

A's News Clips, Monday, April 4, 2011

Oakland A's notebook: Hideki Matsui celebrates Japanese Heritage Day with his 2,500th professional hit

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 4/3/2011

Japanese Heritage Day turned out to be a big hit at the Coliseum on Sunday, highlighted by Hideki Matsui's first official hit with the A's and the 2,500th of his professional career.

Matsui, hitless in seven at-bats in Oakland's first two games, led off the second inning with a double down the left-field line. Feeling frisky, he tagged up on Kurt Suzuki's subsequent fly out to right field but was gunned down by Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki at third.

Matsui admitted afterward he wanted to try something special for the crowd of 22,292, many of them Japanese fans who came out for the occasion.

"I know the strength of (Ichiro's) arm and usually I don't run in those situations," Matsui said through interpreter Roger Kahlon. "But knowing it was Japan Heritage Day, I took a chance, and unfortunately it didn't quite work out."

Manager Bob Geren thought it was a good aggressive play to make with one out.

"There aren't too many guys who would throw him out," Geren said. "Ichiro's one of the few who would, but even though he got behind the ball on the throw, he just got him by a couple of inches."

Even though a number of teammates lauded Matsui's 2,500th hit afterward, the veteran designated hitter wasn't terribly thrilled by it.

"I feel more relief just getting a hit as a member of the A's and getting our first win," he said. "I'm not focused on the combined 2,500 hits between the U.S. and Japan. I kind of feel the same way about the goal of 3,000 hits. I think I'd like to focus on one hit at a time and just see what happens."

The A's generated more than \$65,000 for Japanese earthquake and tsunami relief through the Heritage Day event. The team donated \$1 from every ticket sold, and amid other fundraising functions, raised more than \$10,000 through a silent auction of game-worn jerseys by Matsui and Suzuki. Ichiro's netted \$6,015 and Matsui's \$4,555.

After hitting a single, triple and double earlier in the game, Coco Crisp admitted he was thinking cycle when he came to bat to lead off the eighth. He grounded out weakly to first base.

"I got a pitch up and I like pitches up, but I'm like Kit from 'A League Of Their Own' -- sometimes I get them and sometimes I don't," he said. "This was one where I didn't get it. But it definitely crosses your mind."

Mark Ellis has a 16-game hitting streak dating back to last season. He is hitting .387 (24-for-62) over that span.

Daric Barton dropped a foul pop in the first inning, his third error in three games. He made just 10 all last season, including three over his final 127 games.

Chin Music: A's try to salvage one before tough trip; bullpen already searching

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune, 4/3/2011 11:52AM

Filling in for Joe Stiglich today as he makes the early getaway to Toronto ...

Through two games, the A's bullpen have ERAs that look like menu prices: Craig Breslow 27.00, Brian Fuentes 18.00, Jerry Blevins 13.50. It's an ominous sign for a team that absolutely needs a stout bullpen to have a successful season. Like the defensive lapses, perhaps it's an aberration. Two games is not even a representative sample size, but with a tough early nine-game road trip to begin following today's game, it's critical that the A's stop the bullpen bleedings ASAP. Winning today might be a very good idea, too. Not an absolute, but opening up at home being swept by the worst team in the AL West would not set a very good tone for April.

After finishing up with Seattle, the A's pack up and head out to three games each in Toronto, Minnesota and Chicago. That's a brutal early swing, particularly if your relievers are having issues. Toronto's already off to an early longball pace with six homers in its first two games. Minnesota is always tough at home, and Chicago now has Adam Dunn in its lineup to go along

with its other sluggers. If Oakland comes through this trip anywhere near .500, they'll be fine. But the potential is there for digging a hole it could take a month or two to climb out of.

Anyway, no injury updates today ... it's a day off for Andrew Bailey's rehab. Bailey and Rich Harden will accompany the A's on the trip, but there's no chance they'll be activated to pitch. The A's just want to continue monitoring them firsthand.

