

A's News Clips, Tuesday, July 27, 2010

Oakland A's open key stretch against AL West-leading Texas Rangers

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

Still a bit unsure of what it all means in terms of the big picture this season, the A's nonetheless are playing their best baseball as they prepare to go head-to-head with the team they're chasing in the AL West, the Texas Rangers.

Oakland has won nine of its past 11 and 16 of its past 24 games and has won four consecutive series. For the past month, only the Yankees have a better record than the A's in the American League, but they're still 7 1/2 games behind the Rangers heading into a stretch where they play them six times in the next 13 days.

Whether people choose to believe him, general manager Billy Beane maintains he doesn't want to mess with the team chemistry, even though the major league trade deadline is just four days away and the A's two primary challengers have both made major deals for the stretch drive. The A's will see one of them tonight when the Rangers send Cliff Lee (9-4) to the mound to open a three-game series in Arlington. Sunday, the Angels acquired former A's pitcher Dan Haren from Arizona.

Those deals haven't shifted Beane's mind-set. He reiterated last weekend that he doesn't see the A's as being active before the trade deadline.

"We've hung in there pretty well, and I do think it's important for us to build some momentum, regardless of where we finish this year," Beane said "I think that would require us to hold on to our guys."

The A's probably lost their one bona fide trading chip when veteran starter Ben Sheets went on the disabled list Saturday with an elbow injury. Sheets will be examined today in Dallas by his orthopedist, Dr. Keith Meister, and it's possible he could be out for the rest of the season.

There has been speculation on outfielder Coco Crisp as well, but unlike Sheets, Crisp has an option for 2011 and probably doesn't have a large enough sample size since returning from a broken thumb to bring value in a trade. Besides, the A's like what Crisp is giving them at the top of the lineup, particularly with Rajai Davis nursing a tender hamstring. Davis is expected back tonight after missing the entire Chicago series.

Beane said he has entertained calls from other teams, but those teams more often want to talk about the A's younger players rather than those who get talked up the most as tradable commodities. The club has taken a firm stance that they're simply not going to be dealing from their core group of young prospects.

"We're starting to get some guys back — Brett (Anderson) is due back very soon, we just got Dallas (Braden) back," Beane said. "Hopefully, (outfielder) Conor (Jackson) will be back soon, too. I'd like to provide a little bit of continuity going into the end of the season and just give a chance to some of the guys we originally thought were going to play more to actually play together."

Beane admitted that losing outfielder Ryan Sweeney to season-ending knee surgery was a blow but still doesn't rule his team out of the race completely.

"It's like trying to hold sand — as soon as you get one guy back, you lose another guy," he said. "But if we can get all of our pitching back (save Sheets) — and I think we have good pitching — anything can happen."

That pitching will get a stern test against the Rangers' stout lineup, which is second in the league in hitting and third in runs. The A's probably would have to take four of six in their home-and-home three-game sets with Texas to continue entertaining hopes in the AL West.

"They're playing extremely well, but we feel like we are, too," said A's manager Bob Geren. "It's an important series. But I think at this stage, 100 games into the season, every series is a big series."

"They have a tough team, but it would be nice to go in there and win a few games, then whatever else we could pull off after that would be a bonus," said Crisp. "But these should be some exciting games, because it's starting to get closer to the wire."

Speed, smarts give A's a leg up in stealing

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Rajai Davis has 29 stolen bases this year and has been caught only six times. Since joining the A's early in the 2008 season, he has 95 steals.

The Oakland outfielder possesses the speed and the savvy to rate as one the game's top baserunning threats. Davis says success on the bases results directly from the men on the mound.

"If the pitchers held the runners, it would be really tough to steal bases - but they don't," Davis said. "That's what gives us opportunities."

As power-deprived as the A's are in 2010, they need to take advantage of as many opportunities on the basepaths as they can. They tied a season high with four stolen bases in a 6-4 win over the White Sox on Sunday.

The A's have succeeded on 81 of their 101 steal attempts, an 80.2 percentage that leads the American League. The best season mark in A's history is 80.7, set in 2008.

Manager Bob Geren has three main considerations when he's deciding whether to put a runner on the move:

-- the pitcher's average release time to the plate

-- the catcher's average time on a throw

-- the score and situation in the game

"You weigh all that out," Geren said, "and you give them the green light or you don't."

