

A's News Clips, Saturday, October 2, 2010

Daric Barton's raises his profile with two home runs in Oakland A's rout of Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

One ball went rocketing over the right-field wall in the first inning Friday night at Safeco Field.

Another followed directly in its path the next inning, this time with the bases loaded.

By the top of the second, A's first baseman Daric Barton had the biggest game of his major league career. The fact that he left in the seventh inning with tightness in his right quadriceps didn't diminish his performance in the A's 9-0 victory over the Seattle Mariners.

Barton went 3 for 4 with two homers, including his first career grand slam, and a career-high six RBIs. True, the Mariners aren't offering much resistance as they inch closer to a 100-loss campaign, but Barton's night was an attention-grabber.

"Barty -- the one-man party," catcher Kurt Suzuki said.

Actually, right-hander Trevor Cahill deserved credit too, blanking Seattle for seven innings and notching his 18th victory in his final start of the season.

While Cahill's night was an extension of what he's done all year, Barton's power display was much less common.

He's earned praise from the A's front office, particularly manager Bob Geren, for his work in the No. 2 spot in the batting order.

He entered Friday tied for the major league lead in walks (110) and ranked sixth in the American League in on-base percentage (.393). During the A's last homestand, Geren called him the team's most improved hitter in 2010.

Yet to many observers, Barton is Exhibit A of what ails Oakland's power-starved offense, Friday's big game notwithstanding.

He's totaled 10 homers and 57 RBIs in 552 at-bats, modest numbers coming from a first baseman, a position that teams traditionally look to for power.

The A's -- who rank second-to-last in the majors with 104 homers -- are expected to shop for power hitters this winter.

The available free-agent first basemen will include Adam Dunn, Paul Konerko and possibly Adam LaRoche, if he and the Diamondbacks don't exercise his \$7.5 million mutual option.

Would the A's show interest in any of them?

They're satisfied enough with Barton's play that they're auditioning top prospect Chris Carter -- a natural first baseman -- in left field.

It wasn't a shock to see Barton bust out at Safeco Field, site of his 2007 major league debut. He's hitting .341 (28 for 82) there for his career.

"It's a nice stadium and I see the ball well," Barton said. "It's the first place I played, and it's always nice to come back here."

He said his injury is mild and he expects to play tonight.

Cahill (18-8) has recorded the most wins by an A's pitcher since 2002 -- when Barry Zito won 23 and Mark Mulder 19. He also finished with a 2.97 ERA.

Not bad for a guy who wasn't called up from Triple-A Sacramento until April 30.

At 22, he's recorded the most wins by an American League pitcher 22 years old or younger since Kansas City's Bret Saberhagen went 20-6 as a 21-year-old in 1985.

"What a remarkable season," Geren said.

Notes: Former A's broadcaster Bill King finished among the top three in online balloting for the 2011 Ford C. Frick Award, putting him on the final 10-person ballot. A committee will choose the winner, to be announced during the winter meetings Dec. 5-8. "... Dallas Braden and Eric Chavez will be among the guest commentators during the MLB Network's postseason coverage. Chavez will appear Wednesday and Thursday, and Braden takes his turn Friday and Saturday. "... Matt Carson was scratched in right field with back spasms.

Chin Music: Matt Carson a late scratch with back spasms, other A's thoughts

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 10/1/2010 6:53PM

I'm not sure there's an official stat kept for last-minute scratches and lineup changes, but the A's have to be among the major league leaders. Matt Carson was supposed to start in right field tonight but came down with lower back spasms. Jeremy Hermida takes his place. I saw Carson in the clubhouse and he was walking hunched over and in obvious discomfort. ...

I asked Bob Geren before the game about Vin Mazzaro and where he fits into the mix for next year's rotation. He didn't expand much on Mazzaro specifically, but mentioned him as a starting candidate along with several others. Four of the five spots seem set with Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden, Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, so that leaves Mazzaro battling it out with Josh Outman, Tyson Ross, Clayton Mortensen and whoever else the A's bring to camp. We all know that offense is the obvious area for improvement for the 2011 Athletics, but the competition for that fifth starter's spot will be worth keeping tabs on.

Geren also was asked about Rajai Davis and the season he's had. It's going to be interesting to see how much the A's emphasize the running game next year if they do bring in a power hitter or two. The way I see it, Coco Crisp, Davis and Cliff Pennington could all be back in next year's lineup, meaning one-third of Oakland's batting order (at least) could consist of speedy, base-stealing types. The A's were so successful running this year (and in 2009) that it's tough picturing them not doing it again in 2011. But the main reason they've been so aggressive on the bases is because they're so woeful in the power department. If they import some power over the winter, they're going to have to strike a balance between pushing the envelope with the running game, and dialing it down and letting their big bats do some damage. Their personnel will help determine that. ...