Here are the lineups for the series finale:

OAK: CF Crisp, 1B Barton, RF DeJesus, LF Willingham, DH Matsui, C Suzuki, 2B Ellis, 3B Kouzmanoff, SS Pennington. P Gonzalez

SEA: RF Ichiro, 3B Figgins, LF Bradley, DH Cust, 1B Smoak, C Olivo, CF Langerhans, SS Ryan, 2B Wilson. P Fister

Mark Ellis, Gio Gonzalez lead A's past Mariners

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Five times over seven innings Sunday, Mature Gio stranded runners in scoring position. It's something Younger Gio wouldn't have done. In fact, Younger Gio would have had a meltdown.

"Absolutely," Mature Gio said.

The A's finally won a game, beating the Mariners 7-1, and Gio Gonzalez was the leader. The lefty, coming off a career year with 15 wins and 171 strikeouts, hinted over 116 pitches that fans could expect the same in 2011. If not more.

He repeatedly got big outs, none bigger than in his final inning. The Mariners had runners at second and third, and Gonzalez retired Ichiro Suzuki on a comebacker and struck out Chone Figgins, keeping a 3-1 lead intact.

A four-run rally in the bottom of the inning made it 7-1, and reliever Jerry Blevins completed Oakland's first win, which will make today's flight to Toronto to begin a three-city tour easier to digest.

"He's understanding now, he's a special pitcher," catcher Kurt Suzuki said of Gonzalez. "When he's in that zone, locked in, he's so special that he's basically unhittable."

The key is to keep him in that zone.

"He gets so excited and fired up, and he's such a competitor, sometimes he loses focus a little bit," Suzuki said. "Now that he's making adjustments on his own and locking himself back in, he's going to be a special one for sure."

Gonzalez, 25, admitted the maturation process is ongoing and said his focus is "just slowing down, taking my time and taking a deep breath."

It was noticeable after Ryan Langerhans drilled a second-inning homer. Yes, Gonzalez said a few words to himself. But only a few. In a hurry, he was refocused, retiring the next two batters to finish the inning.

After two mistake-filled losses in which the defense and bullpen failed, the A's were much more crisp - thanks in part to Coco Crisp, who made a sliding catch to rob Justin Smoak and collected a single, double and RBI triple. Other defensive gems came from third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and Gonzalez.

This time, it was Seattle that butchered everything. Shortstop Brendan Ryan's error prompted an unearned run, outfielders Milton Bradley and Langerhans missed flyballs in the sun, and Ichiro Suzuki was slow to Hideki Matsui's bases-loaded flare in the seventh.

It was Matsui's second hit of the day and first RBI in an A's uniform. The A's scored three more runs in the inning when Mariners reliever David Pauley arrived and, with the bases still loaded, plunked a batter, walked another and yielded a sacrifice fly to Mark Ellis, who had three RBIs.

"I think it's the yellow jersey," said Gonzalez, referring to the A's alternate tops. "We distracted them a little bit. Put the yield sign up. It was, 'Hold on, you're facing us.' "

Kidding aside, Gonzalez said, "This is how it should've been right from the get-go. We just needed to wake up a little bit and dust off a couple of cobwebs."

A Suzuki-Suzuki-Matsui trifecta on Heritage Day

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

On Japanese Heritage Day, **Ichiro Suzuki** gloved **Kurt Suzuki's** flyball in right field and threw out **Hideki Matsui** at third base.

"Three Japanese in one play. Who would've ever thought?" said Kurt Suzuki, flashing a postgame smile. "We're in MLB now, right? Not Japan. Suzuki to Suzuki to Matsui - out!"

Matsui was thrown out moments after his first A's hit, a double to left. It was his 2,500th career hit, counting 10 seasons in Japan.

"Usually I know the strength of his arm, and usually I don't run in those situations," said Matsui, who quipped, "but knowing it was on Heritage Day, I took a chance, and unfortunately it didn't quite work."

The A's and their fans raised more than \$65,000 for earthquake and tsunami victims in Japan. In a silent auction, Matsui's autographed game jersey from the opener went for \$4,555. Ichiro's went for \$6,015. A dollar from each ticket went to the cause.