The A's runners most likely to get the green are Davis, shortstop Cliff Pennington (15 steals, two caught) and center fielder Coco Crisp (11 steals, two caught).

Those three don't have the luxury of surprising an opponent when they try to swipe a bag.

Said Pennington: "If you've got double-digit stolen bases right now, they're paying attention to you."

If Pennington or Crisp gets on base before Davis does, Davis uses that as a stolen-base learning tool.

"You can look at what the pitcher's doing," Davis said, "because if he's doing it for them, chances are (he's) going to be doing it when I get out there as well."

Davis tries to understand pitchers' mind-sets.

"Are they focused on you or are they focused on the hitter?" Davis said. "Are they trying to pitch around the hitter so they can get a nice fastball on the outside part of the plate where the catcher ... (has) a better chance of throwing you out, or are they pitching to the hitter?"

When he takes his lead, Davis tries to get into the same stance every time, whether he's going or not.

"If you're consistent, they can't tell what pitch you're going on. If only when you're stealing, you get down like this," Davis said, getting into an exaggerated crouch, "that's obvious. You're giving it away."

Getting a good jump is more important to some base stealers than to others. Geren said Davis "has the exceptional talent where if he gets an average jump, or even sometimes a below-average jump, he's still fast enough to make it.

"The guys who have to get the perfect jumps are the ones with the borderline speed."

In this era of stats, obscure stats and obscurer stats, Geren said he and his coaches have access to such bits of information as how many steals a pitcher has allowed, how many runners have been caught stealing with that pitcher on the mound, how many pickoffs the pitcher has, even pitchout reports on opposing managers.

Said Geren: "I feel like in anything in this game, the more information you have, the better."

Even so, Geren acknowledged "the human element" in base stealing. Case in point: About two decades ago, when Geren was a catcher for the Yankees and Rickey Henderson was at his thieving best with the A's.

"He was so fast and he got such good jumps," Geren said, "that the execution from the pitcher and catcher had to be perfect - and even then, it might not be good enough."

Briefly: Davis (hamstring) and closer Andrew Bailey (back spasms) missed the Chicago series but hope to be ready today when the A's open a three-game series against division-leading Texas in Arlington. ... Former Giants catcher Bengie Molina is 12-for-53 (.226) with two homers and seven RBIs with the Rangers. ... Cliff Lee, Texas' starter tonight, has thrown 130 innings this season. He has 101 strikeouts and seven walks. Absolutely ridiculous.

30-30 club

Rajai Davis needs one more stolen base to become the fifth man in Oakland history to have at least two 30-steal seasons. The four who have done so:

-- Rickey Henderson, 13

-- Bert Campaneris, 8

-- Billy North, 4

-- Claudell Washington, 2

AL stolen bases

The A's rank fourth in the American League in stolen bases and have the best percentage on stolen-base attempts:

Team	SB	CS	Pct.
Tampa Bay	123	32	79.4
Chicago	94	46	67.1

Seattle	88	24	78.6
A's	81	20	80.2
Texas	80	35	69.6

A'S LEADING OFF

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Buck back? The A's are considering adding outfielder Travis Buck on this road trip; he is hitting .154 in a rehab assignment at Triple-A Sacramento but has started swinging the bat better, with hits in his past four games.

Oakland A's Q&A: Matt Watson, OF

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Jul 27, 2010

OAKLAND - One of the most feel-good stories of the 2010 season for the Oakland A's has been the return of Matt Watson to the major leagues. He was last in the big leagues in 2005 and since that time, Watson has traveled through Triple-A to the Far East to independent baseball before finding his way back to the majors with the A's. On Saturday, we spoke to Watson about his journey.

Matt Watson's career path has been anything but conventional. Selected in the 16th round of the 1999 draft by the Montreal Expos, Watson spent nearly five seasons in the minor leagues before finally making his major league debut with the New York Mets in 2003.

Watson was claimed off of waivers by the Oakland A's after the 2003 season and spent two-and-a-half seasons in the A's chain. Despite posting an OPS better than 900 with Triple-A Sacramento over those two-plus seasons, Watson only had a small opportunity at the big league level with Oakland, appearing in 19 games with the A's in 2005.

