

A's News Clips, Sunday, May 9, 2010

A's win as sparkling Sheets looks like new pitcher

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Ben Sheets delivered his best start in an A's uniform Saturday, an effort that was important for his team but even more so for his psyche.

After getting hammered in his two previous outings, Sheets limited the Tampa Bay Rays to four hits over 6 1/3 innings in a 4-2 A's victory. It was just the Rays' second loss in 15 road games.

Sheets spotted his fastball well. He snapped off several curves that appeared to fall through a trap door. In short, he was what the A's envisioned when they signed him to a one-year, \$10 million deal over the winter.

They hope it's a stepping stone for things to come.

"I always have fun, but it's hard to have fun when you get your (butt) handed to you like I did the last two games," Sheets said. "I just had to take a deep breath. Success is fun. Failure's not fun."

After making a slight mechanical adjustment, dropping his arm slot an inch or two in his delivery, Sheets notched a season-high eight strikeouts to go alongside three walks.

The four-time All-Star seemed at a loss to solve his struggles following his past two starts, when he allowed a combined 17 earned runs at Tampa Bay and Toronto.

A's manager Bob Geren said he noticed Sheets' confidence early, as the right-hander threw a sharp curve on the game's first pitch to Jason Bartlett.

"Even for an All-Star pitcher like him, there's a confidence factor," Geren said. "Once you get in a rhythm, you start getting some outs

and your confidence builds. Even with a veteran like him, he needed that today."

The A's scored twice in the first on Ryan Sweeney's RBI single and Eric Chavez's sacrifice fly. Sheets allowed both of his runs in the second, when John Jaso blooped a run-scoring single and Bartlett scored Jaso with a double to tie it.

Daric Barton's sacrifice fly in the bottom of the second gave the A's the lead back. Barton made it 4-2 in the seventh with a one-out single through a drawn-in infield that scored Eric Patterson, who led off with a double.

The A's bullpen allowed just one hit over the final 2 2/3 innings, and the Rays collected just one hit total over the final seven innings.

Geren was impressed that Sheets made the necessary adjustments after the Rays tagged him for eight runs in an April 27 game at Tropicana Field.

Sheets kept his curve down in the zone better this time. Catcher Landon Powell, who also caught Sheets in that previous game against the Rays, said Sheets ran his two-seam fastball inside on hitters.

"Everybody knew he's got stuff and is an All-Star caliber pitcher," Powell said. "... "I think the biggest thing was when he got some strikeouts there, the confidence, you could kind of see it in his demeanor and how he started attacking guys."

Sheets set the Rays down in order three times after failing to notch a 1-2-3 inning in either of his previous two starts.

He seemed less than thrilled to exit with one out and a runner on in the seventh, making a long circle around his gathered infielders as Geren approached. But the bullpen shut the door.

"It was exciting to be able to miss bats," Sheets said. "I think that's what I'll take out of today. I missed bats it felt like for the first time all year."

TODAY: Rays (James Shields 4-0) at A's (Dallas Braden 3-2), 1:05 p.m. TV: CSNCA. Radio: 860-AM, 1640-AM

A's report

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Reversal in trend benefits reliever Blevins, A's in win

Reliever Jerry Blevins had allowed a homer to the first batter he faced in two of his previous three outings.

But the lanky left-hander came through big against his only hitter Saturday, and it helped preserve a 4-2 victory over the Tampa Bay Rays.

Blevins was summoned to face Carl Crawford with runners on second and third with two outs in the seventh inning and struck him out to maintain a then tenuous 3-2 lead.

Blevins labeled it the biggest out he's recorded this year. It would rank up there as one of the bigger strikeouts he's rung up in a career that began in 2007.

"I know that's who they want me to (face) — a lefty-on-lefty situation," Blevins said.

He said he started Crawford off with three straight off-speed pitches, which set up a fastball that Crawford swung through for strike three.

Fellow relievers Michael Wuertz, Brad Ziegler and Andrew Bailey also had a hand in sealing a victory for starter Ben Sheets.

The Rays led the majors with 172 runs coming into the game.

"It was a huge win to get our No. 1 (starter), and to hold them to two runs," Blevins said.

Bailey, who had his own Bobblehead Day at the Oakland Coliseum on Saturday, converted his 27th straight save opportunity. That's the longest active streak in the majors.

Catcher Kurt Suzuki hit off a tee to test his strained rib cage muscle, and he might take regular batting practice today, manager Bob Geren said.

Suzuki likely will need a brief rehab assignment in the minors before coming off the disabled list. Nonetheless, he's expected back soon.

Second baseman Mark Ellis (strained hamstring) is taking grounders and throwing from 120 feet, but still has no timetable to start a rehab assignment. Outfielder Travis Buck (strained oblique) is recovering at a slower rate and isn't expected back anytime soon.

Radio play-by-play announcer Ken Korach and Spanish-radio play-by-play announcer Amaury Pi-Gonzalez are among the nominees for the Bay Area Radio Museum & Hall of Fame's class of 2010.

Chin Music: Sheets tries to rebound; other A's pregame notes

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 5/8/2010 1:00PM

Lots of extracurricular activities at the Coliseum today, with Andrew Bailey getting his own Bobblehead Day and Brad Ziegler hosting military families as part of the A's Salute to Armed Forces Day.

But from the baseball perspective, the focus obviously will be on Ben Sheets and whether he bounces back after two disastrous outings. Sheets worked on making some mechanical adjustments during his side work this week, according to manager Bob Geren, but Geren wouldn't go into specifics on what that entailed.

–Just a heads-up: If you haven't checked out the A's page on spitter.com yet, it's worth a look. <http://sports.spitter.com/t/mlb/oakland-athletics>. There's a pretty good archive of A's articles, and you can post your own tweets.

