

A's News Clips, Saturday, September 4, 2010

Eric Chavez shuts it down for season, hints he may be done

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

Eric Chavez turned up at the Coliseum on Friday night, slipped on an A's uniform and was on the bench to help revel in the A's 8-0 romp over the Los Angeles Angels.

Alas, it was a ceremonial gesture. Chavez, a six-time Gold Glove third baseman, is not on the active roster. He confirmed before the game that he won't be playing again in 2010, although he still hasn't closed the door on reviving his career despite four consecutive frustrating years battling injuries.

"I should be here for the whole homestand, unless they tell me to go home," said Chavez, who was derailed in May with nerve issues in his neck and shoulder.

Whether he returns to baseball or not, Chavez, 32, understands this is probably the end with the A's, with whom he has spent all of his 13 seasons in the big leagues. Only Rickey Henderson logged more years with the A's (14). This is the final year of Chavez's six-year, \$66 million contract extension that he signed in 2004, and even though the A's hold an option for 2011, they surely will exercise the \$3 million buyout on the \$12.5 million option.

"Obviously, the reason I'm here is that I'm going to miss the clubhouse feel," Chavez said. "Oakland's been a big part of who I am and what I've become, so it's important for me to close out that chapter.

"I'm just going to go out there and enjoy that environment for a little bit," he continued. "I wanted to be on the roster, that was my goal. Even if I didn't really play a lot, I just wanted to be with the team, be in uniform and maybe get some at-bats here and there. But it's just not going to happen."

Even though he played in more games this year (33) than the previous two seasons combined (31), Chavez hasn't been on the field since May 20. He was placed on the disabled list May 22 with what was termed a neck strain, and shortly thereafter returned to his San Diego home. Upon his departure, he told the A's he was shutting down his formal therapy and rehab sessions.

"I'm just kind of over that point," he said. "I think I've done everything I can to be healthy and it just hasn't worked out."

As late as a week and a half ago, Chavez said he tried to resume some baseball activities but felt the familiar nagging twinge in his neck and right shoulder.

"Swinging a bat seems to be the thing that irritates it the most," he said. "The jerking motion of the neck just really hits on the nerves."

Chavez hit .234 with eight doubles, one home run and 10 RBIs in 111 at-bats this season. He said his performance level, more than the pain of the injuries, prompted him to pull the plug.

"With all the injuries put aside, you still have to play this game at a certain level, and my head was barely above water even when I was in uniform," he said. "So that was kind of a tough pill to swallow. If you're talking about sucking up injuries and just dealing with the pain, that's not even an issue. I can go out there and do that with the best of them."

While Chavez has publicly mulled retirement on a number of occasions, he's still not ready to call it quits.

"I don't know if I'll ever play baseball again," he said. "I'm definitely not going to make a formal statement about it. I'm not going to give up on it that I might, but I'm not going to say that I'm going to, either. I'm just going to kind of let time be the answer.

"I don't even know what my options are going to be going into next year, if I'll have any at all. So you just kind of take it day by day. At spring training next year, if I'm there, my health is going to dictate everything."

Chavez owns a career batting average of .267 with 230 home runs and 787 RBIs. His best seasons were in 2001 (32 home runs, 114 RBIs) and 2002 (34/109), but he has hit just three homers over the past three seasons.

Chavez admitted he has begun to weigh some post-career options. He said broadcasting is one possibility, and he wouldn't be averse to coaching, either.

"But I've wanted to put all my time and energy to be on the field, and I think now I'm at a point to where I can realistically start thinking about the next chapter," he said. "I just haven't really done that yet."

Oakland A's update: Gio Gonzalez sharp in 8-0 rout of Angels

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

Return to cozy Coliseum is a comfort to A's

After four disastrous days in New York that effectively ended any last sniff of an AL West title, the A's rediscovered the comforts of the Coliseum on Friday night, even with the Raiders having chewed up their field the night before.

Gio Gonzalez pitched six scoreless innings and Kevin Kouzmanoff and Cliff Pennington hit two-run homers in a six-run seventh as the A's posted an 8-0 victory over the Los Angeles Angels.

Even though he had just one 1-2-3 inning and threw only four first-pitch strikes to the 24 hitters he faced, Gonzalez (13-8) nonetheless won his third consecutive start. He allowing just four hits while walking three and striking out six.

"The numbers were better than he pitched," said manager Bob Geren. "That was a battle from the first pitch for him. He didn't throw that well, but to his credit, he kept the runs off the board."

Oakland broke open a close game against the Angels bullpen in the seventh. After Kurt Suzuki opened the inning with an infield single, Kouzmanoff hit his 14th homer over the wall in center field against Jason Bulger. Pennington later hit his fourth against Brian Stokes.

A scary moment occurred with one out in the ninth inning when the Angels' Mike Napoli shattered his bat on a grounder and the sharp end of the broken barrel nearly impaled A's reliever Brad Ziegler. Ziegler suffered a bruise and a deep scratch behind his shoulder but was able to finish the game.

Eric Chavez wasn't the only long-lost face who turned up Friday night. Pitchers Josh Outman and Joey Devine, who have been jointly rehabbing from their respective Tommy John elbow surgeries throughout this season in Arizona, are in town so the A's can evaluate their progress.

The right-handed Devine hasn't pitched for the A's since a sparkling 2008 season when he posted a 6-1 record and 0.59 ERA in 42 games out of the bullpen. He has had a slow recovery from the surgery he underwent on April 21, 2009, but said he hopes to get in some official action before the end of this season.

"I'm ready to pitch a game," he said. "I just want to get the feeling back of being between the lines, facing a hitter where there's some meaning behind it. Then the next thing is to wake up the next morning and see how (the arm) feels."

The left-handed Outman, who underwent his surgery on June 30, 2009, after opening the season 4-1 as a starter, is taking a more cautious approach.

"I just know I'm going to pitch again," he said. "Whether it's this year or next year, the goal is to be ready to go next spring training."

The A's have signed former Florida Marlins and Boston Red Sox outfielder Jeremy Hermida and assigned him to Triple-A Sacramento. Hermida, a former first-round pick by the Marlins in 2002 (11th overall), is a career .265 hitter with 62 home runs spread over six seasons.

Performance isn't flawless, just scoreless

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Perhaps the best indication of Gio Gonzalez's improvement came in the A's 8-0 dusting of the Angels at the Coliseum on Friday night.

Not because Gonzalez tossed six shutout innings, but because he did so without having anywhere near his best stuff.

"Sometimes you look at a line score, a guy gives up a few runs and you say he really pitched better than his numbers," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Tonight was really the opposite. He didn't throw the ball that well, but to his credit, he kept the runs off the board and he got a win."

Gonzalez (13-8) walked three and only 55 of his 103 pitches were strikes. Still, he limited the Angels to four hits and struck out six.

He has lasted at least six innings in each of his past 10 starts and has allowed no more than two earned runs in each of his past six starts.

