



SEATTLE MARINERS NEWS CLIPS

July 5, 2011



Who doesn't like sunny days? M's third baseman Kennedy

LARRY LARUE; Staff writer

Published: 07/05/11 12:05 am

The Tacoma News Tribune

OAKLAND - When the pop fly went up, third baseman Adam Kennedy moved 10 feet into foul territory and froze like a statue – his glove up, waiting – until the ball plunked down behind him.

“I saw it at its height, maybe for an instant on the way down,” the Seattle Mariners infielder said. “When it went into the sun and didn’t come out, there’s really nothing you can do.”

As he stood there, did it occur to Kennedy the ball might hit him in the head?

“You know it’s a possibility,” he said.

An inning later, Oakland’s Jemile Weeks popped one up into foul territory near the stands, and Kennedy took off after it. Sort of.

“I saw it off the bat, then it was gone, and I ran toward where I thought it would come down,” he said.

It landed near his feet and bounced into the stands.

“The fans seemed to enjoy it,” Kennedy said.

He couldn’t recall ever completely losing an infield pop fly, and in two innings Monday lost two.

“I told (shortstop) Brendan Ryan to get to anything he could, because he had a better angle with the sun, and he caught a couple,” manager Eric Wedge said. “I’ve managed enough games here to know, at a certain time of day, in a certain time of the year, balls just disappear over there.”

WORK DAY

Wedge called center fielder Franklin Gutierrez into his office for a morning chat , trying to help him take a little stress out of his life.

“He’s a little bit in-between up there at the plate,” Wedge said. “I told him he wasn’t starting, that I just wanted him to have a good work day and go after it (tonight).”

Gutierrez appeared as a pinch hitter late in the game, struck out, and is batting .182 in 40 games.

“The physical part of his game is not an issue,” Wedge said.

ROSTER SHUFFLE

Jose Yopez is headed back to Tacoma as soon as Miguel Olivo can catch again, which might be tonight. If Yopez goes, who takes his place on the 25-man roster?

The name in the rumor mill is rookie Kyle Seager, who's just a few weeks into his call up from Double-A to Triple-A in Tacoma. Seager could play third base (not his natural position – second base is) – but he is comfortable playing third.

SHORT HOPS

Dustin Ackley had reached base safely in each of his first 13 big-league games, a streak that ended Monday. Alvin Davis owns the team record, having reached base in the first 47 games of his career. ... Blake Beavan's first-game victory Sunday made him the ninth starting pitcher in Mariners history to win in his first appearance. The first? Bob Stoddard in 1981.

ON TAP

Seattle plays in Oakland, a 7:05 p.m. game that will be televised on Root Sports. Probable starting pitchers: Seattle's Felix Hernandez (8-7, 3.35 ERA) vs. Trevor Cahill (8-6, 3.28).

blog.thenewstribune.com/mariners

2 runs enough for 1 victory

LARRY LARUE; Staff writer

Published: 07/05/11 12:05 am

The Tacoma News Tribune

OAKLAND – Chatting before the game, one of the Oakland Athletics broadcasters looked at the stats and made a prediction.

“The first team to score two runs wins each game,” he said, shaking his head.

Two American League West teams rich with pitching and offense-poor squared off on Independence Day, and the Seattle Mariners came from behind to beat Oakland, 2- 1.

“We don't have any guys who are going to hit 40 home runs, so we have to take chances,” shortstop Brendan Ryan said. “You have to have some logic behind it, but we have to take our shots.”

Trailing Oakland and starting pitcher Brandon McCarthy, 1-0, the Mariners and their fans could be forgiven for thinking back to Doug Fister's bizarre 1-0 loss Saturday against San Diego.

In that one, the winning run was scored by a player who shouldn't have been on base, having walked on a three-ball count.

This time?

Veteran Adam Kennedy lost the first of two pop flies in the sun – missed it – and gave Hideki Matsui another swing in the second inning. Matsui singled and came around to score the Athletics' only run of the day.

“I felt terrible, because it cost (starting pitcher Michael) Pineda a run,” Kennedy said. “I don't know that I've ever lost a pop fly in the sun before, not like that.”

So Pineda and his mates were down by a run.

And Josh Bard homered, his first of the season – and first in the majors since August – to tie the game in the sixth.

“Bard’s been doing a great job behind the plate, filling for Miguel (Olivo),” manager Eric Wedge said. “Not a whole lot was happening for us offensively, so that home run was like a breath of fresh air in the dugout.”

