

A's News Clips, Sunday, August 22, 2010

Oakland A's blueprint for victory unravels in eighth

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Things were falling into place nicely for the A's on Saturday night, as they have for most of this homestand.

With one swing of the bat, however, Sean Rodriguez brought that joy ride to a halt.

Rodriguez sent a two-run homer rocketing over the wall in left-center in the top of the eighth, the deciding blow that lifted the Tampa Bay Rays to a 5-4 victory over the A's in front of 16,202 at the Oakland Coliseum. Rodriguez's shot capped a three-run rally off lefty reliever Craig Breslow (4-4), as the Rays erased a 4-2 deficit and snapped the A's four-game winning streak.

The turn of events spoiled what was shaping up as a hard-earned victory for Brett Anderson, who outdueled David Price in a battle of two of the major leagues' top young left-handers.

"You've got to give them credit. They put the bat on the ball and hit in some clutch situations," A's left fielder Rajai Davis said. "You see why their record is what it is."

The A's missed a chance to gain another game on the first-place Texas Rangers, who have lost five of six but still lead the A's and Los Angeles Angels by seven games in the American League West.

The defeat also magnified the need for a healthy return from closer Andrew Bailey, whose absence was masked during the good vibes of the A's winning streak.

Several relievers have helped pick up the slack as Bailey has missed 28 games with a strained rib cage. But his presence is needed to shore up Oakland's late-inning relief.

A's manager Bob Geren said Bailey might be activated as soon as today.

Breslow, who earned the save Friday, relieved Anderson to start the eighth but allowed Willy Aybar's two-out, run-scoring double that pulled the Rays to within 4-3. Then he served up a 1-1 pitch that Rodriguez hit deep into the seats in left-center.

"I tried to get the fastball in, and I left it over the plate," Breslow said.

Rays closer Rafael Soriano needed just seven pitches in the ninth inning to record his 36th save.

Anderson gave up eight hits but allowed just two runs over seven innings.

That marked the 14th straight game in which the A's starter pitched at least six innings and gave up three or fewer runs, the longest such streak in franchise history since the 1927 Philadelphia A's ran off 18 straight starts.

Anderson has allowed just five earned runs over his last three starts but is 0-2 in that span.

Price entered the game having already collected a franchise-record 15 victories for the Rays. But he labored through a 43-pitch first inning, when the A's commanded a 2-0 lead.

Coco Crisp and Daric Barton led off with consecutive singles, and after a double steal, Price hit Kurt Suzuki to load the bases. Kevin Kouzmanoff drove in a run with a sacrifice fly, and Mark Ellis followed with a blooper that fell in shallow center to score Barton.

Still, the A's allowed Price to stick around for six innings.

"We had a really good pitcher on the ropes early," Geren said. "We got him in a deep pitch count, but we really didn't take advantage of it."

Anderson allowed Evan Longoria's solo homer in the second, and the Rays tied the game on Ben Zobrist's sacrifice fly in the top of the sixth.

But the A's took the lead right back in the bottom half, getting Ellis' RBI double and Davis' run-scoring single to make it 4-2.

A's update: Dallas Braden excited about duel with Matt Garza

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Braden vs. Garza offers an intriguing duel

The Tampa Bay Rays were in the opposing dugout when Dallas Braden threw his perfect game May 9.

That outing came on a Sunday afternoon at the Oakland Coliseum.

The same elements will be in place today when Braden takes the mound against the Rays to close out the A's seven-game homestand.

It's his first time facing Tampa Bay since his Mother's Day masterpiece. Making things more interesting: Braden is opposing right-hander Matt Garza, who threw a no-hitter July 26 against Detroit.

This marks the second time this season that pitchers will face each other after throwing no-hitters earlier in the year. Arizona's Edwin Jackson (who no-hit the Rays on June 25) and Philadelphia's Roy Halladay (perfect game against Florida on May 29) squared off July 28.

"It's fun because you get a lot of competitive juices flowing with the way the teams are playing, and knowing (Garza) is a competitor as well," Braden said.

Rays left fielder Carl Crawford said he and his teammates don't feel they have anything to prove against Braden.

"We had a good approach last time," Crawford said. "But if he's on like he was last time, there's pretty much nothing you can do."

A's ball boy Kevin Fennell has been quite the media sensation since cameras captured him handing foul ball after foul ball to a female fan who caught his eye Thursday at the Coliseum.

Fennell, 21, landed all over the highlight shows, and he did an interview with the MLB Network on Friday.

"It's been a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Fennell, a Concord resident, said. "I had no idea it'd turn into this."

Fennell got a kiss on the cheek from the girl, Jacki Lynch, during the game. Afterward he got her phone number, and he said they're planning to get together next week.

Fennell has received plenty of good-natured razzing from A's players. But two people hadn't heard of his fame yet -- his parents, Martin and Lori.

"They've been on a cruise in Alaska," he said. "They have no idea whatsoever."

Manager Bob Geren said it's possible closer Andrew Bailey could be activated from the DL today or Tuesday in the road trip opener at Cleveland. "... Pitchers Joey Devine and Josh Outman, both rehabbing from Tommy John elbow surgery, are throwing from the mound in Phoenix.

