

A's News Clips, Monday April 25, 2011

Josh Willingham's 3 RBI's help Oakland A's salvage a split with the Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

After getting plunked by pitches in his first two at-bats, Josh Willingham turned the tables Sunday and put the hurt on the Seattle Mariners.

Willingham delivered a two-run double in the seventh inning that jolted life into the A's and sent them on their way to a 5-2 victory in front of 16,530 fans at Safeco Field.

Willingham's two-out double down the left field line off Aaron Laffey (0-1) broke a 1-1 tie and put an end to what was shaping up as an afternoon of squandered opportunity for the A's.

What a difference two days makes.

After being shut out in consecutive games to start the four-game series, the A's awoke from their offensive slumber, salvaged a split and are feeling good about themselves as they begin a three-game series Monday in Anaheim against the Angels.

"I think it shows a little resiliency from this team," Willingham said. "When you lose the first two, it's kind of hard to come back and win the next two and get a split, especially on the road."

Willingham is hitting .240 and entered Sunday tied for the major league lead with 27 strikeouts. However, the A's cleanup man is hitting .360 (9 for 25) with runners in scoring position and .417 in the same scenario with two outs.

Those are key numbers for a team that's stranded far too many runners this season. The A's were 1 for 8 with men in scoring position Sunday before Willingham's double.

"We had some easier opportunities to get runs in and didn't get it done," A's manager Bob Geren said. "When somebody doesn't get a guy in, and you do it with two outs, it picks up the team."

Willingham added a run-scoring single as the A's tacked on two runs in the ninth for a 5-2 cushion.

Willingham sported a large patch on his left shoulder after Seattle starter Doug Fister nailed him in the third inning. That came after Fister grazed Willingham's elbow with a pitch in the first.

Willingham was hit 35 times from 2008-10 while with the Florida Marlins and Washington Nationals, ranking among the NL leaders each season.

"I guess I make a lot of people mad," Willingham said.

The A's also got a big lift Sunday from center fielder Coco Crisp, who notched his second straight three-hit game and made an outstanding catch in center field to back starting pitcher Brett Anderson (2-1).

Crisp sprinted into right-center and hauled in Miguel Olivo's sixth-inning drive on the dead run, crashing into the wall -- left shoulder first -- after making the catch. Crisp was wincing after the play but said after the game that his shoulder was OK.

"Your thought process is catch the ball, and after that you try to figure out where wall is," Crisp said. "It's kind of difficult when you're running sideways."

It's no coincidence that the A's offense sprung to life as Crisp heated up in the leadoff spot Saturday and Sunday.

He led off Sunday's game with a single and scored on Hideki Matsui's single to right.

Crisp led off the fifth with a triple, only to be stranded. He singled in the ninth, stole second and eventually scored when Conor Jackson's grounder went under the glove of Seattle third baseman Chone Figgins for an error.

"He did everything," Geren said of Crisp. "He's fun to manage. When he has a day like that, he can carry the team."

Oakland A's notebook: Brett Anderson's success against the Seattle Mariners is no easy chore this time

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Anderson beats Seattle again, but it isn't easy

SEATTLE -- Brett Anderson enjoyed a strong outing Sunday, which is nothing unusual for the left-hander against the Seattle Mariners.

But Anderson had to work hard to earn his second victory over the season, weaving his way out of trouble over a seven-inning stint that was trickier than the box score indicated.

"I had some tough innings where I had to get out of some jams," Anderson said after the A's 5-2 victory. "I made some pitches when I had to."

He surrendered just five hits and two runs (one earned) to go with six strikeouts and one walk. Anderson lowered his ERA to 1.56. Over five starts, he's issued just four walks in 342/3 innings.

Anderson stranded runners at second and third in the fifth when he retired Milton Bradley on an inning-ending fly out. But his best work came in the seventh after he was handed a 3-1 lead.

Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff skipped a throw to first for an error, putting runners on second and third with no outs. Ryan Langerhans' RBI grounder to first made it 3-2.

With the tying run at third, Anderson retired Ichiro Suzuki on a shallow fly to center, then rang up Chone Figgins looking on a fastball.

In 12 career starts against Seattle, Anderson is 6-3 with a 1.90 ERA.

Interim closer Brian Fuentes entered a sticky situation for his first appearance in five days. He relieved Grant Balfour with runners on the corners and two outs in the eighth, trying to maintain the A's 3-2 lead.

Fuentes got pinch hitter Luis Rodriguez swinging on a fastball to escape the threat. Fuentes struck out two in a 1-2-3 ninth for his sixth save.

He will face his former team as the A's begin a three-game series with the Los Angeles Angels on Monday. Fuentes led the majors with 48 saves for the Angels in 2009. He was traded to Minnesota last August before he signed a two-year deal with the A's over the winter.

Designated hitter Hideki Matsui also will see familiar faces after spending 2010 with the Angels.

Reliever Michael Wuertz (strained left hamstring) threw a scoreless inning Saturday night for Triple-A Sacramento. He was to be examined in Oakland on Sunday. That will determine whether the A's activate him for the Angels series.

Chin Music: Baseball under the roof (sort of)

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 4/24/2011 12:41PM

It's raining in Seattle today but the roof is closed at Safeco Field, which provides a weird dynamic. The roof does not enclose the entire stadium. There are huge gaps of open air, so the cold weather sweeps through the stadium even when there's "indoor" baseball being played. If you're ever looking to plan a road trip to watch the A's, I highly recommend Seattle as your destination. It's a great city to navigate on foot, and Safeco Field is considered among the major leagues' best stadiums, for good reason. Just remember to bundle up when you get here ...

