

A's News Clips, Tuesday, August 24, 2010

Oakland A's starters have come a long way in a short time

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

There's a widespread belief that the A's are building one of the better rotations in the majors. But even the A's couldn't have expected their young starting pitchers to come this far so fast.

After losing veterans Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer prematurely to injuries, Oakland is excelling on the mound despite a rotation that averages just 23.6 years of age.

The A's starting staff leads the American League with a 3.40 ERA as the team begins a 10-game road trip tonight against the Cleveland Indians.

That's the primary reason the A's remain on the fringe of contention in the American League West despite an offense with glaring deficiencies -- last in the majors in homers and 26th in runs scored.

The work of Oakland's starting five -- Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden, Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Vin Mazzaro -- is drawing attention.

"I think it's an awful lot to build on," said a major league scout who requested anonymity. "It's as good a young staff as there is."

Tampa Bay Rays manager Joe Maddon -- who has a highly regarded young rotation of his own that includes David Price, 24, and Matt Garza, 26 -- was impressed with the A's starters over the weekend as Tampa Bay and Oakland split a four-game series.

"Their rotation is younger than ours and they're equally as talented," Maddon said. "They're really impressive. They're a well-kept secret being so far west. But trust me, coming into this series, I was very aware of all these guys."

The A's signed Sheets in January and re-signed Duchscherer because they figured their young starters would have growing pains. But consider the progress that Cahill, Gonzalez and Mazzaro have made in light of injuries to those veterans.

Cahill, 22, allowed an Oakland rookie-record 27 homers in 2009 but blossomed into an All-Star this season. Mazzaro, 23, was plagued by inconsistency last year but has a 3.47 ERA in 15 starts.

Both began the season with Triple-A Sacramento.

Gonzalez, 24, was erratic in '08 and '09, compiling a 7-11 record and 6.24 ERA in 30 games (24 starts). This year he leads the team in strikeouts (127) and innings (154.0), and has a 3.39 ERA.

"Trevor obviously is the All-Star, but I think you could put Trevor, Gio and Vinny in the same category," catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "From mentality to stuff, they've made such good improvements."

A second scout likes that the five starters don't overlap in their styles.

Anderson, 22, is a power pitcher who many consider the best among the five. Braden, 27, relies on finesse and barely cracks the mid-80s on the radar gun.

The other three fall somewhere in between.

"They pitch, they're not a lot of throwers," said the scout, who also wished to remain anonymous. "They change speeds and they sequence their pitches well."

Fans can only wonder where the A's might be in the standings if their lineup had more firepower.

Oakland is 81/2 games behind in the AL West with an offense that ranks 26th out of 30 major league teams in runs scored and dead last in homers (73).

The rotation has posted a collective 2.11 ERA over the past 21 games but has an 8-9 record.

Hindsight is 20-20, but if the A's front office knew their current five starters would round into form as they have, perhaps the \$10 million invested in Sheets could have been spent on an impact middle-of-the-lineup hitter.

It's worth noting that Oakland reportedly did make a strong run at power-hitting third baseman Adrian Beltre last winter, but Beltre signed with Boston.

Regardless of the offensive issues, a third scout said the A's rotation is to be envied, especially considering the low price tag.

Anderson will make \$1 million in 2011 in the second year of a four-year, \$12.5 million extension. Braden, who makes \$420,000 this season, will be arbitration-eligible for the first time. The other three are likely to have their contracts renewed for near the league minimum.

"They've got a chance to be really good," the scout said. "It's hard to beat all five of those guys. I like them, especially with the youth and affordability."

Note: The A's announced that left fielder Conor Jackson will have sports hernia surgery Sept. 1 in Philadelphia. Given the typical time frame for recovery, Jackson is all but assured of missing the rest of the season but should be ready for spring training.

Oh, that Pitching ...

How the A's 2010 pitching numbers rank in the American League:

ERA QS Hits WHIP BAA

3.54 79 986 1.26 .242

1st 1st 1st 2nd 2nd

... But Oh, That Offense

How the A's 2010 offensive numbers rank in the American League:

Runs Hits HR RBI AVG

494 1,055 73 461 .256

12th 10th 14th 12th 10th

today's game

A's (Gio Gonzalez 10-8) at Cleveland (Fausto Carmona 11-11), 4:05 p.m., CSNCA

al west race

W L GB

Texas 70 54 --

A'S 61 62 8.5

L.A. Angels 62 64 9

A's staff as easy as 1-2-3 ... 4-5

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

From Hunter, Blue and Holtzman to Stewart, Welch and Moore to Zito, Hudson and Mulder, the A's top rotations in their Oakland era have had clearly defined core trios.

A's pitching coach Curt Young was a member of the Stewart-Welch-Moore rotations of the late 1980s and early '90s. He said it's hard to pick a definitive threesome from his thriving young rotation - and he finds that encouraging.

"We feel good right now about every starting pitcher every day," Young said in the A's dugout Saturday afternoon. "That's really the goal of every team, that every day you have a legitimate chance to shut somebody down."

For the past 21 games, each starter - Dallas Braden, Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill, Vin Mazzaro and Brett Anderson - has worked at least six innings, the second-longest such streak in Oakland history.

In the past 15 games, the rotation's ERA is 1.90.

One reason for the starters' success: Curt Young.

"He doesn't really say much," catcher Kurt Suzuki said, "but when he does say (something), you listen.

"He preaches the importance of just the simple things: throw strikes, get ahead in the count, attack hitters and be confident in what you're throwing."

Suzuki and Cahill say Young adapts his coaching to each pitcher's individual style.

"He's not afraid to try things out with you," Cahill said, "and if you like it, good. If not, he's not going to be offended, which is rare for a coach."