–Injury updates dominated Geren's pregame media chat. Mark Ellis (strained left hamstring) has started fielding grounders, but only on balls hit right at him. He's not moving laterally yet in his defensive work, which will be a big test for his hamstring. Ellis is throwing from 120 feet, but there's still no timetable for him to begin a rehab assignment.

–Kurt Suzuki took about 40 swings today, and if he feels good in the morning, he'll take regular batting practice tomorrow. But Geren said Suzuki likely will need a short rehab assignment, probably with Triple-A Sacramento. That means we probably won't see him Tuesday for the start of a six-game road trip.

–Travis Buck's recovery from a strained right oblique is coming along slowly, so he won't be rejoining the outfield anytime soon.

–I haven't posted an update on lefty Josh Outman in a while. He's throwing a type of simulated game today, with Ellis standing in to face him (no swinging). Outman, coming back from Tommy John surgery, isn't expected back until after the All-Star break.

Today's lineups:

A's: Pennington SS; Barton 1B; Sweeney RF; Kouzmanoff 3B; Chavez DH; Rosales 2B; Gross CF; Powell C; Patterson LF; Sheets RHP.

Rays: Bartlett SS; Crawford LF; Zobrist RF; Longoria 3B; Pena 1B; Upton CF; Burrell DH; Jaso C; Brignac 2B; Davis RHP.

Sheets looks like his pre-injury self against tough team

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

After two horrendous outings, Ben Sheets spiffed up his act Saturday at the Coliseum.

He made a slight change with his arm slot, and he was rewarded with his longest outing of the season and a season-high eight strikeouts in Oakland's 4-2 victory over Tampa Bay.

"I think I relaxed," Sheets said. "I hadn't relaxed all year, but I was comfortable with the adjustment I made and I could throw strikes. It's like I returned to who I was before. ... No doubt that's by far the most comfortable I've been out there."

Sheets, signed to a \$10 million one-year contract in January, missed all of last season after elbow surgery, and the A's expected he'd be a bit rusty at the outset. Sheets is inconsistent, more than anything - he didn't allow more than three earned runs in any of his first four starts and then gave up 17 runs in his last two going into Saturday.

Sheets' location was off in those outings at Tampa Bay and Toronto, and on Saturday, he regained it, hitting the corners with more regularity.

"You could tell he felt back to normal," said catcher Landon Powell, who liked the two-seamer that Sheets was throwing inside to keep hitters off his curveball. Many of Sheets' strikeouts came on the curve, which he threw for strikes early and then was able to get down more in the zone later.

"The first pitch of the game, I love that - he broke the curveball out, flipped it in," A's manager Bob Geren said. "When opponents see that, they go, 'OK, ... huh.' "

The Rays - who are the league's top team in 2010 - had scored eight runs against Sheets 10 days earlier, and it appeared they might ruin his day again Saturday, with a two-out rally in the second. After an RBI single by John Jaso, a walk to No. 9

hitter Reid Brignac and an RBI double by Jason Bartlett, Sheets held the damage there, getting Carl Crawford to fly to center to end the inning.

Sheets came out with one out and a man on in the seventh, the deepest he had been in a game this year, and his longest outing since Sept. 6, 2008.

"He's very good," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "As he gets further away from surgery, I think you're going to see good things from him."

Michael Wuertz came in and Brignac doubled down the first-base line, putting two men in scoring position. Bartlett's grounder to third erased one runner at the plate, then left-hander Jerry Blevins came in and struck out Crawford, an out that Blevins called his biggest of the season.

Brad Ziegler and Andrew Bailey finished up with perfect innings Bailey - honored with his own bobblehead Saturday - extended his career-high scoreless streak to 21 2/3 innings, and he has converted 27 consecutive save opportunities. Oakland hasn't blown a save this season.

Ryan Sweeney singled and tripled for Oakland, and Daric Barton had a sacrifice fly and an RBI single. Eric Chavez had two hits and a sacrifice fly.

Bullpen gets seat upgrade

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Aren't things getting crowded on the bench in the bullpen with nine relievers?

Well, no, said closer **Andrew Bailey** - because there's no bench there anymore. Director of stadium operations **David Rinetti** replaced it with chairs from the club level in order to keep Oakland's tall relievers, 6-foot-6 **Tyson Ross** in particular, from having to hunch over.

"We got an upgrade," Bailey said. "We've got some nice chairs now, and everyone can sit up straight. I want to give the stadium people a shout-out for that."

The awning over the bullpen is what was making Ross, **Jerry Blevins** (6-6) and **Brad Ziegler** (6-4) slump, and **Rinetti** considered raising the awning, but that would have blocked fans' views. The club chairs are just the right height.

"I had Tyson sit in it," Rinetti said. "He said, 'This is cool.' They seem to like it, and that's good - I didn't want to be responsible for our relievers getting bad necks."

Oakland is likely to keep nine relievers until catcher **Kurt Suzuki** comes off the disabled list in a few days.

DL check: Suzuki (ribcage strain) hit off a tee and hit soft-toss and he said everything felt fine. He'll take batting practice today and Monday (probably at Class A Stockton). If that goes well, he'll play in a rehab game Tuesday and rejoin the A's on Wednesday.

Josh Outman (elbow surgery) threw a simulated game in Arizona. Outman said in a text message that the 60-pitch session went "really well," but he's just started throwing his breaking ball again so he'll have a few more simulated games as he regains his arm strength.

Mark Ellis (hamstring) is progressing toward a rehab assignment, as is outfielder **Coco Crisp** (fractured pinkie), who is a week or two away from joining a minor-league team, according to manager **Bob Geren**. Outfielder **Travis Buck** is still healing from an oblique strain, and Geren said his progress hasn't been all that good.

