



Detroit Tigers Clips

Thursday, May 20, 2010

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From Ernie Harwell's family: Thank you, all

May 19, 2010

Letter: In Gratitude

When I came to Comerica Park on May 6 and watched as people filed past my father's casket, taking off their caps, crying, praying and so quietly and respectfully honoring him, I was deeply moved. I am so grateful for the beautiful way you returned the love he had for you.

Thank you, Mr. Ilitch, Dave Dombrowski, the Tigers, and all the press and media, for the many ways you have celebrated my father's life and honored him.

Thanks most of all to all the unknown, unnamed fans who listened to and loved the man who was to them the voice of summer and Tiger baseball. My dad was right when he said the people of Detroit and of Michigan were the best baseball fans in the world.

Thanks so much from me and my family. God bless you.

Gray Harwell

Esterro, Fla.

Rookies make impact in Tigers' win over Athletics

Detroit 5, Oakland 1

May 20, 2010

By John Lowe / Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- During the day Wednesday, Tigers rookies Casper Wells and Danny Worth walked around together in the shopping district in San Francisco.

By night, they ran around on the ball field in Oakland.

Wells had his first two hits in the majors. The second was the double that gave Justin Verlander a four-run lead in his 5-1 domination of the A's.

Worth went 3-for-3 and played a superb second base. The third of his singles drove in the Tigers' final run. His sacrifice bunt in the seventh set up a two-out RBI single by Austin Jackson.

"We're in the same boat," Wells, 25, said of himself and Worth, 24. "We were hanging out at the mall today, talking about stuff. We're in identical situations, coming up pretty much at the same time. It's our first time up here. We were walking around San Francisco today, taking it all in."

Worth had gotten his first hit Sunday, on his first big-league at-bat. Wells was 0-for-5 in the majors when he got his first hit, a solid single to left off Dallas Braden, who in his last start on this field -- in his historic start against Tampa Bay -- hadn't allowed any runners at all.

"A huge weight off my shoulders," Wells said of his first hit. "I thought, 'I got that, now it's time to play baseball.' "

He played the outfield Wednesday night because Magglio Ordoñez was scratched with a sore heel.

"Everything is a whole new experience up here," Wells said. "Just take it all in. Ride the wave and enjoy it."

The Tigers' next stop is Los Angeles. Plenty of waves there.

Hitting slumps stump Tigers catchers Alex Avila, Gerald Laird

May 20, 2010

By John Lowe / Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Tigers manager Jim Leyland was asked Wednesday if he felt that either of his catchers, Alex Avila or Gerald Laird, eventually would provide adequate offense this season.

"I don't know if they will or not," Leyland said. "Right now Alex is a little bit lost, and Gerald, for whatever reason, is pressing.

"I think eventually Alex Avila is going to be a good big league hitter. And I know Gerald is a much better hitter than what he's shown."

Wednesday night's game with Oakland brought the Tigers to the one-fourth mark of the season. As the night began, Avila was hitting .140, with two RBIs, both on solo homers in the same game. He was 0-for-18 with runners in scoring position.

Laird had an bunt single Wednesday and is hitting .157 with one homer and five RBIs. He is 3-for-26 with runners in scoring position.

"I'm trying to hit the ball well and not worry about where it's going," Laird said. "When you tend to worry like me, you get frustrated when things don't fall for you. I want to keep it simple and put myself in the best hitter's position and go from there."

Leyland said: "Gerald is frustrated. For whatever reason, he's antsy. He can't relax at the plate. That's what it looks like to me. I could be totally wrong."

Leyland said Avila "isn't in enough sync -- (he's) not getting enough consistent at-bats."

Avila has an admirable steadiness of demeanor for a rookie who hasn't hit much this season. He epitomized that Wednesday when he answered a question about his pregame routine in the indoor batting cage, which precedes batting practice on the field.

He said the routine remains the same no matter how he's going at the plate.

"Every time I go to the cage, I try to take 20 to 25 swings off the tee to get a feel for all the pitches," Avila said.

"Then I take some soft toss to get loose."

The Tigers' hitting woes at catcher don't stop at the major league level. As Leyland pointed out, all the club's minor league catchers are struggling. On the Tigers' four full-season farm clubs, the highest batting average among anyone who had caught at least 10 games this season entering Wednesday belonged to Erie's Max St. Pierre. He was hitting .217.

ORDOÑEZ OUT: Rightfielder Magglio Ordoñez was scratched from Wednesday night's lineup because of a sore heel. His status was listed as day-to-day. Casper Wells entered the lineup to replace Ordoñez in the third spot. Wells started in left, and Brennan Boesch -- the leftfielder in the original lineup -- started in right.

Tigers are AL-leaders in late-inning heroics

May 20, 2010

By John Lowe / Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — The most memorable wins frequently involve late-inning comebacks. The most searing losses typically often involve letting a late-inning lead slip.

In those categories, the Tigers are doing better in the late innings than any team in the American League.

Entering Wednesday, the Tigers had won six games in which they'd trailed in the seventh or later.

They'd lost only one game in which they'd led in the seventh or later.

That put them five games over .500 in games in which the winning team rallied in the seventh or later.

No other American League team had done as well. Two other teams were four games over .500 in this category, according to records kept by the Free Press.

Toronto entered Wednesday with a league-high seven wins when trailing in the seventh or later. The Blue Jays had lost three times when leading in the seventh or later.

Tampa Bay had won five times when trailing in the seventh or later, and like the Tigers, had lost just once when leading in the seventh or later.

The White Sox also have had a lot of late-inning drama. They entered Wednesday with six wins in which they trailed in the seventh or later. But they also had six losses when leading in the seventh or later.

It would be extra impressive if the Tigers added to their total of come-from-behind wins in Oakland. Entering their series opener with the Tigers on Wednesday, the A's were the only team in the majors that hadn't lost a game they led in the seventh inning or later.

In the second game of the season, the Tigers went ahead in the 11th in Kansas City, but the Royals came back to win with two runs off closer Jose Valverde. Entering Wednesday, that remained the only time this season the Tigers had lost this season when they led in the seventh or later.

The Tigers hadn't lost a game they led in the ninth inning — just like they never lost a game last season they led in the ninth. They did lose two games last season in Minnesota they led in extra innings, including the Oct. 6 division tiebreaker.

NEW FACE: Rookie right-hander Tyson Ross will face the Tigers for the first time as he starts for the A's today. As in his first major league start Saturday, Ross will come out of the bullpen to step in for injured right-hander Justin Duchscherer.

Jeremy Bonderman will start for the Tigers. Bonderman is 3-3 against the A's, who drafted him in the first round in 2001, then swapped him to the Tigers the following season.

Tigers notes and quotes

Detroit 5, Oakland 1

May 20, 2010

By John Lowe / Free Press

AT OAKLAND-ALAMEDA COUNTY COLISEUM

WHAT HAPPENED: The rookie hitters supported the 2006 AL rookie of the year, Justin Verlander, who threw a four-hitter. Three of the four rookies in the Tigers' lineup combined to drive in four runs -- one by Austin Jackson, two by Casper Wells and one by Danny Worth. This came after Brandon Inge led off the seventh with a homer off Dallas Braden to deliver the game's first run. Each of the three rookies had a multi-hit game, and they combined for seven of the Tigers' 10 hits.

DAY LATE, NOT A DOLLAR SHORT: Inge had appeared to have a homer Tuesday at Comerica Park, but the call was overturned by replay review.

BIG SEVENTH: After Inge's homer, Gerald Laird got a bunt single. Braden left at that point because of the flu-like illness that sent him home early the day before. Right-hander Michael Wuertz took over, and the Tigers got three two-out runs, the last pair on a double by Wells.

RESPECT: Jackson singled home the 2-0 run with two out in the seventh and took second on the fruitless throw home. Wuertz intentionally walked Johnny Damon to get the right-vs.-right matchup with the rookie Wells. On the first pitch, Wells lined a two-run double up the gap in left-center.

FIRST ONE: In the third inning, Wells lined a single to left off Braden for his first big-league hit. Wells had gone 0-for-4 in his one previous big-league start.

VERLANDER TALLY: He lost a chance at his fourth career shutout when he allowed a run in the eighth. He threw his seventh complete game. He won his fourth straight start. In none of those four games has he allowed more than four hits. He struck out five and finished with 116 pitches.

PLAY OF THE DAY: In an era in which many pitchers seemingly can't make a strong and accurate throw to second, what a pleasure it was to see this in the second inning: Verlander fielded a comebacker by Rajai Davis and then -- like a quarterback leading his receiver -- whipped and fired a strike to second as shortstop Adam Everett floated to the bag. Everett's peg to first doubled up the speedy Davis and ended the inning.

I'M ILL: Braden was almost as impressive until leaving with flu-like symptoms after giving up a leadoff home run to Brandon Inge in the seventh followed by a single to Gerald Laird.