Matsui said he had "an adrenaline rush" playing in front of many Japanese fans in a game that raised money for the crisis in his homeland.

The A's said they'll continue to raise funds throughout the season at oaklandathletics.com/japan.

Briefly: Coco Crisp had three hits and went 5-for-12 in the series. "I mean, I feel I'm a really good player when I'm healthy," he said. "It's about me staying healthy. It's been the toughest thing for me since 2006. Hopefully, this is one of the years I stay healthy and am able to help the team." ... **Gio Gonzalez** is 4-0 with a 2.93 ERA in four Oakland starts against the Mariners. ... **Daric Barton** committed an error in all three games. On Sunday, he lost a foul pop-up in the sun. It wasn't costly. ... Manager **Bob Geren** used the same lineup all three games. On the absence of **Ryan Sweeney**, Geren said, "When it's said and done, he's going to contribute quite a bit."

Gio shines on day A's get help from sun

Lefty allows one run in seven innings as Oakland gets first win

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 4/3/2011 8:55 PM ET

OAKLAND -- All it took was a bright sky and an even brighter uniform for the A's to finally break away from the loss column on Sunday.

Donning their new gold jerseys for the first time under a warm sun, which proved difficult for Seattle's outfielders, the A's also learned that a strong defensive showing and an even stronger pitching effort -- two facets that were uncharacteristically missing in their previous two games -- can also go a long way.

All of the above contributed to a 7-1 victory over the visiting Mariners, as the A's avoided the brooms in preparation for a challenging nine-game road swing through Toronto, Minnesota and Chicago beginning Tuesday.

Oakland plays 16 of its next 22 contests on the road, essentially making Sunday's contest something of a must-win for a team that played .420 baseball when away from the confines of the Oakland Coliseum last season.

In that same season, the green and gold posted a 35-21 record when playing during the day. Sunday's win continued that trend.

"It was a nice day, beautiful sunshine," manager Bob Geren said. "It looked like the yellow belonged out there with the big sun out there."

"I think it's the yellow jerseys," starter Gio Gonzalez said. "We distracted them. This is how it should have been right from the get-go."

Gonzalez, once the bearer of bad news while under pressure, took his season debut in stride, tallying 116 pitches in seven solid innings. The southpaw surrendered a solo shot to Ryan Langerhans in the second but relied on his defense through the next handful of frames, which saw the A's make two double plays after they committed six errors in the first two games.

First baseman Daric Barton committed the club's Major League-leading seventh miscue in the first frame on a dropped popup in foul territory, but it proved inconsequential on an otherwise mistake-free day for an Oakland team that prides itself on boasting one of the league's best defenses.

"When talking about defense, that and pitching is our backbone," outfielder Coco Crisp said. "Our pitching's been doing good. Our defense has been stinking up the field, the clubhouse, but we were able to minimize the damage today."

Gonzalez took advantage of it, pitching through the seventh inning despite starting the frame in trouble with runners on first and second and no outs. With lefty Jerry Blevins warming in the bullpen and Gonzalez past the 100-pitch mark, Geren paid a visit to his starter.

"It was a little rusty at the beginning, kinda spiraling out of control," Gonzalez said. "Bob came out and gave me good words of encouragement. It's a good feeling when your manager is behind you and believes in your pitching. You try to do your best for him, and that's what I was trying to do."

The 25-year-old southpaw watched Jack Wilson move his teammates over on a sacrifice bunt, but he proceeded to jam Ichiro Suzuki and force a soft grounder before notching a key strikeout against Chone Figgins via his devastating curveball to end the scare.

"He made big pitches when he needed to," Seattle manager Eric Wedge said. "We had a couple different opportunities there to take a lead or at least tie the ballgame, but Gonzalez did a good job. He made pitches when he needed to and that was the difference."

Gonzalez's teammates, meanwhile, did their part against Seattle starter Doug Fister on the offensive side, erasing an early 1-0 deficit with a run in the third on an RBI triple from Crisp and another in the fourth courtesy of a run-scoring groundout by Mark Ellis.