In the top of the seventh, Ryan singled and, with one out and Justin Smoak batting, tried to steal second base.

“I saw him break, but I got a great pitch to hit so I swung,” Smoak said.

And he lined a double into the right-field corner.

Not the Mariners’ swiftest runner, Ryan got to third base and was waved home by coach Jeff Datz. He scored the game-winning run about the time his gas tank hit “E.”

“Totally gassed,” bench coach Robby Thompson said. “He barely made it back to the dugout.”

“He’d have scored easier if he hadn’t tripped over second base,” Kennedy deadpanned, teasing Ryan. “Pick your knees up!”

On a hot afternoon, having thrown 92 pitches, Pineda came out after six innings in favor of a fresh bullpen – and Wedge used Aaron Laffey, David Pauley and Brandon League each for an inning.

Rookie Pineda won his eighth game of the season, League saved his 23rd and Seattle opened a seven-game trip through the American League West.

“A couple of times today, we made them make a play to get us, and one time they did,” Ryan said. “Smoak was on first (in the fifth inning) when Jack (Cust) hit one to the wall in left-center field. Smoak took off and was around second when it was caught, and they doubled him up.

“But if it had hit the wall, he’d have scored. Then Datz sent me home on Smoak’s double”

Much like Oakland – 38-48 and on their second manager of 2011 – Seattle relies on shut-’em-down starting pitching and finish-’em-off relief.

The Mariners managed six hits – two apiece for Smoak and Ichiro Suzuki. And two runs won it.

“You come into a game like this, you can’t let adrenaline pump you up too much,” League said. “You come into a 2-1 game, you feel it more in here”

League touched his chest.

“You know if you get three outs, you’re shaking hands on the field, the music gets played in the clubhouse, and you’re feeling awesome. I can’t really describe it,” he said.

League loves the tight, low-scoring games best.

Good thing.

Mariners' catcher position in flux since Dan Wilson retired

RYAN DIVISH; Staff writer

Published: 07/05/11 12:05 am | Updated: 07/05/11 6:06 am

The Tacoma News Tribune

No offense to Jose Yopez, who by all accounts is a consummate professional, a good guy and even better teammate.

But come on, no one thought he would be on the Seattle Mariners roster this season, including Yopez.

Some of you may be saying, "Who?"

Jose Ricardo Riera Yopez is a 30-year-old minor league backup catcher who in the past few days has assumed that role for the Mariners because backup Chris Gimenez is on the 60-day disabled list and starter Miguel Olivo is recovering from hamstring issues.

Before this season, Yopez played all of one game above Double-A in 10 seasons – catching in the Pacific Coast League title game for the Rainiers last season

when Rob Johnson went down with an injury.

Before that, Yopez toiled in the lower leagues, never appearing in more than 50 games a season since 2007.

There are guys like him in every organization. They are a necessity. But they aren't usually slated to be on a big-league roster unless something goes very, very wrong.

The woes started when Adam Moore was lost for the season after tearing his meniscus in April. Then a week ago, Olivo and Gimenez were injured in the same game, leaving Josh Bard and Yopez to fill their spots.

Yopez will probably never take the field at Safeco, but manager Eric Wedge may get him a token at-bat because it's possible he will never play in the majors again.

Mariners general manager Jack Zduriencik hopes the team's catcher deficit doesn't last.

"This wasn't ideal," he said. "You can't anticipate injuries."

Perhaps not, but the demands of the position often takes its toll.

"Look at Pittsburgh, they are down to their fifth catcher," Zduriencik said.

The forced call-up of Yopez shows how thin the organization's catching depth is right now.

"It's the most difficult position to find," said Zduriencik, who spent decades as a scout. "When you go out into the amateur world and try to come up with catchers, there are not a lot of them. When you look at your draft board each year, there will be seven columns of right-handed pitchers and there will be three-quarters of one column of catchers.

“When I was scouting, the bosses would say, ‘Find us catchers, find us catchers,’” Zduriencik said. “But there just aren’t many around.”

Probably because the role demands tremendous versatility.

“The requirements of that position are so many – you have to be smart, you got to have good hands, good feet, you have to be able to throw, you have to be able to run a pitching staff and build relationships,” Zduriencik said. “Hopefully they give you something at the plate.”

It’s rare to find a complete catcher. If they can catch, they usually don’t hit much. If they can really hit, they usually can’t catch.

