

A's News Clips, Wednesday, September 22, 2010

Trevor Cahill continues home dominance, pitches Oakland A's past Chicago White Sox

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Trevor Cahill has been nearly untouchable at the Oakland Coliseum this season, and surely it goes beyond the home uniforms and "White Rabbit" playing over the P.A. system as he takes the mound to start the game.

Whatever the reasons, Cahill continued his mastery in front of the home fans Tuesday night. He breezed through eight innings as the A's beat the Chicago White Sox 7-2 before a crowd of 11,158.

The A's are doing their best to stay in the American League West race, and first-place Texas seems obliged to help. Oakland won its third straight, while the Rangers dropped their third in a row with a loss in Anaheim to the Angels.

In three days, the A's have shaved their deficit from 10 games to seven. If they can complete a sweep this afternoon and Texas loses again, it sets up an interesting scenario with the Rangers arriving in Oakland on Thursday for the start of a four-game series.

Texas' magic number remains at six, with 12 games left for both teams.

"Obviously, it's still possible," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Meanwhile, the White Sox's eighth consecutive loss clinched the AL Central title for the Minnesota Twins.

Cahill (17-7) did his part to keep Oakland's AL West hopes alive, out-dueling White Sox left-hander Mark Buehrle (12-12) and lowering his ERA to 2.81.

Mixing his curveball and changeup effectively, the right-hander allowed six hits over eight innings and struck out seven. He surrendered single

runs in the fifth and sixth -- with the A's already in front 5-0.

Cahill, 22, became the A's first 17-game winner since Mark Mulder in 2004, and only the New York Yankees' CC Sabathia and Boston's Jon Lester have more wins in the majors since May 1. (Cahill made his first major league start this season April 30, losing to Toronto.)

And Cahill's been at his stingiest inside the unfriendly hitting confines of the Coliseum. He moved to 11-2 with a 1.63 ERA in 14 home starts, compared to 6-5 with a 4.17 ERA in 14 road outings. Entering the night, he had the lowest home ERA and opponents' batting average (.190) in the league.

"It's just one of those things," Cahill said. "I'm used to the backdrop (behind home plate), the weather. Even in the bullpen, I feel a little sharper at home than on the road. Plus, it's a good place to pitch."

With 17 wins, Cahill matched the most victories by an AL pitcher 22 years old or younger since 1986 (three others have notched 17 victories since then).

Buehrle's experiences in Oakland haven't been as fond. He's 4-13 in 27 appearances against the A's and just 1-7 at the Coliseum.

A's catcher Kurt Suzuki had two RBIs for the second straight night. Cliff Pennington drilled a two-run double to highlight the A's three-run rally in the fourth that made it 5-0. Rajai Davis went 3 for 5 and had an RBI, stolen base and run in the A's two-run eighth.

One night after snapping an 0-for-33 streak to start his big league career, left fielder Chris Carter singled in his first two at-bats.

The A's have seemingly dropped off the map in the AL West several times, only to reignite some hope in their fans. At 76-74, they are two games above .500 for the first time since being 56-54 on Aug. 8.

"I think we gave up looking at the standings," Cahill said. "Even if we're 20 games back, we're just going out there trying to win ballgames."

Oakland A's notebook: Manager Bob Geren touts first baseman Daric Barton as Gold Glove-worthy

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Manager Bob Geren has mentioned before how much he thinks Daric Barton has developed as a defensive player.

Before Tuesday's game against the Chicago White Sox, Geren touted his first baseman as an AL Gold Glove candidate.

"With Barton, you could definitely make the argument that he's a Gold Glover," Geren said. "(Picking) balls in the dirt, he's got real good range, an accurate throwing arm "..."

Managers and coaches choose Gold Glove winners, and Barton has some factors working against him:

There's crowded competition at first base, with the New York Yankees' Mark Teixeira (a three-time winner) and Tampa Bay's Carlos Pena (the 2008 winner) among the candidates. Both are much-higher profile players with reputations as dangerous hitters, and there's no doubt that comes into play even though the award is for defense.

Barton also entered Tuesday with 10 errors, tied for second most among AL first basemen. But the high error total isn't reflective of how solid he's been with the glove.

Geren added second baseman Mark Ellis as being Gold Glove-worthy, along with a surprise name -- pitcher Trevor Cahill.

"He's had a great year fielding. He's a ground-ball pitcher, and he gets himself in position to field," Geren said.

Barton left Tuesday's game after the fifth inning with a left thigh contusion.

Ben Sheets was voted the 2010 winner of the Jim "Catfish" Hunter Award, given to the A's player who best exemplifies the competitive spirit of the Hall of Fame pitcher. Sheets made just 20 starts before an elbow injury ended his season. It wasn't known until he underwent Aug. 9 surgery just how bad his right elbow had been all year. He required replacement of his ulnar collateral ligament, as well as repair work on his flexor tendon and pronator tendon. "It's a great honor," Sheets said in a conference call. "Being on our team, I think you could have blindfolded picked a guy and come up with a worthy recipient."

Closer Andrew Bailey will have his right elbow examined Thursday by Dr. James Andrews in Pensacola, Fla. "... White Sox first baseman Paul Konerko on A's pitcher Gio Gonzalez: "I don't think I've seen a better left-handed curve from anyone, not this year." Konerko went down swinging on a Gonzalez curveball Monday.

