

A's News Clips, Monday, October 4, 2010

Oakland A's finish 81-81 after closing with four-game sweep of Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The big prize eluded their grasp, but the A's did take care of business regarding their secondary goals over the season's final weekend.

A 4-3 victory over the Seattle Mariners on Sunday at Safeco Field capped a four-game sweep and clinched second place for the A's in the American League West, their highest finish in four seasons under manager Bob Geren.

With a final record of 81-81, the A's also avoided a fourth straight losing campaign. But for a team that spent much of September clinging to slim hopes of a division title, the strong finish provided only so much consolation.

"I'll be watching baseball (the rest of) October instead of playing it, so it could have been better," winning pitcher Dallas Braden said.

The season-ending road trip was a fitting closing chapter. The A's dropped three straight to the Los Angeles Angels only to rebound and take four straight from Seattle. At several points during the season, the A's seemed to fall from relevance only to steady themselves and remain in the conversation.

"This team plays as hard as any team I've ever managed or been on," Geren said.

Before the game, Geren talked of next season and what the A's must do to challenge for their first division crown since 2006.

The first thing he mentioned was avoiding the injury bug that's plagued the team for all four years of his tenure. A spotty offense -- particularly a lack of home run power -- also hindered the A's most in 2010.

That the A's went deep nine times in a four-game sweep of the Mariners was ironic. Two revealing stats:

Kevin Kouzmanoff, who along with Kurt Suzuki went deep in the finale to help Braden (11-14) finish on a high note after his 1-5 September -- finished with a team-high 16 homers, the lowest mark to lead the team in its 43 seasons in Oakland. He and Suzuki tied for the RBI lead with 71; only Mitchell Page's 70 in 1978 were fewer for an Oakland team leader.

Geren said he wants the team's situational hitting to improve.

"With a guy on third base and less than two outs, I'd like to see that improve -- a lot actually," he said.

Even a small spike in their offensive stats could make a difference in 2011. The A's figure to return most of a pitching staff that posted an AL-best 3.56 ERA.

Most promising is a starting rotation that has become one of the major leagues' best.

"We watched them bust out of their cocoon as butterflies," Braden said of his young rotation mates. "Last year they were caterpillars."

Braden was pulled after just five innings because of soreness in the trapezius muscle in his neck, a problem that he said he's had for a while. He allowed two runs and five hits, then watched Boof Bonser, Henry Rodriguez and Craig Breslow close it out.

Breslow earned the save in the final two games, capping off a season in which he showed remarkable durability as injuries ate away at the bullpen. He made his team-high 75th appearance and finished with a career-high 742/3 innings. Only 7 of 33 inherited runners (21.2 percent) scored against him, third-best in the AL.

His two strikeouts Sunday also gave him 71, most by a lefty reliever in Oakland history. Breslow's season performance was timely; he's eligible for arbitration for the first time this winter.

Oakland A's update: Competition could be wide open for fifth spot in 2011 rotation

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Wide-open competition for fifth spot in 2011 rotation

SEATTLE -- Four-fifths of the starting rotation seems set for next season, but the A's will have lots of candidates for the No. 5 slot.

Vin Mazzaro seemed to have the inside track on that job based on his solid work in the rotation through much of this season.

But after getting sent to Triple-A Sacramento on Sept. 6, Mazzaro returned Sept. 14 and was used sparingly as a reliever.

It's uncertain where he sits in the A's thoughts as the offseason begins.

"I thought I did a pretty good job (in a starting role)," Mazzaro said. "I'm definitely not a bullpen guy. I believe I can start. I guess they just need to see a little more consistency."

Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden (who is arbitration-eligible) appear entrenched as starters.

Among those who will compete with Mazzaro in spring training are Tyson Ross, Josh Outman and Clayton Mortensen. Bobby Cramer also could factor in.

Outman missed the entire season while recovering from the elbow ligament replacement surgery he underwent in June 2009. He's pitching in instructional league games and progressing well.

Left fielder Chris Carter made a diving catch to rob Franklin Gutierrez in the first inning of Sunday's 4-3 win over Seattle. A day earlier he misplayed a similar effort that went for a double off the bat of Justin Smoak.

It's been a steep learning curve for Carter, who switched from first base to left field during the second half of the season. He hopes to get more work in left while playing winter ball in Venezuela.

Whether he can play capably in left will factor into how the A's lineup takes shape in 2011.

"He's a pretty good athlete," manager Bob Geren said. "He could be at least an average outfielder, hopefully more."

