

A's News Clips, Sunday, October 3, 2010

Oakland A's see bigger things for shortstop Cliff Pennington

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

People throughout the A's organization speak highly of shortstop Cliff Pennington's play this season.

Pennington is a bit more critical.

"I've definitely got some things I need to work on," he said before Saturday's 5-3 win over the Seattle Mariners. "I can improve my consistency at the plate and obviously work on cutting down those errors on defense."

So as the curtain draws on his first full big league season, Pennington has room for improvement. But with the A's facing decisions all over the diamond this offseason, they don't appear concerned with their shortstop.

Pennington has started 146 of Oakland's 161 games, no small feat on a team that lost player after player to injury. He also has established himself as a rapidly improving defense player who has displayed excellent range while justifying the A's decision to install him as the starter after only 96 games of major league experience.

"I think he's made a lot of strides both offensively and defensively," A's general manager Billy Beane said. "Last year he kind of ran out of gas. But I think he's improved a significant deal and has everything to be one of the best defenders at his position in the league."

To be mentioned among the game's best shortstops, however, Pennington will have to reduce the errors. Only Miguel Tejada's 26 errors in 1998 were more by an A's shortstop over the past 23 years than Pennington's 25.

In the bottom of the ninth Saturday, he backhanded a bouncer off the bat of Josh Wilson and despite having plenty of time to throw, misfired high for an error.

"I'm just trying to be more consistent with things," Pennington said before the game. "Every now and then I have a tendency to rush, and that's when one goes haywire."

A's infield coach Mike Gallego has worked extensively with Pennington on slowing his tempo. Gallego echoed what a scout told Bay Area News Group earlier this season -- that Pennington commits more errors than other shortstops because his range allows him to get more chances.

"He's molded himself into one of the top five shortstops in the game to me," Gallego said. "His range is as good as anybody's, and his arm is above average."

Pennington is hitting just .252, but his speed has meshed well with the A's aggressive baserunning mentality. But it was long ball that spurred their third win over Seattle in as many days.

Mark Ellis and Jack Cust hit back-to-back homers in the fourth inning and Chris Carter mashed a two-run shot in the fifth.

That made a winner of Brett Anderson (7-6), who went seven innings in his final start and allowed two runs (one earned). The A's (80-81) assumed a one-game lead over the Angels for second place in the AL West. They'd avoid their fourth straight losing season with a win today.

First baseman Daric Barton (quadriceps injury) started the game but was replaced by Jeff Larish in the sixth.

Chin Music: Postgame notes from A's 5-3 victory over Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 10/2/2010 11:30PM

The A's have been very good on the field this weekend, and they were a pretty entertaining product in the clubhouse after the game. A lot of this didn't make my game story for tomorrow, so here's some details.

--Jack Cust's homer in the fourth inning came on a 3-0 pitch, his first career home run on that count. He said he enjoys swinging on 3-0, but that the A's usually give him the 'take' sign. "That's their decision," Cust said. "I would swing 3-0 every

time if I could. It's the only time you know what you're going to get." He was asked if he thought his homer might encourage the A's to let him swing away more on 3-0. "If they can remember next year," he said, "if I'm here next year."

Cust had an interesting take when asked about his low home run total — Saturday's long ball was just his 13th of the season, though he spent the first five-plus weeks of the season in the minors after the A's surprisingly designated him for assignment before Opening Day. "This was a year, after the stuff that happened to me, I was trying to show a little more of what I could do offensively," he said. "I can hit home runs. I averaged almost 30 homers over the last three years and it didn't get me anywhere. I was just trying to show them I can do something else."

Cust was referring to his .275 average, considerably higher than the .239 mark he brought into 2010. I see where he's going with that point, but no matter what, Cust knows what he does best and what the team needed from him. The A's are a light hitting team that desperately needed more power, and he was their best candidate to provide that. So I'm only willing to cut him so much slack on this topic.