Cust travels long road back toward majors

Vittorio Tafur, Chronicle Staff Writer

More than chicks dig the long ball. When a power hitter strides to the plate, there is an anticipation in the ballpark that is almost palpable. Even old-timers who come to a baseball game just to drink beers and swap stories will stop and lock their sights on what could happen next.

With only 19 home runs in 31 games, the Oakland A's are not hot to trot, and the crowds at the Oakland Coliseum have been small and quiet.

Perhaps deep in thought, the fans must be wondering, "Whatever happened to that guy who led the team in home runs the last three years?"

Well, Jack Cust misses you guys too.

He also does a lot of thinking, as he commutes nearly three hours a day from his home in San Francisco to play for the Triple-A Sacramento River Cats. After hitting 84 homers the past three seasons, Cust was shocked when he was sent to the minors after spring training.

Cust is doing better nursing the chip on his shoulder than he was last month. But don't get it twisted; he's not doing well. He still can't believe a poor spring training (.216, one homer, 20 strikeouts in 51 at-bats) cost him his designated hitter job (to Eric Chavez).

"I am still not over it," Cust said. "I know where I can play, and I want to get back there."

Cust, 31, accepted the assignment to Sacramento to get his guaranteed salary of \$2.65 million. He has never considered getting a temporary place there, even though he considers his commute "brutal."

"My wife and I wanted to live in the city, and we just moved in ...," Cust said. "I don't get to enjoy it, but my wife and kids do."

His daughters, Ava and Sophia, are 3 years old and 2 months old, respectively, and the hours that dad gets to spend with them in the mornings help the fatigue melt away. Then, he's back on the road in plenty of time to avoid traffic.

He'll get to Raley Field, change clothes, encourage the younger players, eat a sandwich, stretch ... and ... whoa!

"Not many people face 90-mile-per-hour fastballs after driving that far," Cust said. "That will open your eyes again quick."

Cust has to be opening A's general manager Billy Beane's eyes with his play, hitting four home runs in his past 13 games.

"If not them, maybe some other team could use a bat," Cust said. "I have gone against the best pitchers in baseball, and I can help somebody."

River Cats manager Tony DeFrancesco agrees.

"He's doing his thing, getting quality at-bats," he said. "I don't know if he wasn't seeing the ball well in spring training, but he's got his swing back now."

Cust does seem to be locked in. Besides hitting all four of his home runs in the past 13 games, he has a .429 batting average (18-for-42), 16 RBIs and 15 runs scored during that time. On Friday night, he went 3-for-5 with a double that seemed to go about nine feet high - all the way to the centerfield fence. He came up with Sacramento down 10-6 and the bases loaded in the ninth and ripped a shot that Colorado pitcher Matt Reynolds snared out of self-preservation.

Saturday night, he was 3-for-4 with a double, plus a walk.

Cust might have saved himself from all this aggravation if he hadn't tinkered with his swing in spring training. He tried getting more extension and swinging earlier, but scrapped the experiment just before getting sent down.

"That's what I get for trying new things," Cust said. "I never would have tried to smooth out my swing if I thought I was in danger of losing my job."

Now he is back to being Cust. The career .239 hitter makes late adjustments at the plate, takes a lot of borderline pitches (Pacific Coast League-high 26 walks), strikes out a bunch and every 15 to 20 at-bats or so, he hits one a country mile.

Cust is a major-league hitter who doesn't have much time to sit in a minor-league clubhouse. He quickly hits the road Friday night and, with Howard Stern as a co-pilot on the radio, gets home about midnight. He left Saturday for the park at 1 p.m.

"This game is crazy," Cust said. "One day you're in the penthouse and ..."

The next day, you're on the highway.

Jack back?

	A's DHs	Cust*
Avg.	.231	.307
OBP	.274	.470
HR	1*	4
RBI	13	17

* 2010 stats in Sacramento

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Busy day: Reliever Brad Ziegler launched his Pastime for Patriots foundation, to benefit military families, and 400 tickets were distributed Saturday. Ziegler also pitched the eighth. In the evening, he planned to attend the Sharks game with his parents.

Sheets helps A's cool off red-hot Rays

Fans season-high eight as bullpen locks down win

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Following his previous two starts, A's righty Ben Sheets wasn't exactly a happy camper. Seventeen earned runs will have that effect on a man.

But in the clubhouse after his eight-strikeout performance on Saturday, Sheets was in a better mood, as he led the A's to a 4-2 win over the Tampa Bay Rays.

"It's hard to have fun when you have your [butt] handed to you like I did the last two games," Sheets said. "I just had to take a deep breath."

After giving up a pair of runs on three hits in the second inning, Sheets settled down, retiring 14 of the final 16 batters he faced.

For the first time with Oakland, Sheets said he felt like he got into a good rhythm. He finished 6 1/3 innings, giving up two earned runs on four hits while walking three.

"It was obvious he wanted to put his last two starts behind him," A's reliever Brad Ziegler said. "He was able to do that now."

Sheets recorded 1-2-3 innings in each of the third, fifth and sixth frames. It was the first time he notched multiple perfect innings in the same game this season. He had just four 1-2-3 innings all season heading into Saturday's game.

Much of Sheets' success Saturday had to do with his curveball, which was consistently fooling the Rays all afternoon. His command, too, looked nothing like it did in his previous two starts, as his eight strikeouts were the most he'd thrown since July 9, 2008.

"I missed bats today for the first time I feel like all year," Sheets said.

Though A's manager Bob Geren said Sheets benefitted from a different arm slot, a couple of inches lower than before, Sheets wouldn't acknowledge the change.

"Maybe," Sheets said with a smile. "I wouldn't tell if I did though."

Citing his unfamiliarity with the American League and his status as his new team's ace, Sheets said he was pressing in his first few starts. Sheets said Saturday's start was the most comfortable he had felt in an A's uniform.