Justin Verlander, rookies lead the way in Tigers' win

Detroit 5, Oakland 1

May 19, 2010

By Kirkland Crawford / Free Press

The Tigers rookies stole the show and Justin Verlander gave up just one run for the complete game as Detroit beat the Athletics, 5-1, tonight in Oakland, Calif.

Since beginning the season 1-2 with a 5.53 ERA, Verlander has been stellar over the past month while winning four straight starts for the first time since July 2008. He is 4-1 with a 1.26 ERA over his last five starts, with his last three wins coming after Detroit losses.

“The biggest key for me is controlling my fastball and I was able to do that tonight to both sides of the plate,” Verlander said. “That’s where it starts and ends for me. If I’m able to do that usually I’m going to have a pretty good game.”

Verlander yielded just four hits and a walk while striking out five. He threw 116 pitches.

“He deserved to be out there in the ninth inning because I thought he was our best choice there, he was still sharp,” Tigers manager Jim Leyland explained of his decision to leave closer Jose Valverde in the bullpen. “If he got in any trouble at all we had Valverde ready to go but he was able to close this one down.”

The game was scoreless until the top of the seventh, when Brandon Inge, who turned 33 years old today, led the inning off with a home run to left-center.

Dallas Braden, who's already pitched a perfect game this season, left the game after the next batter, Gerald Laird, reached on a bunt single which Braden tried to field. Braden went six innings, plus two batters, and gave up six hits and a walk while striking out two. He left with flu-like symptoms.

“I don’t feel too hot,” said Braden, who received an IV after being taken out. “It’s something that’s lingering from before my start in Anaheim. I thought it was the flu and I’d be done with it. I feel beat up. I feel like I just went 12 rounds.”

The new pitcher was Michael Wuertz. Tigers rookie second baseman Danny Worth bunted Laird over to second. Then with two outs, Austin Jackson singled to center to drive in Laird. Jackson advanced to second on the throw home, allowing the A's to intentionally walk Johnny Damon and get to another rookie.

Casper Wells, starting for Magglio Ordoñez and hitting third in the lineup, was next and made the A's pay. He doubled in the gap in left-center to drive in two for his first major-league RBIs.

The Tigers added another run in the eighth. Don Kelly, who entered the game for Brennan Boesch, was hit by a pitch. He advanced to second on a ground out and with two outs, Worth singled to right-center to drive in the run.

With two outs in the top of the third, Wells singled to left off of Braden for his first major-league hit.

Worth had three singles and Jackson had two singles.

The A's scored in the bottom of the eighth. Jack Cust and Kevin Kouzmanoff started off with singles. Eric Chavez grounded one to second and the Tigers were unable to turn the double play, putting runners at the corners. Then, Adam Rosales flied out to left to score Cust.

Ryan Raburn, Scott Sizemore have big days for Mud Hens

May 19, 2010

By Kirkland Crawford / Free Press

A couple of Tigers who started the season in the majors continued to try to press their way back with the big team today.

In today's 5-2 win by the Toledo Mud Hens over the Durham Bulls, Ryan Raburn had a hit and scored a run. He's hitting .435 since being demoted to Triple-A last week.

Rookie Scott Sizemore was the player of the game, though. The second baseman had two hits, including a two-run double that scored Raburn and another middle infielder who's played for the Tigers, Brent Dlugach.

Sizemore's hitting .300 since getting sent down to Toledo after last Saturday's win over the Red Sox.

By the way, the Mud Hens' win in Toledo was the team's fifth in a row. They are 23-18, 1.5 games behind Columbus in the International League's West Division. Another second baseman, Will Rhymes, leads the team with 42 hits.

Scott Sizemore, Ryan Raburn contribute in Mud Hens' win

May 19, 2010

By Lee Snider / Free Press

TOLEDO -- The Toledo Mud Hens beat the Durham Bulls, 5-2, Wednesday morning at Fifth Third Field, according to the team's Web site.

Former Tigers second baseman Scott Sizemore, who was sent down to the Triple-A club last week, drove in two runs in the bottom of the third inning with a double to right-center. Another former Tiger, Ryan Raburn, scored on the play after reaching base on a single.

Ryan Ketchner (1-2) picked up his first win of the season for Toledo, while Casey Fien recorded his second save.

The Mud Hens improved to 23-18. It was the team's fifth-straight win.

Tigers 5, Athletics 1: Justin Verlander throws four-hitter

May 20, 2010

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. -- Suitable for framing, this work of art Justin Verlander crafted Wednesday night at Oakland Coliseum.

Verlander has been premier for most of his five years as a starting pitcher for the Tigers. On occasion, he has been overwhelming. That was the operative word as the Tigers beat the Oakland Athletics, 5-1, mostly because of the breezy, almost easy, four-hit game Verlander etched.

"He was in total command, very good tempo," said Tigers manager Jim Leyland, whose team hit the 40-game mark with a victory and a 23-17 record. "He was in a good rhythm all night long."

Verlander's cronies in the lineup helped him push his record to 5-2 as he dropped his earned-run average to 3.43.

Brandon Inge belted a leadoff home run over the left-center field wall in the seventh for the game's first run. It came against Athletics left-hander Dallas Braden, who pitched a perfect game earlier this month, and who, until he got sick to his stomach in the seventh, had the Tigers putting zeros on the scoreboard.

But the Tigers got 10 hits, seven of which were from rookies. They scored three more times in the seventh, starting with a bunt single from beleaguered batter Gerald Laird. Then came a sacrifice bunt by rookie second baseman Danny Worth that meshed nicely with his three singles; a hard RBI single to center from Austin Jackson for the first of his two hits; and a two-run double up the left-center field gap by another of the Tigers' stable of rookies, Casper Wells, who also had a single in the third for his first big-league hit.

With the kids providing much of the punch, by the end of the seventh a scoreless game was suddenly 4-0.

Verlander took care of the rest on a night when his pitch count was textbook: 60 pitches through five innings, 116 for the game. He struck out five and walked one.

"I didn't have my best stuff," said Verlander, whose remarks were overheard by Tigers closer Jose Valverde, who screeched, incredulously:

"What?"

Verlander laughed and explained.

"The biggest thing for me is controlling my fastball, and I was able to do that tonight," he said, adding that a mere five strikeouts should explain why he wasn't exactly Bob Feller against the Athletics.

Verlander said some "mechanical adjustments" by which he was staying more compact, more "over my body, over my legs," was what made the difference.

"It kind of starts and ends there for me," Verlander said of avoiding the dreaded "flying open" delivery that has sometimes undone him. "It's something I'll log in the old memory book. When something goes awry down the line, I'll remember that."

The rookies will also remember Wednesday, particularly Wells, and Worth, the second baseman who had a three-hit game three days after he joined the Tigers. He also turned a double play in the first, after Verlander walked Daric Barton with out one, which Leyland twice praised as "tremendous."

Worth or Wells? It was tough to tell who was floating the highest afterward.

Wells was in the game as a replacement for Magglio Ordonez, whose sore heel made him a late lineup scratch. Batting in Ordonez's No. 3 slot, Wells hit a hard single to left in the third for his first big-league hit, then ripped his two-run double up the left-center field gap in the seventh that broke it open, pumping the Tigers' lead to 4-0. Worth's RBI single in the eighth scored the final run.

"It felt really good to get that first knock," Wells said of his first hit. "It was like a huge weight lifted off my shoulder. Getting up here (big leagues) is the first step. Then getting that first knock is the next big thing. After that, it's almost like you can just enjoy playing the game."

A team full of Tigers enjoyed Wednesday's soiree. Of course, they knew whom most to thank. It was a 27-year-old pitcher, the team's ace, and one precise pitcher when he's rolling.

And just for the record: A right-hander who looks as if he is back to his old dominant self also enjoyed the game.

Rookies rev up Tigers

May 20, 2010

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. -- Gaze across the Tigers clubhouse and you're immediately taken back to spring training. It's that wistful time when kids who haven't a prayer of making the big club are sitting in front of lockers, just like the veterans.

Well, spring camp has reconvened for the Tigers. And the kids are no longer dreamers.

They're helping the Tigers win ballgames, as happened during Wednesday's 5-1 victory over the Oakland Athletics at Oakland Coliseum.

Seven of the Tigers' 10 hits came from rookies: three singles by second baseman Danny Worth; a two-run double and a single from outfielder Casper Wells; and a pair of singles from Austin Jackson, who also lined out to first.

"All of us are feeding off the energy the young guys have brought," said Tigers manager Jim Leyland. "They seem to be relaxed and feeling good out there."

Worth, a 2007 second-round draft pick out of Pepperdine, had to agree.

"I loved it out there," said Worth, who was called up Sunday after Scott Sizemore was sent to Triple A Toledo to sharpen his hitting. "It was good to get that RBI at the end (eighth-inning single that knocked in the Tigers' fifth run).

"It's just great to contribute, to feel part of the team."

Brandon Inge, who has the longest stint in Detroit of any player on the Tigers roster, said he gets as much lift from the rookies as they've been getting from the graybeards.