Chin Music: Saturday pregame update and lineups

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 8/21/2010 5:18PM

Andrew Bailey is back in the A's clubhouse after last night's rehab appearance with Triple-A Sacramento (2/3 IP, 3 H, 2 ER, 1 K, 18 pitches). The results weren't great, but manager Bob Geren said initial reports are Bailey came out of it feeling well. The team is waiting to see how Bailey continues to feel through the night. There's a chance he could be activated tomorrow. If not, perhaps Tuesday for the road trip opener at Cleveland.

Tonight's lineups ...

A's — Crisp CF, Barton 1B, Suzuki C, Kouzmanoff 3B, Ellis 2B, Davis LF, Cust DH, Tolleson SS, Buck RF; Anderson LHP.

Rays — Upton CF, Bartlett SS, Crawford LF, Longoria 3B, Pena 1B, Zobrist RF, Aybar DH, Rodriguez 2B, Shoppach C; Price LHP.

It's a bit of a head-scratcher not to see Cliff Pennington in the lineup considering he's played a major role in the A's past three victories. Steve Tolleson — who can play second base, third and shortstop — has done well in his limited playing time, so it's understandable for Geren to want to get him in and give the everyday infielders a rest. It's August, after all. But Pennington's got to have some confidence rolling right now, so why not stick with him?

Perfecto victims get 2nd look at Braden

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland got another fine starting pitching performance Saturday evening, though the team's four-game winning streak came to an end at the hands of the bullpen.

After a 5-4 loss to the Rays at the Coliseum, the A's can still claim the four-game series with AL East contender Tampa Bay today in a game that should grab a lot of attention. And with good reason: Dallas Braden is on the mound for the A's, and the last time he faced Tampa Bay, on Mother's Day, he threw the 19th perfect game in major-league history.

"Sunday ... day game ... should be interesting," Braden said with a grin. "Definitely interesting."

Spicing things up further: Matt Garza, who is starting for the Rays, threw a no-hitter on July 26. This will be the second time in the past 20 years that two pitchers will face each other after throwing no hitters earlier in the season, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. The other came July 28 when Arizona's Edwin Jackson opposed Philadelphia's Roy Halladay.

"It's pretty weird," Braden said. "The stars align."

Braden is excited about matching up with Garza, saying, "He and I are buddies and we know it's kind of a competition. It's kind of like lining up for a two-man sprint. You know exactly what you're going to get."

The Rays, on the other hand, are looking forward to taking some hacks against Braden. No team likes to get no-hit, and a perfect game is worse.

"I can't say nobody's not thinking about it; it would be hard to say that," infielder Sean Rodriguez said. "There's still some guys hyped up about it saying, 'Dallas Braden, oh yeah, we have to get him.'"

"How do you not? It wasn't just a no-hitter, it was a perfect game. You don't forget that. There's some guys saying we have to give him what we should have given him then."

Braden isn't expecting to duplicate that May 9 outing, either. "I'm not a math major, but the odds are stacked way against me," he said.

"It's just another game," Garza said. "He threw a perfect game; I threw a no-hitter; so that's cool. But it wasn't like it was the same day or anything. ... I really can't say, 'I'm going against Braden, what if this happens ...' "

On Saturday night, A's starter Brett Anderson allowed two runs in seven innings, struck out a season-high eight and left with a 4-2 lead, but left-hander Craig Breslow allowed three runs in the eighth, two on a go-ahead home run to center by Rodriguez. Breslow said he didn't get the pitch in far enough, and he also felt as if his pitches might have been predictable in certain counts.

The A's have had 14 starts in a row with at least six innings pitched and no more than three runs allowed, the longest such streak in franchise history since 1927.

Cliff Pennington, a star in the team's three previous one-run wins, was replaced in the starting lineup at shortstop by Steve Tolleson. Pennington entered in the eighth.

Could one of 2 Rays be a future Athletic?

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

With more than \$20 million expected to come off the A's payroll for next year, including **Ben Sheets'** \$10 million and **Eric Chavez's** \$12 million, there's little doubt the team will go after a big bat or two on the free-agent market this winter.

In the opposing dugout this series, there are two notable players heading for free agency: onetime A's first baseman **Carlos Peña** and outfielder **Carl Crawford**. Peña still has power and Crawford will be among the most coveted players on the open market - if he gets there.

"The main thing is that I want to see how the season ends and how things work out with this team," Crawford said. "I hope things go well, and if not, I'll have to see what's out there. (Oakland) does have good pitching. I'll weigh a lot of things, but obviously I want to go somewhere where the team can win."

Peña is likely to move on from Tampa Bay. Asked if he'd ever consider returning to Oakland, a team that traded him as a rookie, Peña said, "Of course. I don't rule out anything like that, and I like the area."

Playing the field: Ballboy **Kevin Fennell**, something of a media sensation after TV cameras showed him repeatedly bringing a female fan foul balls, has a date with the fan next week, and he says all the ribbing he's received since "is worth it."

The bullpen actively encouraged Fennell's overtures, and reliever **Craig Breslow** said with a smile, "Hopefully it will become a fairy-tale romance."

Friday's batting practice came to a halt when Fennell was highlighted on MLB Network on the stadium's big screen.

"It's been a different week, pretty much," Fennell said. "I've had a lot of Facebook requests."

Fennell's parents are on a cruise in Alaska, unaware their son is in the spotlight. "No idea at all," he said.

Briefly: **Joey Devine** and **Josh Outman** are throwing off the mound in Arizona. ... Class A Stockton beat San Jose 9-5 for its 14th consecutive victory.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Bailey back: Closer Andrew Bailey is expected to come off the disabled list today for the series finale after his throwing session Saturday went well. Bailey, out for more than a month with a ribcage strain, said he "knocked off some rust" Friday at Triple-A Sacramento.

