

Oakland A's are full of surprises but still fall to Chicago Cubs

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Nobody expected to see Conor Jackson batting leadoff for the A's, but the early results were encouraging.

The newest Athletic singled to open Wednesday's game against the Chicago Cubs and eventually scored on Ryan Sweeney's sacrifice fly.

That momentum was short-lived, as Cubs starter Ryan Dempster found a groove, and the A's fell 6-2 at Wrigley Field to even this three-game series heading into today's finale.

Gio Gonzalez (6-5) was touched for six runs over five innings as the A's left-hander lost his second straight start.

Dempster (5-5), after allowing the early run, settled in and struck out seven over 6²/₃ innings.

Jackson, acquired by the A's from the Arizona Diamondbacks on Tuesday, was familiar with Dempster from his time in the National League.

"Especially against a guy like that, you want to get your runs early," Jackson said. "You saw it tonight. If he settles in and finds a groove, he can get out of (jams)."

More than anything, Wednesday's game showed the juggling act A's manager Bob Geren faces with Jackson's addition to his outfield, particularly with no designated hitter available on this interleague road trip.

Geren started Jackson in left field — he said Tuesday he wanted Jackson to be his regular left fielder — and went with Sweeney in center and Jack Cust in right. That left regular center fielder and leadoff man Rajai Davis, coming off a three-hit game Tuesday, on the bench.

Sweeney, who normally plays right field, hadn't played center in a single game this season. But Geren wanted to keep Cust in the lineup as Cust was hitting .400 (14-for-35) over his past 10 games.

Cust went 1 for 4 with two strikeouts Wednesday. He also grounded into a double play.

The A's will get their DH back when they begin a homestand Monday against the Cincinnati Reds. But with Coco Crisp expected to come off the disabled list soon and take over center field, the outfield logjam will remain.

Davis said he knows Geren faces a challenge finding playing time for everyone.

"If you're hitting over .300, you're in there," said Davis, who's at .267. "Last year I started hitting and guess what? I started playing."

But Davis said he was surprised he didn't start Wednesday, adding he got no indication beforehand that he wouldn't.

"I guess that's just how we do it here," he said.

Crisp, coming back from a strained rib cage muscle, played his second rehab game Wednesday with Triple-A Sacramento and is likely to return sometime on the next homestand.

The Cubs took the lead for good with two runs off Gonzalez in the second, including a solo homer from first baseman Derrek Lee, who atoned for Tuesday's two-error performance.

Chicago broke things open with a three-run fifth that made it 6-1. That rally featured Alfonso Soriano's two-run, bloop double, which dropped along the right-field line.

"I pounded the strike zone," said Gonzalez, who walked three. "It was just tough breaks. They got some hits that could have gone either way."

Geren said he doesn't see Jackson as a regular leadoff man, just an option with Crisp hurt and Davis not playing.

Jackson went 2 for 3 with a walk in his first A's start and threw Geovany Soto out at home with a strong one-hop throw from left in the second inning.

He's hit all throughout the batting order during his career.

"Obviously you're going to get your opportunities in the three-, four- or five-hole to drive guys in," Jackson said. "But I think my forte is getting on base and letting guys drive me in."

TODAY: A's (Dallas Braden 4-6) at Cubs (Randy Wells 3-5), 11:20 a.m. TV: CSNCA Radio: 860-AM; 1640-AM

Oakland A's update: Reliever Jerry Blevins takes exception to Carlos Zambrano's remarks

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

CHICAGO — Jerry Blevins was well aware that Carlos Zambrano told Chicago media that the A's reliever "got lucky" by retiring him Tuesday.

Zambrano, the outspoken Cubs right-hander and one of the better hitting pitchers in the game, popped up with the tying run on second base and two outs in the bottom of the sixth inning. The A's went on to win 9-5.

Zambrano admitted he was swinging for the fences during the battle with Blevins, a left-hander.

He fouled off a first-pitch fastball and popped up a 2-1 offering from Blevins. The A's led 5-4 at the time.

"I missed the first pitch and I had a good swing," Zambrano was quoted in Wednesday's Chicago Tribune. "And I think he got lucky because I knew he was coming with the fastball. ... That last at-bat, I wanted to hit the Budweiser building."

The Horseshoe Casino building, which sits beyond Wrigley Field's left-field wall, is often referred to as the "Budweiser building."

Zambrano's comment left Blevins, one of the more easygoing personalities in the A's clubhouse, bent out of shape.

"I did get lucky," Blevins said before the A's 6-2 loss Wednesday. "Any time they don't pinch-hit for a pitcher to face me, I'm lucky. I've gotten a lot better hitters out than him. He's a good hitting pitcher, but he's still a pitcher. Yes I'm lucky — for them not pinch-hitting."

Zambrano was used as a pinch-hitter himself in the eighth inning Wednesday and struck out swinging against Cedrick Bowers.

A's co-owner Lew Wolff, accompanying the team on its road trip, said he'd "have no qualms" with Oakland adding more players and taking on payroll before the July 31 nonwaiver trade deadline.

But he added that he believes the A's, if healthy, can remain contenders in the American League West with their current roster.

Wolff said the A's needs center fielder Coco Crisp back from the disabled list, and "we need everybody healthy. We have a very good, balanced ball team."

The A's agreed to terms with six draftees, the highest pick being fifth-rounder Tyler Vail, a right-hander from Notre Dame High School in Easton, Pa.