Early in the 2006 season, Watson got a call from the Chiba Lotte Marines of the Japanese Professional League and decided to take his chances overseas. He played two seasons for Bobby Valentine and the Marines before returning to the States in 2008. He played in the Toronto Blue Jays' organization, spending the year in Triple-A with the Syracuse Chiefs.

The 2009 season was supposed to be spent in Korea, but Watson wound-up coming back to the US early and playing a handful of games in the Mets chain, as well as 66 games for Lancaster of the independent Atlantic League.

Watson, who is from Lancaster, returned to the Barnstormers at the start of the 2010 season after not receiving any offers from major league organizations during the off-season. He was contemplating his future after an active playing career before the A's called and gave him an opportunity once again in affiliated baseball.

Watson was quick to take advantage of the opportunity, homering twice in his first four games for Triple-A Sacramento. He wound-up hitting eight homers in 28 games for the River Cats and when the A's outfield lost Conor Jackson and Ryan Sweeney just before the All-Star break, Watson got the call to the big leagues.

Last week, Watson hit his first major league homerun, a solo shot off of AL All-Star Clay Buchholz, completing an improbable story of career revival.

OaklandClubhouse.com caught-up with Watson at the Oakland Coliseum on Saturday to talk about his journey since leaving the A's organization for Japan in 2006.

OaklandClubhouse: This season must be a complete 180 for you in comparison to where it started.

Matt Watson: Anytime you are sitting around the house in January and February and you are not sure you are going to have a job, it's tough. Fortunately for me, the Atlantic League is close in my hometown [Lancaster, PA]. Fortunately, things worked out.

A lot of guys when they get older say they actually feel better. I actually do feel better at age 31, almost 32. Some of that is maturity and some of that is physically. I lost some weight and I can move around better. But it was nice to get the opportunity to get back.

OC: Was [former A's minor league manager] Von Hayes still managing in Lancaster and were there still a number of ex-A's minor leaguers on that team?

MW: A lot of the ex-A's farmhands. Jason Perry was there, Ben Fritz and a lot of guys who I had played with in minor league camp and in Sacramento. Tommy Herr was the manager. Von Hayes was in Camden.

OC: Was it easier playing on the team since you knew guys there already?

MW: When you are playing ball a mile from where you went to high school, you are always comfortable. But it was nice to have familiar faces there, guys that I knew and played with.

OC: I know that you left the A's organization in 2006 to sign with a Japanese team, but how did you get to Korea?

MW: I had just finished '08 with Toronto broke a bone in my hand at the end of the year and went down to winter ball and played in Mexico and tried to show teams that I was healthy. It was early when I signed with Korea, but I didn't get any offers. My agent, who I had when I went over to Japan, asked if I wanted to try Korea. I thought that might be another stepping stone to get back to Japan. We had such a good time over there. Unfortunately things didn't work out there for a bunch of different reasons.

OC: You played for Bobby Valentine [with the Chibe Lotte Marines] right?

MW: Yep.

OC: How was that?

MW: I enjoyed it. He's very out-going. He's a self-promoter and he did well for himself. He was really out-going over there. I don't know if it was because there were fewer Americans there, but the first day I met him, he took me out to dinner and talked to me all of the time. I'm not sure, I didn't play for him in the States, so I don't know what he'd be like here. We enjoyed it.

OC: Did you cross paths with him in the Mets organization at all?

MW: I was in Double-A [with the Mets] when he was the big league manager and I was never at big league camp. That was what everyone assumed when I got over there because Benny Agbayani was there and Matt Franco and Dan Serafini, so they thought he was just taking all old Mets guys, but I had never met him until I got there.

OC: How was the Japan experience?

MW: I enjoyed it. There were some parts of it that were more like work and not as much fun. Long spring trainings, but the baseball is fun. The fans are fantastic. There's no booing. For a guy like me to go over there, you automatically turn into a celebrity in your hometown. That was a little awkward for me, but you kind of get used to it. They treated our family great. It was a great family town that we were in. You could take the kids out and it was safe. Parks on every other street corner. It was a really nice experience for the whole family.

OC: How did you get back into the A's organization?

