

A's News Clips, Friday, October 1, 2010

Oakland A's update: Gio Gonzalez closes out strong season with 15th victory

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

SEATTLE -- Gio Gonzalez's final start of 2010 epitomized much of what went right for the left-hander in his first full major league season.

Gonzalez scattered four hits over seven shutout innings Thursday as the A's beat the Seattle Mariners 8-1 in the opener of a four-game series at Safeco Field.

The victory snapped their season-high six-game losing streak and gave Gonzalez his 15th win of the season, which he said was a personal goal.

"What's funny is I'd call my dad every day and tell him (15 wins) was my goal," he said. "I wasn't trying to sound cocky, but it was something I wanted to do."

Gonzalez, 25, also eclipsed the 200-inning mark with Thursday's effort, finishing at 200²/₃ innings.

He was hardly flawless, as he tied a season high with five walks. But Gonzalez (15-9) made key pitches to work his way out of trouble, perhaps his biggest sign of improvement over 2009.

He escaped a fourth-inning jam unscored upon despite walking three in the frame.

The lefty finished with an ERA of 3.23. After All-Star Trevor Cahill, Gonzalez was the A's most consistent starter from beginning to end.

The A's scored four in the fifth, with Mark Ellis tapping an RBI infield single and Jack Cust scoring two with a bloop single to highlight the inning.

Chris Carter turned on an inside fastball from Doug Fister (6-14) and crushed a two-run homer in the sixth, Carter's second big league home run. Cliff Pennington added a solo shot in the eighth.

A's manager Bob Geren said of Carter's homer: "You see him do it in spring training, in batting practice. He has all those homers in Triple-A. To see it live in person, especially in a big park, you see how the ball really flies when he hits it."

Ellis went 2 for 5 and is hitting a major league-best .413 in September, stating his case for the A's to pick up his \$6 million option for 2011. Ellis' 43 hits in September set an Oakland record for hits in the month.

Reliever Michael Wuertz (sore right thumb) could be shut down for the final three games, Geren said. "... The A's, 78-81, need to sweep the four-game series to finish at .500. They've posted losing records in each of the last three seasons.

Oakland A's catcher Kurt Suzuki's season-long tinkering act nearing an end

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

If Kurt Suzuki's season is judged solely by how his pitching staff has performed, consider 2010 a smashing success for the A's catcher.

Oakland has posted the lowest team ERA in the American League, and a decent chunk of that credit should go to the man behind the plate.

But Suzuki knows the A's need more from him, and he expects more from himself.

His offensive stats are down across the board from 2009, when he set career highs with 15 homers and 88 RBIs.

Suzuki is batting .243 after an 0-for-5 performance in Thursday night's 8-1 win over the Seattle Mariners, down 29 points from the .272 career mark he fashioned over his first three major league seasons.

He's hit 12 homers with 70 RBIs -- the latter is tied for the team lead on the offensively challenged A's -- but his slugging percentage is just .363, down from .421 in 2009.

So what gives?

"This year I've felt a bit more like I'm fighting myself at the plate," he said before Thursday's game. "I'm just trying to make a lot of adjustments, just trying things out to help me feel more comfortable. Obviously it hasn't been as good a year as I had last year."

If he's placed more pressure on himself in 2010, it's no surprise.

In July, the A's awarded Suzuki a four-year contract extension worth a guaranteed \$16.25 million, a gesture of faith that makes a player want to justify that confidence.

Suzuki said his new contract hasn't weighed heavily on him but added that "subconsciously I might have been trying to do too much."

And with Oakland lacking a prototypical power hitter in the middle of the lineup, Suzuki has spent much of the season hitting third or fourth, though he's more suited to hitting second or perhaps fifth, where he's drawn his last four starts.

A believer in the power of self-help in the batter's box, Suzuki tinkered with his mechanics earlier this season in hopes of generating more power.

"I wasn't driving the ball like I was before, so I tried to stand a little more upright," Suzuki said. "I tried to raise my hands a little higher to get a better load. I think I got caught up sometimes in trying to hit home runs every time."

He since has gone back to his old stance. And though the overall numbers don't show it, A's hitting coach Jim Skaalen said Suzuki has made strides over the second half of the season.

Skaalen's rule with Suzuki: Simpler is better.

