

Oakland A's fall 3-2 to Chicago White Sox

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

CHICAGO -- The ball jumped off Coco Crisp's bat, and for a moment it appeared the A's might summon more comeback magic Saturday night.

Instead, one slick-fielding outfielder robbed another, as Brent Lillibridge's leaping catch at the left-field wall in the eighth inning helped send the A's to a 3-2 loss to the Chicago White Sox at U.S. Cellular Field.

The A's had one out and a runner on second when Crisp made a dramatic bid for career hit No. 1,000. Lillibridge timed his jump perfectly, reaching over the wall and snatching the ball back into play.

"It's a game of inches -- literally," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

But the A's also could point to other factors that sent them to their 11th loss in 12 games.

Left-hander Gio Gonzalez (5-5) issued a career-high seven walks, and though they led to only three runs, it was another laborious night for a member of the Oakland rotation.

"Obviously there are things I need to clean up on the mound," Gonzalez said.

The A's committed three errors, including reliever Brad Ziegler's off-target throw to second base on a potential double-play comebacker that allowed the go-ahead run to score in the sixth.

One night after scoring four runs in the ninth to win, the A's mustered just four hits, all off White Sox starter John Danks (2-8), who went 72/3 innings.

The A's are 1-8 on a 10-game road trip that ends Sunday.

Crisp refused to discuss Lillibridge's catch, frowning when approached by reporters after the game.

After Hideki Matsui's sacrifice fly tied it at 2-2 in the top of the sixth, Gonzalez issued a one-out walk to Lillibridge, who stole second and went to third when catcher Kurt Suzuki's throw skipped into center field.

With the potential go-ahead run 90 feet away, Melvin called on Ziegler with a 1-0 count on Alexei Ramirez. Ziegler walked Ramirez but got the ground ball he was looking for with Carlos Quentin's comebacker.

Ziegler rushed his throw to second and led shortstop Cliff Pennington too much. Pennington couldn't convert the force let alone the double play as Lillibridge scored to break the tie.

"My goal is to make a throw on the first base side of the bag," Ziegler said. "I just didn't give him time to get there. I've got plenty of time if I make a good throw."

Gonzalez labored through 51/3 innings.

Melvin said it appeared Gonzalez was out of rhythm. Gonzalez repeatedly brought up the word most associated with him after a bad outing -- "composure" -- and said he didn't show enough of it.

He alluded to borderline pitches that didn't go his way. But he also hit a batter on a 1-2 pitch and bounced a curveball for a wild pitch that scored Ramirez in the third.

"It could be going both ways with balls and strikes," he said. "But that's not something I should complain about."

Suzuki endured a rough night. He was attended to after a foul tip caught him in a painful spot, and he went 0 for 3. He's hitting .192 (14 for 73) over his past 22 games.

Before the game, Melvin said he'd like to work backup Landon Powell into the catching mix more and give Suzuki some rest.

"Kurt wants to play every day, and he's able to do it, but you also have to keep him fresh," said Melvin, a former catcher. "When you're playing that much, you don't even understand how much of a toll it takes on you."

Oakland A's update: New manager Bob Melvin settles on Hideki Matsui as No. 3 hitter in order

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

CHICAGO -- A's manager Bob Melvin is using this four-game series against the Chicago White Sox to experiment with personnel, but he's settled on one big decision.

He wants designated hitter Hideki Matsui as his regular No. 3 hitter, a nod of confidence to a player who has largely struggled in his first season in Oakland.

"In the three spot, if you keep running guys in and out of there, or guys that aren't playing every day, psychologically it might play into, 'Well, maybe we're not as good offensively as we think we are,' " Melvin said before Saturday's 3-2 loss to Chicago. "I'd like to have a little more of a set lineup, especially in the middle, and rely on those guys and have confidence in those guys."

Melvin's most drastic departure so far from his predecessor, Bob Geren, is his desire to make Matsui a focal point of the lineup despite the fact the veteran is hitting just .219 with four homers and 23 RBIs.

Matsui has gone 4 for 10 with a home run and four RBIs since Melvin took over for Geren, who was fired Thursday.

Conor Jackson and David DeJesus have seen the most at-bats in the third spot, with Ryan Sweeney and Josh Willingham also drawing starts there.

Entering Saturday, the A's had gotten a .241 batting average and just two homers and 28 RBIs from the No. 3 position in 65 games.

DeJesus was out of the lineup for a second straight day. Though Melvin said DeJesus would start in right field Sunday, Melvin added that position provides his biggest challenge in dividing up playing time among DeJesus, Jackson and Sweeney. After also sitting Friday, DeJesus, hitting just .242, admitted he was surprised not to be back in there. "I came to the park, got my work in, and when he uses me, I'll be ready," DeJesus said. Melvin said he'd have a better idea of players' roles after this weekend.

A prolonged shoulder injury has sidetracked the career of right-hander James Simmons, the A's first-round draft pick in 2007. Simmons hasn't appeared in a game since 2009. But he's progressing well at extended spring training, according to A's director of player development Keith Lieppman. Simmons is likely to join the A's Phoenix-based rookie league team at some point.