And the Mariners?

Since Dan Wilson retired in 2005, they have never found a reliable starting catcher with the exception of Kenji Johjima’s brief career in Seattle. Otherwise it’s been a cavalcade of journeymen, has-beens and never-will-bes.

Remember Ben Davis? Most people are trying to forget.

The search to find catching has been extensive and less than fruitful.

It’s one of the reasons why former GM Bill Bavasi decided at the last minute to take Clement over All-Star shortstop Troy Tulowitzki in the 2005 draft.

Ouch.

It was just a few years ago when they seemed to have a surplus of catching hopefuls with Clement, Moore and Johnson all on the cusp of being big-league ready.

Only Moore, who has been hampered by injuries, remains in the organization. Two years ago, he was deemed untouchable by Zduriencik in offseason trade talks. But Moore will never realize his potential if he can’t remain healthy or get enough playing time.

The Seattle catching situation grew so dire Zduriencik signed Olivo to a two-year, \$7 million contract in the offseason.

While Olivo’s hitting and leadership have been better than anticipated, he still has a weakness when it comes to blocking balls in the dirt. And there is the possibility that his willingness to sacrifice his body playing nearly every day could lead to a second-half decrease in his statistics.

It happened last season in Colorado. He hit .325 with 11 homers and 42 RBI before the All-Star break and .193 with three homers and 16 RBI thereafter.

The Mariners still hope Moore will be the catcher of the future, but after him, the organization isn’t overflowing with prospects.

The best catcher on the horizon is 20-year-old Steve Baron. The supplemental first-round draft pick in 2009 is a fantastic athlete with great instincts behind the plate and a strong arm.

However, he was hitting .197 with four homers and 20 RBI and a .266 on-base percentage at Single-A Clinton. He recently was promoted to High Desert during an organization-wide shift in catching personnel following the Gimenez and Olivo injuries.

Baron is at least two, maybe three years away from being major-league ready. After Baron, well, the landscape is even more barren. Brandon Bantz, the starter at Double-A Jackson, is hitting .206 and is already 24 years old. Trevor Coleman, who was called up to the Rainiers in late June, has never hit above .216 in a full minor league season.

“You hope you take enough of them and get a few guys that will progress through your system,” Zdurienick said.

Zduriencik and amateur scouting director Tom McNamara drafted seven catchers in this year’s draft.

University of Virginia catcher John Hicks was picked in the fourth round. Hicks reportedly agreed to terms Sunday and once he signs, he likely become the top catching prospect once he does.

With Moore done for the season and Gimenez out for at least 60 days, the Mariners have just two viable big league catchers – Olivo and Bard.

After that, well there’s some catchers, but not many good ones.

No offense to Jose Yopez.

Ryan Divish: 253-597-8483
ryan.divish@thenewstribune.com

Too many walks come back to bite Rainiers

MIKE CURTO; Contributing writer

Published: 07/05/11 12:05 am

The Tacoma News Tribune

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – Pacific Coast League veterans know that mistakes in Colorado Springs hurt more than in most other ballparks.

The high elevation and expansive outfield combine to make Security Service Field one of the most offense-oriented ballparks in all of professional baseball, so every out is precious.

The Tacoma Rainiers learned the hard way Monday night, issuing seven walks in a 9-4 loss to the Sky Sox in front of an Independence Day sellout crowd of 8,865.

Four of the batters who walked would score, and it started right away.

“If you walk people in this park, it’s going to come back and haunt you,” fifth-year Tacoma manager Daren Brown said.

Tacoma (41-44) scored two runs in the top of the first inning, but the lead disappeared quickly.

Rainiers pitcher Jarret Grube – making his first Triple-A start of the year – walked Eric Young Jr. and Chris Nelson in the bottom of the first.

With two outs, Grube went to a full count on slugger Mike Jacobs. Jacobs fouled off a couple of pitches before lifting a three-run homer down the left field line, giving the Sky Sox a 3-2 lead.

Colorado Springs (37-47) broke the game open in the bottom of the eighth inning.

Trailing 6-4, new Rainiers reliever Josh Fields walked consecutive batters with one out in the eighth, and then served up a two-run triple to Nelson on an 0-2 pitch.

Tacoma's Matt Mangini was a bright spot, continuing his torrid hitting by going 3-for-4 with three runs batted in. Mangini has 12 hits in his past 15 at-bats.