—Brett Anderson said he suffered a bit of whiplash when a soft liner came his way on the mound and deflected off his glove. Anderson looked a bit comical as he fell to the ground, then tried to recover and throw to first for the out. What's great is that he's as entertained as anybody by his adventures. "It wouldn't be a Brett Anderson start this year if a ball wasn't hit at me and something weird happened," he said. "I tried a 'Matrix'-style move. This body's not made for that."

Bob Geren and head trainer Steve Sayles came out to visit Anderson, but he stayed in the game and delivered seven strong innings. ... Solid way for him to end the season.

Talk to you tomorrow afternoon ...

Gary Peterson: Baseball still not thinking of the kids

By Gary Peterson, Bay Area News Group

Did your windows rattle earlier this week? Not to worry -- it was just Major League Baseball issuing a bombshell announcement.

A decision on the A's request to relocate to San Jose? Heavens no. Years of study have confirmed that will take years of study.

An agreement to test for human growth hormone? Dream on.

A ban on maple bats, whose flying fragments of death put players and fans in grave danger on a daily basis? Nah.

This momentous decision concerned start times for the upcoming Winterfest known as the World Series. Game 3, it was breathlessly revealed, will start at 6:57 p.m. EDT (3:57 p.m. PDT). It will be the earliest start time for a World Series game since 1987.

The other six games? Five are scheduled for the standard issue 7:57 p.m. EDT (4:57 p.m. PDT) first pitch. Game 4, scheduled for Halloween, will air after Fox has concluded its programming of King Football (8:20 p.m. EDT, it is estimated).

But Game 3! Whoa!

"I am extremely pleased we are able to provide our fans the earliest World Series start time since 1987," commissioner Bud (The Insomniac) Selig said.

He added: "When I snap my fingers, you will awaken having no memories of the 1994 strike, the Mitchell Report or Steve Bartman. Oh, and whenever you hear the 'Day-O' song at the ballpark, you'll cluck like a chicken."

And this from Fox: "We've said over the years that if advertisers were willing to support earlier starts at prime-time levels, we'd be able to begin games earlier," said network president Eric Shanks.

Can't you just smell the peanuts and Crackerjack?

The fact is, baseball and its bloodsucking business cronies continue to hold the game's signature event hostage from what should be the next generation of fans. Selig referenced 1987, so let's start there. Since '87, it has taken an average of 3:20

to play a World Series game. Thus, a 7:57 p.m. first pitch in the East -- 91 of 112 World Series games since '87 have been played east of the Rockies -- means an 11:17 p.m. last pitch. Even a 6:57 p.m. start means a 10:17 p.m. finish.

How many 10-year-olds do you know are allowed to stay up that late?

It's not just young viewers who suffer. Baseball suffers when its most meaningful games are played in marrow-chilling cold. Bill Mazeroski hit his Series-winning homer on Oct. 13, 1960. Average Series end date since 1987: Oct. 25.

Thanks for the announcement, Bud. Pass the mukluks.

Cust's blow backs A's power parade in Seattle

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

On Saturday night at Safeco Field, Jack Cust got a little boost from Mariners left fielder Michael Saunders, who knocked Cust's drive to the left-field wall up and out.

That gave the A's - power-hitting fiends in this series with seven home runs - back-to-back home runs after Mark Ellis' two-out shot to left in the fourth, Oakland's first hit off David Pauley. The next inning, rookie Chris Carter belted a two-run drive off Pauley, and the A's beat the Mariners 5-3 to assure themselves of no worse than a second-place tie in the American League West.

"Second place is the first loser," Cust said. "It's cool we'll get a little money for it, but besides that, it's not where we want to be."

If the A's can complete a four-game sweep today, they'll take second outright and will finish with a .500 record, the first nonlosing season in Bob Geren's four years as manager.

A's starter Brett Anderson allowed the leadoff man to reach in all but one of his seven innings, but he minimized the damage and allowed only one earned run, which scored on Anderson's own awkward, unsuccessful attempt to field a comebacker by Greg Halman. Anderson said he had a bit of whiplash after that, but after a few trial pitches, he remained in the game.

"It was probably that Matrix-style move," Anderson said. "This body is not made for that."

Anderson went 4-0 with a 2.18 ERA over his final six starts. He finished the season 7-6, but his record might look different with more support: In five of his losses, the A's failed to score more than one run.