Ellis picked up his second of three RBIs on the day in the sixth with a hit that scored Josh Willingham, who led off the frame with a double. Fister went 5 2/3 innings for Seattle, giving up three runs -- two earned -- on eight hits with two strikeouts.

The A's added four in the seventh. Crisp, who finished a homer shy of the cycle, led off with a double that center fielder Ryan Langerhans lost in the sun. Mariners relievers Josh Lueke and David Pauley then combined to walk three and hit a batter.

Crisp had his chance at the long ball in the bottom of the eighth against Tom Wilhelmsen, but he grounded out to first base.

"I got a pitch up," Crisp said. "I like pitches up, sometimes I get 'em and sometimes I don't. This was one of those where I didn't get it, but [the cycle] definitely crosses your mind."

Sunday's showing is exactly what the A's want to see from Crisp, whose 2010 season was interrupted by injury three times. When healthy, he proved to be the club's catalyst, posting a .279 average with eight home runs, 38 RBIs and a career-high 32 stolen bases in just 75 games.

"I feel I'm a really good player when healthy," he said. "Staying healthy has been the toughest thing for me since 2006.

"Today, I think we did a good job of seeing more pitches and allowing their pitchers to get themselves in trouble and get ourselves in big-inning situations."

Designated hitter Hideki Matsui also fared well, collecting his first two hits with the A's -- the former a second-inning double off Fister that represented his career 2,500th hit, which includes his time in the U.S. and Japan.

Blevins came on in the eighth and gave the club two shutout innings. It was a welcome sight after the A's watched its seemingly untouchable bullpen hand away a pair of wins in the late innings the previous two days.

"That's the team that we should see every day," Geren said.

Matsui's first hit for A's is 2,500th of career

Milestone includes designated hitter's 10 seasons in Japan

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Designated hitter Hideki Matsui collected career hit No. 2,500 in the second inning of Sunday's series finale against the Mariners and, in typical fashion, the selfless veteran simply relayed a sense of satisfaction in getting his first hit with the A's and helping the team to a 7-1 victory.

"I feel like I got more of a relief just from getting my first hit as a member of the A's and getting our first win," Matsui said through translator Roger Kahlon.

Matsui's historic milestone includes his time in Japan and the United States. The veteran slugger is in the midst of his 19th professional season, which includes 10 in his homeland.

"Obviously, that's real special for him," manager Bob Geren said, "and it's great for us to witness it."

The hit, a sharp double down the left-field line off Seattle's Doug Fister, also represented Matsui's first hit in green and gold. His time on the bases didn't last long, though, as he was thrown out by Ichiro Suzuki -- fittingly, on Japanese Heritage Day -- while trying to advance to third on Kurt Suzuki's flyout.

"Usually I know the strength of his arm and don't run in those situations," he said, "but knowing it was Japanese Heritage Day I took a chance and, unfortunately, it didn't quite work out."

With hit No. 2,500 out of the way, Matsui will now look toward a pair of other milestones. He needs just seven home runs for 500 and seven runs for 1,500 in his career.

The 36-year-old slugger, who tallied hit No. 2,501 with a bloop single in front of a sun-blinded Ichiro in the seventh inning, is a .271 career hitter in April with 20 long balls and 98 RBIs.

"He's a great hitter," starter Gio Gonzalez said. "He's going to help this team a lot."

"That's a big, big honor -- 2,500 is not easy."

Relief effort part of A's Japanese Heritage Day

OAKLAND -- Oakland's Hideki Matsui and Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki, Japan's most celebrated current players, joined forces on Sunday to share in the A's celebration of Japanese Heritage Day as their two teams closed out a three-game season-opening set.

It marked a day of continuing relief efforts for victims of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, as the A's announced they have now raised more than \$65,000. The club donated \$1 for every ticket sold to the Red Cross, and the benefit game featured pregame ceremonies and entertainment, including Taiko drummers, along with several fundraising components.

San Francisco Japanese Consul General Hiroshi Inomata was present for the festivities, and Matsui participated in an on-field, relief-effort check presentation. In the stands, the first 10,000 fans who walked in the gates received complimentary Matsui T-shirts.