Chin Music: Conor Jackson makes first A's start in leadoff spot

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 6/16/2010 5:30PM

Tonight's A's lineup features a couple of surprises. Conor Jackson starts in left field (as expected) and he's batting leadoff (unexpected). Ryan Sweeney is playing center and Jack Cust is in right. That's a tough break for Rajai Davis, who had three hits last night and lands on the bench tonight. This is the first time we've seen Sweeney in center this season, though he played there plenty in 2008 and 2009. Just yesterday, A's manager Bob Geren said Jackson could hit anywhere from 1-7, but that he didn't envision him as a leadoff man for Oakland. Before tonight's game, Geren said: "I don't see him as a

leadoff hitter now, but he could be occasionally. Because I elected to go with Jack over Raj, I elected to hit (Jackson) first today."

If the A's outfield seems crowded now, there will be a bigger numbers crunch when Coco Crisp comes off the DL. But it's looking like that won't happen during this road trip. Crisp played his first rehab game w/Triple-A Sacramento last night, and Geren said the team has a 10-day program mapped out for Crisp as he returns from his rib cage injury. That 10-day period is fluid — depending on how Crisp feels, he could come back sooner or later. But Geren made it clear the A's want to be convinced Crisp is 100 percent ready when he does get activated.

A good game last night couldn't keep Davis in tonight's lineup, and his playing time stands to be further reduced once Crisp returns. "He's always in the mix," Geren said of Davis. "He's a good player. We're going to have a situation where we have a lot of good players playing the same position. It's something we look forward to."

Let's throw this question out there: Would you like to see Davis playing regularly even after Crisp returns? We're talking after interleague play, when the DH is available ...

Tonight's lineups, even though the game is now underway ...

A's: Jackson LF, Barton 1B, Sweeney CF, Kouzmanoff 3B, Suzuki C, Cust RF, Rosales SS, Ellis 2B, Gonzalez LHP.

Cubs: Theriot 2B, Baker 3B, Byrd CF, Lee 1B, Nady RF, Soriano LF, Soto C, Castro SS, Dempster RHP.

Dave Newhouse: These all-stars shine in work for the needy

By Dave Newhouse, Oakland Tribune Columnist

LISA KLEIN is blessed. She's a stay-at-home mom with two children, 7 and 3, who have all of the comforts and few of the worries that confront less-fortunate children from the moment they are born.

But Klein has charity in her heart. She is devoted to needy children, especially babies and their mothers who are living in shelters, and desperately need gifts beyond the gift of life.

Klein, an Oakland resident, is the gift-bearer. She gathers used baby clothes and donates them to shelters, hospitals and prenatal clinics in Alameda County.

Since 2007, through her Loved Twice nonprofit, she has distributed 20,000 pounds of clothing to more than 3,000 newborns. Homeless mothers she's helped have cried over her generosity.

"I'm so dedicated to it," she said Tuesday. "It feels really good making a dent in the life of a new mom who has postpartum depression and is taking her baby from a hospital straight to a shelter. She doesn't have to shop for new clothes."

Such commitment is why the Oakland A's, in conjunction with Major League Baseball and People magazine, picked Klein as one of three finalists for the "People All-Stars Among Us" humanitarian award, which will go to one person nationally who is serving his or her community in an extraordinary way.

Each MLB franchise has three finalists. Fans have until Sunday to vote for their favorite. Then the 30 finalists, one per club, will attend the July 13 All-Star Game in Anaheim to be honored in a pre-game ceremony, besides appearing in that week's edition of People magazine.

Klein loves baseball from growing up as a Detroit Tigers fan in Royal Oak, Mich. The A's have even given her nonprofit a grant. But win or lose Sunday, her civic-minded work goes on regardless.

Klein, 41, can stay at home because husband Bill Carson is a fluvial geomorphologist — he studies underground water currents for contamination — for an Emeryville firm.

However, Klein isn't some overnight altruist. At age 6, she did her first walk-a-thon, for a burn center. At 10, she walked 20 miles for the same cause, collected the most money in Royal Oak, and won a \$300 prize.

After becoming a mother, and while contemplating returning to work in the advertising field, she was "stimulated" in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. She and some friends collected baby clothes and mailed them to a church outside New Orleans. Then once Klein started Loved Twice in 2007, she couldn't stop.

"It just kept happening," she said. "I didn't plan on this, but I can do it, it feels great and I have 50 volunteers who help me. So why not help?"

She devotes 30, 35 hours a week to putting donated used baby clothes in boxes. Various agencies then pick up the boxes. She also has four collection bins — at Cool Tops Cuts for Kids stores in Oakland, Lafayette and San Ramon, and at Marin Kids Consignment in San Rafael.

"I'd like it to get bigger," she envisions, "to teach people nationwide how they can do it on their own."

Klein can be reached at www.lovedtwice.org. The "People All-Stars Among Us" voting is done through the fan section of oaklandathletics.com or by going to MLB.com and clicking "Oakland Athletics."

The A's two other finalists: Jan Schilling, of El Cerrito, who in 1996 began a \$5,000 scholarship program to benefit one low-income female student per year from Richmond's Kennedy High; and Sejal Hathi, of Fremont, a Yale student whose Girls Helping Girls nonprofit empowers young females within their communities.

Of course, Klein hopes you'll vote for her.

"It will shine a light on the nonprofit," she said, "and by raising awareness, we'd be able to help more newborns in need — nationally.

"And I'd get to throw out the first pitch at an A's game."

Gonzalez loses to Cubs in worst start of 2010

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Conor Jackson was in the A's lineup for the first time Wednesday night. Not surprisingly, he played left field. Surprisingly, he led off.

At issue for the A's is interleague play. Accustomed to nine hitters on his lineup card, manager Bob Geren must follow National League rules this week and use eight. With Jackson suddenly in the mix, that means someone playing regularly will be on the bench.