—Pretty standard lineup for the A's today, with the exception of Landon Powell catching instead of Kurt Suzuki. It was a planned day off for Suzuki, who hasn't left the team yet for the birth of his baby.

A's – Crisp CF, Barton 1B, DeJesus RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Ellis 2B, Powell C, Kouzmanoff 3B, Pennington SS; Anderson LHP.

Mariners – Ichiro DH, Figgins 3B, Bradley LF, Olivo C, Kennedy 1B, Ryan SS, Saunders CF, Wilson 2B, Langerhans RF; Fister RHP.

–Michael Wuertz could rejoin the A's bullpen for the upcoming three-game series with the Angels. He threw a scoreless inning with two strikeouts Saturday night for Triple-A Sacramento, his best rehab outing yet. Manager Bob Geren said Wuertz would get checked by the training staff in Oakland today, and that would help determine when he gets activated. The A's need this guy in the 'pen. They've got just two right-handers right now, and though Grant Balfour and Brad Ziegler are both throwing well, a little more righty-lefty balance would be nice.

–Did you like the A's aggressiveness on the bases last night? They stole three bases as part of their 12-hit attack, and I'd expect them to continue pressing the action with the running game. Geren says he's looking to pull all strings to get the offense rolling consistently. He still looks for favorable pitcher/catcher matchups that allow for stealing, but I think the A's need to error on the side of aggression right now. Of course, if they hit as they did Saturday night, the running game isn't nearly as vital ...

Coco Crisp, Brett Anderson lead A's in Seattle

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Before Sunday's game, manager Bob Geren said that he'd like to see his team keep up the offensive attack and take some momentum into Anaheim tonight.

His team's bats took a while to get warm again at Safeco Field, but the A's came on strong at the end in a 5-2 victory over the Mariners, splitting the four-game series after getting shut out in the first two games.

"That shows a little resilience from this team," outfielder Josh Willingham said.

"The last couple of games, I think we're hitting the ball like we thought we would at the start of the season," said A's center fielder Coco Crisp, who had three hits, including a triple, and scored three runs.

Crisp also made a good catch in the sixth, slamming hard into the wall in right-center as he hauled in a drive by Miguel Olivo.

"He's going to feel that wall," Geren said. "On both sides of the ball, he did everything."

"Unbelievable, especially to start off the inning," A's starter Brett Anderson said.

Anderson allowed two runs, one earned, in seven innings, and he has yet to allow more than two earned runs in a start this season.

Late in his outing, Anderson twice had to wriggle out of trouble. He stranded two men in scoring position in the fifth and limited the Mariners to one run in the seventh even though Kevin Kouzmanoff's fifth error of the season put Seattle runners at second and third with nobody out. Ryan Langerhans' grounder to first drove in one, and then Anderson got Ichiro Suzuki to fly out and Chone Figgins to strike out.

"That was quite an effort late there," Geren said. "That showed something, to get through the seventh."

Brian Fuentes picked up a four-out save, striking out three.

Willingham, hit by pitches in each of his first two plate appearances, provided a bit of payback, doubling in two runs with two outs in the seventh and singling in one in the ninth.

"It definitely felt good," Willingham said of his big hits after getting hit.

The second time he was plunked by Doug Fister, off the back of his left shoulder, "It hurt pretty good," Willingham said. "Right on the bone."

Willingham was hit 16 times in 2007 with Florida.

For more than half the game, it appeared as if the A's wanted to go back to their unproductive ways. The team scored one in the first inning, on a two-out RBI single by Hideki Matsui, but stranded two runners, and Seattle tied it in the bottom of the inning with an Ichiro hustle run. He bunted for a base hit, stole second, went to third on a sacrifice and scored on a groundout.

Oakland had a terrific opportunity to regain the lead in the fifth when Crisp led off the inning with a triple, but he was left at third.

The A's are a game behind the second-place Angels.

"We're going to see some pretty good pitchers" in Anaheim, Geren said, "so to have some confidence offensively is a lot better way to walk in there than the other way, that's for sure."

A's hitters might be thinking too much

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Through 14 games, **Daric Barton** was hitting .292.

Since then, he is 2-for-26 over a stretch of eight games - his ninth-inning single Sunday ended a 16 at-bat hitless streak - and, though Barton said he is not worried, he would describe himself as "antsy."

"I'm feeling different," Barton said. "I haven't been seeing the ball too well. I don't know if I'm pressing or not. I just feel weird. ... I don't feel like I'm playing up to my potential."

Barton said he has worked "endlessly" in the batting cage, trying to figure out some things, and there's only one thing left to try.

"I have to go up there not thinking," he said.

Then he added, entirely jokingly, "This game is definitely not for thinkers. It's more for dummies."

Barton is arbitration-eligible for the first time this winter, and there have been initial talks about a multiyear deal. The first baseman said that although he is trying not to think about a new contract, that's impossible.

"It's always in the back of your mind," Barton said. "It's not something you like to think about, but realistically, it happens."

Helpful Matsui: **Kevin Kouzmanoff** was, along with Barton, one of the A's struggling hitters - until Saturday, when he had an RBI single and a three-run homer. On Sunday, Kouzmanoff had a single and also his first walk of the season.

