

A's News Clips, Monday, June 7, 2010

Michael Wuertz preserves A's win over Minnesota Twins

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Nailing down a victory Sunday proved more difficult than expected, but the A's weren't in a position to fuss.

They used some timely hitting to jump in front of the Minnesota Twins, then held on for a 5-4 victory to avoid a three-game sweep at the Oakland Coliseum.

Games in early June don't fall in the "must-win" category, but the A's needed a confidence-builder after letting winnable games slip away in the late innings Friday and Saturday.

They begin a four-game series tonight at home against the Los Angeles Angels, who have won 10 of their past 12 and leapfrogged the A's for second place in the American League West over the weekend.

"It's always nice to go into a series against a division rival on a good note," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Closer-for-a-day Michael Wuertz had to preserve a one-run lead in the top of the ninth after Tyson Ross allowed Delmon Young's two-run homer in the eighth to bring Minnesota within 5-4.

Wuertz ended the game by throwing his glove up and snaring Denard Span's liner as it buzzed over his head.

"Obviously that last one to Span was pure luck," Wuertz said.

But Geren called Wuertz's effort the biggest bright spot of the day.

Regular closer Andrew Bailey was in need of a rest. Wuertz, whose wicked slider made him one of the majors' top setup men in 2009, has been spotty after a shoulder injury sidelined him for the first month of the season.

He struck out his only batter in Saturday's loss, and the right-hander credited a mechanical adjustment that has him throwing his slider with crispness again. Wuertz said he's altered the angle of his right wrist as his hands break from his glove during his delivery.

He struck out Nick Punto and pinch hitter Justin Morneau — who was still feeling effects from the stomach flu and didn't start — to lead off the ninth before snagging Span's liner for the final out.

"It was a good day," Wuertz said. "I'm starting to feel a part of the bullpen again instead of never knowing what my role is going to be."

Wuertz's re-emergence would be big for a bullpen that has shown vulnerability lately.

Craig Breslow retired two of the first three batters in the eighth with the A's leading 5-2. But Geren brought in Ross to face Young, who blasted a two-run homer to left-center after Ross grooved a 2-0 pitch.

The relief corps logged a 5.97 ERA on the recently completed 10-game road trip and absorbed losses Friday and Saturday.

The A's scored all five of their runs in the first three innings and chased Twins starter Nick Blackburn (6-3) with two outs in the third. Significantly, all of Oakland's runs came via two-out hits, with five different players driving them in.

Jack Cust and Kevin Kouzmanoff had three hits apiece.

"It's always nice when you get some two-out hits to drive in runs," Cust said. "A lot of times it's the difference in the game."

Gio Gonzalez (6-3) went seven innings and allowed two runs, striking out four and walking one.

With the A's playing their 13th contest in a 20-game stretch with no days off, the bullpen has shouldered a heavy load.

Geren let Gonzalez throw a career-high 117 pitches, the most by an Oakland pitcher since Joe Blanton threw 119 in a seven-inning effort July 4, 2008 against the White Sox.

TODAY: Angels (Scott Kazmir 4-5) at A's (Ben Sheets 2-4), 7:05 p.m. TV: CSNCA. Radio: 860-AM; 1640-AM

Peterson: A's pitcher Gio Gonzalez becoming a reliable part

By Gary Peterson, Oakland Tribune columnist

Gio Gonzalez didn't come with an owner's manual when he arrived in Oakland before the 2008 season. But the A's could write one now.

1) Includes high-performance moving parts.

"You could see it when he would have command of his pitches," Oakland manager Bob Geren said Sunday after Gonzalez pitched seven snappy innings in the A's 5-4 win over the Minnesota Twins. "He put two starts together last year, I think it was at Yankee Stadium and Fenway (Park) back-to-back, where you could see this is a pretty talented young guy if he can command the (strike) zone."

2) Once properly warmed up, can be safely operated for more than two hours.

Gonzalez threw 117 pitches Sunday, the most by an A's pitcher in almost two years. It was by necessity, Oakland's bullpen having pitched 142/3 innings in the team's previous three games.

Both Geren and Gonzalez agreed the young left-hander was capable of filling the role of Designated Innings Eater.

"Today was a good day to do it," Geren said. "He felt strong. When he got up to around 105, 110 pitches, his velocity was still good. The breaking ball was still good. He felt fantastic. So once in a while you've got to push a guy a little bit."

"I didn't care about the pitch count," said Gonzalez, wearing a Donald Duck T-shirt. "I heard my last fastball was at 94 (mph), so I felt great."

Perhaps most important:

3) In the event of electric stuff, simply aim for the heart of the plate and enjoy the amazed looks from teammates and opponents alike.

"Last year we actually started a process where the catcher didn't move too much, kind of stayed centered on the plate and let the ball move," Geren said. "Now (Gonzalez) actually has more command with his pitches. The catcher can have a game plan to follow."

Well, sometimes.

Gonzalez's pitches were diving and darting like Wiffle balls during his pregame warm-up Sunday. Having seen the phenomenon before, catcher Kurt Suzuki knew exactly what to do.

Revert to Item 2 in the manual.

"Obviously you watch how he's warming up," Suzuki said. "Some days his ball is moving a ton and some days it really doesn't. You have to gauge it on his warm-up. Today his ball was moving a lot. You have to try to center it up to get more contact."

It worked like a charm. Suzuki called for most every pitch to be thrown at the center of the plate, knowing Gonzalez's natural movement would cause the ball to move places where Minnesota's hitters would have trouble finding it.

It wasn't a perfect game, but it fit the A's needs perfectly. Gonzalez allowed two runs on six hits in seven innings. He turned a 5-2 lead over to the bullpen. After a few anxious moments, the A's successfully averted a sweep and gave themselves some momentum heading into a four-game series against the Los Angeles Angels.