ON TAP

Tacoma's Anthony Vasquez will make his Triple-A debut as the starting pitcher in the second game of the series, at 6:05 p.m. (PDT) today. Colorado Springs is set to start Billy Buckner (1-3, 5.19 ERA). The game will be broadcast on 850-AM and www.tacomarainiers.com.

Pineda returns to form to top A's

By Greg Johns / MLB.com | 7/4/2011 8:29 PM ET

OAKLAND -- Michael Pineda might not be an All-Star -- at least not yet anyway. But the big Mariners right-hander continued his impressive rookie season with six innings of two-hit ball on Monday as Seattle edged the A's, 2-1, in a Fourth of July game at Oakland Coliseum.

Pineda could still be named to the American League All-Star squad as a replacement after some pitchers throw this Sunday -- with teammate Felix Hernandez in that boat -- and are thus ineligible to participate in the All-Star Game two days later.

The 22-year-old certainly didn't damage his case against the A's, allowing just one run on a pair of singles and two walks while striking out seven. He's now 8-5 with a 2.58 ERA. Those are pretty good numbers for anybody, let alone a youngster in his first big league tour.

"He looked like a very mature pitcher out there today," said Mariners manager Eric Wedge. "He's looked like that all year long."

While the afternoon sun and bright blue skies in Oakland caused fielders some holiday headaches, Pineda was loving the mid-70s warmth as summer seemed to finally arrive.

"I was feeling pretty strong today," said the youngster. "I had this same weather in the Dominican. I like it."

The A's, who finished the day with just three hits, didn't quite have the same warm, fuzzy feelings after dealing with the hard-throwing, 6-foot-7, 260-pounder.

"He's all arms and legs, and he's closer to you and throwing 96," said Oakland manager Bob Melvin. "He throws the slider in off-counts and when he's throwing strikes, not only does he have plus stuff but he's difficult to think along with. You have to get the bat out there for the fastball and he's not afraid to throw the slider when he's behind in counts."

Mariners shortstop Brendan Ryan knows what teams are up against.

"He's a large human being and throws very hard," said Ryan. "And when he finds his slider, it's almost good night."

The Mariners didn't give Pineda a lot of help, but scored once in the sixth and again in the seventh to give him a 2-1 lead before Wedge summoned the bullpen with his prize youngster at 92 pitches.

Aaron Laffey, David Pauley and Brandon League then closed out the deal, with League notching his AL-leading 23rd save as he continued his own All-Star first half.

The win pulled the Mariners within a game of .500 at 42-43 as they kick off a seven-game road trip against division-rivals Oakland and Anaheim.

Pineda's only problem came in the second inning when he gave up a walk and two singles, the last one a run-scoring shot to left field by Kurt Suzuki. But even that came only after third baseman Adam Kennedy lost a foul pop in the sun off the bat of leadoff hitter Hideki Matsui, who followed with a base hit and eventually scored.

Kennedy had trouble in the sun for much of the day, losing another pop foul that fell at his feet and having Ryan rescue him with a long running catch on another foul ball later in the game.

"I can't wait for a night game," Kennedy said wryly after enduring televised highlights of his defensive adventures in the winning clubhouse.

Oakland right-hander Brandon McCarthy, making his first start in six weeks due to shoulder problems, breezed through five innings, allowing just one hit before the Mariners finally cracked his code.

Josh Bard, starting his fifth straight game in place of injured catcher Miguel Olivo, tied the game with a solo home run in the sixth. McCarthy then gave up the go-ahead run in the seventh when Ryan singled and scored from first on a double into the right-field corner by Justin Smoak.

Bard hit three long balls last year in 39 games for Seattle, and now has 38 career home runs over 10 seasons in the Majors with five different franchises. Wedge expects Olivo to return from a tight hamstring either Tuesday or Wednesday, but credits the veteran Bard for filling in well since being called up from Triple-A Tacoma.

"He's doing a great job here," Wedge said. "We've been running him out there every day and he's putting up good at-bats, being aggressive. That [home run] was big for us because McCarthy was throwing the ball real well and there wasn't a whole lot happening."

Smoak snapped a 1-for-30 slump with his run-scoring double, increasing his team-leading RBI total to 42. He finished 2-for-3, as he and Ichiro accounted for four of the Mariners' six hits on another quiet day for the offense.