He lowered his ERA to 3.12. Gonzalez's ERAs in his first two seasons: 7.68 in 2008 and 5.75 in '09.

In Scott Kazmir's last appearance at the Coliseum, on July 10, he allowed an Angels-record 13 runs in five innings in a 15-1 Oakland romp. On Friday night, the A's managed two runs on two hits against Kazmir (8-13), who worked 5 2/3 innings.

In the sixth, he uncorked a pitch to Jack Cust that had to be at least 4 feet outside. Kazmir began shaking his hand after that pitch. He stayed in the game for two more outs and a walk before departing.

The A's broke open the game against the Angels' bullpen. Kevin Kouzmanoff and Cliff Pennington each hit a two-run homer as Oakland scored six times in the seventh. It was Pennington's first homer since April 27 and ended a 105-game homerless streak.

Brad Ziegler endured a scary moment in the ninth. Ziegler got hit in the back with a piece of Mike Napoli's broken bat on a groundout. Ziegler sustained a fairly deep scratch behind his right shoulder, but stayed in.

Briefly: The A's have signed outfielder Jeremy Hermida, whom Boston released Tuesday. Hermida spent his first five big-league seasons (2005-09) with Florida. He will join Triple-A Sacramento. ... With the Raiders having played at the Coliseum on Thursday night, the field was not exactly pristine. The most noticeable blemish: a large brown splotch in dead center.

Chavez says he's thinking about the next chapter

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

Standing in the hallway outside the A's clubhouse late Friday afternoon, prior to an 8-0 win over the Angels, Eric Chavez sounded like a man who isn't quite ready to say his career has ended - but is quite prepared for life off the field.

"I think I've done everything I can to try to be healthy, and it just hasn't worked out," he said. "I don't know if I'll ever play baseball again."

Chavez, a six-time Gold Glove third baseman, has been on the disabled list since late May because of neck and shoulder problems. He acknowledged he won't play again this season. As for 2011 and beyond?

Said Chavez: "I'm definitely not going to make a formal statement about it. I'm not going to give up on it that I might (play), but I'm not saying I'm going to, either. I'm just going to let time be the answer."

After a September call-up in 1998, Chavez played at least 115 games in each season from 1999 through 2006. Injuries have limited him to 154 games combined from 2007 through 2010. He batted .234 with one homer and 10 RBIs in 33 games this year.

Chavez has been at his offseason home in Arizona for the bulk of the past three months. He had hoped to rejoin the A's on Friday as an active player.

He spent some time with the A's team in the Arizona Rookie League and went 1-for-3 in his one game Aug. 23. Chavez said the pain in his neck and shoulder is most noticeable when he swings the bat.

"My will to play, my desire to play was always there," he said. "The skills are even there. I would have closed the chapter a long time ago if my skills had diminished, but the hand-eye coordination has always been there for me. That's not even an issue.

"But the health, with the neck this year and the shoulder, it's been too much to overcome."

Chavez, 32, said he'll consider broadcasting or coaching once his playing days officially end.

"I've wanted to put all my time and all my energy into being on the field," he said, "and I think now I'm at a point where I can realistically start thinking about the next chapter."

A few people have told Chavez that if he goes into broadcasting, he'll have to keep up with the game. He says that won't be a problem.

"Even though I've been away from the game," he said, "my mind has always still been in baseball. The MLB Network has been one of my saving graces."

Chavez ranks fourth on the Oakland career lists for home runs (230) and RBIs (787). If indeed he won't hit another homer or drive in another run, Chavez will relish something beyond statistics when he looks back on his career.

"Some of the coolest things that I've ever heard people say is that they've enjoyed the way I've played the game," he said. "Even though at times it doesn't look like I'm very emotional, that I'm kind of even-keeled, I've always played the game pretty hard.

"I've always enjoyed the game."

A's leading off

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Five-minute warning: Most schedules listed today's Angels-A's game for a 1:10 p.m. start. Because Fox has opted not to televise the game, the A's are using their usual first-pitch time of 1:05 p.m.

A's pull away late to pick up Gio, shutout

Six-run seventh inning ensures 13th victory for Gonzalez

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The way Gio Gonzalez is rolling along, perhaps it comes as no surprise he tossed six scoreless innings on Friday.

But the fact he tossed first-pitch balls to the initial 16 batters he faced? Now that's what you call being effectively wild.

Buoyed by a six-run seventh inning, the A's rolled to an 8-0 victory over the Angels in the opener of a three-game series.

"I was trying to make a record," Gonzalez said, jokingly, "to see how many balls I could throw behind in the count and try to come back and throw strikes. But at the same time, you got to give your respect to each one of those hitters. It was just one of those nights."

Over the past 10 weeks, Gonzalez has harnessed his talent and become one of Oakland's most reliable options in the rotation. With the victory, the 24-year-old southpaw moved to 7-3 with a 2.11 ERA across his last 14 starts.

For manager Bob Geren, he's noticed a difference in his once-emotional and fiery pitcher.

"Control," Geren said. "Control of everything: fastball, changeup, curveball; control of his own emotions; control of the running game. If there's one word, I'd just say control, multiple facets of it. Just maturity all the way around."

While Gonzalez (13-8) didn't feature the greatest command of his stuff on Friday, it was enough to stifle the Angels. Though Gonzalez allowed four hits and three walks, the Angels advanced only three runners into scoring position against him.

In all, Gonzalez issued first-pitch strikes to just four of the 24 batters he faced. After the game, Geren said he pulled Gonzalez aside to commend him for getting the job done despite having an off-night.

"The numbers were better than he pitched, honestly," Geren said. "That was a battle from the first pitch for him, it really was. It wasn't his best outing. ... He didn't throw the ball that well, but to his credit, he kept the runs off the board and got the win."

The victory was a much-needed one for Oakland, as it entered the series on the heels of a four-game sweep by the Yankees. Coupled with the Rangers' 4-3 loss at Minnesota on Friday, the A's moved nine games back of American League West-leading Texas to keep their fading playoff hopes alive.

"As a pitcher, each one of us wants that responsibility [of stopping a losing streak]," Gonzalez said. "Each one of us wants to go out there and constantly try to do our best and be that guy to keep us in the game."

As wild as Gonzalez was, Angels lefty Scott Kazmir was even more so. Kazmir served up a pair of walks and hit two more batters in the first inning, but the A's could push across only one run in the frame.

Oakland tacked on another run against Kazmir in the sixth, but let him off pretty easy, all things considered. Kazmir labored through 5 2/3 innings, allowing two earned runs on two hits, six walks and two hit batters.

"Kazmir was all over the place early," Geren said. "We had some walks and we had a lot of situations, we just really didn't capitalize."

Though Gonzalez recorded just one 1-2-3 inning, coming in the fifth frame, the Angels couldn't take advantage. After Gonzalez, the A's received a scoreless inning apiece from relievers Michael Wuertz, Henry Rodriguez and Brad Ziegler. Oakland now leads the AL with 13 shutouts this season.