Before Saturday's game, Kouzmanoff had talked hitting with designated hitter **Hideki Matsui**; through translator **Roger Kahlon**, the two talked about "having a game plan, sticking with it - not letting it deteriorate," Kouzmanoff said.

Matsui, through Kahlon, said that he told Kouzmanoff that "he seemed to be thinking too much," Matsui said. "I told him not to think too hard. That's really all it was."

Manager **Bob Geren** was happy to hear that his hitters are consulting with one another. "That's impressive, especially when you might think there's a language barrier," he said. "I love it. I'd heard (Matsui) was a positive influence in the clubhouse, but I didn't know he could be a mentor type. That's great."

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Pitcher plans: Andrew Bailey will throw one more bullpen session Tuesday before possibly progressing to throwing to hitters. Michael Wuertz (hamstring) was scheduled to work out in Oakland on Sunday, and he might rejoin the team in Anaheim.

Drumbeat: Series finale at Seattle, A's looking for a split

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 4/24/2011 11:59AM

The general feeling in the clubhouse today is: keep the bats going after last night's 9-1 win, earn a split against the Mariners and go to Anaheim with some momentum. With Oakland facing two of the league's hottest starters, Jered Weaver and Dan Haren of the Angels, during that series, going in with a little bit of offensive confidence certainly might be helpful.

Here's the lineup behind Brett Anderson: Crisp cf, Barton 1b, DeJesus rf, Willingham lf, Matsui dh, Ellis 2b, Powell c, Kouzmanoff 3b, Pennington ss. Kurt Suzuki is just getting a day game off after a night game; he's here, his daughter has not been born yet. It sounds as if the A's would love the delivery to happen on Thursday, the off day, and perhaps then they won't miss Suzuki even for a game, though as I mentioned the other day in the paper, the paternity list (one to three days) is a possibility.

Andrew Bailey will throw another bullpen session on Tuesday and - perhaps - face hitters later in the week. Michael Wuertz, who threw a scoreless inning for Triple-A Sacramento last night, will work out in Oakland today and get checked out, and he's a possibility to join the A's in Anaheim tomorrow.

According to stats expert David Feldman, the A's 20-inning scoreless streak was not the seventh longest in team history, as had been announced. That 25-inning scoreless streak in 2006 was seventh longest. The recent run of innings in which the A's were shut out was tied for 11th longest.

Crisp sets table, Willingham feasts as A's win

Cleanup hitter drives in three runs: Anderson throws seven innings

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 4/24/2011 9:26 PM ET

SEATTLE -- The notion that hitting is contagious has long resonated amongst baseball players.

For Oakland, it hasn't so much held true in the early parts of the season -- except when Coco Crisp is going good.

The speedy outfielder tallied his second consecutive three-hit game on Sunday and, just like that, the A's found themselves on the winning side for the second day in a row, this time with a 5-2 victory against the Mariners to split a four-game set between the clubs.

"Coco gives the guys behind him a big advantage," A's manager Bob Geren said. "When he gets rolling, our offense takes off, there's no doubt."

A's outfielder Josh Willingham agreed.

"There's no doubt that when Coco gets on base, we're a different team," Willingham said. "He puts a lot of pressure on the pitcher. Any time you get the pitcher's mind off the hitter a little bit, it helps the hitter. He also puts a lot of pressure on defense."

Crisp has hit safely in 14 of 19 games this season and leads the team with eight stolen bases and 16 runs -- three of which came Sunday. He also made a remarkable catch in center field, when he slammed into the wall to rob Miguel Olivo of an extra-base hit off A's starter Brett Anderson to lead off the sixth.

"Unbelievable," Anderson said. "Just unbelievable."

"I got a good jump on it," Crisp said. "The thought process is catch the ball, and then -- after that, if you catch it -- you try to figure out where the wall is. It's kind of difficult when you're running sideways. It changes things up, so you turn and hope you're not right on there. I had enough time to tuck my arm, ran into the wall and held onto it."

Crisp latched on to his surgically repaired left shoulder following the play but, seconds later, was all smiles.

"He's going to feel that wall, but he stayed in the game and played both sides of the ball," Geren said. "He did everything. He's an exciting player to manage, to watch. He's a big spark when he has a day like that."

Crisp got things going in the first with a leadoff single against Seattle starter Doug Fister and scored on an ensuing base hit off the bat of Hideki Matsui. Matsui, who entered the day leading the team in RBIs, drove in his 12th run of the season with the hit.

Willingham tied Matsui for the club lead in RBIs in the seventh while facing reliever Aaron Laffey. Willingham shook off two pitches to his body earlier in the day and laced a two-out, two-run, line-drive double down the left-field line to score Crisp and Conor Jackson and break open a 1-1 game.

Sunday marked the second time in Willingham's big league career that he's been hit by a pitch twice in one game. Even more, in 2,294 professional at-bats, he has been plunked 67 times, including a combined 30 times during his 2007 and '08 seasons with Florida.

"I've always been hit a fair amount of times," he said. "I don't know why. I guess I make a lot of people mad."

The A's outfielder, owner of a four-game hitting streak, continued his payback efforts in Oakland's two-run ninth inning with an RBI single off Jamey Wright to make it 5-2. He's now 9-for-24 with runners in scoring position, including 5-for-11 with RISP and two outs. Willingham also ended the day leading the team in RBIs.

"Sometimes, we focus on the less-than-two-outs ones, but a big two-out hit is sure uplifting," Geren said. "It's real good for the team when that happens."