Drumbeat: Pre-game hodgepodge: lineup - no Penny? Bailey update

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum August 21, 2010, 4:43PM

Cliff Pennington has been involved in the game-winning run three games in a row, driving it in on Wednesday and Thursday and, on Friday, hustling to first on Ben Zobrist's error, allowing the run to score. He also made a sensational play in the ninth on a grounder by B.J. Upton.

He's not in the lineup tonight; when I asked manager Bob Geren about how tough it might be to take out someone who's contributing so much offensively and defensively, he said that just because Pennington isn't starting doesn't mean he won't play.

Here's the lineup: Crisp cf, Barton 1b, Suzuki c, Kouzmanoff 3b, Ellis 2b, Davis lf, Cust dh, Tolleson ss, Buck rf

Andrew Bailey played catch before the game and the team will see how he responds to last night's outing and to today's work before making a decision about whether to activate him tomorrow or not. If it's not tomorrow, it's Monday.

I wasn't out here the past two days, but I did see Kevin Fennell, the A's bullpen-area ballboy, giving baseballs to a female fan during the Thursday broadcast, and he's since become something of a sensation: Batting practice stopped yesterday while Fennell was featured on the MLB Network on the big screen. He's a media sensation.

"It's out of control," said batboy Jordan Iserson, who you might recall was the Chronicle's insider during the "Moneyball" filming. I think Iserson might be jealous about ceding the spotlight.

Fennell, 21, did get a date - they're going out next week - after giving the fan five baseballs (he was prompted by the bullpen to keep sending them to her) and though he's been getting lots of grief from players and fellow ballboys, "It's worth it," he said with a smile.

"Hopefully it will become a fairy-tale romance," reliever Craig Breslow said.

Anderson's strong start goes for naught

Lefty leaves with lead, but Breslow allows three runs in eighth

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- For most of the season, A's lefty reliever Craig Breslow has been one of the team's most reliable options in the bullpen.

Since the calendar turned to August, though, Breslow has become a welcome sight to the opposition, as he has allowed a run in six of his eight appearances. For the first time all year, Breslow gave up three runs in an outing, and it cost the A's, who suffered a 5-4 defeat at the hands of Tampa Bay on Saturday.

"We have to turn the page," Breslow said. "Obviously we can come out here and win the series tomorrow. We perhaps won a couple games that we weren't supposed to win and tonight was one that definitely got away from us."

Breslow's struggles erased any chances of a four-game sweep for Oakland, as he coughed up a 4-2 lead in the top of the eighth inning. Breslow issued a walk to Carlos Pena which would come back to haunt him after two outs.

Willie Aybar eventually drilled a double to the right-field gap to score Pena, setting up Sean Rodriguez's go-ahead two-run home run to left-center field. Breslow said he tried to throw Rodriguez an inside fastball but it caught too much of the plate.

"I kept telling myself to stay on the fastball," Rodriguez said. "He'd been throwing a lot of fastballs. I remembered him yesterday getting a lot of guys with the heater, so I just told myself to stay on that. I was fortunate I got a good pitch and put a good swing on it."

Breslow has an August ERA of 8.59 to raise his season mark to 3.58. His ERA sat at 2.81 through July.

"I feel good," Breslow said. "I feel like maybe I'm becoming a little bit predictable with some of my pitches and location in certain counts. But I feel like if I execute pitches then I'll get the results I want, and I didn't tonight."

Unfortunately for A's lefty Brett Anderson, his seven innings were all for naught. While the Rays didn't have trouble hitting Anderson -- they racked up eight hits -- they could manufacture only two runs.

Tampa Bay looked fooled by Anderson's hard slider, as it accounted for seven of his season-high eight strikeouts.

"[I] did a pretty good job of minimizing damage," Anderson said. "I feel like I did a pretty decent job of keeping us in the game, unfortunately it just didn't work out."

Anderson was in line for the victory through seven innings, as the A's rattled off four runs against Tampa Bay's talented lefty David Price. Oakland made Price throw 43 pitches to get through the first inning, sending seven men to the plate.

Price surrendered a singles to Coco Crisp and Daric Barton to start off his evening, and the pair would eventually come around to score. After Price hit Kurt Suzuki with a pitch to load the bases, Kevin Kouzmanoff delivered a sacrifice fly to score Crisp, and Mark Ellis singled in Barton to give the A's a 2-0 lead.

"I think he was getting a little irritated on the mound and a little frustrated with his actions," A's left fielder Rajai Davis said. "But he's a good pitcher, and he was able to work through a difficult situation."

But the inning would also serve as a blessing in disguise for Tampa Bay, as Anderson sat on the bench for nearly a half hour awaiting the top of the second. Upon returning to the mound, Anderson served up a leadoff solo home run to Evan Longoria.

"It's kind of tough," Anderson said of the layoff between innings. "Going in you hear all the good things, and David Price is obviously a phenomenal pitcher. ... But you just got to go out there and throw strikes and try to do what I did in the first inning."

The Rays pulled even at 2 in the sixth inning when Carl Crawford scored on sacrifice fly from Ben Zobrist.

Once Price took to the rubber in the second inning, he looked like a different pitcher, as he retired the next 12 batters. He was humming along until the bottom of the sixth, when the A's used a two-out, two-run rally to reclaim the lead.