Given that the second-place Angels are a half-game ahead of the third-place A's, and a half-game behind the AL West-leading Texas Rangers, you could characterize it as a riveting short-term diversion.

More significant might be the big-picture assessment of Gonzalez, whose career arc is beginning to resemble a foul pole. Two years ago he was 1-4 in 10 major league games (seven starts), with a 7.68 ERA. Last year he went 6-7 in 20 games (17 starts), with a 5.75 ERA.

Sunday's win boosted his record to 6-3. His ERA is 3.58. And even though he is striking out fewer batters, his strikeout-to-walk ratio is a robust 1.91-to-1.

In other words, he's beginning to look like a pitcher the A's can count on in this year of dreaming big. In a related development, he's also putting a nice spin on the Nick Swisher trade.

You remember — the popular A's outfielder/first baseman to the Chicago White Sox for Gonzalez and outfielder Ryan Sweeney? It occurred during one of general manager Billy Beane's periodic purge-for-prospects affectations. As such, it wasn't exactly received with the ringing of church bells.

Now? The White Sox dealt Swisher to the New York Yankees 17 months ago. Meanwhile, Gonzalez is lighting it up, and Sweeney, with two hits and an RBI on Sunday, is hitting .309.

We all knew the A's roster rebuild would come in under budget. If Gonzalez keeps up the good work, there's a chance it might be completed before the next purge for prospects.

A's update: Scouting director likes what may be available with 10th pick

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

Scouting director likes what may be available at No. 10

It stands to reason the A's will land a quality player with the 10th overall pick as the amateur draft begins today.

Who that player might be is anyone's guess. Predicting how the first round unfolds annually is a crapshoot, but there's thought that this year's draft is even more unpredictable than normal.

The Washington Nationals are expected to choose College of Southern Nevada catcher Bryce Harper at No. 1, but the rest of the top 10 is tough to handicap.

The A's have their highest first-round selection since taking Barry Zito ninth overall in 1999. After picking 10th, their next selections in the three-day event come at 60th, 92nd and 125th.

"A top-10 pick carries a lot of cache to it, but I think there's a lot of difference between picking 10th and picking first," A's scouting director Eric Kubota said. "We feel good about what could be available."

This year's class is said to be light on college hitters, but mock drafts have linked the A's to two of the best in University of Texas-Arlington outfielder Michael Choice and Arkansas infielder Zack Cox.

Choice gets high marks for his power, which the A's can always use more of in their farm system. Cox has played both third base and second base this season, and he'd be more valuable to the A's if he can handle third, a position where they lack impact prospects.

Though the A's filled an organizational need last season by drafting USC shortstop Grant Green 13th overall, they maintain they don't target "need" positions early in the draft.

The A's haven't taken a high school player in the first round since choosing pitcher Jeremy Bonderman in 2001. But several highly rated prep players could prove tempting this season at No. 10.

Shortstop Cliff Pennington, who had just one RBI in his previous 21 games before Sunday, had a run-scoring single in a 5-4 win over the Minnesota Twins. Pennington also shined defensively, leaping high to grab Delmon Young's liner in the sixth. ... Manager Bob Geren said outfielder Coco Crisp (strained rib cage muscle) is hitting off a tee and progressing toward a minor league rehab assignment. ... The A's are 11-4 in one-run games, best in the majors.

Carl Steward 'In Our Backyard': Batting Stance Guy becomes baseball sensation

By Carl Steward_Oakland Tribune columnist

If you love baseball and spend any time at all on the Internet, you're probably well aware by now of Gar Ryness, a.k.a. Batting Stance Guy. For sheer comic relief, he may be the game's most hilarious hit sensation since the San Diego Chicken.

With the lone prop of a Wiffle bat, Ryness imitates batting stances — hundreds of them, both contemporary and classic — and they're so spot on and performed with such obvious adoration for his subjects that they've struck a chord throughout the country for what he modestly terms "the least marketable skill in America."

Funny thing, fame. Ryness has emerged from inauspicious backyard beginnings two years ago that started when Ryness agreed to do a video of Red Sox stances for neighbor/collaborator Caleb Dewart. Dewart put them on YouTube for his Boston friends, and Batting Stance Guy mushroomed to a level of high and very marketable demand. The online videos caught fire, and he's become an ever-growing phenomenon.

He's done Letterman. He has a book out published by Simon & Schuster entitled, simply, "Batting Stance Guy: A Love Letter To Baseball." He has his own website, which includes links to dozens of YouTube videos that have received hits well into the millions. MLB franchises are inviting him to their ballparks to perform imitations of their own specific past and present players, and to wit, he was in Oakland on Friday night entertaining the A's and their fans with his inimitable versions of Coco Crisp, Daric Barton and others.

In short, Ryness, at 37, has become a phenomenon doing something so obvious and yet so subtle. Players, perhaps more than fans, can't wait to see themselves immortalized by Batting Stance Guy, and more often than not he leaves them howling with laughter and wanting more because he is so good at it.

"For someone in their mid-30s, balding, married with kids, who long ago gave up the baseball dream, this is about as close as I can get to playing in the bigs, being at the center of a bunch of people laughing in a major league clubhouse," he said.

Here's something you may not know about Ryness, though: He's ours. Born in Walnut Creek and raised in Danville, he's a 1991 graduate of Monte Vista High, where he said he was the last guy on the bench of a team that made it to the North Coast Section title game, ultimately losing to crosstown rival San Ramon.

It was during that time that he started mimicking the stances of the late-1980s A's, whose lineup was loaded with hitters with distinctive, often decidedly wacky batting mannerisms — Rickey Henderson, Tony Phillips, Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, Mickey Tettleton and Carney Lansford, to name a few.

When he went off to college at Syracuse University, Ryness expanded his repertoire to the favorite players of his friends raised in the East. It was always frat-party type of stuff, but he realized he had a knack for being able to recall a stance without too much thought. To this day, he doesn't fully understand his unusual talent.