On Wednesday, it was center fielder Rajai Davis - despite his three-hit effort the night before.

The A's fell 6-2 to the Cubs, who played much tighter than their four-error embarrassment in the series opener. Derrek Lee, who made errors on consecutive plays Tuesday, got two hits off Gio Gonzalez, including an opposite-field home run.

Both teams had nine hits, but the Cubs bunched theirs better. Geren played Jack Cust, who was hitting .400 in 10 games, instead of Davis. Cust played right, and Ryan Sweeney, normally the right fielder, played center for the first time this year.

Cust went 1-for-4 with two strikeouts, and Sweeney slipped when Geovany Soto hit a liner to center, enabling Soto to get a double during a two-run rally.

"It's tough when you play National League games," Davis said. "You're minus one more hitter. It's a tough decision, obviously, for the manager, but when you have options, I guess it's a good thing."

Davis said he wasn't upset but "a little bit" surprised he didn't play, coming off a three-hit game. "I just go with the flow," he said. "I know when I get my opportunity, I'll take advantage of it. Change their minds."

The A's will return to American League play next week. They'll be able to use nine hitters, but the addition of Coco Crisp - two days into his 10-day rehab assignment with Triple-A Sacramento - would put the A's in a similar dilemma.

Davis, who is hitting .267 this year but .326 in his last 25 games, was asked if his at-bats would be limited with Crisp aboard.

"Not if you're hitting .300. Ain't no decision," Davis said. "If you're hitting over .300, you're in there. Last year, I started hitting and guess what? I started playing. If you're hitting, you can't come out of there."

In his first full game with the A's, Jackson went 2-for-3 with a walk and threw out Soto at the plate. Jackson opened the evening with a bloop single, advanced to third on Daric Barton's single and scored on Sweeney's sacrifice fly. Jackson also singled in the seventh, when the A's scored their other run.

Jackson won't normally hit first, said Geren, adding he expects Davis to return to leadoff in today's series finale.

"Our team is built around nine slots. We get eight (at NL parks), so somebody who plays regularly doesn't play," Geren said. "But at the end of the day, I think more guys end up playing if you count the pinch hits and double switches. In some respects, guys get in more games, but might not get as many at-bats."

Gonzalez surrendered a season-high six runs in five innings, and Kevin Kouzmanoff's hit streak ended at 15 games. On the bright side, reliever Tyson Ross relieved Gonzalez with two scoreless innings.

Action Jackson's focus is on baseball

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

CHICAGO - He's Action Jackson the ballplayer, not Action Jackson the actor.

"Right now, my focus is baseball," A's newcomer Conor Jackson said. "I can definitely tell you I won't go off and be an actor any time soon."

Acquired in Tuesday's trade with the Diamondbacks, Jackson has a resume including a cameo appearance as a physical therapist on General Hospital. His father, John, played Rear Admiral Jetro "A.J." Chegwidden in the series "JAG," though Conor knows him as "Dad," the person who encouraged him to play ball, not become a childhood actor.

While Conor played at Cal, he studied theatre. He's not ruling out acting later in life but called his General Hospital gig a "bucket list type of thing." It wasn't arranged by his father, but ESPN the Magazine. He shot it during a Diamondbacks' stop in L.A. and said he did it in one take.

Jackson is one of eight current big-leaguers from Cal. The others: John Baker (Marlins), Geoff Blum (Astros), Brennan Boesch (Tigers), Brandon Morrow (Blue Jays), Xavier Nady (Cubs), Tyler Walker (Nationals) and Tyson Ross (A's).

"Nice to have another Bear around," Ross said.

Buck's leg problem: Travis Buck played in one simulated game last week but said by phone leg soreness keeps him shelved. He'll have tests to determine the problem.

Buck, who went on the DL nearly two months ago with a torn oblique, is accustomed to the A's acquiring other outfielders (Rajai Davis, Coco Crisp, Gabe Gross) and applauded the Jackson pickup.

"I know Conor, I've worked out with him, and he's a great guy," Buck said. "That's the perfect situation for him, and he's a great pickup for the A's. It doesn't change anything for me. If I'm playing to the best of my ability, things will work themselves out -- but I can't help anyone if I'm not healthy enough to play."

A'S LEADING OFF

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Joy ride: Lew Wolff, A's managing general partner, is on a trip down memory lane. He grew up in the St. Louis area (a fan of the Cardinals and old Browns) and is looking forward to this weekend's stay. As for Wrigley Field, it's the first time he visited the place since he drove from his college (University of Wisconsin) for a Bears game in the late '50s.

Drumbeat: Conor Jackson leading off; Raj? Raj who?

John Shea from Chi-town, where the A's are playing the Cubs under mostly blue skies . . . 6/16/2010 5:12PM

Conor Jackson, the leadoff hitter for a day, singled to open tonight's game and scored on Ryan Sweeney's sacrifice fly. The lineup has Jackson in left, Sweeney in center and Jack Cust in right.

Meaning no Rajai Davis, who had three hits yesterday. Manager Bob Geren wanted Cust (.400 in last 10 games) in the lineup.

"We have a new player, and we're in the National League, where I have nine players and eight spots," said manager Bob Geren, who's working without the DH. "The lineup will look a little different the next five games (at Wrigley Field and Busch Stadium), and then we'll look more normal after that.

"I'll mix and match the best I can, put the best team out there offensively and defensively."

What about when Coco Crisp comes back? He's in the second day of a 10-day rehab assignment with Triple-A Sacramento. Will Davis have to pick up his game to stay in the mix?

"He's always in the mix," Geren said. "He's a good player. We have a situation with a lot of good players playing the same position. It's a thing we haven't had before, and something we look forward to."

