

Oakland A's lose to Seattle Mariners, miss chance to gain on Texas Rangers

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

The A's had their clubhouse TVs tuned to the Texas Rangers-Toronto Blue Jays game before they took the field Tuesday, so they knew the opportunity at hand.

That made their 7-5 defeat to the Seattle Mariners all the more frustrating for them.

The American League West-leading Rangers are reeling, having lost their fifth straight Tuesday. With less than four weeks left in the season, the A's can ill afford to miss opportunities to gain ground on Texas.

But they fell behind early before an Oakland Coliseum crowd that was announced at 10,067 and appeared much smaller.

Trailing 7-2 entering the bottom of the ninth, the A's rallied for three runs. But with runners on the corners and two outs, Seattle closer David Aardsma coaxed Cliff Pennington into a game-ending fly out to left.

The A's, who have lost six of their past nine, remain seven games behind Texas.

"These opportunities seem to be coming more and more, and we seem to be doing all we can do to not take advantage of them," said A's starting pitcher Dallas Braden, who allowed six runs over five innings. "Today was squarely on my shoulders."

The Mariners entered play with the fewest homers in the majors (86), so they victimized Braden with a rousing game of Bloop Single Derby.

Seattle had gone 11 straight games in which it scored three runs or less. The Mariners ended that streak with five runs in the second inning alone.

They sent 11 men to the plate, building their rally on seven singles, one walk and one sacrifice fly.

The only ball hit real well was Casey Kotchman's slicing RBI single to the left-field corner, which landed just out of the diving reach of Jeff Larish.

Pennington, the shortstop, uncorked a wild relay throw home on the play, and Seattle had runners on second and third.

Adam Moore delivered a sacrifice fly to make it 2-0, and what followed was a maddening sequence for Braden (9-11).

Matt Tuiasosopo reached on an infield single. Josh Wilson's blooper fell in shallow center to score a run. Ichiro Suzuki served another bleeder into left that fell just inside the foul line to make it 4-0.

After Chone Figgins singled to center, Russell Branyan drove in another with a broken-bat hit that barely reached the outfield grass on the fly.

"You look at it and it's like, 'What can you do?' " A's manager Bob Geren said. "Everybody gets hits off the end of the bat. But to get that many in one inning is a little unusual. It just seemed like it went on forever."

Moore connected for a solo homer in the third to make it 6-0 against Braden, who had allowed three earned runs or fewer in 10 of his previous 11 starts.

The A's hardly cashed in on their opportunities against Doug Fister (5-11).

With the bases loaded and one out in the first, Mark Ellis hit a soft liner back to the mound. Fister caught it and threw to first to double up Jack Cust and end the inning.

The A's stranded 13 runners and went 2 for 12 with runners in scoring position.

Center fielder Coco Crisp didn't start because of a sore left knee but he contributed a pinch-hit two-run single in the ninth and scored on a wild pitch to make it 7-5.

Rajai Davis played center and Jeremy Hermida, promoted from the minors earlier in the day, played right and went 1 for 4 with a walk.

Oakland A's update: Jeremy Hermida gets the chance to show offensive punch

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

Looking to add pop to their outfield, the A's called up Jeremy Hermida from Triple-A Sacramento and started him in right field Tuesday against the Seattle Mariners.

Hermida, 26, was released by the Boston Red Sox on Aug. 31 and signed by the A's on Friday.

A first-round pick of the Florida Marlins back in 2002, the left-handed hitting Hermida could see more starts at one of the corner outfield spots if he produces offensively.

Entering Tuesday, the A's had gotten just 25 homers combined from their outfielders this season, fewest in the majors. By comparison, Toronto ranked first with 78.

"Jeremy is young and he's already showed some real promise in the big leagues," manager Bob Geren said. "We'll give him a chance to see what he can do."

Hermida played five seasons with the Marlins. His best year came in 2007 when he hit .296 with 18 homers and 63 RBIs, but his average fell below .260 each of the next two seasons.

This past offseason, Florida traded him to Boston, where he hit .203 with five homers and 27 RBIs in just 52 games, missing one six-week stretch with a rib cage fracture.

Boston is on the hook for most of his \$3.35 million salary.

The A's still haven't gotten the green light to build a stadium in San Jose, but they've selected 360 Architecture to design their new venue if and when they get the go-ahead.

The company has designed several sports and entertainment venues, most recently New Meadowlands Stadium.

According to a team news release, 360 Architecture also will design a stadium for the San Jose Earthquakes soccer team. A's co-owner Lew Wolff also co-owns the Earthquakes.

Top prospect Chris Carter (sprained left thumb) reportedly will come off the DL and play in Sacramento's playoff opener today against Tacoma, leaving open the possibility the outfielder could rejoin the A's before season's end. "... With a day off Thursday, the A's won't require a fifth starter until Monday or Tuesday, depending on whether they give Gio Gonzalez an extra day of rest. Long reliever Boof Bonser could fill the vacant rotation slot with Vin Mazzaro having been sent down. Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden are in line to start in this weekend's series against Boston.

Jeremy Hermida gets called up, starting in right field vs. Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 9/7/2010 5:48PM

There's a new bat in the A's lineup tonight. Jeremy Hermida was called up from Triple-A Sacramento and he's starting in right field. I'm curious to see what this guy can do. Hermida is just 26 and he was a 2002 first-round pick of the Florida Marlins. This team obviously could use some outfield pop, and if he shows anything at the plate I could see the left-handed hitting Hermida staying in the lineup, either in left field or right field.

He spent five seasons with the Marlins — his best year came in 2007, when he hit .296 with 18 homers with 63 RBIs — then was traded to Boston this past offseason. Hermida hit .203 with five homers and 27 RBIs in 52 games and missed time with a fractured rib. Boston released him Aug. 31 and the A's signed him.

—Aside from Hermida's addition, it's a different looking A's outfield. Coco Crisp gets a day off (Geren says Crisp is battling a sore left knee but that it's nothing serious). So Rajai Davis is leading off and playing center. With Kevin Kouzmanoff still out, Steve Tolleson plays third and Jeff Larish is in left.

—With Thursday's off-day, Geren said the A's will skip the rotation spot left vacant by Vin Mazzaro. That sets up Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden to pitch in this weekend's series against Boston. Cahill will get an extra day's rest, but Anderson and Braden will pitch on regular rest. Mazzaro's turn will come up either Monday or Tuesday in Kansas City — Geren said it depends on whether he wants to give Gio Gonzalez an extra day off. And the manager confirmed Boof Bonser is still a candidate to fill Mazzaro's spot. Clayton Mortensen, who starts Sacramento's playoff opener against Tacoma on Wednesday — could also conveniently slide into that slot without having his schedule thrown off. I keep mentioning Mortensen as a candidate because he's had a good season and the A's are familiar with what he can do at the big league level.