It's rare for the oldest starter in a rotation to be all of 27 (Braden). For Young, success trumps experience.

"It's not like you need somebody to hold your hand and lead you through this," he said. "They know what they want to do."

Young provided insights into each starter, listing his strengths and point of emphasis:

Brett Anderson

Throws: Left **Age:** 22

W-L: 3-4 **ERA:** 2.86

Strengths: "Really, stuff. Stuff and mentality. He's got breaking pitches, two of them, that do exactly what they're supposed to do. A slider down and in to a righty, and a curveball that goes 12 to 6. The depth on those two types of breaking balls is what makes him special."

Point of emphasis: "Command his fastball. If his fastball's in the zone, that's where he gets the swings on his breaking balls that are in the zone and out of the zone."

Dallas Braden

Throws: Left **Age:** 27

W-L: 8-9 **ERA:** 3.49

Strengths: "Attitude. He believes he is the best when he's walking out to that mound. And if you have that attitude and know how to mess with hitters, you've got a good combo. ... He's got the art of pitching mastered."

Point of emphasis: "Just that he doesn't bring too much anger to the game. ... He needs to be very specific with what he does. If he tries to overpower hitters, he's going to get himself in trouble."

Trevor Cahill

Throws: Right **Age:** 22

W-L: 13-5 **ERA:** 2.54

Strengths: "Movement on his baseball. He's got it going every direction: down, away from righties, in to righties. If you're a hitter, you don't know which way his ball is going."

Point of emphasis: "Not to overthrow. Sometimes, he tries to throw maybe a little harder than he needs to. ... He'll get out of his mechanics every once in a while trying to overthrow."

Gio Gonzalez

Throws: Left **Age:** 24

W-L: 10-8 **ERA:** 3.39

Strengths: "Baseball instincts, pitching instincts in general."

Point of emphasis: "Just to make sure he keeps his composure throughout the game. There are times, whether it's an umpire call or a bloop hit, some of those things will affect him - and we're constantly working to get that out of his game."

Vin Mazzaro

Throws: Right **Age:** 23

W-L: 6-5 **ERA:** 3.56

Strengths: "The assortment of pitches that he has. He's got four quality, major-league pitches. He brings them all to the table every game. As a hitter, you can never guess what's coming."

Point of emphasis: "Just to make sure he keeps his energy up. He's kind of laid-back a little bit, and you like to see him with that constant fire in his eyes."

Starter set

-- Oakland starters lead the AL with a 3.41 ERA.

-- The A's starters have worked at least six innings and allowed no more than three earned runs in each of the past 15 games, an Oakland record.

-- The rotation's ERA in those 15 games is 1.90.

-- The A's starters have lasted at least six innings in each of the past 21 games.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Buck optioned: The Chronicle has learned the A's have optioned Travis Buck back to Triple-A Sacramento. Buck went 0-for-10 with Oakland last week after getting recalled from the River Cats. If Matt Watson (kidney stones) is healthy, he'll take Buck's roster spot. If not, look for Matt Carson to be recalled from Sacramento.

Jackson to undergo hernia surgery Sept. 1

A's not prepared to declare slugger out for rest of season

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's confirmed on Monday that Conor Jackson will undergo surgery for a sports hernia on Sept. 1, but the club was not prepared to say whether it will force him to miss the rest of the season.

However, the injury-prone outfielder -- who was placed on the 15-day disabled list on Friday -- is looking at an expected recovery time of four to six weeks. With just six weeks and 39 games left in Oakland's season, the possibility of Jackson returning before then seems unlikely.

Jackson has played in just 60 games this year -- 18 of them with the A's, who acquired him via a trade from the D-backs in June. He missed a handful of time with both teams due to a strained right hamstring, which most recently had him on the DL until Aug. 16 -- four days before he was placed back on it again.

"It's definitely a mental blow," Jackson said. "It's borderline embarrassing, just because I come over to a new organization and I've only played [18] games. I know they had high regards for me coming over here, and I felt like health has ridden my performance."

Jackson's procedure will be performed in Philadelphia by Dr. William Meyers, a sports hernia specialist who has previously operated on several professional athletes, including NFL star Donovan McNabb. It's a surgery familiar to fellow outfielder Travis Buck, who suffered a sports hernia during the 2006 season.

When speaking to reporters on Friday, Jackson said he initially felt discomfort in his lower abdomen and groin in March but hoped to play through the pain. However, during his first at-bat in Thursday's game against the Rays, he aggravated the injury to a point he could barely get out of bed the next morning.

Jackson believes his current injury may have led to the others he experienced this year, so he's hoping the surgery will essentially cure all and lead to a healthy 2011 season.

In the meantime, the A's will rely on a steady supply of outfielders in his absence. Rajai Davis is likely to hold Jackson's place in left field, while Gabe Gross and Buck rotate on the right side.

Pennington growing into his role as leader

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Much of Cliff Pennington's childhood was spent on the diamond, in a steamy Texas heat, between second and third base on the left side of the infield.

"I was always a shortstop," Pennington says.

Maybe so, but there was also a time at Mary Carroll High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, when he played second base, due to a rather weak arm.

That same arm ultimately found its way to the mound, a result of his throwing batting practice to the varsity squad, one of Pennington's freshman-year duties.

"I came back the next year pitching for us," Pennington recalls. "My arm got stronger because of it."

The rest is seemingly history, but the cannon that is now Pennington's arm is part of what's transforming this 26-year-old, who stands just 5-foot-11, into one of the game's finest defensive presences.

"He's gotta have one of the top five arms in Major League Baseball," A's infield coach Mike Gallego said. "Not only does he have the strength, but the accuracy he has with that thing is incredible."

"He's tremendous," teammate Mark Ellis said. "He makes the plays in the hole, makes the plays up the middle. He can go both ways. His arm is one of the best I've seen in the big leagues, and he's only going to get better."