The lineup: CF Jackson, 1B Barton, CF Sweney, 3B Kouzmanoff, C Suzuki, RF Cust, SS Rosales, 2B Ellis, LHP Gonzalez.

New-look lineup doesn't benefit Gio, A's

Southpaw struggles in five-inning outing against Cubs

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

CHICAGO -- Before Wednesday's game against the Cubs, manager Bob Geren was confronted with questions regarding his starting lineup's new look.

At the top of the lineup read Conor Jackson, Oakland's newest acquisition. Missing was Rajai Davis, whom Geren plucked following a three-hit night in order to make room for right fielder Jack Cust.

"New player, new lineup," the A's skipper said.

The new guy did quite well for himself on Wednesday night, tallying his first two career American League hits while also scoring a run. Not much noise was heard below him, though, as the A's dropped a 6-2 game at Wrigley Field.

At the very bottom of the lineup stood Gio Gonzalez, whose plate struggles don't mean much of anything to the club. That's expected for a guy with just four Major League at-bats under his belt after Wednesday's game. But his struggles were found on the mound, too, leading to the lefty's fifth loss of the season.

In just five innings, Gonzalez surrendered eight hits and three walks while fanning three en route to a season-high six runs. His previous high was five, which came just once on April 20 vs. the Yankees.

Following a quick 1-2-3 first, the A's southpaw gave up a second-inning solo shot to Derrek Lee, who made up for Tuesday's two-error performance by tallying two hits and two runs in Wednesday's affair. Gonzalez then allowed his first free pass in the second, one that eventually scored on an RBI single from Starlin Castro.

Castro grabbed his second RBI of the night -- a sacrifice fly -- in the fourth, which began with back-to-back singles off the bats of Lee and Xavier Nady -- both of whom advanced a base on Alfonso Soriano's first sacrifice bunt as a Cub and his first since June 25, 2006, while with Washington.

"That was a sneak attack," Cubs manager Lou Piniella said.

"I've got to do something to score some runs," Soriano said. "On deck, I said if Nady got a hit and we had runners at second and first, I'm going to bunt. I think it worked for the team."

Gonzalez, meanwhile, was forced to battle some more in the fifth, when he allowed consecutive two-out hits to Nady and Soriano that led to the Cubs' final three runs. He tossed a total of 89 pitches in the outing, and he has now pitched more than 5 1/3 innings just once in June.

"You go out there and try to pound the strike zone," Gonzalez said. "I had some tough breaks out there. A couple hits went their way, ones that could have been outs if they were hit a couple inches the other way."

"He threw the ball pretty well," Geren said. "He didn't have as many swings and missed on his breaking ball that he normally has. He also put the ball in play a little more than normal."

Gonzalez's three strikeouts marked his fewest since May 12, when he also recorded three against Texas. At the same time, his offense didn't quite lend him much support following the first inning, when Ryan Sweeney tallied an RBI on a sacrifice fly off Chicago starter Ryan Dempster that brought in Jackson.

The A's racked up Dempster's pitch count early and often and tagged him for a final run in the seventh in the form of an RBI groundout from Daric Barton, but the Cubs' right-hander was able to utilize a total of 120 pitches through a solid 6 2/3 innings, which resulted in two runs on eight hits and two walks with seven strikeouts.

"He's a good pitcher, probably one of the best pitchers in the league," Geren said. "He mixed up his pitches pretty well and kept the ball down in the zone. A lot of veteran pitchers, when they get locked in, they seem to get stronger as they go. We had a chance to get to him early, and we did, but he settled in after that."

"He got out of jams pretty much every inning," said Jackson. "He's not super overpowering, but he works the corners of the plate real well and doesn't give you much to hit."

Kevin Kouzmanoff, who -- along with Jackson -- represented the only two A's players to have faced Dempster before Wednesday, went hitless despite owning a 4-for-8 mark against the righty. Kouzmanoff's 0-for-3 night snapped a career-high 15-game hitting streak.

"They're patient and they put the bat on the ball, and they make you work some deep counts," Dempster said. "They did a good job today of getting on base. It seemed like the first or second hitter of every inning got on base. You just try to keep making pitches and get some ground balls and get some outs."

The A's left a combined seven runners on base, which in effect, didn't give Gonzalez or any members of the Oakland bullpen much chance for salvation. In the process, Tyson Ross' two-inning scoreless performance was slightly lost in the losing mix.

The young righty entered the matchup with a sky-high 17.36 ERA over his past eight appearances due to command issues, but on Wednesday, he didn't allow a hit and walked two while striking out three -- numbers that, on a personal level, represented somewhat of a relief.

"That lasted as long as it did, because I was trying to tinker too much with my pitches," Ross said. "Rather than keeping it simple, I was being picky and not executing my pitches. I've been working a lot on the side with [pitching coach] Curt Young and [bullpen coach] Ron Romanick. Tonight, that's the type of role I want to have coming into games."

"He pitched really well tonight," Geren said. "It was good to see him throwing strikes. He was struggling with his command, but he's bounced back since then."

The bright spots that were Ross and Jackson, though, couldn't take away from the club's fourth loss in its past five games -- all of which have come at National League ballparks and have forced Geren to do some lineup tweaking.

"This team is built around nine slots," he said. "Some of the guys that play regularly don't play, and we let someone else get in there. At the end of the day, more guys actually end up playing, even if they don't get as many at-bats as normal."

"It's challenging, but it's part of the game. Once we get back to the American League, we won't see as much shuffling."

Jackson wants to be a jack-of-all-trades

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

CHICAGO -- Conor Jackson is pretty much ready for whatever role the A's throw his way.