MW: I had just turned down a Double-A job offer from the Angels and I said to my wife, 'you know what? That might be the last one I get, which is unfortunate because I feel good. My swing is good and I have figured a few things out mechanically.' Lo and behold, the next night Tommy Herr called me in and said 'David Forst called and he wants you to call back.' So I called my agent right away and went home and sort of surprised my wife. It was one of her favorite places that I've played. She's big on the sun and the warm weather. She doesn't really like the weather in Pennsylvania too much. We were thrilled. They came out [to California] for a month, so they just left. My boys have soccer camps and I want them to have a summer and not be living out of hotels.

OC: The players are different, but the coaches are the same. What was the experience been like being back in Sacramento again?

MW: It was fantastic getting back with Tony [DeFrancesco]. I tried to keep in touch with him. Lost his number and dropped him a couple of e-mails. I was hoping to get back there and I saw that he was back there and Brian McArn was still there as

the hitting coach and Rick Rodriguez was there as the pitching coach. So that was comfortable, but the first day that I got in there, it was a little weird. I think you start to realize that you are the veteran of the group. All of these other kids are 22, 23. But it took me about a week and then I felt totally comfortable there.

Tony's always been fantastic to me. Plays me when I am doing well and plays me against righties and lefties. There is no substitute for that in baseball, just getting in and seeing pitches on a regular basis.

OC: How did Tony tell you that you were being called up?

MW: We were actually at a day game in Reno. My family was there. Actually my mother was in for about three weeks. We had just driven up from Sac. and gotten everything unpacked. It's getting a little easier as the kids get older. But Tony called me in. I was one of the first ones there. We had a day game and I got in early to get this old body moving and he said, 'come in here. I want you to look at [Chris] Carter's swing for me.' I also see Brian McArn, the hitting coach[, in Tony's office.] I had been thinking about being a hitting coach and had been working with [McArn] this year, looking at mechanics of different hitters just to see things from a different set of eyes.

But Tony calls me in and he shows me video of Carter's swing and he says, 'does this look like a big league swing to you?' And I said, 'I'll be damned if I know what a big league swing looks like. I've been trying to get back there.' Then they played mine, and it was a video of a homerun I had hit to left field. And they said, 'does this look like a big league swing?' And I said 'obviously not.' And he goes, 'well, you'd better fix it quick because you are going up.' So it was a nice way for him to be able to share that with me.

OC: Tell me about hitting your first big league homerun and knowing that now forever on the back of your baseball card you'll have that one homerun.

MW: A lot of it is getting an opportunity here. Like I said, I'm fortunate that the A's brought me back and hopefully I'll get a little longer opportunity this time. Who knows though. I've learned that with baseball. But I always felt like I could get one. I kind of wish I could count my Asian ones. There were pitchers I hit them off of there who have come over here and had success.

But it was funny. I just grabbed an old bat from [Kevin Melillo](#), who had played with the A's a few years back. It was four years old and dry-rotted, but it felt good in BP. I said, 'I think I'm going swing this one today.' Someone told me that [Rajai Davis](#) had some of the old models, the same ones. I went up to him before the game and I said, 'do you have a back-up? I have a feeling I'm going to hit the ball on the barrel and this thing is going to break. It's just that old and dry-rotted.' So he gave me an extra one and lo-and-behold, I hit the homerun and it barely goes out and it's probably the shortest one I've hit this year so far. I'm running around the bases and then when I pick it up again in the dugout, it's cracked through the handle. [laughs] I looked over to Rajai and I said, 'I told you I was going to hit a good one.' I didn't think it was going to be a homerun, but I knew I hit one on the barrel and it broke.

It was a nice story. I called Kevin and sent him a text message and told him that he will forever be immortalized in my basement. It ended up working out perfectly because it didn't go way up in the stands where I would have had to trade to try to get it. It was a nice day to have.

Ratto: Politics, Fertilizer-Slinging and the A's

[Ray Ratto](#), CSNBayArea.com

A's owner Lew Wolff, always the optimist in the face of daunting laughter, keeps saying to anyone who will listen that he has the financing for his San Jose dream home, and all he needs is Bud Selig to say yes.

[Bud Selig says he isn't ready](#) to say yes until the MLB committee he assembled to consider San Jose's viability is ready to issue a report that one could easily write on an Etch-A-Sketch.