"My high school grades would suggest I'm not that smart, so I don't know how I do it," he said. "I guess I just love it. I don't have anything written down and I don't have a mirror that I practice in front of. For some reason my brain is able to call up a stance whenever I think of a given player."

It may have helped that he comes from a family of performers. His younger brother Bryce Ryness is an actor on Broadway, having recently performed a two-year stint in "Hair." A younger sister is a storyboard artist in Hollywood. Another younger sister is involved in musical theater and a talent agent.

"I had the least marketable skill not only in America, but in my own family," he said. "I was the oldest, but the punchline of the joke is here's all these very distinguished people with good careers, and oh, he imitates baseball players."

Like any good impressionist, Ryness' secret is not so much the stance but keen attention to a player's mannerisms before or after an actual at-bat. The Big Papi hand-clap. The Canseco twitch. The Manny Ramirez hippety-hop. He can also take a kooky stance from as well known a star as Henderson to someone like Craig Counsell and exaggerate it just enough to make it that much funnier.

"I get more laughs doing Gary Sheffield looking ticked off than wiggling his bat," he said. "Or Barry Bonds looking bored."

Ryness also feels he's just the right age to be doing this, too. He has about 30 years of acute personal baseball knowledge to draw from, yet he's young enough not to look and act, as he put it, "too creepy." To incorporate older players, he scours eBay for VHS tapes and watches a lot of ESPN Classic and the MLB Network. Amazingly, he still has time for his day job, working for a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles helping to facilitate charity options for actors and entertainers.

"I get a lot of people who are dumbfounded that they weren't the ones who thought of doing it first," he said. "But honestly, there was no business plan, and I've tried not to overthink it. It's not lost on me how amazing this whole thing is, but for the most part, we've strived together keep it loose and low-key. We (he and Dewart) have turned down different things that were more about money or making it like a job. We're constantly trying to keep it fun and about the love of the game, connecting with fans and players."

Ryess not only has connected, he's whacking home runs of hilarity wherever he goes. Maybe that's because he can stand and watch them, too, exactly like Reggie. Somehow, it resonates.

Gonzalez wins 3rd straight as A's hold on

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

After two one-run losses to the Twins involving the bullpen, the A's were pleased to nail down a narrow win of their own Sunday at the Coliseum.

The fact that a key reliever made a prominent contribution to a 5-4 victory over Minnesota made things even better. Michael Wuertz, who was among the best set-up men in the game last year, has been slow to get on track this season after some shoulder trouble during the spring, but Sunday was a big step for a man that Oakland manager Bob Geren called "such a big part of our bullpen."

"Number one is the win," Geren said. "Second to that is the performance of Michael Wuertz."

With closer Andrew Bailey unavailable after working two innings Thursday and an inning Friday, Wuertz got the call, and he earned his first save of the year with a 1-2-3 inning that included two strikeouts (one of them was pinch-hitter Justin Morneau) and then a searing line drive by Denard Span that Wuertz caught in an act of self defense as much as anything.

"He was great, looking sharp," A's second baseman Mark Ellis said. "He's getting his legs back under him."

Over his previous seven outings, Wuertz had an ERA of 11.81. Last year, he led all American League relievers in strikeouts, with 102, and he went 6-1 with four saves and a 2.63 ERA.

Wuertz credited his strong outing Sunday to a small change with the wrist angle he uses on his grip that pitching coach Curt Young and bullpen coach Ron Romanick helped Wuertz make.

The first day Wuertz tried it was Saturday. He went into that game and struck out the only man he faced.

"I was able to make that adjustment and it really helped me go in there (Sunday) and be aggressive," Wuertz said.

Wuertz has had trouble with left-handed hitters, who were 5-for-10 off him, so getting Nick Punto to start things off Sunday was a boost. But the main thing is that just the small difference with his wrist gives his slider the depth he needs to be effective.

"I'm starting to feel like part of the bullpen again," he said.

Gio Gonzalez did the overtaxed bullpen a good turn by working seven innings, and he came away with his team-high sixth victory. He was backed by good defense, particularly from shortstop Cliff Pennington, who leaped high for a line drive by Delmon Young in the sixth.

"What's that movie, 'White Men Can't Jump'? He completely fooled 'em," Gonzalez said with a grin.

Pennington had one of the team's five two-out RBI hits; Ryan Sweeney had a run-scoring double in the second. Ellis, who turned 33 on Sunday, also drove in a run.

Briefly: Coco Crisp (ribcage strain) is swinging off a tee and might start taking batting practice with the team, but he won't start a rehab assignment until later this month. ... The A's are 11-4 in one-run games, best in the majors.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Rough patch: Rookie Tyson Ross allowed a two-run homer by Delmon Young in the eighth and has a 23.60 ERA over his past six outings. Manager Bob Geren said Ross "threw a little bit too good of a strike."

GIANTS & A'S

'Chosen one' will be gone; who's left?

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

One guy the A's and Giants didn't need to heavily scout in preparing for today's first-year player draft was Bryce Harper, this year's supposed prospect of the century and likely No. 1 overall pick.

The A's pick 10th, their first top-10 selection since taking Barry Zito ninth in 1999, and the Giants are slotted at 24 after four straight years of top-10 picks.

Harper is the can't-miss, blue-chip, fast-track, Scott Boras-primed 2010 version of Stephen Strasburg, and he's destined to be Strasburg's teammate. For the second straight year, the Nationals pick first and will have the privilege of engaging in a drawn-out negotiation with Boras.

The other times the A's picked 10th, they took Mark McGwire in 1984 and Eric Chavez in 1996. They would love to snag a similar impact player. But the baseball draft is far less predictable than those in football, basketball and hockey, where draftees go directly to the NFL, NBA and NHL.

"There's a difference between picking first and picking 10th, and I think the value of that pick depends on what the draft pool is like," said Eric Kubota, the A's director of scouting. "We'll pick the best player available. From there, it's a long road to get (to the majors)."