Reliever Michael Wuertz missed the final eight games with right thumb tendinitis, but he said he won't require surgery. "... Infielder Jeff Larish and reliever Henry Rodriguez plan to join Carter and play winter ball in Venezuela. The A's wanted second baseman Jemile Weeks to play winter ball, but the 2008 first-round pick hasn't been able to shake injuries to his left hip and hamstring. Weeks will rehab at home in Florida in hopes of being full strength by spring training.

Some thoughts as the 2010 season wraps up

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 10/3/2010 1:05PM

Today's lineups, as the A's go for a four-game sweep of the Mariners and a .500 record for the season ...

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

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

—Darc Barton's strained quadriceps is still bothering him, though he's available to pinch-hit. Josh Donaldson draws a rare start at first base, where he's played plenty in the minors.

—Michael Wuertz won't be available in the bullpen as he hasn't thrown in a few days because of right thumb tendinitis. Wuertz said an offseason of rest should allow his thumb to heal, and he won't require surgery.

—Holy cow, this season has flown by fast, but they all do. Here's a few quick-hit observations/thoughts as the season draws to a close. Feel free to sound off on any of them.

***The A's 2010 MVP: I think Trevor Cahill is a pretty obvious pick. Normally I'd go with a position player here, but Cahill's mostly excellent work every fifth day is too much to ignore. He developed an effective curve ball and learned to locate his sinker and throw it to both sides of the plate. There's no reason to think he won't continue to get better.

While Cahill's emergence was the biggest success story on the pitching staff, I'd say Gio Gonzalez's season was the most surprising. I think the A's envisioned Cahill someday being able to produce as he did this year. But based on Gonzalez's inconsistency for much of 2008 and 2009, did anyone expect him to be a 15-game winner so soon? Not me ...

**Dallas Braden's perfect game was the biggest highlight of the A's season, I think we'd all agree. But that unfolded in a gradual manner, with excitement building with each 1-2-3 inning Braden delivered. If I had to pick the best single play of the season, I'd go with Gabe Gross' over-the-wall grab that robbed Detroit's Gerald Laird of a homer May 29 at Comerica Park. Pretty amazing effort, and it sticks out in my mind more than any other play. [You can watch a clip of it here](#). Coco Crisp turned in a couple of highlight-reel grabs that are strong runners-up.

—Mark Ellis certainly made his push for his 2011 option to be picked up based on his torrid September, when he hit .413 and set an Oakland record with 43 hits. But just as scouts caution that you can't read too much into a young player who tears it up in September, I think the A's should only lend so much weight to Ellis' incredible month when they decide on his \$6 million option. That's a hefty investment for a team that needs to find a power hitter or two and typically isn't a big spender in the offseason. However, I've got my own selfish reasons for wanting Ellis back. He's money when it comes to a good quote and is one of the most likable and cooperative guys in the clubhouse from a media standpoint. I still think the most sensible move is for the A's to decline his option and see if he's willing to negotiate a new deal with a lower base salary. That might depend on what kind of interest Ellis thinks he could get from other teams, though he's stressed how much he wants to return to Oakland.

—Gotta give a special tip of the cap to David Feldman, an A's historian who's been a huge help finding stats every time that I've hit him up with a request. Talk about a beat writer's best friend ...

And thanks to everyone for reading the blog and taking time to share your thoughts this season. Spring training will be here before you know it!

Season-ending sweep in Seattle gets A's to .500

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

A strong finish to 2010 makes the A's prospects for 2011 shine all the brighter.

Oakland needed a four-game sweep at Seattle to avoid a losing record, and the A's finished the deed with a 4-3 victory at Safeco Field on Sunday to wrap up an 81-81 season, their best in Bob Geren's four years as manager.

That gives Oakland second-place outright, providing 1 percent of the playoff pool to the A's players and also a bit of extra pride in a season that featured an outrageous number of injuries (23 trips to the disabled list) and a few offensive limitations. The team led the league in ERA despite having a rotation that averaged 23 years of age much of the way.

"Obviously, you want to end up on top, but I've got to admit we're heading in the right direction, this organization, this pitching staff," A's second baseman Mark Ellis said. "You've got to be proud of everyone, because we had a few bumps in the road where we could have caved."

Runner-up status didn't console everyone. "I could care less - it's like kissing your sister ... twice," starter Dallas Braden said. "I don't have any place for silver medals."

Braden went five innings Sunday but left because of neck and trapezius stiffness, which didn't allow him to finish his pitches the way he'd like.