Cust homered on a 3-0 pitch for the first time in his career, and Cust said it was because the A's nearly always put on the don't-swing sign.

"I wish I could swing every time 3-0," he said. "There I was just trying to hit a home run. When they do (allow it), I like it - it's the only time you know what you're going to get."

Cust, who didn't come up until mid-May, has 13 homers, half his average in the past three seasons, but he noted that his average (.275) is nearly 20 points above his previous best.

"After all that's happened, I'm trying to show what more I can do offensively," he said. "I averaged almost 30 home runs the last three years, and that didn't get me anywhere, so I'll try to show 'em something else."

He and Geren both thought his homer was well over the fence, rather than assisted by Saunders, who said he thought he had it until he looked in his glove.

Briefly: Rajai Davis has 50 steals, an ongoing career high and the most by an A's player other than Rickey Henderson since Miguel Dilone had 50 in 1978. ... Daric Barton left in the sixth with leg tightness, and Geren said he'll be re-evaluated this morning. ... Matt Carson remained unavailable with back spasms.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

He'd like to return: You'd think after minimal game action with the A's that Gabe Gross would be itching to leave. Instead, the reserve outfielder said the team's outlook is so good for next year, "If they want me, I'll come back with bells on."

Drumbeat: Quest for .500 continues

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 10/2/2010 5:40PM

The A's needed to sweep all four games here in order to finish at .500, and so far, they've outscored Seattle 17-1 in the first two games and they have pitching advantages tonight (Brett Anderson vs. David Pauley) and tomorrow (Dallas Braden vs. Ryan Rowland-Smith).

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

Matt Carson has improved since yesterday, according to manager Bob Geren, but he's not available tonight.

The bullpen should be in better shape, though, thanks to the efforts of first Gio Gonzalez on Thursday, then Trevor Cahill last night. Geren said the other day that if Michael Wuertz wants to pitch, he will this weekend, but my impression is that it's more likely he's done for the season. Why push it with that thumb injury?

Ken Korach wandered over to the writers' session with Geren and asked Geren if Bobby Cramer might be available in the bullpen tomorrow as a second lefty and Geren thought that with 118 pitches on Wednesday, it's borderline, but possible.

Contenders without crowds

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Nobody would imagine it, glancing at the China Basin crowds the past couple of days, but attendance isn't wonderful around baseball. We're not talking just the Marlins (in line for a new stadium in two years) and A's (in line for a new stadium in two decades).

We're talking contenders. The Braves, Padres and Reds rank ninth, 11th and 13th, respectively, among 16 NL teams in attendance, and the Rays are ninth in the AL.

Other than the Rays, these teams play in the new wave of ballparks. While the Giants have been selling out down the stretch, the Padres drew 28,576 for their final home game, not a great sign at a park that opened in 2004. Recent crowds for the Reds (2003 opening), a playoff team for the first time since 1995, have been in the low 20,000s, and 12,061 arrived for a September game.

While the Rays have gone nose to nose with the Yankees all summer, they've averaged less than half what the Yankees draw. Their average of 23,024 actually is a dip from 2009, when they weren't a playoff team.

Baseball's overall attendance isn't much different from 2009 because of the big bump in Minnesota. But several markets are hurting.

Consider Cleveland, which once had a streak of 455 consecutive sellouts. The Indians' attendance this year is last in the majors, an average of 17,395. The season total of 1.39 million is the smallest since they drew 1.22 million at Cleveland Stadium 18 years ago.

This is the same franchise that led the league in attendance in 1999.

But the lousy economy took another day off at Third and King, where the Giants enjoyed their 28th sellout of the season Saturday and need 5,379 today to reach the 3 million mark for the eighth time in 11 years. Their Division Series games, if they're to be played? Already sold out.

Three homers support Anderson's effort

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Typical.

That's how Brett Anderson described his final performance of the season.

Not because of his winning status following a 5-3 victory over the Mariners, or his ability to allow just one earned run while striking out six over seven innings.

Rather, because of a sixth-inning play that had Anderson on the ground.

