

A's News Clips, Thursday, April 7, 2011

Oakland A's fall again in 5-3 loss to Toronto Blue Jays

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

TORONTO -- A struggling team such as the A's operates with little margin for error.

One big mistake from starting pitcher Dallas Braden was more than the A's could recover from Wednesday in a 5-3 loss to the Toronto Blue Jays at the Rogers Centre.

Braden hung a fourth-inning slider to Travis Snider, who belted a three-run homer that turned a 2-1 A's lead into a 4-2 deficit from which they couldn't recover.

That's because Oakland mustered just six hits against right-hander Jesse Litsch (1-0) and two relievers. The A's looked at six called third strikes among their 10 strikeouts.

They're assured of losing this three-game series, which appeared the easiest assignment on a nine-game trip that includes stops against the defending American League Central-champion Minnesota Twins and Chicago White Sox.

The A's 1-4 start has already put them 4½ games behind the Texas Rangers in the A.L. West. Texas is the A.L.'s only unbeaten team at 6-0.

"We need to get a win this series, for sure," A's left fielder Josh Willingham said. "We're not feeling any pressure, but it would just be nice to get a few wins going and get a little momentum."

Braden pitched into the eighth inning, scattering 10 hits and getting charged with five runs.

His performance is crucial if Oakland's starting rotation is to approach last year's level of excellence.

Braden carried a 5.24 ERA during the spring and was given an extra day off in preparation for Wednesday's start to iron out some kinks.

He particularly wanted to work on his slider, and it was that pitch that bit him in the bottom of the fourth. Braden (0-1) left a 2-1 slider belt-high, and Snider smacked it over the right-field wall.

"They just got a big hit, obviously, a three-run homer, and we never quite recovered from it," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Snider's homer came after the A's had just taken a 2-1 lead in the top of the fourth on Hideki Matsui's two-run double. It was a liner into the right field corner, about the hardest ball Matsui has hit going back to the start of spring training.

"The biggest disappointment is when your team goes out there and gives you the lead, you want to sustain it," Braden said. "And that didn't happen."

Braden said he felt he used his slider effectively for much of the game. And he did well to escape a fifth-inning jam. Yunel Escobar wound up with a one-out triple when A's right fielder David DeJesus lost Escobar's line drive in the lights. But Braden retired Adam Lind and Aaron Hill on pop-ups to keep the A's within a run, 4-3.

But after combining for 23 hits in their previous two games, the A's didn't make much noise against Litsch. And the called third strikes were contagious.

"He was keeping the ball down, and the umpire (Lance Barksdale) was giving him the 'down' strike," Willingham said.

Geren gave Andy LaRoche a start at third base in place of Kevin Kouzmanoff, who was in need of a day off after committing three errors through the first four games.

LaRoche was 1 for 3. He made a backhanded stop on Escobar's grounder in the first, then short-hopped a long throw that Daric Barton couldn't scoop at first, but it was a difficult play and ruled a hit.

Geren said Kouzmanoff would return to third for Thursday's series finale.

Oakland Athletics notebook: Michael Wuertz goes in D.L. in another blow to bullpen

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

TORONTO -- Injuries are taking an early toll on the A's bullpen.

Right-hander Michael Wuertz was placed on the 15-day disabled list Wednesday with a strained left hamstring, with Tyson Ross called up to take his roster spot.

Wuertz suffered the injury "a few days back" during a pregame workout, according to manager Bob Geren, though the team didn't reveal the injury until Wednesday. Wuertz, who flew back to the Bay Area, hadn't appeared since Friday's opener.

Not only has Oakland's bullpen struggled -- it entered Wednesday having allowed eight earned runs in 10 1/3 innings -- it's also been short-handed.

Left-hander Brian Fuentes was unavailable for two games because of a blister on his pitching hand, though he was ready Wednesday. The A's already were without two-time All-Star closer Andrew Bailey, who started the season on the disabled list.

"I guess it's a little bit of a challenge, but the starters have been going deep in games," reliever Craig Breslow said.

Dallas Braden worked seven-plus innings Wednesday in a 5-3 loss to the Toronto Blue Jays, the fourth time in five games that Oakland's starter has gone six innings or more.

Bailey, nursing a right forearm strain, has yet to throw off a mound, which means his return isn't likely to be until late April.

The bullpen attrition could influence the A's to bring back Rich Harden as a reliever once he's ready to come off the D.L. for a strained shoulder.

As for Ross, he was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento partly because the A's want to groom him as a starter. But Ross, who attended Bishop O'Dowd High and Cal, was summoned for relief help before the River Cats even began their regular season.

The A's caught a break as Toronto's most dangerous hitter, right fielder Jose Bautista, is out for the series. Bautista reportedly is in the Dominican Republic after the birth of his daughter.

The A's may avoid another big bopper during a three-game series with the Chicago White Sox that begins Monday. Sox designated hitter Adam Dunn underwent an emergency appendectomy Tuesday and his return in time for the A's series is questionable.

Former A's pitcher Mark Mulder was hired as an analyst for ESPN's "Baseball Tonight." Comcast SportsNet California had Mulder in its sights as a potential A's studio analyst before hiring another former Oakland pitcher, Greg Cadaret, and Fernando Vina.

Chin Music: Andy LaRoche draws start at third base, Kevin Kouzmanoff sits

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 4/6/2011 3:33PM

Andy LaRoche starts at third base for the A's tonight in place of Kevin Kouzmanoff. You sort of saw this one coming after Kouzmanoff's struggles last night and LaRoche's good game. Manager Bob Geren wouldn't say he went with LaRoche strictly because of Kouzmanoff's shaky defensive play so far. "It's three days on turf, with a day game tomorrow," Geren said. "Andy looked good in there yesterday. We want to keep everybody healthy." ... Don't be fooled. LaRoche's start is directly related to Kouzmanoff's play, you can guarantee that. Other than that change, Geren went with his opening day lineup:

A's — Crisp CF, Barton 1B, DeJesus RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Suzuki C, Ellis 2B, LaRoche 3B, Pennington SS; Braden LHP.

Jays — Davis CF, Escobar SS, Lind 1B, Hill 2B, Rivera RF, Encarnacion 3B, Snider LF, Arencibia C, McCoy DH; Litsch RHP.

—Reliever Michael Wuertz wasn't available to the media before the game, but Geren said Wuertz hurt his left hamstring during a pregame workout "a few days back," necessitating his trip to the DL. Wuertz's only appearance came in Friday's opener, so combined with Brian Fuentes' blister, the A's have been working with a short-handed bullpen in the early going here. And that's not even counting the absence of closer Andrew Bailey.

Geren was hopeful that Fuentes would be available tonight. Bailey (forearm strain) is still throwing long toss, so he needs to throw off the mound a couple times and then pitch in a couple minor league games before being reinstated from the DL. I'm still looking at the last week of April for Bailey's tentative return, though nobody with the A's is projecting a timetable yet.

With the bullpen banged up, I expect Rich Harden to be brought back as a reliever once he returns from his strained shoulder. Harden will throw off the mound with a hitter standing in Thursday. After that, he hopes to throw just one simulated game before heading on a rehab assignment. Geren said Harden needs to get through two minor league games — a one-inning outing and a two-inning outing — before the A's decide whether he'll be starting or relieving. I don't see him replacing Brandon McCarthy in the rotation with the way McCarthy is dealing, and I don't think the A's will stash Harden in the Triple-A rotation. So I think he'll join the bullpen when he returns. Just my speculation, and as always, the point is moot until Harden shows consistent health.