Chin Music: Hideki Matsui will get crack as No. 3 hitter

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 6/11/2011 3:54PM

Another day, another sign of Bob Melvin putting his stamp on the A's. Here's the lineups ...

A's – Crisp CF, Pennington SS, Matsui DH, Willingham LF, Jackson RF, Sizemore 3B, Suzuki C, Barton 1B, Weeks 2B; Gonzalez LHP.

White Sox – Lillibridge LF, Ramirez SS, Quentin RF, Konerko 1B, Rios CF, Dunn DH, Castro C, Beckham 2B, Morel 3B; Danks LHP.

Melvin said he's using this four-game series against Chicago to experiment with personnel, and he told players that by the start of the homestand, they'll have a pretty good understanding of where they fit in the playing rotation. One thing that's already determined: Melvin wants Hideki Matsui batting third and plans to keep him there for a while.

"If you keep running guys in and out of (the third spot), or even guys that aren't playing everyday, I think psychologically it might play into, 'Well, maybe we're not as good offensively as we think we are,' Melvin said. "I'd like to have a little more of a set lineup, especially in the middle, and rely on those guys and have confidence in those guys."

And what is it about Matsui (and his .222 batting average) that Melvin likes in the third spot? "He's a veteran, you know, a guy we need to lean on, and he's had two very good games," Melvin said. "It doesn't mean it's going to happen every day, but I feel good with a guy like him hitting in that spot."

It's early to draw conclusions, but Matsui does seem energized since Melvin took over from Bob Geren. And it's clear that Melvin is a believer that instilling confidence in a player has a direct effect on performance. He said he plans to work backup catcher Landon Powell into the mix more, in order to keep Kurt Suzuki fresh but also to utilize Powell's talents. "I want everyone to be a part of it," Melvin said. "This is certainly a 25-man roster and everybody feeling good and being a part of it is much more powerful than 17 guys, or whatever it may be."

—David DeJesus is sitting for the second straight day. Melvin said DeJesus will start Sunday but added that the right field spot will be the toughest to divide up playing time between DeJesus, Conor Jackson and Ryan Sweeney.

A's struggle on mound, in field in loss to Chicago

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Gio Gonzalez wasn't getting quite the strike zone he might have liked Saturday night, and while he was walking batters, the A's also were wild in the field.

So the White Sox's 3-2 victory at U.S. Cellular Field was as much Oakland's doing as it was Chicago's in some ways. The A's made three errors, leading to one unearned run. Oakland has made 50 errors this season, tied for the most in the league.

Gonzalez walked a career-high seven, and he recorded two wild pitches, one of which sent in a run.

Oakland still had a good shot, though, in the later stages of the evening - and they got a good shot, from center fielder Coco Crisp, who with a man at second in the eighth, launched a drive to left-center.

But he was robbed of career hit No. 1,000 when Chicago left fielder Brent Lillibridge leaped at the wall to grab a ball that was heading into the seats.

"There's a reason he's always on the highlight reels," Gonzalez said.

"The way it played out, that was the game," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "They were just a little bit better than we were defensively tonight."

Gonzalez wouldn't come right out and say he thought he was squeezed, but he said he didn't think his location was that off, and he repeated several times what "good eyes" the White Sox hitters have. He said that with better composure, he might have gone deeper, but Gonzalez said he appreciated the fact that Melvin sent him back out for the sixth even though he was already over 100 pitches.

"It made me feel so much better," Gonzalez said. "He gave me a chance to redeem myself."

The only walk Gonzalez truly was unhappy about came in that inning, when he put Lillibridge on with one out. Gonzalez threw one ball to Alexei Ramirez, and that's when Lillibridge stole second and went to third on catcher Kurt Suzuki's throwing error, so Melvin replaced Gonzalez with Brad Ziegler in the hope of getting a groundball.

Ziegler walked Ramirez, then got Carlos Quentin to hit a comebacker that appeared to be a perfect double-play ball, but Ziegler's throw to second pulled shortstop Cliff Pennington off the bag and Lillibridge scored on the play.

"I just didn't give him time to get there," Ziegler said. "I had plenty of time to make a good throw."

Gonzalez also gave up a solo homer to Ramon Castro in the fourth. He has not won a game since May 17; he went 3-0 with a 1.67 ERA last month but is 0-3 with a 4.34 ERA this month.

Before the game, Melvin said that designated hitter Hideki Matsui will be the team's No. 3 hitter and that he'd like to have the entire middle of the lineup set. He clearly has Josh Willingham - the team's leading RBI man - penciled into the cleanup spot behind Matsui. Willingham drove in the A's first run, sending Cliff Pennington in from second with a base hit to left in the fourth inning, and Matsui provided a sacrifice fly in the sixth.

Crisp recorded career hit 999 on a double in the sixth, but when approached by reporters for comment after the game, he rolled his eyes and walked away.

A's Mark Ellis almost ready for return

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Mark Ellis said he still believes he'll be ready to come off the disabled list when eligible, on June 22. On Saturday, he ran at about 75 percent effort level on his sore right hamstring, and he also took grounders during batting practice.

