning rave reviews.

Rob Rains

The catch is, we are not talking about the Cardinals.

All of those statements are true about the Cardinals, but they also are true about the best team so far this season in the American League, the Tampa Bay Rays.

Going into Friday night's game at Oakland, the Rays actually were outperforming the Cardinals in the pitching department, an absolutely amazing accomplishment, and doing it with five starters who are not well-known household names.

The starting combination of James Shields, Matt Garza, David Price, Wade Davis and Jeff Niemann were a combined 17-3 following Niemann's 8-0 win at Seattle Thursday night, the Rays' fourth shutout in 28 games. The five have a combined ERA of 2.51 and have allowed only 53 runs, 51 of them earned.

As a staff, the Rays have allowed the fewest runs in the American League, 85, and have a staff ERA of 2.84 in getting off to a 21-7 start, the best record at this point of the season in the Rays history. The Rays' starters have allowed three earned runs or less in 24 of their first 28 games.

The Rays not only have allowed the fewest runs in the league, they have also scored the most runs in the majors, 168, and their run differential after 27 games (plus 75) was the third largest since baseball first expanded in 1961.

"On a nightly basis, our position players, our team, the manager, the coaches, believe when they look out on the mound, that we have a really good chance of winning," Rays manager Joe Maddon told the St. Petersburg Times. "That's a great feeling.

"Our starting pitchers give us a good feeling every night."

Maddon, like Tony La Russa and the Cardinals, knows all too well that the performance of the starting pitcher is the single greatest factor in determining whether a team wins or loses a particular game.

"Honestly, the game could have been calling pitching," Maddon told the Times. "Easily. It could have been called pitching as opposed to baseball, and they would have been absolutely correct."

And from the position players' perspective, knowing that you can expect a quality performance from the starting pitcher every night takes a lot of the pressure off the offense, knowing they may not have to score a bunch of runs if the team is going to win.

"Really good starting pitching gives you a chance to win every single ballgame," said Tampa Bay first baseman Carlos Pena. "There's no secret to that. It just gives you a little bit of breathing room.

“We get to the ballpark every day knowing if we execute a play here or there, or get a big hit here or there, we’ve got ourselves a shot at winning the ballgame.”

Even if their names are not well known yet, make no mistake that the rest of the American League is becoming very familiar with the ability of the Rays’ starters. The average age of the five starters is only 26. Their average salary is \$1.65 million this year. Combined, they are earning less money this year than the Cardinals are paying Kyle Lohse.

“It’s an extremely talented group,” pitching coach Jim Hickey told the Times. “Between the combination of age and talent, I don’t think there’s anybody that can match them.”

The Rays also have proven they can match offenses with almost any team in the league. New hitting coach Derek Shelton, a graduate of Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, joined the Rays this year after working as the hitting coach at Cleveland for the past five years.

He has the offense hitting a collective .319 with runners in scoring position, the best average in the majors. With players such as Carl Crawford, Evan Longoria, B.J. Upton and Carlos Pena to go along with the great starting pitching, it is easy to see why the Red Sox and Yankees are starting to get worried.

The biggest mystery is not how why the Rays are playing so well, it’s how come nobody in the Tampa area is coming out to watch them. The Rays played 15 home games before leaving on their current West Coast trip, and averaged just 23,065 fans for those games. Nine American League clubs have a higher average attendance at home.

Included were two games against Oakland which each drew less than 11,000 fans, the smallest crowds in the majors on both days.

When Tampa Bay was not winning, they used to only draw fans who had moved from New York or Boston and came out whenever the Yankees or Red Sox came to town. There were almost as many cheers for the opponents as there were for the Rays at those games.

Having won the AL pennant in 2008, however, and looking like the early-season favorite this year, Maddon thinks it’s time for that attitude to change, and for Tampa area residents to get behind his team.

“We really do appreciate those (fans) who are loyal, but I’d like to see that we’re getting to the point now where they don’t come to see the opposition, they come out to see us,” Maddon said.

An award Freese didn’t want

David Freese did not win the NL Rookie of the Month award for April, even though he likely deserved it. He probably should be glad for that result.

Freese, the Cardinals’ rookie third baseman, lost out to the Braves’ Jason Heyward despite the fact he hit .324 for the month with one homer and 14 RBI. Heyward, the Braves’ outstanding young outfielder, hit six homers and drove in 16 runs but had only a .240 average in his first month in the majors.

If Freese needs any incentive to be glad he didn’t win, all he has to do is look at what happened to the person who won the award last year – Cardinals’ third baseman Brian Barden, who hit .385 for St. Louis in April 2009. In 21 games, Barden hit three homers and drove in seven.

That month, however, has so far been the highlight of Barden’s career. He was back in the minors by July last year, and even though he is back in the majors this season, he is only playing occasionally as a backup infielder for the Florida Marlins.

Home run haven wasn't planned

The Phillies hit seven homers in their four-game series against the Cardinals, not a surprising total considering how home-run friendly Citizens Bank Park has proven to be since it opened seven years ago.

If you believe the Phillies, however, they did not build the park to be such a home-run haven. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that the Phillies designs for the park were influenced by wind-tunnel tests which were misinterpreted.

"We spent some significant dollars getting a wind study done," the newspaper quoted Phillies president David Montgomery as saying. "Either we didn't ask the right questions or they didn't do the right comparisons because they told us there would be no unusual characteristics. We probably should have asked or they should have told us."

Considering they have won the last two NL pennants, however, and have one of the best offenses in the league, the Phillies don't seem to be complaining now.

Around the majors

The Brewers are becoming increasingly concerned about the status of closer Trevor Hoffman. Now 42, it is hard to know whether the future Hall of Famer is simply going through a tough time or no longer has the stuff to be a closer in the majors. The Brewers have lost five games they were leading in the eighth inning or later, and their seven blown saves are the most in the NL... Don't be surprised if the Marlins call up 20-year-old outfielder Mike Stanton from the minor leagues before long. Playing at Double A Jacksonville, Stanton has 14 homers in his first 27 games and his home run Thursday night in a game at Montgomery was estimated at 500 feet. The Marlins' combined outfield of Cameron Maybin, Chris Coughlan and Cody Ross has struggled offensively all season... Former Cardinal Jack Clark is trying to collect stories about where fans were and what they were doing when he hit the pennant-clinching home run in Los Angeles in the 1985 NL championship series for an upcoming book. Anyone with an interesting story to tell is asked to go to his website, www.jacktheripperclark.com, to submit the story.