Tonight's lineups:

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

Mariners — Ichiro RF, Figgins 2B, Gutierrez DH, Smoak 1B, Langerhans LF, Bard C, Saunders CF, Mangini 3B, Wilson SS; French LHP.

18 wins for Cahill; 2 homers, 1 slam, 6 RBIs for Barton

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Matched against the other power-free team in baseball for the final series of the season, the A's are muscling up against the Mariners.

On Thursday, it was Chris Carter and Cliff Pennington going deep, and on Friday, it was Daric Barton - not once, but twice, including the first grand slam of the first baseman's career, his career-high six RBIs fueling Oakland's 9-0 victory at Safeco Field.

That outburst gave Trevor Cahill his 18th win - despite not pitching for the A's in April - and it kept the team in a second-place tie with the Angels in the AL West.

Cahill, 22, worked seven scoreless innings in his final outing, allowing five hits and two walks and striking out six. The last American League starter to win 18 games at the age of 22 or younger: Kansas City's Bret Saberhagen, who was 20-6 for Kansas City in 1985.

"I think I still have to get better this offseason," Cahill said. "Come in stronger, more refined with one more season of experience under my belt."

Cahill finished the season with a 2.97 ERA, fourth best in the league. The last time an AL pitcher age 22 or younger qualified for the ERA title with ERA below 3.29 was 1990, when Kevin Appier had a 2.76 ERA for Kansas City.

"He's been dominant all year," Barton said.

Barton was sort of the anti-Mark Ellis in September: He hit .226 in the month. But he broke loose Friday with the first multi-homer game of his four-year career.

"Ellis told me to swing and stop walking," joked Barton, who also doubled in a run in the sixth.

He left in the seventh with tightness in his right quadriceps, but he said he'll be back in tonight.

The A's have outscored Seattle 17-1 in the first two games of the four-game set.

Ellis extended his hitting streak to 11 games.

Broadcast news: Bill King, the late A's radio broadcaster, was one of three men voted onto the final ballot for the Hall of Fame's Frick Award.

King received the second-highest vote total behind Montreal and Toronto broadcaster Tom Cheek. A 20-member panel will consider the final 10-name ballot, and the recipient will be announced in early December.

Two A's players will join the MLB Network as postseason analysts: Eric Chavez will make his "MLB Tonight" debut Wednesday and Thursday, and starter Dallas Braden on Friday and Saturday.

Briefly: Matt Carson was a late scratch because of back spasms. Jeremy Hermida played right. ... Manager Bob Geren said Tyson Ross, who missed the final six weeks of Triple-A Sacramento's season with an elbow sprain, was cleared to begin throwing again. Ross will be in the mix for the fifth starter spot next spring along with Bobby Cramer, Josh Outman and Vin Mazzaro, assuming Mazzaro is not traded for a bat this winter. ... Oakland's 17 shutouts this season top the league.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Switched-off offense: The A's had the second-fewest extra base hits (404) and second-lowest slugging percentage (.376) in the league entering Friday. Their 645 runs were fourth lowest; Oakland hasn't scored fewer than 700 runs in a non-strike season since 1985, when the A's had 508.

Drumbeat: Carson a late scratch, Hermida in instead

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 10/1/2010 6:19PM

Matt Carson was just scratched with back spasms and Jeremy Hermida is in instead.

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

Hermida is likely to be a non-tender this winter, but he's hitting better recently and he was once considered one of the game's top prospects. Of course, the A's have Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson coming back from surgeries, and Chris Carter looks like he might be more of an everyday proposition in the outfield than expected. (Carter's still probably a first baseman or DH down the line, but next year left might be the best bet, depending on where the A's are able to add a big bat).

Hermida's a straightforward, no-nonsense guy and he doesn't appear to be under any illusions that he'll be back, but he's playing for other teams to notice him right now - and if he makes a strong impression in Oakland, you never know what might happen in the offseason. The A's non-tendered Jack Cust and then brought him back. It's unlikely, but there's no doubt that Oakland loves to collect outfielders.

Manager Bob Geren says that Tyson Ross was cleared to begin throwing today. Ross will be in the fifth starter mix next spring along with Bobby Cramer, Josh Outman and, if he's not traded this winter, Vin Mazaaro. If the A's need to move anyone to get a bat, any trade partner is going to want one of the good young pitchers, and none of the others are going anywhere. And one theory about Mazzaro's demotion in September is that he was sent down when he started to struggle a bit in order to preserve his trade value; i.e., if he stunk it up all September, he might not be quite so attractive.

At any rate, he'd be the only really obvious trade chip, so I'm not convinced he'll be back unless Oakland sticks purely to the free-agent market to fill offensive needs.

