

# RAYS CLIPS



May 9, 2010

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## Tampa Bay Rays' bats quieted in rare road loss to Oakland Athletics

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

*The staples of good starting pitching and clutch hitting fall short in a rare road loss.*

OAKLAND, Calif. - The Rays had done so well on the road, become so comfortable in their routine - win, play loud music, make plans to go out - that the quiet and hushed tones in their clubhouse after Saturday's 4-2 loss to the A's seemed so stark and unusual.

"In a good way, I guess," Evan Longoria said. "We're not used to losing."

In winning 13 of their first 14 road games, and 22 of 29 overall, the Rays had done a lot of things right. So in a way, they looked at Saturday's game as one of those days when things just didn't work out as well.

"We just couldn't get 'er done today," manager Joe Maddon said. "It's not going to happen every night. I still like the battle, and I like the effort."

The starting pitching that had been so good wasn't, as Wade Davis fought his way through five innings to keep the score close but ended with the loss, the first by a starter in more than two weeks, an amazing stretch going back to April 23. It was the fourth loss (against 18 wins) by a starter all season.

"It's pretty frustrating to get the loss right there," Davis said. "Especially because we've been playing so well. You want to go out there and do as well as you can."

Davis wasn't horrible, he just wasn't as sharp as he had been. He allowed two runs in the first, another in the second, six hits and two walks overall while pitching himself out of the game after five by throwing 99 pitches.

"He never really got into any kind of groove," Maddon said. "Nothing really wanted to seem to work for him."

"I just wasn't getting those quick outs," Davis said. "And it cost me a lot of pitches."

And the hitting that had been so timely so often failed them, most obviously in the seventh. Down 3-2, the Rays had a prime opportunity with runners on second and third with one out and two of the AL's top-six hitters with runners in scoring position coming up, and they still couldn't get anything out of it. Or the ball even out of the infield.

"We just couldn't get that clutch hit today," Jason Bartlett said.

Bartlett, who was sixth with a .440 average, had the first shot but grounded to third. John Jaso, breaking on contact, was caught in a rundown and tagged out.

Then Carl Crawford, who'd ranked fourth at .450, went down swinging against lefty reliever Jerry Blevins. Crawford also flied out with two on to kill a second-inning rally after the Rays had tied the score at 2.

"Just one of them days," Crawford said.

The loss put at least a temporary hold on the research quantifying the Rays' record start and, with the Yankees doing nearly as well, put them in jeopardy of falling out of first place, their AL East lead down to a half game.

Only twice have the Rays lost two in a row - and no more than two - so the focus shifted quickly to how they will respond, with unbeaten opening day starter James Shields on the mound in today's matinee series finale.

"The good thing is everyone understands we're going to lose, we can't win every game, but (today) is the real test," Longoria said. "See where we're at resolve-wise."

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May 8, 2010

## Willy Aybar to DH more, Pat Burrell less for Tampa Bay Rays

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. - The specifics remain open-ended, subject more than anything to the characteristics of the opposing pitcher. But manager **Joe Maddon** acknowledged Saturday a plan to use **Willy Aybar** more often at DH, at a minimum against all left-handed starters, and **Pat Burrell** less.

"I think it's prudent for us to keep Willy active," Maddon said. "He's gotten a lot of big hits. He's starting to look to me like he did a couple years ago. So with that I want all of us to take advantage of Willy right now. So, anyway, we'll keep popping him in there a little bit more frequently."

Burrell - hitting .222 after another hitless day Saturday - was informed of the plan by Maddon and took it relatively well.

"Things are going pretty good around here, so it's tough to argue," Burrell said. "I haven't been swinging the bat all that well. Of course I want to play. He knows that, but his job is to do whatever he can to win. And Willy's certainly been producing when he gets the opportunity. ...

"You want to keep everything positive, and the way things are going with the pitching and the timely hitting we've been getting, you certainly want that to continue. With that being said, when I get the opportunities, I have to make the most of them."

Aybar, hitting .379 (11-for-29) over his past nine games and .293 overall, figures to be in the lineup today against Oakland LHP **Dallas Braden** and Tuesday against Angels LHP **Scott Kazmir**. Of the Rays' first 13 games against lefties, Aybar started seven and Burrell six.

"It just depends on the other teams' pitching," Maddon said. "Right now we're just seeing such a glut of lefties. At some point, if we keep winning vs. lefties, the lefty may go away. We may not get stacked with so many, then that's going to open it up in a different way."

Another option at some point, and sooner if another big-league team (Seattle?) expresses interest since he has an out clause, could be **Hank Blalock**, hitting .388 with a .989 OPS at Triple-A Durham.

**PAIN IN THE LEG:** 3B **Evan Longoria** was hobbling after fouling a ball off his left shin in his final at-bat, but he had it treated and wrapped and said he expects no problems today.

Longoria wants to play every day this season, adding to his streak of the final 88 of last year. "It should be fine," he said. "I'm still chasing the Iron Horse and Cal (Ripken)."

**PITCHING IN:** RHP **James Shields** kicks off the seventh turn through the rotation today determined to get the Rays back on track with a strong start.

"We have the ability to go out there any given day after a loss, that's how good of a squad we have," Shields said. "It's definitely important to try to win the series right now. That's our goal in each series."

Thus far, the Rays are 7-1-1 in series play.

**MINOR MATTERS:** A decision should be coming soon on when and where Cuban OF/1B **Leslie Anderson** starts his minor-league career, likely Class A Charlotte. ... Durham RHP **Jeremy Hellickson** goes for his sixth win today. CF **Desmond Jennings** returned to the lineup after being limited to defense and baserunning for a week due to left shoulder tightness and went 2-for-4 with a double, an RBI and his sixth stolen base. ... SS **Tim Beckham** hit his second homer of the season for Charlotte but is batting .139 in 19 games with 27 strikeouts.

**MISCELLANY:** RHP **Matt Garza** wasn't with the team Saturday, taking a prearranged and approved trip to Los Angeles for a family function. He is still scheduled to start Monday in Anaheim. ... The Rays will use pink bats and wear pink sweatbands and uniform ribbons as part of MLB's salute to Mother's Day. ... Maddon raved about C **Dioner Navarro**'s overall play Friday and his "great instincts for the game."

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May 8, 2010

## No reason to think Tampa Bay Rays can't continue to play close to this level

By Gary Shelton, Times Sports Columnist

They cannot keep this up. Time after time, night after night, you tell yourself this. And then the Rays go out and win another game.

They cannot keep this up. Balls will get lost in the lights, and grounders will take bad hops, and some nights, the opponent will be pretty good, too. You know this. Baseball has its own gravity, and throughout history it has made a pretty firm statement that nobody - *nobody* - wins at this rate over the course of a season.

They cannot keep this up. Sooner or later, bad things are bound to happen because, in baseball, bad things always do. There is a lot of season left and a lot of games against the bankers of New York. Hitters will go into slumps, and umpires will make questionable calls, and sometimes, the ball will scoot between your knees.

No, you remind yourself again, the Rays cannot keep up this staggering pace.

Then again, why can't they?

By now, this is more than just a good start. This is a good team. Despite Saturday's loss, through 30 games the Rays have left skid marks and broken sound barriers. They are moving faster than a 16-year-old with a new car. They have won at home and away, in daylight and in darkness, in warm weather and in cold, in close games and in runaways. Best of all, they have won in Boston.

So remind me again:

Why can't they keep on speeding?

When things are going this well, it is human nature to warn yourself that it cannot last. Sooner or later, you acknowledge that the ride will end. It's a form of self-protection. It's a piece of logic.

Yet, the most impressive part of this Rays start is that it doesn't look as if this is a team playing over its head. These pitchers *ought* to befuddle hitters. These hitters *should* score runs. No, maybe the Rays won't win 22 of their next 30, but why shouldn't they win, say, 18? Maybe 20? That's a pretty good pace, too.

"I see no reason why we can't keep it up," Rays manager Joe Maddon said by telephone Saturday. "Obviously, winning at this rate is something of an anomaly. But if we pay attention to the process - our pregame work, our preparation, running out balls - there is no reason we can't sustain success."

Ask yourself this: Of all of the Rays, who do you think is over-achieving?

Evan Longoria, maybe? He's a great player, yes, but he probably won't finish the season hitting .333.

Carl Crawford, perhaps? Crawford is playing as if the accountants of every team in baseball are watching, which, let's face it, they are. He's hitting .316, which is 20 points higher than his career average, so that number is probably coming down some, too.