"It's so important to make these guys feel like they belong," Inge said. "We used to come up here and feel intimidated. They (veterans) would tell you how hard the game is, and while it is, in all reality it's still baseball. "These guys have been good all their lives. Let's try and give 'em some confidence and let 'em roll."

Inge's blast

Inge hit his fourth home run of the season leading off the seventh against Athletics starter Dallas Braden .

Inge has neither hit for power, nor for average (.224) as he continues to heal from last autumn's surgery on both knees. And while Inge isn't blaming his knees for a bad start, cold weather and rain haven't made his recovery any smoother.

"It's getting there," Inge said of his timeline toward feeling 100 percent, which should free up a lower body that looks too many times like the lower body that was dealing with knee tendinitis during the second half of 2009.

"It's probably closer than I think it is.

"It's hard for me to get a read on where they (knees) are with that wind and cold weather.

"But when that temperature and heat gets up there, we'll turn the page. And I can't wait."

Cold stretch

The Tigers would have bet on one man's comeback in 2010: Gerald Laird . He would hit, no question.

He probably wouldn't compete for an All-Star nomination. But a man who had batted .296 in 2006 and .276 in 2008 would certainly wipe away that .225 effort in 2009 and pump some offense into the tail end of the Tigers' batting order.

Laird came into Wednesday's game batting .153. Thanks to a bunt single, he is now hitting .157. His catching colleague, Alex Avila , who made a splash during his 2009 big-league debut, is batting .140.

Leyland was asked if he believed Laird or Avila would shake loose at some point in 2010 and punch up a batting order that has had its problems from the sixth through ninth spots.

"I don't know that," Leyland said. "For whatever reason, Gerald has just been pressing. Alex is in-between right now.

"Yeah, eventually I think Alex Avila will be a good big-league hitter. Gerald? He's better than he's shown. But you can see it's frustrating for him right now. He's pressing, antsy. He can't relax."

The Tigers by now might have sent Avila to Triple A Toledo for some everyday work, except for one problem - - they really have no call-up options that are any better than Avila, or Laird.

Robinson Diaz , who was signed during the offseason to give the Tigers insurance as Laird's backup, is batting .189. Mike Rabelo is at .143.

Max St. Pierre , who is catching at Double A Erie, is at .217.

"That's one reason why we need (Carlos) Guillen back," Leyland said, speaking of the injured Tigers' designated hitter, and soon-to-be second baseman, who could begin his rehabilitation stint at Toledo as early as this weekend.

"I know Gerald is a better hitter than he's shown. I know that for a fact. We just can't seem to get him relaxed." It leaves the Tigers, for now, hoping that Laird gets rolling in a manner he showed during those healthier hitting seasons he knew during his time with the Texas Rangers.

Avila's apprenticeship continues two years after the Tigers drafted him out of the University of Alabama. In each case, the Tigers are waiting for one of their catchers to begin ripping the ball, with no practical option but to wait some more.

Back problems

Leyland conceded before Wednesday's game the bottom half of the order has been a chronic problem.

Inge, Laird, Adam Everett . All have struggled.

But the Tigers got a boost from a few of the tail-end bats in winning Wednesday's game, beginning with Worth's three hits and Inge's leadoff home run in the seventh. Laird helped out, as well, with a bunt single. It seemed to confirm what Leyland had said earlier. That the Tigers might benefit from, once in a while, doing the unconventional, such as having Laird bunt, which he did on his own in the seventh.

"Some of that is maybe my fault," Leyland said of the back end's woes. "We probably need to be more creative. Bunt, hit and run -- be a little more creative there."

Around the horn

Magglio Ordonez 's sore heel, which forced him to sit out, was not believed to be serious. His official status: day to day.

... Justin Verlander is 4-1 with a 1.26 earned-run average in his last five starts.

... The Tigers are 31-20 against American League West teams the past two seasons. It's the best record of any team in the league next to the New York Yankees, who are 31-19.

... Tigers closer Jose Valverde has not allowed a run in his last 17 outings, a stretch of 16 2/3 scoreless innings. The Tigers aren't regretting their decision to pay heavily, including the loss of next month's first-round draft pick, for a shutdown reliever who has capped one of the best bullpens in baseball.

Stephen Strasburg's schedule might put him on Comerica Park mound

May 20, 2010

By Tony Paul / Detroit News

Triple A has been no fair fight for foes of Stephen Strasburg.

So what, exactly, are the Nationals waiting for?

The uber-prospect with a dynamite right arm has rolled through the International League with all the guilt of a straight-A student who wrecked the curve, allowing four hits in three starts. Before arriving in Syracuse, he wasn't charitable at Double-A Harrisburg, either, and combined for the year, he's 6-1 with a 0.89 ERA and 49 strikeouts in 40 1/3 innings.

He's given up 17 hits in eight starts. In Strasburg's last five starts, he's allowed one hit or zero hits four times. In other words, his time is coming. In fact, it's probably down to a matter of a few weeks. While we don't know exactly when yet, we darn sure know where the highly anticipated major league debut of last summer's No. 1 overall pick certainly will take place: In Washington D.C., where the gate figures to be huge.

That stipulation, because he pitched Wednesday, rules out a promotion until at least early June, because the Nationals are on the road for 10 games, starting May 25. So here's my guess: He makes two more starts at Triple A -- including next week against Toledo, the Tigers' affiliate -- before debuting in D.C. on June 4, against the Reds. That's a Friday, putting him on track to make his second start at home, too, against the Pirates on June 10.

Of course, debuting against the Pirates, on June 9 or 10, seems like an ideal possibility, too. That's a friendlier first foe, after all, and those are mid-week dates that, otherwise, would draw smaller crowds.

Either way, it's setting up nicely for Strasburg, 21, to pitch in Detroit during Washington's June 15-17 visit. Back-to-back rainouts pushed his start back this week, meaning, with typical rest, he's a good bet to start one of the three games, and Tigers ace Justin Verlander and Rick Porcello, also 21, are on track to pitch in that series, too.

What a matchup we could have at Comerica Park.

Guess the Tigers' home interleague schedule doesn't look so dull now, does it?

It's all about pitching

How, exactly, are the Padres 23-16 and in first place in the National League West?

"That's the good thing about our ballclub: We don't really read too much into what all the analysts and experts say," starting pitcher Clayton Richard told me recently. "I don't want to say we expected this, but we felt we had the tools to have a successful start, to carry over what we did at the end of last season."

The Padres won 19 of their final 30 games last season just to finish 75-87, 20 games out. Now, here they are, the year's surprise team so far, thanks not one lick to their offense -- it's produced 159 runs, worst in the NL West (yes, amazingly even fewer than the Giants) -- but all due to a pitching staff that's allowed an NL-best 118 runs, about three per game.

Richard, 26, the lefty who was part of the haul from the White Sox for ace Jake Peavy last July, is a major part of the staff's success. Once upon a time a backup quarterback at Michigan (no, he doesn't have an opinion on RichRod), he's 3-2 with a 2.94 ERA. He's made eight starts, and hasn't allowed more than three earned runs in any of 'em.

The pitching staff -- with its impressive bullpen, but most surprisingly a reliable rotation led by left-hander Wade LeBlanc (2-1, 1.54 ERA), resurgent veteran Jon Garland (4-2, 1.88) and a fella named Mat Latos (3-3, 3.28) who came within an infield hit of a perfect game late last week -- is, single-handedly (several-handedly?), turning to rubbish all those persistent-till-lately trade rumors about slugger Adrian Gonzalez and closer Heath Bell, two hot commodities who're going nowhere now, not with this club looking legit.

Who'd have thunk it? Besides the Padres, that is.

One or the other?

With manager Trey Hillman's canning by the Royals a week ago, it's a fine time for the "Who's Next Pool." Dave Trembley (Orioles) is the obvious candidate, with Jerry Manuel (Mets) and Ken Macha (Brewers) not far behind.

Then there's Marlins manager Fredi Gonzalez, who's no stranger to the hot seat. (He won 87 games last season, only to then hear that potential replacement Bobby Valentine had been chatting up owner Jeffrey Loria.) Now, he's in a heated and public feud with the franchise player, shortstop Hanley Ramirez, who was out of the lineup Tuesday after being yanked Monday following some perceived laziness on defense.

Right or not -- and Gonzalez is right -- it's probably easier for the fan base to stomach dumping the manager than trading the star, who's under contract through 2014.

Good night, bad night

What a rollercoaster of emotions for ex-Tiger Marcus Thames. On Monday night, the Yankees outfielder hit a two-out, two-run homer off Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon -- the first walk-off homer of his nine-year career -- and, then, Tuesday night, he dropped a flyball in right field that led to Boston's winning ninth-inning rally off Mariano Rivera.

"I'm a major league ballplayer. I gotta make that play," Thames told reporters in New York, refusing to blame the cold, windy weather. "What happened (Monday) was gone and this is a new day. I made a bad error and cost the team a game (Tuesday)."

Thames, playing more these days with another ex-Tiger, Curtis Granderson, on the DL (groin), has been a pleasant surprise for the Yankees, though. The three walks he drew in Tuesday's 7-6 loss boosted his on-base percentage to .456. He's hitting .352 in 21 games.