Barton's career night helps Cahill to 18th win

First grand slam, six RBIs pace A's early outburst in Seattle

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Trevor Cahill's storybook season ended without much fanfare in Seattle on Friday night.

That's what happens when you're expected to throw out zeroes and, well, you go and throw out zeroes.

Cahill compiled seven zeroes, to be exact, against a Mariners lineup that couldn't quite match the performance of just one A's hitter.

For what Daric Barton did was something of the special sorts: three hits, his first multihomer game -- one of them his first career grand slam -- and a career-best six RBIs. All in a span of seven innings, before he was lifted due to a tight right quad.

Barton entered October's opener with a forgettable September -- one that included a .226 average -- officially behind him. He got things going in the first with his first homer of the night, a solo shot to right off Seattle lefty Luke French, who endured a nightmare of a second frame.

French allowed a leadoff single to Kurt Suzuki, who moved to second when Chris Carter garnered a free pass. A Jeremy Hermida single loaded the bases for Cliff Pennington, who collected an RBI on a soft infield hit to make it 2-0. With the bases still loaded, French walked Rajai Davis to bring in Oakland's third run and, following a coaching visit, offered up Barton's grand slam to right field.

"[It was a] huge night facing a left-hander," Barton said. "[French] was throwing a couple of offspeed pitches that he got up. Both of them were no-doubters and, obviously, one of them was a big blow. Four RBIs with one swing of the bat is something, with a guy like Trevor on the mound, in a ballpark like this, one swing of the bat looks like you have a very good chance to win that game."

Barton, from whom opponents have come to expect walks and lots of them, said after the game he entered the contest with the "same swing, same approach" -- a mindset that ultimately led to French's exit after just four innings.

"I've been seeing the ball fine," Barton said. "I just haven't been getting hits. Sometimes that happens, and today I put the barrel on the ball and got a couple hits.

"To get a lead early felt good. It always feels good to get hits, especially when runners are on base. We've been getting runners on base a lot, but we just haven't been able to capitalize on it. [It's a] nice ballpark, good place to see the ball. It's the first place I played, so it's always special to come back here."

Meanwhile, Cahill seemingly breezed through the Mariners' lineup, giving up just five hits with two walks and six strikeouts to earn his 18th and final victory of the season -- one he finished with an impressive 2.97 ERA over 196 2/3 innings after starting the year in Triple-A.

His ERA represents the fifth-best mark by an A's pitcher 22 years old or younger since 1913. Furthermore, his 18-8 record makes him the first A's pitcher to garner that many wins since 2002, when Barry Zito tallied 23 and Mark Mulder compiled 19.

"What a great year he's had -- 18 wins, and he didn't even start the season with us," Geren said. "From where he was last year to close to a 20-game winner and an All-Star -- he finished strong and stayed healthy."

Cahill was coming off one of his worst starts of the season, a four-inning stint against the Rangers that resulted in a quick 12 hits and seven runs. Thus, finishing strong was more important than ever for the A's hurler.

"I wanted to bounce back after my last start," Cahill said. "The offense helped me out in a big way by giving me a huge lead, and I just tried to throw strikes."

"He's been throwing the ball well all year long," said Seattle shortstop Josh Wilson. "It's the first time I've seen him all year, but you could see why he has those numbers. He threw a pretty good game."

The young righty posted a remarkable 7-2 record with a 1.78 ERA against American League West opponents this season, but he knows there's always room for improvement in every facet of his game.

"I think the biggest thing for me was staying healthy and finishing strong," Cahill said. "The numbers are a product of a lot of things -- good defense, good run support. It's made a big difference for me.

"I still want to try to get better in the offseason and come into next year stronger, a little more refined, with more experience under my belt. I'll probably appreciate all this a little more when the season's over. It feels weird knowing I don't have to do anything the next couple of days."

Cahill's efforts gave the A's a league-leading 17 shutouts. The A's added on a run in the fourth thanks to an RBI base hit off the bat of Mark Ellis, and Barton fittingly brought home the A's ninth and final run in the sixth with an RBI double.

Coupled with an Angels win in Texas, Oakland remained tied for second place in the AL West while moving within two games of the .500 mark with two contests remaining on the schedule. With a sweep this weekend, the A's can avoid their fourth consecutive losing season.

Barton exits stellar evening with tight right quad

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- In the midst of a career night, first baseman Daric Barton left Friday's 9-0 win over the Mariners in the middle of the seventh inning with what was deemed a tight right quadriceps.

Barton went 3-for-4 with two home runs -- including the first grand slam of his career -- and a career-high six RBIs before his exit. It marked his first career multihomer game.