—Tyson Ross, called up to take Wuertz's roster spot, wasn't expected to arrive until 6 p.m. local time because his flight was delayed during a stop-over in Minneapolis. Ross must have been thrilled. ... But he should be available tonight.

—Jays right fielder Jose Bautista, Toronto's most dangerous hitter, reportedly will miss the rest of this series with a family matter. Big break for the A's, though they didn't take advantage of it Tuesday. They may get lucky next week against the White Sox too. Chicago DH Adam Dunn underwent an appendectomy and is considered questionable for the three-game series with the A's, which begins Monday.

The A's can use all the help they can get right now ...

Chin Music: A's place Michael Wuertz on DL with strained left hamstring; Tyson Ross called up as expected

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 4/6/2011 1:13PM

The latest from Toronto ...

The A's have called Tyson Ross up as a reliever, with Michael Wuertz going on the disabled list with a strained left hamstring. This is the first we've heard of Wuertz's injury. Dallas Braden is still starting Wednesday night's game ... I'll update again after Bob Geren addresses the media ...

Slow start gets shrugged off

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

For all of their high expectations coming into the 2011 season, the A's have fallen flat in the first handful of games.

Oakland's 5-3 loss to the Blue Jays on Wednesday was the team's fourth defeat in five games, the A's worst start to a season since also opening 1-4 in 1998, a year in which the team finished last in the AL West.

Everything is magnified at the beginning of a season, however, and Dallas Braden, Oakland's starter Wednesday, scoffed at questions about the team's scuffling over the past several days.

"I think we all know what kind of team we are," Braden said. "We're going to pitch. We're going to play defense. And with the additions we've made, we're going to score runs. It's game five. There's a long row to hoe. Nothing is ever decided in April."

The A's were error-free for the first time this season, and the bullpen allowed no earned runs, though Brad Ziegler did come in and allow an Aaron Hill single to drive in John McDonald, a run charged to Braden.

Braden worked into the eighth inning, and his only real mistake was a slider to Travis Snider with two men on in the fourth. Snider sent it over the bullpen in right.

"I left one pitch north of the border, and it ended up farther north of the border," said Braden, who allowed 10 hits, a walk and five runs in his first outing of the season.

Kevin Kouzmanoff, who made three errors in the first four games and has looked out of whack in the field, was not in the starting lineup Wednesday, though manager Bob Geren downplayed the defensive reasons for the night off. Geren said that with three games on artificial turf in Toronto, he wanted to get Kouzmanoff one of them off, and he pointed to Andy LaRoche's good evening in the series opener.

LaRoche, who started at shortstop Tuesday and had two hits, added a hit Wednesday. He moved back to shortstop when Kouzmanoff hit for Cliff Pennington in the seventh inning, and Geren said Kouzmanoff will be back at third today.

The A's were not without defensive weirdness again Wednesday. LaRoche had an error taken away that was initially charged to him in the first on a very tough play along the third-base line; Yunel Escobar was awarded a hit and later came in on a double by Adam Lind. Later in the inning, LaRoche bobbled Aaron Hill's bouncer but was still able to get the out at first.

With one out in the fifth, Escobar hit a line drive to right directly at David DeJesus, who lost it in the lights at the last second as it whistled toward his face. As he tried to recover, the ball got by him and Escobar wound up at third, where he got an accidental knee in the helmet. Braden held Escobar there by getting Lind to pop up to short and Hill to foul out to first. Escobar came out because of dizziness after the inning.

DeJesus has a 246-game errorless streak, the longest active streak among big-league outfielders.

The Blue Jays go for the series sweep today, but the A's have All-Star Trevor Cahill on the mound against Toronto's Ricky Romero.

"We need to get a win in this series for sure," Oakland outfielder Josh Willingham said. "This isn't a feeling of pressure, but it would be nice to get a win to get something started."

A's call up Tyson Ross to replace Michael Wuertz

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Tyson Ross' time at Triple-A Sacramento lasted four games of the major-league season.

Ross, who had an 0.59 ERA this spring, joined the A's in Toronto on Wednesday when reliever **Michael Wuertz** was placed on the 15-day disabled list with a left hamstring strain.

The A's have been thin in the pen the past few games, according to manager **Bob Geren**, with Wuertz and fill-in closer **Brian Fuentes** (blister) unavailable.

Fuentes was ready for action Wednesday, Geren said.

The A's usual closer, **Andrew Bailey**, is moving closer to throwing off the mound. He said he is now throwing every day, and he has incorporated flat-ground work into that. Bailey is out with a right forearm strain.

Rich Harden will be ready before Bailey. Harden will throw a bullpen session today with hitters standing in, and then a simulated inning his next time out.

After that, Harden is likely to head out on a rehab assignment, but the A's have not decided if he'll be working in relief or starting. Considering the banged-up bullpen, relief might be the area with the most need.

Briefly: Oakland's first two runs came via **Hideki Matsui**, who has made a habit out of giving the Blue Jays trouble. Matsui's two-run double in the fourth gave him 87 career RBIs against Toronto, his second-most against any team (he has 90 against Tampa Bay). He is a career .315 hitter against the Blue Jays. ... The 2011 A's set an Oakland record for the most errors in the first four games of the season, with nine. The 1966 Kansas City team also had nine. The 1970 team made 10 errors in the first five games.

A's leading off

Game 1,000 today? Mark Ellis' career-high 17-game hitting streak came to an end as he went 0-for-4. Ellis hit .373 during the streak. The A's second baseman played in his 999th career game Wednesday.

'Take Me Out' honored

Associated Press

WASHINGTON - "Take Me Out to the Ball-game," the 1908 tune that became the anthem for America's favorite pastime, will be preserved at the Library of Congress, along with 24 other recordings chosen for their cultural significance, the library announced Wednesday.

This year's selections for the National Recording Registry include Tammy Wynette's 1968 country song that divided American women with the message, "Stand by Your Man."

Drumbeat: Michael Wuertz placed on A's DL with hamstring strain

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Rogers Centre 4/6/2011 2:38PM

Michael Wuertz is the mystery man in the Tyson Ross recall; he has had a left hamstring strain for several days, according to manager Bob Geren. Geren has been operating with a thin bullpen with Brian Fuentes (blister) and Wuertz unavailable, and Geren praised the work the team's starters have done to go deep into games.

Geren said he believes Fuentes will be available tonight, as is of course Ross, who is scheduled to arrive at the stadium at about 6 p.m.; his flight out of Minneapolis was delayed, apparently.

The A's were very careful with three relievers, Wuertz, Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow all spring, but even so, Bailey and Wuertz are on the DL and Breslow missed part of the spring with a hamstring strain. Bailey's injury, of course, was related to scar tissue tearing after his elbow cleanup procedure last September.

Wuertz missed some of the early spring with shoulder tendinitis, but he came back well from that. Geren said he is hopeful that Wuertz is able to come off the DL when eligible, on April 17. Wuertz had his first-ever DL stint last season, and I know his one real wish for this season was full health, so I'm sure he's frustrated by this turn of events.

Bailey is now throwing every day, and he is incorporating some flat-ground work into that, he said. He's not too far away from throwing off the mound, in that case.

Rich Harden is further along. As I mentioned in today's paper, he'll throw a bullpen session tomorrow with hitters standing in, and he'd then throw a simulated game his next time out after that. Then he's likely to go on a rehab assignment and probably get a minimum of two outings wherever he's sent.

Geren said that after Harden has thrown at least a two-inning stint, the team will decide if he's slated for relief or for starting, but you'd have to think at this point that the team will be looking fairly seriously about putting Harden in the bullpen, given that two relievers are on the DL and Harden is ahead of Bailey in his recovery schedule right now.