"I'm embarrassed," Angels outfielder Torii Hunter said. "We're getting no run support for our starting pitchers. We barely get runners in scoring position, so when we do, we try too hard. We've been pretty inconsistent this year. Not just offensively -- our total game."

Oakland's offense, meanwhile, finally broke out of its extended slump in the seventh inning with a six-run outburst.

Kevin Kouzmanoff started off the hit parade by belting a two-run homer to left field to extend the A's lead to 4-0. Kouzmanoff, who was acquired by Oakland from San Diego in the offseason, leads the team with 14 home runs and 69 RBIs. He's hit four home runs in his past eight games.

"Coming in, we figured he could do that," Geren said. "He's adjusted a little bit to the league and he's coming around lately. He hit some homers on the past road trip and tonight was a big one. He's a strong man, he really is. That ball tonight was really struck well."

After Kouzmanoff, Rajai Davis and Gabe Gross delivered back-to-back RBI singles before Cliff Pennington launched a two-run homer to right field, scoring Gross. Pennington, who entered the game as a pinch-hitter in the sixth inning, knocked out his first home run since April 27, a span of 106 games and 353 at-bats.

"I'm not a guy that worries too much about homers," Pennington said. "If I did, I obviously wouldn't be very good at it because I don't hit very many. I was just trying to get a base hit with a runner in scoring position."

The game almost featured a scary moment in the bottom of the ninth, when Ziegler was clipped in the back by Mike Napoli's broken bat. Ziegler said he got a deep scratch and bruise on his back below his right shoulder and that he didn't know if he would be available for Saturday.

"That scared the crap out of me," Ziegler said.

A's Chavez done for '10, ponders future

Neck, shoulder pain brings possible retirement into focus

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A large portion of Eric Chavez's life has been spent in Oakland, making a second home out of the clubhouse and friends out of the security guards. He knows the left side of the A's infield possibly better than anyone, the walk through the tunnel into the dugout all too well.

On Friday, he came to experience all of it for perhaps one of the final times, as he confirmed -- while standing inside those familiar hallways -- he won't be playing again this season and is still very much considering retirement.

But don't expect an official announcement any time soon. Chavez says that may not come for another two years, despite admitting his career window is coming to a close "soon."

"It doesn't matter if I make a formal statement or not," Chavez said. "To me, it's kind of unnecessary. I'll just let time be the answer, and we'll see what happens."

This year, time was all he had. But the "nuisance" that is his neck and shoulder pain never fully went away, thus leaving him no choice but to temporarily call it quits. Chavez attempted to play with the A's Arizona Rookie League team less than two weeks ago, but one game was all he had in him.

"It was the same thing again, the neck and shoulder," he said. "It was one of those things where I was battling, and I knew it wasn't going to happen."

"I think I've done everything I can to try and be healthy, and it just hasn't worked out. I don't know if I'll ever play baseball again. I'm definitely not going to make a formal statement on it, I'm not going to give up on it, but I'm not saying I'm going to play again either."

The 32-year-old Chavez, a six-time Gold Glove third baseman who is bringing home the final portion of his six-year, \$66 million contract this year, admits he hasn't thought too much about life after baseball. When he does, though, he believes he'll find options in broadcasting and coaching -- both of which he'd immensely enjoy thanks to an innate love for the game.

"I love watching baseball," he said. "They've told me, 'You're going to have to know your information if you want to do broadcasting.' I said, 'No problem, I watch baseball all day long.'"

"Even though I've been away from the game, my mind has still always been in baseball. The MLB Network has been one of my saving graces. It's really helped out. I'll always watch baseball. At times it became a business but baseball was always my first love."

That's the same reason why he's back in Oakland, where he plans to stay, alongside teammates in the dugout, for the club's nine-game homestand "unless they tell me to go home."

"Obviously the reason I'm here is because I'm going to miss the clubhouse feel," he said. "Oakland's been a big part of who I am and what I've done in the past 12 years. I wanted to be here to be in uniform, but I knew one way or the other I was coming back."

"I wanted to be on the roster, that was my goal. When the beginning of the year started, it was more important for me to be here at the end than at the beginning. Obviously that's not going to happen, but I still want to be around that camaraderie."

Chavez has been completely honest with not just the organization but, more important, himself throughout the year, which saw him start in Oakland in the designated hitter's spot before going down to injury in late May. Since, he's been forced to face plenty of time in Arizona at home, where he prepared himself for the inevitable of not being able to swing a bat without pain.

"I wasn't shocked," he said. "And with all the injuries put aside, you still have to be able to play this game at a certain level. My head was barely above water, even when I was in uniform in Arizona. That was kind of a tough pill to swallow. If you're just talking about sucking up the injuries and just dealing with the pain, that's not even an issue. I can go out there and do that with the best of them, but this is a Major League game and these are the best players in the world, and you still have to be able to compete when you're in uniform."

Thus, Chavez has portrayed a peaceful mind-set about his situation, knowing full well that this upcoming week is more about closing a chapter than opening a new one. While explaining this to reporters Friday, a familiar face in the Angels' Torii Hunter walked by, gregariously yelling out, "Eric!"

Chavez could only laugh.

"I'm gonna miss guys like that, too," he said.

Angels take shot at emerging A's ace Cahill

By John Barone / MLB.com

The Athletics have churned out one promising starting pitcher after another in recent seasons.

Trevor Cahill, at least in one respect, is in a class of his own.

Since 1915, only one other A's pitcher at age 22 or younger has won more games in a season than Cahill, who enters Saturday afternoon's start against the Angels at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum toting a 14-6 record, a 2.82 ERA and a compelling case for the 2010 American League Cy Young Award.

That other A's pitcher was 21-year-old Vida Blue, a 24-game winner in 1971. Needless to say, Cahill's relative inexperience at the Major League level hasn't fazed him.

"He's really kind of turned into our ace," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "I know everybody knows that whenever Trevor goes out there, we feel really good about our chances. That's kind of the mental side of being an ace -- knowing that if you have a streak, he'll extend it, and if you have a slide, he'll end it."

When Cahill takes the mound Saturday, he'll do so opposite a fellow ace right-hander in the Angels' Jered Weaver.

Weaver notched his fifth double-digit strikeout performance of the year Sunday at Angel Stadium, fanning 11 Orioles in a losing effort that featured eight innings of one-run ball.

He did become the second Angels hurler since 2000 to amass 200 punchouts in a season.

"Did I get there? That's pretty cool," Weaver said. "It is what it is. What can you say? It's not something I tried to get. It wasn't a goal of mine before or during the season, but I guess it's cool. We're trying to go out there and win games, so I'm not worried about that."

Angels: Back-to-back losing months

The Halos are coming off consecutive losing months for the first time since opening the 2007 campaign with three sub-.500 months. ... Angels starters have limited opponents to two or fewer earned runs in seven of the club's past eight games. ... Third baseman Alberto Callaspo has hit safely in 29 of 36 contests since being acquired from Kansas City.