Japanese Heritage Day also afforded fans the chance to take part in a silent auction, which included signed and game-used equipment from A's players, including signed game jerseys worn by Matsui and Ichiro on Saturday. Matsui's went for \$4,555, while Ichiro's brought in \$6,015. A limited supply of signed color photos of Matsui were sold for \$50.

In addition, the A's have created a website as a way to expand their efforts. Fans can visit www.oaklandathletics.com/japan for an opportunity to make tax-deductible donations to the A's Community Fund. All proceeds will be given to the Red Cross, and the website will remain open throughout the season.

A's, Jays to meet Tuesday in season's second set

By Tom Singer / MLB.com | 4/3/2011 5:33 PM ET

The Oakland A's have a lot of early-season company as a preseason hot pick off to a cool start. The Blue Jays have been one of the teams scrawling on that drawing board.

While the A's, a popular pick to unseat Texas as American League West champs, on Sunday managed to avoid being swept by Seattle in their season-opening series, the Blue Jays own a series win over AL Central contender Minnesota, even with Sunday's 4-3 defeat.

Starting Tuesday, their plotlines move inside the lines of Rogers Centre, in the opener of a three-game series.

The A's feel that they pack one of the best set of starting pitchers in the Majors, comparable to the one on the other side of the Bay -- the Giants' World Series-winning rotation. Next to put that theory to a field test will be Dallas Braden.

The left-hander finished the 2010 season by going 7-12 after his May 9 perfect game against Tampa Bay, but, as tailspins go, that's nothing compared to that of his mound opponent, Jo-Jo Reyes.

A 26-year-old southpaw who spent the past four seasons on and off the Braves' pitching staff, Reyes has dropped 10 consecutive decisions since his last win, which came on June 13, 2008, in an Interleague game against the Angels.

Reyes, a high second-round Draft choice by Atlanta in 2003, came through with a strong Spring Training that earned him this shot at reviving his career. In 23 exhibition innings, he compiled a 3.52 ERA and a strong strikeouts-to-walks ratio of 18-8.

"My mind wandered a lot in the past, and I think that had to do with immaturity," Reyes said. "I've grown a lot in the past three years, and I'm figuring it out now. I'm not saying I have figured it [all] out -- I'm still learning a lot, as we speak -- but it's all coming together now."

Reyes' spring command was particularly noteworthy, given his history of control problems. He has 98 walks in 194 career innings.

"You look at the track record, and it kind of makes you ask questions or look a little bit deeper," said Toronto manager John Farrell, the former pitching coach of the Red Sox. "Because when you look at his delivery, you look at his arm action, you look at his stuff, you know that those walk totals shouldn't be there. So it looks on the surface that it's more focus or concentration."

Braden figures to be a main beneficiary of Oakland's improved offense, which broke out for seven runs for Sunday's win after managing a total of four in the first two games against the Mariners. Braden was saddled with a losing overall record (11-14) last season despite a solid 3.50 ERA because of poor run support, getting an average of 3.6 runs per start.

A's: Trying to take the high road

With Tuesday's game, the A's can begin to makeover their reputation as a club that can't win on the road. They were 34-47 away from the Coliseum last season. "Playing on the road is obviously more difficult than playing at home," said manager Bob Geren, "but our guys have played together awhile now, and I think the experience they've gained will help them. We do

need to do a better job on the road, that's for sure." ... Hideki Matsui's second-inning double on Sunday was career hit No. 2,500 between Japan and the Majors.

Blue Jays: Davis expected to return for ex-mates

Outfielder Rajai Davis, after resting his right ankle for a second consecutive game, is set to return to the lineup on Tuesday against the team for which he batted .287 in 2008-10.

Worth noting: Morrow ticketed for rehab outing

Right-hander Brandon Morrow, whose spot is ostensibly occupied by Reyes while he recovers from an elbow injury, threw a bullpen session prior to Sunday's game and is due to make a Thursday rehab start for Class-A Dunedin.