"He got to the point where his average dropped, and he felt like there was more going on than there really was," Skaalen said. "I just told him, 'Clear your mind and get back to attacking the baseball.' "

If it's been a trying year offensively, Suzuki takes pride in the work of the A's pitching staff. Entering Thursday, Oakland pitchers had a 3.34 ERA with Suzuki behind the plate, the lowest catcher's ERA in the American League (Minnesota's Joe Mauer was second at 3.82).

Left-hander Gio Gonzalez threw seven shutout innings against Seattle on Thursday as the A's snapped their season-high six-game losing streak.

Fellow starter Brett Anderson said if things aren't going well at the plate for Suzuki, there's no sign of that when he's behind the plate.

"He kind of separates it into two different games," Anderson said. "The pitching staff and defense, he takes pride in that more than his hitting."

Chin Music: Different opponent, different weather in Seattle

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 9/30/2010 6:35PM

After enduring the sizzling temperatures in Anaheim, the A's are now adjusting to Seattle, where people are wearing jackets in the press box and it truly feels like fall. It's actually not that chilly by Pacific Northwest standards, but there's a bite in the air here that you don't get in many ballparks (OK, so the Coliseum isn't exactly balmy during most night games).

Maybe the climate change will help reverse the A's fortunes on this season-ending road trip. They've lost six straight overall, and they're 0-3 on this seven-game trek. You have to wonder what the motivation level is for both Oakland and Seattle at this point, although A's manager Bob Geren said his team is still focused on the attainable goals. "We all have the same

goal," Geren said. "We still (want) to finish in second place, and we have to win a lot of games to do that." The Angels hold a one-game lead on them for second place entering tonight.

The A's need a four-game sweep to finish at .500 even. They face a tough test tonight in Seattle right-hander Doug Fister, who is 3-1 against them this season. But Oakland catches a break Sunday, as the Mariners announced that ace Felix Hernandez won't start the last game. He's already at 249 2/3 innings, and Seattle has decided not to risk an injury with its franchise pitcher. Can't fault the M's too much on that one ...

One news update from the A's: Geren said reliever Michael Wuertz could be shut down for the final four games with a lingering right thumb injury. As if the A's can stand to lose more relievers ...

Tonight's lineups:

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

Mariners — Ichiro RF, Figgins 2B, Gutierrez F, Smoak 1B, Moore C, Mangini 3B, Halman LF, Saunders DH, Wilson SS; Fister RHP.

A's beat Mariners, Ellis sets Oakland record

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

All is not entirely gloomy for the A's as 2010 nears its close.

There have been a few bright spots despite the team's recent fizzle, including Thursday night's 8-1 victory over the Mariners, which ended Oakland's season-high six-game losing streak and moved the A's back into a second-place tie with the Angels.

Gio Gonzalez worked seven scoreless innings to get his 15th win, an ongoing career high, and to help save the A's banged up and overtaxed bullpen. Gonzalez said that 15 wins was one of his goals coming into the season and he was very appreciative the A's stuck with him. Since the All-Star break, he's 10-3 with a 2.59 ERA.

"Fifteen wins is a pretty good feat," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Especially for a team at or about .500."

Mark Ellis and rookie Chris Carter continue to be two of the team's more upbeat stories. Ellis recorded his 14th multi-hit game out of 28 in September, including each of the past four.

"Mr. On Fire?" Gonzalez said. "I think he's still got it in him."

Ellis has a 10-game hitting streak, during which he's batting .425, and he had the majors' top average in September: .413.

"It's nice to lead the league in anything," Ellis said. "Unless it's bad."

With his second hit Thursday night, Ellis set an Oakland record for most hits in the month of September, with 43, breaking Mark Kotsay's 2004 mark of 42.

Carter hadn't had a hit on the road until Wednesday, but he ended that 0-for-38 string, and on Thursday he notched his first road homer, a two-run blast to left in the sixth. "That was crushed," Geren said.

Cliff Pennington also homered, and Rajai Davis had four hits and got his 48th stolen base.

Oakland's slide the past week and a half is not how the team wanted to finish the season, but there is one bonus that appears likely to come out of it: If the A's finish in the bottom half of the major leagues, their first-round pick next June will be protected, even if they sign a Class-A free agent.

Any team that finishes in the top 15 in baseball loses its top pick in the following draft as compensation for signing an elite free agent, and until the A's skid, they were hovering around the 14th or 15th best record. Now they're tied for 17th. With a low payroll and a strong development program, Oakland values its premium picks, but the club desperately needs to add a big bat in the offseason. Finishing in the bottom 15 gives the A's the ability to do both, if they can lure a Type-A slugger such as Adam Dunn to Oakland.