Kevin Kouzmanoff is out of the lineup tonight. He's had a rough start defensively, but Geren downplayed that when asked about the decision to sit Kouzmanoff; he said that with three games on artificial turf, he'd wanted to get Kouzmanoff at least one off. Geren also mentioned Andy LaRoche's good night at the plate last night.

Here's the whole lineup, and yes, as some of the A's pitchers and Ray Fosse all made certain to mention to me, it's Dallas Braden on the mound: Crisp cf, Barton 1b, DeJesus rf, Willingham lf, Matsui dh, Suzuki c, Ellis 2b, LaRoche 3b, Pennington ss

I get asked about the A's being "secretive" about their injuries, but in this case, especially whenever it's the bullpen, I understand the approach; why tip your hand to opponents when you don't have to? If a reliever has a relatively minor issue and might need just a day or two, there's no sense in letting the other manager know that you're short in the relief department. And as I explained earlier today on the previous Drumbeat, even when reports trickle out early now about call-ups, the A's wait to announce moves until players are on site in the event of disrupted travel or freak injury en route.

So I'm not sure I'd call it "secretive." Tactical, maybe, and even though I'd always like to get any information as soon as possible, if that doesn't serve the team's purposes, they're under no obligation to furnish information until they've actually made a transaction. I actually find baseball teams much more forthcoming about injuries than NHL teams and, sometimes, NFL teams.

Blue Jays bounce Braden, A's on long ball

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TORONTO -- Talk of a small sample size is often thrown around generously at the beginning of the season for teams that are thought to be underperforming or overperforming based on potential and expectations.

For the touted A's, a 1-4 record -- which they reached following Wednesday's 5-3 loss to the Blue Jays -- seemingly has them in the former category based on the high hopes showered upon them before the season opener.

But the A's feel just fine about where they're at as a team. On Wednesday, despite another loss, they felt even better, as there were no defensive errors or late-inning miscues by the bullpen, both of which were on display in three of the club's first four contests.

Rather, a three-run homer hit by Toronto's Travis Snider in the fourth inning off starter Dallas Braden sealed their fate.

"We played solid," manager Bob Geren said. "They just had a big hit, and we never recovered from it."

Thus it was one pitch -- not one too many familiar mistakes -- that kept them in the loss column. Braden, in turn, went back to the sample-size theory, brushing aside any notion of an underperforming start.

"Nothing is ever decided in April," he said. "I don't feel like we're so down and out, or down at the bottom of the barrel. I don't have that sense at all about this team."

"We're talking about a room full of professional athletes who go about their business day in and day out and constantly try to get better, and game five, to feel like we're behind the eight ball or to feel like we're not doing our best, I think it's a little early."

Braden, making his season debut after being given an extra day to work on things, specifically his slider, watched Snider carry that very pitch into the right-field bleachers and was never able to regain the lead. He was charged with the loss after giving up all of the Blue Jays' five runs in seven-plus innings of work.

"I think I did all right," he said. "I left one pitch north of the border, and it ended up farther north of the border. That's how that goes. I think seven ups and downs is not a bad way to start the year, but when your team goes out and gets you the lead, you want to sustain it. It doesn't matter if it's a 1-0 lead or 2-1 lead, you want to go out and hold it, and that didn't happen."

The 27-year-old southpaw quickly found himself in trouble in the first frame, when he gave up an infield single to Yunel Escobar with one out, and then surrendered an RBI double to Adam Lind to give the Blue Jays a 1-0 lead before finding a groove in two subsequent shutout frames.

Meanwhile, Oakland jumped ahead in the fourth courtesy of a two-run double from Hideki Matsui off Toronto starter Jesse Litsch, but Snider's blast permanently erased Oakland's lead. The long ball, Snider's first of the season, brought home Juan Rivera and Edwin Encarnacion, who had walked and singled.

"He was staying away with his fastball, he was locating down and away with tough pitches to hit," Snider said. "He kept us off-balance with his changeup, and what he's known to be effective as is a guy that changes speeds and can pinpoint that fastball when he needs to.

"He made a couple of great pitches on me in different at-bats, and he made a mistake and hung a slider. That's one, as a left-hander, you look to punish -- when they leave the ball out over the plate."

Braden proceeded to put together two scoreless frames and Daric Barton knocked in a run for Oakland in the fifth, but the left-hander gave up back-to-back hits to put runners on second and third with no outs in the bottom of the eighth before being relieved by right-hander Brad Ziegler, who allowed an inherited runner to score via an RBI single from Aaron Hill to extend Toronto's lead by two.

The A's offense, meanwhile, failed to move a runner past second base after the fifth inning and compiled a combined 10 strikeouts in the contest. Seven of those came against Toronto starter Jesse Litsch, who surrendered three runs on six hits in 6 1/3 innings.

"He was keeping the ball down," said Josh Willingham, who went 0-for-4. "The umpire was giving him the down strike. He called it down there all game."

The last time Oakland started a season 1-4 was 1998, when the team went on to finish 74-88. The A's aren't envisioning the same results, but they know how significant a win would be Thursday afternoon in the series finale before they continue a nine-game road swing through Minnesota and Chicago.

"We need to get a win in this series, for sure," Willingham said. "We're not feeling any pressure, it would just be nice to get a few wins going, get a little momentum. There's no doubt we will, we'd just like to go ahead and get started."

"We have a tough trip, obviously, but I like the way we've been playing," Geren said. "We've been playing better overall -- swinging the bats better, starting pitching's been fantastic. We'll keep going."

A's Wurtz placed on DL; Ross recalled

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TORONTO -- The A's placed righty Michael Wuertz on the disabled list with a strained left hamstring and recalled hurler Tyson Ross from Triple-A Sacramento to fill a rather thin bullpen on Wednesday.

Wuertz suffered the injury during pregame workouts a couple of days ago. He hasn't pitched since Opening Night on Friday, when he threw one shutout inning with two strikeouts against the Mariners.

It marks the second straight season in which the veteran reliever, who just entered the second year of his two-year deal with the A's, has experienced an early-season injury.

At the start of the 2010 campaign, Wuertz missed the first month because of a bout of shoulder tendinitis. He struggled upon his return, but bounced back midseason, posting a 3.16 ERA and a 1.21 WHIP from the start of July through the end of the season. Overall, he was 2-3 with six saves and a 4.31 ERA.

Wuertz experienced shoulder soreness and was brought along slowly during Spring Training, but he also noted toward the end of camp that he felt better than he had in a long time and was encouraged by his improved velocity.

Manager Bob Geren said he is hopeful Wuertz will be reinstated from the DL when he is eligible on April 17. In the meantime, Geren will have to rely on his starters to go deep into games and make do with a bullpen that has already blown two saves in four games after tallying just 13 in 2010, which tied for fewest in the American League.

Ross returns to the A's for the first time since July 7 of last year, when he was a surprise roster pick out of camp and posted a 1-4 record and 5.49 ERA in 26 games -- including two starts -- before being optioned to Triple-A Sacramento to resume starting duties. He was 2-1 with a 3.55 ERA in six starts with the River Cats, but missed the final two months of the season with a strained right elbow.

The 23-year-old righty entered camp healthy this year and was a fifth-starter candidate alongside Brandon McCarthy, Josh Outman and Bobby Cramer. McCarthy won the battle, and Cramer beat out Ross for the final bullpen spot when the A's decided they wanted Ross to remain a starter.