Jeff Larish replaced Barton at first base in the bottom of the seventh, but manager Bob Geren said after the game that Barton should be back in the starting lineup on Saturday.

"I expect him to be ready to go tomorrow," the A's skipper said.

Barton made his team-high 154th start, and he admitted to feeling the aches and pains of a grueling season.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Just some leg tightness, that's all. It's been tight all year. In a 9-0 game, it was a good time to come out. It's late in the season. I've played a lot of games, and everyone's banged up at this point."

Braden, Chavez to join MLB Network crew

SEATTLE -- Dallas Braden will take his notoriously offbeat and unique personality to television next week, joining teammate Eric Chavez -- along with Los Angeles' Torii Hunter and Arizona's Chris Young -- as guest analysts on "MLB Tonight" for MLB Network's postseason coverage.

Braden, who stepped into the national spotlight when he tossed baseball's 19th perfect game on Mother's Day, will appear on the show from Oct. 8-9. Chavez, meanwhile, will enjoy a two-night stint beginning Wednesday.

"MLB Tonight" is slated to air live before and after every postseason game. The network, which will celebrate its two-year anniversary in January, has plans for more than 125 hours of live coverage in October.

Less than a month ago, Chavez spoke to reporters about a possible future in broadcasting if he indeed decides to step away from the game for good.

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

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

Worth noting

Matt Carson was a late scratch from Friday's starting lineup against the Mariners due to what was announced by the A's as a lower back spasm. Jeremy Hermida took his place in right field, batting eighth.

Anderson out to continue dominance of Seattle

By John Barone / MLB.com

Years from now, when David Pauley looks back on this season, he hopes it's the one that established him as a Major Leaguer.

Pauley began the season owning nine big league appearances, and none since 2008. Entering Saturday's start against the A's at Safeco Field, the Mariners right-hander has doubled that total this year alone.

Of Pauley's 18 outings for Seattle, 14 have been starts. And of those 14 appearances, the past four have been quality starts. Needless to say, the 27-year-old journeyman has performed like a pitcher who wants to find a home with the Mariners.

"I've made a lot of strides," Pauley said. "When I first got called up [from Triple-A Tacoma], there were a lot of times when I had trouble getting out of big innings and gave up crooked numbers. The one thing I've accomplished is staying out of those big innings and trying to get away with maybe one or two runs, instead of four."

"I've got confidence in my pitches now. Knowing I can come up here and compete, it's been good progress for my career."

The A's already know Brett Anderson can compete. Following a September in which he went 3-1 with a 2.23 ERA over six starts, the 22-year-old lefty will make his final appearance of 2010.

Judging by recent results, there's likely no team he'd rather face than Seattle.

Anderson is 2-1 with a microscopic 0.68 ERA across four starts against the Mariners this season, limiting the American League's 14th-ranked offense to a .189 batting average over 26 2/3 innings of work.

"We know what he can do," said Seattle interim manager Daren Brown. "He's shown it before."

Athletics: Stolen-base trio

Outfielders Coco Crisp and Rajai Davis and shortstop Cliff Pennington have combined to swipe 108 of the A's 153 bags this

season. ... Oakland's 17 shutouts mark its second-highest total in the past 20 years. ... A's pitchers have surrendered 90 home runs on the road, compared to just 60 at home.

Mariners: Smoak swinging hot bat

First baseman Justin Smoak is batting .444 over the course of a career-high eight-game hitting streak. ... Second baseman Chone Figgins is the first Seattle player to increase his hit total in every month of a season, according to STATS, Inc. ... The Mariners have lost 23 contests in their opponent's final at-bat, including 12 walk-off losses. ... Among full-season Minor League affiliates in 2010, Seattle teams led the way in runs (2,956), homers (527), slugging percentage (.439) and OPS (.782).

Worth noting

The Mariners are 43-31 against the A's since 2007. ... Anderson is 0-2 with a 1.08 ERA in four starts at Safeco Field. ... Pauley has never opposed Oakland.

Strong A's bonds help Gonzalez cope

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Gio Gonzalez walked out of a movie theater, good vibes all around following a showing of "Hot Tub Time Machine," primed to continue celebrating with his father, Max Sr., and younger brother, Max Jr.

"We were feeling good," the elder Max said.

It was two days before Opening Day, and his son was on a high, and for good reason. Hours earlier, Gio stood against a wall in the hallway of the A's clubhouse, arms crossed and smile affixed. Reporters surrounded him on what he remembers as a "biting-the-nails, edge-of-your-seat kind of day."

He had just been informed the fifth spot in the A's rotation was his. Front-runner Trevor Cahill was going on the disabled list. Gio was officially in.