Chin Music: Kouzmanoff returns to A's lineup

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 9/21/2010 6:18PM

There was so much injury news last night, what with Coco Crisp being declared out for the season (most likely) and the revelation of Andrew Bailey's elbow problem. Today, the A's actually welcome somebody back to the fold. Kevin Kouzmanoff returns to third base and is batting fifth after missing the past 13 games with lower back spasms. The A's will welcome all the right-handed bats they can find against White Sox lefty Mark Buehrle, who starts tonight.

Here's the lineups, with a little shakeup in Chicago's batting order:

A's — Davis CF, Barton 1B, Ellis 2B, Suzuki C, Kouzmanoff 3B, Cust DH, Carson RF, Carter LF, Pennington SS; Cahill RHP.

White Sox — Pierre LF, Vizquel 2B, Manny Ramirez DH, Pierzynski C, Kotsay 1B, Alexei Ramirez SS, Teahen RF, Morel 3B, De Aza CF; Buehrle LHP.

—Bailey will have his elbow examined Thursday at the Andrews Institute in Pensacola, Fla. Last night, he said he wasn't willing to rule himself out for the season. But the A's surely will be cautious with their second-year closer. As for who handles the ninth inning, A's manager Bob Geren said he'll handle each game individually and match up relievers when it gets to the late innings. Craig Breslow picked up last night's save, and Boof Bonser — typically a long man — made a rare appearance in the seventh to help protect a lead.

Peterson column: Shattering maple bats are an ever-present danger

By Gary Peterson, Oakland Tribune columnist

Brad Ziegler was barely into his follow-through when he saw the jagged shard of maple helicoptering in his direction. It was traveling fast enough to present a 9-1-1 caliber menace, but slow enough for him to process a quick thought before its arrival.

"I was like, of course something like this would happen to me since I've been so outspoken about it," the A's relief pitcher recalled Tuesday afternoon.

Ziegler can joke about it now. He was able to turn and duck his head before being struck by what was left of a maple bat used by the Angels' Mike Napoli. The pointed end of the shard opened a gash on Ziegler's right shoulder blade.

This was Sept. 3. Ziegler, who has been talking to the players' union about the dangers of maple bats since the beginning of last season, pitched again the next day.

Chicago Cubs rookie Tyler Colvin wasn't so lucky over the weekend. While running the bases, Colvin was hit by the shattered remains of a maple bat used by teammate Wellington Castillo. Colvin's upper chest was punctured, and he had to be hospitalized. His season is over.

It could have been worse. Someday it will be.

Maple bats first appeared in the major leagues a little more than 10 years ago. Today they are ubiquitous, to the point that they may outnumber the traditional bats made of northern ash.

Players like maple wood. It's denser than ash, and physics suggest the density causes batted balls to travel faster and farther. But there's another difference between maple and ash.

"Maple explodes," said A's catcher Kurt Suzuki, who swings a maple bat. "You've seen it a bunch."

When a maple bat explodes, the top half is often launched like a Scud missile. It could fly anywhere -- at the pitcher, a base runner, a coach. Into the stands.

"I understand that for players there's an inherent danger of being on the field," said Ziegler, the A's union representative. "It's the fans I'm concerned about. If a bat goes into the stands and stabs a little kid or something, it's going to be devastating for the game."

Colvin's injury has heated up talk of a ban on maple. Don't hold your breath.

"People say ban maple bats," Major League Baseball executive Mike Manfred told the Chicago Tribune. "We couldn't play if we banned maple bats. There's not enough ash available."

According to a recent story in the Parkersburg (W.Va.) News and Sentinel, a beetle first detected in this country 15 years ago has killed more than 30 million ash trees in North America. The story notes that 7.5 billion ash trees remain at risk, suggesting that what has been lost is a small fraction of what's still available.

Manfred also noted that more rigorous inspection of maple bats reduced the number of "multiple-piece fractures" 30 percent from 2008 to '09. Such incidents are down approximately 15 percent this season.

"I definitely think there's been a huge improvement there," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Like anything else, the longer something's researched, the better they get at it."

But "better" is a relative term. You don't have to watch much baseball to see a bat fragment take wing. In 2008 alone, Pirates hitting coach Don Long had his cheek sliced by a broken bat, a fan at Dodger Stadium had her jaw broken and umpire Brian O'Nora had his head bloodied. Earlier this month at AT&T Park a "multi-piece fracture" went whizzing into the stands near the Giants dugout. Fortunately, a fan, using a fielder's glove, was able to stand up and deflect the fragment to the ground without anyone getting hurt.

One manager who used to call the A's dugout home believes baseball is needlessly cheating the odds.

"Get rid of the maple bats. Absolutely, 100 percent," Ken Macha, now the manager of the Milwaukee Brewers, told MLB.com.

Or extend the screen behind the plate to at least protect fans who, Macha noted, often are "not paying attention to anything.

Or experiment with birch, as Ziegler suggested. Or bamboo -- which, according to baseball-bats.net, has the tensile strength of steel.

Because ongoing use of maple is akin to playing Russian roulette, with some of the participants unaware they're even in the game.

And speaking of games: Omar Vizquel, the second batter in Tuesday night's A's-White Sox contest, broke his maple bat on a Trevor Cahill pitch. The head pinwheeled toward first base and died on the infield grass, another bullet dodged.

Tick, tick, tick.

A's beat White Sox, look at the bright side

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

The season is winding down with less excitement than the A's had hoped, but they had a number of pluses to point to Tuesday night.