Mock drafts, usually pointless in baseball because of the unpredictability, link the A's to third baseman Zack Cox (Arkansas), outfielders Bryce Brentz (Middle Tennessee State) and Michael Choice (Texas-Arlington) and pitchers Dylan Covey (Maranatha High, Pasadena), Stetson Allie (St. Edward High, Lakewood, Ohio) and Alex Wimmers (Ohio State).

"It's a deep draft," Kubota said. "Most people are assuming Harper will go first. After that, all bets are off. The consensus is a lot of different guys could go from that point."

The Giants, who picked Tim Lincecum (10th), Madison Bumgarner (10th), Buster Posey (fifth) and Zack Wheeler (sixth) with their top picks the past four years, would hope to be as fortunate as in 2002, when they picked Matt Cain 25th.

"I believe the guy we select at 24 is someone who will be discussed up higher than us," said John Barr, who's overseeing his third Giants draft and suggested this one has plenty of high school pitching. "I'm hoping we're pleasantly surprised who gets to us."

Neither the A's nor Giants have a compensatory sandwich pick between the first two rounds. The A's will pick 60th, 92nd and 125th, the Giants 74th, 105th and 138th.

Harper, 17, was a Sports Illustrated cover boy at 16 and left high school after his sophomore year to enroll at College of Southern Nevada, making him eligible for this year's draft. SI called Harper the "Chosen One," and today he should be chosen one.

Drumbeat: Draft day hoping

John Shea, 6/7/2010 7:05AM

Today's MLB draft starts at 4 p.m. on MLB Network. Here's John Shea's preview.

Mock drafts, usually pointless in baseball because of the unpredictability, link the A's to third baseman Zack Cox (Arkansas), outfielders Bryce Brentz (Middle Tennessee State) and Michael Choice (Texas-Arlington) and pitchers Dylan Covey (Maranatha High, Pasadena), Stetson Allie (St. Edward High, Lakewood, Ohio) and Alex Wimmers (Ohio State).

I expect the A's to take a position player with the 10th pick-- that's their need, they've had much better luck developing pitchers from further down, and the injury risk is lower. The A's got way behind in hitter development in the mid-'00s and are only now making it up.

Specifically, I'm hoping for Zack Cox (scouting report). He changed his swing this year, which has meant more contact and less power. A line of .432/.524/.606 in a strong conference is a pretty strong hint there's a solid major leaguer there. He'll be expensive to sign, which may have scared the Astros off him at No. 9, but the A's haven't been cheapskates in their signings the last couple years. As always, other opinions welcome.

Wuertz returns to form, closes door

Reliever makes short work of Twins in ninth inning

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In manager Bob Geren's eyes, there was more than one win for his ballclub Sunday afternoon.

The first, which came in the form of a 5-4 Oakland victory over the Twins, allowed the A's to avoid their first home sweep of the season and also gain a game on the American League West-leading Rangers.

The second, though not as noticeable in the standings, was signified by the unofficial return of Michael Wuertz, who on Sunday felt -- and looked -- like his old self.

The A's reliever, who represented one of the league's top setup men last year but admittedly has been struggling to find his identity in the bullpen this season, was called upon in the ninth for a save situation in a one-run game.

Wuertz, sporting a new adjustment in his wrist for a more comfortable setup position, made it all look easy, tallying two strikeouts against Nick Punto and Justin Morneau before pulling down a line drive off the bat of Denard Span for the third out and, ultimately, the win.

"I'm real happy about Wuertz," Geren said. "Today was, by far, the best he's looked all year. Obviously his performance is secondary to the win, but he looked great."

It marked just the second time all season Wuertz was used in consecutive days, the only other time coming last week when he surrendered three runs in two-thirds of an inning at Boston in the second of two consecutive games.

It was then, despite the results, that Geren noticed his fastball coming around. And on Sunday, the A's skipper watched his slider work wonders -- a combination of improving elements that has Geren thinking Wuertz -- the Wuertz who went 6-1 with a 2.63 ERA last year -- is back.

"I think I only threw one fastball today," the A's pitcher said, "but my slider was working on both sides of the plate, so being able to make adjustments like that really helped. I had depth on my breaking ball, which is key for me. "

It was also key in allowing starter Gio Gonzalez to hold onto his team-leading sixth win of the season, a greatly deserved 117-pitch effort that resulted in two runs on six hits with one walk and four strikeouts through seven solid innings of work.

The victory not only lent an overworked bullpen some rest, but also put to rest a not-so-memorable contest against the Twins last year, when he offered up a career-high 11 runs in just 2 2/3 innings on July 20.

"Last year," Geren said, "we saw where he had the ability to beat some of the best teams in the league and be a talented young pitcher if he can command the zone. He's doing that this year and has a better changeup. His stuff is so good, and it only keeps getting better."

Gonzalez's superb outing marked the first time an A's pitcher reached the 117-pitch mark since Joe Blanton threw 119 in a seven-inning winning effort against the White Sox on July 8, 2008. It also marked a career high for the A's lefty, who had tallied a season-high 108 pitches in his previous two starts.

"I didn't want to get out of the game," Gonzalez said. "I didn't care about the pitch count. I just wanted to keep the team in the game."

"The bullpen has been so overworked," said Mark Ellis. "For him to throw the ball that way against that lineup is incredible."

And while Gonzalez did his part in the effort, Ellis and Co. offered just enough support thanks to five runs that all came with two outs. The A's second baseman, who drove in a run in the third, represented one of five different Oakland players to tally an RBI in the game.

Kevin Kouzmanoff and Jack Cust, who each connected for three hits, got things going in the first with run-scoring singles off Twins starter Nick Blackburn, who then surrendered second-inning doubles to Rajai Davis and Ryan Sweeney, who drove in a run.