And [San Jose mayor Chuck Reed said "Screw it, I'm ready now."](#)

Is it any wonder, then, that those of us who don't believe that the San Jose stadium plan will ever result in an actual stadium point to the three main characters and say, "See? See? This is it! This is the reason right here!"

Reed has his constituency, and it isn't Wolff (or the guy who has his monetary back, John Fisher) or Selig. He said he will put the ballpark on the November ballot, and that's that. Fish or cut bait, seems to be the mayor's position, and if it means he ends up like Las Vegas mayor Oscar Goodman, shrieking southbound in the face of a northbound tornado, then at least it's off his plate.

But Selig is the classic smart bureaucrat who needs to control the process to control the votes, and he pitched a nutty when Reed announced his intention to go full speed ahead. He wants the committee report (think rubber meeting stamp, if that helps at all) to precede all other actions because he's still corralling votes, and he's still waiting to see if Wolff and Fisher

actually do have their financing down.

And why do we know this? Because if they did have their financing down, they'd screech it from on high, Bud would have told the other owners they have their financing down, and the only bit of business yet is assemble the size of the payoff to Giants CEO Bill Neukom. Because that's politics, too -- "Bill, you can either take what we offer you, come up with a reasonable counter-offer, or we'll do it anyway."

It's a little like the Mob, only they sing the National Anthem a lot more.

Much has been made, annoyingly so, of the Giants' assertion of their territorial rights to San Jose, and let us reiterate for you how they work. The Giants control San Jose until Selig gets the owners' votes to say they don't, because territorial rights were granted by the owners and can be rescinded by them with a simple up-down vote. In other words, the territorial rights don't mean much at all once the other owners decide they don't.

Much more has been made of Bow Tie Billy's wizardry in a courtroom, and how he will have the intellectual power and political might to sue baseball into submission if this happens. This clearly misunderstands how baseball at the corporate level works, because this is how it works:

In case of disputes, as we have already said, people get bought off. And if Neukom wants to fight baseball on this, he is outgunned. He could have two brains and be outgunned, and in baseball, those who fight the power get strung up by their heels. Nothing overt, no press releases -- just a slow, almost imperceptible strangulation.

It's the way baseball has always worked. The nail that sticks up is mercilessly struck down, because otherwise you can't plane, sand and lacquer up the board to make the cabinet look nice and pretty in case Congress has to pretend to get involved.

In sum, Reed jumped the gun on Selig, the A's are secretly happy that he did, and Selig is still unconvinced that the A's can manage this, or is unable to convince the other owners to go along, or he is spending his energies trying to figure out how to handle the Texas Rangers, who are currently owned by a bankruptcy judge.

Either way, Chuck Reed seems like the only guy who is truly ready, and that's probably because he's sick of being tied to this albatross. Our own position is that we don't give much of a damn either way where the stadium goes, or whether there will ever be one. But we know the politics, and Reed's politics aren't Selig's.

What comes next, though, will help us understand which way the fertilizer is being slung. Either the report (get it in the handy coaster size at MLB.com) will suddenly appear, or Wolff will say, "Wait, we have a few more I's to cross and T's to dot."

Or Fremont mayor Bob Wasserman will be buying drinks for the house at TGI Friday's and laughing at his great fortune at avoiding Reed's fate.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Several A's prospects making big strides

Ross, Carter among those posting impressive numbers

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

Billy Owens, A's director of player personnel, is a traveling man. MLB.com spoke to Owens via phone on Monday, soon after he saw Tyson Ross throw five shutout innings in Tacoma, Wash., for Triple-A Sacramento.

As director of player personnel, Owens' responsibilities include providing recommendations for trades and free-agent signings. Owens also knows the A's farm system inside and out, and gave MLB.com the following updates on several high-profile Minor Leaguers:

RHP Tyson Ross, Triple-A Sacramento

After breaking Spring Training with the big league club, Ross spent two up-and-down months in Oakland, primarily as a reliever. The A's sent Ross back down to Sacramento on July 7 so he could go back to his natural role as a starter.

Ross has made four starts with the River Cats since his demotion, his most recent two being five-inning shutout appearances that have lowered his ERA to 2.30. In all, Ross has worked 15 2/3 innings, allowing four earned runs on 10 hits and nine walks while striking out 23.