Athletics: Brief hiccup for starters

A's starters have worked five or fewer innings in four of eight games after tossing six or more innings in 24 straight contests. ... Oakland's pitching staff has surrendered an AL-low 46 home runs at home and an AL-high 79 on the road. ... Center fielder Coco Crisp has reeled off 14 consecutive successful stolen-base attempts. ... Oakland is 58-0 in games it's led through eight innings.

Worth noting

The Angels, 7-7 against the A's in 2010, haven't lost a season series to their California brethren since 2003. ... Weaver is 0-2 with a 6.00 ERA in three starts against Oakland this year. ... Cahill is 2-1 with a 1.64 ERA across three 2010 outings against the Angels.

Devine, Outman join A's to continue rehab

Pitchers keep throwing as part of Tommy John recovery

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Pitchers Joey Devine and Josh Outman, who have missed the season and rehabbed together in Arizona, joined the A's on Friday as they continue their 60-day throwing programs.

While Outman said he won't be pitching this year, Devine said he hopes to make it back on the big league mound before Oakland's season ends. Devine said he has about three weeks left in his rehab, making him eligible to return around the final week of the season.

"I want to finish out the year in the big leagues," Devine said. "But that's not my call. ... It'd be an accomplishment just to know that I got back to the way I was before I got hurt."

Devine and Outman both underwent Tommy John surgery in 2009, Devine in April and Outman in June. Currently, they are throwing simulated games and bullpen sessions.

Devine, 26, was pitching with the team during Spring Training, but has since battled through two bouts of tendinitis and received injections in his arm. After posting a 0.59 ERA in 42 games in 2008, Devine was slated to be the team's closer in 2009 before his Tommy John procedure.

"It's been tough," Devine said. "My expectations were to be back by Opening Day, but now it turns out that we're in September. I'm trying forget about it, because the more I think about it, the more upset I get, the more frustrated I get, and that's not where I need to be mentally for my future and for my own personal career."

Outman, who is in roughly the same stage of his rehab, said the organization has decided to keep him out of game action for the season.

"I don't foresee being able to pitch anywhere this year," Outman said. "I got to go to the instructional league and build up a pitch count, go home, have a good offseason and come in spring ready to make the team again."

Outman, 25, went 4-1 with a 3.48 ERA in 14 appearances (12 starts) for the A's last season. The southpaw threw batting practice in Sacramento on Thursday, marking the first time he faced live batters this season. Though the competitor in him wanted to let loose, Outman said he threw at about 85 percent exertion.

Outman said it's been a pleasure to watch the A's young staff this season, as Oakland led the American League with its 3.58 ERA entering play Friday.

"It's great to see guys I pitched with last year and the way they've come along," Outman said. "Just how well the pitching staff as a whole, starters and the bullpen, have done this year makes me feel kind of left out. But hopefully I can get back in there next year."

While it's been a tough season for both pitchers, at least they've been able to lean on each other through the drawn-out rehab process.

"It's good having a partner," Devine said, "but I hate to see it for Outman and I'm sure he hates to see it for me because we want to pitch."

A's reliever makes long climb to MLB debut

OAKLAND -- From an independent league to the Major Leagues, reliever Justin James has had himself quite the season. Even better, he made his big league debut in the Big Apple on Thursday, in the grandiose Yankee Stadium.

"I guess if you're going to have your debut, that's where you want it at," James said. "Especially with the lineup that they have. ... I just told myself when going out, 'Just try not to worry about the crowd and who you're throwing against.'"

James completed the eighth inning on Thursday, allowing a run on three consecutive singles, but struck out Robinson Cano and Derek Jeter. James, a 28-year-old right-hander, featured a fastball that sat at about 93 mph and a slider.

James entered the game with the A's trailing, 4-0, and it doesn't appear that manager Bob Geren will be inserting James into pressure situations any time soon.

"I have other guys that would be ahead of him in [pressure] situations," Geren said. "But I do feel good about what he's been doing. ... Good movement on his fastball ... aggressive, a lot of the elements that you look for."

James signed a Minor League deal with the A's on June 19 after he made 11 appearances with the independent Kansas City T-Bones. James then posted a 2.29 ERA in 12 outings with Double-A Midland before he had a 1.37 ERA in 16 games with Triple-A Sacramento.

James will be one of seven players to represent Oakland's organization in the Arizona Fall League this season. He is the second A's player to make the jump from independent baseball this year, joining outfielder Matt Watson.

"I worked my [butt] off this year," James said. "As long as I stick with what I was doing with independent ball, I figured somebody would grab me and I'm glad that the A's did. It's a great organization to be with."

James was picked by Toronto in the fifth round of the 2003 First-Year Player Draft. He spent three years in the Blue Jays organization and another with the Reds before joining the T-Bones last season.

A's have winning mark vs. remaining opponents

OAKLAND -- With 29 games left and a 10-game deficit behind the Rangers entering Friday's action, Oakland's path to the summit of the American League West looks nearly impossible to negotiate.

The A's will play 17 games against AL West foes, while four of their remaining seven opponents currently have records better than .500. This weekend's three-game set with the Angels will open a nine-game homestand, as the Mariners and Red Sox also come to town.

"When you play in the division, it's always close games," A's catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "Nothing changes against the Angels. They're a great team and it's always fun games."

Oakland is a combined 33-31 this season against its remaining opponents, including the AL Central-leading Twins and Rangers. The A's will host the Rangers from Sept. 23-26 for a four-game series.

"Your goal still is obviously to finish first," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "If and when that becomes impossible, then we'll go for our second [goals], but right now we're just trying to win as many games as we can."

After the current homestand, the A's will travel to Kansas City and Minnesota for three-game sets before returning for their final home games of the year, three against the White Sox and four against the Rangers. Oakland will wrap up its season with three games in Anaheim and four in Seattle.

"It's no different than any part of the season," Suzuki said. "We're just trying to come out every day and play hard and win games. We don't try to turn it up a notch just because we're playing certain teams. We just want to win. We take the same approach with every team."

Entering play Friday, the A's hold at least a .500 record against five of their remaining seven opponents. Only the Angels, who held a 7-6 season series advantage heading into play Friday, and the Twins, who have beat the A's five out of six times this year, have bested Oakland in the season series this year.

Worth noting

Triple-A Sacramento clinched the Pacific Coast League Pacific South division title on Friday with a 12-8 win over Colorado Springs. It marks the ninth time in 11 years that the RiverCats have won the Pacific South Division. ... Outfielder Jeremy Hermida, who was released by the Red Sox Tuesday, signed with the A's and was assigned to Triple-A Sacramento, going 3-for-5 with a pair of doubles, a run scored and an RBI on Friday. Hermida batted .203 in 52 games with Boston this season. ... Triple-A reliever Cedrick Bowers was placed on the 15-day disabled list Wednesday with an elbow strain. ... Less than 24 hours after the NFL's Oakland Raiders completed their final preseason game, the Oakland Coliseum was converted back into a baseball facility on Friday. Batting practice on the field was canceled for both teams as groundskeepers made their final preparations.