Still, when a guy is playing for his next contract, that's a pretty good incentive. Maybe that's why it didn't bother anyone when *Sports Illustrated* quoted (or misquoted, if you believe Crawford) him as saying he was gone at the end of the year. To be honest, that's what most of us think. If the Rays are going to have a \$60 million payroll, how can they justify paying a quarter of it to their leftfielder? Answer: They can't.

In other words, it doesn't matter what Crawford says. It matters how he plays. And right now, he's lights out.

Maddon? Some will suggest that he's the guy performing over his head. It has always amused me, this nitpicking of a manager who has won more than any other in franchise history.

Even with the Rays owning the best record in baseball, the e-mail is packed with those who think Maddon is on a lucky streak. There are those, it seems, who think Maddon had nothing to do with the success of '08 and everything to do with the disappointment of '09. Hey, you can't have it both ways. Either managers matter, or they don't.

Yes, Maddon rests players. Every manager does. Yes, he pulls pitchers. And so far, those pitchers have stayed fairly healthy. Also, he has the best record in baseball. In a bottom-line business, that's a pretty good argument.

Who else can you accuse of overachieving? Willie Aybar? John Jaso? Reid Brignac?

The thing is, for every player off to a good start, you can find another one who should increase his batting average as the season goes along. Ben Zobrist, for instance. And Carlos Peña. And B.J. Upton.

"If you look at our batting average as a group, we're probably underachieving," Maddon said.

Given it all, why can't the Rays play, say, .700 baseball? Maybe even .710 or so?

Back in 2001, remember, the Mariners played .716. In 1954, the Indians played .721 ball. The '98 Yankees played .704.

So why not the Rays?

So far, they have won 22 out of 30. You know how good that is? The 1927 Yankees, Murderer's Row, didn't do that. The '34 Cardinals, the Gas House Gang, didn't do that. The '75 Reds, the Big Red Machine, didn't do that. The '69 Mets, the Amazing Mets, didn't do that. (Those teams won 21, 18, 18 and 14 games of their first 30, respectively.)

Here's a statistic for you. Of the 16 teams that won 21 of their first 28 games, all but three made the playoffs that year.

Here's another stat: None of those teams had to play this many times against the Yankees, who are almost as hot as the Rays, or the Red Sox, who are aging but still talented.

Is a slump inevitable?

History suggests that, at some point, the Rays will hit a patch of turbulence.

Take the '66 Orioles, for instance. Baltimore won the World Series. Yet, after Aug. 1, the Orioles were a 28-28 team.

It happens. In 1969, the Cubs were on their way before going 9-18 after Sept. 1. In 2005, the White Sox got off to a great start then stumbled their way to a 27-27 record in July and August. In 1972, the Mets started off 23-7 then went 34-47 over the next three months. The '02 Red Sox were 23-7, too, but they were only 10-16 in June and only 12-15 in August.

So, yeah, things happen. Players get hurt and pitchers go into funks and teams lose their way. In baseball, it's always easier to cool off than to stay hot.

On the other hand, have you seen these Rays lately?

At this point, speed bumps wouldn't slow them down.

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May 8, 2010

## Rays Tales: The Ex-Factor as Scott Kazmir prepares to face former teammates

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

Sure, **Scott Kazmir** was saying over the phone the other day he'd marked the date and had been eagerly looking forward and whatnot to his first chance to face his former Rays teammates. "Until," he said, laughing, "I saw these guys play this year." No matter if the Rays are smoking or struggling, Tuesday's game is going to be different. Kazmir had been a part of the Rays since 2004, playing with and growing up with many of their current stars, before being traded, surprisingly, last Aug. 29, and he's still close with many of them.

"It's going to be weird facing these guys," Kazmir said. "I've talked to quite a few of them already. It's just going to be weird when guys step up to the plate. I'm going to have a hard time not laughing, not smiling, especially **B.J. (Upton)**, his closest friend). But you've got to stick to business. No matter how hard it is."

"It *is* going to be a little weird," Upton said. "But he's got that different uniform on now. It'll be good once the game is over."

Kazmir said he has settled in well in Anaheim. Working with current Angels and former Rays pitching coach **Mike Butcher**, Kazmir - and doesn't this sound familiar - has overhauled his mechanics, going to more of an overhand style that he says produces "a lot more action, a lot more velocity" on his pitches and helps him throw his slider with more confidence.

He's looking forward to showing his ex-mates how he's doing.

"It seems like it would be inevitable," he said. "I just didn't think it would be this soon."

### The trade

- Kazmir is 4-4, 3.94 in 11 starts for the Angels, plus three postseason appearances.

- INF **Sean Rodriguez** is hitting .208, playing part time for the Rays.
- LHP **Alex Torres** is 3-2, 3.41 for Double-A Montgomery, and could be a late-season bullpen booster.
- INF **Matt Sweeney** is hitting .275/4/11 for Class A Charlotte.

### The finances

By trading Kazmir, the Rays saved the \$24 million-plus remaining on his contract. The \$8 million salary (slightly less than their current five starters make combined) they didn't have to pay him in theory is going instead to closer **Rafael Soriano**.

### The history

Kazmir was 55-44, 3.92 over parts of six seasons as a Ray and still ranks as their all-time leader in wins, losses, ERA, starts (144), innings (834), strikeouts (874). He started their first - and thus far last - World Series game. **Interesting excerpt of the week**

From **Tom Verducci** on SI.com: "Yes, it's not too early to say that the Rays are for real. They are so good that they have interjected urgency to Boston's season in early May. The Red Sox have already had one bad month. Another will doom them. They have to play .600 ball for five months to have a chance - not impossible, but the sword of **Damocles** will be hanging over them. For all their early problems, Boston's biggest problem is the Rays."

### Rays Rumbblings

There could there be an interesting turf war at the Trop: the Rays are deciding whether to switch next season to Astroturf, which has a sponsorship deal with MLB, or stay with FieldTurf, which just signed 3B **Evan Longoria** as its spokesman. ... After late great Tigers broadcaster **Ernie Harwell** retired to his Florida home in 2002, then-Rays owner **Vince Naimoli** tried to get him to work some of their games. ... The last batter in the last Tigers game Harwell called? **Carlos Peña**, who struck out. "I wish I would have at least grounded out so Ernie had more to say," Peña said. ... Tentative title for the **Jonah Keri** book coming out next spring on the 2008 season: *The Extra 2%: How Wall Street Thinking Took a Major League Baseball Team from Worst to First*. ... Did the Rays know something about 2B **Aki Iwamura**, who is hitting .194 for the Pirates and is being criticized for his defense and lack of speed? ... Did they miss something about RHP **Mitch Talbot**, who is 3-2, 2.88 for the Indians and battling **Wade Davis** for early AL rookie of the year attention? Wait a bit on that one. Plus, where would he pitch? ... The *New York Post's* **Joel Sherman** writes that the Rays should move - either to downtown Tampa or Connecticut.

### Got a minute? John Jaso

#### Best meal you can make?

Barbecue ribs on the grill.

#### Karaoke song if you had to?

*The Devil Went Down to Georgia.*

#### Time-killer at the mall?

I hate the mall.

#### For Mother's Day, best mom sports moment?

When I was like 12 she just took me midnight bowling, spur of the moment.

#### Dream date?

(Actress) Jennifer Love Hewitt.

## Rays suffer rare road loss in Oakland

By ROGER MOONEY | The Tampa Tribune

The visiting clubhouse had an eerie feel to it Saturday as the Rays filed in after losing their first road game in more than half a month. There was actually a fog hanging over the room.

Oh, wait, that was from the postgame steaks cooking in the kitchen off the main room.

Still, the lack of music and the lack of smiles made for an odd setting after the Rays' 4-2 loss to the A's, only their second setback away from Tropicana Field this season.

"Yeah, but in a good way," Evan Longoria said. "We're not used to losing. Everybody understands we're going to lose. We can't win every game. (Today) is the real test, see where we're at resolve-wise."

The Rays have a chance to win their fifth consecutive road series when they face left-hander Dallas Braden in the finale of this three-game series today.

Saturday's loss snapped the Rays' five-game winning streak and their six-game road winning streak. It also cooled, for a day at least, their start to the season. They are 22-8, including 13-2 on the road.

"It's not going to happen every night," Manager Joe Maddon said.

Wade Davis became the first Rays starter to take a loss since April 23. The rookie right-hander struggled through the first two innings, when he faced 12 batters and allowed three runs on four hits and two walks.

"It's pretty frustrating to get the loss, especially since we've been playing so well," Davis said.