"Nothing to try to be a hero about," he said. "We wanted to win this game and go out on a good note."

Ellis, whose \$6 million option for next season will be discussed this week, made a strong push, setting a team record for hits (43) in September and finishing with a 13-game hitting streak, matching his career high. His .291 average led the team.

Asked if his hot final month might help his contract status, Ellis said, "I hope so, but they're going to do what they want to do."

Daric Barton wasn't in the lineup because of increased leg tightness, but he pinch hit in the sixth. After leaving the previous two games early, then not starting Sunday, Barton missed the major-league walk title: He had 110 and Milwaukee's Prince Fielder had 114. Barton did lead the American League.

Reliever Michael Wuertz was unavailable much of the final few weeks, including Sunday, because of thumb tendinitis running down into the side of his wrist.

"It was a tough season for me and the bullpen in general," Wuertz said, "but with what happened this year, we might be better in the long run."

It sounds as though that's the case: Geren said that he'd like to limit each reliever's appearances by five to eight games next season, which should help keep the bullpen fresher and prevent late-season injuries and fatigue.

Craig Breslow, who recorded a four-out save Sunday, finished with 71 strikeouts, an Oakland record for a left-handed reliever.

Must see: Braden will be at the Yankees-Twins series for MLB Network on Friday and Saturday, and he wondered if there would be a large bleep button there to silence him. Braden had a verbal feud with New York third baseman Alex Rodriguez earlier this season.

"It could be my debut and my finale, who knows?" Braden joked of his TV career.

Briefly: Kurt Suzuki ended a career-high 56-game homerless streak with a leadoff home run in the fourth. ... The A's tied with Detroit for the 15th-best record, but Oakland will get the protected pick in the June draft because the Tigers had the better record last year.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Lack of pop: The A's hit nine homers in the series to finish with 109, second fewest in the majors to Seattle's 101. Kevin Kouzmanoff hit 16, lowest ever by an Oakland home-run leader.

Drumbeat: Barton out of action on last day; Donaldson's at first

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 10/3/2010 12:14PM

Game 162 is here, with the A's assured of no worse than a tie for second place. They'd like to win second place alone, of course, both for pride and for a little extra dough - if they tie with the Angels, the two teams split one percent of the playoff pool, cutting individual player takes (usually from \$7,000-\$10,000) in half. An A's win would ensure the full pot goes to Oakland.

Daric Barton is not in the lineup because of leg tightness, which has worsened in the past day or two. So No. 3 catcher Josh Donaldson is at first base; he's played there plenty in the minors, plus an entire Arizona Fall League, and as he just pointed out to me, he sees a lot trickier balls in the dirt when he's catching - and now he'll have a big first baseman's glove on. He was a third baseman in college, he's fine - "unless there's more hidden bullpen mounds," he said. Donaldson provided an amusing moment falling in the bullpen area in Oakland last Sunday.

Manager Bob Geren said Barton might be able to pinch hit "and do a Kirk Gibson."

Michael Wuertz won't pitch again this season, i.e. today; his thumb tendinitis needs a good month to calm down. He saw Dr. Lewis Yocum in Anaheim, and Yocum confirmed the tendinitis diagnosis. Every time Wuertz tried to work his way back, it bit him again - only a solid chunk of rest will allow the irritation to subside. Craig Breslow might be someone Geren stays away from - he threw 27 pitches last night after 42 on Wednesday. Geren would like to reduce the workload of all the primary relievers next season by five-to-eight appearances each. That should go a long way toward improving the bullpen's health, particularly in the final month. It's been very poor the past few weeks.

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

A's claim second in AL West with finale win

Club's strong finish builds confidence for 2011 season

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Following a three-game series sweep at the hands of the Angels on Wednesday, the A's walked into Seattle on Thursday needing four wins in four days in order to seal the deal on a .500 season mark.

"The guys could have been really down after the Anaheim series," manager Bob Geren said. "They could have been, but they weren't."

Thanks to a dose of timely hitting, along with a pair of homers and the usual helping of solid pitching, a resulting 4-3 victory on Sunday capped a four-game sweep over the Mariners that solidified that very notion.

"That was a great finish," Geren said. "I probably said it 50 times in postgame shows, how we came back or almost came back and never quit. Being that it's game No. 162, I'll say it one more time. These guys play as hard as any team I've ever managed or been on."

The A's reached the .500 mark a club-record 33 times this season, so perhaps it was fitting that they went out at the even line. Nevertheless, Sunday's season-closing win paved the way for an outright second-place finish in the American League West.