"He went five innings today and it was electric," Owens said. "He [threw his fastball] 94-98 mph and his slider was wicked. He showed a solid changeup and pitched very aggressively. I think it was great for Tyson to get a taste of the big leagues in a reliever capacity, now he knows what to work on down on the farm as a starting pitcher -- which is his comfort zone. Today, he was awesome."

OF Travis Buck, Triple-A Sacramento

Buck started the season with Oakland, but was sent to the 15-day disabled list with a strained right oblique in late April before being sidelined with leg soreness. Buck played in his seventh game for the Triple-A Sacramento on Monday, going 1-for-4 to raise his average to .154 (4-for-26) during his rehab stint.

"He's definitely swinging the bat a lot better than his numbers indicate," Owens said. "He's striking the ball with authority to all fields. He lined a ball off the wall the other day and has hit four or five line shots right to guys the past few days. He's coming along nicely."

OF Michael Taylor, Triple-A Sacramento

Many A's fans are eagerly awaiting the big league arrival of Taylor, widely considered one of the organization's top prospects. Oakland acquired Taylor from Toronto for Brett Wallace in the offseason, and Taylor is currently batting .269 with five home runs and 59 RBIs.

"I think coming to a different organization, he's had a chance to get comfortable," Owens said. "With that, there's so much expectations of him coming over here with his talent level and I think, initially, he pressed. Now he's playing to his capabilities, using the field, just having a good time playing baseball. His defense has been very good all year, he has a dynamic throwing arm and he gets great reads and jumps in the outfield."

1B Chris Carter, Triple-A Sacramento

Carter is the organization's biggest power threat, as his .253 average, 23 homers and 75 RBIs would attest.

"The bottom line is he's 23-years-old in Triple-A with 23 homers and 75 RBIs," Owens said. "He's a better athlete than advertised and it's going to be fun whenever either [Carter or Taylor] gets the call."

SS Grant Green, Class A Advanced Stockton

Green represented the A's during the All-Star Futures Game in Anaheim earlier this month and has been on a tear over the last six weeks. Green played collegiately at Southern Cal and was drafted by the A's No. 13 overall in the 2009 First-Year Player Draft. He is batting .327 with 10 homers and 53 RBIs this season.

"He's got a natural feel to hit," Owens said. "He's always been an all-fields approach hitter, and he's done that tremendously. His power is going to come later on down the road in Triple-A and in the Major Leagues. The exciting [things are] that he has a ton of extra base hits, the speed he possesses and his ability to hit the ball to all fields."

RHP Michael Ynoa, Rookie League

The A's paid Ynoa a \$4.25 million signing bonus in 2008, a whopping sum for an international free-agent. Ynoa has been plagued with tendinitis this year, but general manager Billy Beane said Ynoa would return to the mound soon. Ynoa, 18, has only thrown nine innings this season.

"He's been throwing great when he's been out there," Beane said. "I think he's just had a nagging elbow issue."

2B Jemile Weeks, Double-A Midland

Weeks, 23, was selected 12th overall by the A's in the 2008 First-Year Player Draft after playing collegiately at Miami. He has been affected by a hip injury this season and is batting .301 in 30 games.

"He's a switch-hitter in the mold of Ray Durham at second base," Owens said. "He can use the field, he has sneaky power despite his diminutive size, he runs very well and has worked very hard to tighten up his defense. Once he accumulates enough games played, he'll make his presence felt."

C Max Stassi, Class A Kane County

Stassi, 19, made quite the impression during Spring Training with the big league club. Billed as a mature prospect, Stassi is hitting .244 with 12 home runs and 46 RBIs this season.

"Max Stassi -- he's a very bright and intelligent kid," Owens said. "It's kind of amazing to think that he's still a teenager the way he catches, throws and leads the pitching staff. Max has exceeded expectations.

"He was born to be a catcher. He's from a long lineage of baseball people in his family: his grandfather played, his father played and is a high-school coach, his uncle played. Through osmosis, this kid is a very advanced baseball student, and someday, he's going to be a teacher. It's impressive the way he's been able to handle the pitching staff.

LHP Ian Krol, Class A Kane County

Krol is a 6-foot-1 lefty drafted by the A's in the seventh round of the 2009 First-Year Player Draft. Krol is 7-4 with a 2.74 ERA in 19 starts this season and has caught the eye of Beane as well.