Davis said he was able to locate his fastball, something he couldn't do when he beat the A's on April 27, but he couldn't find his curveball, a pitch that served him well that night at the Trop.

"He could never really get into any groove, but he kept them to three runs despite all that," Maddon said.

The A's got to Davis for two runs in the first, which ended a stretch of 23 innings in which the Rays did not allow an earned run.

But the Rays tied it against Ben Sheets in the top of the second. B.J. Upton walked, went to second on a grounder to short, stole third and scored on a two-out opposite-field single by John Jaso. Jaso scored on a double by Jason Bartlett.

The A's scored again off Davis in the second on a sacrifice fly by Daric Barton after they loaded the bases with one out. Davis settled down after that, but so did Sheets.

"(Sheets) found his rhythm, and Wade just didn't," Maddon said.

Sheets, who allowed eight runs in four innings when he faced Davis back at the Trop, allowed those two runs and struck out eight in 6<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> innings.

The Rays had a chance against the A's bullpen in the seventh inning, but they couldn't break through during two at-bats with runners on second and third.

First, Bartlett grounded to third base, and Jaso, who was on third and broke for home on contact, was tagged out after a rundown.

Reid Brignac, who was on second after doubling down the first-base line, moved to third and Bartlett went to second during the rundown.

"(Jaso) did everything right," Maddon said. "We took a shot. He gets in a rundown, and we get runners at second and third."

Carl Crawford, who began the day batting .450 with runners in scoring position, struck out to end the threat. He had also flied out to center for the final out of the second inning, leaving runners at second and third.

"Just one of those days," Crawford said.

Now it's back to the top of the rotation and James Shields, who has not lost this season. Shields has said all year the strength of the rotation is the

fact that they can pick each other up, following an off outing with a good one.

That's why the Rays have not had a losing streak of more than two games and why they are in first place in the AL East.

Now it's his turn.

"We know when we lose a game, the next day's starter as a chance to flip it for us," Maddon said, "and Shields has been pitching well and I do anticipate another good start"

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## **Rays' success starts on the mound**

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

OAKLAND, Calif. As the Rays make their way down the West Coast, Manager Joe Maddon and the players are answering the same question: What gives?

They are off to one of the best starts in the past 20 years, and their record away from Tropicana Field sends the team's public relations staff reaching for the record book night after night after night.

Carlos Peña used the word "wiser" when answering the question after the Rays completed the sweep in Seattle.

"I think the team, we don't look at our record too much because the propensity is to maybe rest and enjoy it too much," he 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."

Maddon said the players are so focused on game preparation that they have little time to focus on the weather or any other issue that could knock them off their game.

"We are controlling the controllables," he said. "Those other things, we're just going out and taking them on head on. I love it."

We can sit for hours and dissect what's going right, Maddon's hunches to play this player and rest that player and Willy Aybar's swing path against left-handed pitchers, but the underlying theme to this season is, the Rays' starters are pitching out of their minds.

And that's by design.

James Shields, Matt Garza, Jeff Niemann, David Price and Wade Davis had dinner in Boston last month, the night before the Rays four-game Fenway Park sweep.

"We told each other we're going to stick this out, because if we're going to go to the playoffs, it's on us," Shields said. "It starts with the starting pitching. All the position players feed off of us."

Sometimes, the answers are just 60 feet, 6 inches in front of us.

The rotation is the best in the American League. Price is fifth in the league with a 1.91 ERA, Garza is ninth with a 2.09 ERA and Niemann's 2.23 ERA is 10th. As a group, starters and relievers, the Rays entered Saturday's game with the best ERA in the league at 2.74.

"If you want to make it to the promised land, this is the way we have to do it, because hitters can hit all they want, but if we're not shutting the team down, if we're not pitching the way we're pitching, we're losing ballgames," Shields said. "You saw that last year a little bit, and obviously in the past. So far, so good."

Shields said he had an idea this was developing a few years ago when he saw the competitive nature of the group during spring training. They are tight, they are competitive and they push each other.

Shields is quick to share his experience with the others, especially Davis and Price. He recalled a batting practice talk with Davis during the last homestand, when the rookie wondered why he had trouble pitching deeper in games. Shields mentioned a few tough spots Davis had been in during his previous outing and suggested ways to negotiate them in future games â "use an off-speed pitch or be more aggressive.



After Friday's victory, Price didn't hide his displeasure with his four walks. Shields planned to talk to Price about that before Saturday's game.

Yet, Shields said the fact that Price was not pleased with a night that he went 72/3 innings and did not allow an earned run is a perfect example of the collective thinking of the rotation.

"He knows he shouldn't be (walking batters)," Shields said. "He's capable of better, and that's great because he's striving for the best, and that's how you become the best pitcher in the big leagues, that's how you become the best staff in the big leagues. You overachieve. You have goals and try to reach those goals."

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## **Maddon not concerned as bats cool off a bit**

The Tampa Tribune

Now that the Rays have found a patch of sun to play their games in, their bats seem to have gone a little cold.

1B Carlos Pena was 0-for-4 in Saturday's 4-2 loss to the A's, and he has one hit in his past 34 at-bats, dropping his average to .189. CF B.J. Upton has three hits in his past 28 at-bats after going 1-for-4.

The 10 combined hits in the first two games of this series are among the reasons the Rays scored four runs in Friday's win and two in Saturday's loss.

"We have not gotten a ton of hits. Oakland's got a nice staff, and this ballpark, when it's a little bit cool, the ball is not going anywhere," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "Some balls were hit relatively well, they just hung up. You have to stay on the line here. Line drives and hard ground balls benefit you. ...

"I'm not at all concerned. We'll get our hits."

Longo is fine after fouling ball off leg

3B Evan Longoria fouled a ball off his left shin Saturday.

"The shin guard never works," Longoria said, noting the ball struck him just above the plastic protector.

But despite the pain and the gauze wrap around the bruise when he left the clubhouse, he said he expects to be in the lineup today, as he has been for every game this season.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Still chasing the Iron Horse (Lou Gehrig) and Cal (Ripken)."

Price not pleased

LHP David Price was particularly hard on himself after his performance Friday night, and he was the winning pitcher.

"I wasn't too impressed with my pitching," he said after allowing an unearned run in 72/3 innings of the Rays' 4-1 win.

According to his teammates, that's just Price being Price.

"He might be the biggest competitor I've ever met in my life," LHP Randy Choate said.

"If you're walking fast, he'll walk faster than you," RHP James Shields said.

Price was upset with the four walks he issued.

Maddon said Price's postgame comments likely stemmed from not being able to close out the eighth inning when he walked one batter and allowed an infield single to the next hitter after getting ahead 0-2 to both.

"The only thing I can glean from that is, if you learn one lesson it's that to think about one moment at a time and not really think too far ahead," Maddon said. "And I can almost see that toward the end, where he was trying to get that last out so bad he started to speed up his process a bit."

The Price flop?

Price and C Dioner Navarro were involved in a bizarre play during the eighth inning Friday when Price flipped over Navarro as if he were competing

in the high jump as Navarro bent down to pick up a bunt by Oakland's Rajai Davis a few feet in front of the plate.

"As someone pointed out, we are quite athletic, but that is one particular play I'd like to avoid," Maddon said. "It's Navi's play all the way, because if a pitcher is coming that hard to home plate and has to pick up the ball and throw it to first base, it's going to be very difficult to get that out, and Navi is very good at handling those plays and he has a good arm."

Navarro was able to field the ball and threw the speedy Davis out by a step.

"He was totally distracted," Maddon said. "and he made a money throw with a lot on it."

Odds and ends

The Rays and A's will swing pink bats and wear pink wrist bands today during the annual Mother's Day "Going To Bat Against Breast Cancer" campaign. ... RHP Matt Garza was not with the team Saturday because of family reasons. ... The Rays are 4-1 on this nine-game West Coast road trip. ... C John Jaso drove in Upton from third in the second inning to raise his average to .429 with runners in scoring position. ... RHP Lance Cormier pitched Saturday for only the second time in 10 games.

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May 8, 2010

## Tampa Bay Rays manager Joe Maddon says he's most happy with effort, attitude

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

Of all the things that have gone well for the Rays through the first six weeks of the season, you might be surprised by what's at the top of manager Joe Maddon's list.

- A) That his players are running hard to first base.
- B) That they're not complaining about things like the weather, travel, etc.
- C) And, oh yeah, they're off to the best start in franchise history.

In a way, that seems odd. But it's an indication of the process-oriented approach Maddon believes in.