Strangely, Pennington's arm has also turned into something of a sweet burden, a gift that has led, in part, to the A's infielder racking up 18 errors, which ranks first among all American League shortstops.

"When you say he has 18 errors, obviously, that's a lot for a shortstop of his capability," Gallego said. "At the same time, I think Cliff Pennington is going to make more errors because of his ability. He's going to get to more balls, and he's going to attempt to throw more because of the arm he has."

"He has a tendency to sit back on a lot of balls, because he can depend on that arm so, in turn, if you sit back, you're going to give the ball a chance to take a bad hop. He does get a lot of in-between hops, but he's got such good hands people don't recognize it. He's got the arm that lets him get away with it, keeps him out of trouble."

So, despite his knack for collecting errors at a pace he'd like to see decrease, Pennington also ranks first among all qualifying shortstops in the league in zone rating, the percentage of balls fielded by a player in his typical defensive "zone," as measured by STATS, Inc.

Furthermore, he ranks third in range factor, which simply calculates the number of plays made per game at the fielding position, taking into account the fielder's own ability to get to a batted ball. By day's end, this statistic ultimately rewards the more talented players at each position, which is why many in the game are now weighing its outcome more than a player's fielding percentage.

"I compare Penny a lot to Troy Tulowitzki," said Gallego, who groomed Tulowitzki during his Rockies coaching days. "He had the same kind of style of sitting back on the ball. Penny's obviously fielded that way since high school, and it got him to the big leagues, so who am I to change that? Because of that, I believe he's not going to be errorless ever at shortstop. He's not going to be flawless, but he's gonna be a thrill to watch."

The defensive style Gallego speaks of isn't the lone reason for Pennington's sudden surge into an exciting everyday player. This Texas kid, a first-round Draft pick by the A's in 2005, has matured in every sense of the word by way of confidence, a part of his game that wasn't necessarily missing, but possibly lacking, when he was initially called up at the end of the 2008 season.

It was then he bounced his way around the infield, making a mark not only at shortstop but third base and second base as well. Triple-A Sacramento proved to be his home at the start of 2009, but following the Orlando Cabrera trade on the last day in July, Pennington was again rewarded a ticket to The Show.

"When you break the club, it's obviously exciting," Pennington said, "but you're still trying to fit in, try to see what it's all about. You have to get used to seeing the game, seeing the guys you grew up watching. As you start to get a few games under your belt, you see that you can do it, that you can play at this level."

Even then, though, following a stretch that saw Pennington start 60 of the club's final 61 games at shortstop, the confidence factor still wasn't in full bloom.

Fast forward to Spring Training this year, and cue in Adam Rosales, the jack-of-all-trades kid acquired from Cincinnati via offseason trade.

"Adam was one of those guys that not only could field pretty well -- [he] had a great arm just like Penny -- but also could hit, hit with some power, brought some energy," Gallego said. "There were a lot of pluses Adam brought to the game. I sat back and watched Penny's reaction to all this and listened. If you sit back and listen to Penny long enough, he's going to tell you how he feels."

Their conversations, Gallego said, brought out the competitor in Pennington, who in time told his coach that the shortstop position was his, and no one was about to take it from him.

"He was kind of joking," Gallego said, "but he was trying to prove a point -- not to me, not to the manager, but to himself. And he succeeded. He started off slow, and then he started swinging the bat, making the plays, and doing the things that we needed and expected of him at shortstop."

Since, Pennington has started 111 of the team's 123 games en route to cementing his name in the everyday lineup, where he's also offered a good dose of punch in the No. 9 hole while providing some speed on the bases with 20 steals, the most by any A's shortstop since Alfredo Griffin tallied 26 in 1987.

With 39 games remaining in the season, that mark can still be reached. Pennington's got time and lots of it, thanks to a somewhat newfound ability to control the pace of the game.

"I've made so many improvements from when I was drafted to when I got here, especially on defense and slowing things down," Pennington said. "A lot of it has come with experience and just trusting myself. It's about the confidence in knowing that I'm going to make the play."

"He's a very confident player," Ellis said. "He stays within himself and really doesn't try to do more than he's capable of doing. As a shortstop, you've got to do all the little things right. You've got to make all the plays. He's done that, and then some."

Ellis' veteran defensive presence at second base, perhaps one of the more underrated in the game, has aided Pennington immensely. In fact, Pennington essentially spent his initial months in green and gold leaning on Ellis for almost everything, understanding the game and the position, along with getting through what Gallego called the "rough parts of the season."

"It's time for Penny to be in control," Gallego said. "Now, you can hear him barking things off to [Kevin] Kouzmanoff; you can see him discussing things with Ellis as opposed to just listening. Him and Mark are the leaders. He's the leader of the left side of the infield, and Mark's the leader of the right side."

"We talk about that a lot," Pennington said. "You have to be the quarterback of the infield. It's a big step I'm trying to take this year, being more vocal and not just knowing my role but everybody else's. Obviously, Ellis helps me out a lot, but I'm trying to gain a comfort zone on my own out there."

Pennington admittedly still feels like "the new guy" in the A's clubhouse, but his increasing stature on the infield has many around him thinking that newness is wearing off quickly.

"It's going to be a shame if his efforts aren't recognized at the end of the year," starter Dallas Braden said. "You want to talk about a guy who just absolutely brings this club plays day in and day out, it's just becoming comical. It's almost unfair because I almost expect it out of him."

Pennington, meanwhile, expects it out of himself.

"Obviously, 18 errors is more than I want," he said, "but I try to look at it more of, how many have I taken away versus how many have I given up? You've got to make the routine plays. That's why you're here. But, at the same time, it's fun to take away a hit from somebody."

