

Oakland A's closer situation takes another turn in win

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

There were no angry words Saturday night after the latest twist in the A's closer situation.

Just an amused look from Grant Balfour and a shrug of the shoulders from Brian Fuentes, after Fuentes was called upon in the ninth inning to nail down a 4-2 victory over the Baltimore Orioles at Overstock.com Coliseum.

Fuentes notched his first save in his first save opportunity since May 8 and made his first appearance since criticizing manager Bob Geren on Monday over Geren's use of the bullpen.

In the aftermath of that drama, Geren named Balfour his closer in place of the struggling Fuentes.

But Balfour pitched the eighth Saturday to set the table for Fuentes, who snapped a streak of four consecutive appearances with a loss, an Oakland record for a reliever.

"We're all just keeping Andrew (Bailey's) seat warm," Fuentes said. "It doesn't matter who is pitching the eighth or ninth. When he gets here, he's probably the best man for the job."

Bailey, the A's two-time All-Star closer, has been out all season with a strained forearm. But he declared himself ready to return Saturday after making four rehab appearances with Triple-A Sacramento.

Fuentes said it was his understanding that Bailey would come off the disabled list Sunday, and considering reliever Bobby Cramer had a River Cats bag slung over his shoulder and was saying his goodbyes after the game, it's assumed that Bailey will take his roster spot.

Balfour made just one appearance since Geren declared him the closer Tuesday.

He entered in the ninth inning Thursday to protect a 4-0 lead against the Angels in Anaheim and gave up Mark Trumbo's three-run homer before closing it out.

He had allowed a tying two-run homer in his previous outing against the Giants.

Geren said he talked to Balfour and Fuentes after Thursday's game.

"I talked to both of them after Grant threw and said (that in the ninth) I'm going to give it back to (Fuentes)," the manager said.

Geren also said he originally intended to get Fuentes a couple of outings without the game on the line to get his form back.

"I just felt like I didn't need to do that," Geren said.

Balfour sounded perplexed and amused at the same time.

"I was kind of in the closer's role for four days and no chance to close," he said. "It's kind of weird, but whatever. I'm just trying to pitch, whatever it takes to win for the ballclub."

In his second start since being recalled from the minors, left-hander Josh Outman (1-0) registered his first victory since June 8, 2009, holding the Orioles to two runs over six innings.

Outman missed 11/2 seasons after elbow surgery and began this season with Sacramento. He walked five but avoided major trouble.

"I definitely pitched myself into some jams," Outman said. "The walks, I need to cut back on that. But I worked out of some jams with double plays and nice defense."

Coincidentally or not, the A's won for the fourth time in five games since Fuentes shared his frustration with reporters.

The A's used two-out rallies to score their first three runs off Brad Bergesen (1-6), a product of Pleasanton's Foothill High making his first start at the Coliseum.

With a 3-2 lead, Mark Ellis provided the A's insurance with a solo homer in the eighth, snapping a 49-game homerless streak dating to last season.

Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff returned to third base after missing six games with a groin strain.

Oakland A's update: Outfielder Ryan Sweeney fights for playing time despite high average

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Ryan Sweeney is enjoying a fine May, hitting .375 (18 for 48) in 18 games entering Saturday night's game against the Baltimore Orioles.

He faces an uphill battle, though, to hit his way into more playing time.

Sweeney has learned to adjust to a reserve role this season, keeping his swing grooved and making sure he's mentally prepared on the bench.

He's also learned patience.

"Any time I get in the lineup, I just try to do something beneficial for the team," he said. "Everybody wants to play every day. It's not an ideal situation you want to be in. But you're in the big leagues, so it's not that bad."

Sweeney is hitting a team-high .320 for the season but has collected just 75 at-bats. The dilemma is that it's tough to justify playing him over any of Oakland's starting three outfielders.

Left fielder Josh Willingham entered Saturday leading the team in home runs (eight) and RBIs (30). Center fielder Coco Crisp is the team's most complete offensive player given his hitting ability and speed, and right fielder David DeJesus has swung a hot bat recently.

"We've had a lot of guys swinging the bats the last couple of days," manager Bob Geren said. "(The depth) is starting to be what we envisioned. You have to mix and match to get everybody in there."

Though Sweeney is hitting for a high average, he has just five RBIs and hasn't homered since May 4, 2010.

Closer Andrew Bailey (strained forearm) says he feels ready to come off the disabled list after four rehab appearances with Triple-A Sacramento. The latest came Friday in a scoreless inning against Reno. "I was able to throw all my pitches for strikes," Bailey said. "That's what I was fighting." Bailey played catch before batting practice Saturday, but Geren said there was no decision yet on when to activate Bailey.

There's no timetable for starting pitchers Tyson Ross (strained oblique) or Brandon McCarthy (stress reaction in shoulder) to begin throwing, Geren said.

During Monday's game against the New York Yankees, the A's will have information and donation tables set up to benefit TroopsDirect.org, an organization that sends everyday necessities to troops overseas. The A's will wear Army patrol caps during batting practice that were given to them by a task force based in Kuwait.

Chin Music: No Andrew Bailey roster move yet; the tarp comes out as rain falls at Coliseum

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 5/28/2011 5:44pm

UPDATE: The rain started falling harder at about 5:35, and the Orioles cut batting practice short as the tarps came out. I'll update later if tonight's start looks in jeopardy.

Is this really Memorial Day weekend? The weather feels more like a Raider game in November. It's chilly, and a light rain came down as the A's took batting practice. But if forecasts are right, the rain shouldn't affect tonight's 7:05 game. This is the A's first fireworks night, which typically would draw a bigger crowd. But I'd think the lousy weather might keep some people away ...