To do it against Tampa Bay, which currently has the best record in the Majors, only added to Sheets' joy. Not to mention the Rays only needed four innings to score eight earned runs against him on April 27.

"When you can throw that well against that team, it can only help you gain confidence," Sheets said.

The outing was Sheets' longest in the green and gold, and his longest since he pitched a complete game shutout on Sept. 6, 2008, with Milwaukee.

"Even with a veteran guy like him, an All-Star pitcher like him, there's still a confidence factor," Geren said. "He needed that today, he really did."

Once again, the A's bullpen put forth a great effort on Saturday, completing 2 2/3 innings of shutout relief. Andrew Bailey tossed a perfect ninth to earn his sixth save of the season.

"It was a pretty good bullpen anyways," Geren said. "Now [Michael Wuertz] is starting to get back to where he looked last year and he's going to help a lot. He's going to shorten the game by at least two or three or four hitters."

Protecting a 3-2 lead, Sheets left with one out in the seventh after giving up a leadoff walk and fielder's choice. Wuertz relieved Sheets and gave up a double to Reid Brignac to give Tampa Bay runners at second and third, but the Rays couldn't push anything across.

Wuertz got Rays shortstop Jason Bartlett to hit a grounder to A's third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff, who alertly threw home to catch John Jaso in a pickle between third and the plate. After that, Jerry Blevins came in and struck out Carl Crawford with a fastball to preserve the lead.

Blevins called it the biggest out he's recorded all year.

"It's one of those wins where it's a momentum starter," Blevins said.

The A's jumped all over Tampa Bay starter Wade Davis in the top of the first, scoring two runs on three hits. Daric Barton delivered an RBI single with the infield in to give the A's a 4-2 lead in the seventh.

The win was extra special for Ziegler, who launched his Pastime for Patriots Foundation on Saturday. Ziegler purchased 200 tickets for war veterans and their families and got to meet a handful of them.

"It's icing on the cake," Ziegler said.

Rosales playing his way into regular duty

Infielder's versatility has proven to be valuable addition

By Alex Espinoza and Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Given all the injuries the A's have faced this season, manager Bob Geren has been forced to lean on several replacements.

One of them, second baseman Adam Rosales, who is filling in for the injured Mark Ellis, has proved to be an effective stop gap. Despite being currently mired in a 2-for-16 slump over the last four games, Rosales is batting .284.

"He looks like a regular," Geren said. "He looks like an everyday player, he's playing great."

When the A's acquired Rosales for Aaron Miles this offseason, Oakland knew it was getting a utility player. Aside from also playing a few innings at first base and shortstop, Rosales has been a versatile option in the lineup.

Geren has shuffled Rosales around the batting order a bunch this season, starting him at least three games in each of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth spots in the order. Not that Rosales minds.

"Whether it's the ninth position or the leadoff position, you only hit there once throughout the whole game," Rosales said. "You just got to focus on the task at hand."

But perhaps Rosales' greatest asset to the team is his defense. Though Ellis is perennially one of the American League's best defenders, Rosales is holding his own.

In 23 starts this season, Rosales is yet to commit an error. He and Boston's Dustin Pedroia are the only AL regulars at second base who haven't committed an error.

Donaldson filling in quite nicely

OAKLAND -- Though he's eligible to come off the 15-day disabled list Sunday, A's catcher Kurt Suzuki is still a few days away from returning.

Suzuki took about 40 swings Saturday, some off of a tee, and will try to take batting practice with his teammates on Sunday.

In Suzuki's stead, Josh Donaldson has been one of two options the A's have used behind the plate. Though Donaldson only has one hit in 14 Major League at-bats, manager Bob Geren said he likes what he's seen from his young catcher, defensively.

"I saw a big difference this spring from the previous spring," Geren said.

Among the biggest improvements Geren's seen from Donaldson are with his setup and receiving.

"His chest is up a couple of inches higher, his target's real solid," Geren said. "I like what he's doing back there."

Donaldson's game-calling, too, has been fine according to Geren. Aside from a couple of discrepancies each game, Geren said he's agreed with the pitches Donaldson has called.

Donaldson has been on the other side of Gio Gonzalez's past two starts. Gonzalez has a 3.29 ERA in 13 2/3 innings with Donaldson behind the plate.

Geren said Donaldson still needs to work on blocking balls in the dirt and calming down in the batter's box, though.

"He's got a little bit big with his swing at times, a little over excited," Geren said.

Outman ready for simulation

OAKLAND -- A's lefty Josh Outman, who showed promise in 2009 before being sidelined with Tommy John surgery, will throw simulated game in Arizona on Saturday.

Manager Bob Geren said A's second baseman Mark Ellis, who is rehabbing his strained left hamstring, will stand in the batter's box for Outman's simulated game but won't swing a bat.

"It's a simulated simulated game," Geren said.

Geren said Outman's been throwing off and on since Spring Training with a couple "shutdown periods" along the way.

"In general, he's been going hard since January," Geren said.

Drafted by Philadelphia in the 10th round of the 2005 First-Year Player Draft, Outman came to the Oakland organization as part of the Joe Blanton trade in 2008.

In 14 appearances (12 starts) last season, Outman went 4-1 with a 3.48 ERA and a strikeout rate of 7.1 per nine innings.

Worth noting

Michael Wuertz retired one batter in Saturday's game and did not allow a run to extend his career-high scoreless streak to 15 innings dating back to last year. ... Brad Ziegler, who pitched one perfect inning Saturday, has not allowed a run in nine of his last 10 outings and has not surrendered an earned run in 13 of his 15 appearances. ... Ryan Sweeney has now reached base safely in 27 of his 29 games this season. ... Brad Kilby pitched 2 1/3 scoreless innings for Triple-A Sacramento on Friday and now has a 1.17 ERA in 7 2/3 frames spanning six games for the River Cats. The left-handed reliever, recalled April 23 before being optioned a week later, did not allow a run in four of his five outings with Oakland -- the most impressive coming Sunday in 3 2/3 scoreless innings of work at Toronto.