"I'm up for any role they want me to be in," said the new Oakland outfielder, "whether that's coming off the bench or starting in left field or giving [Daric] Barton a day off over at first. We haven't really discussed it too much in depth, but I'm going to be ready for whatever they want me to do."

On Wednesday, for the club's second contest of a three-game set against the Cubs, manager Bob Geren wanted Jackson to start in left field and lead off.

"He's a contact hitter," the A's skipper said. "He's a line-drive guy, a gap-to-gap hitter. History shows he has a good on-base percentage. I don't see him as a leadoff hitter, but he'll be there a couple times this week until we get back to American League play."

Jackson led off 13 times for Arizona this season -- a mark only outnumbered by the time he spent batting second (19 times). Geren, though, mainly sees Rajai Davis and Coco Crisp -- once healthy -- in that spot. Davis was given a day off Wednesday, leaving Jackson to fill those duties.

No problem.

"I'm not a big strikeout guy," Jackson said. "I don't hit a ton of homers, but I'll hit my doubles and take my walks, take my pitches. I think I'll fit in pretty well with this team."

"I know this is definitely a team that's in contention. I'm excited to be here."

'Surprised' Davis has night off vs. Cubs

CHICAGO -- Rajai Davis walked into the visitors' clubhouse at Wrigley Field on Wednesday ready to build on the three-hit night he put together Tuesday.

However, that was before Davis looked at the starting lineup, which didn't include his name. Rather, it had Conor Jackson leading off and playing left, with Ryan Sweeney in center and Jack Cust manning right.

"I was a little surprised," Davis admitted, "especially coming off three hits. I'm thinking about four. But I'm not the one calling the shots, so you just have to go with the flow."

The one calling the shots is manager Bob Geren, who said he "elected to go with Jack over Raj" and insisted that Davis will continue to see plenty of playing time even with Jackson -- acquired via a trade Tuesday -- in tow.

"He's always in the mix," Geren said. "He's a good player. A lot of players play the same position. That's a luxury we have."

Davis enjoyed a 3-for-5 night with two RBIs on Tuesday and was 6-for-15 (.400) in his past three games after missing four contests with left hamstring tightness.

His absence gave Sweeney his first start in center and Cust his first start in right this season. Meanwhile, Geren sees Jackson as the club's everyday left fielder, meaning Coco Crisp's (intercostal strain) eventual return will create quite the game of musical chairs in the outfield -- a notion Davis is trying not to worry about.

"It's pretty tough for anyone to fill my shoes," Davis said with a smile. "It's really tough. I'm sure of my abilities. I'm going to continue to play my game. I've always seen myself as an everyday player, and I feel like I've proven to everyone here that I'm an everyday player."

Geren, for the second day in a row, mentioned in his pregame media session how much he likes what he's seen from Cust at the plate and didn't specify whether he or Davis will start in Thursday's series finale.

Cust went 0-for-2 with two walks Tuesday and entered Wednesday's affair batting .400 (14-for-35) with two home runs, seven RBIs and a trio of three-hit games over his past 10 contests after he posted a .229 mark over his first 15 games.

More A's Draft picks under contract

CHICAGO -- The A's on Wednesday agreed to terms with six players -- all right-handed pitchers -- from the 2010 First-Year Player Draft, bringing the total number of players signed to 23.

Among those signed Wednesday was one of the organization's four early-round high school selections -- right-handed pitcher Tyler Vail, who was taken by the A's in the fifth round out of Notre Dame High School in Easton, Pa.

The A's also locked up right-handed pitchers A.J. Griffin (13th round, University of San Diego), J.C. Menna (14th, Brookdale CC), Logan Chitwood (19th, University of Texas-Tyler), Rashad Ramsey (20th, Chattooga HS) and Sean Murphy (33rd, Keystone College).

Oakland has now inked 11 of its first 20 picks and has until Aug. 16 to sign its other drafted players.

Worth noting

In Wednesday's edition of the Chicago Tribune, starter Carlos Zambrano said A's reliever Jerry Blevins "got lucky" when he forced a popout to end the sixth frame during Tuesday's contest. "I wanted to hit a home run," Zambrano told the Tribune. "I wanted to hit the Budweiser building." Upon hearing of Zambrano's comments, courtesy of teammate Michael Wuertz, Blevins smiled while shaking his head, saying, "I guess I get lucky every time." ... Coco Crisp will continue his rehab assignment with Triple-A Sacramento, where he is expected to remain for at least eight more days. The A's outfielder (intercostal strain) went 2-for-3 with a triple and two runs scored in five innings during the River Cats' game on Tuesday, and followed that performance with a 1-for-2 night in five frames on Wednesday.

Two pitchers after fresh starts in finale

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Oakland lefty Dallas Braden is looking for a fresh start after a flare-up in his flexor tendon delayed his start for a few days. Cubs righty Randy Wells is envisioning a fresh start to his entire 2010 campaign after five consecutive losses.

That will be the story on the mound on Thursday as the A's and Cubs meet in the finale of their three-game Interleague series at Wrigley Field.

Braden, the author of one of baseball's two perfect games this season, didn't wait very long to respond to questions of his readiness to pitch Thursday, saying, "It's a done deal."

Braden took two days off before going back to his normal routine, including a 40-pitch bullpen Tuesday and throwing on Wednesday. A's manager Bob Geren said that if there are any limitations on Braden, those will be determined after his Thursday warmup.

Meanwhile, Wells is happy to forget about what's transpired to this point. After consulting with pitching coach Larry Rothschild, reading "The Mental ABC's of Pitching" by Harvey Dorfman and employing a few mechanical changes, Wells is ready to begin again.