But, as the Gonzalez family learned within minutes of leaving the theater that night, hometown friend Raul Rodriguez was gone. A longtime pal from Hialeah, Fla., Rodriguez had died following a horrific car accident on what was otherwise a remarkable day for Gio and Co.

"I remember that day so well," Gio said. "It was the day my great friend passed away. It was joy and bitterness because of what happened, but the excitement of getting the fifth spot was unreal. I had been trying not to think too much about it but at the same time knew what was at stake."

"It was a bittersweet day for us," Max Sr. recalled. "We were celebrating, having fun, everything was great. And then it all changed in an instant. That phone call changed all of us."

Rodriguez's pair of rubber cleats still rest inside Max Sr.'s home in Hialeah, Fla. They represent the exchange rate for Gio's old spikes, the same red ones he wore at Monsignor Pace High School.

"Raul was playing in a baseball league down here without real cleats," Max Sr. said. "He didn't have any spikes, so Gio and I decided he needed to have some and we just traded cleats. He was so grateful. Such a great kid."

Those memories, along with the poignant one that formed on April 3, won't soon leave their minds, especially Gio's. After all, it marked perhaps the first day of what's been a rather long and somewhat draining -- but productive -- 2010 season in which he has been forced to deal with a mixed bag of emotions.

Peaks and Valleys

"I always tell Gio," teammate Dallas Braden said, "'There are peaks and there are valleys in this game. If we can stay even, those peaks and valleys won't affect us.'"

Gio, who recently turned 25, has seemingly always been a high-energy player. For that, he can look to his equally boisterous father, the one who admittedly always told Gio "to be aggressive in everything you do," the one who -- on game days -- insists his son eat a homemade tuna fish-filled omelet for a maximized dose of energy.

That aggressiveness, that healthy appetite for life, is what Braden loves about his teammate. Gio the person, he says, is simply "a great heart, very well-intended."

"He wants to do the right thing," Braden explains. "He's guilty of doing what a lot of people are guilty of, and that's not wanting anybody to not like him. He wants to have a connection with everybody."

"We don't have a lot of Latin guys here, and what he exudes is very prevalent in the Latin community, being very spirited. I really enjoy it. At first, it can rub you the wrong way if you're not really sure what the intention is, but once you find out where it's coming from, you understand what kind of guy he is."

The 2009 version of spirited Gio saw a handful of peaks but even more valleys. He began the season at Triple-A Sacramento and endured two one-game stints in Oakland before making a permanent return on June 24. Overall, he was 6-7 with a 5.75 ERA in 20 games, 17 of them starts. He struck out 109 in 98 2/3 innings, but he also walked 56.

The numbers speak for themselves, but Gonzalez's real struggles resided in his mind, where he couldn't quite keep his emotions in check when things began unraveling on the mound. Rather, they were on full display for his opponents, his teammates, his coaches and, of course, his family.

"It was hard watching sometimes," Gonzalez's father said. "Everyone could see his frustration. The A's started telling him to slow his game down."

According to dad, pitching coach Curt Young, in particular, played a large role in this effort, an endeavor that has seen Gonzalez rise above the peaks and valleys this year.

Releasing the Ball of Emotions

Less than two weeks following Rodriguez's death, Gonzalez appeared noticeably detached after a short start in Seattle. He had given up two runs on six hits and four walks in just 4 2/3 innings. While addressing the media in a postgame interview, Gonzalez stood next to his locker, not anything like his upbeat, fast-talking self he's come to display every five days. He kept his words to a minimum, simply saying he had to tip his cap to a patient Mariners lineup, one that forced him to throw 99 pitches.

Rodriguez was on his mind, but now so was his then-girlfriend of eight months, Valerie Mathias. She had been seriously injured in a car accident in Anaheim four days prior and was recovering and attempting to gain back her memory in a San Diego hospital.

A devastated Gonzalez naturally turned to Braden, a born mentor who could relate to his teammate's grieving. Braden had never lost two close friends in a span of less than two weeks, but he had suffered a great loss years prior when his mother passed away following a battle with melanoma.

Braden's upbringing was far from perfect in the messy confines of Stockton, Calif. He knows anger, and he knows pain. Thus, he taught Gonzalez how to combat the two.

"You look at all the stuff he's gone through to become the person he is now -- he's the most mentally tough person I've ever met," Gonzalez said of Braden. "He's gone through it all. He's someone I can go to any time."

So he does. And often.

"What I've really tried to make him understand or teach him to do," Braden says, "is to allow those things off the field that can get to someone like him because he's so spirited -- he wears his emotions on his sleeve, and things at home can affect him here and vice versa -- to channel that, to save that, put it into a little ball. And, on game day, that's the ball we take out to the mound. That ball of energy, that ball of emotion, now we've channeled it and focused it into your game plan, the way you're going to pitch tonight."