'Country Joe' an umpire who works to preserve baseball

By LOWELL COHN, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Word came down umpire Joe West would be available to talk. West has been an umpire for 30 years and he's one of the great personalities in sports. He was umpiring the A's/Rangers series a few days ago and he wanted to talk about Tigers announcer Ernie Harwell, who had passed on Tuesday.

You must understand the protocol of talking to umpires. You don't just walk into their locker room even if you have a credential. In Oakland, Bruce stands in front of their door, and when he's not working security, Bruce works construction, and Bruce is big. I told Bruce I had an appointment with Joe West. Joe's publicist — yes publicist — had set it up, and Bruce knocked on the door and said I was outside and West motioned me in.

The umpire's room is two rooms. In the back is the standard locker room where they dress. But the front room is a kitchenette, and West was sitting at a wooden table surrounded by boxes of cereal, and behind him was a toaster and microwave.

They call West "Country Joe" because he writes and sings country music, has released CDs, has played all over the place, including the Grand Ole Opry. He is a large, smiling man with a voice like liquid honey, and he and former Tigers' pitcher Bill Slayback made a video of Harwell, including a soundtrack which the A's would play before the game.

"I remember one day (Ernie) came by the All Star Game," West said, "and we had 20 people in our locker room. When he opened the door, he saw there were so many people there. He just closed the door and tried to sneak out. I raced across the room and chased him down the hall and said, 'You get back in here. You're the only Hall of Famer that's in this room.' He was pleased that I went and got him. All of baseball is going to miss him. It's a sad day. I stood out there at second base (Tuesday) night. I had a tear in my eye three or four times. I was just thinking of when you pass how many people are really going to miss you, and I think the whole baseball world is going to miss Ernie."

West has several roles in baseball. Of course, he is a rules enforcer. He is an umpire — president of the World Umpires Association. Beyond that, he is a rememberer. He remembers what baseball was and he honors past luminaries like Harwell and he wants baseball to remain special. You can ask him any question you want except about the Yankees and Red Sox and their long games, which West recently called, "a disgrace to baseball." The publicist warned me off that disgrace topic, although playing a game that lasts 3:46 is a disgrace and I'm glad West said it.

I thanked him for talking about Harwell and asked if we could speak about other topics and he said yes. I asked if players ever bench-jockey him about his country music and that led to this answer. I'm not sure it follows from my question but I love this answer:

"(Tuesday) night I ran the third baseman (Kevin Kouzmanoff) off because he went to talk to the pitcher. They didn't get the guy warmed up in the bullpen in time so the third baseman went in to talk to the pitcher to delay. When they finally did bring the pitcher in he said, 'What did you run me off for? I can't go talk to my pitcher?' I said, 'I don't want to hear about your labor pains. Just show me the baby.' And he started laughing. He says, 'How long did it take you to think that up?' And I said, 'Oh, I wrote that on my first song.' "

Here is West on relations between umpires and players: "I think they're much better. Years ago when you'd have an argument, it festered for the whole year and sometimes years. (Umpire) Lee Weyer and Dave Bristol hated each other. And I can give you a counter to that. I used to kick Dick Williams out of a game at least one time each season. The office and I were having a squabble over something. It was an issue over an ejection and Dick Williams went to bat for me. He never went to bat for any umpires. But I kicked him out every year and he said, 'The guy does his job; leave him alone. You're picking on the wrong guy.'

"One of the funniest things ever happened I told Earl Weaver, 'You know Bobby just passed you (in getting kicked out of games).' Earl says, 'No he didn't. No one's ever going to pass me.' He's arguing about that. If you kick out Bobby Cox, the next day it's over. Jimmy Leyland's the same way. (Tony) LaRussa's the same way. Whitey Herzog was the same way. You go down the list. Like I said, Dick Williams was feisty. He was going to do everything he possibly could to win. He was sarcastic, surly, but he was a baseball man — one of the best managers I ever saw."

What does it take for West to kick out a player?

"Most players kick themselves out. We very seldom kick a player out."

What is his tone of voice when he kicks someone out?

"Over the years it has calmed down. When I was younger, I'd get real fiery and charged up. It's a protocol. You have to give them the motion (he raised his arm). I don't get angry on the field anymore unless somebody's really trying to cheat or hurt somebody. There are times you can ignore something, walk away. I don't think you should ever turn your back and walk away when there's a confrontation. I believe you should stand your ground. Any time you let them push you, they're going to push harder the next time. (Umpire) Al Barlick told me years ago, 'It's very bad to kick a player out of a game who doesn't deserve to get kicked out. It's far worse not to kick a player out of the game who should have been kicked out because somebody's going to have to go behind you and clean up your mess.' "

What does he love about baseball?

"Every time you watch this you're a piece of history. I was behind home plate when Willie McCovey hit his 500th home run. I was at first base when Nolan Ryan threw his fifth no-hitter. I was at first base when Pete Rose tied the record for the modern-day hit streak in the National League and the next day I was behind the plate when he broke it. You look back on them five or 10 years later, you go, 'Wow, I was there for that.' "

Joe West is the rules enforcer. He also is the rememberer.

Sheets slows down Tampa Bay offense

Oakland ace makes slight delivery change to spark A's 4-2 win over Rays

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Ben Sheets stopped pressing and started pitching like the ace the Oakland Athletics expected him to be.

The right-hander responded with his best outing of the season after making a slight adjustment in his pitching delivery, scattering four hits over 6-1/3 innings with a season-high eight strikeouts to help the A's beat the Tampa Bay Rays 4-2 on Saturday.