With a runner on second and two outs in the frame, the A's southpaw took a liner to his glove off the bat of Greg Halman that ultimately resulted in confusion for Anderson and a single for Halman.

"I threw a fastball inside, and I couldn't really tell if he barreled up or how it was hit off the bat," Anderson said. "It looked like it was coming at 100 mph, and it was probably coming at 40. Just tried to knock it down, do a Matrix-style move, and this body's not made to do that. I tried to get him on first, but fell a little and couldn't get him out."

Yup, pretty typical for a hurler who, seemingly every five days, has ended up showcasing a silly stumble.

"It wouldn't be a Brett Anderson start unless the ball was hit at me and something weird happened," he said.

Weird, though, is what happened after the incident.

"I had a little whiplash," he said. "I threw the next pitch, and it was like I was staring into a light. I don't know how to describe it really, but I was out of it for a second. I told [catcher Kurt] Suzuki I needed a breather because I didn't know where I was or what was going on for a second."

Four pitches later, though, he found himself rid of the frame. And, by night's end, which for Anderson was after the seventh inning, he had thrown a season-high 122 pitches, marking the first time an A's pitcher had tossed that many since Joe Blanton did so in 2007.

Anderson's durable season-ending performance was something of a personable accomplishment in a 2010 campaign that saw him battle two separate stints on the disabled list. He finished the year 7-6 with a 2.80 ERA.

"You never want to deal with going on the DL, but that's something I had to deal with," he said. "I feel strong now. My velocity's good, my slider's good, which is important."

Meanwhile, the A's powered their way into sole possession of second place in the American League West, pounding out three homers to aide Anderson's efforts in their final night game of the season. An Angels loss in Texas on Saturday means the A's will finish the season with no less than a second-place tie.

"It's great, considering what we've gone through this year," manager Bob Geren said. "No one wants to tie, but knowing we'll at least have a 2 next to our name rather than a 3 or 4 is important. What we'd like to do is finish at .500 and alone at 2. That's what we want going into the offseason."

Maybe so, but Jack Cust made it clear after Saturday's game that he'd rather be a bride and not a bridesmaid.

"Second place is first loser, doesn't mean much to me," he said. "It's not where we want to be. We want to play meaningful games in September. But we made a good run and I guess it's something to build on for next season."

Cust did his part in Oakland's third straight win, following Mark Ellis' solo home run in the fourth with one of his own on a 3-0 pitch off Seattle's David Pauley -- one Michael Saunders likely never wants to see again. The Mariners left fielder attempted to prevent Cust's blast from getting over the left-center-field wall, but accidentally helped it over.

"I tried to time my jump and I'm not sure if the ball was going to go out," Saunders said. "I had it in the tip of my glove and the impact of the wall caused it to go out. Initially, I thought I had it. I was excited, looked in my glove, and did a 180. I was shocked. I got a piece of it, but couldn't hold on."

Cust was a little surprised, too -- only because he thought he hit it harder.

"I thought it was going in the upper deck," he said. "I don't know what happened, but it didn't go in the upper deck. In the first inning, I thought I got one, so I was able to get far enough on that one. I wish I could swing every time 3-0. In that situation, I was just trying to hit a home run."

It represented Cust's first career homer on a 3-0 pitch, a situation in which he said he'd like to be given the green light more often. Whether he gets to in Oakland next year will depend on if the A's decide to tender his contract. They didn't last year, but they ultimately brought him back only to designate him before Opening Day and play him in the Minors for six weeks.

Since, Cust has tallied 13 homers with Oakland while compiling a .275 average. The former stat ranks lowest among his four big league seasons, while the latter is a career high.

"I've averaged almost 30 homers every year," he said. "Everyone knows I can hit home runs. I tried to show them something else this year and hit for a higher average. Hopefully I have the chance to do both next year."

The long balls by Cust and Ellis represented the fourth time this season the A's have hit back-to-back homers and the first time since Suzuki and Cust did so on July 24 against Chicago.