Oakland beat the White Sox 7-2, cutting the deficit in the AL West to seven games (the White Sox loss handed the AL Central crown to the Minnesota Twins), with division-leading Texas arriving in town for a four-game series that starts Thursday.

It was the A's 76th win of the season, their most in three years, and Trevor Cahill become the A's first 17-game winner since Mark Mulder in 2004.

"The offense did a great job, the defense was solid," Cahill said. "It was kind of more a team thing."

Cahill allowed six hits, a walk and two runs in eight innings, and he struck out seven. His victory total matches the highest by an American League pitcher age 22 or younger since 1986, and he's the second Oakland pitcher to win at least 10 games in each of his first two seasons, joining Tim Hudson. Cahill, 22, has the lowest opponents average in the league, at .210 - the A's lowest mark since Mike Norris' .209 in 1980.

He is 11-2 with a 1.63 ERA at the Coliseum and, Cahill said, "Even in the bullpen I feel sharper at home."

Oakland sprinkled runs in the first, third, and fourth off Mark Buehrle, and two more in the eighth, helped along by a double steal by Rajai Davis and Jeff Larish; Davis scored on the subsequent error by catcher A.J. Pierzynski. Davis had three hits, stole a base, and scored twice, while Kurt Suzuki and Cliff Pennington each drove in two runs.

First baseman Daric Barton left after five innings with a thigh contusion incurred sliding into home in the third inning.

Before the game, Barton cited his good health all year as the reason for his major-league-leading walk total of 103. He has played in all but three games this season.

A's manager Bob Geren noted that Barton also has hit high in the order, ensuring a lot of plate appearances to go along with Barton's keen eye. Geren called Barton's strike-zone knowledge "as good as anyone I know."

Barton said he's comfortable batting second, and, he said, "I've done it to the best of my ability. Hopefully, they'll want to keep me here. I like it here."

There have been no indications that the A's are looking to move Barton, who is not yet arbitration eligible, but the team's need for a power hitter might change that, because so many sluggers play first. So does top power-hitting prospect Chris Carter, currently playing left.

Geren touted Barton as a Gold Glove candidate before the game, declaring him the "best first baseman in the league, and that's not a knock on a guy like Mark Teixeira."

Carter followed up his first career hit Monday with singles in his first two at-bats Tuesday.

Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff returned to the lineup after missing more than two weeks with back spasms.

Andrew Bailey to see doctor about elbow soreness

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Andrew Bailey actually wouldn't mind so much if his right elbow needs a minor cleanup procedure.

He said Tuesday that he's heard from several pitchers who've had Tommy John surgery that occasionally, several years later, a little spiffing up is required. Bailey, who had Tommy John surgery five years ago, said that would be preferable to something chronic, such as arthritis.

The A's closer is scheduled to visit Dr. **James Andrews** on Thursday about elbow soreness that is similar to the same issue he had this spring, which was diagnosed as tennis elbow.

With Bailey out, **Craig Breslow** and **Michael Wuertz** are likely to get more save opportunities, as they did when he was on the disabled list with an oblique strain this season. Manager **Bob Geren** also mentioned **Boof Bonser** as someone who is pitching well; Bonser earned the victory Monday with a scoreless seventh.

Sheets gets Catfish Hunter award: Starter **Ben Sheets** was named the recipient of the Jim "Catfish" Hunter Award as the A's player best exemplifying Hunter's courageous, competitive and inspirational spirit. The award is voted on by players and coaches.

"Being on that team, you could blindfold and pick a teammate and have a good recipient," Sheets said on a conference call from his home in Louisiana, where he is rehabbing from multiple elbow surgeries. "I don't know if they really like me," he added jokingly, "or if I threatened their lives."

Said Geren, "He played hard, he worked hard, he was a great example to guys. Look at the list of guys who have won this award, super people."

Other winners include **Tim Hudson**, **Mark Ellis** (twice), **Jason Kendall**, **Mike Sweeney** and **Kurt Suzuki**.

Breslow will be presented with the team's Dave Stewart Community Service award before today's game. His Strike 3 Foundation has raised nearly \$150,000 for pediatric cancer research and patient support.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Minor shuffle: In the past few days, the A's have lost low Class A affiliate Kane County (Ill.) to Kansas City and short-season Vancouver to Toronto. Geographically, replacements won't be ideal: Burlington, Iowa, is the lone Class A option, along with a New York-Penn League short-season team, probably Vermont.

Drumbeat: Kouzmanoff back in action, Bailey's exam scheduled

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 9/21/2010 4:50PM

Andrew Bailey will get his tennis elbow looked at by Dr. James Andrews on Thursday; the A's closer reiterated today that he hopes he'll be able to pitch again before the end of the season. This is the second time he's had this issue this year; he missed time during spring training with tennis elbow.

Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff is back in the lineup for the first time in more than two weeks, his back spasms all cleared up and several thorough workouts under his belt. He's batting fifth.

The consensus in the A's clubhouse is that Chris Carter might get on a nice roll now that that first big-league hit is finally out of the way. Carter got a nice hand from the minuscule crowd here last night (Monday Night Football must have halved the unusual Monday-type attendance). Carter's teammates gave him a big welcome in the dugout.

"I hope he goes 10 for 10 now," second baseman Mark Ellis said.

Manager Bob Geren spent some time lobbying for Gold Gloves for a few of his players today: When I asked about the fact that Daric Barton is leading the league in walks, Geren morphed the conversation into a plug for Barton as a Gold Glove candidate at first, Ellis at second and Trevor Cahill at pitcher.