Oakland snaps 4-game losing streak

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Gio Gonzalez pitched six innings to win a season-best third straight start and Kevin Kouzmanoff hit a two-run homer as the Oakland A's snapped a four-game losing streak with an 8-0 victory over the Los Angeles Angels on Friday night.

Gonzalez (13-8) has a 1.04 ERA over his last four starts and improved to 7-3 at home this season with a 2.59 ERA. The left-hander allowed four hits, struck out six and walked three.

Coco Crisp, Rajai Davis and Gabe Gross all hit RBI singles, and Jack Cust drew a bases-loaded walk from Angels starter Scott Kazmir (8-13) in the first to put the A's ahead.

Kazmir lost his third straight start, fourth consecutive decision and eighth decision in nine.

Not long ago, these clubs regularly played games that counted in September. Neither is in the playoff chase in the final month of 2010.

Cliff Pennington added a solo homer in the A's six-run seventh, his first since April 27 at Tampa Bay. The drive snapped a 105-game and 355 at-bat homerless streak.

Oakland avoided matching its worst losing streak of the season, a five-game skid from May 12-16. The A's bounced back after being swept in a four-game series at New York.

Gonzalez allowed singles to Torii Hunter and Juan Rivera in the fourth but got out of the inning. The Angels didn't really threaten otherwise.

Kazmir struggled from the start and allowed a season-high six walks in 5» innings. Daric Barton drew a one-out walk in the first, then two batters later Kazmir plunked Kouzmanoff and Mark Ellis consecutively to load the bases. Kazmir received a mound visit from pitching coach Mike Butcher before he faced Ellis. Cust then drew a bases-loaded walk to make it 1-0.

The Angels are still looking for their first consecutive wins since a three-game sweep of Kansas City from Aug. 9-11 — and first on the road since Aug. 6-7 at Detroit.

The field was beaten up and hardly looked its best following the Oakland Raiders' preseason finale that ended late Thursday. The outfield was particularly bad, with a huge dirt patch right smack in center field.

Neither team took batting practice outside before the game, instead doing their hitting in the indoor cage.

Davis stole his 43rd base in the seventh, matching his career high established last season.

Urban: The Legacy of Bill King

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com 9/3/2010

Bill King didn't do what he did for so many years -- delighting generations of Bay Area fans with his brilliant machine-gun accounts of Raiders, Warriors and A's game -- in a quest for accolades.

The accolades came because he did it so well.

Sadly, the greatest accolade of all for a baseball broadcaster, the Ford C. Frick Award that comes with it a day on the podium at the National Baseball Hall of Fame, eluded King before his death in 2005.

To which Bill, were he with us today to be asked about the inconceivable slight, would probably shrug, offer a wry smile and say something self-deprecating yet sophisticated.

Something like, "I'm usually busy that day, anyway, and I don't like to give away my opera tickets."

It's never too late to right a wrong, though, and voting is underway now -- again -- for the Frick Award, which was Giants voice Jon Miller's entrée to Cooperstown this summer.

Miller was certainly a deserving recipient, but a fairly easy case could be made that King should have been in the Hall long before he passed.

Maybe we're biased here. Maybe we're unable to compartmentalize King's work. We're thinking about his many memorable calls of indelible moments in Raiders history. We're hearing him cuss out the clueless referee along with Rick Barry while living and dying, as we did, while he passionately detailed so many Warriors games.

We're thinking about how many times we woke up at 2:30 in the morning with the radio on, our 12-year-old minds having fallen to sleep the moment King signed off for the night.

The Frick Award is about baseball, of course, and some have contended that baseball was King's third-best sport on the air. OK. But should that keep him out of Cooperstown? It's a little like saying the baseline windmill was Jordan's third-best dunk, no?

Special is special, and King was as special as anyone's ever been behind a microphone.

He was special away from the microphone, too. I had only recently started dabbling in radio when, in 2004, King cornered me in an elevator. He said he'd been listening to me and asked if I was open to some constructive criticism.

Uh, yeah, Bill. I'll take a pitching lesson from Tom Seaver. Sure.

Our little chat lasted no more than five minutes, but the level of detail to which he went into was astounding -- and everything he said was spot-on. I immediately made the corrections and changes he suggested, and a month later I found myself in the same elevator with King.

"Keep up the good work, kid," he said, holding my elbow, a twinkle in his eye. "They don't let just anybody do what we do, you know."

That was Bill King. It wasn't about me. It wasn't about him. It was about the craft. It was about doing things the right way. It was about respecting the medium and the sport.

What you're reading right now, though, is very much about Bill. About how amazing he was at his craft. About how incredibly dedicated he was to doing things the right way. About the respect he had for his medium and myriad sports.

It's about greatness, and greatness needs to be immortalized.

It's about thanking Bill King for those many nights of thrills and chills. For being a part of our lives for so long. For being our friend. For being our voice.

It takes so little time. Please vote today, tomorrow, as many times as they'll allow it. Bill King belongs in three Hall of Fames, but it starts with one. This one. Right now.

Urban: Weekend in Bay Ball (Sept. 3-5 Edition)

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

It's "NorCal vs. That Place We All Detest In The Not-So-Northern-Part-Of-Our-Fine State Weekend" in Bay Ball, and much is on the line for all four teams participating. Never mind that the Giants are the only legit contender among the quartet; we'll explain the riveting ramifications for all as we row, row, row our boats from the shores of McCovey Cove to Jack London Square and back ...

... No need to explain what's at stake for the Giants during their three-act play at Dodger Stadium, so let's focus on what's at stake for Barry Zito. When he finally beat the A's on June 12, he was 7-2 with a 3.13 ERA and looking like an awfully strong candidate for Comeback Player of the Year. As recently as Aug. 6, Zito's ERA was 3.35 after a gutty 10-strikeout outing at Atlanta in which he didn't get the run support needed to post a win, but the Giants won in 11 innings. Since then he has a 9.60 ERA in four starts and one relief appearance.

... What's at stake for the A's? Pride. They just got mollywhomped in New York, effectively killing what little hope they had of making the playoffs, but here come the Halos, who can steal from Oakland second place in the AL West by winning two of three. That can't happen. The A's need to gather in the left-field corner this afternoon before stretch time, look each other in the eyes, and say, "We've been through too much together to stagger to the finish line. Time to shine. Right here. Right now."

... How great of a word is "mollywhomped"? Nobody uses it anymore. Let's get it back in the mix. Help us out here.