Fun isn't just had on the field for Pennington, though. For as much as he's matured on the diamond, he's grown up in a bigger sense off the field, where he and wife, Missy, welcomed their first child last November.

Brady, nearly 10 months old now, has eased the roller coaster feeling of the 162-game grind, the one that is now viewed through a completely different lens.

"Brady doesn't care if I made an error or struck out three times," Pennington said. "Obviously this is a job and I love playing, but being a dad puts everything in perspective and helps you relax because of the fact it is just a job."

"With the new addition, there are new responsibilities," said Gallego, who has three children of his own. "It's a new outlook on life. With a family, I think Penny's starting to realize a baseball player is not who he is. It's what he does. He's a husband and father first. It eases those bad nights at the ballpark when you have that smiling child waiting."

Gallego, who spent 12 years playing in the A's organization, exudes a unique commitment toward his players that makes it seem he knows them just as well as they know themselves. Thus, he's also not afraid to brag about some of the more modest ones, Pennington included.

"We've all known Cliff has the ability and the tools to be a Major League shortstop," Gallego said. "But he needed to mature and grasp a hold of the mental part of it -- the day-in, day-out grind of success and failure. The mental side of the game is

always going to be the last thing these young players are going to control. But if they can do that, they're going to be successful. Cliff has done a good job of doing just that. He can be a hero one night and come back the next day and be the same Cliff Pennington who gets his work in."

That doesn't mean he can't add a little something to his pregame mix, though.

"There's nothing wrong with walking around with a little bit more confidence like he seems to be doing," Gallego said. "If you're going to walk with a big stick, you better be able to handle it and use it, and he's proving that he belongs here. Players think they're proving it to their peers, their manager, their general manager. For me, they're proving it to themselves. If they can prove it to themselves, all the rest is gravy.

"He's gotten to that point, and I think we're going to see Cliff Pennington at shortstop for a very long time. I think he's starting to make a name for himself. Teams that we play on a consistent basis in our division, they know who Cliff Pennington is. The rest will know soon as well."

Need a lift? Call on baseball's 'masked men'

By Tom Singer / MLB.com

They are lurking in the shadows, waiting for fate to tap them on the shoulder.

Anonymous youngsters, faceless Minor League journeymen. Players without pasts and, as the passage of time will cruelly show, little futures.

But they will have *now*, when the moment to impact pennant races finds them and they leave their footprints in a team's path to glory.

They will indeed feel that tap, and have a chance to make a difference.

Now through September belongs to heroes, and not only the likely ones. It is when the clock strikes 3:10 in Yuma. Dave Parker used to refer to it as "panty-hose time" and when asked for an explanation would simply cite a popular ad slogan of the day:

"You know, no nonsense."

September mints enduring legacies and fleeting legends who run across the stage then disappear, with everyone asking each other, "Who was that masked man?"

These are Baseball's Ground Zorro ...

... On Sept. 17, 2008, John Maine is hurt and the Mets are hurting and Jerry Manuel needs someone to stop the pain. Brandon Knight, 32 and still without a big league win, steps up to pitch five innings against the Nationals and hold them to two runs for a win that keeps the teetering Mets within a half-game of the Phillies.

Two days later, the Mets would move into the National League East lead for one final time. Knight sustains the dreams, theirs and his.

"I'll take it this way. It's worth it," says Knight, who will not pitch in a Major League game again.

... Dan Johnson is a proud Durham Bull on the morning of Sept. 9, 2008, in Scranton, Pa., for the night's game in International League championships. He gets the 9 a.m. ring calling him instead to Boston, where the Tampa Bay Rays will be protecting their half-game lead in the American League East over the Red Sox.

Johnson, a 29-year-old first baseman with limited prior experience with the A's, who had waived him six months earlier, packs quickly and lightly: "Two T-shirts, a pair of jeans and a pair of shorts."

Manager Joe Maddon has Johnson in his starting lineup, but various travel glitches delay his arrival. Twenty minutes to first pitch, still no sign of him, Maddon scratches Johnson.

Which makes Johnson's bat available to come off the bench, leading off the ninth inning with the Rays trailing, 4-3. Johnson pulled a full-count Jonathan Papelbon pitch over the bullpens in right field to tie the game and spark a 5-4 win, to keep the Rays on top and pump enough bravado into them to carry them to the World Series.

"Sometimes, you just do something, and you don't know why it happens," said Johnson, who had four more hits for Tampa Bay before disappearing to Japan -- although he recently resurfaced to fill in while Carlos Pena was on the disabled list with his sprained foot.

... Bud Smith is a 21-year-old left-hander as ordinary -- except for being in a Major League rotation for a contender at such a young age -- as his name. That "contender" label threatens to slip off Smith's St. Louis Cardinals as Sept. 3, 2001, dawns with them in the middle of the NL Central pack, in third place and seven games behind Houston.

The Cards have been playing win-one-lose-two for a couple of weeks as Smith takes the mound in San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium, looking for his first win since July. He gets it in stimulating fashion: a no-hitter over the Padres that ignites a fiery 18-3 stretch drive that carries the Cardinals into the postseason.

It is Smith's fourth win of his rookie season. He would win only three more the rest of his abridged career.

... Brian Leshar had seen the Majors before, but never like this. The muscular right-handed hitter had averaged 25 games from 1996-98 with the A's, then it was back to the Minor League life until Sept. 2, 2000, when the Mariners, clinging to a 2 1/2-game AL West lead over those same A's, need a wake-up call off the bench.

It is a scoreless seventh-inning tie in Fenway Park when, after Mark McLemore singles with two outs, Leshar is called on to pinch-hit and take his first big league at-bat since July 21, 1998. He triples to drive in McLemore.