Ellis drives in 3 runs as A's avoid sweep

Hideki Matsui cared more about getting his first hit with Oakland than where he took his grand total: He's now over the 2,500 mark for his career between Japan and the majors.

By JANIE McCAULEY, AP Baseball Writer

Hideki Matsui cared more about getting his first hit with Oakland than where he took his grand total: He's now over the 2,500 mark for his career between Japan and the majors.

Matsui reached that milestone in a 7-1 win over the Seattle Mariners on Sunday as the Athletics celebrated Japanese Heritage Day and raised money for earthquake and tsunami victims in his homeland. He doubled to start the second inning for his first hit of the year after an 0-for-7 start, then added an RBI single in a four-run seventh.

"I feel relief just getting my first hit as a member of the A's and getting our first win," Matsui said. "I'm not really focused on my hits between Japan and the big leagues."

Mark Ellis drove in three runs to back Gio Gonzalez's strong 2011 debut as the A's avoided a season-opening weekend sweep against their AL West rivals.

Coco Crisp hit an RBI triple in the third inning and missed hitting for the cycle by a home run. Oakland, which expects to contend for a division title, earned its first victory of 2011 to keep from starting a season 0-3 for the first time since 1996.

"This is how it should have been right from the get go," Gonzalez said. "We just needed to wake up a little bit."

Ryan Langerhans homered in the second but the Mariners managed little else against Gonzalez, a 15-game winner last season who improved to 5-1 for his career against Seattle.

Gonzalez (1-0), who picked out the new retro bright gold jerseys worn by the A's for the first time, was unfazed after falling behind on Langerhans' drive. He allowed six hits, struck out four and walked four, retiring his final three batters after the first two hitters reached in the seventh inning.

He stayed in the game after a mound visit by manager Bob Geren.

"I think it was the yellow jerseys. We distracted them," Gonzalez joked.

Oakland observed a pregame moment of silence to remember the victims of the devastating March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Opening-day uniforms worn Friday and autographed by Ichiro Suzuki and Matsui were auctioned off to aid the Red Cross, raising more than \$10,000 between the two.

Ellis' RBI groundout in the fourth gave the A's a 2-1 lead. Kurt Suzuki helped set up the run, reaching on a one-out double when Mariners left fielder Milton Bradley lost a fly ball in the sun. The same thing happened Saturday night when Ichiro Suzuki and center fielder Michael Saunders lost track of Daric Barton's fly.

We weren't making plays. Obviously the sun got us a couple of times, a couple of the balls dropped in there," manager Eric Wedge said. "We opened the door for them and they took advantage of it. That's going to happen at this level."

Langerhans also singled for the Mariners, who head to Texas next to face the AL champion Rangers in a three-game series before returning to Safeco Field for their home opener Friday against Cleveland. Seattle's lone break in the first 24 days of April comes Thursday.

Seattle was trying to move to 3-0 for only the second time in franchise history - joining the 1985 team. The Mariners haven't swept the A's in Oakland since Sept. 17-19, 2007, and have only three wins in their last 11 games at the Coliseum.

Ichiro Suzuki finished his first three games at 5 for 12 (.417). The leadoff hitter broke Edgar Martinez's franchise hits record during Saturday night's 5-2 win.

After getting outscored 11-4 in the first two games of the series, the A's generated more offense from their upgraded middle of the order.

"That's more of the team that we should see every day," manager Bob Geren said.

Oakland tagged Doug Fister (0-1) for three runs - two earned - and eight hits in 5 2-3 innings. Fister lost three of his final four starts in 2010, including his last two.

The A's, who committed five errors in Friday's opener and one Saturday, had another in the series finale when Barton dropped Chone Figgins' popup in foul territory in the first inning.

"Our defense has been stinking up the field and the clubhouse," Crisp said.