–There's no word on when Andrew Bailey will be activated, but he said he feels sharp and ready to come off the DL. Bailey threw last night and said his command all around was better. "I was able to throw all my pitches for strikes. That what I was fighting (before)," Bailey said. He played catch before batting practice, and manager Bob Geren said no decision had been made yet. You figure that if Bailey isn't an option to pitch tonight after throwing last night, there's no use in activating him until Sunday.

Bailey seemed really happy to get reacquainted with Joey Devine in the clubhouse. Bailey was not with the team on the last road trip, when Devine rejoined the team. It's amazing to think just how much time Devine missed with his elbow injury. His teammates just haven't had much of a chance to be around him. At any rate, when Bailey returns, the A's will be stacked in right-handed relievers.

–Nothing much to report yet on Tyson Ross or Brandon McCarthy. Neither has started throwing yet, Geren said.

–Kevin Kouzmanoff is back at third base after missing six games with a right groin strain. This A's lineup should look familiar – it's the opening day starting nine – but we haven't seen it in a while ...

–There's a local boy on the mound for Baltimore – right-hander Brad Bergesen, who was a Foothill High School teammate of the Giants' Brandon Crawford.

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

Orioles: Andino 3B, Jones CF, Markakis RF, Guerrero DH, Reimold LF, Hardy SS, Reynolds 1B, Adams 2B, Tatum C; Bergesen RHP

Clutch hits help A's, Outman, beat Orioles 4-2

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

There were a few notable items on Saturday at the Coliseum: the A's continued success with two-out hitting, and a marked propensity for scoring in one-run blips.

Perhaps the most interesting news out of the team's 4-2 victory over Baltimore, though, was Brian Fuentes' return to the closer role, his first appearance since the left-hander's postgame criticism of manager Bob Geren last week.

Since Fuentes questioned Geren's communication and the way that Geren was using him after his fourth loss in as many games, Oakland has won four of five - and a win today would give the team a sweep of the Orioles and get the A's back to the .500 mark.

With two-time All-Star closer Andrew Bailey coming off the disabled list today after missing the first two months of the season, the whole closer issue is sort of moot, anyway, Fuentes concluded Saturday.

"We're really all just keeping Andrew's seat warm, anyway," said Fuentes, who earned his first save since May 8. "So it doesn't matter who pitches the eighth, ninth, seventh. Whenever he gets back, he's probably the best man for the job. ... I don't know if he'll go right back in the role or not, but he'll definitely help the team either way."

Fuentes and Grant Balfour - back working the eighth inning Saturday after briefly being named closer last week - both said Geren told them Saturday of his plans to switch back to their previous roles.

"I talked to both of them, obviously," said Geren, who said that he had planned to get Fuentes one non-pressure inning of work before returning him to save situations. No such opportunities presented themselves, and Geren said, "I just felt I didn't need to do that."

Balfour didn't have a save opportunity during his brief time as closer. He allowed three runs in the ninth inning in Oakland's 4-3 win at Anaheim on Thursday.

"I had the closer role for four days and no opportunities to close," said Balfour, who had one walk in a scoreless eighth Saturday. "Kind of weird, but whatever. Kind of a weird situation, but I'm just trying to pitch and do whatever it takes to win for the ballclub."

The team did not make an announcement about Bailey's pending return, but reliever Bobby Cramer, called up one day earlier as a stopgap until Bailey came off the DL, was sent back out after Saturday night's game.

All but one of Oakland's runs Saturday came with two outs, and the team scored single runs in the second, third, sixth and eighth. That last one was a home run by Mark Ellis, the second baseman's first of the season, snapping a 49-game homerless streak dating back to last year.

Kevin Kouzmanoff, back after missing six games with a groin strain, made his eighth error of the season in the first inning, then drove in the first run of the game - with two outs in the second inning. Josh Willingham had a two-out RBI single in the third, and he is 6-for-13 lifetime against Orioles starter Brad Bergesen, who is from Pleasanton. Coco Crisp had the final two-out RBI single, in the sixth.

Josh Outman's win a long time coming

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Josh Outman pitched in and out of trouble Saturday night at the Coliseum, and while he wasn't happy with the five walks he issued, the left-hander was thrilled to pick up his first victory since June 8, 2009.

"I'll take the positives," Outman said.

Outman missed most of the 2009 season and all of last year after Tommy John surgery. Reliever **Joey Devine** missed all of both seasons for the same reason - and Devine also worked in the A's 4-2 victory over Baltimore.

"That's our first time on the field together since we've been back, and after what we've gone through to get to this point, to both take part in a team win is a good feeling," said Outman, who made his second start since replacing injured right-hander **Brandon McCarthy** in the rotation.

Devine worked the seventh after Outman left and extended his scoreless streak to a career-high 14 2/3 innings dating to 2008. Devine has not allowed an earned run in 31 games since May 20, 2008.

Bailey back, Harden news: Andrew Bailey allowed two hits in a scoreless rehab inning at Triple-A Sacramento on Friday night, and the closer will come off the disabled list today after missing the first two months of the season with a right forearm strain.

Rich Harden, out all season with a muscle strain under his right arm, said that he threw 15 pitches off the mound Saturday and that it went well. Harden said his next major step will be to throw to hitters, but that has not been scheduled yet.

Briefly: **Cliff Pennington's** single in the fourth extended his hitting streak to seven games, tying his career high. He's batting .429 in that span. ... Designated hitter **Hideki Matsui** went 0-for-4 with a strikeout and is batting .206 in May. He is unlikely to be in the lineup today against Zach Britton; Matsui hasn't started against a left-hander since May 2. ... The start of the game was delayed by 10 minutes by rain.

Leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Monday plans: On Memorial Day at the Coliseum, the A's will honor military personnel, including Kuwait-based Bravo Company Task Force 3/197th Field Artillery. The team and the unit have exchanged caps, and Specialist Mark Braden and starter Dallas Braden (no relation) exchanged uniforms.

Geren needs to set clear expectations

Gwen Knapp, San Francisco Chronicle

After beating the Brewers with a grand slam in his first majorleague game the night before, Brandon Crawford couldn't crack the Giants' Saturday lineup for a simple reason. On Friday, Bruce Bochy had told Emmanuel Burriss that he would start at shortstop the next day.

He had to keep his word and stick to the plan.

When athletes praise a coach or manager's communication skills, they are referring to decisions like that one. Bochy didn't react to the emotions of the moment, favoring giddy impulse over thoughtful preparation.

The A's bullpen can't count on the same consideration.

Oakland fans knew that before temporarily demoted closer Brian Fuentes delivered an exasperated thesis on manager Bob Geren last week in Anaheim. They've routinely seen relievers ordered to warm up when they have no chance, or reason, to enter a game. The job involves enough inherent chaos; the bullpen doesn't need additional uncertainty created by its own management. It's mentally draining.

If Geren had the hard edges of a throwback manager, indifferent to the finer psychological needs of his players, the approach might make some sense. It probably wouldn't work with modern athletes, but it would be consistent.

Strong friendship

But the A's manager is not an alpha character. He is an amiable personality who got his job in large part because of his longtime friendship with general manager Billy Beane. Relationship- building should be Geren's forte, if he has one.

Instead, he somehow inspired Huston Street, now Colorado's closer, to eviscerate him after the Fuentes incident.

No doubt, Street spoke up primarily to defend Fuentes, who took some inevitable blowback for complaining about how he was used after absorbing losses in four straight appearances. But Street wasn't popping off. He was three seasons removed from working under Geren. He took the time to write everything down, sending a fairly lengthy text message to Chronicle beat writer Susan Slusser, in which he called Geren "my least favorite person I have ever encountered in sports."

Outwardly, these two men appear to be one of the least likely pairs ever to get into a public clash. On the closer's personality scale, Street scores at the low end for mercurial behavior. But his final sentence in the text said volumes: "I am very thankful to be in a place where I can trust my manager." When the A's returned home for the weekend, Beane attributed the Fuentes eruption on Tuesday to a frustrating stretch for the team. Six straight losses, including two extra-inning disasters against the Giants.

Three starting pitchers removed from the roster because of injuries. Closer Andrew Bailey's absence.

Street, of course, didn't experience any of that, and Geren's bullpen choice did nothing to alleviate frustration. He told the media before Tuesday's game that he might be turning to Grant Balfour as the closer instead of Fuentes, who had been handling the job in Bailey's absence. He did not, however, tell Fuentes, who was called on to close out Saturday's 4-2 win over the Orioles after Balfour worked the eighth.

Avoiding confrontation

The whole episode reeked of avoidance — ducking confrontation, decision-making or both. Geren doesn't have to talk to his players the way a Dusty Baker would. He doesn't have to be their therapist. He has to set clear expectations.

Street, by the way, is exactly the kind of player who would be disturbed by vague authority. He values structure and wants to respect his boss. The loudmouth egotist doesn't care so much.

Geren projects limited selfassurance for a major-league manager. That might be an issue of style, rather than substance. But one has to wonder how much he defers to Beane, the maestro of the organization. Since Geren was promoted in 2007, the assumption has always been that the close relationship with Beane interfered with the general manager's assessment of Geren. It's also possible that the reverse is true, and their friendship inhibits the manager's authority and baseball instincts.

Working for a close friend is extremely difficult. On Friday, Beane pointed out that personal connections create job opportunities all over baseball, and he is absolutely right. But he and Geren have an especially tight bond, and Beane, for all his cerebral qualities, has a deeply sentimental side.

Beane let his friend go into 2011 with an expiring contract.

He has said that the past four years under Geren did not reflect his managerial skill, because until now, the A's couldn't gather the talent to contend. This season is the real test, and Geren will almost certainly get to finish it, player dissent notwithstanding. If he fails, and continues beyond 2011, then the entire franchise has failed to set expectations.

Drumbeat: Rain at the Coliseum; Andrew Bailey is here but not yet off DL

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 5/28/2011 5:41pm

It's been raining steadily, although not hard, for a good half an hour or more, and the Orioles cut short their batting practice and the tarp is now on the field. The A's haven't announced any delay, but any time the tarp goes on, it's always possible.

Andrew Bailey is back from his one inning of work at Triple-A Sacramento last night, he threw 13 pitches and allowed two hits. He said he feels good and he was happy with his control, and that's a key consideration for the team when it comes to Bailey coming off the DL. The A's haven't made a move yet today, and it seems more likely that if Bailey were to be activated, it would be tomorrow or even Monday to ensure his availability.

Bailey hasn't worked in back-to-back games on his rehab assignment, and the A's usually like to have their relievers do so before they return, but in this case, if Bailey is healthy and his stuff is good, he might be more valuable here, now, and he can work his way back to consecutive appearances with the A's.

Here's the lineup: Crisp cf, Barton 1b, DeJesus rf, Willingham lf, Matsui dh, Suzuki c, Ellis 2b, Kouzmanoff 3b, Pennington ss.

No Ryan Sweeney after his two hits and an RBI last night, but manager Bob Geren explained that with several players starting to swing the bat well and contribute, he feels it's back to a "mix-and-match" situation. Coco Crisp is back in center, Willingham honered last night, David DeJesus is batting .500 over his past six games - so it's Sweeney out for tonight. DeJesus is also 4-for-8 against Brad Bergesen.

Kouzmanoff is back after missing six games with a groin strain.