— Are you getting your hopes up yet, A's fans? Oakland is 7 games out with 25 to play. That's a difficult hill to climb, but it's all about being within reasonable striking distance when the Rangers visit for a four-game series Sept. 23-26.

Tonight's lineups:

A's — Davis CF, Barton 1B, Suzuki C, Cust DH, Ellis 2B, Larish LF, Hermida RF, Tolleson 3B, Pennington SS; Braden LHP.

Mariners — Ichiro RF, Figgins 2B, Branyan DH, Gutierrez CF, Lopez 3B, Kotchman 1B, Moore C, Tuiasosopo LF, Wilson SS; Fister RHP.

Braden, A's lose to Mariners

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Dallas Braden's night was about as frustrating as it comes for a starting pitcher.

Seattle collected bloop after bloop in the second inning. Every bounce went the Mariners' way. It was a long list of some of baseball's favorite excuses, but Braden isn't one to go to the bad-luck well, especially with his team trying to make a race of it in the AL West and the division-leading Rangers losing their fifth in a row earlier in the evening.

"These opportunities seem to be coming more and more and we seem to be doing what we can to not take advantage of them," Braden said after Oakland's 7-5 loss at the Coliseum. "And this one falls squarely on my shoulders."

The A's did come up with a two-out rally in the ninth, scoring three times. Coco Crisp pinch hit with two on, fell behind 0-2, fouled off two pitches and then fought back to a full count before delivering a two-run single. He later scored on a wild pitch.

"Good effort, good fight right to the end," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Braden walked Franklin Gutierrez to open the second, and Jose Lopez singled to left. Casey Kotchman then put a drive just out of Jeff Larish's reach in the corner in left; Larish dived and the ball ticked off the end of his glove. He scrambled to get it, hit cutoff man Cliff Pennington, and Pennington's throw home went to the backstop.

One run scored on the hit, and the runners advanced on the error. Lopez then came home on a sacrifice fly by Adam Moore.

Matt Tuiasosopo loaded the bases with an infield hit, and Josh Wilson blooped a single to center to score Kotchman. Ichiro Suzuki blooped one to left, driving in a run, and Chone Figgins hit a soft single to center, loading them again. Russell Branyan pushed across another with a hit to right.

"Such is baseball," said Braden, who at one point resorted to cliches scribbled on index cards by video coordinator Adam Rhoden. "Hit 'em where they ain't, right?"

"What can you do?" Geren said. "You make the pitches, we're playing everywhere that needs to be played. Broken-bat hits are part of the game, but to get that many in one inning is a little unusual. It seemed like it went on forever."

Moore homered to center with one out in the third, and Seattle tacked on a late run against Jerry Blevins.

Braden lasted six innings, and it was his worst outing since April 28 in terms of earned runs allowed.

The A's put together a rally in the fifth and scored twice, both on a base hit by Kurt Suzuki, but they left two men on in the inning. In the sixth, they left the bases loaded. They also had the bases loaded in the first with one out and came up empty.

Kevin Kouzmanoff remained out with back spasms. Geren said after the game that the third baseman was feeling much better.

Outfielder Hermida called up from Triple-A

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

The A's added a former first-round draft pick to their lineup Tuesday when they called up **Jeremy Hermida** from Triple-A Sacramento. Hermida played right field and hit seventh, going 1-for-4 with a walk and a strikeout.

Hermida, 26, had signed with the organization Friday after being released by Boston earlier in the week. He was taken with the 11th pick of the 2002 draft and was a high-profile player his first several years with Florida, particularly when he hit .296 with 18 homers and 63 RBIs in 2007. But his production tailed off the next two seasons before he was traded to the Red Sox in November.

Hermida's time in Boston this year was derailed for more than a month when a collision with third baseman **Adrian Beltre** left him with five fractured ribs. Hermida said Tuesday that Boston did him a favor by letting him go - he knew he wasn't in their plans, and by releasing him, they gave him a chance to get a shot elsewhere for the final month.

The A's are collecting outfielders at a rapid rate, but top prospects **Chris Carter** and **Michael Taylor** haven't proven themselves as everyday players, and **Ryan Sweeney** and **Conor Jackson** are coming off injuries. If Hermida shows much, the team might have found a decent player without having had to give up anything. He has one more arbitration year left.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Hermida said of next year.

Reliever **Ross Wolf** was Hermida's teammate in Florida. "He was not a first-rounder for nothing," Wolf said. "He's got the tools, he can hit for power and he's got a good eye."

Briefly: Manager **Bob Geren** said the fifth starter will go Monday or Tuesday depending on whether **Gio Gonzalez** gets extra rest. **Boof Bonser** is a candidate. ... **Josh Outman**, who had Tommy John surgery last year, threw 20 pitches in a simulated inning and said it went well. ... Reliever **Craig Breslow** is the A's finalist for the Roberto Clemente award for community service.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Stats watch: Jack Cust's next homer will be his 100th in the majors - and with his minor-league totals, he'll have hit 304 in his pro career. Cust, who hadn't hit fewer than 25 homers the past three years, has 10 this season.

Drumbeat: Former first-rounder Hermida comes up; he's in the lineup

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum, 9/7/2010 4:20PM

Jeremy Hermida, a former first-round pick (11th in 2002), is now up with the A's, a week after being designated for assignment by the Red Sox, and he's playing right and batting seventh.

He's only 26, and he was a .296 hitter with 18 homers three years ago with Florida. It's likely that the A's will give him a good long look the rest of the way to see where he might fit in their plans for next year.

Does this make it clear that Travis Buck is no longer in the A's plans? What about all these other zillions of outfielders? Conor Jackson will be healthy, presumably, and the A's have indicated they believe he's an important piece for next year. Could that change? What about Chris Carter? Is he even an outfielder? And Michael Taylor - he's essentially the end result of the Carlos Gonzalez deal. You'd think the A's would want him in Oakland at some point. Carson, Watson, etc. - it's crowded. And of course this is assuming that Coco Crisp's option is picked up and that Rajai Davis is back, and that Ryan Sweeney is healthy. I think the A's could field a starting nine out of just outfielders.