Never say never

When the Red Sox rallied to beat the Yankees on Tuesday, it marked the eighth time this season a team has won a game after trailing by five runs or more. The Tigers -- or comeback cats -- have accounted for half of them:

April 11: Detroit, trailing 7-1 in sixth, defeated Cleveland 9-8.

April 13: Detroit, trailing 5-0 in seventh, defeated Kansas City 6-5.

April 28: Arizona, trailing 11-6 in fourth, defeated Colorado 12-11.

April 28: Detroit, trailing 6-1 in fourth, defeated Minnesota 11-6.

May 11: Mets, trailing 6-1 in fifth, defeated Washington 8-6.

May 14: Toronto, trailing 9-3 in third, defeated Texas 16-10.

May 15: Detroit, trailing 6-1 in fifth, defeated Boston 7-6.

May 18: Boston, trailing 5-0 in fifth, defeated Yankees 7-6.

• Source: Elias Sports Bureau, Baseball-Reference.com

Can't buy a win

With a loss May 11, right-hander David Hernandez has gone 16 straight starts without a win, an Orioles record and the longest streak in the majors the past two years:

16 starts (11 losses): David Hernandez, Baltimore -- streak started Aug. 17, 2009; streak is active; 6.81 ERA.

14 (10): Justin Masterson, Cleveland -- started Aug. 25, 2009; streak is active; 5.38 ERA.

13 (9): Aaron Harang, Cincinnati -- started May 30, 2009; ended Aug. 3, 2009; 5.49 ERA.

12 (9): Jason Berken, Baltimore -- started May 31, 2009; ended Aug. 2, 2009; 7.21 ERA.

12 (6): Ross Detwiler, Washington -- started May 18, 2009; ended Sept. 23, 2009; 5.89 ERA.

12 (4): Chad Gaudin, San Diego/Yankees -- started July 3, 2009; ended Sept. 22, 2009; 4.58 ERA.

12 (3): Clayton Kershaw, Dodgers -- started July 24, 2009; ended April 7, 2010; 2.82 ERA.

11 (6): Josh Geer, San Diego -- started May 30, 2009; ended July 27, 2009; 6.46 ERA.

11 (8): Jeremy Guthrie, Baltimore -- started Sept. 13, 2009; ended May 3, 2010; 5.09 ERA.

10 (7): Armando Galarraga, Detroit -- started May 1, 2009; ended June 19, 2009; 7.48 ERA.

• Note: Six others were at 10; Source: Baseball-Reference.com

Diamond digits

1 -- The Mets' place in the NL East on May 1, with a half-game lead.

5 -- The Mets' place in the NL East on May 16, six games out.

15 -- Days it took the Mets to fall from first to last.

4-10 -- The Mets' record in that span.

-16 -- The Mets' run differential (78-62) in that span.

He said it

"Baseball demands maybe seven, eight, nine times a game you gotta really bust your (butt) and make a play. You can't do that?"

-- Stan Van Gundy, coach of the NBA's Magic to the Orlando Sentinel, sticking up for his pal, Marlins manager Fredi Gonzalez, who benched star shortstop Hanley Ramirez this week for loafing after a ball he had kicked.

Tony's top five

1. Tampa Bay (1): Rays finally demoted Pat Burrell (.202), called up Hank Blalock, who hit .349 in 26 Triple A games.

2. Philadelphia (4): Ryan Howard's nine grand slams are tied for most in majors since '05 (Alex Rodriguez, Richie Sexson).

3. N.Y. Yankees (2): For second time in club history, Yankees have blown three straight eighth-inning leads at home (May '92).

4. Minnesota (3): Carl Pavano had four consecutive quality starts before getting routed by Blue Jays on Tuesday (6 ERs, 4 IP).

5. St. Louis (5): Albert Pujols batted third in 1,046 consecutive starts, before batting cleanup Monday. He went 3-for-3.

Tony's bottom five

26. Seattle (23): Cliff Lee is 1-2, despite 2.08 ERA because M's have averaged 2.25 runs in his starts. Some sales pitch.

27. Cleveland (27): Gotta like progress of Jake Westbrook, who's had 1.20 ERA in winning last two starts, one a complete game.

28. Kansas City (28): Here's betting Brewers castoff Ned Yost doesn't get fired in thick of pennant race this time around.

29. Houston (29): Lance Berkman finally is starting to come around; he's hitting .344 with .447 OBP in last nine games.

30. Baltimore (30): Ty Wigginton hitting .313 with 12 HRs, 26 RBIs in 37 games; he had 11 HRs, 41 RBIs in 122 games in '09.

• Note: Last week's rankings in parentheses. For Tony Paul's complete weekly power rankings, visit his blog at detnews.com/tigers.

Scott Sizemore not giving up after demotion to Toledo

May 20, 2010

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Toledo, Ohio -- Ever misplace a glove at school? Try the lost-and-found.

Ever been handed a job, then have it taken away? Try the found-and-lost.

In Scott Sizemore, the Tigers thought they had their second-base solution in house after not re-signing Placido Polanco.

They believed he was going to play adequate defense, but hit enough to earn his keep. He didn't hit -- or, in a more hopeful vein, just hasn't yet.

Now the Tigers are on the West Coast and Sizemore is back with the Toledo Mud Hens, taking his hacks Wednesday in a 5-2 victory over the Durham Bulls.

To make matters ironic, Carlos Guillen took the field here after the Mud Hens' victory to continue his preparation as Sizemore's successor at second.

Here's a question that hasn't been answered yet, however. When Guillen begins his rehab assignment, probably on Saturday, he'll be playing second base right away because that's the job which awaits him.

So, what happens to Sizemore when he has to hand his position over to Guillen during his rehab assignment?

He'll have to play elsewhere, of course.

Another reminder he wasn't the answer.

What happened to Sizemore? Was he in over his head? Was he "fighting himself" while he was with the Tigers, as manager Jim Leyland put it?

Was he getting a "little lost," something else Leyland said?

Sizemore doesn't believe he was. With his batting average dropping to .206 because of the .118 he hit in May, the rookie prefers to think he just didn't hit enough.

"Obviously there's some heartbreak with being sent down," said Sizemore, 25, "but it's for a reason. I have to improve in some areas. I just have to get better, period."

In no way does Sizemore sound like a player who thinks he "blew it." The Tigers also don't sound like an organization with that belief.

In their announcement after Saturday night's game that Sizemore was being optioned to Toledo, both Leyland and Tigers president/general manager Dave Dombrowski made it clear the organization still thinks highly of Sizemore.

"Hopefully they'll have the confidence to call me up again," Sizemore said after going 2-for-4 with two RBIs against Durham. He's now 3-for-10 since being sent down.

"I was struggling, it was a grind every day, but whenever I stepped into the box, I felt I had a chance to get a hit. Sometimes as a hitter, though, you go through spells where you just can't figure it out.

"All I can do is go where they put me and do the best I can to get back up there.

"This isn't going to end my career. It's a bump in the road. I just have to keep plugging anyway."

Around the horn

Guillen and the Mud Hens are looking at Monday night as the game in which they'll probably face top Nationals prospect Stephen Strasburg .

... Clete Thomas ' season has been interrupted by a rather vague left knee injury that has landed him on the disabled list.

It looked like he was getting it together with a 5-for-13 stretch in which he hit three home runs and had five RBIs, but now he's on the DL for the second time this season. He hasn't played since May 11.

... Brent Dlugach didn't strike out Wednesday, but he still leads the International League with 58, 10 more than anyone else.

... Outfielder Ryan Raburn is shining. Since being sent down by the Tigers last week, he's hitting .435 (10-for-23) with five doubles in six games.

... Starter Phil Dumatrait , who was in spring training with the Tigers and was 4-1 with a 3.16 ERA in eight starts for Toledo, has gone to Seoul, South Korea, to pitch for the LG Twins.

According to the Korea Times, the deal is worth \$200,000 for Dumatrait, who pitched in the majors for the Reds and Pirates.

Tigers' Magglio Ordonez sits out with sore heel

May 19, 2010

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. -- A sore heel knocked Tigers outfielder Magglio Ordonez out of the lineup ahead of Wednesday's game against the Oakland Athletics at Oakland Coliseum.

Ordonez's status was listed as day to day.

He was replaced in manager Jim Leyland's batting order by rookie Casper Wells, who was to bat third against Athletics starter Dallas Braden, who earlier this month threw a perfect game.

Brennan Boesch moved from left field to right field, where Ordonez was to have started Wednesday.

Tigers ace Justin Verlander tosses complete game to beat Dallas Braden and A's

May 20, 2010

By Steve Kornacki / Mlive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- A pitchers duel is what one expects when Justin Verlander meets Dallas Braden, and that was exactly what they provided.

Braden, in his first game at Oakland Coliseum since throwing a perfect game against the Tampa Bay Rays, gave up a solo home run in the seventh inning to Detroit Tigers third baseman Brandon Inge to break a scoreless tie. Detroit jumped on A's reliever Michael Wuertz after Braden came out that inning, and Verlander had more than enough for a 5-1 win Wednesday night.