"I've declared tomorrow as the start of a new season for me," Wells said Wednesday. "Right now, I'm 0-0 in my mind. I'm excited."

"I feel I can get back on track and just a little encouragement here and something as easy as that book to reassure your thoughts I think will be beneficial."

A's: Jackson getting leadoff time

Oakland's newest outfielder, recent trade acquisition Conor Jackson, led off Wednesday's game and could do a bit more of it in Interleague Play. "He's a contact hitter," Geren said. "He's a line-drive guy, a gap-to-gap hitter. History shows he has a good on-base percentage. I don't see him as a leadoff hitter, but he'll be there a couple times this week until we get back to American League play." Jackson led off 13 times for Arizona this season. ... Braden has never faced the Cubs.

Cubs: Club hires stat analyst Kaplan

The Cubs hired Ari Kaplan as manager of statistical analysis. "He'll add to the process," Cubs general manager Jim Hendry said Wednesday. "We can always use some more help." Kaplan is the first hire of new Cubs owner Tom Ricketts. ... Wells has never faced Oakland.

Worth noting

The Cubs on Wednesday announced that they came to terms with 11 selections from the 2010 First-Year Player Draft, including fourth-round pick, Hunter Ackerman, a left-handed pitcher. ... The A's announced that they will celebrate the 1970s with a Turn-Back-the-Clock Night on Saturday, June 26. As part of the promotion, the A's are offering specially discounted tickets of \$9.70 for Plaza Level seats (regularly priced at \$24) and \$19.70 Lower Box seats (regularly \$30), while malts and cracker jacks will be sold at Turn-Back-the-Clock prices (half off regular price).

A's lose to Cubs, 6-2

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Derrek Lee made up for his shaky performance from a night earlier with a home run and a great defensive stop at first base.

That Lee would rebound so quickly was not a surprise for the Chicago Cubs in a 6-2 victory over Oakland on Wednesday night.

What was a bit startling was a sacrifice bunt from Alfonso Soriano — his first ever in a Cubs uniform and first overall in four years.

"Everybody was surprised and everybody was laughing," Soriano said. "It was a good play. They gave me a green light to do whatever I want."

What Soriano and all of the Cubs, including winning pitcher Ryan Dempster, really want is to shake this season-long funk before it's too late. The win Wednesday night was only Chicago's seventh in the last 19 games.

"I can do whatever I can to make the team better and win and I'm more than happy to do it," Soriano said.

Dempster (5-5) gave up eight hits and two runs, striking out seven in 6½ innings.

A's starter Gio Gonzalez (6-5) surrendered eight hits and a season-high six runs in five innings.

Lee, in a 1-for-13 slump, led off the bottom of the second by lining his eighth homer of the season into the left-field bleachers, tying it at 1.

Soriano walked one out later and moved to third on Geovany Soto's liner to center that was scored a double when Ryan Sweeney fell down fielding it. Starlin Castro followed with an RBI single to left and Soto was thrown out at the plate trying to score from second on a strong throw from Conor Jackson.

"That's the great thing about baseball. You have a chance to redeem yourself the next day," said the normally sure-handed Lee, who made two of Chicago's four errors in a sloppy loss Tuesday night.

"I had a terrible night last night. It was embarrassing. So you try to come back and help your team. ... Last night was not fun."

Castro hit a bases-loaded sacrifice fly to make it 3-1 in the fourth. It followed singles by Lee and Xavier Nady and the sacrifice bunt by Soriano — his first since he was with the Nationals in 2006 and only the ninth of his major league career — and an intentional walk to Soto.

Nady had a two-out RBI single, a hard smash that went past third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and made it 4-1 in the fifth, and Soriano followed with a two-run double down the right-field line.

But it was his bunt that had his teammate talking.

"It just shows you right there he cares about us winning more than anything he does personally," Dempster said. "It really brought a spark to us."

The A's got a run in the first when Jackson, who was acquired Tuesday from Arizona, and Daric Barton opened with back-to-back singles and Sweeney delivered a sacrifice fly. But with two runners still on, Dempster escaped the big inning by getting Kurt Suzuki to hit into a 1-4-3 double play.

"He mixed it up pretty well and kept the ball down in the zone," Oakland manager Bob Geren said of Dempster. "But we had a chance to get him early."

Dempster, who had a baserunner in each of the first five innings, was backed by three nice defensive plays from third baseman Jeff Baker.

"He got into some jams pretty much every inning," Jackson said.

"He's not super overpowering. Kind of works the corners and really doesn't give you much to hit."

Barton had an RBI grounder in the seventh when Lee made a nice stop to keep the ball from getting through for a single.

NOTES: Cubs general manager Jim Hendry said before the game it's too early to plan whether the team will be subtracting or adding as the trade deadline approaches at the end of next month. "We're not 17 back, we're 7 1/2. I like to think these guys know the spot we're in," Hendry said. "You can't defend how we've played. We just have to fight our way out of it." After the win, the Cubs were within 6 1/2 games of the lead. ... NOTES

A's OF Coco Crisp had his first rehab assignment at Triple-A Sacramento on Tuesday and went 2 for 3. Crisp, on the DL with a strained chest muscle, is on a 10-day program and will not be activated on the current roadtrip, Geren said.

Kouzmanoff's 15-game hitting streak ended. He went 0 for 3.

Is A's Beane delirious with World Cup fever?

By Rob Neyer, ESPN.com

Joe Posnanski didn't really believe that Billy Beane has thrown over baseball for soccer, *couldn't* believe it ... until he noticed that Daric Barton, Oakland's first baseman and best hitter (which isn't saying much, but bear with us) has nine sacrifice hits this season ...