Ellis doubled home Barton before scoring on a Davis single to for a 4-2 advantage. Price got out of the jam by getting Jack Cust to ground out to second base, as he finished six innings, allowing four earned runs on six hits and a walk while striking out five.

"It's always fun to see how you stack up against some of the better pitchers in the league," Anderson said. "It's been a pretty tough string of good pitchers that I've gone up against, and I'm sure it's not going to get any easier in Texas [on Friday]."

Barton was Oakland's top performer in the batter's box Saturday, going 3-for-3 with a walk and two runs.

With the loss, the A's missed an opportunity to pick up a full game on the Rangers -- who lost, 8-6, at Baltimore -- and stayed seven games back in the American League West.

No-hit kings Garza, Braden hook up

By Cash Kruth / MLB.com

In Sunday's series finale at Oakland Coliseum, two of the biggest stars of the "Year of the Pitcher" will square off.

Rays starter Matt Garza (12-7, 3.74 ERA) will face A's starter Dallas Braden (8-8, 3.44). Both right-handers threw no-hitters this season, with Braden's perfect game coming May 9 against the Rays and Garza tossing his no-no on July 26.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Sunday will be only the second time in the past 20 years two pitchers will face each other after throwing no-hitters earlier in the season. The other time also came this season, when then-D-backs starter Edwin Jackson faced Philadelphia's Roy Halladay.

Despite the rarity of the occasion, Garza said the matchup itself isn't something he's going to focus on.

"He threw a perfect game and I threw a no-hitter the same year, cool," Garza said. "But it wasn't the same day. It's not like we pitched and did the same thing. It is what it is, and I'm just going to go out there and play. I really can't say, 'I'm going against Braden, what if this happens?'"

Braden agreed.

"That's not something I really look into," Braden said. "He's [Garza] a good guy, he's a friend of mine. I think more than anything we're probably excited about the competition, not necessarily between each other, but I guess enjoying the competition we each know we're going to bring."

Since struggling in his initial return from the 15-day disabled list in mid-June, Braden has rattled off four wins in his past five starts, two of which have been complete games. In his previous outing against the Blue Jays, Braden allowed one earned run on three hits in seven innings.

Garza broke a two-game losing streak in his previous start, tossing seven shutout innings against the Rangers, and he said he's feeling great heading into Sunday's duel.

"Things are going fine," Garza said. "Just trying to stay where I'm at, staying aggressive, just keep doing what I've been doing, being aggressive and going after guys."

A's: Bailey nearing return from DL

After spending the past month on the 15-day disabled list with an intercostal muscle strain in his rib cage, closer Andrew Bailey could return Sunday. Bailey threw 18 pitches Friday in a rehab appearance at Triple-A Sacramento, facing five batters and allowing two earned runs on three hits. "I think we're coming down to the end here, and it's just about being able to respond quickly and feel good the next day as well," Bailey said. "Obviously, not playing in a month, you're not going to be as sharp as you'd like to be. I think right now, based on how I felt yesterday, it's more of a baseball thing than a health issue."

Rays: Hellickson a bullpen possibility after Minors stint

With a full rotation and their eyes toward September and beyond, the Rays on Friday sent Jeremy Hellickson to Class A Charlotte, where the right-hander will work out of the bullpen. Rays manager Joe Maddon said Hellickson "definitely" is a candidate to pitch out of the 'pen should the Rays make the postseason, much like David Price did in 2008. Between Triple-A Durham and the big leagues, Hellickson, 23, has thrown 144 innings this season, which will affect how Maddon uses the top prospect. "You're not going to use him like everybody else," Maddon said. "I would imagine he'll do well with this. And then you're going to want to use him more often, but you can't. So you're going to have all these different little rules going on that you're going to create for him to benefit from his abilities and at the same time not abuse his arm."

Worth noting

Garza has never beaten the A's. In four career games, three starts, he's 0-3 with a 3.70 ERA. ... Ben Zobrist (5-for-11) is the only Rays player hitting better than .222 against Braden. ... The Rays are 28-13 when the opposition starts a left-hander.

Braden respects, excited to face Garza

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Spanning three panels of the left-field wall of the Oakland Coliseum sits an illustration of Dallas Braden, complete with a caption that says, "May 9, 2010" and "Dallas Braden's Perfect Game."

Of course, it commemorates the last time Braden faced the Rays on a Sunday. When Braden takes the mound against Matt Garza on Sunday, it will mark the second time this year that pitchers who had thrown no-hitters in the same season will square off.

In the other, the Phillies' Roy Halladay defeated the D-backs and Edwin Jackson on July 28.

But for Braden, all that other stuff doesn't matter.

"That's not something I really look into," Braden said. "He's [Garza] a good guy, he's a friend of mine. I think more than anything, we're probably excited about the competition, not necessarily between each other, but I guess enjoying the competition we each know we're going to bring."

Braden said he has gotten to know and respect Garza over the years. The pair faced each other thrice last season, and Oakland won all three contests, with Braden getting the win and Garza the loss on two occasions.

"I obviously have taken notice that he's a pretty fiery guy, a pretty fiery competitor," Braden said. "I have a lot of respect for people who play the game with emotion."

The series finale will cap the four-game set, which features the two best pitching staffs in the American League, as Oakland entered play Saturday with the league's best ERA (3.55), just ahead of Tampa Bay (3.62).