Anderson, meanwhile, surrendered a quick run in the first but proved rather effective through his final six innings, going seven total with just one earned run, five hits, one walk and six strikeouts to his name. He also stranded six Mariners on base.

Seattle nearly tied a 3-1 game in the bottom half of the seventh but, instead, settled for one run courtesy of Kevin Kouzmanoff's fifth error of the season. With Michael Saunders on first, Jack Wilson hit a ground ball that Kouzmanoff threw short to first base, allowing runners to reach second and third with no outs.

A subsequent RBI ground-ball out to Ryan Langerhans narrowed Oakland's lead to one, but Anderson managed to force Ichiro Suzuki to fly out before fanning Chone Figgins to end the threat.

"I had some tough innings there where I had to get out of some jams and make pitches when I had to, and I feel like I did a pretty good job of that," he said.

With the win, Anderson's second of the season, the 23-year-old southpaw improved to 6-3 with a 1.90 ERA in 12 career starts against the Mariners. He has tossed six or more innings in three of his four starts this year, allowing two runs or fewer in each one.

The A's, winners of nine of their last 15 games, continue their stretch against American League West opponents in Anaheim on Monday, when they begin a three-game series against the Angels, who suffered a four-game sweep at the hands of the Red Sox on Sunday.

"The last couple of games, I think we've been hitting the ball like we thought we would at the start of the season," Crisp said. "Hopefully, we can continue and keep taking strides and help the pitching staff out."

After lengthy journey to Majors, Cramer sits

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Bobby Cramer's baseball journey hasn't exactly been the smoothest.

The A's left-handed hurler reached the Majors after making his way through independent ball, the Mexican League and virtually everywhere in between, including six years in the Minors -- stints that have all been well documented by now.

Finally on a big league roster at 31 years old, Cramer is still struggling to stay in the game -- this time literally. He entered Sunday with three appearances in Oakland's first 21 contests, and his last came 10 days ago in Detroit.

"Our starters have been going deep into games, and there's really been no need for a long man," Cramer said Sunday. "Our bullpen's not being used a whole lot right now, and when it is, there are certain guys they want to make sure get work. I think they take priority."

Oakland's starting pitching staff entered the series finale against the Mariners second in the Majors in innings pitched (136 1/3) while the bullpen has gotten 52 1/3 innings of work. Cramer is responsible for just 3 2/3 of those, having surrendered one run, one hit and one walk with two strikeouts during that span.

Following starter Trevor Cahill's six innings on Saturday, when the A's held an eight-run lead against the Mariners, manager Bob Geren elected to use relievers Brad Ziegler, Craig Breslow and Grant Balfour. The first two had just pitched the day before, and while Geren said he considered using Cramer in that situation, he wanted to hand that trio the "sharp-inning work they needed."

"Trying to get them back-to-back good outings in a row and build their confidence," Geren said.

In the meantime, Cramer said he's remaining both mentally and physically strong, even though frustration sets in every once in awhile.

"I come to the field prepared every day," he said. "It's a little frustrating because we're all here because we love to pitch, but every day I come in thinking it could be my day. I've been through a lot in this game, and that's what keeps me going."

Cramer knows those days could be coming to an end, though -- at least in Oakland, where righty Michael Wuertz is expected to be removed from the disabled list soon. The A's, currently carrying five left-handers in their bullpen, are likely set to send down one of their southpaws, making Cramer a prime candidate.

"We'll see what happens when Wuertz comes off," he said. "Five lefties, that's unheard of, so something's gotta give."

Wuertz could rejoin A's as soon as Monday

SEATTLE -- Following four Minor League rehab outings, A's right-hander Michael Wuertz could be activated from the disabled list as soon as Monday for the start of a three-game road set against the Angels, manager Bob Geren said Sunday morning.

Wuertz, who retired all three batters he faced for Triple-A Sacramento on Saturday night, was scheduled to return to Oakland on Sunday to undergo a workout, at which point the club will assess how he's feeling in order to make a decision on his readiness for Monday.

The veteran reliever, who was placed on the DL on April 6 with a left hamstring strain, was itching to return to the club last week but manager Bob Geren said he wanted to first see Wuertz throw a handful of sharp outings.

Twice, Wuertz allowed three runs in an inning of rehab work, once for Class A Stockton and another time for the River Cats. Overall, he surrendered seven runs, eight hits and three walks with six strikeouts in four innings of work.

Prior to Wuertz's injury, he made one appearance in Oakland, striking out two in one shutout inning against the Mariners on Opening Night.

Once Wuertz is activated, the A's are likely to option one of their five left-handed relievers. Southpaw Bobby Cramer, who has made just three appearances and none since April 14, could potentially be sent to join the River Cats.

A's emphatically end scoreless drought

Pennington, Kouzmanoff launch homers to give Cahill victory No. 3

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 4/24/2011 2:16 AM ET

SEATTLE -- Runs have been at a premium for an offensively challenged A's team this year.

The A's struggled again on Saturday. Only this time, they struggled to make outs.

Homers from Cliff Pennington and Kevin Kouzmanoff highlighted Oakland's long-awaited offensive outburst in Seattle, as the A's put an end to a 20-inning scoreless drought with a 9-1 victory over the Mariners.

"It was nice to see the offense have a big night," said manager Bob Geren.

A relaxed Geren wasn't so at ease a couple of hours prior in the third inning, when it appeared that his club was geared for another night of frustration -- except it turned out to be an incident at which he could only laugh about following a big victory.