I had to read this paragraph about nine times — one for each sac bunt. Daric Barton, the team's first baseman, is leading the league in sacrifice bunts? For the Oakland A's? And he's doing it by moving runners SECOND TO THIRD with NOBODY OUT? And EVERYBODY IS HAPPY ABOUT IT? (That's Barty," hitting coach Jim Skaalen said. "Team first, a professional in all areas"). What in the hell is going on over there in the Bay Area?

Apparently, Barton has been sacrifice bunting on his own ... nobody is asking him to do it. Nobody, not even the craziest bunting manager on earth, would ask him to bunt in the situations he's been bunting:

--snip--

Holy \$#@\$!%. Somebody tell that man to stop doing that immediately. Holy #@\$#@\$\$. Seven of his league-leading nine sacrifice bunts were, just as he said, bunting a runner from second to third with nobody out. This isn't just a waste of an out, it's crumpling an out, stomping on it with disdain, and then purposely not putting it into the recycle bin. Why would you do this? There's no double play in order. A single might score the run. According to the BaseballProspectus Run Matrix, bunting a runner from second to third reduces a team's run expectation level from 1.09 runs to .93 runs.

But it gets much worse. Five of the nine sacrifice bunts were done in the FIRST INNING.

These days, nobody bunts much ... and the teams that do bunt might surprise you. In the American League, the two buntingest teams are the Rangers and the A's, neither of them strangers to the reams of data suggesting that sacrifice bunts are pointless (at best).

But the numbers are so small that 1) one player can make a big difference, and 2) there's little effect on scoring, generally.

To the first point, I'll note that Barton has nine of Oakland's 22 sacrifice hits, and Elvis Andrus has nine of the Rangers' 24. To the second point, I'll simply suggest that nine sacrifice hits, even by your best hitter in odd situations, probably isn't going to cost you, theoretically speaking, more than two or three runs.

Granted, you don't want to give away two or three runs because you never know when two or three runs will be the difference between October and non-October; it's rare, but it does happen. Which makes me wonder if two or three runs is simply the price that Billy Beane (and Bob Geren) is willing to pay for non-conformity.

Billy Beane once said to me -- actually, he might have said it more than once -- "When everybody's zigging, I like to zag."

There might be a corollary to that, though. Something like, "When everybody's *saying* I like to zig, I zag."

Maybe Daric Barton just got a crazy idea in his head that the best hitter on the team should give himself up every so often, and his manager just didn't want to discourage that sort of selfless (if counter-productive) thinking. And maybe the manager's boss really is so obsessed with the Premier League and now the World Cup to put a stop to it. But I can't help wondering whether the general manager is sitting back right now, and chortling about our inability to figure out what the holy \$#@\$!% he's doing.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

River Cats pitchers combine on two-hitter

By Lauren McCarthy / Sacramento River Cats

The Sacramento River Cats won their third consecutive game over Reno Aces on Wednesday, shutting out the Aces 4-0 at Raley Field.

This marked the River Cats' third shutout of the season and first since a 2-0 victory over Reno on April 17, also at home. Sacramento's other shutout came April 13 at Tacoma. Reno starting pitcher Wes Roemer began the game on a roll, striking out five River Cats within the second and third innings.

In the fifth inning, Sacramento opened the scoring when Adam Heether doubled down the left-field line, advanced to third on a Michael Taylor fly ball to right field and scored on an Anthony Recker sacrifice fly.

The Aces only had two hits in the game. Shortstop Pedro Ciriaco hit a single in the fifth, breaking Kyle Middleton's chance at a no-hitter. First baseman Brandon Allen singled to right-center field in the seventh, ticking the Aces' only other hit.

Reno right fielder Doug Deeds struck out three times, twice against the starter Middleton. Middleton, who allowed one hit through 5.0 innings, finished with four strikeouts.

Three River Cats raced home in the seventh, stretching the lead to 4-0. Roemer walked Dallas McPherson to start the inning. Adam Heether then singled to left field, advancing McPherson. A wild pitch sent the crowd roaring and advanced both men. Michael Taylor singled on a fly ball that dropped in front of center fielder Drew Macias, scoring McPherson with Heether advancing to third. Corey Wimberly then hit a sacrifice fly to Deeds in right field, scoring Heether. Taylor advanced to second on the throw home, and then to third base when catcher Carlos Corporan misfired to second base. A Michael Affronti single scored Taylor to cap the inning.

Eric Sogard went 2-for-4 (both singles), pulling his batting average to .297.

The River Cats' bullpen pulled through to relieve Middleton after five innings. Jamey Wright, making his first appearance with Sacramento, pitched two innings and struck out one. Edwar Ramirez relieved Wright in the seventh, striking out four of six batters faced.

Sacramento looks to sweep the Aces in Thursday night's series finale at Raley Field.

Midland rallies again, beats Frisco

Midland rallies to beat Frisco for the second straight game, holding on for a 7-6 victory over the 'Riders on Wednesday afternoon.

Leading by a score of 6-4 in the ninth inning, the RockHounds tagged Frisco reliever Josh Lueke (1-1, 3.86) with three runs, including a two-RBI double by Shane Peterson with one out in the inning.

Frisco was able to bounce back and get on the scoreboard early against Midland. First baseman Wes Bankston connected on a three-run home run in the bottom of the first inning to give Frisco an early 3-0 lead. Second baseman Matt Lawson followed that up with a two-run shot to center field in the bottom of the second inning, staking the 'Riders to a 5-0 lead.