After Seattle plated an unearned run in the fourth, Chris Carter continued Oakland's homer-happy evening in the fifth by blasting a two-run shot off Pauley far beyond the left-field wall to make it 4-1. It marked the rookie's third career home run and his second of the series.

Oakland added its fifth and final run in the eighth when Rajai Davis tallied a leadoff single, garnered two stolen bases -- bringing his season total to a career-high 50 -- and scored on a sacrifice fly by Ellis. Davis' 50 stolen bases rank second in the AL to Juan Pierre's 66 and are the most by an A's player since Rickey Henderson's 66 in 1998.

Athletics aim to finish season at .500

By Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

For Seattle, perhaps the 2010 season couldn't finish soon enough. For Oakland, this year will be remembered as one full of missed opportunities.

The Mariners were plagued with poor chemistry this season and floundered in last place in the American League West for most of the year. The A's, meanwhile, couldn't take advantage of the league's top pitching staff and were doomed by an offense lacking major pop.

"The starting pitching has been outstanding all year, defense has played great," Oakland reliever Brad Ziegler said. "The offense has come up clutch in a lot of different areas, we just didn't have that one 30-homer bat that kind of puts fear into the other team."

But Oakland did manage to form a new identity this season. Instead of relying on walks and home runs, the A's turned into a small ball team that relied on pitching and defense.

Looking ahead to next season, Oakland is excited about its developing young arms like Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Brett Anderson. But the season finale belongs to Dallas Braden, who turned in the year's most memorable effort, his perfect game on May 9.

Braden has also made strides this year, as he became a 10-game winner for the first time in this four-year career. Braden, the clubhouse leader of the pitching staff, also enters Sunday with a career-low 3.50 ERA.

Seattle will counter with Ryan Rowland-Smith, who will start in place of Felix Hernandez, who was shut down after throwing a league-high 249 2/3 innings this year.

"The perfect scenario -- [Rowland-Smith can go] five or six innings and be able to build some confidence going into the winter," Seattle interim manager Daren Brown said. "It's been a tough year for him, but he'll get the start on Sunday and hopefully get us around four or five innings."

A's: Players find offseason work

Braden will serve as a guest analyst on MLB Network on Friday and Saturday. Eric Chavez will serve as a guest analyst on Wednesday and Thursday. ... With a victory Sunday, the A's would finish at the .500 mark for the first time in Bob Geren's four-year managerial career.

Mariners: Gutierrez about to make history

If center fielder Franklin Gutierrez makes it through Sunday's finale without an error, he will set a new MLB record. Gutierrez has played 146 games in the field without making an error this season, a span of 415 chances. The current mark for an errorless season was set in 1966, when Curt Flood converted 396 chances without a blemish.

Worth noting

Rowland-Smith is 1-10 with a 6.90 ERA this season. He is 0-2 with a 8.59 ERA in three starts against the A's this year. ... The A's enter Sunday with a one-game lead over the Angels for second place in the AL West.

Major League: Saturday grab bag

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 10/2/2010 6:22PM

Pregame tidbits from Safeco Field, where the A's are getting ready to play their final night game of the year: Geren said

Matt Carson might not be available today or tomorrow because of a lower back spasm that forced him out of Friday's lineup before the first pitch. ... **Daric Barton**, who exited in the seventh after a monster night Friday, is back in and feeling better. ... When asked if **Bobby Cramer** could work out of the bullpen tomorrow, Geren said he's thought about it but hasn't made a decision. ... Several players' statuses for next season are uncertain. The big one, obviously, is **Mark Ellis**. I'd think the club would ultimately decide to bring him back -- not only because of what he offers this team but also because there's really no one to step in for him right away. So when I asked Geren about a guy like **Eric Sogard**, who could potentially be at second base if Ellis departs, and about how close he feels Sogard is to stepping into a big league everyday role, he simply said he's not sure because he hasn't been tested in such a role yet. Same for **Josh Donaldson**, who could be **Kurt Suzuki's** backup next year if the club decides to part ways with **Landon Powell**. Geren likes the strides Donaldson has made in the past year, especially defensively. ... The A's feel good about their chances these next two games, both of which need to be won in order to avoid a fourth straight losing season.

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.