Will Ellis have an everyday spot to return to when he does come back? It's hard to imagine that the team's longest-tenured player, in his 10th season with Oakland, would not regain his job, especially because Ellis is among the best defensive players in the league, and he's the A's unofficial team captain.

Ellis, though, is batting .211, and rookie **Jemile Weeks**, who came up Tuesday, is hitting .400 with two triples in his four games. He's seen as the A's second baseman and leadoff man of the future.

"I know I'm a good player, I know he's a good player, and you can't have too many good players," Ellis said. "These things have a way of working themselves out."

New manager **Bob Melvin**, asked his plans for second base when Ellis returns, said he's going day to day right now.

Ellis helped Weeks during the spring with some fielding tips, and he's done more of that this week.

Right in spotlight: With **Hideki Matsui** back in an everyday role at designated hitter, **Josh Willingham** in left and **Coco Crisp** in center, that leaves three strong options for right field, and Melvin said **David DeJesus** will be there today. **Conor Jackson**, who hits lefties far better than does DeJesus (.357 to .127 entering the night), was in Saturday against Chicago's **John Danks**.

Ryan Sweeney, who leads the team in on-base percentage, was on the bench Saturday.

"They all deserve playing time," Melvin said. "I wish we could play a rover out there and have four guys in the outfield, but that's not the case."

Melvin said **Landon Powell** will spell catcher **Kurt Suzuki** more often, usually in situations where Powell has good matchups against pitchers.

Leading off

Geren appreciation: Kurt Suzuki was sorry he didn't get to say goodbye to ex-manager Bob Geren. "I am grateful for everything Bob did for me and my career," Suzuki said. "I have a lot of respect for Bob Geren. He is a good person."

A personality conflict in the desert

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

The Diamondbacks have made a bunch of blunders — at least highly questionable decisions — in their short history, and firing **Bob Melvin**, now the A's manager, apparently was one of them.

Melvin was dismissed on May 7, 2009, and the move went over so well that the Diamondbacks rehired him last month as an adviser, virtually admitting the mistake.

With **Josh Byrnes** and **A.J.Hinch** no longer working for the Diamondbacks, the former catcher accepted the post. Melvin had a falling out with Byrnes, the general manager who had replaced him with Hinch, who had no coaching or managing experience.

Hinch went 89-123 until both he and Byrnes were canned last July 1.

This is an organization once run by **Jerry Colangelo**, who willingly put the team \$150 million in debt. It got him a 2001 World Series ring but put him on double-secret probation and forced him to sell controlling interest of the team.

Ken Kendrick became the new boss and, with sidekick **Jeff Moorad**, handed out a series of questionable contracts, one to **Russ Ortiz** that prompted the Diamondbacks to eat \$22 million. Kendrick gave Byrnes an eight-year contract and dismissed him with five years remaining.

Before the 2005 season, the Diamondbacks hired **Wally Backman** to manage, only to can him four days later because of revelations he had a misdemeanor and DUI on his record that he didn't acknowledge during the interview process.

Kendrick took the blame, admitting he did no background check.

With Backman gone, the job went to Melvin, who was **Bob Brenly's** bench coach in the championship season. Melvin won a division title his third year (2007), fell to second in '08 and was fired after a 12-17 start in '09 in part because of a reported "deteriorating relationship" with Byrnes.

Melvin's well-respected pitching coach, **Bryan Price**, resigned out of protest and now is on the Reds' staff. Melvin, when he returned to the Diamondbacks as an adviser, confirmed the "disconnect" with Byrnes.

One positive move, courtesy of CEO **Derrick Hall**, was the September hiring of GM **Kevin Towers**, who retained interim manager **Kirk Gibson**.

They've put the Diamondbacks, who will host the Giants in a three-game series beginning Tuesday, on the right track as an apparent NL West contender.

Towers is **Bruce Bochy's** buddy from San Diego, the architect of four Padres division titles in 14 years, including the 1998 World Series team. His strength in San Diego was building pitching staffs on the cheap, and his offseason priority was recreating a Diamondbacks bullpen that posted a 5.74 ERA and blew 24 save chances.

At the winter meetings, Towers signed closer **J.J. Putz**, who converted his first 16 save chances; acquired Baltimore's **David Hernandez**, who turned from starter to setup man and hasn't surrendered a lead all season; and used the Rule 5 draft to swipe Giants minor-leaguer **Joe Paterson**, an effective left-handed specialist.

Towers also vowed to cut down on the swings and misses. The Diamondbacks struck out 1,529 times last year, a bigleague record, so the GM packaged free-swinging K-king **Mark Reynolds** to the Orioles for two relievers.

Drumbeat: Bob Melvin moves Hideki Matsui into No. 3 spot; other A's lineup tidbits

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at U.S. Cellular Field, 6//11/2011, 2:56pm

Bob Melvin spoke yesterday about the A's lack of a true No. 3 hitter, and he said he understood why Bob Geren bounced Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson in and out of the spot.