BASEBALL SUNDAY

THE BULL PEN

By John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Brian Fuentes lost his job as A's closer after taking his seventh loss.

White Sox starter **John Danks** is 0-7, and his manager, **Ozzie Guillen**, said, "He's had only one bad game."

The Sox have averaged 2.5 runs in Danks' 10 starts, scoring two or fewer runs in six of them.

Danks should have no complaints.

Pittsburgh's **Paul Maholm** was 1-7 in 10 starts before Saturday's shutout while receiving just 14 runs of support. Plus, the bullpen erased two wins for Maholm.

Don't blame **Scott Cousins**. Blame **Leo Nuñez**, the guy on the mound when the Giants completed their four-run, ninth-inning rally to send Wednesday's game into extras and set the stage for Cousins' 12th-inning trampling of **Buster Posey**. Nuñez blew the save opportunity after converting his first 18 chances, a Marlins record to start a season.

The Angels had "Kendry Morales Bobblehead Night" last week. Two problems: Morales is done for the season, and his name was misspelled. He's **Kendrys Morales**.

A's manager **Bob Geren**,

after watching infielder

Wilson Valdez pitch — and win — for the Phillies, guessed Valdez had pitched before because of his velocity and movement. Valdez said he last pitched (for fun) nine years ago in the Dominican.

Boston's **Carl Crawford** tripled twice and singled twice against the Tigers on Thursday, bringing to mind **Willie McCovey's** big-league debut — two triples, two singles off future Hall of Famer **Robin Roberts**.

McCovey played 2,587 more games and, according to baseballreference.com, never had another two-triple game.

Class-A Jupiter beat Clearwater 2-1 in 23 innings Monday, not that Jupiter manager and former A's catcher **Ron Hassey** could tell you about it. He was ejected in the 14th, long before the 5-hour, 37-minute game ended.

Timely hitting helps A's win third in a row

By Tom Green / MLB.com | 5/29/2011 2:45 AM ET

OAKLAND -- The A's have made a name for themselves with their pitching, but it's been their hitting that's done the talking the last three days.

For the third game in a row, the A's notched double-digit hits, as they downed the Orioles, 4-2, to extend their winning streak to three games.

Coco Crisp knocked in the go-ahead run in the sixth inning, when he laced a line-drive single to center to score Cliff Pennington, who had doubled one at-bat earlier and beat the throw home from Baltimore's Adam Jones.

Both Crisp's and Pennington's hits came with two outs in the inning -- a familiar scene in the Overstock.com Coliseum the last two days. After coming through with six two-out knocks on Friday, the A's scattered seven of the timely hits on Saturday night -- including six off Orioles starter Brad Bergesen (1-6, 5.36 ERA), who was chased shortly after Crisp's hit.

Once again, the two-out hits proved to be the difference in the game. Three of the A's four runs were plated with two outs.

"It's been a challenge for a lot of our guys, especially in the counts, too," Orioles manager Buck Showalter said of the two-out hits. "We had a lot of counts in our favor, too. We were a hitter away from having some easy innings, just couldn't get it done."

The first of the A's three well-timed runs came in the second inning, after Mark Ellis reached on a single and advanced to second on a throwing error with two down. That was followed by an RBI single to right by Kevin Kouzmanoff, who returned to the lineup after missing six games with a groin injury. Kouzmanoff finished the night 2-for-4 at the plate.

It was Josh Willingham's turn in the next frame to deliver with two outs. Willingham hit a line drive to center that scored Crisp, who led off with a single and then swiped his 15th base of the season.

"Early on in the year, it just seemed like [two-out hits] didn't happen, and now I think it's just a by-product of guys swinging the bat better," A's manager Bob Geren said.

The A's final run of the night was also due to something that didn't happen earlier in the season -- an Ellis home run. Ellis led off the eighth with his first round tripper of the season to give the A's an insurance run, after which, the second baseman received the silent treatment from his teammates in the dugout.

"His teammates were pretty fired up," Geren said. "It was fun, and guys were jelling and having a good time."

While the A's came up with timely hits for the second night in a row, they also got an up-and-down outing from their starting pitcher for the second straight game. Josh Outman, filling in for the injured Brandon McCarthy, was wildly effective in his second start since Tommy John surgery in 2009. Outman (1-0, 2.08 ERA) earned his first win since undergoing the procedure and tossed six innings of two-run ball in which he walked five batters.

"I definitely pitched myself into some jams," Outman said. "The walks -- I need to cut back on that, and command is obviously a bit of an issue. But I was able to work out of some jams with some double plays and some nice defense. I got to take the positive out of it: I got my first win in a year and a half, so that's a plus."

Outman's biggest jam came in the fourth inning. The southpaw gave up his own pair of two-out singles, as the Orioles tied the game, 2-2, before Robert Andino walked to load the bases for Adam Jones. With the bases juiced and a two-strike count on Jones, Outman pulled out his first breaking ball of the night to fan the Orioles' center fielder and escape further damage.

After the A's secured the lead for Outman, the bullpen clamped down for three scoreless innings to secure the A's fourth win in five games. Grant Balfour -- who a few days earlier had been named the team's closer -- pitched the eighth before Brian Fuentes reclaimed the role in the final frame and found himself in the save column for the first time in nearly three weeks. Fuentes had been tagged for a loss in each of his last four outings before Saturday's scoreless ninth.

"It felt good," Fuentes said. "I'm always surprised when I don't pitch well, so I guess that's a good thing. It was just another day."

Bailey impressive in fourth rehab outing

By Tom Green / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's haven't yet made a decision about the next step for two-time All-Star closer Andrew Bailey in his recovery from a forearm injury that has sidelined him all season. But if Bailey has any say in the matter, he'll be activated from the disabled list soon.