... What's at stake for the Dodgers and Angels? Relevancy. Going into the season they were tabbed by many as the favorites in their respective divisions, and rightfully so. They have two of the best managers in the game and organizations with fairly rich histories. Now the Dodgers are the butt of divorce jokes -- not such a funny topic at any time, incidentally -- and the Halos are less of a factor in the what's-cool-now circles of L.A. than Pauly Shore.

... Hi, I'm Freddy Sanchez, and I'm now leading the team in batting (.292) among Giants who have at least 310 at-bats. If I stay hot, I'm going to lead this team into the playoffs. Oh, and can you please have Buster Posey hit behind me? I'm thinking Andres Torres-me-Buster-Aubrey Huff-Pat Burrell-Jose Guillen-Pablo Sandoval-Juan Uribe is a pretty sick lineup.

... Dallas Braden of the A's said he was disappointed with the tepid reception he got from Yankees fans on Thursday, grading them out at "F." Here's why you didn't get the typical creativity that the Bombers' fan base brings for the most hated of foes: They don't hate Braden. Deep down, they like him. They'd love to have him on their team. And deep down, they don't care all that much for A-Rod.

... Night game tonight, night game tomorrow, night game Sunday. The Giants' stretch drive is appropriately prime-time stuff these days, and if the series opener between Zito and Chad Billingsley doesn't have you jacked like a 9-year-old on seven shots of 5-Hour Energy, you've been buying way too much into the months of hype with which the Disney Channel has hammered you in advance of "Camp Rock 2: The Final Jam." If you *are* suitably pumped, have fun watching the G-Men on that 10-inch, black-and-white screen in the garage. You can't compete with the JoBros, mom and dad.

... And finally, our "Why?" of the day: Call me crazy or uneducated about the effects of humidity on the human body under duress, but doesn't it seem like someone should have figured out a way to make sure Braden didn't suffer as he did with cramps in the Bronx? It's not like the forecast for was wind and threats of sleet.

That's all for which we have time today, folks. Peace, a pint of FreeStyle Belgian Blonde from Black Diamond Brewery in Concord, and "Sometimes I Rhyme Slow" by Nice & Smooth to all.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Oakland A's MLN: Four Tickets Punched

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Sep 4, 2010

The Oakland A's farm system is going to be busy this month. On Thursday, the Vancouver Canadians became the first A's affiliate to clinch a post-season berth in 2010. On Friday, three more teams joined the party. We have all of the details inside...

Offensive Explosion Paces Sacramento In Division Clincher

Offense is usually never in short supply in Colorado Springs, and things were no different on Friday night, as the Sacramento River Cats and the Colorado Springs Sky Sox combined for 36 hits and 20 runs. Sacramento had 21 of those hits and 12 of those runs to give them a 12-8 win. With the win, the River Cats have clinched the Southern Division title and a spot in the Pacific Coast playoffs for the ninth time in 11 years.

Sacramento's win completed an improbable climb for the River Cats, who were once 12.5 games out of first place. The division title is the River Cats' fourth straight.

Eric Sogard led the way for Sacramento with four hits and three RBIs. He hit his second homerun in as many days, collected two doubles and raised his average to .299. Corey Brown and Matt Watson also added homers for Sacramento. Every River Cats starter had at least one hit and scored at least one run.

Corey Wimberly, Michael Taylor and the newly acquired Jeremy Hermida (more on him later) each had three hits, while Tom Everidge, Watson and Adrian Cardenas added two hits apiece. Taylor and Brown each stole a base, and Wimberly swiped two bags, his 54th and 55th of the season, an on-going record for Sacramento.

It was a rough return to his former stomping grounds for ex-Colorado Rockies ace Jason Jennings, who was making his third start for Sacramento. Jennings allowed six runs on 10 hits in five innings. Edwar Ramirez and John Halama combined to toss 2.1 innings of relief with one run allowed before Fernando Hernandez took over with one out in the eighth inning. He got the final five outs, including the last two on a double-play, to earn his third save.

Sacramento Roster Moves

The River Cats had a number of roster changes on Friday. The team added outfielder Jeremy Hermida, who was signed by the A's as a free agent on Friday. Hermida, once one of the top prospects in all of baseball when he was in the Florida Marlins organization, had spent the entire 2010 season with the Boston Red Sox before he was released earlier this week.

He hit .203 with a 605 OPS in 52 games with Boston this season. In 568 career major league games, Hermida has a .259 average and a 755 OPS. In 410 career minor league games, Hermida is a .284 hitter with an 834 OPS.

The River Cats' catching corps changed on Friday, as Josh Donaldson was activated from the disabled list and Jared Price was placed on the DL. Donaldson, who didn't play on Friday, had been on the DL since August 3rd when he hurt his knee.

Midland Clinches, Seeks Title Defense

The Midland Rockhounds' defense of the Texas League title is officially a go. The Rockhounds defeated the San Antonio Missions on Friday night by a score of 4-2 to clinch the second half title. Midland won the Texas League championship last season for the first time since 2005.

Ryan Edell got the start for Midland and, as he has been for most of his time with the 'Hounds, he was brilliant. In 6.2 innings, Edell allowed two runs on three hits and one walk with 10 strike-outs. The effort moved his record to 9-6 and lowered his ERA to 3.17.

Fautino De Los Santos, Daniel Sattler, Derrick Gordon and Neil Wagner combined to throw 2.1 hitless innings to close out the game for Edell.

On offense, the Rockhounds collected 11 hits. Alexander Valdez, Archie Gilbert, Josh Horton and Matt Sulentic each had

multi-hit games. Valdez hit his 13th homerun of the season and Gilbert swiped his team-best 28th base.

Stockton Holds On, Clinches Second Half Crown

One night after blowing a two-run lead in the ninth inning, the Stockton Ports saw an early 7-1 lead nearly evaporate and then a late three-run lead come into danger before finally closing out the Bakersfield Blaze for a 9-8 win. The victory gives the Ports the second half division title. The Ports are 41-26 during the second half. They were 31-39 in the first half.

Stockton traveled to Bakersfield on Friday night to take on the second-place Blaze with their magic number at two. The Ports looked like they would breeze to the division title early on when they scored four runs in the first, with the big blow coming on Jeremy Barfield's 16th homer of the season. Stockton added onto that lead in the second inning when Stephen Parker hit his 21st homer of the season, a three-run shot, to give the Ports a 7-1 lead.

That lead quickly came into danger, as the Blaze scored twice in third and three times in the fourth to move within a run of the Ports. The game remained at 7-6 until the top of the ninth inning, when the Ports would score twice to go up 9-6.

Stockton would need all of those insurance runs, as Paul Smyth allowed a two-run homerun before recording an out in the bottom of the ninth. He retired the next two batters but then gave-up a two-out double to Tommy Mendonca. Smyth was lifted for Scott Hodsdon, who came on and struck-out Doug Hogan. The ball was in the dirt, but catcher Yusuf Carter recovered the ball and threw down to first in time to end the game.