"I think I just relaxed, and I hadn't relaxed all year," said Sheets, who pitched into the seventh inning for the first time in nearly two years. "I felt like I was kind of returning to who I was before. I was comfortable with the adjustments I had made. Everything could be thrown for strikes."

Sheets' outing was in sharp contrast to his previous two starts when he allowed 17 runs in only 7-1/3 innings. One of those games was an 8-6 loss at Tampa Bay on April 27.

That led Sheets to slightly alter his pitching motion and lower his delivery slot. The results were impressive.

His eight strikeouts were his most since recording 11 against Colorado on July 9, 2008, with Milwaukee. It's also the first time Sheets pitched into the seventh inning since Sept. 6, 2008, when he shut out San Diego.

"His command was a lot better," A's manager Bob Geren said. "He said he felt his arm lower an inch or two and he felt that was a better slot. He's always been kind of up over the top. He just wanted to get it down."

Jason Bartlett had an RBI double for Tampa Bay, which fell to 13-2 away from Tropicana Field and lost to the A's for the first time this season.

"We just couldn't get it done today," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "It's not going to happen every night. I liked the effort, that's what I'm really locked into. I'm not at all concerned. We'll get our hits."

Daric Barton drove in a pair of runs and four Oakland relievers combined for 2-2/3 scoreless innings.

Andrew Bailey pitched the ninth for his sixth save in six tries, while Ryan Sweeney and Eric Chavez added two hits each for the A's.

Sheets ran into problems in the second but was otherwise stellar while keeping the major league's top offense in check. After Bartlett's double in the second drove in John Jaso and tied the score at 2, Sheets retired 13 of the next 14 batters he faced before walking Pat Burrell leading off the seventh.

The A's right-hander left one batter later, after Jaso's fielder's choice.

"I felt like I got in a rhythm," Sheets said. "When you can throw that well against that team, it can only help you gain confidence from it. Plus I don't feel like I was the same pitcher I was 10 days ago."

Tampa Bay pitchers had not allowed an earned run in 23 innings before the A's scored twice off starter Wade Davis in the first.

Sweeney had an RBI single and Chavez added a sacrifice fly for Oakland, which also got a hand from Davis early in the inning when the right-hander threw an errant pickoff attempt that allowed leadoff hitter Cliff Pennington to go from first to third.

The Rays tied the game with two runs in the second, but the A's loaded the bases against Davis in the bottom half and took a 3-2 lead on Barton's sacrifice fly.

Davis (3-2) left after five innings, matching his shortest outing of the season. He had three strikeouts and two walks.

"He could never really get into any kind of a groove," Maddon said of his rookie right-hander. "He normally has a pretty good curveball and slider (but) early in the game that was part of the problem for him. Just nothing really seemed to want to work today."

Michael Wuertz, Jerry Blevins and Brad Ziegler held the lead until Bailey retired all three batters he faced in the ninth. The reigning AL rookie of the year has converted 27 straight save opportunities dating to last season, the longest active streak in the majors.

NOTES: Rays 1B Carlos Pena still needs one walk to pass Fred McGriff on the team's career list. Pena currently has 305. ... Oakland is 9-3 in day games, tops in the majors. ... Barlett is batting .444 with runners in scoring position. ... The A's are the only team in the majors without a blown save this season. ... Sweeney has reached base safely in 27 of his past 29 games.

It's time for Oakland A's pitcher Dallas Braden to lay off New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez

John Harper, New York Daily News

BOSTON - Apparently this Dallas Braden character didn't get the memo: open season on Alex Rodriguez is over. He'll never be as respected around baseball as Derek Jeter, and he'll always have to wear the steroids scarlet letter, but the days of him being an easy target ended last November.

A-Rod hit in the clutch and helped deliver a championship for the Yankees, and along the way he basically shut his mouth and dedicated himself to winning in a team-oriented way changed the way teammates thought about him.

From all indications, he hasn't gone back to his old ways, to when he seemed to be more interested in pursuing celebrity status than championships, so what's the problem?

Braden didn't care for Rodriguez running across his mound a few weeks ago. OK, fine, even though it's hard to find anyone who had ever heard of that as one of baseball's unwritten rules.

The A's pitcher had his say at the time and it seemed born of genuine emotion, in a way that made you respect the guy as a competitor.

But now he just seems to be looking for attention or something. He's out of line insinuating, as he did this week, that a fight is brewing if and when he faces A-Rod in July, the next time the teams meet.

First of all, if Braden wants to be a tough guy, in the old-school manner of Bob Gibson or Don Drysdale, why doesn't he just drill Rodriguez in the ribs next time he faces him rather than tell the world about it two months ahead of time?

"There are things that are going to have to happen," Braden told CSN Bay Area on Wednesday. "Out of respect to my teammates, out of respect to the game. I think he's probably garnered a new respect for the unwritten rules and the people who hold them close to their game. But I think you're right, we don't do much talking in the 209."

We don't do much talking in the 209?

How can you take a guy seriously who refers to the area code where he lives, in Stockton, Calif., as if to explain why you shouldn't mess with him?

Braden went on to essentially call Rodriguez a "fool" for the crack he made at the time of the incident, when he laughed off the A's pitcher as someone "with a handful of wins" in the big leagues.

Finally, Braden took the prima donna angle on Rodriguez.

"He's an individualistic player," Braden said. "He plays for the name on the back of the jersey, not the front. I don't know if he's noticed, but he doesn't have a name on the back over there so he should play for the name on the front."

This stuff would have been timely five years ago, when Curt Schilling and the Red Sox were pounding A-Rod partly for the famous slap play in the 2004 ALCS and partly for being quoted that winter intimating that he works harder at being great than everybody else in baseball.

It even would have been somewhat timely a year ago, when Rodriguez was fresh off being outed as a steroids user and ridiculed for doing that magazine photo shoot in which he kissed himself in the mirror.