"I think I'm ready," Bailey said.

Bailey said his arm felt great after his fourth rehab outing with Triple-A Sacramento. The righty hurled one inning -- the eighth -- on Friday night for the River Cats and allowed two hits, while striking out one and not permitting a run on 13 pitches. The best sign for the former American League Rookie of the Year, though, was that 10 of his 13 pitches found the strike zone.

In Bailey's first three outings with Sacramento, he threw 19 of his 39 pitches out of the zone -- and location was part of the reason for the fourth rehab appearance. But Bailey was pleased with his control on Friday.

"I was confident with all my stuff and was able to throw strikes," Bailey said. "It was nice to get out there, put the ball where I want it and kind of stay under control and let the ball go. It was nice to get ahead of guys and feel like I had command."

Although Bailey feels he is ready to rejoin the ballclub, a final decision will have to wait until he meets with A's manager Bob Geren. Prior to Saturday's game with the Orioles, Geren said he hadn't had a chance to meet with his closer yet to discuss the what's next for him, but that a decision will come soon enough.

When Bailey is reactivated for the A's, though, he said he'll be ready to pitch in any situation -- despite not seeing any save opportunities, let alone the ninth inning, during his rehab stint.

"Being a closer is a mental thing," Bailey said. "I feel like I am a closer, so I have that mentality. I think I'll be all right in whatever role I'm asked to pitch in. But hopefully, I'll be here soon and be able to get out there."

Sweeney sits after big game against O's

OAKLAND -- A day after going 2-for-5 and driving in the go-ahead run in the A's 6-2 win against the Orioles, Ryan Sweeney found himself on the bench again.

Sweeney, who started Friday's game in center field when Coco Crisp was given the day off, has been the A's best hitter in May -- hitting .375 for the month, a full 101 points better than the second-best average on the team. Still, the outfielder has seen at-bats in only 18 of the team's 26 games this month.

A's manager Bob Geren explained his decision to sit Sweeney, who had a double and also scored two runs on Friday night.

"[Josh] Willingham had a great game, [David] DeJesus has been swinging better than anybody and [Hideki] Matsui had a great game," Geren said.

But Sweeney, who is stuck behind Willingham, DeJesus and Crisp on the outfield depth chart, isn't griping about the decision.

"I'm not one to say what should happen," Sweeney said. "They're going to make that decision, and I'm just going to take advantage of the opportunity when I get in there."

Sweeney has certainly taken advantage, reaching base safely in 14 of the 18 games he's played in this month while rotating in and out of the lineup every couple of days. Because of that, Sweeney, who has seen his at-bats nearly double from April to May, has also seen his batting average skyrocket from .222 to .320 since the end of April.

The 26-year-old outfielder said his increased production at the plate isn't due to a change in his approach, but just a result of getting more chances to take cuts. In the first month of the season, Sweeney only had five games where he got at least three at-bats. But this month, that number has more than tripled.

"Going in and pinch-hitting against closers and guys in the bullpen, it's not easy to just get one at-bat and go 0-for-1 or whatever," Sweeney said. "Obviously, when you get four or five at-bats at a time, you get a little better shot at getting a hit than if you get just one or two."

Due to Sweeney's surge this month, Geren has been left trying to juggle five outfielders for four positions -- including designated hitter -- which means Sweeney won't always crack the lineup despite his hot bat.

"Everybody in the lineup has been getting hits, and we're starting to be where we envisioned, where we have to mix and match to rotate everybody in there because we have a lot of good players," Geren said. "It's never a problem having too many guys hitting."

Jackson remains an option at third

OAKLAND -- With the A's struggling to find consistency at third base, manager Bob Geren said on Saturday that Conor Jackson remains a viable option at the hot corner.

Jackson has seen time at third in only four games this year, including Thursday's 4-3 win in Anaheim. But Geren likes what he has seen out the A's 2010 midseason acquisition.

"He's still learning the position, but he played there the other day ... and he looked fairly comfortable," Geren said, adding that Jackson continues to work at the position in practice.

While Jackson gets more accustomed to the position in workouts, the A's will continue to lean on the tandem of Andy LaRoche and Kevin Kouzmanoff to man the hot corner. Kouzmanoff returned to the lineup on Saturday after missing six straight games because of a groin injury. But Geren insisted Kouzmanoff is ready to get back into the swing of things.

"He's fine," Geren said. "He had nice early work -- ground balls, batting practice. He looked great, ready to go."

Britton, Moscoso face off in series finale

By Austin Laymance / MLB.com

When Sunday's scheduled starter Zach Britton is on the mound for Baltimore, the Orioles just can't seem to score many runs for the rookie.

The Orioles have scored two runs in Britton's last 22 innings pitched -- including a stretch of 21 scoreless innings. Baltimore finally managed to plate a run in Britton's last outing, but the left-hander wasn't dwelling on his team's lack of run support.

"Well, you know, I wasn't really thinking about it too much," Britton said after his start Tuesday against Kansas City.

"Obviously, it's good when the team puts up runs for you. But my job was to keep it close."

Britton, who is in the race for the American League Rookie of the Year, has a team-high five wins and sports a 2.35 ERA -- the lowest of any Oriole. The California native will make his first big league start in his home state, as Baltimore wraps up a three-game series with Oakland.

The Athletics, though, aren't worried about scoring enough runs for scheduled starter Guillermo Moscoso.

Oakland has won four of its last five games entering Sunday's series finale, and has scored at least four runs in each of those wins. The A's have posted double-digit hits in each of their last three games, and the offense appears to be coming around.

"We've had a lot of guys swinging the bats the last few days," said Oakland manager Bob Geren. "Everybody in the lineup has been getting hits. We're starting to be where we envisioned."