That's why he can say, with a straight face: "If there's one takeaway I've had from this whole season to this point, the one thing that I like or I'm most proud of, is that our guys are running hard to first base. I can't say all the time, I'm saying 95 percent of the time. That's the part I've really enjoyed, and I've tried to convince our players of this - that permeates the rest of the game."

The benefit goes beyond the obvious, such as a supposedly sound defensive team like the Mariners rushing on routine plays and throwing the ball around. It's Maddon's theory - which he admits he can't prove - that players who routinely run hard are going to play better overall.

"Because you have the mental wherewithal to do that, thus you're going to play hard in the rest of your game," Maddon said, "and I think it increases your focus."

Similarly, he views the lack of complaining another sign of the players' maturity and the progress in the mental aspects of the game.

"The difference with this group," Maddon said, "is that I have not heard any griping about anything at all - period - this year, including the weather. There's been nothing about the weather, travel, food in the clubhouse, nothing. There's been no griping."

And that's important, he said, because "when you're always complaining, your focus is not on what it's supposed to be on."

For example, if the hitters are griping about the weather, they're probably not concentrating enough on the opposing pitcher.

"We're controlling the controllables," Maddon said, "and those other things we're just going out and taking them on head on - and I love it."

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## Draft diary: Washington spurned Rays last year

Posted 21h 32m ago

By [Seth Livingstone](#), USA TODAY

The [Tampa Bay Rays](#) thought enough of LeVon Washington to make him the 30th overall pick in the 2009 draft.

Washington, advised by agent [Scott Boras](#), felt confident enough in his abilities to reject Tampa Bay's offer. Originally expected to play for the [University of Florida](#), he didn't make the grade academically and spent this spring playing for [Chipola College](#), a junior college in Florida.

**GET TO KNOW:** [Chase Headley, Padres](#)

Chipola coach Jeff Johnson has no complaints.

"He played really well for us," Johnson says. "I don't know of anyone else out there like him with his bat and speed."

Washington came out of Buchholz High School in Gainesville, Fla., a school that has produced big-leaguers Andrew Miller, Marshall McDougall and Steve Lombardozzi.

Following last year's draft, Washington's father, Victor Washington told *The Gainesville Sun* that the Rays refused to budge from a slot value offer estimated between \$1.08 million and \$1.11 million and that the team refused to negotiate.

A shoulder injury that required surgery could have played a part in the Rays' reluctance to offer more. The Rays also failed to sign second-round pick Kenny Diekroeger, a high school shortstop who enrolled at Stanford.

Johnson says that Washington, 5-11, 170 pounds, is pain-free and at least 85% recovered from the torn labrum that restricted him to DH duty early this college season.

In 38 regular-season games he batted .371 with eight homers, 11 doubles, 25 RBI and a .602 slugging percentage. He was 8-for-11 on stolen-base attempts.

Although some scouts, including the Rays', have seen him as a potential second baseman, Johnson played him exclusively in center field.

"I think you have to play him there," Johnson says. "He can go-go-get-it in center field."

Washington's speed enables him to compensate on many balls even when he doesn't get a particularly great jump. He's been clocked at 6.21 for 60 meters, although Johnson says he's a tad slower from home to first because of his big left-handed swing.

"He's a real good offensive player," Johnson says. "He has quick hands and a lot of pop in his bat. And he has good plate discipline. He understands the strike zone very well."

As for his ability to play at a higher level, Johnson defers to pro scouts.

"I don't think he would have gotten drafted in the first round if people didn't think that (he could handle more advanced pitching)."

Johnson says Washington came to Chipola with a positive attitude and a good grasp for his situation.

"As far as his attitude," Johnson says, "he was not caught up in all that (hype). He understands his situation. He was glad to come back to school, and we'd be happy to have him come back again."

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## **A's win as sparkling Sheets looks like new pitcher**

[By Joe Stiglich](#)

[Oakland Tribune](#)

Posted: 05/08/2010 08:21:47 PM PDT

Updated: 05/09/2010 05:51:20 AM PDT

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

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## Sorry Yankees and Red Sox, the real beasts of the AL East are the Tampa Bay Rays

[Bill Madden](#)

Saturday, May 8th 2010, 2:49 PM

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- 

It's way too early for scoreboard watching - and yet the age-old Yankee-Red Sox hostilities at Fenway this weekend have become tempered by the [Tampa Bay Rays'](#) scary surge out of the [AL East](#) gate.

As one veteran [American League](#) exec told me in the spring: "The Rays have so much talent, all those high-ceiling, high-draft choice guys. If they ever all put it together at the same time, they could be awesome. The problem is that almost never happens and then they start breaking it up - which is what will likely happen with the Rays. The clock is ticking for them."

Apparently, the Rays are hearing it. In getting off to a best-in-baseball 22-7 start, their pitchers were leading the American League in ERA and shutouts along with the fewest walks, while their hitters were leading the league in scoring. All five of their 20-something starters had ERAs under 3.00 and eight of their regulars had double-figure RBI totals.

Their 13-1 road record matched the second-best road start of the expansion era (1961), second only to the 1984 Tigers, who got off to a 17-0 start away from home. The Rays also led the majors in both runs scored (164) and the AL fewest runs allowed (86) for a differential of 77, the best by an AL team after 28 games since the 2003 [Yankees](#).

"We feel like we're playing our game and winning the way we want to win," [Carl Crawford](#) told the [St. Petersburg Times](#) "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."

Ominous words for the Yankees and [Red Sox](#).

Because Crawford and [Carlos Pena](#) are pending free agents, Maddon knows his team needs to stay in the race. All spring, speculation persisted that the Rays would seek to trade one or both of them at the trading deadline if it looked like another season of the Yankees and Red Sox having a hammer lock on the division. A bad start, Maddon said, would only increase the Crawford-Pena distraction.

Crawford in particular is off to a career season, hitting .327 with a .392 OBP, as he is poised to cash in.

The Rays are taking a different approach at the plate this year under new hitting coach [Derek Shelton](#), and led the majors in batting with runners in scoring position (82-for-254, .323).

"We learned some good lessons from last year," Maddon said by phone from [Oakland](#) on Friday. "We got behind three teams and when you have to fight back from that, it sucks a lot of energy and it's very difficult. You watch us every day now and what you see is effort. They're all into it. The position players batting with runners in scoring position have been exceptional, and the pitchers are pounding the strike zone with first-ball fastballs, which has resulted in better command and pitching deeper into the game, making the bullpen a lot better."

## TWO OF THE BEST

Bad week for baseball with the loss of two Hall of Fame gentlemen and credits to the game in [Ernie Harwell](#) and [Robin Roberts](#). I feel privileged to have known both of them as friends, Harwell as a frequent press-box companion and Roberts as a fellow member of the [Hall of Fame Veterans Committee](#) that elected former Yankee second baseman [Joe Gordon](#) to [Cooperstown](#) two years ago. Said fellow [Hall of Famer Jim Palmer](#) of Roberts: "I roomed with Robbie my first year in [Baltimore](#) when I was 19 and he was 38. Fully knowing that I or some other young pitcher would eventually take his place, he couldn't have been a better mentor, teaching all of us the nuances of pitching. My first appearance in the big leagues, in Boston, was with the bases loaded and [Tony Conigliaro](#) at the plate. Robin got me into that predicament. I could've gotten the grand slam out of the way the first (actually second) batter I faced."

But Palmer struck out Conigliaro looking then got a double play to get out of the jam.

"That night, Robin took [Dave McNally](#) and me to dinner and picked up the check," Palmer said.

Harwell's generosity likewise knew no bounds. In the mid-'80s, in addition to being the Daily News' Yankee beat reporter, I wrote a memorabilia/collecting column for [The Sporting News](#), which Harwell would often call me about to offer his views. One Friday night when the Yankees were in [Detroit](#), I was having dinner in the [Tiger Stadium](#) press room when Harwell approached me: "Mr. Collector," he said, "I'd like to take you to lunch tomorrow, if you're not busy."

I wasn't. The next day, I met Harwell at the old London Chop House and as we were sitting down at the table, he reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

"I thought this was something you might like for your collection," he said, cryptically. "It was my first World Series game."

I opened the envelope and my jaw dropped. It was a ticket from the 1929 Philadelphia A's-[Chicago Cubs](#) World Series, and affixed to it, the 1929 A's press pin in pristine condition. When Ernie announced last summer he was dying of cancer, I called him at his house in Detroit to say goodbye, along with something else. "Do you remember giving me that 1929 World Series ticket and press pin?" I asked. "Well I just want you to know it's right here on my desk, where it's been for all these years."

It's a lasting memory and memento from a friend I'll dearly miss.