But he made the effort to change his image last season and, with his achievements tainted by the steroids admission, A-Rod seemed to find joy in actually caring more about winning than his legacy. As a result, he became less of an outsider and more one of the boys in the clubhouse, and earned his made-man status with all of his clutch hits in the postseason.

You only have to watch how Jeter interacts with him, without a hint of the cold shoulder he once gave him, to understand how much different life is for Rodriguez as a Yankee these days.

He did the smart thing Friday, refusing to take the bait from Braden and get into a war of words.

Rodriguez did slight Braden again, saying he wasn't going to "extend his 15 minutes of fame." Apparently he couldn't resist at least one dig, but it seems fair to say Braden had that one coming.

And it's worth noting that, even during his Madonna days, A-Rod never referred to himself by his area code.

Shh, don't tell anyone, but A's discovered that Sheets was tipping his pitches

Bob Nightengale, USA Today, 5/8/2010

The Oakland A's didn't want to talk about it publicly, but ever so secretly, knew exactly what had been wrong with Ben Sheets.

He was tipping his pitches.

The A's were convinced of it. Just watch, they secretly said, and you'll see the difference in Sheets, the A's told Daily Pitch this week.

Sheets goes out Saturday, faces the best team in baseball in the Tampa Bay Rays, and shuts them down, leading the A's to a 4-2 victory.

Sheets yielded four hits and two earned runs in 6 1/3 innings, striking out eight, in his finest performance of the season. He retired 14 of the final 16 batters he faced. He had three 1-2-3 innings after producing just four the entire season.

The curveball, the same one that the opposition was crushing in the last two starts_7-for-12 with five extra-base hits_was back. He constantly threw his curve, resulting in his most strikeouts since July 9, 2008.

The difference, this time, was obvious.

He was not tipping his pitches.

Simple as that.

Just don't get the A's to publicly admit it.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Sacramento offense knocks their Sox off

By Kevin Poveda / Sacramento River Cats

The Sacramento River Cats were able to get things going at home, as they came from behind and beat the Colorado Springs Sky Sox 16-5 on Saturday night at Raley Field.

Sacramento starting pitcher Clayton Mortenson got off to a rough start, allowing three of the first four batters to reach base in the first inning. It would only get worse for Mortenson, as catcher Chris Iannetta followed with a grand slam to left field on a 1-0 count.

Fortunately for the River Cats, Colorado Springs starting pitcher Kurt Birkins didn't start the game on a hot note either. Sacramento lead-off man Corey Wimberley singled in the first before Birkins allowed the next four River Cats batters to reach with three singles and a walk.

Birkins didn't last long enough to face every batter, allowing six runs off five hits without recording an out. Right-hander Matt Wilhite relieved Birkins and closed the first inning with two pop outs and a strikeout.

The River Cats extended their lead to 16-5 throughout the next five innings as every River Cat starter recorded a hit, and all but one contributed with an RBI. Five River Cats had multi-hit games, including third baseman Steve Tolleson and second baseman Eric Sogard, who extended their hitting streaks to 11 and 12. River Cats left fielder Jack Cust continued to play well, going 3-for-4 with a double, three runs and two RBIs. Sacramento recorded 16 hits in all, and tied its season high for runs in a game.

The victory at home, in front of a sold out crowd of 14,014 (Raley Field's second of the season), was a much needed victory for the River Cats, as they have struggled to get victories at Raley Field thus far this season. Prior to Saturday's game, Sacramento had lost four of its last five games at home, including a game in which the Salt Lake Bees come back from an 8-3 deficit.

The Sacramento River Cats continue their four-game series with the Colorado Springs Sky Sox on Mother's Day at Raley Field with a game time of 1:05 p.m.

Injuries and Errors Hurt Hounds In Loss

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

It seemed fitting that Thursday night's losing pitcher, Derrick Gordon, lowered his earned run average by almost two points en route to the "L."

Gordon was the victim of two errors on one play, with the miscues leading to a pair of unearned runs that broke a 1-1 tie. That would be the ballgame, as the Corpus Christi Hooks snapped a 5-game losing streak to the RockHounds with a 3-1 win in front of 4,084 at Citibank Ballpark Thursday night.

After a one-out walk to Koby Clemens, Hooks designated hitter Jimmy Van Ostrand singled to center with Clemens moving as far as second. Matt Sulentic bobbled the ball in center just long enough for Clemens to move to third. 'Hounds shortstop Yung-Chi Chen then tried to catch Van Ostrand off the bag at first, but threw the ball away. Clemens scored and Van Ostrand moved all the way around to third as the throw went out of play. A sacrifice fly then scored him with second run. Factor out the errors and neither run would have scored. Ouch.

In the first inning, Jemile Weeks was injured running to first base and left the game. Ouch.

Starter Carlos Hernandez struggled. He allowed just one run on three hits (two of them infield singles), but didn't appear to be at 100% and departed (nothing definitive as to why) after just 3.0 innings. Ouch.

Then came the errors. Ouch.

The only good news was the return of reliever Jared Lansford, who had last pitched April 23. While not on the D-L, "Lanny" had been sidelined with tightness in his throwing arm. He threw a 1-2-3 eighth inning with two strikeouts.

The Corpus Christi bullpen was ridiculously good in wrapping the game up. Henry Villar and Danny Meszaros combined for 3.0 innings, allowing no runs, no hits and one walk with seven strikeouts. Both are considered top 30 prospects in the Houston Astros' organization.

The 'Hounds conclude their quick, 4-game home stand Friday night, facing Corpus Christi Thursday (Cap Night) with the first pitch set for 7:00. The RockHounds then travel to Frisco for their first meetings of the season against the RoughRiders, a series running Saturday through Tuesday in the Metroplex.