"He has a natural feel for pitching," Owens said. "He can throw the fastball anywhere from 86-92 mph, but already at a young age, he can throw the ball to all quadrants of the strike zone. He can change speeds naturally and he's got a good curveball.

"His changeup is going to be a burgeoning pitch. It was something he didn't really need before, but he's been able to pick it up and use it as a weapon as the season's progressed. He has an uncanny knowledge of pitching, and it's shown so far this year."

3B Stephen Parker, Class A Advanced Stockton

Parker, 22, recently earned high praise from Beane when discussing A's farmhands. Parker is batting .297 with 15 home runs and 68 RBIs this season.

"Stephen's just a very strong, athletic kid," Owens said. "He's got a very simple, short efficient swing and he's capable of lining the baseball line-to-line and he will have some power down the road. He's playing a solid third base. He's a grinder, a good kid with a tremendous work ethic and his numbers speak for themselves."

RHP Fautino De Los Santos, Double-A Midland

De Los Santos was acquired in the Nick Swisher trade but has been slowed since undergoing Tommy John surgery two years ago. He had a 2.30 ERA in 12 games with Stockton, but has a 7.47 ERA in 11 appearances with Midland. De Los Santos has a strikeout-to-walk ratio of 5 to 1.

"He's throwing consistently 96-98 mph," Owens said. "At times, his stuff has been electric and his breaking ball has been nasty. His strikeout-to-walk ratio is excellent. He's had some unlucky appearances where he's lights-out for an inning or two and then things tend to blow up a little bit at the end.

"But as far as him having Tommy John surgery 24 months ago ... he's back throwing 98 mph. He has good breaking stuff, he attacks the zone and we're definitely excited about what he's doing."

IF Adrian Cardenas, Double-A Midland

Cardenas, 22, played 31 games with Triple-A Sacramento, but has thrived since he was moved to Midland. After batting .228 with Sacramento, Cardenas is hitting .358 in 37 contests with Midland.

"He's got a knack to hit the baseball on the barrel of the bat to all fields," Owens said. "His eyes are exquisite, he sees the ball directly out of the pitchers' hand. He's able to manipulate the ball with authority, and I think at the tender age of 22, he starting to grow into his man-strength and drive the ball."

OF Corey Brown, Double-A Midland

Brown, 24, is a left-handed hitter tearing it up at the Double-A level. After struggling in Triple-A, Brown is now batting .327 with seven homers and 31 RBIs in 57 games with Midland.

"He reminds of another Oklahoma State star in Jeromy Burnitz," Owens said. "He'll walk, he'll strike out, he'll hit the ball over the fence, he'll play excellent defense, he'll rack up a ton of extra base hits and he'll do it with a smile on his face. He has a certain toughness and grit to him."

Sacramento returns home after 7-5 road trip

By Abbie Ellis / Sacramento River Cats

Steve Tolleson smacked a home run in the ninth inning to tie the game and give the River Cats a fighting chance. What was a relatively close game all afternoon concluded in the 10th inning when Mike Wilson singled home Matt Mangini for the winning run in a 5-4 Tacoma victory. The Cats had 12 hits, and the Rainiers had 11.

Tyson Ross pitched a solid first 5.0 innings for Sacramento, allowing just two hits, no runs and striking out eight. It was the Sacramento bullpen that was unable to pull through. The loss went to Jon Hunton, who allowed two hits, including the game-winning run.

It was the sixth inning before Tacoma put their first numbers up on the scoreboard. Tacoma earned three runs when Edwar Ramirez replaced Ross in the sixth. A Matt Tuiasosopo two-run homer put Tacoma on top 2-1. Brad Nelson also got in a home run bomb for Tacoma to close the inning ahead 3-1.

The River Cats pulled together in the seventh inning to tie the score 3-3. A Chris Carter pop up double scored Corey Wimberly and Tolleson. This was Carter's second double of the day, and he finished 4-for-5 at bat.

The lead switched back to Tacoma in the eighth inning when an Adam Moore single scored Matt Mangini to make it 4-3 Rainiers.

The River Cats tried to rally in the ninth inning. Tolleson pulled through in the clutch with a home run to left field that tied the game at 4-4. Eric Sogard flew out to left field for the first out. Carter singled on a line drive. Michael Taylor walked and sent Carter to second. Travis Buck flew out to left field for the second out. Pinch-hitter Dallas McPherson then replaced Josh Donaldson and flew out to left field for the third out, leaving two men on base.