Melvin said today, however, that he's decided he wants a everyday No. 3 hitter - he said he feels it's important from a psychological standpoint to have a set No. 3 guy, it's too key a spot to rotate different hitters in and out.

So the A's No. 3 hitter is: Hideki Matsui. Melvin showed an immediate affinity for Matsui, and Matsui has responded in Melvin's first two games as manager. Now he's making his first appearance of the season batting third, and Melvin said he likes Matsui there because "he's a veteran and he's a guy we need to lean on."

To say this is a shift in approach from Geren is an understatement.

Another shift: Melvin plans to use Landon Powell more often, to make sure starting catcher Kurt Suzuki stays fresh and healthy for the long haul. But Melvin is not just going to look at Powell for the obvious day-game-after-night-game situations, or, say, have him play once every six days or something. Melvin said he wants to find spots for Powell to succeed, put him in against pitchers he hits well, in situations where he'd best be able to contribute.

The trickiest part of determining the lineup now, with Matsui back in an every day role, is the right field spot, where, Melvin says, he feels he has three guys for one position. He joked that he wished he could use a rover, because it's David DeJesus, Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson all possible options for the one spot.

DeJesus, who has been an everyday player in the big leagues and who was expected start every day in Oakland, is out of the lineup for the second night in a row. Melvin said he'll be in tomorrow; DeJesus said that they have talked, he's OK with it and just waiting to see how everything shakes out. "It will all work out," he said.

DeJesus had just started swinging the bat well, but then, as Melvin noted, Sweeney is the team's leader in on-base percentage. Jackson kills left-handed pitching. But Melvin wants Coco Crisp in center every day and he wants Josh Willingham in left every game, so that leaves the logjam in right. It sounds as if the A's might have a generally set lineup most days, with the exception of the right-field carousel.

Here's tonight's lineup behind Gio Gonzalez: Crisp cf, Pennington ss, Matsui dh, Willingham lf, Jackson rf, Sizemore 3b, Suzuki c, Barton 1b, Weeks 2b.

Graham Godfrey remains in line to take his turn next time it comes up in the rotation, though that doesn't sound absolutely set in stone. Melvin said he's likely to have a definitive answer tomorrow, but Godfrey "certainly didn't pitch poorly."

The A's have few other options for that spot right now, anyway. They could use Monday's offday to tinker with the rotation if they wanted to switch things around.

I asked Melvin what he might have in mind when Mark Ellis comes off the DL, because Jemile Weeks has played so very well since coming up on Tuesday. Melvin said he's just going to go "day-to-day."

Ellis (hamstring) ran at about 75 percent effort level today and he just fielded grounders during batting practice. The A's longest tenured player, and one of the best defensive players in the league, Ellis said he isn't concerned about what might happen when he's healthy.

"These things have a way of working themselves out," he said.

Walks, poor defense bite A's in Chicago

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 6/11/2011 11:53 PM ET

CHICAGO -- The scoreboard could've read much worse than a 3-2 loss for the A's in Chicago on Saturday.

Pitching, defense and offense were all lacking in the club's third game against the White Sox. The game was only close because the White Sox stranded 12 baserunners.

But a loss is a loss, and Saturday's represented the club's 11th over its last 12 games, leaving the A's eight games behind first-place Texas in the American League West and putting to rest a good portion of the momentum that came out of Friday night's thrilling four-run comeback victory.

Lefty Gio Gonzalez carried much of the burden, walking a career-high seven in just 5 1/3 innings. That number represented a quarter of his total batters faced, and he also hit a batter, tossed a pair of wild pitches -- one which led to a run in the third -- and was called for a balk. He also surrendered a solo home run to Ramon Castro in the fourth.

"It's almost to a point where you can't even explain it," Gonzalez said. "I felt like it was a lot better than what the numbers showed. I felt like I gave it all I got. I felt like I was in the game. Not mechanics, just more about composure."

Gonzalez's ineffectiveness led to just 60 strikes out of 115 pitches, and the walks marked the first time an A's starting pitcher had offered seven free passes in a game since southpaw Greg Smith did so in August 2008 at Detroit.

But the 25-year-old southpaw wasn't too down on himself following the game, noting the called balls and strikes "could be going both ways." He wasn't about to reel off any excuses, though.

"That's not something I should be complaining about," he said. "It shouldn't be a topic. I just need to throw strikes, pound the strike zone. I felt like I was close enough to where I could get some contact, but the White Sox have a great eye."

"He got a little quick at times," interim manager Bob Melvin said. "I don't have much history with him, so maybe not his best command, but he certainly battled."

Enough so that Melvin brought his pitcher out for the sixth even though Gonzalez already had thrown 107 pitches.

"It set the tone," Gonzalez said. "It made me feel so much better as a starting pitcher. Bob gave me a chance to go out there and redeem myself and keep me in the game."

"He knew he had to be economical," Melvin noted. "I was going to give him the opportunity, but I wasn't going to let him go to 120."