Geren called Barton by far the best first baseman in the American League, "and that's not a knock on a guy like Mark Teixeira," he said.

Here's the lineup: Davis cf, Barton 1b, Ellis 2b, Suzuki c, Kouzmanoff 3b, Cust dh, Carson rf, Carter lf, Pennington ss.

The A's have lost their low Class-A affiliate, Kane County, to Kansas City, and their short-season A ball team in Vancouver to Toronto.

The team announced that Ben Sheets has won the player-voted Catfish Hunter award, given to the A's player who best exemplifies Hunter's courageous, competitive and inspirational spirit; Craig Breslow, whose Strike 3 Foundation has raised nearly \$150,000 for pediatric cancer research and patient support, was named the winner of the Dave Stewart Community Service award, which will be presented before tomorrow's game.

Cahill's solid outing lifts A's against White Sox

With Texas' loss, Oakland picks up a game in AL West

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Trevor Cahill likes talking about the building momentum booming from the youthful band of brothers that makes up the A's clubhouse -- not just for the remainder of the season, but for the coming year as well.

Much of that thrust comes from the exciting efforts made by Cahill himself, though he modestly would likely shy away from such talk. He'd be inclined to point the driving force elsewhere instead.

But Cahill is very much a part of what has this A's team optimistic about the future.

And on Tuesday, he showed why in a big way.

The right-handed hurler, not so much known for his strikeout ways, delivered a rather nasty curveball en route to fanning seven while also limiting the visiting White Sox to six hits over eight innings in a 7-2 Oakland win, one that handed Cahill his 17th victory of the season -- marking the most by an A's pitcher since Mark Mulder tallied 17 in 2004.

"He's just made so much progress since last season," manager Bob Geren said of Cahill. "The command of his fastball is a whole heck of a lot better. ... Tonight, he was very effective."

The A's win not only dealt a difficult blow to their Chicago opponents, who were officially eliminated from the playoffs with the loss, but it again held Texas' magic number in the American League West to six thanks to a corresponding Rangers defeat.

Oakland now trails Texas by seven games, a number that could severely shift in either direction beginning Thursday, when the Rangers are slated to come to town for four contests. A first-place finish is no easy chore for the A's, who realize the task is something of a stretch and are simply trying to win as many games as possible right now.

That part seemingly starts on the mound, where Oakland starters have watched 27 of their past 28 games come with a decision, as was the case Tuesday when Cahill strutted his typical stuff to help Oakland garner its 76th win of the season -- the club's most in three years.

"I think we gave up looking at the scoreboard," Cahill said. "Even if we're 20 back, we're going to go out there and try to win every game."

Well, the team has won three in a row. And the Rangers, suddenly, have dropped three of their past four.

"Obviously, [winning the division] is still a possibility," Geren said. "If we win tomorrow and they lose, it could make that series very interesting with them."

Interesting is what Cahill has done in a rather limited amount of time since starting the year at Triple-A Sacramento, where he says he "didn't just want to go through the motions." Rather, he worked on refining his pitches, among them a sinker ball that on Tuesday induced 13 ground ball outs, including two double plays.

Meanwhile, the A's lent Cahill plenty of support, pushing across five runs in the first four innings against White Sox lefty Mark Buehrle. The veteran southpaw found himself in trouble early on in the first frame, which saw Kurt Suzuki notch an RBI groundout.

The A's catcher came up big in the third frame again, this time with a run-scoring double that again scored Barton, who beat out a play at the plate that resulted in a collision with Chicago backstop A.J. Pierzynski. Barton remained in the game for two more innings before exiting with what was deemed by the A's as a left thigh contusion.

Before his departure, though, he found himself in the middle of a three-run fourth. Singles from Jack Cust and Chris Carter put runners on first and third for Cliff Pennington, who drove in both of his teammates with a two-run double before Barton capped off the inning with an RBI bloop single that made it 5-0.

All runs were tagged to Buehrle, who gave up 11 hits while striking out five through six innings of work. The White Sox posted a run in both the fifth and sixth frames, but nothing more against Cahill.

"We started getting to [Buehrle] early and we were aggressive with our bats," Davis said. "We were able to put some balls in play and hit them where they're not and get an early lead on him. I think that kind of took him out of his focus, and he wasn't really able to get settled in."

"It was a good effort up and down the lineup," Geren said.

Included in that mix was Carter. The young phenom, who finally picked up his first Major League hit on Monday after enduring a career-opening 0-for-33 stretch, went 2-for-3 on Tuesday while also notching his first career run scored before being replaced in left field by Gabe Gross to start the seventh inning.

"He looked more aggressive last night," Geren said, "and I think he looked very, very relaxed tonight."

Relaxed has come to be something of a natural feeling for Cahill when pitching at home, where he's 11-2 with a 1.63 ERA in 14 starts compared to a 6-5 mark and 4.17 ERA in 14 outings on the road.

"It's one of those things, the whole backdrop, the weather, I'm used to," he said. "Even my bullpens feel stronger here than on the road. Plus, it's a good place to pitch."

A's aim for sweep of struggling White Sox

By Joey Nowak / MLB.com

It seems like just yesterday the White Sox were experiencing one of the most profound hot streaks in baseball. Now, as they've fallen ice-cold, the team they're in pursuit of has begun heating up again.