With two outs, Coco Crisp on second and Daric Barton running at first, Conor Jackson singled through the second-base hole. Crisp made his way toward the plate, looking to easily score, but third-base coach Mike Gallego showed a stop sign, as a confused Crisp eased his way back to the bag at third, leaving the bases loaded in a one-run game.

As it turns out, Gallego's red light was not for Crisp, but for Barton. And neither scored in the inning.

"It was bizarre," Geren said. "I've never seen that before. Very, very strange play. At the time, it was sinking. It was like a bad-dinner feeling in your stomach, when you're thinking, 'I hope that doesn't come back to haunt us.'"

"We felt good, we were having good at-bats," Pennington said. "It wasn't like it was the only opportunity we'd have. We felt like we missed something, but that there would be more."

Much more, as the strange scene ultimately represented the calm before a much-needed offensive storm. The nine runs marked a season-high for the A's, who entered the contest averaging just 3.3 runs per game -- second-lowest in the American League to the Twins.

Pennington's two-run shot, his first of the year, capped a three-run fourth inning against Seattle starter Jason Vargas to break open a 1-1 game, while Kouzmanoff's long ball -- a three-run homer to left off reliever Josh Lueke -- sparked a five-run sixth frame.

"Everybody in the starting lineup reached base," Geren said. "We were showing some power from the eighth and ninth spot. That's a real positive."

It's also, apparently, a conversation starter.

"It's fun, because Kouz and I are next to each other all game long," Pennington said. "When we get hits, it's fun to talk to each other. When we're not, neither one of us want to talk."

Geren noted before Friday's game that he had seen an improved swing from Pennington, who was batting .278 over the past nine games after hitting just .160 (4-for-25) over the first 10 games of the season.

"I've put in some work, and this whole series I've felt good, kinda getting back to being me a little bit, letting the ball travel a little better," Pennington said. "I had some good at-bats against Felix [Hernandez] the first night and a couple last night, and tonight some fell in, so it was nice."

Fell in?

"Fell in over the fence," Pennington said, smiling.

The A's came in off back-to-back shutouts for the first time since May 13-14 at Cleveland, and they extended an 18-inning scoreless streak by two frames before Crisp plated Mark Ellis in the third.

Crisp was one of a large handful of players who had been struggling at the plate, evidenced by a .213 mark he carried into the contest. The veteran outfielder tallied a pair of RBI doubles as part of a three-hit night, one which saw the A's rack up 12 hits, and the club got a solid showing from starter Trevor Cahill to snap a season-high three-game losing streak.

Oakland's output offered an easy win to Cahill, who gave up one run on seven hits with one walk and two strikeouts while tossing 100 pitches -- 56 for strikes -- in six innings of work.

"When the ball is in the strike zone, it has a lot of movement, so you've really got to concentrate on barreling it up, and he's good at what he does," said Seattle's Adam Kennedy.

The A's right-hander was admittedly not at his best, but he had a little leeway.

"I wouldn't say I had my sharpest stuff, but I battled through it and made pitches when I needed to," Cahill said. "It was real good to see the offense come out swinging like that. I didn't feel that great, and for them to take some pressure off, score that many runs, it definitely helped out a lot.

"Hopefully we can get into a groove, score some more tomorrow and keep it going."

Vargas lasted just five innings and dropped to 0-2 on the season after surrendering six runs on six hits and three walks while fanning three as the victim of a rare offensive surge from his opponents.

In time, many believe, it might not be so rare.

"This is a good offense, and we're going to score runs," Pennington said. "We had everyone not swinging well at the same time. Normally, we have three or four guys hot and three or four guys not, and we just all were not at the same time. I don't think we're too worried about it.

"We're starting to feel pretty good, so hopefully that can roll for the next couple days."

Weaver works on historic run as Angels host A's

By John Schlegel / MLB.com | 4/24/2011 8:31 PM ET

While Jered Weaver's start to the 2011 season borders on historic, Gio Gonzalez has put together a stellar start himself with considerably less fanfare.

Weaver will be trying to become the first Angels pitcher to start the season at 6-0 when he leads the Angels against Gonzalez and the A's as the two American League West rivals kick off their first series of the season on Monday night at Angel Stadium.

Weaver's 5-0 record through his team's first 18 games marked the most wins by a starter in that span since Dave Stewart did the same with the A's in 1990. Six wins through 23 games would match the start Randy Johnson had for the D-backs in 2002.

Weaver's 1.23 ERA is accompanied by 39 strikeouts and just nine walks -- none in a complete-game gem at Texas in his previous outing.

"It takes a lot to get off to a start like this," Weaver said. "The guys have been playing really well."

Gonzalez, meanwhile, at least is among the few who have been in the same zip code as Weaver so far. He boasts a 2-1 record and 1.80 ERA in four starts that ranks sixth in the AL and ninth-best in the Majors. His lone loss came in his last outing, when he allowed four runs to the Red Sox, seeing a scoreless-innings streak end at 18 in the second inning of that one.

Gonzalez is 3-1 with a 3.29 ERA in five career appearances against the Angels and 2-0 with a 3.52 ERA in three starts at Anaheim.

Weaver enters the start against the A's having recorded just one win in his last 11 starts against Oakland. He is 3-6 lifetime with a 3.45 ERA vs. the A's.