Gonzalez proceeded to get a quick ground ball, but then walked Brett Lillibridge on four pitches, paving the way for righty Brad Ziegler's entrance and an ensuing messy scene that brought about two of the club's three errors on the night.

While stealing second base, Lillibridge advanced all the way to third as catcher Kurt Suzuki's errant throw sailed past second base. Ziegler then walked Alexei Ramirez before throwing a potential double-play ball off the bat of Carlos Quentin into center field, allowing Lillibridge to score.

"I threw too quick and just didn't give him enough time to get there," Ziegler said. "It's one of those plays where you've got plenty of time if you make a good throw, but I didn't give him time to get to the bag. He was playing the hole.

"I turned and I think I kind of floated the ball a little bit, partially because I saw he wasn't going to get there. I threw a little bit of a changeup. Where I was trying to throw, I threw it right there, I just didn't give him enough time."

Said Melvin: "Just the way we drew it up, but we were just a little sloppy in the field."

The A's, meanwhile, stayed quiet against White Sox hurler John Danks, who allowed two runs on four hits with two walks and four strikeouts through 7 2/3 frames.

They narrowed Chicago's lead to one in the fourth on Josh Willingham's RBI single and knotted the game at 2 in the sixth when Coco Crisp doubled, moved to third on a sacrifice bunt from Cliff Pennington and scored on Hideki Matsui's sacrifice fly.

Following the fateful sixth frame that put the White Sox ahead, 3-2, Oakland nearly grabbed hold of the lead, but Crisp was robbed of not only a two-run homer but his 1,000th career hit as Lillibridge snatched the ball just above the yellow line on the left-field wall.

"Coco hit it on the barrel," Danks said. "I thought it was halfway up the concourse. Luckily the weather kind of knocked it down, but Brent made a heck of a play out there."

"Seen him do that a few times in a couple different fields," Melvin said. "The way it played out, that was the game. We feel like if we get a couple runs there, we can close it out. They say it's a game of inches, literally."

Matsui hits third for first time since '09

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

CHICAGO -- Making Hideki Matsui one of the focal points of the A's batting order is essential to interim manager Bob Melvin.

That very perspective influenced Melvin to insert Matsui into the third spot of the lineup for Saturday's contest against the White Sox, marking the designated hitter's first start there since 2009 and just the 23rd of his career -- 18 of which came in 2007 with the Yankees. The change, Melvin said, has potential to become a permanent one.

"He's a veteran," Melvin said. "He's a guy we need to lean on. He's had two very good games, and it doesn't mean that it's going to happen every day, but I feel good with a guy like him hitting in that spot."

Matsui was 4-for-8 during the first two games in Chicago following a disappointing 4-for-40 stretch over his previous 12 contests. He's mostly hit fifth this season, with 16 starts in the fourth spot as well.

Meanwhile, Conor Jackson has received the most starts in the No. 3 hole this season, with 28, and David DeJesus isn't too far behind with 22. Ryan Sweeney (8) and Josh Willingham (7) are the only other players to start there.

"I wrestled with the fact that you want to run the best lineup out there every day and you want to match up the best you can with a particular pitcher, but in the three-spot, if you keep running guys in and out of there, psychologically that may play into, 'Maybe we're not as good offensively as we think we are,'" Melvin explained. "I like to have a little bit more of a set lineup, especially in the middle, and rely on those guys and have confidence in those guys."

"That's a very important position, and when you rotate in and out of there, I don't think it sends a good message. We'll see where it goes, but at least that's the thought of the day."

Matsui went 0-for-2 with a walk and a sacrifice fly in the A's 3-2 defeat.

Melvin figuring out perfect fit for right field

CHICAGO -- Taking over a team midseason presents its own obvious difficulties. Certain factors make it even more of a challenge, as A's interim manager Bob Melvin -- three days into his new job -- is learning.

Oakland boasts five proven outfielders, all of whom have been everyday players at one point in their careers. But Melvin can't sprinkle each one into the lineup on a daily basis, particularly three -- David DeJesus, Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson -- who are fighting for time in right field.

Melvin has deemed right field his most difficult decision. With Jackson getting the start on Saturday, each of the trio has played there at least once under Melvin, a nod to his determination to feel out a staff he's still getting to know.

"I told them at the beginning, give me these four days to figure out the personnel, and once we get back home to Oakland, when they leave the ballpark that night, they're going to know if they're playing or not," he said.

That wasn't always the case before Melvin's arrival, as the lineup was routinely posted rather late in the day, often without any player knowing beforehand whether he was starting. Melvin said DeJesus will start on Sunday, but the position will likely continue to be a revolving door.

"Right now, Josh [Willingham] is important in the four-spot, and Coco [Crisp] is so important in the one-spot, that it seems like it's right field between three guys that all deserve playing time," he said. "It's really difficult. DeJesus is used to being a regular, Conor Jackson is used to being a regular, and Sweeney has got our highest on-base percentage."

"There's no perfect formula. Someone's going to be left out, and I feel bad about that. I wish we could play a rover out there and have four guys in the outfield, but that's not the case."