Ross was scheduled to arrive in Toronto, where the A's are in the middle of a three-game road series, around 6 p.m. ET after a delay in Minneapolis. Geren said the right-hander was available for Wednesday's contest, as was lefty Brian Fuentes, who has been dealing with a blister on his finger.

Still, the A's are playing without closer Andrew Bailey (forearm), who is steadily progressing in his rehab but has yet to return to the mound.

"Everything's on schedule with him," Geren said. "Things couldn't be going better, but we can't rush anything."

Harden nearing a rehab assignment

TORONTO -- Injured hurler Rich Harden is getting close to a rehab assignment, but the A's aren't close to a decision on whether the right-hander will resume starting or relief duties once he is healthy.

"Whatever is going to be best for the team, best for him," manager Bob Geren said Wednesday. "We're leaving all options open."

Harden, who has been dealing with a sore lat muscle since Feb. 15, is scheduled to throw another bullpen session on Thursday, this time with hitters standing in to allow him to increase the intensity level.

If Harden passes that test, he'll likely throw in a simulated game before making at least two Minor League rehab stints -- the first a one-inning outing, the second spanning two frames.

"No matter which way we decide," Geren said, "he has to go those two innings."

Harden has experience as a starter and reliever, and he most recently pitched to a 5-5 record and 5.58 ERA in 20 games -- 18 starts -- with the Rangers while battling shoulder and glute injuries during the 2010 season.

Since going 11-7 with a 3.99 ERA in 31 starts during the 2004 season, the 29-year-old Harden has made at least 20 starts in just two of the six seasons that have followed, and has endured nine DL stints -- six of them coming with Oakland -- throughout his career.

Geren gives Kouzmanoff the night off

TORONTO -- After committing three errors during the club's first four games, Kevin Kouzmanoff received the night off Wednesday for Oakland's second meeting with the Blue Jays.

The uncharacteristically high number of early-season miscues might warrant a mental day away from the field, but A's manager Bob Geren insisted that he simply wanted to give his third baseman some time off as part of an overall effort to keep his team healthy.

Geren also noted that it was a good time to give Kouzmanoff a night off because the club was playing three straight games on artificial turf, which can prove harder on the body.

In his place, Andy LaRoche was handed a second straight start after starting at shortstop in Tuesday's 7-6 loss. LaRoche went 2-for-3 with a double, an RBI and two runs scored in the contest.

"Andy looked good there yesterday," Geren said.

Cahill hopes for better results against Jays in 2011

By Evan Drellich / MLB.com

A's right-hander Trevor Cahill's last outing in Toronto, his first big league start of 2010, doesn't bring back the best of memories.

On April 30, he allowed eight runs (six earned) on seven hits -- three of them homers -- in five innings at Rogers Centre. Things hadn't exactly been going swimmingly for Cahill to that point, either: He started the year on the disabled list, then made two starts at Triple-A before being called up to Toronto to fill in for an injured Brett Anderson.

Fortunately for Cahill, what came afterward brings almost all positive memories.

"Luckily, everything kind of clicked after that," Cahill said.

Then 22 years old, Cahill went on to finish the year with an 18-8 record and a 2.97 ERA in 30 starts of an All-Star season.

"I thought I threw the ball all right [last time in Toronto], they just hit some bad pitches," he said. "I don't really remember having any nerves, it just didn't work out so well ... I was just happy to be back."

On Thursday, Cahill is scheduled to return to the Rogers Centre mound in a 12:37 p.m. ET start in the finale of a three-game set. Left-hander Ricky Romero is to make his second start for the Blue Jays, who are going for the sweep.

Cahill walked four and struck out eight in his first start this year after averaging just 2.9 walks and 5.4 strikeouts per nine innings last season.

"Command needs to be better," Cahill said. "I think things will be a little easier and more low-key since it's not Opening Day. I have one under my belt, so hopefully I'll be throwing more strikes and getting some early contact. You want to keep your pitch count down to go deeper in games."

For Romero, control was a problem in the spring, but he was on point in his first start. He allowed three runs (one earned) over 6 1/3 innings against the Twins in a 13-3 blowout, also at Rogers Centre. He struck out seven and walked none.

"Any time you come out of a game with no walks, it's something that shows you that you're attacking the strike zone and you're making pitches when you're supposed to make pitches," Romero said. "I'm proud of that. That's one of the things I'm hoping to cut back on this year."

A's: Ross recalled to bigs

- Right-hander Michael Wuertz went on the disabled list on Wednesday, and Tyson Ross, also a right-hander, was recalled from Triple-A Sacramento. Wuertz has a strained left hamstring that he suffered during pregame workouts a couple of days ago.

Ross returns to the A's for the first time since July of last year. He went 1-4 with a 5.49 ERA in 26 big league appearances last season, all but two of them in relief, before returning to Triple-A to pitch in the rotation fulltime.

- Right-hander Rich Harden is nearing a rehab assignment. He's been nursing a sore lat muscle since Feb. 15, and is scheduled to throw a bullpen session on Thursday with hitters standing in.

Blue Jays: Cuban prospect out of reach

- A top prospect from Cuba whom the Jays were previously linked to is reportedly near to signing a deal with the Rangers. General manager Alex Anthopoulos said Leonys Martin, a 23-year-outfielder, was on his radar, but did not comment on whether signing him was seriously considered.

Worth noting

The Jays have won 11 of 13 against Oakland in Toronto, dating to 2008. ... The A's are 1-4 to start the season for the first time since 1998. ... The Jays entered Wednesday night with eight homers through four games, the most they had hit through as many games since 2001 (also eight). They received another homer from Travis Snider, his first of the season, in the fourth inning on Wednesday.

A's lose to Blue Jays, 5-3

ASSOCIATED PRESS

TORONTO — Dallas Braden isn't panicking about Oakland's poor start to the season.

Travis Snider hit a three-run home run, Yunel Escobar had three hits before leaving with an injury and the Toronto Blue Jays beat Braden and the Athletics 5-3 on Wednesday night.

Oakland has lost four of five to start the season and today will try to avoid being swept. The A's visit Minnesota and Chicago before returning home.

"We have a tough trip, obviously, but I like the way we've been playing," manager Bob Geren said. "We've been playing a lot better overall, swinging the bats a little better. The starting pitching has been fantastic."

Still, some wins would be nice.

"Hopefully we'll put all three facets of the game together," outfielder Josh Willingham said. "We need to get a win this series, for sure."

Braden (0-1), who allowed 10 hits and five runs in seven-plus innings, understands there's plenty of time to right the ship.

"There's always room for improvement," Braden said. "But I don't feel like we're so down and out or at the bottom of the barrel or anything like that. I don't have that sense at all about this team. For game five to feel like we're behind the 8-ball or feel like we're not doing our best, I think it's a little early."

Jesse Litsch pitched 6« innings for his first win since July 20 and Jon Rauch got two outs for his first save as the Blue Jays won for the eighth time in their last 11 games against the Athletics.

Starting for the first time since Aug. 1, 2010, Litsch allowed three runs and six hits, walked two and struck out a career-high seven. He missed the end of last season after undergoing hip surgery.

Oakland, which came in with a major league-high nine errors through four games, didn't make another but did misplay two balls.

Escobar was involved both times, picking up a single after third baseman Andy LaRoche couldn't handle his grounder in the first, and a triple on a ball that eluded right fielder David DeJesus in the fifth.

Escobar was shaken up after sliding face first into LaRoche's leg on his triple, laying on the ground and being tended to by the trainer before getting up. Escobar ran the bases and played defense in the sixth but was replaced by John McDonald in the seventh after complaining of dizziness.

"We're hopeful and at least cautiously optimistic at this point that we're not entertaining something like (a concussion)," Blue Jays manager John Farrell said.