The Tigers got a three-city West Coast trip off to a good start thanks to plenty of offense from a growing list of impressive rookie hitters.

Verlander gave up four hits and struck out five in his first complete-game win in 2010 and the first this season by a Tiger.

His 15 2/3 scoreless inning streak ended in the eighth inning when consecutive singles by Jack Cust and Kevin Kouzmanoff led to a sacrifice fly by Adam Rosales.

"I didn't have my best stuff," Verlander said.

Closer Jose Valverde begged to differ.

"What?" he asked, shaking his head and smiling.

Verlander looked at Valverde, who warmed up but was not needed, and said, "Just listen. The biggest thing for me is locating my fastball. That's where it begins and ends for me."

TRACKING THE TIGERS

Wednesday's game: Justin Verlander went the distance for Detroit in a masterful four-hitter. Brandon Inge's seventh-inning home run off Oakland A's starter Dallas Braden broke a scoreless tie, and the Tigers ended up with a 5-1 win as three rookies exploded offensively.

Record: 23-17

The ace is dealing: Verlander is 4-1 with a 1.26 ERA in his past five starts.

Key stat: Tigers rookies Austin Jackson, Casper Wells (first hits) and Danny Worth (first RBI) combined for seven hits and four RBIs.

Next up: 3:37 p.m. Thursday vs. Oakland A's (Jeremy Bonderman vs. Tyson Ross), FSD

Valverde, who has some pretty impressive stuff himself, was not convinced.

"Yeah, right, whatever," Valverde said, grinning again.

Oakland catcher Kurt Suzuki, who collected one of the four singles Verlander allowed, said, "He's an outstanding pitcher. The guy throws three above-average pitches. His fastball was anywhere from 95 to 98 (mph) all game, and he locates it. It was pretty hard to muster up anything the way he was throwing."

Tigers manager Jim Leyland said it was a great example of what pitch economy can do for Verlander, who threw 116 pitches. He had thrown more than that in each of his past five starts but only made it past the seventh inning once.

"That's an excellent, excellent performance by a very, very good pitcher," Leyland said. "Very impressive. He had outstanding stuff and an excellent curveball. He gets it going with that changeup, and it's pretty good."

Leyland said Braden's quick game pace helped Verlander keep his rhythm, and Verlander agreed. But he said he did not mind sitting a while during the four-run seventh.

Inge got it going with his fourth home run of the season.

"Braden had gotten me on two changeups," said Inge, who previously popped up and grounded out. "But he threw me another changeup that he left up and I got it. He's a competitor out there, but you've got to step in the box and compete. It's the only way you beat a guy like that."

Detroit's rookies kept it going offensively.

Outfielder Casper Wells, who earlier singled off Braden for his first major league hit, powered a double into the gap in left-center for his first runs batted in.

"Man, I can finally take a deep breath," Wells said. "I had a lot of weight on my shoulders until getting that first one. Wow, now it's time to play baseball."

Catcher Gerald Laird followed Inge's home run by beating out an infield single that Braden could not handle near the first-base line. Braden then came out after throwing 79 pitches.

He was coming off back-to-back complete games but went as long as he could with flu-like symptoms and had an IV for fluids after the game.

Braden was honored before the game, T-shirts commemorating his perfect game were given to fans and Oakland mayor Ronald Dellums proclaimed Friday "Dallas Braden Day" and this "The Perfect Homestand." The homestand began with two wins against the Seattle Mariners, but Detroit ended the perfection.

Rookie second baseman Danny Worth, with two singles earlier in the game, moved Laird to second with a sacrifice bunt in the seventh. Then, rookie center fielder Austin Jackson laced a two-out single up the middle for the second run.

Johnny Damon was intentionally walked before Wells brought them both home with the double.

"Casper got kind of a killer hit there," Leyland said.

He was a late lineup addition because right fielder Magglio Ordonez was scratched with a right heel injury. Leyland said Ordonez could have pinch-hit and likely will play Thursday.

Wells said infield coach Rafael Belliard tapped him on the shoulder about two hours before the game with the news he was starting. Then, Wells looked at the lineup card and said, "Oh, three-hole, good."

He produced in a way expected of the No. 3 hitter.

Worth knocked in his first run in the big leagues in the eighth inning. His two-out single was his third of the game, and he has four hits in his first six at-bats (.667).

"I loved it out there," said Worth, who also helped turn a slick double play. "It was a blast, and it was good to get that RBI, too."

So, that was four RBIs and seven hits combined for rookies Jackson, Wells and Worth.

The only rookie starter who was hitless was right fielder Brennan Boesch, who entered the game leading all American League rookies with a .387 batting average.

Verlander is 4-1 with a 1.26 ERA in his past five starts and followed a Detroit loss with a win for the third consecutive outing.

He applauded Inge's home run from the dugout, but ended up getting much more than that initial offensive support.

"You know you've got to keep up with that guy," Verlander said of Braden.

Tigers' Brad Thomas excited about reuniting with wife and daughter from Australia

May 19, 2010

By Steve Kornacki / Mlive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Detroit Tigers left-handed reliever Brad Thomas is getting his pitching in line after a rough beginning in his first season with the club.

The native of Sydney, Australia, has had many adjustments to make in returning to the major leagues after several years of pitching in Japan and Korea. The mounds he pitched from last year in Korea were flatter and the balls were tackier, making it easier to throw breaking balls.

But he has gotten through those changes.

Now, he's looking forward to getting back to his family. Thomas has not seen his wife, Kylie, and 3-year-old daughter, Sienna, since leaving in February for spring training in Florida.

It has been more than three months since he has hugged his girls, but he said both have arrived in Los Angeles from Australia to be with him this weekend when the Tigers play the Dodgers.

"We've never done this before and it's been hard," Thomas said. "I hate being away from them.

"We use Skype almost every day to stay in touch, and it helps. But you know, it's not hardly the same as being with them."

He paused and added, "Sienna is little but is coming to understand this is how it is with me playing baseball.

Still, she says, 'I want to see Daddy.' "

Thomas said it was easier to stay together when he played in Asia because of proximity and time differences.

"They are 15 hours ahead of us," Thomas, 32, said of the time in Detroit. "So, it's already early in the morning there."

Sienna's preschool arrangement in Australia has made it difficult to be together, but Thomas said he's looking to get her into a school somewhere in the Detroit area.

"We need to see about settling in here and settling into a normal life," he said.

Thomas, who has made two emergency starts when Dontrelle Willis was ill, is settling into his pitching role. He is 1-0 with a 3.60 ERA in his past five outings and has cut down on his problem with walks with five in his past 15 innings.

"I think it did do him good to get out there (in the starts)," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "He got some work in."

Thomas agreed.

"Getting the innings under my belt really helped me get comfortable," he said. "I'm more comfortable with the ball, the mound and the Western game. Right now, everything's getting better and better. Even my stuff's getting better because of all those things."

Overall, Thomas is 1-0 with a 4.76 ERA. He last pitched in the majors for the Minnesota Twins in 2004 -- long before Sienna was even a twinkle in his eye.

"My daughter loves baseball and watching the games," Thomas said. "But my wife's already warned me. She said, 'Sienna thinks we are coming here to take you home.' "

Tigers rookie Brennan Boesch will face former Cal-Berkeley teammate Tyson Ross in Oakland

May 19, 2010

By Steve Kornacki / Mlive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Detroit Tigers rookie outfielder Brennan Boesch will square off against former Cal-Berkeley teammate Tyson Ross in Thursday's game against the Oakland A's.

It will be the second start for Ross (1-1, 3.97), who has taken the rotation spot of injured Justin Duchscherer.

"I was a freshman when Brennan was a junior and he left after that year," Ross said. "So, we didn't know each other real well. But he was always swinging at the ball then and he's always swinging at the ball now.

"I've seen him plenty on the highlights, and his swing hasn't changed. He's just a lot bigger. The Cal coaches are pretty excited about this."

Boesch said: "We'll have fun competing against one another. Cal has done a good job of getting players to the pros."

Boesch said about 10 friends and family members from San Jose will attend the game and was excited about his Cal Bears hitting coach, Jon Zuber, being at Oakland Coliseum. Boesch said Zuber, who played first base and outfield for the Philadelphia Phillies in 1996 and 1998, had a big impact on him.

"Jon always said, 'If there's anything you can do to learn and make yourself better, do it,' " Boesch said. "He said to never be satisfied and always get better. That fits my mentality. There was a lot of tough love from him."

Boesch entered Tuesday night's game leading all American League rookies with a .387 batting average and 19 RBIs and is second with three home runs.

Tigers' Magglio Ordonez missed Wednesday's game against A's with right heel injury

May 19, 2010

By Steve Kornacki / Mlive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Detroit Tigers right fielder Magglio Ordonez said he came out of Wednesday's lineup against the Oakland A's because of a problem with his right heel. He pointed to a red spot on the heel and said he is day-to-day.