Also, the opener marks the return of Hideki Matsui for the first time since his one-year stay with the Angeles. He's one run away from a combined 1,500 runs between the U.S. and Japan and five away from 500 home runs.

Athletics: Wuertz on target for return

Following four Minor League rehab outings, A's right-hander Michael Wuertz could be activated from the disabled list as soon as Monday for the start of the three-game set against the Angels.

Wuertz retired all three batters he faced for Triple-A Sacramento on Saturday night. He was scheduled to return to Oakland on Sunday for a workout, and the club will assess how he's feeling in order to make a decision on his readiness for Monday.

Overall, in four innings of rehab work, he surrendered seven runs, eight hits and three walks with six strikeouts. Prior to his injury, he made one appearance in Oakland, striking out two in one shutout inning against the Mariners on Opening Night.

Angels: Offense searching for runs

The Angels were held to just five runs in their four-game sweep at the hands of the Red Sox, and that was coming off a 5-1 road trip in which they'd averaged 5.8 runs per game.

Whatever the numbers, Angels manager Mike Scioscia knows his club needs to generate some support for their pitching staff. Scioscia tried to shake up his lineup Sunday, putting Alberto Callaspo at cleanup and Howard Kendrick at No. 6, to no avail in a 7-0 loss to the Red Sox.

"It is a lot to ask our pitching and defense to absorb over the course of time and reverse that trend, but we will," Scioscia said. "Our offense isn't going to play at this level for long streaks, but right now we are seeing one."

Worth noting

The Angels took the 2010 series over the A's, 11-8, and haven't lost a season series to Oakland since 2003. Last year's series was lopsided in terms of scoring, with the Angels having a 60-26 advantage in games they won and the A's going for a 66-14 advantage in the ones they won.

Bailey throws 'rockets' in bullpen session

If all goes well, A's closer could be cleared to face live hitters

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- A's closer Andrew Bailey, who is out with a right forearm strain, threw a 35-pitch bullpen session Saturday afternoon in Seattle and may only need one more session before being cleared to face live hitters.

"It comes out like rockets, you know?" said A's pitching coach Ron Romanick. "He wants to be in the game, but he has to go through the process."

That process includes another three-day cycle that involves a simple round of catch, long toss and, ultimately, another bullpen session. At the end of that sequence, the club will decide if the right-hander is ready to throw to hitters and undergo a Minor League rehab stint.

If all continues to go well for Bailey, the A's could get him back in early May.

Worth noting

Reliever Michael Wuertz (strained hamstring) fanned two in a scoreless inning of work for Triple-A Sacramento in his fourth rehab appearance on Saturday. The right-hander tossed 18 pitches, 10 of which were strikes. There is still no word on when Wuertz will rejoin the A's.

Gutierrez: A's, Angels have had each other on their minds for decades

Paul Gutierrez, CSNCalifornia.com

I was still in junior college, stringing for my hometown newspaper, when I broke big league baseball protocol.

It was late in the afternoon of Sept. 1, 1990. The game was over, another frustrating loss for the then-California Angels in another season full of frustrating losses for them, and I approached the hulking back of Brian Downing. In a deserted home clubhouse, he was sitting at his locker, staring into a morass of clothes, shoes, ointments.

"Um, Mr. Downing?" I said nervously with what sounded more like a question than a greeting.

"Yeah?" he replied, without looking up.

"Do you, um, you have time for an interview?" I barely spit out.

"Depends," he said in what could be described best as a low growl. "Where you from?"

I'm sure I stammered when I said, "Uh, Barstow. The Barstow Desert Dispatch."

Downing turned his intense gaze toward me.

"Barstow?" he howled, before smiling. "Well, I guess we all gotta start somewhere. Pull up a seat."

And with that, Downing entertained my questions in the wake of a 9-5 defeat to the Chicago White Sox.

Protocol? Such wide-ranging interviews are supposed to take place *before* games, not after, especially not following a loss.

But looking back now, we could have talked about the hotshot rookie in the visitors clubhouse, big kid by the name of Frank Thomas who had been called up to the Show less than a month earlier. Or discussed that skinny Sammy Sosa *muchacho* who played right field the day before to see if Downing thought dude had any pop. Or gotten his thoughts on Bobby Thigpen getting save No. 47 that day on his way to 57, a record which would last 18 years, until an Angel closer with the handle "K-Rod" would shatter it with 62 saves. I could have asked him about the White Sox's outspoken shortstop and got Downing's take on if that Ozzie Guillen character had any managerial skills.

Instead, we talked about the Angels, and how frustrated he had become in Anaheim. He had been on the team's only - at the time - three division winners and had lost in increasingly heartbreaking fashion, in 1979 to Baltimore in four games, 1982 to Milwaukee in five after winning the first two, and 1986 to Boston in seven, despite being one strike away from clinching the American League pennant in Game 5, the Donnie Moore-Dave Henderson affair.

Downing was down. But not merely because of his star-crossed ALCS history. No, he had more pressing issues. Ones that floated down from up north.

The way Downing saw it, the Angels were suffering from paralysis by analysis, not doing anything to upgrade their roster despite fading further and further away in the AL West race. Meanwhile, Oakland, the defending world champs, had just plucked a marquee hitter in Harold Baines from Texas three days earlier.

Downing had the A's on his mind.

Twenty-plus years later, little has changed between the franchises. In fact, the enmity and envy has only grown stronger. Both ways.

As it should be, with the the A's and Angels meeting for the first time this season for a three-game series beginning tonight in Anaheim.