"It's always nice to get two-out hits like that," Cust said. "A lot of times it's the difference in the game. Pitchers are one out away from getting out of the inning, so you always try to keep things going."

"We've played a lot of close games, that's for sure. Today we swung the bats well, and it's good to get out of here with at least one win. I'll take a three-hit day any day."

The A's forced Blackburn out of the game after just 2 2/3 innings and failed to plate against Minnesota's bullpen, which put together 5 1/3 innings of three-hit ball. That's OK, though, when you've got a consistently dominant bullpen of your own.

Said bullpen, though weary in the midst of a stretch of 20 consecutive games, limited the Twins to two runs -- in the form of a two-run homer from Delmon Young off righty Tyson Ross in the eighth -- to hang on for a win that very much defined Oakland's offensive style.

"I can't think of a big hit today," Geren said, "because they came from all over. We were linking them together in almost every inning. That's a typical day for our offense, so it's nice to get runs when we're doing that."

Crisp nearing rehab assignment

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Coco Crisp was slated to begin baseball activity Sunday and could potentially be ready for a rehab assignment as early as next week.

The A's outfielder, placed on the disabled list for the second time this season May 23 with a strained right intercostal muscle, will take part in batting practice within the next two days -- the results of which will determine when he can make a Minor League rehab assignment.

Crisp began the season on the DL with a fractured left pinky and rejoined the club May 21st, when he began a string of two games before falling victim to the injury bug yet again. In his short stint with the A's, he tallied three RBIs.

Braden hosts Little Leaguers Sunday

OAKLAND -- A large handful of Little Leaguers roamed the Oakland Coliseum on Sunday, the majority of them guests of Dallas Braden.

The A's pitcher hosted Hoover Tyler, his former Little League, to the club's afternoon contest against Minnesota, where it was invited to participate in Oakland's Little League Day and parade around the warning track of the field while swapping high-fives with Braden.

It was just last season Braden announced his decision to annually sponsor a child from Hoover Tyler who is being raised by a single parent, a situation in which he grew up in nearby Stockton, Calif. Braden's own mother, Jodie Atwood, raised her son singlehandedly before succumbing to melanoma nine years ago.

"I am happy that I am in the position to be able to give a few kids a carefree day at the ballpark with their friends and family," Braden said. "Every day I spend at the ballpark, my life is changed, and I want to be able to give that gift to all the boys and girls that are in a position that I, myself, know all too well."

This year, the A's lefty is sponsoring a pair of children, brothers Reagan (11) and Alec (9) Liddon, who have been under the care of their mother, Lisa, since their father passed from anemia in 2006. Thus, Braden will take care of all baseball-related costs, including hats, jerseys, pants, equipment, league fees and photo packages.

Sweeney will keep eye on Draft

OAKLAND -- Ryan Sweeney will be keeping a rather close eye on this week's Draft picks.

Well, one pick, really.

Ryan's younger brother, 17-year-old Kellen Sweeney, is expected to be taken in the first couple of rounds in this year's First-Year Player Draft, which begins Monday.

Kellen, an infield prep prospect out of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has already committed to the University of San Diego. However, he could see a change of plans if drafted near the top -- a situation similar to that of Ryan, who was taken out of high school by the White Sox in the second round of the 2003 Draft.

Though busy with his own baseball schedule, Ryan manages to still keep in touch with Kellen on a regular basis, despite not being able to join his parents and younger sister in the stands. Following Sunday's affair with the visiting Twins, Sweeney plans on touching base with a potential fellow Major Leaguer who just happens to be his brother.

"I just want to wish him good luck," Ryan said. "I know that we're all just hoping for a team to select him that will give him the best opportunity."

Worth noting

Manager Bob Geren said Eric Chavez, rehabbing from neck spasms, will continue to work out with the club this week and -- as reported Saturday -- could begin a rehab assignment by the end of the A's homestand Friday. ... Rajai Davis was caught stealing for the fourth time this season in Sunday's game, yet it represented just the first time it did not come on a pitchout.

AL West tightening as Angels, A's open set

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

Apparently, it was only a matter of time before the Angels finally caught fire this season.

Fresh off a three-game sweep over the Mariners, the Angels have won five in a row and eight of their past nine entering a four-game series against the American League West rival A's that begins Monday at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum.

Although Angels manager Mike Scioscia maintains he doesn't look at his club's place in the standings, it enters just a half-game back of the Rangers in the AL West, which is the closest the Angels have been to first place since May 1.

The Angels will turn to left-hander Scott Kazmir in the series opener against A's right-hander Ben Sheets.

Kazmir, who is 4-5 with a 5.86 ERA this season, is coming off one of his better outings of the season when he limited the Royals to just one run over 5 2/3 innings on Wednesday. But he also struggled with his control with four walks and just two strikeouts.

"The results were there, but his command wasn't what it needs to be," Scioscia said. "When he had to make a pitch, he did, but his ball-to-strike ratio was not good."

The A's, meanwhile, have been a pleasant surprise this season and enter just one game behind the Rangers in the standings. But they enter having lost four of their past six after playing the always-tough Red Sox and Twins.

Oakland will look to Sheets to get it back on track, and the nine-year veteran has done his best to keep the A's in games, as he's pitched at least six innings in each of his past six starts.

Sheets, though, has just one win over that stretch despite a 3.32 ERA and is 2-4 with a 5.00 ERA on the season. He tossed six innings again in his last start on Wednesday but allowed four runs in a loss against the Red Sox.

"I was up and down," he said. "I'm still working on being consistent with good arm speed. I didn't think it was great by any means."

Angels: Izturis held out

Infielder Maicer Izturis was held out of the Angels' 9-4 win over the Mariners on Sunday because of soreness in his right knee, but he is expected to be back in the lineup on Monday. "I could play," Izturis said, "but it's probably better to take a day off."