With Minnesota's 6-4 win against the Indians and Chicago's 7-2 loss to Oakland on Tuesday night, the Sox were mathematically eliminated from the American League Central race.

"There's one thing that's not going to happen to us. We're not going to quit," said infielder Brent Lillibridge. "We're going to keep playing hard, keep on playing with enthusiasm and energy and a positive attitude, knowing that we're still a great team. It's just that we have to play now just for playing good baseball, finish off on a great note and make sure we can be the best team we can."

After going 25-5 to end the first half, they're without any momentum, having lost a season-high eight games in a row. It's the club's most consecutive losses since eight straight from Aug. 11-19, 2007.

"[Monday] night I felt the team was kind of flat" White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen said when asked if he was embarrassed by his team's performance. "Besides that, we play hard. We're just not winning."

The White Sox will continue to have to battle against an A's pitching staff which is, in a sense, a walking oxymoron. Rarely in baseball do you ever see such a combination of youth and poise, as the club with the AL's youngest pitching staff also boasts the league's best ERA. But the A's, who also lead the league with 15 shutouts, have done just that.

"The consistency," said A's manager Bob Geren. "Leading [the American League] in shutouts is something that, if you look at how young our staff was coming out of Spring Training, that'd be a very difficult thing to predict. A lot of that credit goes to the bullpen, too."

One of those young hurlers, the red-hot Brett Anderson, has been excellent in four starts since hyperextending his knee in Texas. Signed to a four-year extension this season, two stints on the disabled list have prevented Anderson from working his way toward No. 1 status in the rotation.

In those last four starts, Anderson is 3-1 with four earned runs in 27 1/3 innings of work.

White Sox: Jackson looking to bounce back from no-no gone wrong

In his last time out, White Sox starter Edwin Jackson -- who will face the A's on Wednesday -- flirted with his second no-hitter of the season, when he held the Tigers hitless through 5 2/3 innings.

"I could feel it," said Jackson, who was battling a right calf cramp that night. "But if I stay out there, I believe I can get the job done."

When all was said and done, the right-hander left after giving up four runs on four hits over 6 1/3 innings. He struck out five and walked four, eventually taking the loss in the 9-2 Detroit victory.

Athletics: Things looking up

With 76 victories, the A's have already eclipsed their win total from the previous two seasons. Now 76-74, Oakland has an opportunity to go three games over .500 for the first time since the All-Star break. ... The Oakland staff's 15 shutouts is four short of the franchise record, set in 2002, and tied for fourth-best in the designated hitter era. ... A victory Wednesday would mark the longest winning streak (four games) in Anderson's career.

Worth noting

The A's have used the disabled list 23 times this season, second-most in franchise history. The most was 25 times in 2008. ... White Sox outfielder Juan Pierre's 59th stolen base of the season Tuesday tied him with Patsy Donovan (518) for 30th on the all-time list.

Sheets' demeanor earns him A's Hunter Award

Despite injury, left-hander made big impact on clubhouse

By Alex Espinoza and Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- With his slow-paced southern drawl and hilarious attitude, Ben Sheets won over the A's clubhouse this season. On Tuesday, the team announced Sheets as this year's winner of the Jim "Catfish" Hunter Award, which recognizes his contributions to the team both on and off the field and is voted on by coaches and players.

"I don't know if it's that they really like me or I threatened their lives," Sheets joked over a conference call. "I'm pretty tough."

It's quite an honor for Sheets, especially considering he hasn't pitched since July 19 with elbow problems. Sheets has since undergone surgery to repair a flexor tendon, pronator tendon and ulnar collateral ligament in his elbow. He's expected to miss at least 16 months, putting the rest of his career in doubt.

Sheets, 32, is currently at home in Louisiana and said he doesn't know whether he will return to join his teammates before the season ends, like he did in the weeks following his surgery.

As far as clubhouse comedy, it was hard to find a better source than Sheets this season.

Like the time he jested pitcher Trevor Cahill, saying, "I lost 10 pounds, but Trevor found them!"

Not even the daunting surgery could damper Sheets' spirits. In the weeks after the procedure, he sported a complex contraption on his right arm. One time a reporter asked Sheets if he slept with the balky brace, to which he responded, "Get your head out of the gutter. I'm married."

After seeing Sheets throw a bullpen session in February, the A's inked him to a one-year, \$10 million deal. Unfortunately for Oakland, the deal didn't pan out from a performance perspective, as Sheets went 4-9 with a 4.63 ERA in 20 starts.

"I think it's a great honor," Sheets said. "Now if he could loan me some World Series rings that would be cool, too."

The A's have also announced Craig Breslow as the team's 2010 Dave Stewart Community Service Award winner, after Breslow raised more than \$150,000 for child cancer research with his Strike 3 Foundation. Stewart will present Breslow with the award before Wednesday's 12:35 p.m. PT contest against the White Sox.

Cramer earns spot in rotation for rest of 2010

OAKLAND -- With two wins in two starts to begin his career, 30-year-old southpaw Bobby Cramer looks like he's secured a spot in the rotation for the rest of the season. Likewise, Vin Mazzaro will be working out of the bullpen for the remainder of the year.

On Tuesday, Oakland manager Bob Geren said Cramer will make "a couple more starts this season," something significant given the A's have 13 games left entering Tuesday's contest. Cramer will start against Rangers righty Tommy Hunter on Friday.