Stockton had 10 hits, with the middle of the order doing the big damage. Grant Green had three hits and Parker, Carter and Barfield added two hits each. Barfield and Parker each finished with three RBIs. Parker needs four RBIs over the last three games of the season to hit the century mark. Barfield (85) and Green (84) both have outside chances of reaching the 90-RBI plateau.

The Ports were also patient on Friday, drawing nine walks. David Thomas, Barfield, Parker and Tyler Ladendorf each drew two walks.

Justin Marks got the start and went only 2.1 innings, as he is on a strict pitch count. Scott Deal earned the win in relief with 3.2 scoreless innings.

Kane County Uses The Force To Inch Closer To Post-Season

On Star Wars night at Elfstrom Stadium, the Kane County Cougars used a three-run rally in the fourth inning and some good pitching to defeat the Peoria Chiefs, 4-2. Kane County is now sitting on a magic number of one to clinch a spot in the post-season. The Cougars also have a .5 game lead in the race for the top playoff spot.

The Cougars managed only four hits, but they made them count. The biggest blow was Rashun Dixon's two-run homer in the fourth inning, his eighth of the year. That homer was part of a three-run fourth inning rally that erased a 2-0 deficit and gave the Cougars a lead they wouldn't relinquish.

Chris Mederos earned his seventh win with a strong seven-inning performance. He allowed only two unearned runs on five hits and a walk. He struck-out four. Robert Gilliam worked 1.2 scoreless innings and Jose Guzman struck-out Luis Flores with the tying runs on base to earn his 18th save of the season.

The Day After, Success for Vancouver

One day after clinching the second half division title by splitting a double-header, the Vancouver Canadians came home and looked like champions with a 1-0 win.

Four Vancouver pitchers combined to allow only two hits, two walks and two hit-by-pitches in the shut-out win. Daniel McDaniel got the start and didn't allow a hit in four innings. Pedro Vidal was credited with the win after allowing only two hits in two scoreless innings. Jake Brown (two perfect innings) and Logan Chitwood (a scoreless ninth) closed out the game. Chitwood earned the save by inducing a line-out to third with the tying and go-ahead runs in scoring position.

The game's only run came in the fifth inning when [Nino Leyja](#) singled with one out and then stole second and moved to third on a wild pitch. He scored on [Marcos Luis'](#) single.

The C's had only five hits, as many of the team's regulars had the day off. [Michael Fabiaschi](#) had the C's only extra-base hit, a double.

Cats clinch another PCL division title

By Ashley Marshall / Special to MLB.com

Comebacks are nothing new for the Sacramento River Cats. Neither is winning Pacific Coast League division titles. Sacramento capped the biggest comeback in its 11-year history Friday, clinching a record-breaking ninth PCL division crown with a 12-8 triumph over the Colorado Springs Sky Sox.

The River Cats trailed Fresno by 12 1/2 games in the first week of June, then won nine of their next 11 games and put together two six-game winning streaks before the Triple-A All-Star break.

The Cats went 19-9 in July and used that momentum to claw their way back into contention over the next three weeks. After taking four of five from the Grizzlies from Aug. 25-29, they took a one-game lead in the Pacific South Division and never looked back.

Included in that stretch was a 13-11 win over Round Rock on Aug. 11 in which the River Cats overcame an 11-run deficit.

"We're excited," manager Tony DeFrancesco said. "We've just had a nice celebration, we've had some champagne and hopefully we'll be doing this again next week, too.

"We wanted to control our own destiny tonight and we knew we could come through it."

Sacramento used 21 hits -- one shy of a season high -- to secure their ninth title in 11 years, more than any other team in major American pro sports.

The Cats, the top affiliate of the Oakland Athletics, grabbed a 4-1 lead in the fourth inning, but the Sky Sox plated two runs in the bottom of the frame and three more in the fifth to forge ahead, 6-5.

Sacramento regained the lead in the seventh, only to watch Colorado Springs tie it again at 7-7. But a three-run eighth proved the difference.

Corey Wimberly singled, stole two bases and scored the go-ahead run on a base hit by Tommy Everidge. After newcomer Jeremy Hermida and Anthony Recker produced insurance runs, Eric Sogard slugged a two-run blast in the ninth to seal the victory.

"This division win is No. 1," DeFrancesco said. "In the past, we were clinching with 15 games to go or with 10 days left in the season, but this one came right down to the wire. At no point in the other years were we almost 13 games behind, but now we're the first team in the PCL to clinch."

The Cats, who have won four PCL championships, posted a 37-35 home record -- matching the worst in team history -- and it seemed fitting they clinched on the road, where they are 11 games above .500 (40-29).

"I have been here seven years and we have dominated at home in the past. We'd be 15 or 20 games over .500, but there was just something about being at home this year," DeFrancesco said.

"There was no quitting in this team. At Triple-A, guys come and go, free agents sign and guys go to the big leagues, but we have kept a good team chemistry and everyone has played hard because they want to be here."

Pitching has been the River Cats' strength. They lead the 16-team league in strikeouts, have allowed the second-fewest homers and rank fourth with a 4.27 ERA. The rotation is led by former first-round pick Clay Mortensen, who will start Game 1 of the playoffs on Sept. 8.

The 25-year-old right-hander is 13-6 with a 4.25 ERA and leads the team in starts, wins, innings and strikeouts. His 13 victories are tied for second in the PCL behind Fresno's Eric Hacker (16).

Although the River Cats rank 13th in the league in hitting, their on-base percentage is fifth and they're third in runs scored. Chris Carter, currently on the disabled list, is fourth in the league with 31 homers and 94 RBIs.

Sacramento also has gotten key contributions from Sogard, who's batting .299; Wimberly, who leads the PCL with 55 steals and ranks third with 95 runs scored; and Dallas McPherson, who has 22 homers and 75 RBIs in only 84 games.

"Everybody has stepped up, 1-9," DeFrancesco said. "Wimberly and Sogard have been great and Carter has had a big second half. Guys like Dallas McPherson and Matt Watson have contributed every day, too."

With Tacoma clinging to a 1 1/2-game lead over Salt Lake in the Pacific North Division, the River Cats' first-round playoff opponent has not yet been determined. Sacramento will host Games 1 and 2 of the best-of-5 PCL semifinals on Sept. 8-9.

"Talent-wise, we are good enough to win it all," DeFrancesco said. "This is just the first step of the journey."

Hounds Reach Playoffs Again With Win In San Antonio

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

When the 2010 season began, Ryan Edell was a member of the Cleveland Indians organization. Friday night in San Antonio, he became a 10-game winner for the RockHounds, and that 10th win sent the RockHounds back to the Texas League playoffs.

Released by Cleveland, Ryan signed with the Oakland A's and was assigned to the RockHounds in mid-May. In 21 appearances (20 starts), he has now become one of the league's top 10 pitchers (10-4, 3.17).

Friday's game "line" was simple: A RockHounds win and the club clinched a playoff spot. A San Antonio win would keep the Missions very much alive in the race.