While coping with Mathias' health struggles, which included brain surgery, Gonzalez proceeded to endure another difficult start -- five walks and five runs in 4 1/3 innings against the Yankees on April 20 -- before posting stellar May numbers that saw him surrender three runs or fewer in five of his six starts while also tallying 33 strikeouts in 39 innings over that span. The month included a dazzling eight-inning blanking of the Giants in Oakland on May 22, when Gonzalez started receiving the kind of attention many believe he's always deserved.

"He started going from pouting and yelling and being angry and upset," Braden said, "to being able to take that energy out to the mound and transform it."

Braden wasn't the only one around the A's clubhouse who began to take notice.

"He's always had the stuff, but his mental game has made a tenfold [leap] from what it was last year," fellow lefty Brett Anderson said. "I think Dallas has helped him with that, kind of taking him under his wing. He no longer really lets his emotions get the best of him. He's slowed the game down, and I think it shows in his numbers.

"You could always tell when things started to go south just by his body language and his demeanor. You could see it on the mound. But when I've watched him this year, he's been the same even-keel guy."

This Year's Gio

Set for smooth sailing the remainder of the season, looking to put saddened months behind him, Gonzalez took a 7-6 record into the All-Star break. Three of his final four first-half starts saw the lefty surrender one run or fewer across six or more innings. Offensive help wasn't necessarily there -- each of his losses in the first half came with one or no runs of support -- but Gonzalez never let it get the best of him.

In fact, Gonzalez took time, as he still does to this day, to thank his teammates and coaches in nearly every postgame media session. He praises his defense, glorifies his battery mates and carries the utmost respect for his coaches -- most of the time leaving anyone but himself to grade his own performance.

"I've learned to listen a little more this year," Gonzalez said. "I've learned to sometimes keep my mouth quiet, watch the game, study everything."

The 2010 version of Gonzalez was growing up. Yet just when life seemed to be calming down, another storm came over him following another shocking event. His cousin, Andy Maxfield, had suddenly died at the young age of 18 in August. And Gonzalez's father wasn't so sure how much more his son could take.

"It was just one thing after another," Max Sr. said. "In a way, he was depressed. I think we all were. That's too much loss in such a short amount of time -- something you're never prepared to go through."

Strangely, Gonzalez was partly prepared. At least when it came to the task of grieving -- and performing through grief. Again, he went to Braden. And, through it all, he learned a few things.

"It's all about family and friends, this life," Gonzalez said. "When you lose someone so quick, there's no joy. The joy you have is getting to see your family again because, just like that, they could be gone. You have to take advantage of what you have now, and I've matured in that way. I recognize this all now.

"It's all part of what was missing last year, and Dallas is always telling me he sees a huge difference between last year's Gio and this year's Gio."

This year's Gio turned an ugly August off the mound into a special one on it. He made six starts in the month, all of them coming with six or more innings. He gave up nine earned runs in a combined 41 innings. He struck out 37 and walked just 13.

The emotion wasn't gone. It was simply under wraps, for the most part.

"If you feel something, go with it," Braden said, "because that's who you are. But understand that in this realm, you've got to conform to the majority. You can't just throw your hat out there and be [upset]. You've got to clean it up. He's done a tremendous job. The growth is night and day."

Change, and a Changeup

On Thursday, Gio stepped back on the mound at Safeco Field for the first time since April 14, the day he revealed a deep sadness coming from two unimaginable events. Looking for a career-high 15th win, Gonzalez took with him his Braden-inspired ball of emotions. He walked five and battled much of the game. Yet in a game that may have best exemplified the strides he's made this year, he didn't allow a run. Rather, he tallied eight strikeouts in seven shutout innings.

It represented the 12th time he had gone at least seven innings in the season and the 25th time he had offered up three runs or less. And, despite the season-high five free passes, it was his fifth start of at least seven innings and no earned runs.

After the game, Gonzalez appeared to exude not so much excitement as he did relief. He had made it. Those peaks and valleys stood in the rearview mirror, and Gonzalez stood composed. He had gone 8-3 with a 2.61 ERA in 14 starts since the All-Star break without much fanfare beside the well-known duo of Trevor Cahill and Anderson, along with Braden, who tossed a perfect game earlier this season. Gonzalez finished the year 15-9 with a 3.23 ERA following 200 2/3 grueling innings.

"He's just been doing his thing every start," manager Bob Geren said. "He hasn't received much national attention; he's just been plugging along in every one of his games."

"It's very humbling," Gonzalez admitted. "You can be the low-radar guy, but once my time comes every five days, I'm going to be right there beside Cahill and Anderson and Braden. I want to be that go-to guy. When you get the ball in their hands, it's almost an automatic win. That's where I want to be."