Second place also provides some extra monetary incentive: The four non-wild card second-place clubs - the players, not the teams - split 4 percent of the playoff pool. That translates to about \$7,000-\$10,000 per player, depending on how the players decide to award shares. Third place does not get paid.

The A's will have an easier path Sunday: The Mariners announced that Cy Young candidate Felix Hernandez will not start the season finale; the team's prize pitcher has thrown 249 2/3 innings this year, which Seattle felt was more than enough.

Lifetime, Hernandez is 9-4 with a 2.83 ERA against Oakland.

"He's not fun to face," Ellis said. "His stuff is the best in the league, in my opinion."

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

ERA to remember: Since 1992, the only American League team to finish a season with an ERA under 3.62 was the 2002 Red Sox (3.53). Oakland's league-best ERA going into Thursday night's game was 3.54, second best in the majors to the Giants' 3.51.

Drumbeat: The push to finish .500, and the state of the bullpen

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 9/30/2010 5:51PM

Well, the A's need to win all four games here at a park that has not been friendly this season in order to avoid a losing record. The one bit of bright news as far as Oakland is concerned is that the Mariners said today that Felix Hernandez will not pitch the final game of the season on Sunday; they want to avoid a little excess wear on their prize player's arm, despite Hernandez's push for the Cy Young.

The bullpen is pretty thin again. Michael Wuertz is likely to be unavailable with his sore thumb; no one expects to see Jerry Blevins (shoulder) again this year; and Craig Breslow (two innings) and Brad Ziegler (1 2/3 innings) have had heavy workloads. Manager Bob Geren seems to turn to those two, primarily, these days, but it would be nice to see Henry Rodriguez get some more of these innings, even if his results in tight spots haven't been exactly what was wanted recently. He needs the work, and he really needs the experience. Wouldn't this be the time of year to give it to him? I know .500 and second place are nice goals, but isn't next year an even bigger concern, really?

It's the same lineup as yesterday. Geren noted that when he runs out the same lineup two days in a row, he doesn't get lineup questions. So I asked why he's using the same one when yesterday that bunch didn't do a lot; he said, "They're ready to go tonight."

When I asked about needing to sweep here to finish at .500, Geren said, "We're in a little bit of a rut, we're concerned about getting a win right now, breaking this (losing) streak right now, and going from there. The guys all have the same goal. We are still hopeful of finishing in second place."

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

A's fire on all cylinders to snap skid in Seattle

Oakland bangs out 16 hits; Gonzalez earns career-high 15th win

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- The A's carried a season-high six-game losing streak into Seattle on Thursday, needing four wins in their final four games to finish the year at the .500 mark.

Starter Gio Gonzalez wasn't just looking for any win, though. He was looking for his 15th in his final outing of the season, a number implanted in the back of his mind since Spring Training, a goal he and his father, Max Sr., discussed on a near daily basis.

"I didn't want to sound cocky," Gonzalez said, "but it's something I wanted to do."

Mission accomplished.

The A's lefty bulldogged his way through seven shutout innings, walking five but limiting the damage en route to a 8-1 Oakland win, one that had Gonzalez allowing just four hits while striking out eight and improving to 15-9 in his rather remarkable season.

"He's got three good pitches," Seattle's Justin Smoak said. "He's got a good two-seamer, a good curveball and a good changeup. He was around the zone tonight, and with a guy like that, you have to go out there and battle."

Gonzalez may have battled even more. Seattle's leadoff runner reached base in five of the hurler's seven frames, but Gonzalez managed to escape much commotion, including a troubling situation in the fourth, when the Mariners had runners on first and second with no outs in a scoreless game.

The A's lefty watched the runners advance by way of a sacrifice bunt from Matt Mangini. He struck out Greg Halman for the second out before escalating the drama by walking Michael Saunders to load the bases for Josh Wilson. The Seattle shortstop, however, did nothing more than send a fly ball to center field, where Rajai Davis put an end to a rather eventful frame.

"He got the big strikeout when he needed to," manager Bob Geren said. "He obviously didn't give up any runs. He got himself in some trouble, but rebounded and got out of it. It was a good last game for him. To have 15 wins on a team that's just below the .500 mark shows a great effort."

The offense, meanwhile, stayed quiet through the first four frames against Mariners right-hander Doug Fister. But RBI singles from Daric Barton and Mark Ellis, along with a two-run base hit off the bat of Jack Cust, quickly made it 4-0 in the fifth.