Adam Lind's RBI double in the first gave Toronto an early lead, but Oakland's Hideki Matsui answered with a two-run double in the fourth.

After Juan Rivera walked and Edwin Encarnacion singled, Snider restored Toronto's advantage with a booming drive to right in the bottom half, his first.

"I left one pitch north of the border and it ended up further north of the border," Braden said. "That's how that goes."

The Athletics got one back in the fifth when Coco Crisp hit a two-out triple and scored on Daric Barton's single.

Toronto chased Braden in the eighth when McDonald led off with an infield single and Lind followed with a ground-rule double. Brad Ziegler came on and gave up an RBI single to Aaron Hill but escaped further damage by striking out Rivera and getting Encarnacion to ground into a double play.

Braden walked one and struck out three.

A'S NOTES

Oakland placed RHP Michael Wuertz (strained left hamstring) on the 15-day DL and recalled RHP Tyson Ross from Triple-A Sacramento.

3B Kevin Kouzmanoff, who made an error and misplayed two balls in Tuesday's loss, was held out of the starting lineup but pinch hit in the seventh.

RHP Rich Harden (right shoulder) will throw a bullpen session today.

LHP Brian Fuentes, out since April 2 with a sore finger, threw before the game and declared himself ready to return.

Ross joining A's in Toronto, but in what capacity?

Paul Gutierrez, CSNCalifornia.com

The Spidey Senses went on full alert yesterday when the A's announced Dallas Braden's season debut was being pushed back a day for no real concrete reason. Was it to split up the lefties in the rotation? Was he simply taking an extra day to tinker with his delivery? Was something physically nagging at Braden? If so, how serious could it be?

Susan Slusser of the San Francisco Chronicle is reporting out of Toronto that Tyson Ross is being called up, though it's not sure for what role exactly as Slusser writes that Braden "is fine." Speculation is that Ross would start against the Blue Jays in place of Braden tonight.

There is no official word on Braden's condition, though he is expected to take the mound. But the Twitterverse is rife with tales of a neck injury. Braden last pitched in the A's exhibition finale a week ago today and did not show any signs of injury. So should he head to the disabled list, it would presumably be retroactive to March 31, meaning he'd be eligible to come off in time for the A's next home game, on April 14 against Detroit.

The A's pitching staff is already missing closer Andrew Bailey, who is on the DL with a forearm strain, and left-hander Brian Fuentes is dealing with blister issues.

Perhaps Ross is joining the A's to solidify their thus-far shaky bullpen. Things should clear up around 1 p.m. PT, when manager Bob Geren meets with the media in Toronto.

Oakland A's Owner Wolff Seeks \$1.8 Billion From Hotels as Sales Considered

By Nadja Brandt, Bloomberg Opinion

Lew Wolff, co-owner of the Oakland Athletics baseball team, began acquiring luxury hotels in the 1990s, when they were considered a risky investment. Now he may be selling as rivals are buying properties.

Maritz, Wolff & Co., the Los Angeles-based company founded in 1994 by Wolff and Philip "Flip" Maritz, has cut its portfolio to nine hotels, including Manhattan's Carlyle, from almost 50 a decade ago. The closely held firm is seeking to return another \$500 million to investors in the next four years.

"We don't have any of the pressure that public companies have," Wolff said in an interview. "We have time to find legitimate buyers at a price we wouldn't necessarily pay ourselves. That makes it a good deal."

The 76-year-old investor is considering selling as hotel values begin to recover from their recession slump. Prices peaked at about \$126,000 per room in 2007 then plunged 39 percent to a low two years ago, according to New York-based research company Real Capital Analytics Inc. The average price climbed to more than \$160,000 a room in last year's fourth quarter because of a surge in luxury-hotel transactions.

Even with the increase in values, it's too soon to be a seller of lodging properties, said Patrick Scholes, a New York-based analyst with FBR Capital Markets.

"After what we've just come through, for the most part it's probably better to be buying at this point than selling, because we're still early in the price appreciation of hotels," he said.

Contrarian Investor

Wolff, also co-chairman of real estate investment trust Sunstone Hotel Investors Inc. (SHO) and part owner of a soccer team, has long made contrarian investment decisions -- in lodging and in the sports world, his business partner said.

"Lew and I would rather zig when others are zagging," Flip Maritz, 50, said in a Feb. 22 interview in Beverly Hills, California. "There are so many buyers, REITs or pension funds that are looking to deploy money. We'd rather be the sellers at this point than the buyers."

Maritz and Wolff, both St. Louis natives, met in 1990, when they were introduced by a mutual friend. Wolff had been president of the real estate division of movie studio Twentieth Century Fox, while Maritz was working in office-building leasing in Northern California.

One of their first investments together was in sports, not lodging. In the early 1990s, the owners of the St. Louis Blues were considering moving the National Hockey League team out of the city. The two men participated in a group to acquire the Blues and keep it in town.

Called the Mayor

"Lew said, 'I like hockey,' and called the mayor to discuss the possibility of buying the team," said Maritz, who is also managing director at Palo Alto, California-based real estate investment firm Broadreach Capital Partners.

The duo's first luxury hotel investment was the 1994 acquisition of the Ritz-Carlton in St. Louis, which was financially troubled. The purchase paved the way for Maritz Wolff to become one of the biggest luxury-hotel owners in the U.S., with stakes in 49 properties at its peak in 2001.

"I had never been in the hotel business," Maritz said. "For both of us, it was a pretty big leap."

The investment in luxury hotels seemed contrarian at a time when high-end properties were viewed by many investors as too risky after real estate values had plummeted following the savings-and-loan bust of the 1980s, Maritz said.

Gap Family

John Fisher -- son of Gap Inc. (GPS) co-founder Don Fisher, who died in 2009 -- and his family have been investors in Maritz Wolff since its formation. The Fishers have a majority stake in the Oakland A's and also co-own the San Jose Earthquakes soccer team with Wolff.

"Lew sees things far ahead of most other people," said the 49-year-old Fisher, who helps manage his family's fortune, in a telephone interview. "He likes to pretend he's an old man but, in truth, Lew operates on a very entrepreneurial and forward-looking basis."

Wolff, who has lived in the same two-story Tudor home in the Westwood section of Los Angeles for 40 years, employs a full-time driver and has his own Citation jet for flying to make deals and visit the Oakland A's offices. He and his wife Jean have a daughter and two sons, one of whom works on sports-venue developments for Wolff.

Maritz Wolff, whose properties include the Park Hyatt Aviara near San Diego, has a total return target of \$1.8 billion by about 2015, Flip Maritz said. That would be 3.2 times the original investment, according to the two men. By 2007, the company sold more than \$1.1 billion of hotels. It has had an internal rate of return greater than 30 percent a year, according to Maritz.

Guarantee 'Good' Returns

"We were always looking to buy the best product in each market, like the Four Seasons in Austin," Wolff said. "We felt buying those kind of hotels would guarantee us good returns."

Sales of lodging properties in the Americas are likely to jump as much as 25 percent this year to \$13 billion, buoyed by REITs and foreign investors seeking to deploy cash, brokerage Jones Lang LaSalle Hotels said in January. A rebound in U.S. business and leisure travel is attracting hotel investors.

Revenue per available room, or revpar, in the top 25 U.S. markets rose to \$68.89 in the first two months of 2011 from \$62.90 a year earlier, according to Smith Travel Research Inc. of Hendersonville, Tennessee.

Any of the duo's remaining nine properties, including the upscale Carlyle on Manhattan's Upper East Side, may be sold should an offer prove attractive.