Oakland outfielder Josh Willingham hopes his team can keep up its recent hot streak at the plate, as they attempt to reach .500 on Sunday. The A's are 18-5 in games when they score at least four runs, including an 11-1 mark in May.

"I like our chances when we score four or five runs in a game," Willingham said.

Moscoso will make his second appearance of the season filling in for the injured Tyson Ross. In his first outing, Moscoso scattered three hits over six scoreless innings in a win over the Angels. The right-hander has allowed three earned runs in 1 2/3 innings pitched against Baltimore in his career.

Orioles: Guerrero on a tear

- Outfielder Vladimir Guerrero extended his hit streak to 13 games on Saturday, the longest hit streak of the year for the Orioles.

Guerrero is batting .368, with five doubles, a home run, eight RBIs and seven runs scored during his streak. He has hit safely in 16 of his last 17 games.

- Nick Markakis' 12 game hit streak ended on Saturday, after he went 0-for-4 with a walk.

Athletics: Sweeney owns the Orioles

- Ryan Sweeney enters Sunday's game with an 11-game hit streak against Baltimore and is a career .367 hitter against the Orioles.

Sweeney was not in the starting lineup on Saturday, despite a 2-for-5 performance with an RBI and two runs scored on Friday night.

- The A's have committed 41 errors, second most in the American League.

Worth noting

- Baltimore is 1-11 in Oakland since the start of the 2008 season. The Orioles have been outscored 60-32 and have scored two runs or fewer in eight of the 12 games.
- Oakland is 74-31 against Baltimore since the start of the 1999 season, the best winning percentage against the Orioles by an American League club over that span.

A's win third straight game with 4-2 victory over Orioles to build some momentum

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

The Oakland Athletics weren't going to let a little drizzle rain on their hit parade.

So even with a weather-delayed start to their game Saturday night against the Baltimore Orioles, the Oakland offense still went out and rapped out ten hits on their way to a 4-2 win.

It's the third win in a row for the A's, and it's also the third game in a row where the team notched a double-digit hit total. Four different players had two hits for Oakland tonight, as starting pitcher Josh Outman won his first major-league game since June 8, 2009.

This is the kind of offense the A's need every game, and it's a good confidence boost for the team to deliver three straight offensive performances that have been enough to win the game -- especially after a stretch where the team went 2-6 despite a 1.60 ERA from their starting pitchers.

Coco Crisp, Mark Ellis, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Cliff Pennington each registered two hits on the night, while Ellis also hit his first home run of the season in the eighth inning to provide the final scoring for the A's.

Outman gave up two runs in six innings, and Joey Devine, Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes closed the game out for Oakland, in order, through the late innings.

But the offense was the story again -- in addition to the number of hits, the A's also had some timely swings tonight. Crisp, Kouzmanoff and Josh Willingham each had two-out RBI for Oakland, and the team as a whole went 3-for-7 with runners in scoring position.

The lack of scoring has cost the A's many wins already this year, so when they do produce enough offense to score and win, it's a welcome sight. The team is only 8-11 in one-run ballgames, for example, and they'll need to finish at least at .500 in those close games in order to make the playoffs this year.

Consider that the San Francisco Giants -- with their second-worst in the league offense and their third-best in the league pitching -- are 15-6 in one-run ballgames this year.

First, that's a staggering amount of close games that both teams are playing, but if this is your style of play -- good pitching, mediocre at best hitting -- you have to be able to make it work.

Some of it is luck, but it's also ... *moxie*, for lack of a better word. That three-game difference in overall record right now between Oakland (26-27) and San Francisco (28-23) comes down to the mark in those one-run ballgames.

Win the close ones, and you have a successful season. Lose them, and it's a lot of "what if?" in the offseason.

And you win the close ones by scoring runs late in the game -- not by giving them up in those scenarios.

So with a little boost on the offensive side and a tightening down of the bullpen on the other side, Oakland might have a chance to put this all together soon -- if the bats can keep this up, even a little.

Plus, the A's get two-time All-Star and 2009 American League Rookie of the Year Andrew Bailey back from the disabled list soon.

Thus, this might just be the time for Oakland to seize control of this division, even with the New York Yankees coming to town on Monday.

A's defeat Orioles 4-2.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Coco Crisp had two hits and drove in the go-ahead run to help the Athletics beat the Baltimore Orioles 4-2 on Saturday night.

Mark Ellis hit a home run and Josh Willingham and Kevin Kouzmanoff also drove in runs for the A's, who have won four of their last five following a season-high six-game losing streak. Adam Jones and Craig Tatum each drove in runs for the Orioles, who have lost 11 of their last 12 games in Oakland.

Josh Outman, in his second start since returning to the majors for the first time in two years, allowed two runs and six hits over six innings. He walked five.

Outman (1-0) earned his first major-league victory since June 8, 2009 against the Minnesota Twins.

Brad Bergesen (1-6) allowed three runs and nine hits in 5 2-3 innings. He walked two and struck out five.

Joey Devine, Grant Balfour each pitched a scoreless inning and Brian Fuentes got the final three outs for his 10th save in 12 chances.

Fuentes recorded his first save in his first save opportunity since May 8.

Crisp, Ellis, Kouzmanoff and Cliff Pennington each had two hits for the A's, who recorded double-digits in hits for the third consecutive game for just the second time this season.

Ellis ended a 50-game homerless streak with his solo shot in the eighth, making it 4-2.

Crisp put the A's ahead with a two-out RBI single in the sixth.

The A's scored two of their runs with two outs and have scored seven of their last 10 runs with two outs.

The Orioles did not get a runner past first base since they left the bases loaded in the fourth.

Vladimir Guerrero singled in the fifth to extend his hitting streak to 13 games. Nick Markakis went 0-for-4 and had his 12-game streak snapped.