But for the second straight game, the 'Riders bullpen couldn't clamp down the win after entering the game with a 5-4 lead.

Ryan Tatusko (5-0, 3.04) started for Frisco and pitched five innings on the afternoon. He allowed four runs on eight hits and struck out two batters.

The RoughRiders (36-27) split the four-game series with Midland (31-33) after dropping three out of four against San Antonio last week. Frisco will begin a 12-game road trip on Thursday, with the club traveling to Corpus Christi to begin the trip.

Notes

Frisco has homered in back-to-back games for the first time since May 30-31.

Late Surge Gives Ports 8-6 Win And Series Victory

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - One night after setting a new season-high in runs and tying two league records, the Stockton Ports used three late runs to get past the Bakersfield Blaze by a final of 8-6, winning the rubber match of their three-game set. With the win, the Ports improve to 7-3 over their last 10 games and head home to host the Visalia Rawhide in a three-game set that will round out the first half of the season.

Stockton picked up right where they left off on Tuesday night. After tying a league record with 11 doubles, Jermaine Mitchell started Wednesday's contest with a double to left-center. Mitchell advanced to third on a passed ball and scored on a sac-fly from Grant Green to give the Ports a quick 1-0 lead.

The Blaze countered in the bottom half of the inning. Davis Stoneburner doubled with one out and went to third as the ball was misplayed by Jeremy Barfield. Engel Beltre followed and reached on an error made by third baseman Stephen Parker, scoring Stoneburner and knotting the game at 1-1.

In the third, the Ports got a one-out RBI single from Mitchell (who was caught trying to take second on a throw home), and a two-out solo home run from Green to take the lead back at 3-1.

Ports starter Shawn Haviland (6-3) would have his roughest inning of the night in the fourth. With one on and one out, the Blaze got three straight singles from Mike Bianucci, Jose Felix and Chris Gradoville to make it a 3-2 game. With the bases loaded and one out, Tommy Mendonca hit a 3-2 fastball to the gap in right-center, scoring two more runs and giving Bakersfield their first lead at 4-3. Andres James came up next and grounded to second to score a fourth run in the inning to make it a 5-3 Blaze lead.

Haviland, however, would finish strong and keep the Blaze off the scoreboard over his final two innings. Haviland would end up with the win, going six innings and allowing five runs (four earned) on 10 hits while striking out six, snapping a two-game losing streak.

Stockton came right back and tied it in the fifth. Ryan Ortiz led off with a triple to right and scored on an ensuing single from Michael Richard. Richard would score three batters later on a two-out double from Parker to knot the score at 5-5.

Stockton's first five runs came off Blaze starter Wilmer Font, who received a no-decision after going six innings while allowing six hits and striking out a season-high nine.

With the score tied 5-5 in the seventh, the Ports scored a critical two-out run. With Mitchell at first and two down, Green tripled down the right field line to score Mitchell and make it a 6-5 Ports lead. The run was allowed by Blaze reliever Fabio Castillo (1-3), who would take the loss on the night.

The Ports added two big insurance runs in the top of the ninth. With Green at first and one away, Mike Spina doubled to right-center to score Green. Spina went to third on a throwing error to the plate made by Stoneburner on a relay play and scored when Johnson came up next and hit a sac-fly to foul territory in left to increase Stockton's lead to 8-5.

After Trey Barham pitched a scoreless seventh, Paul Smyth (SV, 10) came on and pitched the final two innings to earn his 10th save of the year. Smyth allowed a run to score in the ninth on a fielder's choice groundout, but Stockton's two runs in the top of the ninth made the run a non-factor.

Six of Stockton's 10 hits went for extra bases on Wednesday night. Of Stockton's 40 hits in the three-game series, 21 were for extra bases.

Green led the way on Wednesday with a 2-for-3 performance featuring a home run, triple, and three RBI. Mitchell finished the series an impressive 6-for-12 hitting at the top of the order.

After taking two of three against Bakersfield, the Ports return home on Thursday night to start a three-game set with the Visalia Rawhide to cap off the season's first half. Left-hander Paul Oseguera (1-1, 4.86 ERA) will head to the hill for Stockton. First pitch is set for 7:05 p.m. PDT.

Cougars Pound Bandits, Even Set

Balanced 14-hit attack leads Kane County to Game 2 victory

DAVENPORT, Iowa – A night after scoring one run and stranding 14 runners on base in a loss, the Kane County Cougars pounded the Quad Cities River Bandits, 8-2, on Tuesday night at Modern Woodmen Park to even the three-game series. The Cougars poked 14 hits, and each player had at least one. All-star Ian Krol gave up one run over five innings for his third straight win.

The Cougars jumped on Scott Schneider for three runs in the first inning. Rashun Dixon smoked a two-out two-run double, and Kent Walton followed with an RBI single. After the Bandits got one in the second, Max Stassi scored Tyreece House in the fifth to make it 4-1. Then Stassi crushed a three-run triple in the seventh, and Dixon delivered another run-scoring double for an 8-1 game. Conner Crumbliss, House and Anthony Aliotti all scored two runs at the top of the order.

Krol (5-2) yielded the one run on three hits, walked none and fanned four in the victory. He has walked only one batter over his last 30 2/3 innings. Connor Hoehn fanned three over two scoreless relief innings, and Bo Schultz got touched for an eighth-inning run to account for the 8-2 final.

The Cougars (31-35) and River Bandits (39-26) conclude the series Thursday night at 7 CT, as the Cougars try to win their fifth set in a row. Rob Gilliam (3-5, 4.34) will face Shelby Miller (1-3, 5.12). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and online at www.kccougars.com with pregame coverage starting at 6:45 p.m.