'No Emotional Ties'

"I have no emotional ties to any property," Wolff said. "They are inanimate objects. That's the only way we can be fair to our long-term investors who trust us to do what's best."

Maritz Wolff has received numerous calls from potential buyers for the Carlyle, whose cash flow never dropped below \$10 million annually during the recession, Flip Maritz said. The 188-room hotel boasts views of the Manhattan skyline, features "fine antiques" in many rooms and provides "lush velour terry child-sized" bath robes and slippers for its younger clientele, according to its website.

"We get approached a lot, and when you get approached, you think about things," Maritz said.

For properties like the Carlyle, it's reasonable for Maritz Wolff to consider offers, said Scholes, the FBR analyst.

"Where it may make sense to sell is if you're in a gateway city with a trophy hotel that doesn't need significant capital expenditures," he said. "Bidding for those has been crazy."

Lagging Ballpark Attendance

Wolff has faced challenges over the past several years with both his hotel and sports investments. During the recession, the lodging industry slumped to its lowest levels since the Great Depression.

Failed attempts to build a new baseball stadium have perpetuated lagging attendance for the Oakland A's, in which he purchased a stake in 2005 at the suggestion of Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig. He and Wolff were Pi Lambda Phi fraternity brothers in the 1950s at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

There are similarities between owning a baseball team and owning a hotel, Wolff said.

"In one case we sell rooms and in the other case we have seats to sell," he said. "Every time a guest has a good experience they hopefully become an annuity and continue to come back to the ballpark or to the Carlyle."

Theory of 'Moneyball'

Wolff said he has drawn inspiration for both hotel purchases and his team investment from "Moneyball," the 2003 book by [Michael Lewis](#) that detailed the Oakland A's use of such player data as slugging percentage to judge performance.

"The theory of 'Moneyball' is that by looking at certain statistics you can make a better subjective decision," Wolff said. "All decisions in baseball are ultimately subjective. Similarly, the best way to buy quality properties is to not buy 20 hotels and raise money for that, but to view each one individually."

Billy Beane, general manager of and an investor in the A's, said Wolff is as deeply involved in the team as he is in the management of his hotels.

"Since Lew became managing partner, since that day, quite frankly, I talk to him at least once a day," Beane said in a telephone interview. "But that can probably be misleading because Lew is giving me a lot of autonomy."

Fairmont [San Francisco](#)

In the lodging business, among Maritz Wolff's challenges has been the [Fairmont San Francisco](#), a hotel the company owns in partnership with Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal. The investors have been unable to get city permission to convert a portion of the Nob Hill hotel into a residential tower and Maritz Wolff is considering selling its stake, Flip Maritz said.

"We're at a point where we feel, maybe let the next guy figure it out," he said.

Maritz Wolff has had to contend with natural disasters as well. In the West Indies, the company had to rebuild the [Four Seasons Resort Nevis](#) twice after hurricanes damaged the property. After the third storm, the company handed the hotel over to its lenders.

The Fairmont New Orleans was "pretty much devastated" by [Hurricane Katrina](#), Wolff said. Wolff Maritz used insurance proceeds to pay back all the lenders in full and then sold the hotel to a local developer, who rebuilt it as the [Roosevelt New Orleans](#), Wolff said.

Beanie Babies

Most of Maritz Wolff's hotel dispositions have been more lucrative.

In 1999, Maritz Wolff merged its 50 percent share in Fairmont Hotels & Resorts with Canadian Pacific Hotels. [Fairmont](#) today manages more than 60 hotels, including the Plaza in [New York](#). In 2004, Fairmont bought Maritz Wolff's share for \$75 million, about triple the original investment, Maritz said.

In 2000, Maritz Wolff sold the Four Seasons Biltmore in [Santa Barbara, California](#), to H. Ty Warner, the creator of the Beanie Babies line of toys, for \$150 million. The company had bought the property five years earlier for less than \$50 million.

Even as Maritz Wolff -- which also holds a 50 percent stake [Rosewood Hotels & Resorts](#), the Dallas-based operator of 19 properties -- mulls additional sales, a partnership between the two men is "very likely" to continue because they enjoy each other's company, Maritz said.

"I don't fool myself that I can continue indefinitely," Wolff said. "But I have too many friends that retire and a year later they call me for any extra [office space](#). That's why I don't plan on stopping."

Says Beane, the A's general manager, of Wolff: "He keeps on reminding me that he's 76 but, frankly, I think his gray hair is a con."

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Opening Day offers River Cats a 'new beginning'

By Mark Ling / Sacramento River Cats

It's that time of year again, River Cats fans.

Time for hot dogs and nachos; autographs and foul balls. It's time for River Cats baseball.

Opening Day means something different to every fan. For some, it brings back memories of going to the park with their parents. For others, it's a time of excitement and anticipation.

For River Cats clubhouse assistant Raul Rosopa, Opening Day is all about turning a new leaf.

"It's about new beginnings," he said. "It's time to see how the team does. To see people from last season, meet the new people and see where everybody's at now."

But, what does Opening Day mean to the players?

"It's a big day," said outfielder Chris Carter. "It's the first day for all the fans to come out and see the players. We're happy to get out there - happy to get going."

No matter which player you talk to, the sentiment is the same: we're ready.

"It's something we build toward and look forward to during the offseason," said reliever Joey Devine. "Baseball's around the corner. Spring Training was a tune up and now it's just a matter of going out and competing."

The voice of the River Cats, Johnny Dосkow, agrees.

"I love Opening Day," he said. "There's something about a new season. I love this time of year."

Expectations are high for the River Cats' 2011 season. The roster is jam-packed with talent and Opening Night (April 7, 7:05 p.m. start vs. the Tacoma Rainiers) finally allows these athletes to show how they've improved since October.

"I really like our team," said 6-foot-7 pitcher Trystan Magnuson. "We've got some studs on this team so I'm excited. I just want to get out there and dominate some hitters."

The players aren't the only ones with high expectations.

"The prospect is so bright for the River Cats," Dосkow said. "When you win nine division titles in 11 years, you wonder what's going to happen next. Everybody's asking, 'How are the River Cats going to do?' "

This is what makes Opening Day great. The expectations and the mystery. The season-long answer to all of our questions begins today.

However, with expectation comes pressure. And with all the anticipation, both internal and external, the River Cats are ready to play.

"You get a little bit (of the jitters) because it's the first game," Carter said. "I'm just happy to get going and to have another great year."

While the whole team feels the butterflies in their stomach on Opening Day, nobody lets it get to them. Some players even use it to add fuel to the Opening Day fire.

"You get that feeling every day, especially on Opening Day," Devine said. "It's just one of those things. I hope it never goes away."

Despite the expectations, the anticipation and the butterflies, everybody in the River Cats organization is ready for the season to begin.

"It's what we've been waiting for all offseason and through Spring Training," said outfielder Jai Miller. "We're ready to get it going."

Miller isn't the only one who's excited to take the field.

"The smell of baseball is back," Devine said. "The fans are back. You can smell the concession stands, the whole works. That atmosphere is back."

Dосkow puts it best.

"We're going to be fired up for it," he said. "Opening Day never gets old; it's always special. There's going to be a big crowd pumped up for the 12th season of River Cats baseball.

"It's just awesome."

New River Cats manager fishing for wins in PCL

Aileen Voisin, Sacramento Bee

New River Cats manager Darren Bush arrives in Sacramento with quite a reputation. Some of his closest colleagues describe him accordingly: Very much a Boy Scout. Almost an introvert. Absolutely an intellectual. Possibly the next Joe Maddon.