NOTES

O's IF Mark Reynolds started at first base for the first time in two years.

Devine has not allowed an earned run in his last 31 games (31 1-3 innings) dating to 2008.

O's Brian Matusz (left intercostal muscle strain) is set to throw a bullpen session Sunday.

O's IF Derrick Lee (left oblique strain) is expected to start baseball activities at extended spring training Sunday.

Pennington has hit safely in a career-high matching seven games.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

RockHounds' recent woes continue against Naturals

By Oscar LeRoy, Midland Reporter-Telegram

The Midland RockHounds or their fans haven't had much to cheer about over the last two weeks as the 'Hounds have won twice in their last 13 games.

And during that stretch, the team has lost in different ways; from lack of quality starting pitching, to costly errors, to late-game collapses.

On Saturday night it was all the above as Northwest Arkansas scored a bunch early, took advantage of five RockHound errors and then put the game away with a four-run seventh inning in a wild 14-9 victory over Midland in front of 4,754 fans at Citibank Ballpark.

The RockHounds have now lost three of their four games on their current homestand despite having some good offensive production. They had 11 hits by seven different batters on Saturday and Jermaine Mitchell once again shined by going 2 for 3 with a double, triple, RBI and three runs scored.

But all that offense once again not enough to overcome a bad start as the Naturals, who share the Texas League North Division lead with Tulsa, plated four runs in the first inning off Midland starter Shawn Haviland (2-4). The Naturals had four hits in the inning but Haviland didn't help his own cause as he dropped a ball thrown by first baseman Michael Spina, which would have gotten Anthony Seratelli out at first base. The Naturals scored three runs after that miscue.

Northwest Arkansas added four more runs in the third inning to chase Haviland. The Naturals had five hits but also had help from the RockHounds' defense, which committed two errors. One of those errors came after a Tim Smith triple as Jason Christian air-mailed the relay throw into the seats on the third base side to allow Smith to score. Mario Lissou, the No. 9 hitter, also had a two-run single for the 8-1 advantage.

But as commanding of a lead as that seemed, the RockHound bats responded and made this a nail-biting game at one point.

Midland scored three runs in the bottom of the third thanks in part to a two-run home run by Adam Heether to cut it to 8-4.

Mitchell, who doubled and scored in the first inning, had an RBI triple, his 13th of the year, and then scored when Northwest Arkansas second baseman Kurt Mertins air-mailed a throw into the stands. That run cut the lead to 8-6 and ended Naturals starter Edgar Osuna's night after four innings.

But the RockHounds couldn't stop Northwest Arkansas from scoring despite the Naturals coming into the game with a Texas League worst .253 batting average. The Naturals had three of their 15 hits to score two more runs in the fifth inning to push the lead back to 10-6.

Again the RockHounds made the fans in attendance get excited about a possible comeback with three runs in the fifth inning to cut it to 10-9. Heether (2 for 4) and Christian each had RBI doubles and Kent Walton added an RBI single.

That hope of a comeback for the RockHounds was dashed in a forgetful seventh inning for reliever Jon Meloan, who couldn't find the strike zone. Of the 33 pitches he threw that inning, only 11 were strikes as four Naturals hitters walked, including Jeff Bianchi walking with the bases loaded. It didn't help matters that right fielder Heether dropped a fly ball, which allowed two more runs to score for the 14-9 advantage. The Naturals also stole two of their six bases on the night in that frame.

The RockHounds' offense could not muster another rally as Kelvin Herrera was masterful in relief, throwing two perfect innings with four strikeouts. Herrera preserved a win for Willy Lebron (1-1), who pitched three innings of middle relief.

'HOUND BITES: RockHounds CF Jermaine Mitchell extended his on-base streak to 22 games with a leadoff double in the first inning. The on-base streak is the longest of the season for any RockHound. Grant Green had a 21-game on-base streak earlier this season. ...Naturals LF and former Midland College standout Tim Smith was 2 for 3 with a triple, two RBI and three runs scored before leaving the game in the bottom of the seventh. ...RockHounds 1B Michael Spina got ejected in the ninth inning by home plate umpire Brian Hertzog after Spina got called out on strikes. Spina started arguing while heading back to the dugout and finally got tossed by Hertzog. Spina then walked back to Hertzog, argued some more and then dropped the bat in front of Hertzog's feet. ...Temperature at 7:04 p.m. first pitch was 105 degrees.

TODAY'S PROBABLES: The RockHounds host Northwest Arkansas in the second game of a three-game series at 2 p.m. today. Midland's starting pitcher is to be announced, while the Naturals are expected to start LHP Chris Dwyer (1-3, 5.82 ERA).

Late Runs Lift Ports Past Rawhide 6-5

05/28/2011 11:00 PM ET

VISALIA, Calif. - It had been nearly two full weeks since the Stockton Ports did something they'd done every time for the first month-and-a-half of the season--win a series. On Saturday night at Recreation Park, the Ports got back on track. Using four runs over the final two innings, the Ports defeated the Visalia Rawhide by a final of 6-5 to take three of four games on their trip to Visalia.

Ports starter Rob Gilliam (4-4) had to work around some tough situations to minimize the damage in his outing. After walking two batters and not allowing a run in the 1st, Visalia got to Gilliam for three runs in the 2nd. With one out, Keon Broxton hit a solo home run to center to give the Rawhide a 1-0 lead. After a single from Jon Mark Owings and a walk drawn by Rossmel Perez, Raoul Torrez doubled to left to score both Owings and Perez and make it a 3-0 Rawhide advantage.

Gilliam would pitch through the 7th inning and have at least one baserunner aboard in each inning for the remainder of his outing, but allowed just the three runs on seven hits while striking out six and walking four in a winning effort.