A's: Crisp nears rehab assignment

Outfielder Coco Crisp resumed baseball activities on Sunday and could potentially be ready for a rehab assignment this week. Crisp, who is on the disabled list with a strained right intercostal muscle, will take batting practice early in the week, and then the A's will decide when Crisp will begin his Minor League rehab assignment.

Worth noting

The Angels will have Scioscia back at manager on Monday after he missed the final two games in Seattle to attend daughter Taylor's high school graduation. Bench coach Ron Roenicke was the club's manager in Scioscia's place. ... A's manager Bob Geren said Eric Chavez, rehabbing from neck spasms, will continue to work out with the club this week and could begin a rehab assignment by the end of the homestand Friday. ... Angels catcher Jeff Mathis, recovering from a fractured right wrist, caught a full game for the second day in a row on Saturday for Triple-A Salt Lake, going 1-for-4 with an RBI in a 7-2 loss to Colorado Springs. Third baseman Brandon Wood was 0-for-4 in his fifth rehab assignment at third base.

Two-out scoring pushes A's past Twins

Associated Press

OAKLAND - Manager Bob Geren couldn't pick a particular hit that carried the A's in their latest nail-biter. There were several of them -- and the A's needed every one.

This team is accustomed to close games given that it has played four one-run contests in a row now.

"It's just the games we play," designated hitter Jack Cust said.

Gio Gonzalez struck out four in seven innings to win his third straight decision, and Oakland scored all of its runs with two outs in a 5-4 victory over the Minnesota Twins on Sunday.

Cust and Kevin Kouzmanoff hit back-to-back RBI singles in the first to stake Gonzalez (6-3) to an early 2-0 lead. Ryan Sweeney hit an RBI double in the second and Mark Ellis and Cliff Pennington then hit consecutive run-scoring singles in the third to chase Twins starter Nick Blackburn (6-3).

"Those are big two-out runs to keep the rally going," catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "As a catcher, you hate when you give up two-out runs."

Delmon Young hit a two-run homer off Tyson Ross in the eighth for the Twins.

The A's avoided being swept by Minnesota in Oakland for the first time since July 18-20, 1997, bouncing back from one-run losses in the first two games of the series in a fittingly close finale.

"A lot of singles but we're getting hits, getting guys on base and giving ourselves opportunities to score," Ellis said. "We felt we could have won all three of these games."

The Twins got one run back in the second on an error and Matt Tolbert added a third-inning sacrifice fly.

It didn't help having their hottest hitter out.

Justin Morneau had the flu and didn't start for the Twins a day after the A's intentionally walked him as a pinch-hitter to start Minnesota's ninth-inning rally in a 4-3 win. On Sunday, Morneau struck out as a pinch-hitter in the ninth.

Gonzalez allowed two runs on six hits and walked one in a 117-pitch performance. He threw the most pitches by an A's starter since Joe Blanton's 119 against the White Sox on July 4, 2008, at Chicago. Michael Wuertz earned his first save of the season in his first try, getting two strikeouts in a 1-2-3 ninth.

Gonzalez, coming off two straight no-decisions, won for the first time since beating the San Francisco Giants on May 22 and beat the Twins for the first time in three tries. He also finally figured out the Twins.

The lefty was tagged for a combined 18 hits and 18 runs in 5 2/3 innings of two starts last year against Minnesota.

"It's a fresh start," he said. "I did my homework this time."

After the one-run losses in the first two games, including Friday night's 5-4 loss in 11 innings, Oakland dropped out of first or second place in the AL West for the first time since losing its season opener to Seattle back on April 5. Sunday's win helped get the team going again heading into a key four-game series against the rival Angels starting Monday night in the Coliseum.

Suzuki took a foul tip from Young off the neck and chin in the sixth, giving the A's a scare. He stayed in the game after being examined by an athletic trainer. Suzuki thought he might have chipped a tooth but his mouth was intact.

Blackburn was done after Ellis and Pennington hit consecutive RBI singles with two outs in the third. His 2 2/3 innings marked his shortest outing of the season, topping the 3 2/3 innings he tossed in his previous start. He gave up 10 hits for the second straight start, one off his season high.

Blackburn is winless against the A's in four career outings.

"They were sitting on my good pitches and hitting the mistakes," he said. "They even hit some good pitches. There has to be some sort of reason for what happened and whatever it is I'm just going to keep working on the same things."

Rajai Davis was caught stealing in the first for just the fourth time in 24 attempts. Blackburn has gone 94 2/3 innings without allowing a steal dating to Davis' stolen bag last September.

After being swept in Seattle to start this road trip, the Twins rebounded to win this series for a 3-4 showing. They now head home for the next nine games.

Brendan Harris singled in the second to snap an 0-for-20 stretch, then Minnesota leadoff man Denard Span ended an 0-for-22 funk with a triple to start the third.

Notes Ellis celebrated his 33rd birthday. ... A's CF Coco Crisp, on the disabled list for the second time this season, has begun hitting off a tee in his recovery from a strained chest muscle and will be taking batting practice in the coming days. ... Oakland DH Eric Chavez (neck injury) could begin a rehab assignment in about a week. ... A's LHP Dallas Braden, who pitched a perfect game May 9, hosted his former Little League team -- Hoover Tyler -- for Sunday's "Little League Day." Some 275 Little Leaguers from Braden's hometown of Stockton attended.

A's lose another close game

Malaika Bobino, Oakland Post, 6/6/2010

Oakland, CA – It was “de ja vu” all over again. Bottom of the eighth inning, the Oakland A's rally back to tie the game but one call may have determined the outcome which led to the A's losing game two of the series 4-3 to the Minnesota Twins.

Closer Brad Ziegler entered a tied game top of the ninth frame and knew the pressure was upon him. After striking out the first batter, pinch hitter Justin Morneau was up next. Morneau has been the Twins strongest batter this season.