"It was good -- especially with Brendan at first and taking off there -- being able to get that run across," Smoak said. "I got a pitch right down the middle and was able to put a pretty good swing on it."

It helped that Ryan was already off and running, trying to steal second to get something going against McCarthy.

"I was going on that pitch, trying to pick a breaking ball," said Ryan. "And of course I didn't, but it worked out in the end and that's all that matters. We have to take chances. We don't have guys that are going to hit 40-50 home runs. As long as they're smart, logical chances, you pick your spots."

Pineda and the 'pen again made two runs count. Pineda is now 3-0 with a 1.41 ERA in five starts during day games, while the bullpen ran its scoreless streak to 16 straight innings dating back to June 14.

One Mariners streak was snapped, however, as rookie Dustin Ackley went 0-for-4 and didn't reach base for the first time in 14 career big league games.

Greg Johns is a reporter for MLB.com. Follow him on Twitter @GregJohnsMLB as well as his Mariners Musings blog. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Felix, Cahill square off in duel of 8-game winners

By Avi Zaleon / MLB.com | 7/4/2011 8:42 PM ET

An 8-7 record is not what you would expect from an All-Star.

But that's just what Mariners right-hander Felix Hernandez is, coming off an uncharacteristic outing in which the 2010 Cy Young Award winner gave up five runs on 10 hits in 7 2/3 innings.

"I'm close, but I'm inconsistent right now," Hernandez said. "I throw one game good and the next one is OK. I need to be more consistent and just try to do what I did last year."

The two-time All-Star still maintains a 3.35 ERA heading into Tuesday's divisional matchup against Oakland, and manager Eric Wedge said he's not worried about his star starter's up-and-down beginning to the year.

"He's an impressive young man," Wedge said of Hernandez. "I recognized that over the course of the winter just doing some different functions with him. He's got a great personality, he's a good teammate, a hard worker. He doesn't let his ego get in the way and he's grounded. He handles the good and the bad like you like to see anybody handle it."

Hernandez's opponent, Trevor Cahill -- another eight-game winner -- looks to be more consistent after going 0-5 following a 6-0 start to the season. In his last outing, the right-hander lasted just 4 2/3 innings, giving up four earned runs on nine hits against the Marlins.

"Any time you come out of the game is tough," Cahill said. "I just try to go out there and at least throw a quality start every time, and so it's frustrating to not even make it through five. I think it's just one of those days I didn't have my best stuff and wasn't able to battle through it."

Cahill, who was not selected to the All-Star team, has one less loss than Hernandez, as well as a slightly better ERA, with the A's starter owning a 3.28 ERA compared to Hernandez's 3.35.

Mariners: Olivo sits out for fifth straight day

- Catcher Miguel Olivo (right hamstring muscle) was out of the lineup for the fifth straight day on Monday against the A's. To test his leg, Olivo did some drills with trainer Rick Griffin prior to Monday's afternoon game and ran the bases, but the starting nod still went to replacement Josh Bard. "It's not 100 percent, but it's closer," Olivo said on Monday. "I don't want to mess it up more though." His situation remains day-to-day.

- Rookie Blake Beavan joined rare company with his win on Sunday against the Padres. The right-hander became only the second starting pitcher in Mariners history to win his first Major League game while allowing one run or less. Beavan, who was called up from Triple-A Tacoma to fill in for the injured Erik Bedard, allowed the lone run on three hits in seven innings in a 3-1 victory. The last time that feat occurred from a Mariners pitcher was on May 18, 1991, when Pat Rice won his MLB debut after tossing 5 2/3 shutout innings against the Yankees.

A's: Balfour expected to return on Thursday

- Oakland right-hander Grant Balfour (strained right oblique) is scheduled to make a Minor League rehab appearance with Triple-A Sacramento on Tuesday. Barring any setbacks, he will be activated from the disabled list on Thursday, the first day that he will be eligible to do so.

- The A's top power hitter, Josh Willingham, could potentially return to the lineup before the All-Star break, manager Bob Melvin said on Monday. The outfielder, who has been out since June 18 with a nagging Achilles injury, is still facing an indefinite return date. If the A's take a more cautious route, Willingham could rest through the break despite a key series against Texas this weekend.

Worth Noting

- Seattle center fielder Franklin Gutierrez, who has gone 4-for-32 over the last ten games, was given the day off on Monday, but will be back in the lineup on Tuesday.

- Tuesday's pitching matchup will be a rematch of the Opening Day contest between these two clubs.