"It's been great," Cramer said. "It definitely feels like I can pitch up here. ... I'm trying to do the same things that got me here. My game is trying to throw strikes and change speeds, that's what allowed me to be successful at the lower levels and I'm hoping that's what allows me to be successful up here."

In his two starts, Cramer has allowed three earned runs over 11 innings to post a 2.45 ERA. He has struck out six batters while walking four and allowed three home runs. Cramer also said he's still trying to get comfortable with catcher Kurt Suzuki.

"I think he's learning me as I go and he'll help me make the adjustments I need to make," Cramer said. "Right now I have the advantage that people don't really know much about me and I can go out and do things my way, because I only got three, four starts here. If I do get a chance to come back and play a full season next season, I'm going to definitely have to be able to make adjustments on the fly."

If the A's indeed decide to re-sign Cramer this offseason, he would likely be a long shot to make the 2011 rotation as the fifth starter. Not only will he have to compete with Mazzaro, but Josh Outman and Tyson Ross are expected to be recovered from their respective injuries by Spring Training.

Blevins day-to-day with sore left shoulder

OAKLAND -- As it turns out, closer Andrew Bailey isn't the only reliever unavailable in the A's bullpen. Left-handed setup man Jerry Blevins, who hasn't pitched since Sept. 15, said he is day-to-day with soreness in the back of his left shoulder.

"I just felt a little thing in my shoulder when we were in Kansas City," Blevins said. "We're just resting it; don't want to force it too quick. It's coming back, feeling better today."

Blevins, 27, has a 3.70 ERA in a career-high 63 games this season. Without Blevins, Craig Breslow is currently the lone lefty in Oakland's bullpen.

"It's nothing too serious," Blevins said. "We're just taking it a day at a time."

Geren touts A's trio as deserving Gold Gloves

OAKLAND -- For years now, Mark Ellis has been one of the game's premier defensive second baseman, but he is still seeking his first Gold Glove.

On Tuesday, A's manager Bob Geren touted Ellis, first baseman Daric Barton and pitcher Trevor Cahill as Gold Glove-worthy players this season. Geren had particularly high praise for Barton, who has made strides defensively this season.

"He's by far the best first baseman in the league," Geren said. "And we have some good first basemen in the league. That's definitely not a knock on [Yankees first baseman Mark] Teixeira, guys that have won it in the past."

While defensive statistics tell only part of the story, Barton ranks No. 1 in American League range factor (9.54), which combines putouts and assists and divides the total over games played. Cahill, meanwhile, leads AL pitchers in assists with 50, despite spending the first month of the season in Triple-A.

"Trevor Cahill's had an incredible fielding year on the mound," Geren said. "He's been unbelievable. He just has a real wide spread of the arms where he catches a lot of balls up the middle that other guys won't get to. And he's a ground ball pitcher; he gets himself into a position in his delivery to flag down a lot of balls that are hit."

Currently, Ellis is swinging one of the team's hottest bats, as he is batting .406 in September. His .994 fielding percentage is also second-best in the league behind New York's Robinson Cano (.996). Among all active players, Ellis' .990 career mark is tied for the fourth-highest figure, trailing only Placido Polanco (.993), Craig Counsell (.991) and Dustin Pedroia (.990).

Worth noting

First baseman Daric Barton left Tuesday's game after the fifth inning with a left thigh contusion following a collision at home plate with White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski. ... Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff returned to the A's lineup Tuesday after being sidelined with lower back pain for more than two weeks. ... Ryan Sweeney, who underwent season-ending right knee surgery July 30, had an MRI on his left knee Tuesday in Vail, Colo., to determine if he'll need surgery on that knee as well. Sweeney said via text he'll likely know results of MRI on Wednesday, when Dr. Richard Steadman is expected to decide on the next step. ... Andrew Bailey said he will have his sore right elbow examined by Dr. James Andrews in Florida on Thursday. The A's closer, who believes the pain is similar to that experienced during Spring Training when he dealt with a dose of tennis elbow, is still not ruling out returning before season's end. ... On Tuesday, the A's lost longtime Class A affiliate Kane County to the Kansas City Royals, who signed a two-year player development deal with the Cougars. The news came just days after the A's learned short-season Class A affiliate Vancouver dropped Oakland to team up with the Toronto Blue Jays. There's no word on where the club's new affiliates will be located.

Cahill dominant for A's, picks up 17th win

Righthander is first Oakland pitcher with that many wins since Mulder in 2004

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Trevor Cahill pitched eight solid innings for his team-leading 17th win and the A's beat Chicago, 7-2, on Tuesday night, sending the White Sox to their eighth consecutive loss and handing the AL Central title to the Minnesota Twins.

Kurt Suzuki and Cliff Pennington drove in two runs apiece for the A's, who pounded out 13 hits against Mark Buehrle and one reliever.

Omar Vizquel had two hits for the White Sox, who have lost 12 of 14 overall. Minnesota rallied to beat Cleveland, 6-4, and became the first team to clinch a postseason spot when it secured the division with Chicago's loss.

One day after Gio Gonzalez and three relievers combined on a four-hit shutout, Cahill (17-7) dominated the White Sox through eight innings by himself.

He retired 12 of the first 14 batters before Alexei Ramirez doubled leading off the fifth. Ramirez scored on Brent Morel's groundout and Chicago added another run in the sixth but that was it.