The series has featured some of the game's best young arms, including A's All-Star Trevor Cahill, Rays rookie Mark Hellickson and Saturday's matchup of Brett Anderson and David Price, two of the league's best young southpaws.

"There's a lot to be said for that if you're a baseball connoisseur, the ability to enjoy a good pitchers' matchup every now and then," Braden said. "There's nothing that exudes baseball more than a well-pitched baseball game, because you see every aspect of the game comes to the forefront. You have to start doing all the little things right, because you know the arms are going to keep it in check."

Bailey could return from DL Sunday

OAKLAND -- After throwing 18 pitches with Triple-A Sacramento on Friday in a rehab appearance, A's closer Andrew Bailey could return from the 15-day disabled list for Sunday's series finale with Tampa Bay.

Bailey faced five batters on Friday, getting two outs while allowing two earned runs on three hits and striking out one.

"I think we're coming down to the end here and it's just about being able to respond quickly and feel good the next day as well," Bailey said. "Obviously, not playing in a month, you're not going to be as sharp as you'd like to be. I think right now, based on how I felt yesterday, it's more of a baseball thing than a health issue."

Bailey played catch before Saturday's and said he would discuss the plan moving forward with the A's medical staff and manager Bob Geren. Bailey and Geren both said a Sunday return was possible.

Bailey hasn't pitched with the A's since July 20 due to an intercostal muscle strain in his rib cage. In 38 appearances this season, Bailey has converted 20 of his 23 save opportunities and a 1.56 ERA. But since Bailey has gone down, Geren has relied relievers like Michael Wuertz, Craig Breslow and Jerry Blevins to close out the game and the trio has filled in nicely.

"These guys definitely picked me up while I was gone," Bailey said. "It's been a group effort, it's always been like that down there. It's not easy closing out games, but it just shows that a lot of guys on our team can do it."

Breslow picked up the save on Friday, after tossing a perfect ninth inning to preserve a 5-4 victory over the Rays. It was Breslow's first game action since being hit by a line drive in Tuesday's contest.

"I knew I got hit by a smoked line drive a couple of games ago, but I felt like I could be effective," Breslow said after the game. "Maybe because I didn't feel spectacular, it kind of kept me within myself a little bit. ... But like I've been saying all year, the last three outs aren't necessarily the most important or the most crucial, they're just the ones that everybody watches."

Rodriguez earning trust, more responsibility

OAKLAND -- This homestand has been something of a coming-out party for A's reliever Henry Rodriguez, as he picked up his first Major League win on Friday in the 5-4 victory over the Rays.

Rodriguez is gaining the confidence of manager Bob Geren, who has used Rodriguez in consecutive pressure situations for the first time in his career. On Friday, Rodriguez pitched a 1-2-3 eighth to pick up the victory, thanks to a two-run rally in the bottom of the frame.

"Getting a win in the Major Leagues is a blessing, and I would like to thank God for giving me this day," Rodriguez said. "I want to dedicate my first victory to my family, the A's and my country."

Rodriguez, 23, was signed by the A's out of Venezuela in 2003. After making his debut last season, Rodriguez has a 3.52 ERA in 14 appearances over four stints with Oakland this year.

Rodriguez has strung together six consecutive scoreless outings, attributing his success to the ability to control his fastball, which usually runs 99-100 mph, and throw it to both sides of the plate. Rodriguez said he's feeling more confident with each outing.

"Little by little," Rodriguez said. "I have worked for this opportunity, and I want to enjoy this as much as possible. I will continue to work hard to improve and gain experience in the Major Leagues."

Red-hot Pennington out of starting lineup

OAKLAND -- Not even three game-winners in three days could save Cliff Pennington from the bench.

The A's shortstop was given the day off by manager Bob Geren for Saturday's tilt with the Rays, replaced by Steve Tolleson, who batted eighth. Pennington said he felt fine on Saturday.

"Just mixing Tolley through," Geren said. "I gave [third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff a day off], I gave [second baseman Mark Ellis] one."

Asked if it was any harder to keep Pennington out of the lineup given his recent performances, Geren said, "He's just not starting. Doesn't mean he can't go in."

Pennington is 1-for-2 with two walks in four plate appearances against Tampa Bay's Saturday starter David Price. Pennington is batting .440 (11-for-25) in seven games against the Rays this season. He is hitting .333 over his past 58 contests since his average bottomed out at .200 on June 9.

Worth noting

Class A Stockton notched a 9-6 victory on Saturday night to win its 14th straight contest. ... With Brett Anderson's seven-inning, two-run performance in Saturday's 5-4 loss to the Rays, Oakland has received a record 14 consecutive quality starts. ... Coco Crisp recorded his 500th career run scored in the first inning Saturday.

A's lose to Tampa Bay, 5-4

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Sean Rodriguez hit a go-ahead, two-run home run in the eighth and the Tampa Bay Rays remained a game behind in the AL East with a 5-4 win over the Oakland Athletics Saturday night.

Evan Longoria hit a home run and Ben Zobrist and Willy Aybar also drove in runs for the Rays, who ended a four-game losing streak to the A's.

Mark Ellis had two hits and drove in two runs for Oakland, which had a four-game winning streak end. Kevin Kouzmanoff and Rajai Davis also drove in runs.

Randy Choate (3-3) pitched a perfect seventh for the win. Rafael Soriano worked the ninth for his 36th save. Craig Breslow (4-4) took the loss after giving up Rodriguez's eighth home run of the season.