Before Ziegler had the opportunity to battle the situation at hand, manager Bob Geren gave the call to intentionally walk him. That strategy would've worked had Brad retired the next two batters but that didn't happen.

“Fortunately, in my career, I haven't given up many of those,” said Ziegler. “I don't remember ever seeing that before?” “I felt a good rhythm after facing the first batter so, it caught me off guard... I would have liked to have been given a shot in that situation but it's not my decision.”

The next batter up was walked unintentionally and then the unexpected happened. Matt Tolbert hit the game winning run and got his first RBI of the season. Tolbert was recalled from the Triple-A Rochester on June 1st.

“I was pretty nervous but figured I had to do something,” said Tolbert. “I was glad to get a hit at the right time for the win because I hadn't done anything up until that point.”

The A's found themselves exactly in the same situation the night before yet, again things didn't go their way. Adam Rosales tied the game in the eighth frame when he doubled bringing in two runners. The fate of the game came down to which team had the better bullpen.

“A little disappointing in giving up the lead but we battled back,” said manager Ron Gardenhire. “Everytime we play Oakland it's a grind, they don't give up and that's kind of our history.” “Tolbert came up with the hit for the win, that was big for him and our ball club.”

Lefty Cedrick Bowers was summoned to replace Ziegler. Bowers got his second opportunity from the bullpen at the mound. Despite the results of last night's game, he feels it's still early in the season for the team to panic.

“There is still a lot of time to get better,” said Bowers. “It's a constant grind everyday out there!” “We have a great bullpen, I'm confident in myself and the team.”

It was the second straight disappointing finish for the A's, despite their efforts to tie both games late. Oakland now falls three games behind Texas in the standings and remain in the third spot behind the Anaheim Angels who they face Monday to begin a four-game series.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Fresno slugs past Sacramento, takes 11.5-game lead

By Robbie Enos / Sacramento River Cats

Chukchansi Park, home to the Fresno Grizzlies, is a nice park for the hitter. With a short 335-foot wall down the right-field line and a cozy 324 feet down left, the park proves to be a nice attraction for batters and nightmare for pitchers.

This fact reared its head in Sunday's game between the Sacramento River Cats and Grizzlies, as Fresno pulled off an 8-6 win in a game that included six home runs, three for each team. The only multi-homer player was Eugenio Velez of Fresno. Also stroking shots were Matt Carson, Matt Watson and Anthony Recker of the River Cats, along with Brock Bond of the Grizzlies.

Ironically, it was a single error that decided the slugfest, as a bobble off the glove of second baseman Eric Sogard led to a three-run rally for the Grizzlies in the seventh inning. This inning gave Fresno the lead and Sacramento could not answer back.

Continuing a monster series was right fielder Tyler Graham of Fresno, who's 4-for-4 performance with two doubles made him 7-for-7 through two games in the four-game series. Adding a walk, Graham has not made a single out all series. He contributed two of Fresno's runs Sunday.

The game started with a bang. Watson smoked a solo shot over the right-field fence to give the Cats the early lead. This was his fourth home run in just 10 games played (Watson had a .667 slugging percentage entering Sunday). But Fresno answered in the bottom half facing Sacramento starter John Halama, when Jesus Guzman walked and Velez hit his first home run.

Grizzly Brock Bond led off the bottom of the third with a home run. Following suit was Graham, who doubled, advanced to third on a flyball from Brett Pill, and scored on an RBI single from John Bowker. The two-run inning gave Fresno a 4-1 lead.

Velez's second home run came in the fourth inning, as he sent another Halama pitch packing. But the River Cats flexed their muscles in the fifth, starting with a double off the bat of Dallas McPherson. Catcher Anthony Recker followed with a two-run bomb, closing Fresno's lead to two.

Fresno manager Steve Decker removed starting pitcher Matt Kinney in the top of the sixth. Kinney finished with 5.0 innings of work, six hits and four strikeouts. He gave way to reliever Osiris Matos, who went on to throw an inning worth forgetting.

The Cats drew two walks to lead off that inning, first from designated hitter Josh Donaldson and then Chris Carter. A Carson grounder advanced both runners, and then another walk to Adam Heather loaded the bases with one out.

Coming through in the clutch was McPherson, playing in just his second game back from the disabled list, who pounded another double to bring Carter and Donaldson home. The base hit tied the game. After a walk to Anthony Recker, Matos' day was done. Geno Espineli took over and managed a double play off the bat of Sogard to end the inning.

Halama gave way to Fernando Hernandez in the sixth, finishing a bit of a rough outing. Halama gave up nine hits and five earned runs. His stuff did not fool any of the Grizzly hitters, as he recorded only one strikeout in the outing.

With Espineli still in the game, Sacramento snagged the lead back in the seventh thanks to a Carson home run. This was Carson's sixth home run of the year, and already his fourth in June.

The game-changing inning came in the seventh, when a big Grizzly rally became a big three-run affair. It started with a single from catcher Nestor Rojas. With two outs, Sogard bobbled a ground ball from Brock Bond, and could not make the throw in time at first to get him. The error turned out to be huge for Fresno.

Graham slugged a single to load the bases. This set up a sacrifice fly to center from Pill, scoring Rojas and tying the game. Following that Bowker laced a big two-RBI single right, scoring Graham and Bond.

The win gives Fresno an 11.5-game lead over Sacramento in the Pacific South Division. The River Cats will play them again Monday at 7:05 p.m., attempting to close the gap and hopefully even the series Tuesday.

Swaggerty Holds Down 'Hounds

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

The last time Ben Swaggerty faced the RockHounds at Arvest Ballpark in Springdale, Arkansas was last September. He watched Raul Padron's home run sail over the wall in right-center field in the 12th inning of what would be the decisive game of the Texas League Championship Series.

Flash forward to 2010, and Swaggerty did not allow a home run ... or a ht for that matter ... tossing 3.1 scoreless innings for the win as the Naturals defeated the RockHounds, 6-1.