For all involved, the feat represented something to build on. At the end of the day, though, it didn't hand them a ticket to postseason action.

"I could care less," starter Dallas Braden said. "I don't have any place for silver medals."

Game No. 162 pitted Braden against Seattle southpaw Ryan Rowland-Smith, the former looking to finish a rather remarkable year -- one highlighted by a perfect game -- on a high note.

Braden did, for the most part, in the form of his 11th win of the season, after allowing two runs on five hits with one walk and two strikeouts through five innings of work. He tossed 75 pitches in a rather short stint due to a sore neck, ending the season with a respectable 3.50 ERA through 30 starts.

"I'll be watching baseball in October rather than playing it, so the season could obviously have been better," Braden said. "There's always room for improvement. I have an offseason chalk full of areas that need improvement, and it'll be about building up the armor once again to get ready for a healthy season for [2011]."

The A's handed Braden a 1-0 lead in the third thanks to an RBI double from Mark Ellis, who ended the season riding a career-high-tying 13-game hitting streak. The A's second baseman -- carrying a club option for next season -- collected two hits in the contest, marking the sixth multi-hit game during his hitting streak.

"I can't say enough about what Ellis did over the last month -- big, big contributions from him," Geren said.

The veteran second baseman noted satisfaction in being able to "get back in the groove of things," but he understandably kept his words to a minimum when approached about his contract status.

"Obviously it was a good way for me to end the season," Ellis said, "but they're going to do what they want to do. It's up to them."

Ellis' showing was followed by Kurt Suzuki's 13th homer in the fourth, a first-pitch solo shot off Rowland Smith, who surrendered two runs on four hits with three strikeouts and a walk in five innings.

Braden, meanwhile, offered up a two-run double to Ichiro Suzuki in the fifth that tied the game. But an RBI base hit from rookie Chris Carter in the top of the sixth put the A's hurler back in position for the win.

Kevin Kouzmanoff's team-leading 16th homer of the season off Garrett Olson in the eighth lent the A's some breathing room for a 4-2 lead. It also put Kouzmanoff back into a first-place tie with Suzuki for RBIs (71) among the A's on the year.

Relievers Boof Bonser, Henry Rodriguez and Craig Breslow combined for three innings of one-run ball to hold Oakland's lead and secure the club's 81st and final win of the season. It marks Geren's first non-losing record at the helm in Oakland, where -- before Sunday -- the A's last avoided a losing season in 2006, when they won the division with a 93-69 mark.

"I think winning the last four games was definitely huge, just giving us a chance to finish at .500," Suzuki said. "We obviously want to be on top, but we know we can be better."

Breslow's appearance gave him 75 on the season, marking the second straight year in which the southpaw has reached such a plateau. His workload, seemingly the one constant in a banged-up bullpen this year, never went unnoticed.

"He's a guy that obviously is in the mix in the sixth and seventh, and then he had some opportunities in the eighth, and then he ended up being our closer," Geren said. "Obviously everyone knows how intelligent he is, but he actually pitches that way, too."

Pitching is an area of no worries for the 2011 A's, as the club looks to retain Braden, along with young phenoms Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson and Gio Gonzalez, next season. Oakland's starting staff finished a breakthrough 2010 season with a Major League-best 3.47 ERA.

"That's been the bright spot for us, watching those guys. Watching them bust out of those cocoons as beautiful butterflies," Braden said of his pitching mates. "Last year, they were all ugly caterpillars. We knew they'd have pretty wings when they came out, and sure enough ..."

Season comes full circle for five A's starters

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- In their final game of the season, one they're hoping will secure sole possession of second place in the American League West, the A's paraded out five of the nine players that were found in the Opening Day lineup almost six months ago.

Rajai Davis, Kevin Kouzmanoff, Kurt Suzuki, Mark Ellis and Cliff Pennington represented the only green and gold members to start both the season opener and season finale -- both against Seattle. Three of the missing four -- Eric Chavez, Ryan Sweeney and Travis Buck -- were sidelined much of the season due to injury. And Daric Barton, who was one of the club's few consistently healthy players in 2010, was forced to sit out of Sunday's contest due to a lingering right quad strain.

However, manager Bob Geren said Barton might be available to pinch-hit and "do a Kirk Gibson." In his place at first base was Josh Donaldson, a September callup who is putting the finishing touches on his second stint with the A's this year.

It represented Donaldson's first Major League start at first base, a position at which he has one inning of big league experience. Geren noted, though, that he's played the infield corner a handful of times in the Minors.