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## **New math can't justify high strikeout totals**

By Sheldon Ocker  
Beacon Journal sports writer

POSTED: 04:56 p.m. EDT, May 08, 2010

CLEVELAND: Strikeouts don't matter. We hear it all the time from baseball computer geeks.

There are complex graphs showing that strikeouts don't affect the number of runs scored one way or another. It's true, but it doesn't have to be.

Yes, the way the game is played today, the weapon of choice is the home run. Power hitters swing hard. Consequently, you have to accept their gargantuan strikeout totals to reap the benefits of the home runs.

In other words, those charts merely reveal what we already know: That's how modern baseball has evolved, mostly because owners pay more for home runs than anything else. But that's not necessarily the way the game should be played.

Is swinging hard in case you hit it the best way to attack a pitcher? We all know that it's not. Nor is there anything productive about striking out. Moreover, most home run hitters don't have to swing as hard as they can to drive balls over the fence. With a more controlled swing, their home run totals might even increase.

Yet an inordinate number of strikeouts are becoming accepted by the baseball establishment. They don't like it, but it's not really such a bad thing. How many times have I heard a bright and presumably sane baseball executive say, "Would you rather see the guy strike out or hit into a double play?"

The answer, of course, is that there are lots of other alternatives to those extremes, and for a responsible baseball "expert" to frame his response that way only insults his listener's intelligence. When is the last time a runner scored from third on a sacrifice strikeout, or a batter reached on a two-base strikeout?

But there are times when baseball people who normally shrug off strikeouts become intolerant of them. If there is a runner in scoring position, particularly on third, strikeouts suddenly become wasteful, even evil, and for obvious reasons.

The problem is that hitters who are prone to striking out can't pick their spots. They can't turn off their strikeout swing just because a runner is on second or third. Theoretically they could, but most free swingers are so accustomed to hacking away at will, they probably would strike out trying to make the adjustment.

So isn't it more sensible to frown on all strikeouts and teach hitters in high school, college and the minor leagues to temper their swings? I'm not suggesting that baseball return to the dead-ball era, when the primary goal of a hitter was to reach first base by slapping pitches all over the field. What we have now is the polar opposite of that approach, and it's far from perfect.

Is there something to gain from striking out? Unless a batter swings at strike three on a pitch that ends up bouncing to the screen, and he reaches first, there is no useful purpose to a strikeout. If a hitter makes contact, even bad contact, something beneficial might occur.

Through the end of the series against the Toronto Blue Jays, the Indians made 170 outs with runners in scoring position (excluding sacrifice bunts, which are intentional outs). Of those outs, 53 came on strikeouts, 31 percent of the total.

That means 53 times, no runner had the opportunity to advance. Inasmuch as the Tribe is 12th among American League teams in runs per game with 3.51, fractionally ahead of only the Baltimore Orioles (3.46) and the Seattle Mariners (3.4), how much more productive might it have been if 15 or 20 hitters who struck out had made contact? Of course, we'll never know.

Keep in mind that of the 170 outs with runners in scoring position, double plays accounted for only nine percent of the total.

Do strikeouts inhibit scoring, or are they statistically neutral? I guess it depends on the team.

Stat freaks will point to the Tampa Bay Rays as their model. The Rays lead the league in runs with 5.9 per game and strike out with impunity (7.7 per game). But that is hardly the whole story.

The Indians rank 13th in the league with 8.1 strikeouts per game. Toronto is the only team that strikes out more (8.3), but the Blue Jays lead the league in home runs.

So is it OK for the Jays to carry the AL banner in strikeouts? Probably not, since they average 4.8 runs a game, far fewer than the Rays, the New York Yankees (5.6), the Minnesota Twins (5.3) and the Boston Red Sox (5.0), all of whom strike out significantly less.

Twins batsmen strike out only 5.8 times a game. Could that be one reason why their offense is more efficient than that of the Blue Jays? The Yankees, also one of the more prolific scoring teams in the league, also strike out 5.8 times a game.

The Red Sox (2nd) and Yankees (4th) rank among the better home run hitting teams in the league without striking out to excess. Then there are the Indians, whose hitters continue to swing hard but rack up few longballs — witness the club's home run total, 13th worst in the AL.

It seems to me that no matter how hard you try to put strikeouts in perspective and run the numbers, rationalize the results or fall back on the latest graphs and mathematical formulas, it doesn't make a lot of sense to tolerate high strikeout totals.

But that's just me. I still play *Pac-Man*, *Galaga* and *Donkey Kong* on my computer.

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## Attendance drop not just an A's thing

John Shea

Sunday, May 9, 2010

The A's aren't the only big-league team struggling to fill seats in a down economy.

Attendance dips are being seen throughout the majors; 22 of 30 teams have smaller crowd counts, on average, than at this point last year - led by the Mets, who entered their series against the Giants with a per-game decrease of 8,930 at Citi Field, where the newness seems to be wearing off quickly.

Other significant declines: Blue Jays (6,211), Indians (5,539), Padres (4,241), Astros (3,746), Marlins (3,009), Rays (2,693), Angels (2,214), White Sox (2,104) and Diamondbacks (2,076).

The A's (1,594) didn't even make the bottom 10.

Overall, baseball's attendance is somewhat constant, but that's because of the drastic bump in Minnesota, where the opening of Target Field has prompted a per-game boost of 15,209.

The Giants are one of eight teams with an increase: 2,891.

Winning makes a difference, but only to an extent. The Rays have the majors' best record, and when the A's visited Tropicana Field - picture the Coliseum with artificial turf and a roof - each game drew fewer than 11,000.

It's a small sample size but still a concern for the commissioner's office, where **Bud Selig** tracks daily attendance numbers as passionately as wins and losses.

This season, we've seen the smallest crowd in the Blue Jays' 22-year history at Rogers Centre, the Orioles' 19-year-history at Camden Yards, the Indians' 17-year history at Progressive Field and the Mariners' 12-year history at Safeco Field.

Last year, MLB drew 73.4 million fans, a drop of 6.6 percent from 2008, partly attributed to the smaller capacity in the two parks opening in New York.

Attendance always improves when the weather improves and kids get out of school. Let's see if more seats will be in use.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/05/09/SP701DB08G.DTL>

This article appeared on page **B - 6** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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## **Baldelli back in game with a new role**

By MICHEAL COMPTON, The Daily News, [mcompton@bgdailynews.com](mailto:mcompton@bgdailynews.com)/783-3247

During the Bowling Green Hot Rods' home series last week against the Fort Wayne TinCaps, there was a makeshift locker in the coaches' office at Bowling Green Ballpark.

Hanging on a door was a Tampa Bay Rays uniform. Baseball cleats sat on the floor, with the name "Baldelli" written on a strip of masking tape above the door.

The setup was for former Tampa Bay Rays player Rocco Baldelli, who has taken a new role with the Major League Baseball organization that drafted him a decade ago.

Baldelli took a job with Tampa in March, agreeing to serve as a special assistant helping minor league players with base running and outfield defense.

"I'm definitely happy and thankful to be back," Baldelli told the Daily News last week. "It's been fun so far. I like it. It's definitely different than what I'm used to, but it is all worthwhile."

The 29-year-old outfielder was a significant contributor to the Rays' rise in the American League, bursting onto the scene for Tampa in 2003.

After hitting .280 with 16 homers and 74 RBIs in 2004, Baldelli endured a string of injuries, including a torn anterior cruciate ligament prior to the 2005 season and an elbow injury that required Tommy John surgery.

Baldelli also began to suffer fatigue and was diagnosed with mitochondrial abnormalities, a condition that put his promising MLB career in doubt.

"As a person I think it helps you deal with a lot of things," Baldelli said. "You learn to not take anything for granted. When things come easy to you and you get everything you want and you don't deal with too many difficult times, you find joy and goodness in a lot of things I never thought about before."

He eventually returned to the field in August 2008 and was part of the Rays' run to the World Series, where they lost to the Philadelphia Phillies.

"We weren't very good for a long time and that was tough," Baldelli said. "There was a lot of people there who put in a lot of time and effort. We stuck with it and for the select few that were there through the tough times ... that was pretty special. That was something you couldn't even ask for. I never expected that playing with the Tampa Bay organization, but I think now it is expected from top to bottom."

Last year, Baldelli signed as free agent with the Boston Red Sox and appeared in 62 games, but a shoulder injury kept him off the postseason roster. Still, Baldelli said he enjoyed his brief career in Boston.