Rays' starter David Price lasted six innings, giving up four runs on six hits. He walked one and struck out four.

A's starter Brett Anderson went seven innings, allowing two runs on eight hits. He walked two and struck out a season-high eight.

The A's loaded the bases with no outs in the first, with Kouzmanoff hitting a sacrifice fly and Ellis singling home another run before Price settled in and avoided further damage.

Longoria led off the third with his 18th home run. He has three home runs in his last four games following a homerless streak of 19 games.

Zobrist tied the game with a sacrifice fly in the sixth, but the A's responded with two of their own. Ellis doubled in a run and scored when Davis singled.

Breslow got two outs sandwiched around a walk to Carlos Pena in the eighth. Aybar doubled into the right-center field gap to drive in a run ahead of Rodriguez's shot.

Notes: The Rays optioned RHP Jeremy Hellickson to Single-A Charlotte after Friday night's game. RHP Dale Thayer was recalled from Triple-A Durham to replace him. ... Crisp scored his 500th run in the first. ... Price needed 26 minutes and 43 pitches to get out of the first. ... A's OF Travis Buck is 0-for-10 since being called up from Sacramento. ... A's pitchers set an Oakland with 14 consecutive games of allowing three or fewer runs and lasting at least six innings. Anderson's effort broke a tie with the 1980 A's staff.

Errors dominate landscape as A's overcome Rays in 5-4 win

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

Considering they made two official errors in the first inning -- and made another mental error -- that contributed to an immediate two-run deficit, it was pretty impressive for the Oakland Athletics to beat the American League playoff-bound Tampa Bay Rays on Friday night.

The A's fought back to finally take the lead in the eighth inning on their way to a 5-4 win, their fourth victory in a row, but it wasn't easy -- or pretty.

Both teams combined for four errors and three unearned runs, and Oakland scored the winning run on an error by the Rays to secure the win.

The A's started the blunder barrage during the second at-bat of the game. Second baseman Steve Tolleson booted a ground ball, allowing Rays hitter Ben Zobrist to reach base safely. Oakland starter Vin Mazzaro then committed an error, with Zobrist reaching second base.

Carl Crawford then hit a grounder to Mazzaro, but first baseman Daric Barton didn't cover the bag -- so Crawford was credited with a single, although it really was another defensive blunder by the A's.

After Evan Longoria popped out and Crawford stole second base, Mazzaro walked Carlos Peña. Then with two outs on a 3-2 pitch, Matt Joyce lined a single to center field to give the Rays a 2-0 lead, courtesy of too many Oakland mistakes.

Mazzaro wasn't super-sharp in this one, walking four batters in 6 1/3 innings, but he only gave up three hits and one more run (earned, this time) in his start. That stabilizing recovery gave the offense a chance to get back in the game, and they did -- the A's tied the game in the sixth inning when Jack Cust homered.

But when the Rays took the lead in the seventh inning on a Zobrist home run (off Jerry Blevins), it looked like the Oakland win streak was coming to an end.

But Cust walked to start the inning, and Kevin Kouzmanoff followed with a single -- he made it to second when Joyce threw behind Kouzmanoff to first base. With runners on second and third, Rajai Davis hit a sacrifice fly to tie the game.

Then, with two outs and runners on first and third, Cliff Pennington -- who drove in the winning runs on both Wednesday and Thursday -- grounded to second base, and Zobrist booted the ball. Kouzmanoff scored the go-ahead run, and the A's closed out the game in the ninth behind Craig Breslow's two strikeouts.

In a game of errors, Oakland started it off poorly, and Tampa Bay ended it even worse.

The A's will take that "formula" every time.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Cramer dazzles in River Cats' win

Sacramento Bee

Take a bow: Bobby Cramer allowed only two hits in eight innings and combined with Justin James on a shutout in the River Cats' 3-0 victory over Salt Lake.

Turning point: The River Cats scored all their runs in the fifth. Eric Sogard, Adrian Cardenas and Michael Taylor began the inning with singles, producing one run. After Jared Price's sacrifice bunt, Corey Wimberly grounded into a forceout at second, scoring Cardenas. Matt Carson drove in Taylor with a sacrifice fly.

Who's hot: Taylor went 2 for 3 with a double and an RBI.

Who's not: The Bees, who were shut out for the eighth time this season and lost their fourth consecutive game.

Major league moment: Cramer faced only one jam, in the second. Terry Evans doubled with one out and went to third on a wild pitch, and Nick Gorneault walked with two outs. Cramer then struck out Ryan Budde.

Upcoming: Today, River Cats (TBA) at Salt Lake (TBA), 1:05 p.m. Spring Mobile Ballpark, Salt Lake City.

'Hounds score 8 in last two innings to snap skid

Midland Reporter-Telegram

SPRINGDALE, Ark. -- For seven innings, the Northwest Arkansas pitching staff kept the Midland RockHounds bats at bay. That was two innings too few.

The RockHounds put up eight runs the last two innings to pull out a 9-2 victory at Arvest Ballpark on Saturday. The victory snapped a three-game losing streak and helped Midland retain its three-game lead over San Antonio in the Texas League South.

A six-run eighth inning rally began innocently enough for the RockHounds. No. 9 hitter Gabriel Ortiz singled with one out off Naturals reliever Ben Swaggerty (4-5). Jemile Weeks followed with a single that resulted in Swaggerty's removal in favor of Patrick Keating.