The decision would be slightly easier, he noted, if the club didn't have an everyday designated hitter in Hideki Matsui, as an outfield candidate could fill that slot every now and then. But, "it's more important to have [Matsui] in the lineup right now," he said.

Worth noting

- Right-hander Graham Godfrey appears likely to stay on turn in the rotation, despite Monday's off-day, Melvin said on Saturday. Godfrey, who gave up five runs in 4 1/3 innings in his Major League debut against the White Sox on Friday, "certainly didn't pitch poorly," Melvin offered.

"We'll stick with that right now," he said. "I'll be definitive with it [Sunday]."

- Daric Barton hit eighth for the first time since 2009 on Saturday. It marked the 49th time he's started in the No. 8 hole in his career, having made one start there in 2007, 29 in 2008 and 18 in 2009.

Great catch robs Crisp of HR; A's return to losing ways

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Gio Gonzalez issued seven walks against the White Sox and the last one was most costly.

The Oakland Athletics' left-hander lost his third straight start on Saturday as Chicago beat the A's 3-2.

Gonzalez took the mound in the sixth inning and issued a one-out walk to Brent Lillibridge before being relieved by Brad Ziegler.

Lillibridge stole second and advanced to third when Kurt Suzuki's throw hopped into center field. After Alexei Ramirez walked, Carlos Quentin hit a comebacker to Ziegler, who threw wide to second on what could have been an inning-ending double play, allowing Lillibridge to score and put Chicago ahead 3-2.

"We've got plenty of time if I make a good throw, I just have to give him more time to get there," Ziegler said. "I got the groundball I needed, I just didn't make the play."

Lillibridge then helped make John Danks a winner, robbing Coco Crisp of a go-ahead home run and what would have been his 1,000th career hit.

With Daric Barton on second and one out in the eighth, Crisp lofted a flyball deep to left-center. Lillibridge retreated to the wall, leaped and snared Crisp's drive before it cleared the fence.

"Coco put a good swing on it. I was just running to the track. I didn't think it was actually going to go out the way the ball was carrying tonight," Lillibridge said. "I picked up the wall and took a chance. I actually didn't think I was going to hit the wall that hard. ... It was big."

Crisp declined to speak to reporters after the game.

"The way it played out, that was the game," A's interim manager Bob Melvin said. "We felt like if we got a couple runs right there, we could close it out. They say it's a game of inches ... literally."

That turned out to be the last batter Danks (2-8) faced. He allowed just four hits, struck out four and walked two in 7½ innings. He won his second straight start after going winless in his first 11 starts to start the season.

Ramon Castro hit his third homer of the season, a solo shot in the fourth.

Gonzalez (5-5) is winless in his last five starts. Oakland issued nine walks, has lost 11 of 12 games and fell to 1-2 under interim manager Bob Melvin.

Gonzalez allowed three runs in 5½ innings, five hits, a career-high seven walks, hit a batter, committed a balk and threw two wild pitches.

"I just have to throw strikes, pound the strike zone," Gonzalez said. "I felt I was close enough to get some contact, but the White Sox have great eyes, they can see the ball good."

Chicago's Jesse Crain worked 1½ hitless innings, picking up his first save one night after White Sox closer Sergio Santos blew a two-run, ninth-inning lead in Oakland's 7-5 win on Friday.

Josh Willingham's RBI single tied the game at 1 in the fourth for Oakland, but Castro broke the deadlock with a leadoff homer in the bottom half of the fourth.

Oakland knotted the game in the sixth on Hideki Matsui's sacrifice fly to right.

Gonzalez's control problems led to Chicago's first run in the third. Ramirez stroked a one-out single. Quentin walked and Paul Konerko struck out. With two outs and Rios at the plate, Gonzalez threw a pitch in the dirt that bounced away from catcher Suzuki and Ramirez scored the game's first run.

Rios eventually walked, giving Gonzalez four walks in three innings. He's walked four or more batters in six of his 13 starts this season.

NOTES: A's 2B Scott Sizemore, who won Friday's game with a three-run double with two outs in the ninth, went 0 for 4 with two strikeouts.

New manager gets first-hand look at typical Oakland loss in 2011

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

Welcome to the 2011 Oakland Athletics, Bob Melvin.

The A's turned in a typical performance for their team this year in a 3-2 loss to the Chicago White Sox on Saturday: minimal hitting, good-enough pitching and bad defense.

Now Melvin knows first-hand what he's dealing with, right?

Starter Gio Gonzalez wasn't sharp at all, but the A's had a chance to win heading into the late innings, trailing only by a run after the White Sox took the 3-2 lead in the sixth. But with only four hits on offense, Oakland couldn't come through against the Chicago bullpen in this one.

And sadly, the White Sox scored that go-ahead, winning run on a throwing error by reliever Brad Ziegler.

The "new" A's -- same as the old A's.

Oakland is now 8-14 in one-run ballgames, and two of the biggest culprits behind that record reared their ugly heads in this game.

First, the offense: four hits isn't usually going to cut it, but when the A's tied the game at two runs apiece in the top of the sixth, they were right in the game. But the White Sox retired ten of the last 12 Oakland batters to close the door on any potential scoring.