"It was different," Baldelli said. "It was a little tough, but it was a fine organization. They do things the right way and they make everyone that comes in feel comfortable. I'm from there, anyway, so it was a pretty easy transition for me."

Still recovering from the shoulder injury, Baldelli works out with the Rays when they are at home. When Tampa Bay is on the road, he travels across the country - helping to instruct minor leaguers in the organization. The Hot Rods are the Rays' Class A affiliate.

"I've already been interested in what goes on in the running of a Major League Baseball team," he said. "I find that a lot of these young guys are going through the same things I went through. It's worthwhile seeing a young guy come out and maybe struggle, but then, through years of hard work and help, develop into a major league baseball player. That's the goal here."

Baldelli said he was impressed with what he saw in Bowling Green last week, as well as what he's observed throughout the Rays' organization.



"We have a lot of good ballplayers," Baldelli said. "Almost without question at every level, we have guys that can someday be out there on the big field playing and contributing and making significant impacts. We have a lot of good, young guys who are good people, too, which is nice to see."

Baldelli said he was impressed with Bowling Green outfielders Chris Murrill, Brett Nommensen, Dustin Biell and Ty Morrison.

"Morrison looks like me," Baldelli said. "I was skinny like that. I was always worried about trying to gain weight and get bigger. I'm still thin, but in time you get stronger and your body kind of fills out and comes together. When I look at (Morrison's) frame, I see a little of what I was dealing with at that time, too."

And while some of the Hot Rods have struggled offensively at times this year, Baldelli said fans should be patient.

"The Tampa Bay organization has always gone after good athletes," he said. "A lot of that time that translates to good major league players someday. These guys are young. I remember playing at this level when I was 19. There is a lot of learning to do. The players these guys are now are not the players they will be in three, four, five years. They are going to take some pretty nice steps forward and they will learn a lot this year."

While Baldelli is enjoying the chance to see the game from another perspective, he doesn't rule out a comeback at some point. He continues to rehab his shoulder and even took batting practice with the Hot Rods last week, part of a process he hopes will lead to his return to the field.

"I still feel like I'm pretty young," Baldelli said. "I don't feel like I should be done playing. But, that being said, I have to get my arm feeling better first and see where I am at that point. Yeah, I would love to be back out there."

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## **Phil Rogers / Mauer and Ramos: Terrific two / Twins catchers could be best in American League**

Phil Rogers

No fair. The Twins already have Joe Mauer. Do they really get to keep Wilson Ramos?

Considered the Twins' top prospect entering the season, Ramos made his big league debut last week. He announced his presence with seven hits in his first two games and a presence behind the plate that prompted Minneapolis Star Tribune columnist Jim Souhan to ask if the Twins might have the two best catchers in the American League.

Who would be the next-best behind Mauer? The short list includes the Athletics' Kurt Suzuki, the Orioles' Matt Wieters and the Yankees' Jorge Posada. Victor Martinez should be on the list but has gone backward after a strong finish to 2009 for the Red Sox. Indians prospect Carlos Santana is, like Ramos, a bundle of possibilities.

Ramos has flashed his skills in a huge way while Mauer is taking it easy after bruising his left heel stepping awkwardly on first base. He has shown why the Twins wouldn't consider dealing him for a closer after Joe Nathan was lost for the season and why they would have to be blown away to deal him at midseason.

Don't ask general manager Bill Smith how Mauer and Ramos can fit together long term.

"It's all way too premature," he told Souhan. "Let's just say you can't have too much talent at any position."

Ramos' play helped the well-rounded Twins sweep the Tigers last week at Target Field. During the series, Tigers slugger Miguel Cabrera threatened to smuggle Ramos out of Minnesota.

"I can fix everything," Cabrera said. "The best thing would be if they traded Ramos to Detroit. What are they going to do, with Mauer already here? It's tough. So the best thing would be to send Wilson to his big brother. Send him to me. I'll take good care of him."

Ramos, 22, entered the weekend hitting .400 in five games. He had shown enough that a lot of people were thinking he never would go back to the minors, catching a couple of games a week while also serving as a right-handed designated hitter. That would help balance a lineup that leans to the left.

"I want to stay here," Ramos said. "I know I can help the team a lot. I can hit, I can play pretty good defense, but I don't know what decision they'll make."

Few teams spend money as wisely as the Twins. Their Venezuelan scouts got Ramos for \$30,000 when he was 16, not long after the Marlins signed his friend Cabrera for \$1.8 million.

Cabrera was pursued widely because he was big when he was little. Ramos matured physically while progressing through the Twins' farm system, establishing himself as a factor when he hit .317 after a promotion to Double A last season.

"It's pretty simple, really," Twins assistant GM Rob Antony said. "He can hit, he has power, he can throw and he can catch. What more are you looking for in a catcher?"

But what if you have Mauer, 27, a two-time batting champ and reigning AL MVP, signed through 2018?

In the AL, there's no reason teams can't play two top catchers at the same time. Managers don't because they're afraid of losing the DH spot late in games if the guy behind the plate has to come out. But it's easy enough to carry a third catcher or roll the dice.

Losing the DH spot for a few innings here or there seems a small price to pay for carrying two of the league's best catchers.

Following it up: Ubaldo Jimenez's no-hitter April 17 is only part of a much longer pattern for one of baseball's best pitchers. He had won all six of his starts entering one Saturday against the Dodgers, including three overpowering outings since the no-hitter.

When the Padres scored a run off him Monday, it was the first he had allowed since giving up two April 11 to the Padres. Jimenez is one of the few pitchers in the majors who can touch 100 mph on a radar gun, and he does it even though Rockies manager Jim Tracy leans on him (three 120-pitch starts in his last four).

In the no-hitter at Atlanta, his 127th pitch was clocked at 98 mph. He's able to maintain his stamina because he works hard off the field, including an hour-long run on the morning after every start.

"I knew God gave me this kind of arm, so I had to work hard every day so I didn't lose what he gave me," said Jimenez, who took an 0.87 ERA into his Saturday start.

Sweet home L.A.: When the Cubs traded for Juan Pierre after the 2005 season, they sent Ricky Nolasco to the Marlins — a move they almost immediately regretted. John Ely doesn't have Nolasco's velocity, but the White Sox may have made a mistake when they sent him to the Dodgers to get Pierre and \$10.5 million last winter.

A third-round pick in 2007, Ely was 14-2 for Double-A Birmingham last season. He was deemed expendable in large part because of concern about whether his high-80s fastball would be good enough to set up his plus changeup and Bugs Bunny curveball in the big leagues.

While Ely didn't hit 90 once Thursday night, that combination of pitches looked awfully strong. He left his second big league start with a 3-1 lead over the Brewers and was robbed of a victory only because Jonathan Broxton couldn't convert the save. Ely has worked six-plus innings in both starts since being promoted from Triple-A Albuquerque, and he might stick much longer than anybody expected.

Ely doesn't have nearly the tools of the young cornerstones of the Dodgers' staff, Clayton Kershaw and Chad Billingsley. But he figured out how to pitch a long time ago. That can carry a pitcher a long way, especially in the NL West.

Stalling out: Jason Bay revs his engine, but it just won't turn over. The Mets' \$66 million left fielder was 0-for-12 in Cincinnati last week, dropping his batting average to .238. He entered the weekend having hit one homer and driven in nine runs. Meanwhile, he's on pace to strike out 198 times.

Scouts expect he eventually will hit, but he seems to have aged five years in the two seasons he spent with the Red Sox.

"It's painful," Bay said about his slow start, which included a .194 average with runners in scoring position. "There are a lot of guys doing a lot of good things offensively to help us win, and I'm not one of them. It's a massive funk."

The last word: "I'm not staying with them forever. It's not a suicide pact." — Orioles GM Andy MacPhail on a group of slow-starting hitters, including Garrett Atkins, Nolan Reimold, Luke Scott, Adam Jones and Julio Lugo.