The two franchises have basically run the division since the turn of the century, last year's World Series run by Texas notwithstanding. In fact, you could say it took a couple of former Angels (team co-owner and president Nolan Ryan and catcher Bengie Molina) and an old A's coach (manager Ron Washington) to get the Rangers over the hump.

From 2000 through 2009, either the A's or Angels represented the division in the postseason, with both in the playoffs in the Halos' 2002 world series-winning season.

Not bad, considering Major League Baseball briefly considered contraction by merging the A's and Angels back in 2001.

Thankfully, it did not happen, otherwise we would have missed such epic rivalry moments as the A's walk-off win in 2004 at the Coliseum, when Francisco Rodriguez muffed a throwback from his catcher, allowing Jason Kendall to score the game-winner. Or the 2006 brawl at Angel Stadium, when Kendall rushed John Lackey and took him down in front of the mound, despite catcher Jeff Mathis hanging on his back. In the scrum, Mark Kotsay had Mathis in a memorable headlock.

Distaste for the other seems to have tempered a tad since, especially with the A's last being relevant in 2006.

But with the Angels re-engineered, and coming off a humbling four-game sweep by Boston, and the A's boasting their best pitching since the halcyon days of the Big Three, this early-season series takes on added meaning.

Again, as it should.

Since 2000, the A's are just over .500 versus the Angels, going 105-101 against their SoCal neighbors. But since the Angels won the World Series in 2002, they own the series, going 81-72 against the A's.

In fact, the A's have won only one season series from the Angels since 2003, in 2007.

Last season, the Angels won their 11 games against the A's by a cumulative 60-26, while the A's beat the Angels eight times by a combined 66-14.

Blowout, anyone?

It's all cyclical, and the wheel of fortune falls on two of the more dynamic starting pitchers in the game tonight.

Oakland sends out the enigmatic Gio Gonzalez, who is 2-1 with a 1.80 ERA and 23 strikeouts in 25 innings. The left-hander is 2-0 in Anaheim in his career.

The Angels counter with Jered Weaver, 5-0 with a 1.23 ER and his 39 K's lead the American League. His 5-0 mark through his team's first 18 games was the most wins by a starter in that time frame since Dave Stewart did it in 1990.

Of course it had to be an A's pitcher, right?

Come to think of it, maybe I should have asked Downing about Stewart's start, way back when. Nah, too delicate. Even two decades later.

Coco Crisp, Brett Anderson lead A's past M's, 5-2

Associated Press

SEATTLE - Coco Crisp had three hits, scored three runs and stole a base, and Brett Anderson pitched seven strong innings as the Oakland A's earned a series split with a 5-2 win over the Seattle Mariners on Sunday.

Crisp has six hits in his last two games, breaking a skid that saw him bat just .175 over the previous 15 games to help spark a previously dormant Oakland offense.

Anderson (2-1) allowed two runs, one earned, and struck out six for the victory. Brian Fuentes came on in the eighth inning and struck out three of his four batters in picking up the four-out save. It was his sixth save in seven chances.

With the game tied at 1 in the seventh, Crisp reached on a fielder's choice against reliever Aaron Laffey (0-1) and moved to third on a single by pinch-hitter Conor Jackson. Josh Willingham followed with a double down the left-field line that Milton Bradley misplayed in the corner and allowed Jackson to score from first to give Oakland a 3-1 lead.

Seattle got a run back in the bottom half as Michael Saunders led off with an infield single. Jack Wilson reached on a throwing error by Kevin Kouzmanoff and the runners advanced as the ball caromed into the stands. Ryan Langerhans picked up an RBI on a groundout to first that allowed Saunders to score, but Wilson was left stranded at third as Ichiro Suzuki flew out to center and Chone Figgins struck out looking.

The Mariners threatened again in the eighth inning, but pinch-hitter Luis Rodriguez struck out to strand the tying run at third.

Oakland tacked on a couple of insurance runs in the ninth inning to seal the win.

Hideki Matsui came up with a two out single to right field that scored Coco Crisp from second to give Oakland the 1-0 lead.

Suzuki led off with a bunt single of his own in the bottom half of the first and, despite being picked off by Anderson, was able to get into second base safely when Daric Barton's throw hit him in the backside.

A grounder to second by Bradley brought Suzuki home and tied it at 1.

Mariners starter Doug Fister worked out of a jam in the fifth after giving up a leadoff triple to Crisp. Adam Kennedy snared a one-hopper from Barton at first and kept Crisp from advancing home. Fister then forced David DeJesus to pop up to third base and Josh Willingham flew out to end the threat.

Crisp then flashed his glove. In the sixth inning, Miguel Olivo led off with a drive to center that Crisp tracked down and caught running full speed before slamming into the wall with his left shoulder. Crisp seemed to favor it briefly before shaking it off and staying in.

Fister allowed just four hits and one run over six innings for Seattle.

Look ahead: Angels hitters seek reprieve -- against majors' toughest staff

Jorge Ortiz, USA Today

After what the Boston Red Sox pitching staff did to them, the Los Angeles Angels will be glad to see any other team come into Anaheim – even one with the best ERA in the majors.

Riding a stretch of 11 wins in 14 games before the Red Sox showed up, the Angels are now trying to bounce back from a four-game sweep in which they scored five runs total and none in the last 19 innings. In the previous six games before that, they had averaged 5.8 runs.