Rookie left fielder Casper Wells took Ordonez's place in the No. 3 spot in the batting order, and rookie Brennan Boesch moved from left field to right field.

Ordonez is batting .310 with five home runs and 24 RBIs and is tied for second in outfield assists with four.

Magglio Ordonez scratched from tonight's Tigers' lineup in Oakland

May 19, 2010

By Steve Kornacki / Mlive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Tigers right fielder Magglio Ordonez was a late scratch from tonight's game and rookie Casper Wells will take his place in the batting order. Wells will start in left field, and Brennan Boesch will move to right field.

Justin Verlander will start for Detroit, and here is the lineup that will face the Oakland A's left-hander Dallas Braden, who pitched a perfect game two starts ago:

1. Austin Jackson, CF
2. Johnny Damon, DH
3. Casper Wells, LF
4. Miguel Cabrera, 1B
5. Brennan Boesch, RF
6. Brandon Inge, 3B
7. Gerald Laird, C
8. Danny Worth, 2B
9. Adam Everett, SS

Who will be the last Tigers player with a Mohawk standing?

May 19, 2010

By Ian Casselberry / Mlive.com

Brandon Inge joined Alex Avila in opting out of the Detroit Tigers' Mohawk club. Will any Mohawk be left standing come October? "It's just hair," said Tigers reliever Phil Coke.

Oh, is it, Mr. Coke? Just hair? Or the latest sensation sweeping Tigers Nation? (I prefer "Tiger Town," by the way, but ceded to the rhyme.)

Coke acknowledges the phenomenon he and his fellow relievers may have created by shaving their hair into Mohawks between games of last week's day-night doubleheader versus the New York Yankees.

May 18, Oakland Press: "We've kind of created a Mohawk epidemic," declared Phil Coke with undisguised pride.

"Nothing wrong with that," insisted Coke, whose spiked hairdo is easily the most outrageous and provocative on the team.

Lest you think Jim Hawkins' description of Coke's Mohawk is intended to scare women and children, we're talking about a gel-aided, free-standing follicular structure that spits in the face of conformity. And given that Coke used to play with the Yankees, where long locks and scruffy beards go to die, the man was probably itching to express some creativity with his scalp.

Welcome to Detroit. We'll take your Mohawks. Especially if you can strike out Mark Teixeira or Justin Morneau when called from the bullpen.

(I know I felt inspired to join the Mohawk club upon hearing the news last week. And had a set of clippers been nearby - as well as several adult beverages - I may well have sheared the sides of my head. Either that, or I knew my mother would be outraged. But that's why these guys are professional athletes, and I'm just a blogger. They go out and do it. I just sit on my couch and wish.)

But could the ranks of Motown's latest incarnation of Bad Boys be thinning out? Last week, Alex Avila decided that looking like Travis Bickle while speaking at a fundraiser might not be the best way to go. Between that, and disapproval from his fiancée, Avila shaved off his hair fin and rejoined normal society.

And now, as reported by our own James Schmehl on Twitter, Brandon Inge has also decided the Mr. T look doesn't suit him. Presumably, Inge's 2-for-16 performance with the Mohawk factored into the shave-off. He insists, however, that his significant other did not influence the decision. (Inge showed he was a veteran with that one. Avila's admission was clearly a rookie mistake.)

So that leaves the Tigers pitchers to wave the Mohawk flag. This whole idea was concocted by the bullpen in the first place. (See what happens when you give a bunch of guys innings upon innings to think about ways to express team camaraderie? Spitting sunflower seeds and choreographing leg crossings only provides so much amusement.)

Inge represented the infielders and Avila stood for the catchers, while Johnny Damon arguably let his hair speak for the outfielders (though he sported a faux-hawk that still looked acceptable in social circles). But really, it's been the bullpen (along with Jeremy Bonderman, who's never kept much hair on his head) that's taken this movement most seriously. And as my fellow Cutoff Man contributor Matt Sussman wagers, it will be a reliever who takes this thing as far as it can go.

According to sources in the Tigers' clubhouse, Joel Zumaya is the one who suggested the Mohawks in the first place. So it seems rather likely that he'll be the last to cave in to conformity. And should it be any other way? Don't back down, Zoomie.

Tigers' Brennan Boesch working 'endlessly' on his defense

May 19, 2010

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

DETROIT -- Tigers outfielder Brennan Boesch has made headlines with a power-hitting resume that features 16 RBIs and a .421 batting average during a 15-game stretch.

But, the 25-year-old rookie hasn't received much praise about his defense in the outfield – and, rightfully so. It hasn't been all that impressive through his first 20 career games.

Boesch, who has made 16 game starts in the outfield, committed his third error Tuesday, which eventually led to a two-run eighth inning in Detroit's 6-2 loss to Chicago. He's tied for the third most errors on the team behind second baseman Scott Sizemore (6) and first baseman Miguel Cabrera (5) – each having made at least 30 starts at their respective position.

Manager Jim Leyland said he has no plans of pulling Boesch from the No. 5 spot in the Tigers' lineup anytime soon. But, his troubling .889 fielding percentage could force Leyland to plug the hot-hitting slugger at designated hitter on a more consistent basis.

Boesch, who grew up in Santa Monica, Calif., returns to his old stomping ground this week as part of a seven-game West Coast trip featuring three ballparks in eight days. Dodger Stadium, which has a reputation as a pitchers' park due to its deep outfield dimensions, will provide Boesch with his first real outfield test.

“We'll get out early and Tigers outfield coach Tom Brookens hits to us off the fungo bat and we take ground balls and try to figure out the nuances of each stadium,” Boesch said. “It's definitely a big part of adjusting to play up here.”

Boesch is hitting .387 and has collected 14 extra-base hits in the first 20 games of his career, but he said he's been focusing more on his play in the outfield – particularly left field -- than his presence at the plate.

“Coach Brookens and I work endlessly on trying to get a good feel for each stadium,” Boesch said. “I don't think a lot of people realize that aspect of the game, as far as going into stadiums you've never played in and adjusting to how the ball carries and how you see it off the bat. That factors in to how to be a good outfielder and it is all stuff that I take a lot of pride in.”

Boesch has seen the majority of his playing time in left field this season – an early test for the left-handed slugger who primarily played right field for Class A Lakeland and Double-A Erie the past two years. Boesch was only 17 games into his season at Triple-A Toledo before being promoted when Carlos Guillen went on the 15-day disabled list with a strained left hamstring. He made 13 starts in right field, one in center and did not see action in left for the Mud Hens this season.

Out of town blogroll: Oakland Athletics' radio signal, bullpen go out against Detroit Tigers

May 20, 2010

By The Oakland Press

The KTRB-AM (950) radio signal went out in Oakland during the fifth inning of the Detroit Tigers' 5-1 victory over the Oakland Athletics — just before the A's bullpen fell apart.

The absent radio signal was just as well, one Oakland blogger says.

The KTBR signal still was stronger than the A's bats, writes Nico at Athletics Nation. At The Oakland Tribune, baseball writer Joe Stiglich says opposing pitchers have turned up their intensity against Dallas Braden since he pitched his perfect game. And Susan Slusser of The San Francisco Chronicle writes Braden needed IV fluids after coming out of the game against the Tigers.

Everything Al Kaline did in 1955 was right

May 19, 2010

By Jim Hawkins / The Oakland Press

The cover of a new book on Tiger great Al Kaline, written by longtime Oakland Press sportswriter Jim Hawkins.

Editor's note: This is the second of four excerpts from Oakland Press baseball writer Jim Hawkins' eighth book, "Al Kaline: The Biography of a Tigers Icon," published by Triumph Books. Check back next week for the third excerpt, or purchase the book here.

(Chapter 6 - Everything I Did Was Right)

The silver bat, symbolic of batting supremacy in the American League in 1955, still hangs in Al Kaline's den in his suburban Detroit home. More than half a century later, it remains one of his most prized possessions. Kaline has never been a trophy guy, but that one is a keeper.

"That's one of the few trophies I still have," Al admitted. "That, and one Gold Glove. I gave all my other Gold Gloves and stuff to my parents and kids and the grandkids."

Who needs the metal when you have the memories? Ironically, under today's rules, skinny young Al Kaline would probably not have been in the big leagues, batting third for the Tigers in 1955 when he hit .340 and won his one and only batting crown.

Instead, Kaline, straight out of high school, would most likely have been sent directly to the Tigers' farm system in 1953. And he probably would have still been there in 1955, honing his skills as young players did in those days, impatiently waiting, worrying, wondering when his time and his turn to come.

When the Tigers signed Kaline as a bonus baby in 1953, their plan, although never publicized or publicly acknowledged, called for Al to spend the requisite two years riding the bench in the big leagues, getting his feet wet and taking a ribbing from envious veterans, then spend two or three seasons developing into the ballplayer the organization believed he could be by playing every day in the high minors. That was the way things were done in those days. It was standard operating procedure.