Olivo sits out for fifth straight day

By Greg Johns / MLB.com | 07/04/11 4:53 PM ET

SEATTLE -- Miguel Olivo was out of the lineup for a fifth straight day on Monday, as the Mariners catcher continues to recover from a right hamstring muscle that tightened up on him last Tuesday.

Olivo did some drills with trainer Rick Griffin prior to Monday afternoon's game against the A's and ran the bases a little bit to test the leg, but Josh Bard started again with still-unused rookie Jose Yopez available for backup if needed.

Olivo was something of an ironman for the Mariners in the first three months, but they're being cautious rather than risking a more significant problem.

"It's not 100 percent, but it's closer," Olivo said. "I don't want to mess it up more though."

"He's feeling better," manager Eric Wedge said. "Today was a good day. He wants to play. Mainly it's the running. That's where he's feeling it more than anything. He's caught a bullpen, he's been hitting and throwing. The main focus was the running."

The Mariners moved backup catcher Chris Gimenez to the 60-day disabled list on Sunday to create a 40-man roster spot for pitcher Blake Beavan. Wedge said that Gimenez suffered a Grade 3 strain of his oblique, a level of injury that will take several months to heal.

Olivo's situation remains in the day-to-day category, with his return imminent.

"We feel confident that he's going to be able to go in the next couple days," Wedge said. "We'll keep rolling with Bard as long as we need to. And we've got Yopez here as kind of a safety net for us."

Greg Johns is a reporter for MLB.com. Follow him on Twitter @GregJohnsMLB as well as his Mariners Musings blog. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Beavan joins rare company with win

By Greg Johns / MLB.com | 07/04/11 4:53 PM ET

OAKLAND -- Rookie right-hander Blake Beavan became only the second starting pitcher in Mariners history to win his first game in the Majors while allowing one run or less, with his seven-inning gem on Sunday against the Padres.

Beavan, called up from Triple-A Tacoma to fill in for the injured Erik Bedard, allowed just one run on three hits in the 3-1 victory

Pat Rice won his MLB debut with 5 2/3 shutout innings for the Mariners at Yankee Stadium on May 18, 1991.

That turned out to be Rice's only Major League victory, a fate that Beavan hopes to avoid. He'll get a chance to zoom past Rice's career win total in his next start on Friday at Anaheim, with Bedard expected back after the All-Star break.

The 6-foot-7 Texan was still basking in the glow of his opening win on Monday as the team arrived at Oakland Coliseum for the start of its three-game series with the A's.

"It's just good to get that first one out of the way," Beavan said. "It was fun. It still really hasn't hit me yet. You definitely know where you are though. It's a lot different. Everything is better up here. You can't ask for anything more, really."

Nor could Beavan have hoped for anything more from his initial outing. He became just the ninth Mariners pitcher to get the win as a starter in his Major League debut, and the first since Travis Blackley on July 1, 2004.

For the youngster acquired from Texas last year in the Cliff Lee deal, it was a dream come true.

"Ever since I was little, I've always wanted to pitch in the big leagues," he said. "I wanted to be at this level one day. No matter how long it took me, I was going to keep working for it. Luckily I got the opportunity to come up here and get a start, and it was a good time."

It took Beavan one inning to calm down and get into a groove.

"That first inning, my heart was coming out of my chest pretty good," he said. "Then I realized that it was just another game and another hitter in the box. You have to settle down and just throw your game and trust your stuff. Just try to throw strikes. That was like my only goal yesterday, just go out and compete and throw strikes."

Greg Johns is a reporter for MLB.com. Follow him on Twitter @GregJohnsMLB as well as his Mariners Musings blog. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Wedge gives slumping Gutierrez day off

By Greg Johns / MLB.com | 07/04/11 4:53 PM ET

OAKLAND -- Center fielder Franklin Gutierrez, hitting just .183 as he continues to try to fight out of a tough stretch, was given the day off on Monday with rookie Greg Halman taking his place.

Manager Eric Wedge said he had a sit-down with the veteran outfielder prior to Monday's game and told him to use the day to work on some things, with the plan to be back in the lineup on Tuesday.

Gutierrez, who missed the first six weeks of the season battling a stomach issue, went just 4-for-29 in the Mariners just-completed home stand, and was 0-for-3 with a pair of strikeouts on Sunday.