The task doesn't get much easier for Angels hitters tonight in the start of an intriguing three-game series against the Oakland A's, whose 2.46 ERA is nearly half a run better than the next closest club, the San Diego Padres (2.95).

Then again, Los Angeles is sending the majors' winningest pitcher to the mound. Jered Weaver (5-0) will try to become the first pitcher in Angels history to win six games in the club's first 23 games. The last pitcher to notch six victories within his team's opening 23 games was the Arizona Diamondbacks' Randy Johnson in 2002, when he claimed his fifth and final Cy Young Award.

Weaver also leads the AL in ERA (1.23) and strikeouts (39). He and Dan Haren (4-1), who took his first loss Friday, are responsible for 75 percent of the Angels' 12 wins.

Weaver's chances to remain perfect improve simply by virtue of not facing Boston, which has beaten the Angels in 13 of their last 14 meetings, but he's opposing another tough pitcher off to a strong start.

A's left-hander Gio Gonzalez sports the league's sixth-best ERA at 1.80 and had a streak of 18 scoreless innings snapped Thursday by those rampaging Red Sox.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Easter Sunday rally falls short for Sacramento

By Veronika Tafoya / Sacramento River Cats

Just like the children who darted around the Raley Field grass hunting for Easter Eggs, the River Cats used a similar tactic in hunting thier own golden egg.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if all the eggs were in the Tucson's' basket, as the Padres took the win over Sacramento 7-5.

Padres snatched up runs in the first inning, with Jesus Guzman sending a bases-clearing double down the left-field line with the bases loaded for a 3-0 lead. The Padres polished off another prize in the second inning, with Eddy Rodriguez blasting a solo home run on a 1-1 pitch way over the left-field wall, his first home run of the season.

In the second inning, Adrian Cardenas scooped his first stolen base of the season.

"It felt good," said Cardenas, who also collected one run, two hits and an RBI. "It's always good to get the first one out of the way, and it's good to start getting the zeros off the stat columns."

After scoring three first-inning runs in Saturday's game against Tucson, the River Cats were on the look out for hits, but struggled into the fifth inning to collect only three against pitcher Jon Leicester, who picked up his first win of the season.

Leicester pitched 5.0 innings, throwing four strikeouts and allowing only three hits and one walk against Sacramento.

Padres relievers struggled to hold the same control over the Cats as Leicester, allowing the River Cats to put a little spring in their step.

In the sixth inning, Josh Donaldson hit a double off the wall that sent in both Tolleson and Cardenas and brought the score to 6-2. It was his first hit in six at-bats in the current series against the Padres.

The River Cats scrambled to collect two more runs, one off of a single by Anthony Recker that scored Mitch Canham, and another single by Cardenas that allowed Jemile Weeks to score in the seventh inning.

The Cats continued the fight for a comeback in the eighth, drawing back-to-back walks to Shane Peterson and Adam Heether, plus a third walk to Jemile Weeks to load the bases. Sogard hit a sacrifice fly to send Peterson hopping over home plate for one more, with the Padres leading only two runs.

Despite the hopeful late-inning rally, the River Cats couldn't manage to crack through the Padres' hard shell of a lead, taking the first loss in the series against Tuscon.

The third game in the four-game home stand against Tuscon takes place Monday at 7:05 p.m. with right-hander Guillermo Moscoso leading the River Cats against Simon Castro.

Hounds Rally Comes Up Short On Easter

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

Citibank Ballpark - - -

In the baseball movie "For Love of the Game," as Billy Chapel (Kevin Costner) is pitching a perfect game, his shortstop handles a potentially pesky pop fly, thanks in part to a good scouting report. The shortstop is greeted in the dugout by his manager who says " ... Jose ... atta way ... it's all about positioning, right?"

In the last of the ninth, with pinch runner Tyler Ladendorf on first and two out, Yusuf Carter hit a ball toward the left field corner ... if the ball drops, Ladendorf scores. Instead, the San Antonio field staff positioned left fielder Daniel Robertson solidly toward the corner, and he was able to haul in the sharp drive off carter's bat. The man was right; it IS all about positioning.

- For the second time in the series, the RockHounds bullpen gave the club a chance to erase an early deficit. Paul Smyth, Neil Wagner and Trey Barham combined to pitch 5.0 innings, allowing one run on one hit, with three walks (one intentional) and nine strikeouts.

- The only hit allowed by the 'Hounds pen was Blake Tekotte's solo home run in the sixth, and that run would decide the game.

- In Friday's win and Sunday's comeback attempt, RockHounds relievers went a combined 11.0 innings, allowing one run on six hits, walking four and striking out 13.

- Sunday, the San Antonio bullpen, although allowing two inherited runners to score, was outstanding, allowing no runs on two hit over 4.0 innings.

- San Antonio took 3-of-4, scoring 20 runs (21) for the third time this season in the third game of the set (21-8). The other three games were decided by a combined four runs. San Antonio departs with a one game lead in the TL South.

- Jaff Decker, after whiffing in all five at bats Friday, hit another home run in Sunday's game, his third in two games, and finished with nine RBI in the last two games of the series. He leads the league with 25 ribbies.

- Outfielder Kent Walton made an impressive Double-A debut, going 2-for-3 with two double and a walk. A teammate of RockHounds' third baseman Stephen Parker at BYU, Kent hit .317 with one home run and nine RBI for the (Advanced-A) Stockton Ports before being promoted to take the roster spot vacated when Shane Peterson was called up to (AAA) Sacramento.