NOTES: Gonzalez threw 116 pitches, fourth-most of his career. ... RHP Josh Lueke made his major league debut when he relieved Fister in the sixth, then RHP Tom Wilhelmsen made his first big league appearance in the eighth. ... Mariners closer David Aardsma, recovering from hip surgery, threw a 30-pitch bullpen session and let it go toward the end of his outing with no problems. It was his third bullpen. ... These teams will play 16 more times this season, with the A's visiting Safeco Field for the first time from April 21-24. Oakland took the 2010 season series 13-6. ... The A's and their fans raised more than \$65,000 in all for Japan, which included \$1 from each ticket Sunday. Suzuki's uniform sold for \$6,015 and Matsui's went for \$4,555.

Gutierrez: Gonzalez gives A's what they need

Paul Gutierrez, CSNCalifornia.com

OAKLAND - A year ago, Gio Gonzalez folds.

He tucks his tail, skips the "fight" self-defense mechanism and goes straight to "flight."

Nursing a two-run lead in the top of the seventh with one out, Seattle runners at second and third and Ichiro Suzuki striding to the plate, Gonzalez's continued maturation process played out at the Coliseum.

The A's left-hander stared down Ichiro, getting the future Hall of Famer to bounce back to him for the inning's second out. Then Gonzalez looked in at Hall of Fame pest Chone Figgins. He calmly finished Figgins off with a wicked curveball that Figgins could only flail at to end the threat, the inning and Gonzalez's day.

This is what the A's needed.

This is what the A's fans expected.

This is what the A's have to have if they are to be taken seriously as contenders in the American League West this season.

Yes, yes, a million times, yes. I know this was only the opening series of the season. But had the A's been swept at home by the purported dregs of the division in the Mariners before hitting the road for a nine-game road trip with said added expectations placed upon them, well, a sour taste in the mouth doesn't begin to describe what might have been.

"Any time you have a couple losses you want to get win under your belt as soon as possible," A's manager Bob Geren said before the series finale. "As far as any extra added expectations, I don't know about that. You never want to get swept by anybody."

"That's looking at it negatively. This could be the start of a winning streak."

Yes, the A's have won one straight and start three, three-game series Tuesday, at Toronto, Minnesota and Chicago.

"The guys, the first couple days, were pressing a little bit," Geren said later, following the A's 7-1 victory. "This was a looser game."

Credit Gonzalez again. It was he who chose for the A's to wear the yellow day-glo jerseys on a gleaming day. If you can't play loose looking like a human highlighter, when can you?

And still, Gonzalez, walked a tight rope more than once. Six of the seven runners Gonzalez stranded were in scoring position.

"I think it's the yellow jerseys," Gonzalez deadpanned. "We distracted them."

Gonzalez, who surrendered one run on a Ryan Langerhans second-inning solo home run, was joking. We think.

"This is how it should have been, right from the get-go," he added, referring the A's tight-fisted ways in dropping the first two games of the series to Seattle while committing a combined six errors and watching its bullpen implode.

"No disrespect to (the Mariners), we had to dust off the cobwebs and wake up a little bit."

As well as continue to trust in Gonzalez, who owns the best pure "stuff" on the A's vaunted pitching staff.

That's why, when Gonzalez gave up a lead-off single to Langerhans and then walked Brendan Ryan to start the seventh, the most tenured of the A's did not flinch. At least, not in 2011.

"Second and third, with Ichiro up there, I would have had a hard time figuring he would have gotten out of that last year," said second baseman Mark Ellis. "Special pitchers take it to another level there."

"To get Ichiro there and Figgins with that curveball, that was really special."

Kurt Suzuki called it a "turning point." He was referring to the game, but could potentially have been portending the future.

"He's understanding that he's a special pitcher now," the A's catcher said of Gonzalez. "When he's locked in, he's basically unhittable."

There's that word again - *special*.

"The more he trusts himself and trusts his ability," Suzuki said before pausing, "he made pitches when it counted."

The 116 pitches Gonzalez threw were the fourth-most of his career as he struck out four and walked four while scattering six hits.

His last pitch, though, was the most telling. And rewarding. Not only for himself and his team, but for an edgy fan base needing the A's to scratch out a win before a nine-game-in-10-days roadie.

"I'm just settling down," Gonzalez said. "Taking my time and taking a deep breath."

"With positive thinking comes positive play."

It's what Gonzalez expects. What the A's need.