The move didn't net the intended results. Keating allowed an RBI single to Archie Gilbert. After intentionally walking Shane Peterson to load the bases, Keating then allowed a two-run double to Corey Brown. Two batters later, Val Majewski doubled with two outs to drive in two more runs. Alex Valdez capped off the inning with an RBI single.

The RockHounds batted around in the inning and interestingly enough, Matt Sulentic accounted for the first and last outs in the RockHounds' big inning.

Gilbert put the game out of reach with a two-run home run in the ninth.

Heading into the eighth, though, the RockHounds trailed 2-1 and never led after falling behind 1-0 in the first.

RockHounds starter Anthony Capra allowed two runs in 6 1/3 innings on four hits and three walks and also uncorked four wild pitches as he took a no-decision. Neil Wagner (5-2) and Daniel Sattler combined to pitch 2 2/3 scoreless innings of relief, allowing just three hits and a walk.

Naturals starter Blake Johnson had a second straight strong start against the RockHounds, allowing just one run on five hits and a walk in six innings, but his bullpen kept him from picking up the win.

Stockton's Streak Continues With 9-6 Win Over Giants

SAN JOSE, Calif. - Returning to the site of their last loss, the Stockton Ports, for the 14th time in a row, refused to lose. The Boys of Banner Island scored early and often as they defeated the San Jose Giants by a final of 9-6. The Ports, with losses from Bakersfield and Modesto, now hold a four game lead in the North Division standings and are alone atop the Wild Card standings.

Stockton got off to a fast start in the first as Giants starter Andrew Romo (0-1) ran into two-out trouble in his Cal-League debut. After Romo recorded two quick outs to start the inning, Stephen Parker drew a walk, went to second on a passed ball, and scored on a Mike Spina RBI single to give the Ports a 1-0 lead. Yusuf Carter came up next and hit a two-run homer to left to make it 3-0. Romo then walked Tyler Ladendorf who stole second. Jeremy Barfield was hit by a pitch and both Ladendorf and Barfield advanced 90 feet on a wild pitch. David Thomas came up with two in scoring position and singled to center to give the Ports a 5-0 advantage.

Romo would pitch just the first inning and take the loss, allowing five runs on three hits while walking two and striking out three.

Stockton also had a starting pitcher making his Cal-League debut in left-hander Ian Krol (1-0). Krol tossed a scoreless first inning, but made a three-run mistake in the second. After allowing back-to-back walks to start the inning, Krol recorded two quick outs. With two down, however, Giants catcher Matt Klimas came up and hit his first home run of the season to pull San Jose to within two runs.

The Giants would take advantage of an error to make it a one run game in the fourth. With runners at second and third and one out, Drew Biery hit a grounder to Parker at third. Parker threw home in an attempt to get Charlie Culberson who was running down the line, but his throw skipped off Culberson's helmet and into foul territory, an error that pulled the Giants to within a run. Krol would retire the next two batters, however, to escape further trouble.

Krol retired the last five batters he faced to finish his Ports debut strong. He'd go on to earn the win, allowing four runs (three earned) on four hits while walking three and striking out three.

The Ports would reassert themselves in the fifth. With Carter at second and one out, Jeremy Barfield singled to center to make it a 6-4 game. After Giants reliever Eric Stolp allowed back-to-back walks that loaded the bases, Jermaine Mitchell reached on a fielder's choice that brought in another run. Grant Green followed with an infield RBI single to get the Ports lead back up to four runs at 8-4.

San Jose got a run back in the sixth off Ports reliever Jose Pina. Pina allowed an infield single to Culberson, who stole second and went to third on a wild pitch. James Simmons brought him home by grounding to second to make it an 8-5 game.

Stockton tacked on another run in the eighth on an RBI single from Parker off Stolp to bring their lead back to four runs at 9-5. Stolp allowed four runs on six hits in four innings of work.

The Giants proved resilient in the late innings. San Jose put two on with one out with Pina on the hill in the eighth, forcing Ports skipper Steve Scarsone to call upon closer Paul Smyth (SV, 25) earlier than expected. Smyth recorded back-to-back strikeouts to escape the eighth inning jam.

In the ninth, Smyth allowed a leadoff double to pinch-hitter Johnny Monell, who scored two batters later on an infield single from Juan Perez. Jose Flores followed with a double to left, putting runners at second and third and bringing the possible tying run to the plate with one out. Smyth, however, would bear down and record back-to-back strikeouts of Michael Sandoval and Culberson to end the game and preserve the win.

With 25 saves, Smyth is now second in the league behind Lake Elsinore's Brad Brach (40).

The Ports and Giants will play the second game of their three-game set on Sunday at San Jose Municipal Stadium. Left-hander Fabian Williamson (4-0, 3.92 ERA) will head to the hill for Stockton, opposed by San Jose right-hander Jorge Bucardo (1-1, 4.29 ERA). First pitch is set for 5 p.m. PDT.

Oakland A's Q&A: Aaron Nieckula, MGR

Bill Seals, OaklandClubhouse.com

Aug 21, 2010

The Kane County Cougars are focused on a second-half division title. The man at the helm for the Cougars this season, Aaron Nieckula, is no stranger to postseason play having led the Oakland A's affiliate to the postseason for two of his three previous years in Geneva. Kane County's skipper chatted with OaklandClubhouse on a variety of topics prior to Thursday night's game in Cedar Rapids.

OaklandClubhouse: Let's start with a synopsis of the Cougars squad as it stands right now with only a few weeks left to go in the 2010 season.