Matt Clark hit a 2-run home run, his 26th of the season, off Edell in the last of the 1st, and the Missions took a 2-0 lead.

Alex Valdez, Archie Gilbert, Josh Horton and Matt Sulentic singled in the 2nd, with Sulentic's hit bringing in two runs to tie the game. Valdez then ripped a solo home run with two out in the 3rd, a swing that would be the game-winner. Gilbert singled, stole second (his 28th steal) and scored on Val Majewski's single in the 6th to close the scoring.

After Clark's home run, Edell was nearly perfect, allowing just one more hit and one walk through the top of the 7th.

Dan Sattler struggled, walking two batters to open the last of the 8th, but Derrick Gordon came on to get three consecutive outs, including two strikeouts, to end the threat.

In the 9th, Neil Wagner earned his first save with a 1-2-3 inning, aided by back-to-back outstanding defensive plays by second baseman J.C. Holt, one on a one-hop rocket from Clark.

The win puts the RockHounds in the playoffs for the second consecutive season under Darren Bush.

The RockHounds now return to Citibank Ballpark for a 3-game Labor Day weekend series against Frisco, a series which will decide the second half pennant race.

The pennant race & deja vu: As they did a year ago, the RockHounds need one win in a quick, 3-game series with the Frisco RoughRiders to capture the second half pennant. If Frisco sweeps the series, and both half-seasons pennants, they would gain home field advantage in a potential game 5 of the South Division Championship Series. If the RockHounds win the second half, they would host games 3, 4 and 5 (as needed).

There are three (3) games remaining in the 2010 Texas League regular season.

Ports Second-Half Champs After 9-8 Win

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - For the 11th time in franchise history, the Stockton Ports won a second half division title on Friday night at Historic Sam Lynn Ballpark. Despite nearly blowing an early six-run lead and a late three-run advantage, the Ports were able to hang on in a thrilling finish, stranding the possible-tying run in scoring position and defeating the Blaze by a final of 9-8. The loss not only clinches the second-half crown for Stockton, but also eliminates the Blaze from playoff contention.

Early in the contest, it looked as if the Ports would run away with the game. Stockton scored four runs in the first off Blaze starter Ezequiel Rijo (0-1), highlighted by a three-run homer off the bat of Jeremy Barfield.

Bakersfield got a run back in the bottom half of the inning on a solo blast from Chris McGuiness to make it 4-1.

Stockton would come back strong, however, with three runs in the second on another three-run homer. Rijo started the inning by walking Brandon Pinckney and was then lifted in favor of Yoon-Hee Nam. Nam allowed a one-out single to Grant Green followed by a three-run homer from Stephen Parker to give the Ports a commanding 7-1 advantage.

Rijo took the loss, going an inning-plus and allowing five runs on four hits in his Cal-League debut. Nam went 3.2 innings and allowed two runs on two hits while striking out one.

After the second inning, momentum shifted to the side of the Blaze. Ports starter Justin Marks allowed a leadoff home run in the third to Davis Stoneburner to make it a 7-2 game. Marks would be lifted due to pitch count after striking out Eric Morrison. Jose Pina followed Marks into the game and allowed a second solo home run to McGuiness that brought the Blaze to within four runs at 7-3.

Marks would go 2.1 innings and allow two runs on two hits while striking out three and not factor into the decision.

Pina experienced more struggles in the fourth. After walking back-to-back hitters to start the inning and uncorking a wild pitch, Pina allowed an infield RBI single to Doug Hogan to make it 7-4. Two batters later, Stoneburner singled to left to make it a 7-5 game. Pina was then lifted for Scott Deal (3-4), who allowed a single to Eric Morrison that loaded the bases. Deal then walked McGuiness to bring in another run that brought the Blaze to within a run at 7-6. Deal, however, would induce an inning-ending 4-6-3 double-play off the bat of Mike Bianucci to end the fourth and keep Stockton's lead preserved.

Pina would not factor into the decision after going one inning and allowing four runs. Deal went on to earn the win, pitching 3.2 scoreless frames and allowing three hits while striking out three.

Blaze reliever Justin Miller took over for Nam with two down in the fifth. Miller would record seven outs in the game, all of them coming via strikeout in 2.1 scoreless innings of relief.

Stockton went without a hit from Parker's three-run homer in the second until the start of the eighth when Barfield reached on an infield single. The score remained 7-6 until the ninth when the Ports scored two huge insurance runs on RBI singles from Green and Yusuf Carter to make it a 9-6 lead. The runs were charged to Hector Nelo who pitched an inning-plus in relief.

Bakersfield, however, would not go quietly into the night. Paul Smyth came on to start the ninth and, after allowing a leadoff single to McGuiness, gave up a two-run homer to Bianucci to bring the Blaze back to within a run at 9-8. Smyth would retire the next two hitters, but allow a double to Tommy Mendonca to put the possible-tying run in scoring position. Smyth would be lifted for Scott Hodsdon (SV, 3), who struck out Hogan to end the ballgame.

With a second-half title in-hand, the Ports will play out the three games remaining on the regular-season docket starting on Saturday night. Justin Murray (10-4, 3.48 ERA) will head to the mound for Stockton, opposed by Bakersfield right-hander Kennil Gomez (5-8, 5.63 ERA). First pitch is set for 7:15 p.m. PDT.

Cougars Inch Closer to Playoffs

Kane County needs one more win or one Beloit loss to clinch playoff spot

GENEVA, III. – The Kane County Cougars used a three-run rally in the fourth inning Friday night to surge past the Peoria Chiefs and sweep the three-game series in front of 7,695 at Elfstrom Stadium. The Cougars' victory, their eighth in the last 11 games, has them one win or one Beloit loss away from clinching a post-season spot. Clinton and Beloit split a doubleheader Friday, so the Cougars have jumped into the top playoff spot by 0.5 games over Clinton and lead Beloit by 2.5 games with three to play.

Peoria jumped on the board first with a pair of unearned runs in the top of the fourth against Chris Mederos, but the Cougars quickly responded in the bottom half. Mitch LeVier doubled home Anthony Aliotti against Brett Wallach (6-4), and Rashun Dixon hit a two-run homer to make it 3-2. Aliotti later singled home Jose Crisotomo in the seventh to account for the 4-2 final.

Mederos (7-5) worked seven innings for the third time in four outings, and the Cougars improved to 5-1 in his quality starts. He gave up five hits, walked one and fanned four in the win. Rob Gilliam worked 1 2/3 innings, Max Peterson faced one batter in the ninth and Jose Guzman struck out Luis Flores to end it and convert his 18th save.

The Cougars (37-29, 69-66) start their final series of the regular season Saturday night at 6 CT with the opener of a three-game series against the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers. (31-36, 57-78). Dan Straily (9-7, 4.44) will face Hiram Burgos (5-6, 4.08). The game will be broadcast on WBIG 1280-AM and www.kccougars.com with pre-game coverage starting at 5:45 p.m.