Hermida was happy that Boston let him go; he said he wasn't going to be in their plans next year and they set him free to get at-bats elsewhere, and that means.....somewhere where he might be in the plans for next year.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said.

If he performs well, there's no reason he shouldn't be, especially considering he's shown some power in his career. The A's need it. Hermida also had three hits to help Triple-A Sacramento clinch the division on Friday. It sounds as if the A's gave him a strong indication that he'd be called up soon after signing.

The A's haven't announced a starter to take Vin Mazzaro's place in the bullpen, but they won't need that spot until Monday or Tuesday, manager Bob Geren said. Boof Bonser remains a candidate, and the Monday or Tuesday timing certainly makes Clayton Mortensen a possibility. He's starting for Sacramento tomorrow night in the playoff opener.

Josh Outman threw 20 pitches in a simulated inning today; he faced Matt Carson and Steve Tolleson and he said he felt as if he was around the zone because they were making contact. Outman, who is more than a year removed from Tommy John surgery, was like Joey Devine two days ago just happy to be throwing to hitters for the first time in months.

Outman isn't going to go out on a rehab assignment but he will go to instructional league.

Here's the lineup: Davis CF, Barton 1B, Suzuki C, Cust DH, Ellis 2B, Larish LF, Hermida RF, Tolleson 3B, Pennington SS

A's hire architect for proposed San Jose stadium

Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer

The Oakland Athletics haven't received permission to move anywhere, but that hasn't stopped the team's owner from hiring an architect for a new ballpark in San Jose.

A's owner Lew Wolff said Tuesday he has hired 360 Architecture, based in Kansas City, to design a stadium for the Athletics in downtown San Jose. The firm will also design a separate stadium near the San Jose airport for the Earthquakes soccer team, also owned by Wolff.

"We just want to be ahead of the curve," Wolff said Tuesday. "This architecture firm is one of the best, and we want to make sure they're committed to us."

Major League Baseball has yet to decide whether Wolff can move the A's to San Jose. Oakland has proposed three waterfront stadium sites, and Fremont has pitched a stadium at the former Nummi auto plant.

Wolff wants to leave Oakland, the A's home of 42 years, because he says the Athletics suffer by sharing the Coliseum with the Oakland Raiders football team. A real estate developer, Wolff also wants to build a retail and housing complex with a new stadium in hopes of attracting more fans.

Oakland City Councilman Ignacio De La Fuente said he wasn't fazed by Wolff hiring an architect.

"Mr. Wolff has made it very, very clear that Oakland is his last choice for the A's," De La Fuente said. "The reality is, we have the best sites of anyone, but it takes two to tango."

Both proposed stadiums in San Jose would be funded privately.

Wolff was set to move the Athletics to Fremont until 2009, when public opposition over traffic prompted him to cancel the plan.

San Jose is eager to host the A's. In July, Mayor Chuck Reed proposed placing a stadium initiative on the November ballot, but canceled it at the request of Major League Baseball, pending the outcome of its ruling on the A's future whereabouts.

After Braden struggles, rally falls short

Left-hander gives up five runs in second, loses to Mariners

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- So close, yet so not.

For the A's, that notion played the part of more than one meaning Tuesday.

Before they even took the field, they were handed a break in the standings by way of a Texas loss in Toronto. The Rangers' fifth straight defeat allowed the A's to move within 6 1/2 games of first place -- a number not completely out of reach, but also not exactly easy to overcome.

But when the A's did take the field, looking to capitalize on Texas' ongoing skid, they were overwhelmed by a Mariners team that wouldn't stop hitting -- bloop hits, that is. And, so, softly plunked balls that made their way toward Oakland defenders, but stayed just far enough away for hits combined to hand Dallas Braden and Co. a night of frustration.

In the end, despite a late-inning comeback, the A's were left looking at a 7-5 loss to Seattle, one that prevented them from gaining any sort of momentous ground in the American League West, where they remained seven games behind Texas with 24 contests left on the schedule.

Time's ticking, and Oakland is far from oblivious as to what's been transpiring on the out-of-town scoreboard, which the club watches "every day, all day," according to Braden.

"We want to know what's going on, we want to know what kind of position we're in as a team," he said. "By no means does what happens on a day-in, day-out basis affect what kind of approach we take, but we're in it to win it and perform well. Paying attention to the scoreboard, you want to be a part of the proverbial race."

So does that make Tuesday's loss that much harder to swallow? A resounding "yes" was heard in the A's clubhouse, where players didn't shy away from the question.

"We know [Texas] lost tonight," Mark Ellis said. "It's impossible not to know. It's on the scoreboard out there, everybody knows. It was disappointing we couldn't pick up the game tonight. It was definitely a tough one to lose."

"These opportunities seem to be coming more and more, and we seem to be doing everything we can to not take advantage of them," Braden said. "But today falls squarely on my shoulders. There's nothing that anybody out there didn't do that got us to the end result today."

For Braden, Tuesday's affair represented his worst start statistically since April 28, when he allowed six runs in four innings against Tampa Bay. This time around, he allowed six in five frames, which also brought about nine hits -- seven of which came in an eventful second that saw 11 Mariners come to the plate, marking the highest number of hits allowed by an A's pitcher in an inning this year.

Braden, who garnered a 1-2-3 first, was forced to throw 36 pitches in the second, which began with a leadoff walk to Franklin Gutierrez.

"Walks are always brutal," the A's lefty said. "They always can change the complexion of a game or an inning instantly. A walk, in general, that's not what I signed up to do."

The free pass was only followed by a nightmare of a scene, including seven singles, five of them which came in a row and three of which were of the bloop variety. By inning's end, Seattle had posted five runs off Braden after having scored three runs or less in each of its previous 11 games.

"That was rough," he said. "If they were better pitches, they could have been balls, and then you start nibbling, and you start working behind, so throwing strikes is what I'm gonna do."

"That's just baseball, you know?" catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "I don't think Dallas could have made better pitches. His game is getting early outs with soft contact by keeping them off-balance, but they just found holes. Sometimes that's the way this game goes, sometimes they're caught and sometimes they're not. Tonight, they weren't caught."

The tough-luck inning had several heads shaking in the A's dugout, which proceeded to watch the offense do very little against Seattle's Doug Fister.

The right-hander handed the A's just two runs, both of which came in the fifth courtesy of a two-run single by Suzuki. Fister went five innings, giving up five hits with four walks and four strikeouts in five innings.