It was Tacoma who stole the lead back one last time in the 10th inning with a Wilson single that sent Mangini home for the win.

The River Cats return to Sacramento on Tuesday after being away for the All-Star break and a 12-game road series, of which they won seven. The Cats will take on Colorado Springs.

Clutch Hitting & Bullpen Key Comeback

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

In a 5-month, 140-game season, there will be some "odd" scheduling from time to time. The Texas League schedule had the RockHounds hosting the San Antonio Missions eight times in 12 days (July 15-26), with the clubs playing two, 4-game series in that span, and the 'Hounds making a 4-game road trip to Corpus Christi in the middle.

The RockHounds won 5-of-the-8-games, and did so in remarkable fashion:

- San Antonio's three wins came by a total margin of 33 runs
- The RockHounds' five wins came by a total margin of six runs

The clubs split the first series and the 'Hounds won the second 4-gamer (3-1) with a 7-6 win Monday night at Citibank Ballpark.

Monday night, the RockHounds erased a 5-0 deficit, scoring seven unanswered runs, and did the all their damage against the Texas League's top pitcher, Jeremy Hefner. In 17 starts against the rest of the Texas League, Hefner is 7-2, with a 1.56 ERA. In four starts against the RockHounds, he is 1-3 with an ERA of more than NINE. Go figure.

Monday, the Missions used a pair of 2-run home runs from Matt Clark and Sawyer Carroll to build a 5-0 lead, with Hefner retiring the first nine batters he faced. Jemile Weeks led off the fourth with a single, and the 'Hounds would get on the board on Alex Valdez' 2-run single. In the fifth, Adrian Cardenas ripped a 2-run single and Val Majewski lifted a 2-run home run to right for a 6-5 lead. Each team added an unearned run late, and the Missions put two on in the ninth before Clark lined out,

sending a laser back at pitcher Justin Souza, who somehow knocked the ball down and threw to first to end the game. A wild finish to a wild series.

The RockHounds' three, 2-run swings (Valdez, Cardenas and Majewski) each came with two outs, and the hits from both Valdez and Cardenas came on 1-2 pitches.

The RockHounds have now won three, consecutive series (each by a 3-1 count) and are 7-2 in their last nine games.

At Frisco Monday night, Corpus Christi scored six runs in the seventh inning to defeat the RoughRiders, 6-5, bringing the RockHounds within two games of Frisco in the second half race. The RockHounds and RoughRiders play 12 times between now and the end of the season (four, 3-games series) beginning Tuesday night at Citibank Ballpark.

Cougars Drop Finale in Midland

Kane County goes 1-5 in 6-game trip through Michigan

MIDLAND, Mich. – After winning six straight series, the Kane County Cougars have lost two straight sets. With their 5-0 loss Monday night at Dow Diamond against the Great Lakes Loons, the Cougars finished a six-game trip through Michigan with a 1-5 mark. They were swept in Lansing and lost two of three against Great Lakes.

Justin Marks (3-12) made only a few mistakes Monday, and they cost him the game. He faced the minimum in five of the six innings he completed but also gave up a pair of homers to Brian Cavazos-Galvez -- a two-run shot in the second and a solo shot with two outs in the seventh. Marks left during a three-run seventh, giving up five runs on four hits over 6 2/3 innings. He walked two and fanned six in the loss, and A.J. Huttenlocker handled the final 1 1/3 innings with run-free work.

Meanwhile the Cougars' offense had chances in each of the first five innings against Brett Wallach (6-0) but stranded seven and could not score. The Cougars then went 1-2-3 in each of the final four frames, and Jordan Roberts notched the save for the Loons (24-6, 66-32), who own the best record in all of professional baseball.

The Cougars (17-13, 49-50) are off Tuesday and continue their road swing Wednesday night at 7 CT with the opener of a three-game series against the Quad Cities River Bandits (19-9, 59-38). Kenny Smalley (0-1, 6.00) will make his third start as a '10 Cougar. Quad Cities has not officially announced its starting pitcher. The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and online at www.kccougars.com with pre-game coverage starting at 6:45 p.m.