Seattle still has that one-run lead when Leshar, who remained in the game at first base, next comes up in the ninth with two on and one out. This time, he "only" doubles to drive in both, completing a three-RBI game for the difference in a 4-1 win.

Two weeks later, Leshar has another 2-for-2 game to again push the Mariners toward an October in which they will win the first postseason series in their history, in the Division Series over the White Sox. So Leshar's final season line is 4-for-5, only one hit less than he will get in his last 38 big-league at-bats for the Blue Jays in 2002.

... Jeff Bittiger already has 189 Minor League games under his belt and -- always a sour sign -- has spent five years in Triple-A when the Twins need a fresh arm to start against the White Sox on Sept. 7, 1987. The Twins are protecting a three-game AL West lead over the A's, who have been on their heels for 2 1/2 weeks and are looking for the opening to make a move.

Bittiger is in total control, going seven innings, holding the White Sox to six hits and one run while striking out five without a walk in an 8-1 victory. He won't win again that season -- and only twice more in his career -- but the Twins don't stop winning, right through Game 7 of the World Series over St. Louis.

... On Sept. 18, 1983, veteran Orioles catcher Rick Dempsey is hit by a pitch in the third inning and Baltimore manager Joe Altobelli, playing it smartly with his team already trailing Milwaukee, 7-0, sends rookie receiver John Stefero to run for him. Flash forward through six convoluted innings -- and there's Stefero delivering a walk-off single in the bottom of the ninth for a 10-9 comeback win.

Flash forward one whole day: There is Stefero again, delivering a walk-off single in the bottom of the 11th for an 8-7 victory over the Brewers.

The Orioles go on to win the AL East, then the World Series. Stefero goes on to disappear for three years, resurfacing in 1986 for the rest of his 79-game career.

... Ken Macha had spent his first Major League week on the bench, watching the other Pirates chase the Cardinals in vain. On Sept. 20, 1974, it's time for Macha to get off that bench -- his seventh-inning RBI pinch-hit double triggers the comeback from a 3-0 deficit to the Mets. Four days after that 4-3 comeback win, the Pirates move into first place.

The Bucs return to the playoffs. Macha returns to the shadows until 1977, when he begins the rest of his 180-game playing career.

... Late on Sept. 13, 1969, most of the 26,389 fans have left Atlanta Stadium and those who remain are grumbling. The Astros had broken through a scoreless tie with two runs in the top of the 13th. The Reds had already won their game in San Francisco and, in three more outs, would tie the Braves atop the NL West.

Out of options, Braves manager Lum Harris asks Jim Breazeale to make his Major League debut by hitting for pitcher Paul Doyle in the bottom of the 13th. Breazeale works a walk -- and works his way around the bases to score the winning run at the end of a stirring rally.

The Braves go on to make their first postseason appearance since arriving in Atlanta from Milwaukee. Breazeale, only 19 at the time, returns a couple years later for a handful of Braves games -- then vanishes for six more years until making his final cameo with the 1978 White Sox.

... It is Sept. 18, 1963, and Dick Nen is about to set the Masked Men standard. St. Louis' Busch Stadium is rocking -- the Cardinals are two outs away from slashing the Dodgers' lead over them in the NL standings to one game. The Cards have a 5-4 lead with one out in the ninth, Ron Taylor on the mound -- and on 0-and-1 pitch on its way to Nen, who in 579 at-bats that year in Triple-A Spokane had managed only nine home runs.

But the ball is somewhere between the mound and the plate when fate taps Nen: He crushes the ball over the right-field roof to tie up a game the Dodgers would win in 13, and sweep the demoralized Cards out of the race.

The Dodgers go on to win the World Series. It is Nen's only hit for them -- still worth a \$1,000 World Series share voted by thankful teammates -- and his only big league hit for anyone until July 6, 1965, when he is with the Washington Senators to begin the rest of his .224-hitting big league career.

... It is Sept. 27, 1940, and Floyd Giebell is about to set the Masked Men tone. He is a "rookie," in service time only, not in age, a 30-year-old right-hander about to make his second Major League start for Detroit -- in Cleveland, against Bob Feller, as the Tigers begin a season-ending three-game series with a three-game lead over the Indians.

Giebell unfurls a six-hitter to beat Feller, 2-0, and clinch the pennant -- which the Tigers keep by that one game after losing the final two games. Giebell never wins another game.

Well played, Fate.

The Tampa Bay (R)A's

by Jason Follain, realgm.com 8/23/2010

The most valuable commodity a major league baseball team can have is young, cost-controlled players that are producing at a high level, whether it be pitchers or position players, and the Tampa Bay Rays have them in spades. Unlike their division foes, the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees, the Rays don't have the finances needed to pay top dollar on the free agent market. Rather, they must build from within and develop the talent they obtain through the draft.

While they did have the benefit of choosing at or near the top of the draft for the first decade of their existence, you cannot attribute their recent success to that alone. For comparison's sake, the Pittsburgh Pirates have been mired in the dregs of sub-.500 records since the moment Barry Bonds left town and have yet to parlay that into even a winning season, much less contending to reach the playoffs.

A lot of the good things that you are able to say about the Rays of today are the same things that were being said about Oakland A's a decade ago. Both teams worked within the constraints of a small budget compared to their contemporaries, and thus were forced to rely on deft drafting skills combined with talent development in their respective minor league system. These minor league systems both produced a top notch major league starting rotation, which became the focal point of each franchise and the envy of all others.

While young, cost-controlled players are what every team craves, it is the young starting pitcher that is the crown jewel of major league assets. The Oakland A's went to the playoff four years in a row from 2000 through 2003 on the backs of what came to be known as the Big Three. During that four year period, Tim Hudson compiled an ERA of 3.26, Barry Zito clocked in at 3.12 and Mark Mulder rounded out the three at 3.77.