Ellis -- deemed "Mr. On Fire" by Gonzalez -- collected two hits in the game to extend his hitting streak to 10 games, a span during which he's compiled a .425 average. Furthermore, it marked his fourth straight multihit game, as he finished the month of September with a Major League-best .413 mark.

"I'm hitting the ball like I should hit the ball," Ellis said. "I'm just having good at-bats. I've gotten back to where I feel comfortable at the plate -- just trying not to do too much and staying within myself and what I know how to do."

"That's about as good a month as I've seen from him," Geren said. "He's not hitting a lot of homers, but he's hitting the ball to all fields. He's hit for a high average, getting big, big hits. It was a great month, period."

Following the four-spot posted by Ellis and Co., Chris Carter tallied his second career home run -- a two-run shot to left field -- to extend Oakland's lead to six in the sixth.

"That was crushed," Geren said. "We saw it in Spring Training and in batting practice. He's done it all year in the Minors, but to see it in a park like this and see it live in person, that ball just really flies when he hits it."

The club's six-run lead jumped to seven when Cliff Pennington followed with a walk and proceeded to ultimately score on a throwing error by catcher Adam Moore. Pennington scored the club's eighth and final run in the eighth by way of his sixth homer of the season off Anthony Varvaro.

With the win, coupled with an Angels loss in Texas, the A's moved into a second-place tie with Los Angeles in the American League West. More important, though, is the fact that their six-game skid is officially in the rearview mirror.

"You never want to go into the offseason losing a bunch of games," Ellis said.

The club is looking to avoid its fourth straight losing season. If accomplished, it would represent Geren's first .500 year at the helm.

"You know, we got a lot of breaks today," Geren said. "We didn't exactly crush the ball. But we've seen that so many times against us. We've been beat on weakly hit balls, so it's nice to have it go in our favor on a day we really needed it."

French, Cahill set to square off at Safeco

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

The last time Chris Carter was in Seattle, he was a wide-eyed rookie chasing pitches. Oakland's top prospect, a 23-year-old slugger, made his Major League debut at Safeco Field on Aug. 9, but his first big league stint ended after six games and an 0-for-19 skid.

Carter has made strides in his second go-round with the A's, though, as evidenced by his no-doubt home run on Thursday against the Mariners. Carter has now hit safely in eight of his past 10 games, after overcoming an 0-for-33 start to his career.

Carter, a natural first baseman, is also improving defensively in left field. He will be playing in the Venezuelan Winter League this offseason to work on his outfield skills.

"It takes a while to make the adjustment with your eyes from the infield to the outfield and learning how read balls off the bat," A's first-base coach Todd Steverson said. "If the season ended and he was never to show up again for Spring Training, he would probably still be behind as an outfielder. But him going to winter ball, that's going to help him quite a bit."

That early August series also marked the beginning of Daren Brown's tenure as the Mariners' interim manager. Between his time with Seattle and Triple-A Tacoma, Brown has seen plenty of lefty Luke French, who will take the mound on Friday against A's ace Trevor Cahill.

"When I first got here, he was kind of good start, bad start, good start, bad start," Brown said. "I think he's shown the last two times a little more consistency and being able to go out do what he needs to do -- command his fastball, throw his changeup, get it around the plate and throw his breaking ball and get it around the plate. When he does that, he has a chance to be successful."

French, 25, started the season in Tacoma, but has proved to be a serviceable addition to the staff since being promoted in August. Over 11 starts in that span, French is 5-5 with a 3.80 ERA.

"He's not a guy that's going to go out there and out-stuff you and come at you with a 90-something mph fastball. He has to pitch, and he understands that," Brown said. "I think more than anything in the last few starts, it's consistency. I think the big thing with any pitcher or player is understanding who you are, what you do and doing it well. Not everyone throws 95 mph, but that doesn't mean you can't pitch up here. It's something you have to go through as a young player. I'm impressed with what he's done lately."

A's: Oakland aiming to finish at .500

Oakland will have to win its remaining three games to finish at .500 for the first time in Bob Geren's four-year tenure as the club's manager. ... Cahill has yet to face the Mariners this season. Cahill gave up a career-high 12 hits and seven earned runs in his last start against Texas.

Mariners: Felix shut down for season

Ace Felix Hernandez has been shut down for the rest of the season after throwing 249 2/3 innings. Hernandez leads the American League with a 2.27 ERA, but his 13-12 record may not be enough to win him the AL Cy Young Award.