Ports Snap Skid With 5-4 Win In Extras

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - It took some extra time, but ultimately it was worth the wait. The Stockton Ports, after blowing a three-run lead in the seventh inning at Sam Lynn Ballpark, came back in the 10th inning and scored a run that would ultimately help them snap a three-game losing streak as the Ports beat the Bakersfield Blaze by a final of 5-4. The series is now even at a game apiece heading into Sunday's doubleheader.

Ports starter Anivoris Ramirez, after suffering through at 0-5 start to his season, struggled early on, but ultimately showed tremendous resiliency as the game went on. Ramirez gave up a leadoff single to David Paisano to start the top of the first, followed by a walk to Davis Stoneburner. Two batters later, the Blaze were on the board as Mike Bianucci lined a single to center, scoring Paisano and putting the Blaze up 1-0.

Ramirez, however, pitched around a one-out error made in the second and a one-out error in the third as Grant Green mishandled what could've been a double-play ball. Despite allowing the lone run in the first, Ramirez would have the Blaze strand five total baserunners over the first three innings.

Ramirez' containment of Bakersfield's offense paid off as Stockton took their first lead in the fourth. With Green at third and one out, Mike Spina brought him in with a sac-fly to right to tie the game at one. Jeremy Barfield followed with a solo home run to left, his third of the season to give the Ports a 2-1 advantage.

Stockton's offense stayed with it in the fifth and added a two-out run. With Kala Ka'aihue at second after a walk and a stolen base, Shane Keough doubled to left-center to make it 3-1.

Ramirez would go on to have far and away his best outing of the season, leaving with a chance to earn his first win but ultimately receiving a no-decision. The right-hander tossed six full innings, allowing just one run on four hits while striking out four and walking two.

The Ports chased Blaze starter Michael Main from the ballgame in the seventh. With one out, Ka'aihue doubled to left and would steal third. The double knocked Main from the contest and Bakersfield brought in right-hander Cody Eppley. Eppley, with two down and two strikes on Green, uncorked a wild pitch that allowed Ka'aihue to score from third and give the Ports a 4-1 edge.

All four Ports runs that scored from inning's 1-7 were charged to Main who received a no-decision, going 6.1 innings and allowing six hits while striking out four.

Bakersfield's big surge of the contest came in the last of the seventh. Scott Hodsdon came out of the bullpen to start the inning for the Ports, and on an 0-2 pitch hit pinch-hitter Jake Kaase in the foot to put the leadoff man aboard. Paisano followed with an infield single, and Stoneburner drew a walk to load the bases with nobody out. Hodsdon then hit Engel Beltre to bring in Kaase and make it 4-2. Bianucci followed with a single to left that brought home Paisano and made it 4-3.

Bianucci's hit chased Hodsdon from the game and brought Trey Barham in from the bullpen. Barham would record back-to-back strikeouts of Mitch Hilligoss and Erik Morrison, but yield a four-pitch walk to Doug Hogan that forced in the tying run. He'd get Tommy Mendonca to ground to third to end the inning.

All three runs in the inning were charged to Hodsdon who failed to record an out. Barham worked just the seventh and retired three of the four hitters he faced.

Bakersfield had a chance to win the game in the last of the ninth. With Paul Smyth (1-1) on the hill, the Blaze got a one-out double from Hilligoss. After an intentional walk to Morrison, a strikeout of Hogan and a walk drawn by Mendonca, the Bakersfield had the bases full with two down. Smyth, however, would bear down and get Kaase to fly to left to send the game into extra innings.

The Ports pushed the eventual winning run across in the 10th. With one out, Stephen Parker knocked his first hit of the series, a double to left off Blaze reliever Corey Young (1-1). Young would then walk Spina and Barfield to load the bases. After a visit from Blaze manager Bill Hasselman, Young was left on the hill to face Petey Paramore, who drew a bases-loaded walk to bring Parker in and make it 5-4.

Young would take his first loss of the year, going 1.1 innings and allowing a run on two hits.

Smyth would finish strong and survive a final Blaze rally in the 10th. Paisano led off the inning with a single and was sacrificed to second by Stoneburner. With the tying run in scoring position, Smyth recorded back-to-back strikeouts of Beltre and Bianucci to end the ballgame.

Following their extra-innings contest, the Ports and Blaze will play a doubleheader on Sunday. Two seven-inning games will begin at noon with first pitch of Game 1 (there will be a half-hour break between games). In the first game, Justin Murray (2-1, 3.38 ERA) will take the hill, opposed by right-hander Carlos Pimentel (3-1, 4.26 ERA).

Marks, Cougars Blank Chiefs

Kane County southpaw earns 1st win as team posts 1st shutout

GENEVA, III. – With a 5-0 victory Saturday night against the Peoria Chiefs in front of 6,885 fans at Elfstrom Stadium, the Kane County Cougars earned their first shutout win of the season. Justin Marks tossed six innings to earn his first win, Bo Schultz handled the next two and Josh Lansford wrapped it up, as the Cougars evened the three-game series and got back to .500 and within four games of first place.

In addition to his first win, Marks (1-3) posted his first quality start of the year. He scattered five hits -- all singles -- and walked two while fanning five. He was given three quick runs of support in the bottom of the first. Leonardo Gil drew a bases-loaded walk against Jonathan Nagel (0-2), and Franklin Hernandez cracked a two-out, two-run single for a 3-0 score.

Gil singled in Tyreace House in the sixth for his team-best 20th RBI, and Mike Gilmartin doubled home Hernandez in the seventh to account for the 5-0 final. The Cougars' offense totaled nine hits, drew nine walks and never went 1-2-3.

The Cougars (15-15) and Chiefs (19-11) conclude the set Sunday afternoon at 1 CT. Rob Gilliam (1-1, 3.13) will face Su-Min Jung (4-0, 0.78). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and online at www.kccougars.com, with pregame coverage starting at 12:45 p.m.