However, because of baseball's restrictive Bonus Rule, Kaline had been immediately force-fed into the major leagues where, with little more than one full season in the big leagues under his belt, he suddenly exploded with the season of seasons in 1955, slugging his way to the coveted American League batting title when he was still nearly three months shy of his 21st birthday.

No one so young had ever led the AL in hitting before. And no one so young has done it since. Ironically, Kaline edged out former Tigers legend Ty Cobb, who won the first of his 12 batting titles in 1907, by a single day for that distinction. Cobb was born on December 18, 1886; Kaline on December 19, 1934.

By the start of the 1955 season, Kaline had bulked up to a solid 175 pounds and had become a fixture in right field. But his future big-league stardom was still far from a certainty.

As Kaline prepared himself physically and mentally for the 1955 campaign, he knew he needed a breakout year. Armed with a new \$9,000 contract—he had gotten his first pay raise in the big leagues—Al knew he needed to hit with more power, with more authority, to establish himself as a bona fide big-league hitter. He needed to hit more home runs, more doubles, more triples. He needed more RBIs. He wanted to hit .300.

"Near the end of the 1954 season, all of the other players kept saying, 'You've got to go upstairs and ask for a raise because you're a regular now,'" Kaline recalled. "At the time, I was still making the major-league minimum, which was \$6,000.

"So I went up and talked to Muddy Ruel, who was our general manager. He gave me a \$2,000 raise for 1954. After the season, when I went in to talk about my contract for 1955, he said, 'We already gave you a raise.' So I made \$9,000 in 1955."

Kaline finished 1955 at .340 with 27 home runs and 102 RBIs. Kaline led the league with 200 base hits, including two on the next-to-last day of the season, and scored 121 runs.

At 20 years, nine months, and six days, Kaline was the youngest American League batting champion ever. The next-best hitter in the AL in 1955 was Kansas City's flashy-fielding Vic Power, who batted .319, 21 points behind the Tigers sensation.

Kaline had outthit Mickey Mantle, who was then in his prime, by 34 points, and Willie Mays, arguably the greatest all-around player ever, by 21.

Ty Cobb, hailed as the “Greatest Tiger of All” and “a Genius in Spikes,” was older by one day than Al Kaline when he won his first American League batting title in 1907. Ty went on to win 11 more, nine of them in a row. But Kaline never led the league in hitting again. And he would long be haunted by his breakout performance in the summer of 1955.

“It was a good thing and a great thrill,” Al said years later. “But it just happened to me too early.

“Everything I did was right that year. For a long time, the pitchers didn’t think I was for real. By the time they found out, the season was over and I had the batting championship.”

Kaline was named the 1955 Player of the Year by The Sporting News, whose word, in those days, was widely accepted in baseball as gospel.

However, the Yankees’ Yogi Berra beat out Al for the American League Most Valuable Player Award by 17 points. Berra, it is worth noting, batted just .272 that season with 27 home runs, the same as Kaline, and 108 RBIs. But the Yankees won the pennant. And the Yankees, of course, were the Yankees.

It was not the first time a player from Detroit had been snubbed by the national media. Nor would it be the last. The failure, decades later, of Mickey Lolich, Jack Morris, and Alan Trammell to be awarded their rightful places in baseball’s Hall of Fame comes to mind.

For his efforts, the American League’s new batting king received a \$6,000 raise—from the \$9,000 he was paid in 1955 all the way up to \$15,000 in 1956.

“I wasn’t real happy about that,” Kaline admitted. “But when I questioned it, Muddy Ruel told me, ‘If we keep giving you those kinds of raises, we won’t be able to afford you.’” That was the logic that baseball employed in 1955.

At a banquet that winter, Kaline bumped into Leo Durocher, who was leaving his job as manager of the New York Giants to work as a TV commentator at NBC.

“I hear you signed your ’56 contract,” the always blunt Durocher said. “Don’t know what they gave you—but it wasn’t enough.”

Typically, Kaline grinned and said, “I’m not kicking.”

However, more than half a century later, Al Kaline can only imagine how much money a 20-year-old batting champion might be worth on today’s free-agent market. The money would be mind boggling.

Verlander runs May record to 4-0

Four-run seventh is more than enough offense for Tigers ace

May 20, 2010

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Verlander Express keeps on rolling.

Winner of his previous three starts, Detroit right-hander Justin Verlander turned in his finest performance of the year on Wednesday in a 5-1 Tigers win over Oakland. Verlander went the distance, allowing one run on four hits and a walk while striking out five.

During his postgame meeting with reporters, Verlander started off his first response by saying, "I didn't have my best stuff tonight."

This prompted Detroit's colorful closer, Jose Valverde, who was within an earshot of Verlander, to yell out, "What?" in disbelief.

The way Verlander was dealing, one could hardly blame Valverde. Through seven innings, Verlander only faced one batter over the minimum. His final out, a strikeout of A's outfielder Ryan Sweeney, came on a fastball that touched 96 mph on the stadium radar gun.

"The biggest key for me is controlling my fastball, and I was able to do that tonight to both sides of the plate," Verlander said. "That's where it starts and ends with me. If I'm able to do that, I'm usually going to have a pretty good game."

Aside from harnessing his powerful fastball, Verlander said he made a recent mechanical adjustment -- trying to stand more upright on the rubber -- that's aided him in his last few starts. Over his last four starts, Verlander is now 4-0 with a 1.50 ERA and 25 strikeouts in 30 innings.

"He's one of the best pitchers in baseball," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "He was tough. He certainly didn't run out of gas there at the end. After 110 pitches, he was still throwing 96, 97 [mph]. A lot of pitchers can keep it up when they start to smell the finish line."

Verlander needed 99 pitches to get through eight innings, but assured manager Jim Leyland he was still good to go in the ninth.

"I checked with him after the eighth and he said he had plenty in the tank yet," Leyland said. "He deserved to be out there obviously in the ninth inning. I thought he was our best choice."

The game was a pitcher's duel to start, as A's starter Dallas Braden matched Verlander's initial six shutout innings, until the Tigers' offense broke it open with four runs in the seventh.

Leyland said he thought Braden's quick pace and rhythm actually benefitted Verlander, as it kept the tempo of the game rolling.

"Braden was good, we weren't doing too much with him," Leyland said. "It was kind of in-and-out, in-and-out. Both pitchers really good tempo going and like I said, I think their guy pitching good helped our guy really." Braden left the game in seventh inning with an illness and said he received IV on Tuesday and another one after the game. Leyland praised Braden for being able to keep Detroit's hitters off balance, calling it the best performance Braden had ever delivered against the Tigers.

"He was tremendous," Leyland said. "He used both sides of the plate, he used his changeup, he really pitched extremely well. He had tremendous control, I was very impressed with him."

Aside from Verlander's stellar outing, Wednesday was yet another marquee day for Detroit's talented rookies. Outfielder Casper Wells, who was inserted into the lineup shortly before game time to replace Magglio Ordonez (right ankle), recorded his first big league hit during the third inning. He made the evening even sweeter by doubling in a pair of his teammates during the seventh.

"Man, I can finally take a deep breath," Wells said. "I've got a lot of weight off my shoulders. ... Getting your first knock is the next step, then you can just play the game from there."

Wells said he didn't even keep track of the ball once he hit it, though it eventually ended up in the hands of catcher Gerald Laird in the dugout. Wells said he got a congratulations from A's first baseman Daric Barton upon reaching base, but that he doesn't know what he'll do with the ball.

"When I have a house and have my own room, I can put some of my stuff up there," Wells said. "I've got some Little League trophies in my room now. Little gold guys standing there."

Wells' fellow rookie, second baseman Danny Worth, also had his biggest game since being called up from Triple-A Toledo on Sunday. Worth finished 3-for-3 with an RBI, which came via a single in the eighth to extend Detroit's lead to 5-0.

Wells and Worth are just two of five rookies to make their debut this season, making it the earliest a quintet of Tigers has debuted since 1922.

"We're just going out there and trying to hit the crap out of the ball," Worth said.

Brandon Inge started off the scoring by sending a Braden changeup over the left-center field wall for a leadoff homer in the seventh. The next batter, Laird, laid a bunt down the first-base line and Braden failed to make the play before exiting the game. Laird said he bunted on his own.

"It's something I like to do when I'm struggling like I am now," Laird said.

Laird came around to score on an RBI single by Austin Jackson, before Johnny Damon was intentionally walked. Casper, the next batter, hit the first pitch he saw to left-center, plating Damon and Jackson to make it 4-0.

"When we bring them up, we don't sit them," Leyland said of his rookies. "I think that's what you should do. I don't like to bring guys up and just sit them down, I want to throw them in the fire and see what happens."

Ordonez scratched from Tigers' lineup

Tigers right fielder day-to-day with right ankle injury

May 20, 2010

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Magglio Ordonez was not in the lineup Wednesday for the opener of the Tigers' two-game set against the A's.

Ordonez said he injured his right ankle and will be day-to-day. He was on the trainer's table icing his right ankle before the game started and was scratched about two hours before the first pitch.