The 22-year-old Cahill, who began the season in the minors after losing out to Gonzalez as Oakland's fifth starter, became the first Oakland pitcher to win 17 games since Mark Mulder did it in 2004. The right-hander is also the first A's pitcher to get to 17 wins without a win in April since Vida Blue in 1974.

Cahill benefited from an A's offense that had its best night in more than a month. Oakland had four doubles and got some help from two Chicago errors.

Rajai Davis had three hits and scored twice for the A's, who reached 76 wins for the first time since finishing 76-86 in 2007. Jack Cust and rookie Chris Carter had two hits apiece.

The White Sox fell 12 games back of Minnesota in the AL Central after they led the division by a half-game at the All-Star break.

Buehrle (12-12) got knocked around early and often, extending his winless slump to six games. The left-hander, who beat the A's in Oakland with a four-hitter on July 23, was tagged for five runs and nine in the first four innings alone. He left after six innings with five strikeouts.

It marked the 16th consecutive game the White Sox have failed to get their starting pitcher a win, breaking the franchise record of 15 set in 1985. Chicago starters are 0-9 with a 7.12 ERA over the rough stretch.

The White Sox loaded the bases in the ninth against two relievers before Craig Breslow got pinch-hitter Paul Konerko to ground out, ending the game.

NOTES

Buehrle needs 1» innings to reach 200 for a 10th straight season, which would be the longest active streak in the majors. ... Chicago RHP Gavin Floyd, who left Monday's game after just seven pitches due to tightness in his right shoulder, is almost certain to miss his next start while resting. ... Oakland RHP Ben Sheets, on the disabled list after undergoing three surgeries on his right elbow, was selected as the winner of the 2010 Jim "Catfish" Hunter Award, given annually to an A's player who exemplifies the courage and spirit of Hunter. ... Carter singled in his first two at-bats against Buehrle, giving him three straight hits after starting his major league career with an 0-for-33 slide.

Breslow's pitch would've been a hit with Clemente

Dave Solomon, New Haven Register, 9/21/2010

At the age of 11, when athletic young men with live arms dream of playing major-league baseball, Craig Breslow started thinking about making a profound impact on the world.

He was incredibly scared when his sister, Lesley, two years his elder, had contracted cancer, and Breslow remembers thinking his destiny was to help find a cure for the insidious disease in the medical field.

Medical school may be in his future at some later date, but for now, the man dubbed as "the smartest man in baseball" is living the major-league dream as a highly successful left-handed relief pitcher for the Oakland A's.

Last week, Breslow, a former Yale standout and founder of the Strike 3 Foundation, was selected as a finalist for the Roberto Clemente Award, given to a player whose commitment to the community and helping others sets him apart. Among the charitable work of the Strike 3 Foundation is a pledge of upward of half a million dollars over five years to the Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant Program.

"I wouldn't be satisfied if all I was doing were playing baseball for three or four hours a day, and that was it," Breslow said this week. "So I definitely feel a sense of accomplishment by doing this. I thought my impact on the medical community would be as a physician, and not philosophically. But this is kind of the way things turned out and the best way for me to make an impact and help people."

Breslow, who was a molecular biophysics and biochemistry major at Yale, still laughs at being dubbed the smartest man in baseball. But he quickly confesses that he might not have even been “the smartest guy on my team at Yale. Two of my classmates got drafted and one went on to Harvard Medical School (pitcher Matt McCarthy) and another went on to Yale Law School (pitcher Jon Steitz).”

It might be as accurate to call Breslow the most underpaid player in baseball, considering the way his career has blossomed the past two years with Oakland after stints with Milwaukee (the team that drafted him in 2002), San Diego, Boston, Cleveland and Minnesota.

He’s made 67 appearances, allowing a mere 47 hits in 65½ innings and is holding opposing batters to a .197 average. In 60 games with the A’s in 2009, he held opposing batters to an identical .197 average.

For this, he earns \$425,000, which, to make our point, is half that of Sergio Mitre of the Yankees; \$2.3 million less than Hideki Okajima of the Red Sox; and about \$800,000 less than Ryota Igarashi of the Mets.

“Well, I’m happy with the way I’ve been throwing the ball and hopefully we can even out that underpaid part,” chuckled Breslow, a Trumbull native.

Breslow, 30, is too young to have seen Clemente play, but he wouldn’t be the smartest man in baseball without a sense of history.

“When you say the name of Roberto Clemente, there are two over-riding sentiments,” Breslow said. “One being that he was a great player. ... one of the most talented players who ever played the game. The second part is that he was a great philanthropist, ultimately resulting in a career that ended far too early and a life that ended far too early. To be mentioned in the same breath as Roberto Clemente, along with the other great charitable guys in baseball, is very humbling.

“But not all of this is my doing. I’ve had a great support system, and I’ve had a lot of help. And I don’t think anyone who’s nominated for the award does the work they do with the intention of being nominated or winning the award. Recognition is definitely humbling, but not the driving force.”

If Breslow flies under the radar as a major-league player, than Joe Lizza, the former catcher at the University of New Haven and co-founder of the Strike 3 Foundation with Breslow, is truly his noble, behind-the-scenes aide-de-camp.

Lizza, who played at Derby High and now teaches in Danbury, became friends with Breslow about seven years ago, serves as his off-season batterymate, pitching confidant and COO of the foundation.

“I don’t care that I fly under the radar because the purpose is about helping kids,” Lizza said. “As much recognition as Craig gets, he’s going to say the same thing. It’s not about him. It’s about one goal and one mission and helping to find a cure for this deadly disease. Flying under the radar. ... big deal. I don’t know how to explain it, but we both have the same mentality where you just go. He puts his whole heart in it, and that’s what I did.”