The A's were kept quiet through the next three frames, but they came out in the ninth proving they weren't quite done in the form of three runs off Brandon League courtesy of a two-run single from pinch-hitter Coco Crisp, who ultimately scored on a wild pitch. Their comeback attempt followed a 1-for-10 stretch with runners in scoring position and had many speaking of the club's competitive nature, no matter the score.

"That's big, just as far as perseverance is concerned," Braden said. "There's obviously an old saying, champions try hard and work hard even when no one's looking. I think that kind of flows over into what we're doing. No one is really looking, no one is really watching, but there are still 25-plus guys here that want to play baseball, play hard, and play to win."

"That just shows something about our ballclub, we're not going to give up," Suzuki said. "Even when Dallas was out there, he gave up five runs in the second and he ended up going five, and he probably could have went another one. That kind of shows we never feel like we're out of it. We're always trying to chip away and get back into this game."

Hermida called up, starts in right field

Geren gives Crisp day off to rest sore left knee

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Oakland's seemingly never-ending game of musical chairs in the outfield continued Tuesday with the addition of Jeremy Hermida, who was selected from Triple-A Sacramento and immediately placed in the lineup, playing right field and batting seventh.

Hermida represented the 15th outfielder the A's have used this season, one that has them inching toward the mark of 18 set in 2007.

The 26-year-old Hermida, signed by the A's to a Minor League contract on Sept. 3 after being released by Boston three days before, played just three games with Sacramento and went 4-for-13 with two doubles and three RBIs before his promotion, which filled Oakland's 40-man roster.

"He's still young," A's manager Bob Geren said. "He's shown some real promise. I'm happy we got him, and we'll give him a chance to see what he can do."

Hermida, a former first-round Draft pick of the Marlins in 2002, spent a span of 52 games with the Red Sox this season, which was interfered by a disabled list stint due to a left rib-cage fracture. He returned to Boston in late July and played in just seven games before being released, an event Hermida says was influenced by the fact he was never really in the Red Sox's future plans.

"Everything happens for a reason," Hermida said. "It was a nice move on their part to let me come somewhere and get some at-bats."

Geren said Hermida's presence won't change the fact he'll likely continue to rotate his outfielders on a daily basis. On Tuesday, Jeff Larish received a start in left with Rajai Davis in center as a result of a day off for Coco Crisp, who has been battling left knee soreness intermittently for about a week.

"I felt like today was a good day to give him a day," Geren said. "Hopefully this will help him."

Kouz has MRI, day-to-day with back spasms

OAKLAND -- Kevin Kouzmanoff was sent to get an MRI on his ailing back Tuesday afternoon, the results of which he said after the A's 7-5 loss to the Mariners showed "nothing serious."

The injured third baseman suffered lower back spasms in the fifth inning Sunday against the Angels, and manager Bob Geren said there is no timetable for his return. Kouzmanoff reiterated that notion, saying it's really a "day-to-day thing."

Kouzmanoff has a history of back problems after falling down dugout stairs while attempting to catch a foul ball in Arizona Fall League action six years ago. Since then, he's experienced lower back spasms nearly every year, but only for a handful of days.

As of Tuesday, the 29-year-old infielder had appeared in 132 of the club's 138 games, making him one of Oakland's most consistent offensive and defensive presences. In his stead, Geren said he plans to platoon Jeff Larish and Steve Tolleson, the latter receiving the start at third Tuesday.

Club to skip fifth starter's spot this week

OAKLAND -- Manager Bob Geren confirmed Tuesday that the A's, who optioned righty Vin Mazzaro to Triple-A on Monday, will skip the fifth starter's spot with Thursday's off-day.

Oakland won't look for another start from the fifth spot until Monday or Tuesday in Kansas City, Geren said. Reliever Boof Bonser, who has experience starting, is an option, as is dipping down into the Minor League roster.

Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden will face Boston starting this weekend, and Geren said he may give Gio Gonzalez an extra day of rest by bringing in a fifth starter Monday.

Mazzaro's demotion came as somewhat of a surprise given the timing, but both Geren and assistant general manager David Forst said the young right-hander needs to gain consistent command in the Minors, where he's slated to start Sacramento's playoff game Friday.

A's select architect for proposed stadium

OAKLAND -- The A's announced Tuesday that they have formally selected 360 Architecture as the architect for the club's proposed new stadium, the implementation of which is dependent on a decision from Major League Baseball.

A's co-owner Lew Wolff soon hopes to hear from Commissioner Bud Selig, who is awaiting a report from the three-panel committee he appointed in March 2009 to study the A's stadium operations, particularly one involving San Jose that would involve territorial rights.

The city of San Jose is considering asking for voter approval to build a ballpark for the A's there, but the San Francisco Giants have publicly stated that they would oppose the move due to an encroachment on their territorial rights to Santa Clara County, where they have a Class A team.

Wolff is also co-owner of Major League Soccer's San Jose Earthquakes, which also appointed 360 Architecture on Tuesday as the architect for a potential new stadium.

360 Architecture specializes in the planning and design of professional and collegiate sports facilities, including recent notable projects like New Meadowlands Stadium, home of both the New York Giants and New York Jets.

Both the A's and Earthquake stadiums are planned to be constructed privately, with no public money provided. The Earthquakes stadium is slated to be built as the anchor of a new development near San Jose International Airport. The A's, however, have to wait on Selig's word before deciding on a location.

Sister inspires Clemente candidate Breslow

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The relief help Craig Breslow lends to the A's is undeniable, but at the end of the day, it pales in comparison to the aid he's offered in the community, a reason for which he's been selected as the club's candidate for the annual Roberto Clemente Award presented by Chevy.

Breslow exudes quite the passion for helping children through medicine, and to that end, he created the Strike 3 Foundation in 2008. He uses the foundation to honor his sister Lesley, a pediatric thyroid cancer survivor, in hopes of heightening awareness, mobilizing support and raising funds for childhood cancer research.

Since the time of its founding, Breslow has hosted a handful of charity events, many of which took place this season, thanks to a growing support base.

"It's definitely the year we've gained the most momentum, had the most widespread recognition and financially generated the most revenue," Breslow said. "Most importantly, there are more people familiar with the Strike 3 Foundation and what we do who weren't a year ago. Because we're still young and we're still growing, I think that's as important as the dollars that were raised."

All 30 award nominees, including Breslow, have immersed themselves in the type of humanitarian and community efforts that distinguished the life of Clemente, a life that ended at age 38 on New Year's Eve, 1972, with the crash of a plane aboard which he was personally delivering aid to Nicaraguan earthquake victims.