Aaron Nieckula: This team is in a position to qualify for the postseason in the second half. Although we have lost six in a row (as of Wednesday, Kane County would go on to beat the Kernels Thursday night, ending its losing skid) it still doesn't take away from the fact that we played quality baseball throughout the entire year.

We did start off a little slow offensively, but we have grinders on this team that have a knack for playing the game and improvement. This has been a joyful year, in terms of the personnel that I've been around. I see young men, both offensively, defensively, pitching-wise and base-running, making adjustments and getting better to have success at the next level. Ultimately, that's what I get paid to do.

OC: As a manager, you were promoted one level to Stockton last season. Being that you were a former catcher in the A's minor-league system, is it safe to assume one of the reasons you ended up back at Kane County for 2010 was to work with fourth-round draft pick [Max Stassi](#)?

AN: I believe that's the reason why, coming back to work with a young catcher to get him developed. We also had a catcher up in Stockton named [Ryan Ortiz](#) who was having a good year until he hurt his arm. Regardless, it was a good situation to be back home with family and especially with a young daughter. You don't really have that opportunity very often in minor league baseball.

You count your blessings and go where they tell you go. I accepted my assignment to Kane County. It's nice sleeping in your own bed, getting home cooked meals by your wife and having your laundry done. But the bottom line is I have a job to do and do well every single day.

OC: What were your impressions of Stassi coming into 2010, his first full season of professional ball?

AN: I knew of Max's pedigree before he even stepped foot on the baseball field, and his background, what kind of young man he was, and what kind of skills he brings every single day. I knew what to expect. He's a very attentive young man that asks the right questions. He has an outstanding work ethic, wants to learn and get better, and make the adjustments if something's wrong.

OC: After having much of this season to tutor the up-and-coming backstop, what type of improvements have you seen?

AN: The biggest adjustment that he's made, at least on the defensive end is two-fold. One has been with his leadership and ability to handle a staff. Run the staff on the field and in pre-games, in terms of staff meetings, scouting reports of the opponents and tendencies of the hitters. Secondly, his throwing and footwork are much improved. He started the season 0-for-22 and now he's at about a 32-percent clip.

OC: Switching gears, it sounds like tutoring young baseball players has become a year-round passion with the offseason camps and clinics (<http://www.nieckula.com/index.html>) you run in suburban Chicago.

AN: Working with young men that want to learn, get better and make the adjustments certainly makes our jobs as coaches much easier. I've been very fortunate the several years to work with young men in the tri-cities area of Batavia, St. Charles

and Geneva, as well as in Naperville, Aurora and Wheaton. It's been a very enjoyable part of my off-season.

OC: Which types of players do you work with during the fall and winter?

AN: They range in age from 8-18. I've worked with little leaguers and kids that are about ready to go off to college. I find it to be a very rewarding experience, whether it's hitting, catching, infield, base running, or just general knowledge of the game. Kids at that age are so eager to learn and improve. You have their full attention.

I don't discriminate. If it's a young man that doesn't have all the talent in the world, but is eager to practice and play, then I work with him. If it's a young man that has the ability to be a first-rounder, I'll work with him as well. I just enjoy teaching the game and seeing the young men get better, and the joy it brings to their lives.

OC: Does this commitment take up your entire off-season, or do you take some time off after a grueling summer in the minors?

AN: I have some die-hards that like to get started in November and December, with hitting and catching lessons. It starts to pick up in January with small group lessons, individual sessions, larger camps, and team clinics. My wife has been very accommodating with my passion for the game and the desire to work in the off-season. I enjoy what I do. Maybe there are a lot of people that can't say they enjoy waking up and going to their place of work, but I honestly do.

When the season's over with, I usually take a month off and get things done around the house. But once January and February rolls around, that's when it picks up and I'm gone quite a few hours during the week.

Cougars Drop Opener to River Bandits **Kane County returns home but falls**

GENEVA, III. – After winning a dramatic extra-inning game Friday night in Cedar Rapids and claiming that series, the Kane County Cougars returned home to Elfstrom Stadium on Saturday night but suffered a 5-2 loss in front of 12,158 fans in the opener of a four-game set with the Quad Cities River Bandits. Conner Crumbliss led off the bottom of the first inning with a home run, but the Cougars managed just one run the rest of the way in the defeat.

Crumbliss homered off Daniel Bibona (3-0), who settled down to last five innings and surrender that lone tally in the win. Crumbliss also drew two walks to bring his total to 104, tying the Cougars' single-season franchise record set by Tyrone Horne in '97. The Cougars other run arrived in the seventh on an infield RBI single by Jose Crisotomo.

Starter Jose Macias (0-1) suffered the loss in his Cougars debut. He had a shutout through four but left in the fifth without recording an out. Kenny Smalley took over and allowed the inherited runners to score, as the Bandits grabbed a 2-1 lead. The visitors made it 5-1 in the top of the seventh with three runs -- one earned -- against Bo Schultz, and Crisotomo's RBI in the bottom half accounted for the 5-2 final. Jose Rada posted his fourth save for Quad Cities.

The Cougars (29-24, 61-61) and River Bandits (33-19, 73-48) continue the series Sunday afternoon at 1 CT. Murphy Smith (7-1, 3.92) is set to face Shelby Miller (7-5, 3.74). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and at www.kccougars.com with pre-game coverage starting at 12:45 p.m.