"He's a little in-between up there right now," Wedge said of his hitting approach. "He's trying to fight through it. Work is never an issue with these guys. The work is being done. But ultimately, I just felt like we needed a little chit-chat to see where he's at and what he's feeling. Not just mentally, but what he's feeling at home plate. We'll get him back in there tomorrow night."

Wedge believes that Gutierrez is back to full strength after his stomach problem.

"I don't think the physical part is an issue anymore," he said.

Gutierrez says he's just focused on getting himself squared away to help the team as best he can.

"I've been working hard this year," said the Gold Glove outfielder. "It's been a little crazy for me, but I'm still working every day. I know the numbers don't show what I've been working on, but the most important thing for me is how I feel physically and how I'm helping my team. That's what I'm concentrating on. Every day, every at-bat. And if I don't do it offensively, I try to help defensively."

Greg Johns is a reporter for MLB.com. Follow him on Twitter @GregJohnsMLB as well as his Mariners Musings blog. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

Originally published July 4, 2011 at 3:43 PM | Page modified July 4, 2011 at 10:55 PM

Mariners' Justin Smoak breaks slump with game-winning double at Oakland

By Geoff Baker

Seattle Times staff reporter

OAKLAND, Calif. — Justin Smoak could not have picked a better time to break out of his worst slump of the season.

His seventh-inning double to the right-field corner Monday afternoon put Seattle ahead for good in a 2-1 win over the Oakland Athletics and helped Smoak's offensively-challenged team end quite a slump of its own. This comeback victory to support more stellar pitching by Michael Pineda gave the Mariners consecutive wins for the first time in nearly three weeks.

And that kept the Mariners within striking distance of first place as they began a crucial seven-game trip that could very well determine their 2011 season.

"I haven't felt terribly bad, I just haven't been on the fastball," said Smoak, in a 1-for-32 slump before a pair of late hits on Monday.

And a fastball is exactly what A's starter Brandon McCarthy opted to throw Smoak at the same time Brendan Ryan took off from first base looking to make something happen. That fastball happened to be right down the middle — one of the few mistakes McCarthy made — and Smoak didn't miss.

"It was good," Smoak said. "Especially with Brendan on first and him taking off right there and me hitting that ball down the line. I was able to get that run across."

A run that was all the Mariners needed against a team almost as bad at scoring as they are. Seattle entered this Fourth of July contest, played in front of 15,566 fans at the Coliseum, with the lowest-scoring offense in baseball and Oakland came in third worst.

And things looked bleak indeed as the first nine Mariners hitters failed to reach base. Seattle was held scoreless by McCarthy until Josh Bard turned the tide with two out in the sixth, hitting his first home run since August in Cleveland to tie things up.

"That was big for us because McCarthy was really throwing the ball well," Mariners manager Eric Wedge said. "There wasn't a whole lot happening, so for him to hit the ball out of the ballpark and tie the ballgame up, it gave us a breath of fresh air and we were able, obviously, to build from there."

Pineda had already made quick work of Oakland, allowing just two singles through six innings of one-run ball that might have been shutout ball had Adam Kennedy not lost a foul pop-up in the sun at third base. That missed chance for an out in the second inning kept Hideki Matsui alive long enough to hit a leadoff single and score from second on a two-out hit to left by Kurt Suzuki.

Mariners left fielder Carlos Peguero had a shot at throwing out Matsui but made a poor, offline toss that enabled the cement-legged Matsui to barely make it home safely. It looked like that run might hold up the way McCarthy kept tying the Mariners in knots. The Oakland right-hander was making his first start since May 19 after a stint on the disabled list.

Seattle's best chance to score before Bard's tying homer came after Smoak walked in the fifth, then took off when Jack Cust drilled one to the deepest part of the park in left-center. But Conor Jackson made a tremendous catch at the warning track and doubled Smoak off first base to end the inning.

"Cust crushed that ball," Smoak said. "I was sure it was going to be off the wall or gone. It's one of those things where, if it's off the wall, I've got a chance to score."

Ryan couldn't blame Smoak for thinking in such aggressive fashion. It's exactly how Ryan was thinking in the seventh when he was on first after a leadoff single with Smoak at the plate.

"We have to take chances," Ryan said. "We don't have guys who are going to hit 40 or 50 home runs, so, as long as they're logical, smart chances ... you can't hang your head too much."

And that's why Ryan took off looking to steal second on what he thought would be an off-speed pitch from McCarthy. Instead, Smoak got a fastball down the middle and the Mariners had the lead.