"It's obviously very humbling," Breslow said of the nomination, "but I would imagine that all the people under consideration don't do the work that they do for recognition. But whether I'm fortunate enough to be recognized or not, it's not going to dissuade or discourage me from continuing to do the work."

Fans will once again have the opportunity to participate in the selection of the national winner. They can cast votes for any of the 30 club nominees through Oct. 8.

The fan-ballot winner will be tallied as one vote among those cast by a special selection panel of baseball dignitaries and media members. The panel includes Commissioner Bud Selig and Vera Clemente, widow of the Hall of Fame right fielder.

Voting fans also will be automatically registered for a chance to win a trip for four to the 2010 World Series to see the national winner presented with the Roberto Clemente Award.

In the meantime, Breslow will be honored by the A's for his consideration in a pregame ceremony before Wednesday's home contest against the Mariners at the Oakland Coliseum. Looking on will be teammate Andrew Bailey, who has joined forces with his fellow reliever by jumping on board with the Strike 3 Foundation as Director of Development.

"His sister having cancer and being a survivor, he's always said the charity's more or less a celebration of the good things that can happen, the feel-good stories that do happen with cancer," Bailey said. "You hear so many times [that] young kids are suffering through hard times, and for someone to survive all that treatment and go on to live a full and unrestricted life is something to celebrate rather than to be upset about."

"The charity is obviously big in my heart as well, for what he's doing. I kind of look at things a little differently now."

Ratto: The 'In The Race' A's

Ray Ratto, CSNBayArea.com

The art of determining when a team is actually "in the race" is largely a matter of taste. But most tastemakers agree that the Oakland A's, well, aren't.

In general, one is not "ITR" if one's team is more than one series behind the team it wishes to overtake, and the A's are a full week behind the Texas Rangers with less than four weeks remaining. In fact, at their present rate of success, they can catch the Rangers only if Texas goes 3-21 from here on out.

But frankly, it would be worth grinding through nights like Tuesday to see the A's pull it off, because if nothing else, they would, without question or historical antecedent, be the weirdest postseason participant ever.

Sure, there were the 1914 Braves, and the 1944 Browns, and the 1951 Giants. But nobody brings the mutant quite like these A's.

And in fairness, they do tend to linger longer than most mediocre teams. They have a penchant for nearly resuscitating a lot of dead games, as they did Tuesday against Seattle, and even though they lost, 7-5, they did . . .

Oh, like hell they did. They spent eight innings sucking what little life there was inside the building (I mean, there's only so much that having poker star Phil Hellmuth throw out the first ball can do for you), then tried to de-fib the evening with a three-run ninth.

But their strange sense of rhythm betrayed them yet again. Having chased Brandon League in the ninth and forced the Mariners to go to their closer, former Giant David Aardsma, they sent the slumping Cliff Pennington to the plate to try and drive in newcomer Jeremy Hermida and Steve Tolleson.

To the strains of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." By Devo. Devo, for God's sake.

And this, after luring an announced crowd of 10,067 that impersonated a crowd of 4,500 to the park and seeing to it that they never emitted a noise unless prompted by the omnipresent scoreboard woman, Kara Tsuboi.

Even the way they fell behind spoke of stealth. The Mariners, easily the worst hitting team on Earth, strung together a five-run, seven-hit second inning in which the only hard-hit balls were the second and third outs. Dallas Braden lost his 11th game of the year, and the first in which all the damage was done by paper cut.

But still, they're not doomed yet, as bizarre as that seems when you watch them for any extended length of time. The Rangers are still scuffling with their traditional September wobbles, the Angels are going nowhere fast, and the Mariners left nowhere sometime ago because they couldn't afford the high rent.

And the A's have just enough pitching and just enough home games and just enough . . . well, I'm not exactly sure, really . . . to hang around awhile longer. They don't look like they have a hope in hell, except there they are, on the very distant fringe of the horizon. Not "in the race" by any means, but not yet out.

And every time the Rangers cack up another game, you wait for those eminently resistible A's to do something about it.

So far, they've resisted the temptation to make Texas sweat, or to inspire their own followers to defy convention and come out to the park on their own. Tuesday, they resisted it with considerable vigor.

But you'd love to see them sneak in anyway, if only to see if they could muster up the gumption to draw people to this secret party. They'd have to give up bobbleheads, jerseys, beach umbrellas, fireworks and late model sedans to every ticket holder, and they'd have to figure out a way to win while being no-hit, and they'd have to do it with a roster that has achieved Billy Beane's greatest goal – complete anonymity.

Oh, to hear Jon Miller on the Sunday Night Game lean into his microphone and say in that deep stentorian voice of his, "And here's ANOTHER guy I have never heard of in my entire life."

It won't happen. We don't live that well. But we can dream. We can drink, and we can dream. And we can answer Jon with one voice:

"Beats the hell out of us, pal. We just got here ourselves."

A's lose to Mariners, 7-5

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Doug Fister won for the second time in nearly four months, Adam Moore homered and the Seattle Mariners broke out of a long scoring slump to beat the Oakland Athletics 7-5 on Tuesday night.

Fister (5-11) scattered five hits over five innings and pitched out of several jams while leading the Mariners to their first win at the Coliseum since Opening Day. Seattle had lost six straight in Oakland since then.

Kurt Suzuki singled twice and drove in two runs for the A's, who missed a chance to gain ground on first-place Texas in the AL West.

Quirky luck not on Braden's side this time as Mariners rough up A's, 7-5

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

To throw a perfect game as Dallas Braden did on May 9 earlier this season, you need a certain amount of luck.

On Tuesday night at the Coliseum, luck was not on Braden's side as the Seattle Mariners strung together some crazy-good fortune to beat the A's, 7-5, and keep Oakland from gaining ground on the American League West division lead.

Certainly, Braden can never complain about being unlucky, as perhaps he used up a lifetime of serendipity on Mother's Day this year.

But what happened in the second inning was one of those rare sequences where you can do most everything right and still get scored upon, again and again and again and again.

Baseball's cool that way.

It all started with the home-plate umpire (Jerry Crawford) and his poor call on a 3-1 pitch to Franklin Gutierrez. The Seattle batter clearly went around on his checked swing, but Crawford called ball four to start the inning innocently enough.

Jose Lopez followed with what was the only decently-hit ball of the inning, a single to left field with Gutierrez stopping at second.

And then it got crazy.

Casey Kotchman hit a flare down the left-field line than just landed fair, allowing Gutierrez to score. Adam Moore hit a sacrifice fly to score Lopez from third, but then Matt Tuiasosopo hit a weak grounder to third -- and beat the throw by A's third baseman Steve Tolleson for an infield hit.