Whispers: Dontrelle Willis (1-1, 3.99 ERA) appears to be all the way back for the Tigers. He froze Justin Morneau with a well-placed 94 mph fastball Tuesday, when he retired 12 straight Twins in one stretch. Twins manager Ron Gardenhire called Willis' stuff "good, really good." He faces the Yankees on Monday. ... The Mariners' Ken Griffey isn't the only old hand whose popularity and production is an issue for an AL West front office. The A's are dealing with the same thing involving Eric Chavez, who is turning the designated hitter spot into a powerless wasteland. He's healthy, and the A's really don't want to release him. They might have to if they're serious about contending. ... Hall of Famer Robin Roberts, who died Wednesday, is the only pitcher to allow 500 home runs (505). That's not going to be true much longer, however, as Jamie Moyer has allowed 498. Fergie Jenkins, at 484, allowed the third-most. ... Moyer, meanwhile, became the oldest player in big league history to throw a shutout as he and the Phillies blanked the Braves 7-0 on Friday night. At 47 years, 170 days, he beats out Phil Niekro, who was 46 years, 188 days when he tossed a four-hitter for the Yankees against the Blue Jays on Oct. 6, 1986. ... The Giants' Tim Lincecum, who starts Sunday against the Mets, never has lost in May (7-0 in 16 starts). ... According to tatertratcher.com, the A's Adam Rosales circled the bases almost as fast on two over-the-fence home runs as David DeJesus and Stephen Drew did on inside-the-park homers. Rosales' quickest was 15.86 seconds, compared with 15.84 for Drew's Opening Day inside-the-parker. ... The Padres insist we shouldn't be shocked to see them contending in the NL West. They were 23-13 down the stretch last season. They manufacture runs like Paul Molitor was their hitting coach. ... The slow-moving sale of the Rangers could have serious competitive implications. If Tom Hicks' creditors succeed in forcing MLB to seize the club from Hicks, the team might not have the flexibility to address needs, such as catching. The team's saving grace is its deep farm system, which could allow GM Jon Daniels to make prospect-for-prospect trades, if not add salary.

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## Nick Cafardo / BASEBALL NOTES At Fenway, seats are full but something is missing

By Nick Cafardo | May 9, 2010

Star power, electricity, pizzazz, call it what you want. It's lacking in Boston.

There's no Joe Mauer, Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols, Ryan Howard, Mark Teixeira, Derek Jeter, Miguel Cabrera, Adrian Gonzalez, Prince Fielder . . . name your superstar of choice.

The Red Sox have Dustin Pedroia, a former MVP and a great player. But as a second baseman and a top-of-the-order hitter, he just doesn't generate the edge-of-your-seat thrills that some of those other players do.

What a difference walking into the Yankees clubhouse as opposed to the Red Sox'. There's A-Rod, Jeter, Teixeira, CC Sabathia, Mo Rivera.

The Sox used to have players who were events unto themselves. Roger Clemens excited the masses. Fans were on the edge of their seats every time Pedro Martinez pitched. Mo Vaughn hit monster home runs. David Ortiz, in his prime, was worth the price of admission. Manny Ramirez had to get out of town because of his behavior, but when he did play, you watched when he stepped to the plate.

It doesn't mean you're not a good team if you don't have this. The Sox could very well end up being a very good team in 2010, but if so, they'll do it without the marquee player. Sometimes that's a more rewarding way to win, with a bunch of lunch-pail guys who come together.

In 2004, the Sox had Curt Schilling, a must-see guy. They had Martinez, who could still spin a masterpiece. They had characters like Kevin Millar and Johnny Damon. The 2007 team had a dominant Josh Beckett, who looked like Clemens and Martinez for that one year.

Sox teams in the past had Hall of Famers like Ted Williams and Carl Yastrzemski. They had Wade Boggs, one of the greatest hitters ever. They had a young Nomar Garciaparra, who was as good as there was in baseball.

This year's Sox have an All-Star starting staff. But do you buy a ticket because you want to see any of them pitch? Do you buy a ticket to watch Marco Scutaro or Adrian Beltre? Collectively, it's a very good team, but individually? Eh.

General manager Theo Epstein tried to obtain a marquee player in Teixeira, but management and ownership couldn't quite seal the deal.

This has been called a "bridge year," of course, so the Sox were intent on acquiring players with one- or two-year contracts, so they could then move on. Starting next offseason, or even perhaps at the trading deadline, look for this to change.

The lack of marquee players doesn't seem to affect attendance. The Sox still have their sellout streak. They have more than 23,000 season tickets sold. But in the absence of the "must-see" player — as the Patriots have in Tom Brady — the excitement factor isn't what it once was.

The Sox are fully aware that, with some of the highest ticket prices in sports, they must keep reinventing themselves.

The best way to do that is with star power.

So . . . who?

The Sox will shed some serious payroll after this year. Mike Lowell and Ortiz account for \$24 million. They will be off the hook for Julio Lugo's \$9 million. Beltre could be gone. Victor Martinez is a free agent.

The big first basemen who will be free agents after the 2011 season — Fielder, Gonzalez, and Pujols — would be players they'd like to go after. It's hard to imagine the Cardinals wouldn't pay Pujols whatever he wants, but Gonzalez or Fielder could be available in deals prior to that. You know Scott Boras is looking at Boston's roster and licking his chops about a long-term deal for Fielder if he doesn't re-sign in Milwaukee.

The Sox will likely have their eye on free agent outfielder Jayson Werth, a big-time player on a high-profile Phillies team that has won a championship. He could help the Sox from a production point of view and eventually be J.D. Drew's replacement.

Mauer, of course, would have been the perfect superstar; until he signed with the Twins (for the remainder of his career), Boston was likely going to be his second choice.

You'll note that at last season's trading deadline and again during the offseason, one of the pitchers Epstein targeted was Felix Hernandez. Now there's an event.

OVER TIME?

This old hand starts to sound like a retiree

John Smoltz (left), who worked the MLB Network broadcast of Sox-Angels Thursday, said he's content with his career being over, if in fact it is. Which gives rise to speculation as to who will be the veteran second-halfers that teams will call upon for help.

One would appear to be Pedro Martinez, who was at Fenway's Opening Day and did not declare his career over. The youngest candidate would be Jarrod Washburn, a Scott Boras client who remains unsigned. There's always Paul Byrd, who has been able to blend in on the Sox staff when needed.

Smoltz said that, given his broadcast schedule and his attempt to qualify for the US Open, he doesn't have the time to devote himself to getting ready to pitch again.

"I'm OK with that," Smoltz said. "I know a lot of people speculated I'd do a Pedro Martinez thing and pitch in August or whatever, but I don't see it happening.

"I'm very content with the way things ended, if that's the case. The only thing I would have changed is that I would have done things more on my terms here in Boston. That's the only small part of this that didn't end the way I wanted it to.

"But that's OK. I had a long career and did a lot of things I wanted to do in this game."

TROUBLE SPOTS

Could Astro help Seattle's sinking ship?

There's still skepticism among some in the Houston organization that Lance Berkman really would leave his beloved Houston. But if he does indeed waive his no-trade clause, said one Astros organizational person, "He'd fit Boston like a fiddle. He's got natural power to left and left-center. He works the count like they like and has always had a high on-base percentage."

The Sox have had interest in Berkman in the past, but now he's 34 and is hitting .196 after spending the first part of the season on the disabled list. He's being paid \$14.5 million this year and has a club option for \$15 million next season with a \$2 million buyout.

Teams such as the Mariners and White Sox could really use a hitter, and Berkman would have appeal.

The Mariners, the sexy pick to win the West, just can't hit; they have Casey Kotchman playing first base and batting third. And Milton Bradley is on the restricted list as he seeks mental-health help.

General manager Jack Zduriencik is looking everywhere for a solution, but few teams are in selling mode in the second month of the season.

One outfielder who would seem to fit them is Jeremy Hermida, but it doesn't appear the Red Sox would entertain any offer at this juncture. Jermaine Dye remains on the market, but teams are leery that he's declined too much.

The performance of Ken Griffey at DH (one extra-base hit since Opening Day) hasn't helped. Franklin Gutierrez, a superb defensive outfielder, ended a 76-inning homer drought for the Mariners when he went yard Wednesday night.

Earlier in the week, the Mariners released outfielder Eric Byrnes after a 3-for-32 spell. He had been released by Arizona over the winter, and the Mariners were only on the hook for \$400,000. They had hoped the energetic Byrnes would give them a spark. He is only 34 but it sure looks like it's over for him.

ETC.

Apropos of nothing

1. Robin Roberts gave up an all-time-high 505 homers. Right behind him is Jamie Moyer, another Phillie, at 498; 2. Justin Masterson is 1-10 since the Victor Martinez deal; 3. This past week only reaffirmed how much the Angels need to sign Carl Crawford in the offseason; 4) Do the Nationals really have to go through this minor league formality with Stephen Strasburg?; 5. The three Scott Boras clients who signed one-year deals — Adrian Beltre, Andruw Jones, and Johnny Damon — are all having very good years.