The A's went only 1-for-6 with runners in scoring position, leaving four men on base. They didn't have a lot of chances to score, and Oakland didn't maximize what opportunities they had.

Second, the defense: the A's made three errors Saturday night, boosting their season total to an American League-worst 50 miscues this season. This has also led to a AL-high 35 unearned runs this year.

This is why the A's lose so many close games: can't hit, can't field.

How Bob Melvin addresses those issues -- which he has now seen first-hand -- will go a long way to determining how Oakland closes the last two-thirds of the season in 2011.

MLB realignment would be a good move, for A's and every team in baseball

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

Labor discussions in major-league baseball currently include a discussion of realignment to the current two-league, six-division format, and it's a really good idea in the 21st century of revenue-sharing equilibrium for the sport.

The best way to go for MLB is to have two leagues and no divisional play -- with the top handful of teams, all playing balanced and equal schedules, making the playoffs.

For the Oakland Athletics, this may not make much of a difference in their current state. But for the future, it could mean a better shot at the postseason for small-market teams like the A's.

Divisional play entered MLB in 1969 -- prior to that, each league operated as one big division, and every team played the other teams in the league equally. With the imbalance in financial and payroll status today, the divisional play has become a hindrance to teams stuck in divisions with large-market teams.

This new format could mean every team would have a theoretical, equal chance to qualify for the postseason, regardless of their financial circumstance and payroll.

It doesn't matter how many teams are in each league, although it makes sense to even it out at 15 each -- right now, the American League only has 14 teams while the National League has 16 teams. But there is the potential for a scheduling quirk if each league has 15 teams, of course, as straight league play would mean an odd team out every day.

That could be eliminated with the advent of regular interleague play, which is better for the game and the fans, anyway.

It also doesn't matter how many teams make the playoffs in each league. Right now, four teams from each circuit qualify for the postseason, and there is talk of upping that to five each -- or even six. It probably would be best to not add another round of playoffs, as the postseason already extends very deep into the fall (early November).

But more playoff teams means more revenue, more fan interest later into the season and generally-increased exposure for the sport in a time when college and professional football dominate the sports headlines.

All in all, this is a win-win for the sport, even if there are some minor negatives as noted above. There is no timetable for such a radical change, but it would behoove MLB to do it as soon as possible.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Miller time erupts in Sacramento victory

By Veronika Tafoya / Sacramento River Cats

A solid start is never a bad thing for the Sacramento River Cats, as seen in Saturday's 11-4 victory over the Tacoma Rainiers.

Outfielder Jai Miller led by example, starting the night with a two-run homer in the first inning, giving him his team-high 14th home run of the season.

"(Tacoma starter Charlie Haeger) was a knuckleballer, and I was just able to put a good hit on it," said Miller, who went 4-for-5 with two doubles and the homer. "It's a real big deal to get a good start early on because you don't have to press as hard and can just let the game come to you." Sacramento, which is 22-5 this season when scoring first, led 8-0 by the fifth inning.

River Cats starter Yadel Marti was another example of the importance of a hot start. Marti, who has had two no-decisions against Tacoma this season, pitched five scoreless innings before allowing three runs in the sixth.

Haeger gave up seven runs in 4.0 innings pitched, giving the Cats a 7-0 lead going into the fifth. Tacoma attempted to chip away at Sacramento's lead in the sixth, during which Alex Liddi and Luis Antonio Jimenez got back-to-back home runs off Marti. Tacoma would pull in another run off of Marti before he was retired for the night.

But the River Cats held their ground, supported with an RBI from Anthony Recker in the seventh and a two-run homer by Kevin Kouzmanoff in the eighth. Sacramento was also backed with a stellar relief effort from Vinnie Chulk and Fernando Cabrera, whose one run allowed in the ninth wasn't enough to crack the Cats.

With the win, Sacramento breaks a three-game losing streak and nets the first win in the series against Tacoma. The River Cats also hold on to its five-game lead over Las Vegas in the Pacific South Division.

The series against Tacoma closes Sunday at 1:05 p.m at Raley Field.

Hooks making life miserable for RockHounds

Jordan Mason, Midland Reporter-Telegram

Saturday was the fourth consecutive game the Midland RockHounds fell behind early against the Corpus Christi Hooks, and once again they were unable to dig out of that hole as the Hooks coasted to a 9-4 victory at Citibank Ballpark.

Midland committed four errors on the day and now is just one game ahead of the Hooks for last place in the Texas League South standings.

"We just need to play smart baseball," said RockHounds manager Steve Scarsone. "We didn't do that tonight."

The RockHounds trailed right out the gate for the second straight game after a series of mishaps ruined pitcher Polin Trinidad's return from the disabled list early.

After Jose Villar reached first on a leadoff single that hit Trinidad in the glove, Jimmy Paredes hit a chopper toward Grant Green on the very next pitch that got lost in the sun and hit the shortstop in the face, allowing Paredes to reach first and Villar to advance to second.