Josh Wilson hit a weak loop that landed in short centerfield to score Kotchman, and then Ichiro Suzuki hit another soft flare to left field for another hit that scored Tuiasosopo.

Still, with one out, Chone Figgins hit a skunker off the end of his bat which found the outfield turf to load the bases. Then, in the final bit of misfortune, Russell Branyan shattered his bat -- but managed to get the ball just into short right field to score Wilson.

The Mariners went 6-for-6 with runners in scoring position in that sequence, and not one of the balls was hit hard. The inning started with a bad umpiring call, and it just went downhill from there.

"Brutal to quite brutal," Braden told reporters after the game. "I've seen less bleeding at a hemophiliac convention. That was rough."

Indeed.

Although the A's lefty managed to strike out Gutierrez and get Lopez to fly out for the final two outs, the damage was already done.

And the Mariners, with the worst offense in the AL that had gone 11 straight games without scoring more than three runs in any single contest, had a win that defied common sense.

Coming into the game, Braden had the fourth-lowest ERA in the AL since the All-Star Break and had allowed only one run in his last 14 innings.

But sometimes, luck just isn't on your side.

A's, Quakes have architect for proposed stadiums

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — The Oakland Athletics, along with the MLS San Jose Earthquakes, have selected an architect to design the teams' proposed privately funded stadiums.

While the San Francisco Giants hold the territorial rights to San Jose, Commissioner Bud Selig could soon make recommendations on how to proceed.

He formed a committee to study the issue and has regularly said the run-down Oakland Coliseum isn't a viable long-term option for the small-market A's.

A's and Earthquakes owner Lew Wolff announced Tuesday that 360 Architecture had been selected for the projects. The company handled the New Meadowlands Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., the home of the Jets and Giants.

Team spokesman Bob Rose says the A's have no estimate of the size or cost of the new stadium if they're allowed to move.

A's pick architect for San Jose baseball stadium

Eric Young, San Francisco Business Times

The Oakland A's don't know if they will move to San Jose, but that is not stopping the club from picking an architect in case they do.

A's owner Lew Wolff said 360 Architecture has been selected to design a new home for the team.

The A's said they are awaiting a decision from **Major League Baseball** whether the club can move to San Jose. MLB formed a committee more than a year ago to study the issue. It's unclear when that three-member group will finish its work.

San Jose has been courting the A's for some time. The city is negotiating to buy enough downtown acres to allow it to assemble land for a ballpark.

Wolff, who also owns the **San Jose Earthquakes** soccer franchise, said 360 Architecture will also design a new soccer stadium in San Jose. The stadium planned for the Earthquakes will be built as an anchor for a mixed use residential, retail, research and development and hotel site next to San Jose International Airport.

360 Architecture specializes in designing professional and collegiate sports facilities. Notable projects include New Meadowlands Stadium, home of football's **New York Jets** and **New York Giants**. 360 Architecture has offices in San Francisco, Dallas, Kansas City and Columbus, Ohio.

A's could contend, but owners would rather move to San Jose

Ann Killion, SI.com, 9/7/2010

The Oakland Athletics didn't surface in the revenue sharing report leaked last month to Associated Press, which saved owners **Lew Wolff** and **John Fisher** a few days of embarrassment.

That top-secret information provided evidence how teams like the Pittsburgh Pirates and Florida Marlins reap millions of dollars by losing and keeping fans away.

The A's are certainly in the same situation, with the third-lowest payroll in the league and the second-lowest attendance. It would be a bit distasteful to have the details of their role as a baseball welfare recipient exposed, especially while Fisher's family has a fine art collection being shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ("Calder to Warhol," running through Sept. 19).

Fisher is a billionaire, whose vast wealth comes from the Gap. He and frontman Wolff continue to wait for **Bud Selig's** blue-ribbon commission to rule that they can move to San Jose because Oakland is an untenable situation. The panel was appointed 18 months ago but there's been no hint that it is close to a recommendation.

Wolff and Fisher -- who have been eyeing San Jose since they bought the team in 2005 -- would like you to believe that they've done all they can to make it work in Oakland, though boosting their team's payroll and adding pieces that could help fuel a serious playoff run hasn't been among their strategies.

Meanwhile, while the revenue sharing profits roll in and the fans stay away with depressing regularity, the A's are hanging around in the playoff picture. Though they struggled at the end of August -- thanks in large part to a four-game sweep at Yankee Stadium -- they appear destined to break their trend of finishing in the bottom of the AL West (3rd in 2007, 3rd in 2008, last in 2009). From their perch in second place, they remain within site of the Texas Rangers, seven games back. "Weird things can happen," said catcher **Kurt Suzuki** on Monday, a day when the A's won and the Rangers lost their fourth in a row. The teams play one more series -- four games in Oakland -- later this month.

Exhibit A of weirdness is the San Diego Padres' swoon, which has caught the attention of every team still hanging around and nurturing postseason dreams.

The A's have hung around thanks to the strength of their young pitching staff. **Trevor Cahill**, **Gio Gonzalez** and **Dallas Braden** are all among the league leaders in ERA. **Brett Anderson** earned a win on Monday with a four-hit outing against Seattle.

But the fifth man in the rotation is the odd man out. The A's sent starter **Vin Mazzaro** down to Triple-A on Monday -- a backward move at a time when most teams are expanding their rosters with September call-ups. Mazzaro got in trouble on Sunday, giving up a two-run home run on a 3-0 count to the Angels, and manager **Bob Geren** was clearly exasperated. "He needs to improve his command," said Geren, whose team has an off-day and may choose to skip a spot in the rotation. The move -- not willing to risk another bad start by Mazzaro in these critical days in September -- leads an observer to believe that the A's think they're a contender. But they're a hard team to figure out. The A's were in virtually the same position at the July trade deadline and clearly in need of some offensive help, yet chose to do nothing. General manager **Billy Beane** was happy to uncharacteristically sit on the sidelines and do nothing.

Whatever happens this season, the A's pitching would seem to be laying a strong foundation for the future. However, don't ask the dwindling A's fan base to get too excited about that. They've already seen two versions of a foundation-worthy rotation dismantled and sold for parts before it reached its full potential: **Mike Mulder**, **Tim Hudson** and **Barry Zito** in the early 2000s; **Dan Haren**, **Joe Blanton** and **Rich Harden** a few years later.