Updates on nine

1. Koby Clemens, 1B, Astros — The young Clemens, who led all of minor league baseball with 123 RBIs last season in Single A, has picked up where he left off with Double A Corpus Christi. Through Thursday, he had 8 homers and 19 RBIs. Clemens was hitting only .253 and had 32 strikeouts, but he is making a positive impression in his next step up. A scout who has watched him said, "To think he could make it to the big leagues is a legitimate possibility. Like any hitter, as he moves up he'll see more off-speed stuff, and how he adjusts to it will determine how quickly he rises. Don't forget, I'm sure he's seen a pretty good split from his dad."

2. Jason Castro, C, Astros — The young phenom has struggled offensively at Triple A Round Rock, but old friend Kevin Cash, recently recalled by the Astros, said, "The thing that's impressive about him is that he calls a really good game for a guy of his age and his experience. When you watch him, you understand the excitement about him because he has a chance to be a very good all-around catcher. The pitchers feel comfortable with him, and that's a great sign."

3. Barry Zito, LHP, Giants — Give him credit for quite a turnaround. Considered a bust after he signed a \$126 million deal with the Giants, he is 5-0 with a 1.49 ERA. Zito was 31-43 in his first three seasons with San Francisco and even started 0-8 in 2008, when he was sent to the bullpen for a while. Zito told Bay area reporters that he has unburdened himself from the expectations of the contract and is finally at peace with the pressures it brought. Makes sense.

4. Eric Chavez, DH, A's — Like Ken Griffey and David Ortiz, he is a beloved player in his city whom his team may have to make a tough choice on soon. Chavez is hitting .220 and the A's are struggling offensively. They have Jack Cust at Sacramento, champing to get back to the big leagues, but he isn't that attractive an option.

5. Kerry Wood, RHP, Indians — He was recalled from his rehab assignment in Akron Friday, so let the clock begin ticking toward the trade deadline. If Wood has shown he's healthy — always a big if — he should attract a contending team. His \$10.5 million salary is pricy, but by the deadline, that's more than cut in half.

6. Wilson Ramos, C, Twins — When Joe Mauer signed his megadeal in Fort Myers, I made the comment that the most depressed people in baseball had to be the catchers in the Twins organization. Ramos started out hitting .179 at Rochester before Mauer's heel injury brought him up. He took the opportunity by storm. Now what do they do with this talented catcher? Suggestions abound, including moving him to another position or having him catch a couple of times a week so Mauer can DH and take it easy. GM Bill Smith thinks it's too early to make determinations, but there is no future for him as a Twins catcher, so something has to give.

7. David DeJesus, OF, Royals — He is more than available for teams needing a lefthanded-hitting outfielder. In return, the Royals would want bullpen help and some sort of a positional prospect. DeJesus gets on base and can drive in the tough run, can play all three outfield positions, and is still young enough (31) to be incorporated in either short- or long-term plans. He earns \$4.5 million this season and has a \$6 million option for next year.

8. Gerald Laird, C, Detroit — Is there anyone playing better at the catcher position than Laird? His bat is a liability, but Laird, according to one scout, “is such a presence behind the plate. You have to put up with his offense, or lack thereof, but for a team looking for a catcher, he’d solidify it. He might shut down the running game as well as anyone in the AL and maybe in both leagues.” Laird has allowed 15 of 21 runners to steal, but, said the scout, “If they’re stealing, it’s off the pitchers, because his release is really quick.”

9. Terry Francona and Ozzie Guillen, managers, Red Sox and White Sox — Francona managed his 1,000th game for Boston Wednesday, a day after Guillen managed his 1,000th for Chicago. Francona’s record was 579-421, while Guillen was 523-477. Francona won two pennants and two World Series, Guillen one pennant and one World Series. Francona was the 22d player taken in the 1980 draft. Guillen was signed as an amateur free agent out of Venezuela in the summer of 1980.

Short hops

From the Bill Chuck files: “Through Thursday, in Manny Acta’s last 162 games managing the Nationals and the Indians, his record was 53-109 (.327)” . . . Also, “According to Wezen-Ball.com’s ‘Tater Trot Tracker,’ it took Alex Gonzalez 29.28 seconds to circle the bases after his April 21 home run. Next slowest was David Ortiz’s 28.95-second run after his second HR on May 1. I personally think Big Papi was going at full speed.” . . . Tiverton (R.I.) High School catching prospect Zach Kapstein is enhancing his position for next month’s draft. In 16 games, he’s hitting .571 with 4 homers, 20 RBIs, and 21 runs, and has 13 steals in 13 attempts . . . Happy 74th birthday, Floyd Robinson.

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## GEORGE VECSEY / Walking Tentatively in Protesters’ Shoes

By GEORGE VECSEY

When the Phoenix Suns wore the name Los Suns on their jerseys Wednesday night, it was construed by many of their fans as a political statement against the new Arizona law regarding illegal immigrants.

But as Phoenix Coach Alvin Gentry noted, the Suns had worn Los Suns twice during the season before the law was passed — and now have won all three games in the jerseys. Plus, Wednesday was Cinco de Mayo, the celebration of Mexican heritage.

As a political gesture, it fell far below the black gloves worn by two American sprinters in the 1968 Olympics. However, there definitely was a measure of criticism of the law from high up on the team — including from the Suns’ owner, Robert Sarver; the general manager, Steve Kerr; and players like Grant Hill, Amar’e Stoudemire and Steve Nash.

It was refreshing to hear reaction to current events from sports figures. It is easy to take pot shots at athletes and team officials for living in a bubble, isolated by money and fame. When athletes care about something, conservative or liberal, it is a sign they are alive.

But nobody should be waiting for basketball or baseball players to dump over their water pails and walk out of the mine — the signal for a wildcat strike in coal country. These lads are not going out.

The new law, signed by Gov. Jan Brewer, and apparently supported by a slim majority of Americans, empowers law-enforcement officers to stop anybody who appears to be an illegal immigrant.

Kerr described the new law as something out of Nazi Germany. He is entitled to his vision of what happens when passion and prejudice get out of hand, inasmuch as his father, Malcolm H. Kerr, was assassinated in 1984 while serving as president of the American University in Beirut.

Nash, a Canadian originally from South Africa, has his world view, as does Hill, whose parents, Calvin and Janet, are prominent in public life.

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Some baseball players have also spoken out against the law, raising the prospect of players’ developing the Arizona Flu heading toward the 2011 All-Star Game, currently scheduled for Phoenix.

Only recently diagnosed, the Arizona Flu manifests itself with a low-grade ache, a few twinges of migrainelike headache, vague tightness in the hamstrings, throbbing in the rotator cuffs. From what I hear, it tends to strike professional athletes.

This illness is nothing like the Blue Flu, that mysterious ailment that strikes police officers suddenly, overnight, during times of labor disagreements, causing them to miss a shift.

However, there will be no outbreak of any flu, Arizona or Blue, leading to that All-Star Game. Baseball is particularly sensitive to the new law because 30 percent of its players are Latino and because half of the 30 teams now train in Arizona.

Michael Weiner, the head of the Major League Baseball Players Association, recently criticized the law and said he hoped it would be “repealed or modified promptly,” or else the union would consider “additional steps,” which he did not specify.

One of the steps will not be a walkout because the current contract is not believed to permit any form of strike.

Still, if enough players expressed symptoms of the Arizona Flu, this might even force Commissioner Bud Selig to take pro-active steps to move the All-Star Game out of Arizona. But the implications of the new law are much too serious to be foisted on Selig, who is just one person, serving 30 owners.

The new law mandates that officers pick out illegal immigrants among people walking the street. It’s easy to spot them, Rep. Brian Bilbray, Republican from California, recently told Chris Matthews on MSNBC — just check out his footwear.

“They will look at the kind of dress you wear, there’s different type of attire, there’s different type of right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes,” Bilbray said. “But mostly by behavior, it’s mostly behavior.”

With guidelines like this, it is not hard to imagine a visiting athlete walking down the street in Phoenix, wearing some cutting-edge shoes with faux mud on them, holes in the knees of his \$1,000 jeans, a designer T-shirt that said Alcatraz on it, and getting hauled off by somebody with a badge and a pistol. Then who’s going to play center field that night?

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One thing the new Arizona law might do is encourage solidarity among players of color. Torii Hunter of the Angels, a really good guy, recently made an ill-phrased comment, including the word “impostors,” about Latino players being counted with black players. Hunter knows better. The fear is real that anybody in Arizona, any athlete, anybody of color, could get hauled in by the shoe posse.

Speaking as somebody with relatives of various hues and backgrounds, I wouldn’t want them going to Arizona during the current time of the troubles. I also worry about the health of the ballplayers.

If any All-Stars feel the Arizona Flu coming on, they should lie down and rest.

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