When I asked the only remaining Athletic from the days of the Big Three, Mark Ellis, about the comparison of two teams from different eras, he replied, "It all starts with pitching. If you can pitch, you're going to have a chance."

The Rays no doubt have a chance, night in and night out.

While I'm sure the Rays' opponents wished their starting rotation was only three deep, that is far from the case. Some might say that Tampa Bay has a stable of youngsters that runs six and possibly even seven deep.

The starting five, whose average age is a fresh-faced 25.8 years old, is led by former number one overall pick of the 2007 amateur draft, David Price, who is making a solid pitch for the American League Cy Young award in his second full season at the age of 24. Price has baffled opponents this season to the tune of a 2.97 ERA while striking out 8.33 batters per nine innings. Opposing batters are also hitting a measly .230 off of him. All of this has been accomplished while primarily facing some of the stiffest competition in the major leagues in the American League East.

Matt Garza, who has anchored the Tampa Bay rotation for the past three seasons, is his usual, innings-eating self. The Rays' 26-year-old has contributed yet another solid performance season to date with a 3.74 ERA over 156 plus innings of work.

Garza got off to a fantastic start to the season, reeling off three straight eight inning outings while only giving up a total of two earned runs. He cooled off after that, but has gotten back into the swing of things of late while compiling a 1.72 ERA and allowing a miniscule OPS of .497 to opposing batters over his past five starts.

Perhaps the unsung hero, Jeff Niemann has been as solid as any pitcher in the rotation. Also a former first round draft pick, Niemann has been the definition of steady while going at least six innings in all but two outings. Having compiled a 3.12 ERA in 22 starts while relying primarily on a heavy sinkerball that generates a lot of groundballs, Niemann is finally realizing his potential at age 27. He is currently on the disabled list recovering from a shoulder strain, but will return to the rotation this coming week. And if you've been paying attention to the standings, the Rays' staff hasn't skipped a beat due to the fact that they have two pitchers in their bullpen that would be starting for most other teams in Jeremy Hellickson and Andy Sonnanstine.

The elder statesman of the group, James Shields, checks in at 28-years-old. His moniker of "Big Game James" alone tells you what his teammates think of him despite his 4.82 ERA. Shields has cut his teeth in the AL East over the past five seasons, but in the 2010 campaign has been victimized by the long ball having given up 29 home runs in 158 2/3 innings. While Tampa Bay looks to be a lock for the playoffs, Shields' rough year should relegate him to bullpen duty come October.

The youngest starter that the Rays will run out is highly-touted prospect Wade Davis. Like Niemann, he is scheduled to come off the disabled list this week. In his first full season in the big leagues, Davis' high strikeout totals that he displayed in the minors (8.7 K/9) are not translating over to the majors (5.7 K/9 in 2010). He has also been giving up more than twice as many home runs at the major league level compared to his minor league days. The Rays, however, have confidence that the latest in their long line of front-of-the-rotation horses will put it all together and improve upon the 4.45 ERA that he has given them in 2010.

Young starting pitching isn't the only similarity between the A's of the early 2000's and the Rays of today, as the players backing those pitching staffs up were eerily similar as well. Both had extremely potent lineups with the ability and willingness to take a walk, a staple of the Billy Beane *Moneyball* era.

In particular, Ellis added, "They have a few players in the middle of their lineup with Crawford, Longoria and Carlos Pena, who can drive the ball out of the ballpark. You put Tejada, Chavez and Giambi in the middle of the A's lineup back then and it's really similar."

The parallel that exists between Evan Longoria and Eric Chavez is a poignant one when you delve into the numbers. When you compare Chavez's age 22 season through age 26 season and Longoria's first three campaigns, his age 22 through 24 seasons, the fact that they bat on opposite sides of the plate might be the only distinct difference between the two.

BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	K rate	BB rate	
Chavez	.280	.357	.513	.870	16%	10.6%
Longoria	.282	.360	.523	.883	21%	10.3%

The resemblance doesn't end at the plate, either. Longoria won his first Gold Glove last season of what is sure to be many more that he will end up adding to his personal trophy case, as he is widely considered the best fielder at the hot corner in all of Major League Baseball. Chavez snagged six consecutive Gold Gloves between 2001 and 2006 to claim the same title during that timeframe. So, while both players are virtually mirror images of each other, surely Longoria is hoping that his career is much less injury-riddled than that of Chavez, who has only managed 249 plate appearances since 2008. Rays management is optimistic that the nine year contract they signed Longoria to a mere six days into his major league career will provide them maximum value out of the face of their franchise for years to come.

Another thing the Rays of today share with the A's of yesteryear is a patient, power-hitting first baseman. In his last three seasons in Oakland, Jason Giambi averaged 38 home runs per season, while the Rays' version of Giambi, Carlos Pena, has averaged 39 home runs per campaign during his time in Tampa. Giambi also had an otherworldly walk rate of 18.3%, but in his Rays career Pena has done his best Giambino impression while walking in 16.0% of his plate appearances, well above average in the patience department. As Giambi did when he fled Oakland for his big payday with the New York Yankees, Carlos Pena will be seeking the same as a free agent this offseason and the Rays aren't giving any indication that they will be bringing him back on a large, multi-year deal. So, the Rays will most likely be filling their first base vacancy from within, as they are accustomed to doing.