You'll excuse the fans if they don't believe they'll see this version of the A's lead the team to glory. For years, virtually every A's player that becomes a star is shipped out, leaving the fans without a draw to hook their interest. That strategy, as much as anything, has kept fans away from Oakland. Over the weekend --three day games in beautiful weather -- the team drew a total of 42,221. That's about 4,000 fewer fans than the Yankees average for one game.

The most excitement generated at the Coliseum this summer was when a Hollywood crew showed up to film exteriors for a production of *Moneyball*, based on the book by **Michael Lewis** about Beane's ability to work the big market/small market system. **Brad Pitt**, who will play Beane, generated a star power that is generally absent from the Coliseum.

The A's are still playing Moneyball. Low payroll, high revenue-sharing profits. With a few more pieces they could be making a serious run at the playoffs. But most of their energy is focused on an attempt to run out of Oakland.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

River Cats host Rainiers in first round

Sacramento River Cats

One game at a time.

That's how the Sacramento River Cats pulled off the biggest comeback in franchise history, rallying back from a 12.5-game deficit in the standings to clinch their ninth division title in 11 seasons.

"In baseball, the funny thing is anything can happen," said outfielder Michael Taylor. "It's been a really fun ride to be 12.5 out and come back. You have to take it one step at a time."

Sacramento's Pacific Coast League Pacific Conference Championship opponent will be the Tacoma Rainiers. The first-round series will open with Games 1 and 2 at Raley Field on Wednesday and Thursday nights (both 7:05 p.m. starts). Games 3 (Friday, 7 p.m.), 4 (Saturday, 12 p.m.) and 5 (Sunday, 7 p.m.) will be played at Safeco Field in Seattle.

Right-hander Clayton Mortensen (13-6, 4.25) will start Game 1 for Sacramento, with right-hander Travis Banwart (4-2, 4.81) throwing Game 2. Tacoma will counter with Andrew Baldwin (9-7, 4.90) in Game 1 and Blake Beavan (2-2, 6.47) in Game 2.

Tacoma (74-69) clinched the Pacific North Division title on Sunday with a 9-0 win over Fresno. Sacramento (79-65) split the season series 8-8 with the Rainiers, with each team going 4-4 at their home ballpark.

The River Cats have faced Tacoma three previous times in the postseason, including last season when Sacramento took three of four games. The River Cats split the first two games in Tacoma, and then closed the series with wins in Games 3 and 4 at Raley Field. First baseman Chris Carter hit a home run in each of the four games in the series. The slugger's four postseason homers tied a River Cats record, set three other times. The River Cats lost to the Memphis Redbirds in the PCL Championship Series.

The River Cats also faced Tacoma in 2001 and 2005. In 2001, Sacramento held a 2-1 series lead before losing Games 4 and 5 at Raley Field to lose the series. In 2005, Sacramento won Games 1 and 2 in Tacoma before losing Games 3, 5 and 5 at Raley Field. This is the first time Sacramento has opened a series against Tacoma at home.

The River Cats' nine division titles this century are the most of any major American professional sports team, with the New York Yankees and Detroit Red Wings coming closest with eight.

The River Cats season looked bleak for Sacramento in mid-June, when the team trailed the Fresno Grizzlies by 12.5 games in the South Division standings. But Sacramento clawed back, closing to 6.0 games back in early July and catching the Grizzlies on July 22. From there, it was a battle for the playoffs between Highway 99 rivals. The River Cats surged ahead during a late August five-game series between the clubs, taking four of five games and a 1.0-game lead in the standings.

"We came a long way," said reliever Jon Hunton. "We know that we're not done yet. We struggled in the beginning of the season, especially at home, but we stayed strong as a team through the whole season."

Wright slotted to start Game 3 of TL Playoffs

Shawn Shroyer, Midland Reporter-Telegram

In his 11 seasons in the minor leagues, Matt Wright had seen it all. Or so he thought.

Then he made his 2010 debut in the Korean Baseball Organization for the KIA Tigers. It was literally foreign to him.

"Baseball's their main sport, so their atmosphere is almost like Game 1 of a championship every night," Wright said. "They have fans that are in the stands that are loud and crazy. They play songs that the whole stands will chant. It's a little more intense there."

Wright's stay in Korea lasted two starts before a hamstring injury sent him back to the United States. But the Oakland Athletics, who invited Wright to spring training, jumped at the opportunity to pick him up and assigned him to the Midland RockHounds.

Now he'll be entrusted to take the mound for the most pivotal game of the RockHounds' Texas League South Divisional Series with the Frisco RoughRiders.

Wright has been a steady presence in the RockHounds starting rotation, going 7-3 with a 3.20 ERA in 15 starts. He's been all business on the mound, working quickly, pounding the strike zone and issuing 12 walks in 78 2/3 innings. And there's no reason to think he won't carry that mentality over into his start in Game 3 of the RockHounds' best-of-five series. Being the Game 3 starter, Wright will have the opportunity to either clinch a sweep for the RockHounds, avoid a sweep by the RoughRiders, or put his club in position to take the series in Game 4.

The atmosphere for Game 3 at Citibank Ballpark likely won't compare to that of the KIA Tigers' Moodeung Stadium, but Wright's time in Korea was the beginning of a season of growth for the veteran right-hander.

"Korea was fun, it was a good experience, but there's nothing like playing baseball in the states," Wright said. "Thank goodness Oakland gave me another opportunity in Double-A. I feel like I've done fairly well and that was my goal, just to pitch and help the guys win. We're in the playoffs, so I feel like I've done that."

Wright didn't have to arrive in Midland with such an attitude. He'd spent the last three seasons and part of 2006 in Triple-A with the Atlanta Braves and Kansas City Royals organizations. He worked out in spring training with the A's Triple-A club. He's proven he can compete at that level.

Rather than sulk, he's become a more well-rounded pitcher, saying his assignment to Midland has been "a blessing in disguise." In particular, he's developed his changeup this season, something he said he probably wouldn't have been able to do in Triple-A, where pitchers are expected to already have their pitches refined. In turn, the RockHounds have benefited from having Wright in their clubhouse.

"His clubhouse presence and his veteran leadership are big," RockHounds pitching coach Scott Emerson said. "He's pitched at higher levels. His ability to help out during pitching meetings about game planning, he's done a great job helping the pitching staff."

RockHounds manager Darren Bush said in addition to throwing his changeup more, Wright has improved at controlling opponents' running games because teams in the Texas League are so aggressive on the bases. It's a lesson Wright began learning in Korea, where he said players are contact hitters who rely on stealing bases to move from station to station.