Thanks to a transformed mental game, not to mention a devastating repertoire, Gonzalez is well on his way.

"The kid's got a ridiculous arm," Braden says. "His arm is live. He's got the best left-handed curveball in the game. I don't know of another guy who's got that power curveball and garners the swings and misses and the weak contact he does."

Looking Ahead

A breakthrough 2010 performance has Gonzalez wondering what's in store for 2011. His victory on Thursday gave the A's two pitchers in their age-24 season or younger with 15 wins. Cahill, slated to pitch on Friday, has 17. They're just the 23rd set of teammates since 1920 to each be that young and win as many games in a season.

That's all well and good, but Gonzalez is already looking for better numbers. And Braden's willing to help him grab hold of them.

"I think last year, or the year before, he's the guy that the lights would have gotten to," Braden says. "I don't think he's that guy anymore. I think, given the opportunity to perform in a big market, he would relish that opportunity. He would take it and run with it. But being able to kind of fly under the radar and take his lumps as they come and enjoy the success when it's there, that's really helped him get to that next level of becoming a big leaguer, of becoming a big league pitcher.

"I expect him to come in and be hungrier. To taste what he's had this year, he has to know you can always work harder. No matter how hard the year you worked before, you can always work harder than that. If he can realize what he did from last year to this year can be outdone, imagine the success he can have. I want him to understand that."

Gonzalez is a product, Braden tells him. He is his "best selling point." Gonzalez must always first convince himself -- before others -- of his own abilities, and never let any off-the-field struggles take that away from him. It may have taken too much pain to see that this year, but Gonzalez is not simply a changed pitcher but a changed man because of it.

"It's been awesome to watch," Braden said, smiling. "He's just really done a great job of being able to take what's kind of distracting him or what's on his mind and transform it into baseball success."

"He amazes me every day," Max Sr. said of his son. "Every single day, that kid amazes me. He's grown up and, as his father, I couldn't be more proud of him."

Major League: Looking ahead: 2011 rotation

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 10/1/2010 7:57PM

Bobby Cramer has strung together some impressive outings. Vin Mazzaro endured a healthy taste of sustained success for much of the season. Josh Outman is on the mend. And Tyson Ross isn't too far behind any of them. So who fills out the rotation next year, assuming Cahill, Anderson, Gonzalez and Braden all break camp healthy? Could be another fun competition next spring. Mazzaro may seem to have the edge simply because of his extended experience, but I wouldn't write off Cramer and Outman just yet. Ross, meanwhile, may need some extra time in the Minors to make up for the lengthy time he lost this year due to elbow injury. According to Geren, he was cleared to throw just today, and I'd suspect the club wants him to undergo a string of healthy starts in Triple-A before joining a big league rotation. Nevertheless, Geren made mention of all four guys when approached with the subject today, so it should be interesting how the offseason -- Mazzaro may be prime trade bait for offensive help -- and Spring Training unfold.

Right now, who would get your vote for the 5th spot?

Barton homers twice, including slam, as Cahill wins 18th

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — Daric Barton homered in his first two at-bats, including a grand slam just inside the right-field foul pole, and Trevor Cahill pitched seven sharp innings for his 18th victory to lead the Oakland Athletics over the Seattle Mariners 9-0 on Friday night.

Barton cracked a solo homer in the first, beginning a miserable outing for Seattle starter Luke French. An inning later, Barton jumped on French for his first career slam. Barton struck out in the fourth and doubled in the sixth before leaving the game.

Cahill (18-8) finished the season with career bests in wins, innings, ERA and strikeouts. His 18 victories are tied for fourth-most in the American League and he lowered his ERA to 2.97.

Seattle was handed its 99th loss and must win its final two games to avoid dropping 100 for the second time in three years. But with the defeat, the Mariners assured themselves of having the second overall pick in next June's amateur draft.

Barton made sure of that early.

With just eight homers entering Friday, Barton jumped on a 3-2 pitch from French in the first, driving it deep into the right-field seats. An inning later, French had already allowed two runs to score and received a visit from pitching coach Carl Willis when Barton hit a 1-2 fastball for just the second grand slam of the season by the A's.

Barton's slam came after an RBI infield single by Cliff Pennington and a bases-loaded walk to Rajai Davis.

Barton added an RBI double to left-center in the sixth off reliever Chris Seddon, adding to his career-best night. Barton was replaced on defense by Jeff Larish in the seventh and didn't get a chance to boost his totals.

The A's announced Barton left the game with a tight right quadriceps. Still, he finished with the most RBIs in a game by an Oakland player this year.