Stockton's offense got going in the 5th. After being shut down over the first four innings by Rawhide starter Eric Smith, Myrio Richard reached on a one-out infield single. Michael Gilmartin followed with a two-run homer to left, his third of the year to cut Visalia's lead to 3-2.

Smith, despite leaving with a chance to win the game, would receive a no-decision as he went six innings and allowed two runs on five hits while striking out three.

Trailing 3-2, the Ports managed to score three runs while getting just a single hit in the 8th. Rawhide reliever Adam Worthington (1-3) walked Conner Crumbliss to start the inning. Three batters later after recording two outs, Worthington walked Mitch LeVier. Ryan Ortiz came up next and struck out swinging, but reached base on a wild pitch as the ball got past Perez to keep the inning alive.

Visalia then turned to their closer Yonata Ortega. Ortega, with the bases loaded, walked Anthony Aliotti to tie the game at 3-3. Richard came up next and singled up the middle to score a pair of runs and give the Ports their first lead at 5-3.

All three runs in the inning were charged to Worthington, who took the loss after going 1.2 innings despite not allowing a hit in that span. Worthington did walk two batters in his outing.

The Rawhide got a run back in the bottom of the 8th off Ports reliever Ben Hornbeck. With two on and two out, Owings doubled to left to score Matt Davidson and make it a 5-4 ballgame.

Stockton, however, plated an insurance run in part due to benefitting from a close call in the top of the 9th. With one out, Ortega walked Crumbliss and gave up a single to Ryan Lipkin. With two on and one out, the runners took off on a 3-2 pitch to Michael Choice on which Choice struck out looking. On the throw down to third base and a bang-bang play, Crumbliss was ruled safe to keep the inning alive. While LeVier was batting with two down, Ortega uncorked a wild pitch that allowed Crumbliss to score and give the Ports a 6-4 advantage.

As it turned out, it was an insurance run the Ports would need. With Jose Guzman (SV, 6) on the hill in the 9th, Visalia put runners at the corners with one out. Adam Eaton came up and hit a hard grounder to the backhand side of the third baseman Leonardo Gil. Gil made the backhand play falling to his right, and then threw to first and the ball skipped by Aliotti. The runner from third scored to make it 6-5, and Eaton, trying to take second on a throw that got away, would be thrown out by Aliotti as he recovered the ball quickly. That left the tying run at third base with two down, and Guzman got Davidson to pop to short to end the ballgame.

Guzman would be credited with his 6th save on the season for Stockton.

After taking three of four from the Rawhide, the Ports travel to San Jose for a three-game set with the Giants beginning on Sunday. San Jose is coming off a franchise-record ninth-straight road victory after completing a sweep of the Bakersfield Blaze. Murphy Smith (2-4, 5.17 ERA) heads to the mound for the Ports, opposed by Giants right-hander Zack Wheeler (3-2, 4.32 ERA). First pitch is set for 5 p.m. PDT.

Bees Sweep Doubleheader over River Bandits

05/28/2011 11:30 PM ET

BURLINGTON, IA (May 28, 2011)- Bees RHP Nate Long (3-0) pitched six innings of shutout baseball in the second game of a doubleheader and the Bees won two more over the River Bandits. The Bees took game one 5-3 and game two 4-0.

The Bees started the scoring action in game one after a walk to LF Douglas Landaeta (1-2) by River Bandits RHP Trevor Rosenthal (2-5). An errant throw by Rosenthal on a check to first base sent Landaeta all the way to third base. Landaeta later scored on a fly out by SS Wade Kirkland (0-2) to make it 1-0.

In the third inning the Bees added three more runs, two coming from a double to left field by RF Royce Consigli (1-3). Later in the inning Consigli scored on a wild pitch from Rosenthal to extend the Bees lead to 4-0.

The River Bandits scored their first run in the fourth inning after a fly out by C Robert Stock (0-1) brought LF Chris Edmondson (0-2) in from third.

SS Ronny Gil (0-3) reached on an error by Bees 2B Nino Leyja to start the fifth inning. Gil eventually scored after a double to left field by teammate 2B Starlin Rodriguez (1-4) to make it 4-2.

The Bees plated one more run in the fifth inning after an RBI double by 1B Josh Whitaker (1-2) scored DH Tony Thompson (0-2).

CF Nicholas Longmire (1-2) blasted a home run to left field to pull closer to the Bees at a score of 5-3 in the sixth inning.

The Bees opened up the scoring in game two of the doubleheader in the bottom of the first inning thanks in part to the speed of CF Tyreece House (0-2), who reached first base on a passed ball by River Bandits C Cody Stanley and then stole second and third. House scored on an RBI single from DH Josh Whitaker (1-3) to put the Bees up 1-0.

Quad Cities RHP Zach Russell (1-5) walked three in the bottom of the second inning and the Bees added two more runs thanks to a groundout by 2B Nino Leyja (0-3).

In the bottom of the third inning, LF Douglas Landaeta (2-3) hit a double to left field and scored on a wild pitch to put the Bees on top 4-0.

The Bees continue their series against the Quad Cities River Bandits on Sunday with exciting baseball action at 2 p.m. At Community Field it is "Faith Day" where fans can bring their Church bulletin and get \$1 off up to four general admission tickets. It is also "Louisa Communications Kids Day" where all kids 12 and under get in free (when accompanied by a paid adult) and get to run the bases after the game brought to you by Louisa Communications. The River Bandits will send LHP Anthony Ferrara (4-2, 2.91) to the mound for the afternoon, while the Bees will send RHP Jose Macias (1-0, 0.00) to the mound. Pre-game coverage starts at 1:40 p.m. on Newsradio 1490 KBUR and online at www.gobees.com.