The only potential blemish on his résumé, they say, is a cheating heart.

"Darren's a commercial fisherman in the offseason," Cats hitting instructor Todd Steverson said with a grin, "and I always tell him he's a cheater. 'How can you consider yourself a fisherman if you're picking up the fish (grouper) in nets? You're not throwing any reels out over the sides of the boat? That's cheating.' We all just like to give him a hard time."

Bush, who previously worked with Steverson and new River Cats pitching coach Scott Emerson in Stockton, is the straight man of the bunch. Steverson tosses out the zingers. Emerson laughs from the belly.

Entering his seventh season with the A's organization, Bush still can't characterize his style, except to say he is not the second coming of the departed Tony DeFrancesco.

A fan favorite who put on a nightly show, the foot-stomping, umpire-baiting, crowd-pleasing Tony D. – who did two terms in Sacramento – left the organization last fall when it became apparent he wasn't in Billy Beane's major league plans.

When Beane and player development director Keith Lieppman considered candidates for the Triple-A vacancy at Raley Field, they quickly agreed on Bush despite his relative youth (37) and lack of playing experience.

"We took a chance," Lieppman said during spring training. "We wanted to see if Darren has what it takes to be a minor league manager. He's very quiet, sort of cerebral, a Joe Maddon type. But we think he's one of our best instructors, and he works very well with Todd (Steverson) and (Scott) Emerson.

"We looked at each other and said, 'You know what? Let's do it. We think this guy could be a very good manager if given the opportunity.' "

The Darren Bush pedigree is almost equal parts athletics and academics. And fishing. Fishing is his first love. Bush recalls ice fishing with his parents while a toddler in Ohio, the freezing temperatures tearing through his coat. When the family moved to Dunedin, Fla., a few years later, he split his spare time between ocean fishing and baseball.

"Our school sat right on the Toronto Blue Jays' spring training facility, and everything just kind of evolved from that," he said.

Eventually growing to almost 6 feet and 200 pounds, with the squat physique of a catcher/outfielder combination, Bush played two years at a community college and two seasons at Valdosta State in Georgia. He could hit. He could always hit.

But after three years in the independent leagues and three more unfulfilling seasons in the San Diego and Philadelphia farm systems, he acknowledged his defense was average, that he didn't run very well and that his other skills were – as he puts it – "lacking."

"Now that I'm on the other side of it," he said with a smile, "I can see it a lot easier. My body didn't perform the way I expected it to. I accepted it and was looking to get into coaching. I had a degree (early childhood development) and was applying for grad school when I got the call that got me back into baseball."

Ready for another fish story? Another true fish story?

Bush, who moonlighted for extra cash every offseason, returned from working a five-day commercial trip and retrieved a phone message from his mentor Mal Fichman. Within the ensuing 12 hours, Bush flew to New York, interviewed for the job and was named manager for Berkshire in the independent Northeast League in Pittsfield, Mass.

He gained additional experience in Quebec before joining the A's system at Class-A Stockton (2005-08), Double-A Midland, Texas, (2009-10) and now Sacramento.

"Somewhere in there I reconnected with Rebecca and found myself married," he said with a laugh. "We knew each other as kids. Our parents were friends. Our son (Wyatt) is 3 years old, and, man, she's got the toughest job. He's a handful!"

While it's true that Bush could never be a body double for DeFrancesco, his warmth and intelligence are revealed in his alert, inquisitive hazel eyes.

"Bushie is the best manager I've ever had," said River Cats infielder Adrian Cardenas, who played for Bush in Stockton. "He's not going to get in your face and yell. He talks to you one-on-one, explains exactly what he wants. He's very serious like that. And you have to respect the fact that he's brutally honest."

Asked to recall a lighter moment with his manager, Cardenas paused.

"Actually I can," he continued. "When I got promoted my first year (to Double A), he called me into his office and said, 'You know what? You're not working hard enough.'

"I was stunned because I pride myself on my work ethic. He said I had to work harder on this, on that. Then he stopped and said, 'Ah, just kidding! You got promoted!' But that's Bushie. He has moments of everything."

Texas League Baseball: Fresh faces want similar results for RockHounds

BY BEN MAKI, Odessa American

MIDLAND The Midland RockHounds will have a different look this year.

The Double-A affiliate of the Oakland Athletics has a completely revamped coaching staff this season.

Steve Scarsone replaces Darren Bush as manager, while Don Schulze and Tim Garland take over as pitching and hitting coaches, respectively. Bush is now the manager at Triple-A Sacramento and took former RockHounds pitching coach Scott Emerson with him in the same capacity.

Former hitting coach Webster Garrison is now the manager at High-A Stockton.

Scarsone, Schulze and Garland all coached in the same capacity last year in Stockton.

"I've been here (since Sunday)," Scarsone said. "From what I've seen so far, I enjoyed the company and the people."

The infield will be much different.

Possibly the most notable addition to the roster this season is A's top prospect Grant Green. This isn't the shortstop's first experience in Midland since he was called up during last season's Texas League playoffs.

"They did it with me the year I got drafted, (as well)," Green said. "They sent me to Stockton for five games. Get the taste of the league and kind of experience the travel. Last year we went to Northwest Arkansas, which is the farthest drive in this league. Traveling is the hardest thing in baseball."

Green, the A's first-round draft pick in 2009 out of the University of Southern California, moves up with the same coaching staff he had in Stockton, as well as his double-play partner Tyler Ladendorf.

"I haven't seen a second baseman turn (a double play) as fast as he does in a long time," Green said. "Knowing that saves me time. I can stay and wait on the good hop to get it to him, and he's going to do exactly what he's going to do to make the play."

However, there will be some familiar sights. Several outfielders and pitchers return from last season.

The rotation starts out with Graham Godfrey getting the opening day start at 7 tonight against the Arkansas Travelers at Citibank Ballpark.

"It's a great honor that I'm really excited to do," Godfrey said. "The first game of the season sets the tone for the rest of the year."

Godfrey went 4-8 with a 5.33 ERA in 29 appearances at both Midland and Triple-A Sacramento. Opponents batted .271 against him.

The remainder of the rotation is Carlos Hernandez followed by Anthony Capra, Sean Haviland and Ethan Hollingsworth.

In all, there are 15 players who played for the RockHounds at some point last year, as well as six players who saw time in Triple-A.

Some notable returning players include outfielder Matt Sulentic, who is entering his third season with the RockHounds; outfielder Jermaine Mitchell, who spent time at three different minor league levels last season; and catcher Yusuf Carter, who is the nephew of Joe Carter, former Major League great and member of the Midland Cubs.

"They haven't all played together, obviously," Scarsone said. "Some of them have been here last year and years past. Others are coming up from lower levels. "We're going to see how it all plays together."

A's top prospect Green feels no pressure

Oscar LeRoy, Midland Reporter Telegram

Grant Green is used to having high expectations placed on him. So considering he is the No. 1-rated prospect in the Oakland A's organization, he's not putting any extra pressure on himself entering this season with the Midland RockHounds.

Green's been used to those lofty expectations since he was the top draft pick (13th overall) by the A's out of the University of Southern California in the 2009 baseball draft. The 23-year-old shortstop hopes that gave him an idea of what it would be like and it prepared him for this season.

"It's the same whether you're the No. 1 prospect or the last guy they picked to put on the team. You just go out there and play every game as hard as you can and go from there," Green said. "All that prestige and whatnot that people want to put on it, they can say what they want, but I'm just going to go out there, play a game and everything that comes with it will be fine."