The 'Hounds got back-to back singles to open th game, but Naturals starter Blake Johnson esaped the jam and would then retire nine batters in-a-row.

Northwest Arkansas took advantage of three walks from 'Hounds starter Anthony Capra in the fourth inning, with Ernesto Mejia driving home the game's first run on the inning's only hit.

Jeff Baisley's RBI double tied the game in the sixth, but the Naturals responded with four, consecutive singles against Beau Vaughan, scoring twice to break the tie. Mke Moustakas ... the league's top hitter ... then put the game away with a 3-run double in the last of the eighth.

Ports Pummeled In 11-3 Loss To Rawhide

VISALIA, Calif. - On a 96 degree afternoon in Visalia, the Stockton Ports couldn't take the heat. The Visalia Rawhide scored five first-inning runs and never looked back in an 11-3 rout on Sunday at Recreation Park. With the loss, the Ports finish their road trip at a 3-4 mark as they return home for a seven-game homestand.

It was the Ports that scored the first run of the afternoon in the top of the first. With runners at second and third and one out, Mike Spina drove in Grant Green with a groundout to short to put the Ports in front 1-0.

Visalia, though, would come through with a strong counterpunch in the bottom of the inning. Ports starter Shawn Haviland (5-2) allowed back-to-back singles to Brent Greer and Byron Wiley to start the inning and put runners at the corners. After a strikeout of Ryan Wheeler, catcher Ryan Ortiz threw down to second on a stolen base attempt by Wiley and the throw wound up in center field, scoring Greer Wiley and giving the Rawhide a 2-1 lead. Paul Goldschmidt then singled to center, followed by a two-run homer from Marc Krauss to make it 4-1. Alfredo Marte doubled and Kyle Green singled to put runners at the corners, and a sac-fly to center from Rossmel Perez put the Rawhide lead at 5-1.

Haviland would take the loss in what would be his shortest outing of the year. Stockton's starter went four innings and allowed five runs on six hits-all in the first inning-while walking three and striking out four.

After allowing a run in the first, Rawhide starter Wade Miley (4-4) kept Stockton off the board until the sixth when the Ports cut the lead to three. Green led off with a double to right and scored three batters later on a two-out single from Jeremy Barfield to make it a 5-2 game.

Miley would earn the win, going six innings and allowing two runs on nine hits while striking out three.

The Rawhide came right back and got the run back in the bottom half of the inning. Perez led the inning off with a double off Ports reliever Scott Hodsdon. Perez would wind up at third with two down in the inning and a 1-2 count to Wheeler. Hodsdon would be called for a balk that allowed Perez to score and put Visalia's lead back at four with a 6-2 score.

Brett Hunter came on to start the seventh for Stockton and gave up back-to-back singles to Krauss and Marte with one out that netted a run and made it 7-2.

Visalia put the game well out of reach in the eighth. With one out, Greer hit his first home run of the year over the left field fence to make it an 8-2 ballgame. Hunter was lifted after an ensuing single from Wiley and Trey Barham was summoned from the bullpen. Barham gave up a double to Wheeler, scoring Wiley and making it 9-2. With two down, Visalia got three straight singles from Krauss, Marte, and Greene, the last two resulting in two more runs to bring Visalia's lead up to 11-2. Hunter was charged with three runs in 1.1 innings, while Barham yielded two in two-thirds of an inning of work.

The Ports tacked on a run in the ninth on a one-out solo home run from Ortiz, his fourth of the year to make it 11-3. After allowing back-to-back walks to Shane Kough and Michael Richard, Rawhide reliever Christian Beltre (SV, 1) struck out Jermaine Mitchell and Green back-to-back to end the game.

Beltre earned a three-inning save for Visalia, his first save of the season. Beltre struck out a staggering eight batters in three total innings of work.

Green was Stockton's offensive leader on the afternoon, going 4-for-5 with two runs scored.

Stockton returns home on Monday to begin a seven-game homestand, beginning with four games against the Bakersfield Blaze. Left-hander Paul Oseguera (0-1, 2.57 ERA) will toe the rubber for Stockton. Bakersfield has yet to announce their starting pitcher. First pitch is set for 7:05 p.m. PDT.

Cougars Can't Get Sweep in Kentucky

Successful Kane County road trip ends on sour note

BOWLING GREEN, Kent. – The Kane County Cougars wrapped up a six-game road trip Sunday afternoon with an 11-6 loss against the Bowling Green Hot Rods at Bowling Green Ballpark. The Cougars were unable to sweep the series and snapped a four-game winning streak with the defeat. Still they went 4-2 on the road trip and won each series.

The Cougars built an early 3-0 lead against Wilking Rodriguez. Anthony Aliotti nailed a two-run double in the first inning, and Rashun Dixon led off the second with a homer. Starter Dan Straily, who struck out the side in a perfect first inning, gave up five runs in the second and left before the frame was over. He gave up three hits, walked three and fanned four in 1 2/3 innings. The Cougars got one run back in the third on Dixon's RBI double for a 5-4 score through three innings.

Neither club scored in the fourth, but the Hot Rods plated one in the fifth off Josh Lansford and five in the seventh against Connor Hoehn and Bo Schultz to make it 11-4. The Cougars' final runs came in the eighth and ninth. Aliotti walked and scored on an error, and Kent Walton singled home Conner Crumbliss. Straily (4-3) suffered the loss, and Rodriguez (4-3) earned the win. A.J. Huttenlocker worked 2 1/3 perfect innings and Jose Pina handled one scoreless frame out of the Cougars' bullpen.

The Cougars (26-32) are off Monday and start a six-game homestand Tuesday night at 6:30 CT against the Fort Wayne TinCaps (29-29). Murphy Smith (1-0, 3.00) will face Jerry Sullivan (5-2, 3.15). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and online at www.kccougars.com with pregame coverage starting at 6:15 p.m.