The reality that a small market franchise faces is one that no matter how good the product they put on the field is, the fans are only trickling through the turnstiles. Over the past three seasons, when the Rays have had one of the better teams in baseball, yet they have averaged 22,727 fans per home game. In the same time frame, they have ranked 26th in attendance out of 30 teams in 2008, 23rd in 2009, and also 23rd so far in the 2010 season. The A's struggled with lousy attendance a decade ago as well which prompted them to start pushing for a new ballpark. To this day, they still play their home games at the relic of a stadium otherwise known as the Oakland Coliseum. The Rays are hoping that they won't have the same fate ten years from now, as Bud Selig has backed the Rays ownership's request for new digs. However, the Rays have a lease arrangement with the city of Tampa that runs through to 2027. Quick math tells me that that's not any time soon.

For a well-rounded team with World Series aspirations, the Tampa Bay Rays hope to ride their youngsters all the way to title

town. The preferred destination was the same for the A's, but, unfortunately for them, their seasons all ended before they were able to realize that dream.

When prompted for advice to the Rays as they push towards their ultimate goal, Ellis suggests the most important thing, "is playing like you played all year when you get to those playoff appearances."

Younger teams can certainly press a little harder come crunch time due to lack of experience. This current Rays team is counting on their playoff run in 2008, and subsequent loss to the Philadelphia Phillies, and the experience it provided to propel them to immortality as World Series Champions.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

BOBBY CRAMER EARNS PACIFIC COAST LEAGUE PITCHER OF THE WEEK HONORS

WEST SACRAMENTO, Calif., August 23, 2010 – Sacramento River Cats starting pitcher Bobby Cramer was named the Pacific Coast League Pitcher of the Week for the week of August 16-22, League officials announced Monday. This marks the second time a River Cats player has won the weekly award this season (Kyle Middleton won Pitcher of the Week from June 21-27).

The 30-year-old left-hander made two starts during the week, finishing 1-1 with a 0.64 ERA over 14.0 innings pitched. On Monday, August 16, Cramer allowed seven hits, one earned run and struck out eight as the River Cats fell, 3-2, to the visiting Omaha Royals. He followed that performance allowing just two hits and striking out seven over 8.0 scoreless innings as the River Cats topped the Salt Lake Bees, 3-0, on August 21. Overall for the River Cats this season, Cramer is 2-1 with a 1.57 ERA in four games and 23.0 innings pitched.

Cramer, a native of Anaheim, California is in his second stint with the River Cats. He appeared in six games with Sacramento in 2009, including one start.

Bobby Cramer, August 16-22

G	GS	CG	SHO	W-L	ERA	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
2	2	0	0	1-1	0.64	14.0	9	2	1	1	15

Sacramento Rivercats at Salt Lake Bees – loss 7-6

Terry Evans' eighth-inning sacrifice fly snapped a 6-6 tie and sent the Salt Lake Bees to a 7-6 win over the Sacramento River Cats on Monday night. The Bees trailed 6-3 going into the bottom of the seventh, but evened up the game on an RBI single by Evans and a two-run single by Mark Trumbo. In the eighth, Tyson Auer delivered a one-out triple to right center and on the first pitch, Evans lofted a fly ball to the edge of the warning track in left to bring home Auer with the eventual winning run.

Angels reliever Brian Stokes (1-1), who is with Salt Lake on injury rehab assignment, worked two scoreless innings to earn the victory. Three Bees pitchers (Matt Palmer, Barret Browning and Stokes) combined for a staff season-high 14 strikeouts. Tyson Auer led the Bees with his first three career Triple-A hits including a double and a triple with two runs scored. Trumbo added two hits and three runs batted in, while Evans added one hit and two RBI as Salt Lake snapped its five-game losing streak.

Hounds lead cut to two games after loss

Staff Reports, Midland Reporter-Telegram

SPRINGDALE, Ark. -- The Midland RockHounds dropped a second straight game to Northwest Arkansas on Monday, and it was the fifth loss on the recent six-game road trip.

But despite an 8-2 loss to Northwest Arkansas on Tuesday, the RockHounds (28-28) still maintained a two-game lead in the Texas League South Division standings for the second half. Midland is two games ahead of second-place Frisco, and three games ahead of third-place San Antonio, who lost on Monday.

Any chance the RockHounds had to put a little buffer between themselves and the rest of the division on Monday, went away early in Monday's game at Arvest Ballpark.

The Naturals opened up with a 2-0 lead in the first inning, but then broke the game open with a four-run third inning and rolled from there.

In the Northwest Arkansas half of the third, Jeff Lyman came in to replace starter Carlos Hernandez. But after Hernandez allowed two runs on four hits in the two innings, Lyman didn't fare much better.

Lyman gave up three singles to the first three batters in the inning as Manuel Pina's single to left drove in Josh Field for a 3-1 Naturals lead. Two batters later, Chris McConnell broke the game open with a three-run home run over the left field fence for a 6-1 Northwest Arkansas advantage.

The RockHounds added a run in the fifth on a solo home run by Jemile Weeks, but that was one of seven hits for Midland in the game against three Northwest Arkansas pitchers. The Naturals now hold a two-game lead in the Texas League North Division second-half standings at 34-22.

Midland will return home for a four-game set with the Corpus Christi Hooks, beginning at 6:30 p.m. today at Citibank Ballpark.

Giants Walk Off With 6-5 Win Over Ports

SAN JOSE, Calif. - After winning 14 games in a row, the Stockton Ports are hoping to avoid a long streak of a different kind. On Monday night, the San Jose Giants blew a two-run lead in the eighth inning, but came back in the ninth and handed the Ports their second straight loss by a final of 6-5.

Stockton scored the game's first run in the second, but perhaps came away with less than they should have. With one out, Yusuf Carter doubled to left and scored on an ensuing single from Jeremy Barfield to give the Ports a 1-0 lead. Todd Johnson followed with a double to center to put runners at second and third with one out. Giants starter Oliver Odle was able to bear down and strike out Kent Walton and get Brandon Pinckney to ground to second to escape the jam having allowed just the one run.