Casper Wells started in left field and replaced Ordonez in the lineup, hitting third. Wells made his Major League debut on Saturday in Boston, going 0-for-4 with two strikeouts. In 31 games with Triple-A Toledo this season, Wells hit .203 with five home runs and 12 RBIs.

After Wednesday night's 5-1 win over the A's, Detroit manager Jim Leyland said he could have used Ordonez as a pinch-hitter if necessary.

"He's going to be fine," Leyland said.

Boesch feels at home in Bay Area

OAKLAND -- When Brennan Boesch took the field on Wednesday in Oakland, there were about 10 of his family and friends from the Bay Area in attendance.

Boesch, who played his college ball at nearby UC Berkeley from 2004-2006, said he will also get a chance to reunite with his former hitting coach Jon Zuber

Boesch said Zuber, who had a brief Major League career with the Phillies in 1996 and 1998, coached with "a lot of tough love."

"We'd get into some verbal battles and really hash things out and get into it because we were just really passionate about getting me to where I'm at," Boesch said.

Boesch said he's also looking forward to face former college teammate and current A's righty Tyson Ross when he makes his second career start on Thursday. Ross was a freshman and Boesch was a junior when the two played together on the 2006 Cal team.

"That'll be good," Boesch said. "I'm proud of him. He made the big leagues this year, and to be able to face him is going to be fun. He's a great kid, but it's all business once we get out there."

Also on that 2006 Cal team was current Blue Jays starter Brandon Morrow. Boesch also mentioned other recent Cal alums like Xavier Nady and Conor Jackson who have made the big leagues.

"It's fun to be part of a good program that's really starting to feed in some big league talent," Boesch said.

Tigers catchers scuffling at plate

OAKLAND -- For as good as the Detroit Tigers' lineup has been this season, they haven't received much offensive help from their catchers.

Through 39 games, the splits for Gerald Laird and Alex Avila haven't exactly been Pudge-ian. The Tigers' catchers are hitting a combined .153 with three home runs and seven RBIs this season.

When asked if he thought Laird or Avila will come around, Detroit manager Jim Leyland said, "I don't know if they will or not."

Since signing with the Tigers before the 2009 season, Laird has yet to display the offensive promise he showed in his six seasons with Texas. He hit .255 during his time with the Rangers and had career highs of nine home runs and 47 RBIs over 120 games in 2007. Last season, Laird hit .225 with four home runs and 33 RBIs.

"I think right now, Alex is a little bit lost," Leyland said. "And for whatever reason, I think Gerald is just pressing. ... I could be totally wrong, but that's just an observation."

Avila enjoyed some success in 2009 after getting called up to the big leagues in August. In 29 games, he hit .279 with five home runs and 14 RBIs. Avila's Minor League stats suggest offensive potential as well. In 151 Minor League games, Avila hit .280 with 13 home runs and 77 RBIs.

But the poor offense from catchers isn't exclusive to the big league club when it comes to the Tigers' organization. As Leyland sat in his office Wednesday and thumbed through his organization's Minor League stats, he found most of the regular catchers are hovering around the Mendoza line.

Robinson Diaz, Triple-A Toledo's primary backstop, is hitting .213. Double-A Erie catcher Jeff Kunkel is hitting .200. Class A West Michigan's Eric Roof is hitting .202. Class A Lakeland catcher Julio Rodriguez leads the bunch with his .250 average.

Worth noting

Brennan Boesch had his eight-game hitting streak snapped in Wednesday's 5-1 win over the A's. ... The Tigers are now 31-20 against teams from the AL West since the start of the 2009 season. Only the Yankees (31-19) are better. ... Austin Jackson has hit safely in 19 of his 20 road games this season. ... Johnny Damon has reached base safely in 31 of his past 36 games.

Tough act for Bonderman to follow

By Alex DiFilippo / MLB.com

Jeremy Bonderman and Justin Verlander have lockers side-by-side in the Tigers' clubhouse at Comerica Park. Yes, the Tigers are on the road for a two-game set in Oakland, but Bonderman will certainly try to channel some of Verlander's success. The Tigers ace pitched an absolute gem on Wednesday, surrendering one run off four hits en route to a 5-1 victory against the Athletics. The win upped his record to 4-0 in May.

Bonderman (1-2), on the other hand, hasn't seen the same success. His only win of the season came way back on April 10, in the Tigers' fifth game of the season. Since then, he's started five games, earning three no-decisions to go along with his two losses.

Bonderman was expected to start on Tuesday to kick off the series against the White Sox after a rainout Monday, but his start was pushed back to keep Verlander on schedule. He pitched one inning against the Red Sox on Sunday to stay fresh and didn't allow a run.

In his last start, Bonderman threw well, but was unable to garner any run support from his teammates. He allowed only two runs on five hits in seven innings, but took the loss to the Yankees.

"I just thought he mixed stuff pretty good," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said after Bonderman's last start. "I thought he had some movement on it. I thought he was rested. I think that probably helped him. But I just thought overall, he pitched very, very well."

For the Athletics, right-hander Tyson Ross (1-1) will be making only his second career start. He's never faced the Tigers, who have been on a roll of late, posting 19 runs in their last four games.

Ross was a spot starter in his first career start, and Athletics manager Bob Geren planned on putting him back in the bullpen after taking the loss. Not due to a poor performance, just to give the 23-year-old rookie some time to find his bearings.

But Ross will again start on Thursday and he's comfortable with it. He's been a starting pitcher his whole career before reaching the Majors.

"It's something I'm used to," Ross said after his last start. "It was nice to have that familiar feeling.

Geren didn't mention an exact pitch count for Ross, but he said, "We'll see how it goes and go from there."

Athletics: Braden battles through

After throwing a perfect game two starts ago in Oakland, expectations for Athletics starting pitcher Dallas Braden were sky-high entering Wednesday's bout against the Tigers.

Braden (4-4) looked strong on the evening, before allowing two runs in the seventh inning. He exited the game early with flu-like symptoms and took the loss.

His perfect game on May 9 against the Tampa Bay Rays made him an instant celebrity. Mayor Ron Dellums even announced that Friday will be "Dallas Braden Day."

Tigers: Young guns still rolling

The Tigers have had five players make their Major League debut this season -- the most since 1922.

And on Wednesday, the rookies were the key to the Tigers' victory. Four of them were in the starting lineup.

Outfielder Brennan Boesch, who has been red-hot in 21 starts, went 0-for-3. The other three rookies combined to go 7-for-13 on the night.

Outfielder Casper Wells, who was a late addition due to a foot injury to Magglio Ordonez, recorded his first big league hit. But one wasn't enough, as he also recorded a second hit and tallied two RBIs

Second baseman Danny Worth went 3-for-3 on the night and also tacked on his first RBI.

Worth noting

Boesch will face Ross for the first time on Wednesday. The two played together at the University of California.

... Tigers rookie Austin Jackson has recorded a hit in 19 of 20 road games this season.

Daily Transactions

CBSSports.com

Wednesday, May 19, 2010		
Team	Player	Transaction
Arizona Diamondbacks	Cole Gillespie	Sent to Minors
Arizona Diamondbacks	Gerardo Parra	Called Up from Minors
Boston Red Sox	Josh Beckett	Placed on 15-Day DL, (Lower back strain)
Boston Red Sox	Joe Nelson	Purchased From Minors
Chicago Cubs	Jeff Stevens	Called Up from Minors
Chicago Cubs	Esmailin Caridad	Placed on 15-Day DL, (Right elbow strain)
Cleveland Indians	Shelley Duncan	Purchased From Minors
Cleveland Indians	Grady Sizemore	Placed on 15-Day DL, (Bruised left knee)
Cleveland Indians	Asdrubal Cabrera	Transferred to 60-Day DL, (Fractured left forearm)
Florida Marlins	Chris Leroux	Placed on 15-Day DL, (Right elbow strain)
Florida Marlins	Tim Wood	Called Up from Minors
Minnesota Twins	Jeff Manship	Called Up from Minors
New York Mets	Jonathon Niese	Placed on 15-Day DL, (Mild right hamstring strain)
New York Mets	R.A. Dickey	Purchased From Minors
San Francisco Giants	Eugenio Velez	Sent to Minors
San Francisco Giants	Freddy Sanchez	Recalled From Minors, Rehab Assignment
San Francisco Giants	Freddy Sanchez	Removed From 15-Day DL, (Recovery from left shoulder surgery)
Seattle Mariners	Milton Bradley	Reinstated From Restricted List
Seattle Mariners	Sean White	Sent to Minors
Tampa Bay Rays	Pat Burrell	Released
Toronto Blue Jays	Marc Rzepczynski	Recalled From Minors, Rehab Assignment
Toronto Blue Jays	Randy Ruiz	Released
Toronto Blue Jays	Jeremy Reed	Called Up from Minors
Toronto Blue Jays	Marc Rzepczynski	Removed From 15-Day DL, (Fractured left middle finger)
Toronto Blue Jays	Marc Rzepczynski	Sent to Minors