Worth noting

Manager Bob Geren confirmed Michael Wuertz has not thrown for a few days because of an off-and-on battle with right thumb tendinitis. All other relievers, however, were expected to be available on Sunday.

Major Lee-ague: The final word...

Jane Lee, mlb.com 10/3/2010 5:52PM

...from **Dallas Braden**, who will be an analyst for MLB Network on Oct. 8 and 9 for postseason action:

"Get your Dallas Braden fix. It's a different side of the game, different side of the business I haven't seen before. It's an honor for someone to think I would be a good fit there. We'll have some fun with it."

When asked if he expects to temper his unique personality at all, Braden quickly replied, "No."

"...So it could be my debut and my finale, who knows?"

It just might be, especially since he's slated to work on the Twins-Yankees series broadcast.

"Live look-ins with A-Rod in the dugout. ... Keep that mic away from me. Is that when they're going to hit that button that doesn't let you talk? And I'm just yelling at the TV and you can't hear me. ... Get your popcorn ready."

Braden, of course, is joking for the most part, and he said all of this with a smile. As outspoken as he comes across, he's truly an athlete of character, and he respects the game and the people who play it far too much to put his own character in jeopardy. That being said, don't expect the bleep button to come out in full force when A-Rod's face is on the screen. That doesn't mean Braden won't be biting his tongue, though...

A's finish season on a high note

By TIM BOOTH, ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — Kurt Suzuki and Kevin Kouzmanoff hit long solo home runs, and Oakland's Chris Carter added the go-ahead RBI single as the Athletics beat the Seattle Mariners 4-3 on Sunday to complete a season-ending four-game sweep.

Oakland finished 81-81 for its first non-losing season since winning the AL West with 93 wins in 2006. Dallas Braden (11-14) allowed two runs and five hits in five innings.

Suzuki's homer on the first pitch of the fourth inning gave the A's a 2-0 lead. Seattle pulled even in the fifth on Ichiro Suzuki's two-out, two-run double, but Carter came through in the sixth with a bases loaded single off Anthony Varvaro (0-1).

Kouzmanoff added a little insurance in the eighth with a solo shot off Garrett Olson, his 16th homer of the season. Seattle finished at 61-101, its second 101-loss season in the last three years.

Sunday could have been the crowning moment for Seattle ace Felix Hernandez, who could have made one more turn on normal rest. Seattle missed on an opportunity to showcase Hernandez on the final day of the regular season and give him another chance to strengthen his AL Cy Young Award credentials. But Mariners management erred on the side of caution, noting Hernandez's league-best 249 2-3 innings was already the highest of his career. The 24-year-old also led the AL in ERA, opponents batting average against and was second in strikeouts, one behind the Angels' Jered Weaver. Hernandez was relegated Sunday to standing on the dugout railing and acknowledging a standing ovation from the 23,263 in attendance following a video tribute on the big screen in the middle of the third inning.

That was about the most exciting moment for Mariners fans, a far cry from a year earlier when Ken Griffey Jr. and Ichiro Suzuki were carried around the field on teammates' shoulders after a surprising 85-win season.

Ichiro Suzuki's double providing a brief jolt, giving the All-Star his 213th hit. He added a single in the eighth for No. 214 and scored on Justin Smoak's two-out single.

Mark Ellis gave Oakland a 1-0 lead in the third with a two-out RBI double to score Rajai Davis, who barely beat a potential double play to keep the inning going. Kurt Suzuki's homer into the A's bullpen in left field was his 13th. Oakland then took the lead in the sixth off Varvaro, with Ellis scoring on Carter's sharp single.

Neither starter pitched past the fifth. Seattle's Ryan Rowland-Smith gave up two runs and four hits in five innings. Craig Breslow got four outs for his fifth save in seven opportunities.

Seattle center fielder Franklin Gutierrez set a major league record for the most chances in an entire season without committing an error. Gutierrez was the designated hitter on Sunday, ensuring the record. He played 146 of his 152 games in center field this season and was perfect in his 415 chances. The previous mark was 396 by Curt Flood with St. Louis in 1966.

NOTES: Sunday was the final game for Seattle video coordinator Carl Hamilton after 21 years. Hamilton is retiring at the end of the calendar year. He threw out the first pitch to former Mariners C Dan Wilson. ... Seattle OF Ryan Langerhans and IF/OF Matt Tuiasosopo will each have surgery next week to remove bone chips from their elbows. ... Oakland 1B Daric Barton did not start because of a strained quadriceps. He pinch hit in the sixth and struck out.