"The decision is he's had a phenomenal year, pitched a terrific season for him," Seattle general manager Jack Zduriencik said. "He leads the league in several categories. At the age of 24, we feel as we move forward in this organization, he's the centerpiece of what we're doing."

Worth noting

Seattle infielders Jose Lopez (dislocated middle finger) and Russell Branyan (sore lower back) are likely done for the season. ... The A's lead the season series, 10-6.

Geren, A's focused on finishing season strong

Oakland hoping to win out in Seattle to reach .500 mark

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Manager Bob Geren has always stressed the importance of goals, whether they be long-term or short-term, primary or secondary.

Following the A's mathematical elimination from the playoffs, Geren insisted his club's itinerary included the likes of a second-place standing in the American League West and a finish above the .500 mark.

Now, the A's skipper simply wants a win.

Oakland entered Thursday's series-opening contest in Seattle on a season-high six-game winning streak, one during which A's pitchers have compiled a 6.20 ERA and the offense has scored three runs or fewer four times.

Now four games under .500 for the first time since July 10, the A's are in need of four consecutive wins to avoid a fourth consecutive losing season.

"Right now, we're in a little bit of a rut," Geren said. "We're concentrated on getting a win and breaking this streak. After we do that, we'll go from there."

"The guys know we have the same goal in mind. We still have hopes of finishing in second place, and we know what we need to do to get there."

Season-ending struggles are nothing new to this A's team, which finished the 2009 campaign by dropping seven consecutive games. They also lost each of their final five games in 2008 and fell in 10 of their final 12 games the previous year.

"No matter where you are in the standings, you always want to finish strong," Cliff Pennington said this week. "It hasn't really been any one thing during this stretch, but hopefully we can come out against the Mariners and get back on track."

Worth noting

Michael Wuertz (right thumb) is "doubtful" for Thursday, according to manager Bob Geren. The A's righty hasn't pitched in five days, and while it may be best to shut him down for the remaining four games, "If he wants to pitch, he'll pitch," Geren said. ... Oakland's 151 stolen bases are the most since the 1991 club also stole 151. The last time the A's stole more than 151 bases was in 1987, when they had 157. ... Entering Thursday's contest in Seattle, the A's had lost 16 of their past 19 games at Safeco Field. In Oakland, they've won nine of their past 11 contests against the Mariners.

Urban: Carter the Up-and-Comer

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com 9/30/2010

Hitless in a six-game stint with the A's in August, much-hyped prospect Chris Carter was recalled to Oakland in the middle of this month and looked like the same overmatched 23-year-old rookie in going hitless in his first five games back.

A fearsome slugger during his days in the minor leagues, Carter certainly looks the part of an impact power bat. He's an imposing 6-foot-5 and tips the scales as a taut 230 pounds, and to watch him take batting practice it to watch a steady stream of baseballs effortlessly launched over fences.

He is, in the usually astute mind's eyes of Oakland's talent evaluators, the right-handed, middle-of-the-order threat that the team hasn't really has since Matt Holliday.

OK, bad example. Really bad. So let's go with Frank Thomas -- the 2006 version that led the A's to the American League Championship Series and should have been named the AL MVP.

It might be unfair to Carter to compare him to the Big Hurt, who surely will be a first-ballot Hall of Famer, but since when are sports fair? Comparing up-and-comers to all-timers is what we do.

And what a delicious coincidence that Carter's big-league coming-out party came last week against the White Sox, the team whose cap Thomas will be wearing on his plaque in Cooperstown. In a three-game series against visiting Chicago, in front of the A's fans almost certainly getting a tad anxious to see the kid bust out, Carter went 4-for-8 with his first homer.

Better yet, a couple of the hits came off sliders. The word on Carter among scouts is that sliders are his kryptonite, and that was clearly the case during his August cameo. It wasn't so much that he was taking bad, off-balance swings at them; in fact, his hacks were very balanced and under control. It appeared as though he simply wasn't recognizing or identifying the pitch as a slider.

Now that he's had a little success against the pitch on the game's highest level, though, he at least knows that he's capable of handling it, and that will help him down the road.

More important is that he know exactly what his focus needs to be this winter, and something else that several scouts have said about him -- he's a hard-working, bright young man -- is true, he should be able to ... you know, *slide* right into the middle of the order, as planned, next April.