Mark Ellis added an RBI single in the fourth off French (5-7), but Pennington was the only Oakland player other than Barton to have more than one hit. French allowed eight hits and eight earned runs in four innings, the worst of his 13 starts for the Mariners.

Cahill threw 96 pitches through seven innings, mowing through Seattle's meager lineup that featured a number of regulars. He struck out the side looking in the second inning, part of his six strikeouts on the night.

Cahill made just one start in April, spending most of the first month with Triple-A Sacramento. He's the first American League pitcher 22 or younger to win 18 or more games since Bret Saberhagen won 20 games as a 21-year-old for the 1985 Kansas City Royals.

Cahill allowed just five hits — all singles — walked two and only once, in the seventh, did Seattle get a runner to third base. About the only positive offensively for the Mariners was first baseman Justin Smoak extending his hitting streak to eight games, the longest run of his young career.

The Haves and the Have-Nots: Bay Area Baseball

By TYLER MCKEE, Forbes.com 10/1/2010

A few nights ago, Tampa Bay Rays players complained they were "embarrassed" to play in front of a half-empty stadium as they were fighting to clinch a playoff spot. This sentiment is certainly understandable, especially when you see another team in the same division, the high-falutin' New York Yankees, secure their spot with a packed house on hand to witness it. Still, it's hard to feel too badly for the playoff-bound Rays. I would instead prefer to share my sympathies with another team that plays in front of sparse crowds: the Oakland Athletics.

There is, perhaps, no greater example of the disparity between the haves and have-nots of Major League Baseball than the two teams that play in the Bay area: the San Francisco Giants and the Athletics. One team plays in a city that's among the top-five most expensive in the country; the other plays in a city that had a 17 percent unemployment rate in August. Between their ballparks, their fan base, and the players they put on the field, the teams, just like their cities, present a stark contrast.

Despite hanging around the .500 mark for most of the season, the Oakland A's haven't been able to generate much fan support and will finish 2010 with the second-lowest attendance in the Majors. Once lauded in Michael Lewis's best-selling book "Moneyball" as the standard for how to run a team on a low budget, the Athletics have not had a winning season since 2006. With little fan support, Oakland finds itself in the vicious cycle that plagues many small market teams: No fans equals slim profits, slim profits equals tight budget, tight budget equals inability to attract or keep star players, which equals less winning, which equals fewer fans.

Sadly, it seems that there's no end in sight. There's just too little for Oakland fans to cling to. Going into the 2010 season there were fewer than 5 veterans on the roster who had contracts extending beyond this season. The rest of the lineup was made up of rookies, or young, unproven players. The team had no real identity, no players for fans to hang their hats on, no one they could count on being around for the long term.

Even when fans do show up to see a squad made up of other team's cast-offs and unproven talent, they are forced to do so in what is undoubtedly one of the most unattractive venues in all of professional sports. The Oakland-Alameda Coliseum is archaic by baseball standards. While most other teams had new stadiums built since 1990, the Athletics continue to occupy a throwback, multipurpose stadium which also houses the city's football team. It is old and ugly, with seemingly no charm. In much the same way that Mets fans felt about the transition from Shea Stadium, Oakland fans would welcome a change without hesitation.

Just a short kayak ride across the San Francisco Bay those same fans can see for themselves exactly what they are missing.

The Giants are currently in the middle of a tense playoff race in the National League West and find themselves in first place as the season enters its final weekend. Accordingly, they are a hot ticket in town and regularly pack their stadium to capacity. In 2010 they rank 9th in the Major Leagues in terms of total attendance and 5th in terms of ticket sales relative to their stadium size. Even in previous years, when the Giants weren't in a playoff chase, they still had relatively good attendance. In part it's due to the fantastic ballpark they play in, worth visiting whether or not you are a baseball fan, and partly because of the young, talented team the Giants had invested in.

AT&T Park is one of the most beautiful baseball stadiums in the country. Built in the middle of the baseball stadium renaissance of the 90s-00s the facility wonderfully blends the feel of old ballparks with quirky dimensions while also providing all the modern amenities. Add a fabulous location, right on the bay, and the park regularly makes the Top 5 on anyone's list of baseball stadiums in the country.

The fans of San Francisco, meanwhile, not only get to enjoy their stadium for its beauty but also for the team it houses. Over the last few years the Giants have developed a stable of talented pitchers, establishing one of the deepest starting rotations in baseball. Even more recently, they have produced young, exciting hitters to complement this staff and now seem poised to have a perennially successful team. What is most important, and strikingly different from the A's, is that

management has invested in this team. Because they generate the revenue to do so, the Giants have spent the money to develop and lock up their talent long-term, and provide the fans with a core group of players that they can bond with for years to come.

While the Giants and the Athletics may be close together in proximity, their fortunes are far apart.