The foundation’s third annual First Pitch Celebrity Gala, benefiting pediatric cancer research, will take place on Nov. 13 at the Stamford Hilton, co-hosted by Bobby Valentine and ESPN’s Karl Ravech.

Asked if he thinks he’ll be best known as a pitcher or philanthropist, Breslow shared thoughts that he probably couldn’t have verbalized when he first learned the news about his sister, a pediatric thyroid cancer survivor, nearly 20 years ago.

“I’d like to be remembered for all those things, but in terms of the adage, leaving the world in a better place than you found it, I don’t know that being a really good baseball player would do that. ... outside of the really diehard Oakland fans, who appreciate my services,” Breslow said. “But long after my playing days, I kind of hope that people will remember what the Strike 3 Foundation set out to do and what we are, as opposed to a big pitch I might have made at some point in my career.”

Roberto Clemente would have liked that.

Split season would make Astros, A's contenders

Paul White, USA Today, 9/21/2010

Playoff fever in Houston and Oakland. Not so much in Colorado. The difference between disappointment and disaster in Boston.

Those would be some of the differences in baseball's stretch drive if the major leagues borrowed the split-season concept. Most minor leagues play the season in two halves, with the winner of each half advancing to playoffs.

There's even a precedent in the majors, when a labor stoppage interrupted the 1981 season from June 11-Aug. 9. When games resumed, the teams in first place -- each league had two divisions at the time -- were declared first-half winners. The remainder of the season would produce second-half winners.

That's the year the Division Series, the official name of the current first round of playoffs, was created. If the winners of the two halves were different -- and they were in all four divisions -- they would meet in a best-of-five series.

The most surprising part of the concept was that the teams with best overall records in the National League's divisions didn't make the '81 playoffs. Without the split season, St. Louis would have won the East and Cincinnati the West. But both finished second in each of the halves.

And neither of the World Series participants, the winning Dodgers and the Yankees, would have reached the postseason.

Nothing so drastic would occur this year had the split-season been in place. But some of the races would be different. We took every team's record after 81 games and created first-half standings, then took the records since then to produce second-half races. The results:

- **AL East:** After winning the first half by one game over the Red Sox and two over the Rays with a major league best 50-31 record, the Yankees are a half-game behind Tampa Bay in the second half. Boston has sunk to last at 34-35, but only a half-game behind Toronto and a game behind 35-34 Baltimore.
- **AL Central:** The race was in the first half, when Minnesota and Detroit tied at 44-37, a game ahead of the White Sox. It's no contest in the second half, with the 46-23 Twins 10 games ahead of Chicago.
- **AL West:** Texas has a chance for the sweep after winning the first half with a 48-33 record, three games better than the Angels. But the Rangers have slipped to 35-33 in the second half, barely ahead of Oakland's 35-34.
- **NL East:** The Phillies are cruising through the second half with a major league best 47-23, nine games better than Atlanta. But the Braves have their playoff spot from a 48-33 first half, which beat the Mets by three games and the Phillies by five.
- **NL Central:** The 41-28 Astros lead first-half winner Cincinnati by 2 1/2 games after finishing next to last with a 32-49 first half. The Reds were 46-35 in the first half, two games better than St. Louis, which is 33-35 and tied with the Cubs for third place in the second half.
- **NL West:** The Rockies have been more consistent than their recent surge might suggest and that hurts them. At 39-29, Colorado is 3 1/2 games behind 43-26 San Francisco in the second half. San Diego won the first half at 48-33, three games ahead of the Dodgers and five ahead of the Rockies.

A's extend player development contract with River Cats through 2014

John Schumacher, Sacramento Bee

The baseball connection between Sacramento and Oakland will continue for at least four more years.

The A's extended their player development contract with the Triple-A River Cats on Tuesday through the 2014 season.

Sacramento has been affiliated with the A's since 2000, when the River Cats began play at Raley Field in West Sacramento. Sacramento has won nine division titles and four Pacific Coast League championships in 11 seasons.

"Obviously, we've had a heck of a run," Alan Ledford, the River Cats' president, general manager and chief operating officer, said in a phone interview.

"Beyond the performance on the field, the relationship we have with the A's entire organization, but especially their baseball operations group, is a terrific one.

"We're thrilled to be renewing it."

Billy Beane, the A's vice president and general manager, said the relationship had been a successful one.

"We consider Sacramento to be the premier franchise in minor league baseball, providing us with an ideal situation in regards to a first-class playing facility, a supportive fan base and close proximity to the Bay Area," Beane said in a statement.

"We are excited about continuing this very successful association."

The River Cats led minor league baseball in attendance for nine of the past 11 years, finishing second this season with a 9,137 average, trailing Lehigh Valley (9,227).

Sacramento rallied from 12 1/2 games behind Fresno to win the Pacific South Division title this season.

"I don't think we could have anticipated the success we've had on the field," Ledford said.

Ledford said there are plenty of reasons to expect the relationship between the River Cats and A's to continue beyond 2014, including past success at the Triple-A level and Oakland's philosophy of winning in the minor leagues as part of player development.

"We can't imagine a better fit," he said. "You overlay geography on top of that, Sacramento fans get a chance to know the River Cats' players and follow them almost as closely in Oakland.

"We have all angles covered with this relationship."