The Ports made it 3-0 in the fourth with a pair of runs in what was Odle's roughest inning of the night. With one out, Carter doubled for the second time on the night. Barfield followed with an infield single to third baseman Joel Weeks. Weeks attempted a throw to first and the ball went into foul territory, a throwing error that allowed Carter to score and gave Stockton a 2-0 lead. Three batters later with two down, Pinckney singled to left to score Barfield and make it a 3-0 game.

Odle, upon getting the final out in the fourth inning, would go on to retire 10 in a row to take him through the seventh and finish his night. Odle received a no-decision, going seven innings and allowing three runs on seven hits while striking out five.

San Jose got to Ports starter Shawn Haviland in the fourth. Jose Flores led off with a single, stole second, and then scored on a one-out single by Charlie Culberson to make it a 3-1 game.

The Giants added an unearned run in the fifth. With James Simmons at second and one out, Juan Perez hit a slow bouncing ball to short that handcuffed Grant Green. Green, knowing he didn't have a play any longer at first, threw to third in hopes of getting Simmons who'd rounded the bag aggressively. Green's throw, however, went wide into foul territory, allowing Simmons to score and bringing the Giants to within a run at 3-2. It was ruled a hit for Perez plus a throwing error on Green.

Haviland came out to start the sixth inning and yielded a leadoff single to Culberson. A.J. Huttenlocker was then brought in from the bullpen and hit Wendell Fairley to put two on with nobody out. Two batters later, pinch-hitter Michael Sandoval flew out to center. David Thomas, after making the catch, threw to third and it wasn't in time to get Culberson who'd tagged. It also allowed Fairley to tag from first and advance to second. With two in scoring position, Simmons singled to center to give the Giants their first lead of the night 4-3.

Haviland would receive a no-decision, going five-plus innings and allowing three runs (two earned) on seven hits while striking out two.

Huttenlocker pitched into the seventh and with one out, allowed a single to Johnny Monell which signaled the end of his outing. Scott Deal came on and, after striking out Culberson, gave up an infield single to Fairley, then an RBI double to Drew Biery that scored Monell and made it a 5-3 game.

Huttenlocker also received a no-decision after allowing two runs in 1.1 innings of work. Deal tossed 1.2 scoreless innings and did not factor into the decision.

Stockton tied the game using weakly hit singles in the eighth. With Edwin Quirarte in for the Giants, Stephen Parker and Mike Spina started the inning with back-to-back singles. Carter came up and hit into a 5-4-3 double-play, leaving Parker at third with two down. Barfield came up next and hit a Baltimore chop single up the third base line, scoring Parker and making it a 5-4 game. Ryan Verdugo (3-0) came on for the Giants and walked pinch-hitter Tyler Ladendorf to put runners at first and second. Kent Walton followed with a slow chop RBI single to the middle of the infield, scoring pinch-runner Jermaine Mitchell and knotting the score at five.

Quirarte allowed both runs in two-thirds of an inning of relief. Verdugo would go on to get the win after tossing a scoreless 1.1 innings of relief.

With the score tied, Trey Barham (3-2) came on to pitch the ninth and immediately found himself in hot water. Flores led off the inning with a single and was pinch-ran for with Ehire Adrianza. Monell singled next on an 0-2 pitch, and Culberson would be intentionally walked to load the bases. With the Ports using five infielders, Fairley stepped up and hit a single to right over the head of Mitchell to give the Giants a 6-5 walk-off win. Barham would be charged with the loss after allowing the winning run in the ninth.

After dropping two of three to the Giants (all five of Stockton's losses in August have been at San Jose), the Ports head home to finish off their regular-season home schedule with a seven-game homestand at Banner Island Ballpark. The Modesto Nuts head to Stockton for three games to kick off the homestand. Left-hander Ben Hornbeck (6-3, 4.69 ERA) will head to the bump for the Ports, opposed by Nuts right-hander Juan Nicasio (11-9, 4.00 ERA). First pitch is set for 7:05 p.m. PDT.

Cougars Fall to Bandits in Game 3 **Kane County drops 3rd straight in back-and-forth battle**

GENEVA, III. – The Kane County Cougars saw two different leads slip away Monday night in an 8-6 loss to the Quad Cities River Bandits at Elfstrom Stadium. Advantages of 2-0 and 6-3 were not enough, and the Cougars dropped their third straight and ninth in the last 11. With 14 games left, the Cougars now trail Clinton by 1.5 games for the top playoff spot and are tied with Beloit for the Wild Card spot.

Mike Gilmartin singled home Leonardo Gil in the second, and Max Stassi scored on an error to make it 2-0. Starter Jonathan Joseph yielded an unearned run in the third for a 2-1 score and pitched well over five innings. He gave up three hits, walked four and fanned six, leaving in line for a win but getting a no-decision.

After the Bandits took a 3-2 lead in the seventh on a two-run homer by Devin Goodwin off Connor Hoehn, the Cougars rallied for four in the bottom half. Conner Crumbliss nailed an RBI double, Jose Crisotomo poked an RBI single and Anthony Aliotti drilled a two-run double to make it 6-3. But the Bandits came right back with three in the eighth off Ryan Doolittle, putting together four straight singles with two outs. Then in the ninth Jose Guzman gave up a controversial two-run homer to Robert Stock, who hit a shot down the right-field line that was ruled fair by the plate umpire. Two members of the Cougars were ejected for arguing the call.

The four-game series concludes Tuesday night at 6:30 CT. Chris Mederos (5-5, 2.80) will pitch for the Cougars (29-25, 61-62), Eric Fornataro (7-13, 5.27) will go for the River Bandits (34-19, 74-48). The game will be broadcast on www.kccougars.com with pre-game coverage starting at 6:15 p.m.