Instead of a possible double play, Trinidad had no outs with runners on second and third and a fallen Green, who eventually walked off on his own power.

When Trinidad finally threw his next pitch, Jose Altuve smacked a bases-clearing triple to the gap in right, and just like that the RockHounds were down before they got up to bat again.

The RockHounds managed to crawl back and were down 5-4 entering the seventh before Villar got to second on a two-base throwing error by left fielder Adam Heether, and Altuve reached on a fielder's choice where Tyler Ladendorf failed to get Villar out at third.

Trey Barham replaced Jared Lansford on the mound and immediately found himself in a battle with Hooks designated hitter Jon Gaston.

Gaston battled to a 3-2 count and, after seven pitches, hit a chopper up the middle that scored Villar and Altuve and gave his team the breathing room it need with a 7-4 lead.

"It's 3-2, you never know what they're going to throw," Gaston said. "It's really just be on your toes for any pitch.

"I just closed my eyes and swung the bat."

That type of fortune for the Hooks and misfortune for the RockHounds summed up the series as the RockHounds have got off to a frustrating start to their eight-game homestand.

And with Frisco, winners of six straight to start the month of June, coming to town for a four-game series today, Scarsone said his team must focus on playing better baseball.

"The opponent's really not the issue right now -- it's us playing good baseball," he said. "If we play good baseball we can beat anybody in this league."

NOTEBOOK

'HOUND BITES: One night after his Texas League season-high 31 game on-base streak ended, Midland center fielder Jermaine Mitchell started off 3 for 3 against the Hooks with two doubles, finishing 3-for-5 on the night. ... RockHounds manager Steve Scarsone said shortstop Grant Green, who was injured on a chopper that hit him in the face in the first, doesn't need stitches and may play today against Frisco. RockHounds pitcher Jon Meloan was sent to the disabled list Saturday. ... The RockHounds wore special lavender uniforms with purple sleeves and purple caps for the second straight game Saturday to promote cancer awareness.

TODAY'S PROBABLES: Midland is expected to start Gary Daley (0-1, 4.66) today while Frisco is expected to start Texas Rangers No. 1 prospect Martin Perez (4-0, 2.60).

STOCKTON STILL STUCK IN TAILSPIN

By The Record

The Ports spiral continued in Bakersfield on Saturday night.

Stockton lost for the seventh time in eight games, this time surrendering a run in each of the first seven innings, falling 8-3 to the Blaze before 523 fans at Sam Lynn Ballpark.

After leading the first-half race early on, the Ports (30-32) have fallen into last place in the Northern Division - and the San Jose Giants have already clinched. There are still eight games remaining before the all-star break, with the Ports hoping to secure a split with Bakersfield at 1:30 p.m. today.

The latest loss came after the Blaze pounded Stockton starter Murphy Smith for 12 hits, six runs (five earned) in 42/3 innings. Smith had allowed one earned run in 11 innings in two starts against Bakersfield over the past month, but Alex Bucholz had a two-run single in the third inning for the Blaze, and an RBI single by Andrew Means chased Smith in the fifth.

Stockton's offense managed 10 hits against four Bakersfield pitchers, but left nine runners on base.

Tzu-Kai Chiu working 31/3 innings of one-run ball to earn the win out of the bullpen. Chris Carter continued his rehabilitation assignment with Stockton, going 3 for 4 with a solo home run in the second.

Whitecaps Win 9-2

By Jon Versteeg

BURLINGTON, IA-The West Michigan Whitecaps (29-23) scored nine runs on nine hits to beat the Burlington Bees (41-22) 9-2 before 1,378 fans at Community Field on Saturday night.

The Whitecaps scored a run in the first inning. SS Hernan Perez (1-5) reached on an error and went to third base on a single by C Rob Brantly (2-5). 3B Nick Castellanos (2-4) lifted a sacrifice fly to right field to score Perez for a 1-0 lead.

The Bees tied the game on back-to-back doubles by C John Nester (2-4) and SS Wade Kirkland (1-4) respectively in the second inning.

West Michigan scored five runs in the third inning against Burlington RHP Josh Bowman (5-2). Perez hit a three-run home run over the left field wall as part of an inning that gave the Whitecaps a 6-1 lead.

Burlington got an RBI double from SS Ryan Pineda (1-3) in the fifth inning for a 6-2 Whitecap advantage.

The Whitecaps scored three runs in the eighth inning to take a 9-2 lead.

The Bees and Whitecaps finish their series Sunday afternoon at 2:00 p.m. It's Bark in the Park with all fans encouraged to bring their dogs to the ballpark. The Des Moines County Humane Society will provide a micro chip service for \$20.00. It's also a Louisa Communications Kids Day with all kids 12 and under getting in free. Sunday concludes "Mt. Pleasant Community Weekend." If you show your Mt. Pleasant area I.D, you can receive discounted general admission tickets. It's also Faith Day where fans that bring their church bulletins will receive four dollars off up to four general admission tickets. LHP Kyle Ryan (3-5, 3.41) gets the start for West Michigan against RHP Jonathan Joseph (1-1, 5.40) for Burlington.