Wright will face a similar lineup in the RoughRiders. Frisco's leading home run hitters are Joey Butler and Andy Jenkins, who each have 10 in a combined 876 at bats. On the other hand, Renny Osuna leads the RoughRiders with 20 stolen bases in 119 games, Guilder Rodriguez has 15 in 96 games and Engle Beltre already has eight steals in 47 games.

Of course, Wright already knows that. His start on Friday will be his third straight against the RoughRiders. He's gone 1-1 his last two times out with six runs allowed in 12 1/3 innings. The RoughRiders got the better of him in his last start, but it's a two-way street in the Texas League when it comes to pitchers' familiarity with lineups.

"It's kind of a cat and mouse game," Wright said. "You just have to try to locate your pitches. They know what you've got and they've seen you. I know what their hitters can do. It's all about execution on both sides."

SCHEDULE OVERLOAD: Today will be the seventh time the RockHounds and RoughRiders have met in their last 11 games. By the end of the series, the two clubs might have played eight straight games. If a Texas League title weren't on the line, the teams might be tired of seeing each other.

"It gets to that point, but at the end of the day, it's baseball and we've got a chance to go win a championship," Weeks said.

Despite the way the schedule broke down to end the season, right-hander Matt Wright is the only RockHounds pitcher making his third straight start against the RoughRiders, although Anthony Capra will be making back-to-back starts against the RoughRiders. Still, RockHounds pitching coach Scott Emerson said he feels like Wright has the upper hand.

"He has the advantage," Emerson said. "He's the ultimate professional. He has so many minor league innings, he knows what to look for. He's always asking questions between innings when he's pitching and he's asking questions when he's not pitching. He's very observant of the game."

SERIES MATCH UP: With their victory in the regular season finale, the RockHounds improved to 13-15 against the RoughRiders. The RockHounds are 7-7 at home against their division rivals, but 6-8 at Dr Pepper Ballpark in Frisco.

As those records show, the two clubs have been even head-to-head. While the RoughRiders have hit .277 as a team against the RockHounds and their pitchers have posted a 4.90 ERA, the RockHounds lineup has hit .270 against Frisco pitching and Midland's staff has posted a 4.31 ERA against Frisco bats.

TODAY'S PROBABLE PITCHER: The RockHounds will send Graham Godfrey (0-1, 3.86) to the mound today to face Frisco's Richard Bleier (7-11, 5.04). Godfrey actually started the first game of the playoffs last season for the RockHounds.

It's been a season of mixed results for Godfrey, who began the season at Triple-A Sacramento. But after posting a 4-7 record and 5.59 ERA in 106.1 innings with 87 strikeouts to 53 walks, he was assigned to Midland. In five appearances with the RockHounds, he's had a two-inning relief appearance in which he allowed three runs, one start that ended after a third of an inning due to injury and another where he allowed five runs on 10 hits in 5 1/3 innings. But against two good offenses in Northwest Arkansas and San Antonio, Godfrey tossed 11 shutout innings, allowing eight hits and recording 12 strikeouts to four walks.

Bleier will be making his third straight start against the RockHounds and fourth since Aug. 4. On Aug. 4, he allowed five runs in seven innings and lost.

CALIFORNIA LEAGUE PLAYOFFS

TAKING RIVALRY TO NEXT LEVEL

STOCKTON, MODESTO FEEL EMOTION OF PLAYOFF SERIES

By Jason Anderson, Stockton Record

STOCKTON - The disappointment Modesto felt when the Oakland Athletics moved their Single-A affiliate to Stockton in 2005 has subsided, and the players who touched off a bench-clearing brawl in a 2008 game are long gone.

Even so, the dusty stretch of highway between Stockton and Modesto is too short and the history between their teams too long for this to feel like any ordinary matchup.

The Ports held a light workout Tuesday afternoon at Stockton Ballpark in preparation for Game 1 of their best-of-three California League North Division playoff series against the Modesto Nuts at 7:05 p.m. today at John Thurman Field. Players

and coaches move too quickly in the minor leagues to get wrapped up in longstanding rivalries, but Ports starter Shawn Haviland said he senses the emotion in the stands when his team plays Modesto.

"You can kind of hear the fans chirping back and forth at each other," Haviland said. "It's pretty neat that it means a little more than just Ports-Nuts. It's kind of two towns against each other."

The Ports won 14 consecutive games and went 21-7 in August, putting them in position to win the second-half division title after finishing 14 games out of first place in the first half.

The Nuts, who were the Modesto A's when they were an Athletics affiliate from 1978-2004, won their last six games to secure a postseason bid after trailing Visalia by four games in the wild-card race on Sept. 1.

"Obviously, they're playing well, but this last month, we've played very well, too, and I think we have as much confidence as they have going into this game," Ports manager Steve Scarsone said.

Haviland will oppose Modesto's Rob Scahill in the series opener. Game 2 on Thursday and, if necessary, Game 3 on Friday will be in Stockton.

The winner will face the San Jose Giants in the best-of-five North Division finals beginning Saturday in San Jose. The Giants were 42-25 in the first half but 31-39 in the second half, finishing 12 games behind the Ports.

The North Division finals winner will meet the South Division winner in the California League championship series on Sept. 16-20. The Ports are seeking their 12th title and second since 2008.

"Both of us want to get to San Jose because we know they're a good team, but they're beatable," Ports shortstop Grant Green said. "It's going to be a dogfight, but we're looking forward to it."

Stockton led the North Division with 143 home runs this season. Green is hitting .318 with 20 home runs and 87 RBI. Stephen Parker is hitting .296 with 21 home runs and 98 RBI. Michael Spina, who leads the team with 23 home runs, is hitting .253 with 88 RBI.

Modesto was last in the California League with 84 home runs and lost a key contributor when Jordan Pacheco, who ranked among the league leaders with a .321 average, was promoted to Double-A last month.

One of Stockton's greatest strengths has been a pitching staff that posted a 2.99 ERA in August. Right-hander Justin Murray, who will oppose Modesto starter Juan Nicasio in Game 2, went 3-1 with a 1.82 ERA in seven August starts. Left-hander Ben Hornbeck went 6-1 after the All-Star break but is not scheduled to start against Modesto.

The Nuts are third in the California League with a 4.50 ERA. Right-hander Ethan Hollingsworth won his last five starts, improved to 12-8 to tie for the league lead in wins and has the second-lowest ERA at 3.31, but he will not pitch against the Ports after starting Monday's regular-season finale.