Green is coming off a good season in his first year of professional baseball. He hit .318 with 20 home runs with 87 RBI at Advanced Single-A Stockton. He also had his first taste of Double-A baseball when he received a postseason promotion to Midland and hit two home runs for the RockHounds.

If there were a knock on Green's play, it would have been his defense as he committed 37 errors last season with the Ports.

"I had some struggles here and there defensively, I'm sure everyone knows, but it's a work in progress," he said. "I'm going to work with (Midland manager Steve Scarsone) again this year and hopefully fix a lot of the kinks we had. I did a lot of work during spring training and the offseason, so hopefully that will be able to show through."

The good news for Green is that he's going to continue his working relationship with Scarsone, his manager with the Ports last year. Green said having that familiarity with the manager's style should help his game.

"It's always good to see new faces but I'm comfortable with him," Green said. "I know exactly what he wants from me and what he expects from me and the team."

Scarsone, who's in his first year of managing the RockHounds after leading Stockton to a 74-66 record and a spot in the California League playoffs in 2010, said Green will definitely be a player to watch.

"He's going to be leading the charge for us in the infield," Scarsone said. "We're excited not only with what he does on the defensive side but what he brings to the table on offense. We're excited to see how he continues to mature. Me being a former infielder, I think I've got a lot of input in his advancement. We've gotten to know each other pretty well over the last year or so, as we've done a lot of work together."

Green also will have the benefit of having his double play partner of second baseman Tyler Landendorf from Stockton with him in Midland. Green said that only will add to his comfort level as he begins his first full season at the Double-A level.

"Having (Landendorf) all of last year, I know exactly where he wants the ball and how fast he can turn," Green said. "It's only been one season but I haven't seen a second baseman turn the ball as fast as him in a long time."

Green, the 6-foot-3, 180-pound product from Anaheim, Calif., only has done a lot of work with hitting coach Tim Garland, who also got promoted from Stockton to Midland. By working with Garland in the batting cages, Green has developed some power with his already potent swing. Green wasn't exactly known for his power at USC, as he only hit 15 home runs during his three-year career. However, his 20 career triples were a school record, and his .359 career average has him sixth on USC's all-time career list.

Garland said Green is a perfectionist when it comes to his work ethic.

"He's a guy that's obviously knows how to put the bat on the ball," Garland said. "We worked on driving it, which allowed him to hit 20 home runs last year. This year we're going to do the same. We're going to continue with that same type of approach where we're wanting him to drive the ball and be a gap-to-gap type of guy, and if it gets out of the yard that's fine."

Green has shown that his power wasn't limited to the Single-A level when he hit a home run for the RockHounds on the first pitch he saw against Frisco in the clinching game of their first round Texas League playoff series. He hit another homer against Northwest Arkansas in the championship series.

"I wouldn't say it's something you dream about but it's the type of thing where I was feeling good at the plate at the time and the guy was going to challenge me," said Green about his first homer. "He might have known it was my first game in Double-A and he was going to challenge me first pitch and I got him that day."

With the way the 2010 season finished for him, Green is hoping that success carries over into this year. And who knows, he might find himself in Oakland very soon if he continues his progress.

"Personally, I want to start off where I ended last year, play well and hopefully the A's see that and call me up," Green said. "That's everyone's goal for the season: to get moved up to either Sacramento or Oakland. I'm no different. Hopefully, if everything goes well I will be able to play well here, win some games and then they call me up and I do the exact same thing there."

Ports Sweep Cats in Exhibition Play

MIDLAND ROCKHOUNDS

The Stockton Ports swept their Triple-A affiliate, the Sacramento River Cats in a two-game, home-and-home series Wednesday night, with a final score of 3-1 at Banner Island Ballpark. The Boys of Banner Island clawed their way back from a one-run deficit late in the 6 ½ inning game with three runs in the bottom of the sixth. Once again, timely hitting helped the Ports surge ahead late in the game.

The Ports gave up the lone run in the first inning. Cats first baseman Wes Timmons lead off the inning with a single up the middle, one of only three hits for the Cats all scrimmage. Timmons advanced home on back-to-back sac flies by Adrian Cardenas and former Port, Chris Carter, who looked much stronger in left field Wednesday night than he did in the exhibition match Tuesday at Raley Field. The Ports would hold the Cats run-less for the remaining six innings on the backs of starter Murphy Smith and reliever Ryan Doolittle.

Similar to Tuesday night's game, the Ports received some offensive help from the Cats, this time in the form of a poor pitching performance. Reliever Joey Devine, who recently underwent Tommy John surgery, never looked comfortable on the mound, walking three straight Ports batters to load the bases. Things went from bad to worse for Devine, as a wild pitch brought home Ports pinch hitter Michael Gilmartin. Devine ended his evening giving up a two-run single to right fielder

Rashun Dixon to bring the final score to 3-1, Ports. The River Cats opted to finish the inning, and brought in reliever John Wasdin to close the game. Wasdin, who will be the A's Short Season affiliate, the Vermont Lake Monsters pitching coach this season, recorded the final out of the game for the Cats in a solid pitching effort.

The Cats couldn't mount a comeback in the top of the seventh and the managers called an end to the game after the final Cats out was recorded to bring a close to exhibition play for the two minor league affiliates of the A's. The River Cats open at home tomorrow against the Tacoma Rainiers, the Seattle Mariners Triple-A affiliate.

The Ports kick off their season on the road against the Modesto Nuts, the High-A affiliate of the Colorado Rockies. Fans can make the short drive down to Modesto to catch the action or listen to the Ports on the KWSX 1280 AM radio. First pitch is at 7:05 p.m.

Ports primed to start season

By [Jason Anderson](#), Stockton Record

STOCKTON - The bright blue sky and wispy white clouds above Stockton Ballpark before Wednesday's exhibition game against the Sacramento River Cats were a welcome sight for Ports leadoff hitter Conner Crumbliss.

Crumbliss and many of the team's other new players spent last season with the Oakland Athletics' Low-A affiliate in Kane County, Ill., where the temperature was 15 degrees cooler Wednesday.

"It's almost like a whole different game because the ball flies so well here," said Crumbliss, a native of Arkansas City, Kan. "The ball doesn't fly as well in Kane County, and obviously the cold temperatures were no fun. It was like 70 degrees here yesterday, so it's nice to be in California."

The Ports will open the season on the road against the Modesto Nuts at 7:05 p.m. today after beating the River Cats 3-1 in seven innings to sweep a two-game exhibition series against Oakland's Triple-A affiliate. Rashun Dixon hit a go-ahead two-run single to key a three-run sixth for the Ports.

Right-hander Fabian Williamson will oppose Nuts starter Chad Bettis in the season opener. Williamson started 13 games for the Ports last season, going 5-2 with a 4.57 ERA.

"I'm excited to get on the bump and try to start the team off on the right foot," Williamson said.

The Ports won't play their home opener until they start a seven-game homestand against Modesto on April 14, but two rounds of batting practice and Wednesday's exhibition game helped players get acquainted with Stockton's waterfront ballpark.

Center fielder Michael Choice, the 10th overall pick in the 2010 draft and the only first-round selection on Stockton's roster, said he likes his new surroundings.

"Nice yard, good clubhouse and it looks like a good fan base, too," Choice said. "It's probably one of the nicest parks in the league, and the ball flies."

Ports manager Webster Garrison last came to Stockton as a visiting manager with Visalia in 2002 when the Ports played at Billy Hebert Field.

"The last time I was in Stockton was at the old ballpark, so it's been a while," Garrison said. "The team they had that year was pretty good, so it wasn't fun for me going into that ballpark, but it's definitely going to be fun in this one."