Aaron Laffey pitched a perfect seventh, David Pauley allowed a single in a scoreless eighth and Brandon League survived a one-out walk in the ninth. That capped the first back-to-back wins by the Mariners since June 15-17 after a month of struggles to generate offense.

The Mariners play three here, then four in Anaheim against the Angels before the All-Star break. Getting Smoak and Franklin Gutierrez hitting again is paramount for the team's survival, regardless of whether the front office intends to add a bat or two via trade.

"Brendan got a good jump on that steal and then Smoak was able to hit it down to the corner," Wedge said. "That was big for us. I still feel like he's heading in the right direction, like we talked about before the game. And we saw some more of that."

Geoff Baker: 206-464-8286 or gbaker@seattletimes.com.

Originally published July 4, 2011 at 10:01 PM | Page modified July 4, 2011 at 11:34 PM

Ichiro, the mortal, will try to answer critics in season's second half

By Jerry Brewer

Seattle Times staff columnist

Ichiro, the mortal, is an oddly fascinating character.

He's intriguing in the same way that Superman was when he decided to only be Clark Kent for a while. It seems that we purposely make the narrative of a star athlete's career mimic a superhero's: superhuman ascent, underappreciated excellence, crisis of identity, dramatic rebirth. Ichiro fits neatly into that script now, and even though this movie has been made many times, the suspense never ceases.

Because the expectation is that it will end in triumph.

But what if it doesn't?

No, no. It has to end the other way. The expected way. The right way. Ichiro, the mortal, just exists to make us appreciate the superstar when he returns. His struggles are all for plot. They have to be. Right? And everything will start changing for the better now that Ichiro has been left off the All-Star team for the first time in 11 seasons.

Right?

The alternative is too frightening to ponder.

For certain, Ichiro, the mortal, isn't as fun to watch as his other personas: the mysterious star, the dynamo of habit and the solitary baseball savant. During his time with the Mariners, we've seen those sides of him, and it didn't matter that we couldn't understand his eccentricities because his excellence overwhelmed the desire to figure him out.

As long as he collected 200 hits, posted a .330 batting average and won a Gold Glove, it was foolish to be dissatisfied with greatness. Just the same, it was impossible to appreciate him fully because he seldom reveals a human side to embrace. As a character, Ichiro had been a flat, unchanging protagonist starring for a team that made the playoffs only in his rookie season, and we've been left to interpret him, which of course leads to misinterpretations, unrealistic expectations and all-around buffoonery.

But Ichiro, the mortal, is different. He's, well, normal. There's no mystique about average performance. He's a 37-year-old man with salt invading the pepper in his hair. It's hard to observe his declining skills at times, but when critics breathlessly declare that he's done, it's fun to watch him defy the notion.

He did it in June, responding to a May slump that made everyone realize he's nearing the end of his career. But it's early July now, and Ichiro still isn't quite right (or even close enough to disguise it). In addition, he wasn't popular enough to be voted an All-Star Game starter. And his reputation couldn't convince Texas manager Ron Washington to ignore his .274 average and emerging defensive problems and put him on the team as a reserve.

It wasn't a snub, either. Clearly, it was the right decision. Ichiro hasn't been good enough the first half of this season.

Ichiro, the non-All-Star? Unfathomable. Consistency defines him. Same routine, same results. We know five absolutes about Ichiro. He's meticulous in taking care of his body. He hits .300. He collects 200 hits. He wins a Gold Glove. And he makes the All-Star team.

One absolute is gone. The Gold Glove probably will be, too. And he'll have to sprint to reach .300 and 200 in the second half.

Well, at least he's still in great physical condition. If not, he probably would be done.

I expect Ichiro to have a tremendous second half. I expect him to get his .300 average and 200 hits. Those numbers matter to him. If he accomplishes them, it will mean he played some of the finest baseball of his career. He still has that in him. Right?

Remember the tear he went on after manager Eric Wedge gave him a day off earlier this season? Ichiro will get the entire All-Star break off this time. He'll be refreshed. And he'll be intent on answering those "What's wrong with Ichiro?" questions.

Right now, Ichiro is neither superstar nor Ken Griffey Jr. in his final season. He's merely descended from great to some level of good. Like all aging players, how good depends on the day. And like all aging players, Ichiro must evolve if he wishes to remain effective.

The best thing about old stars is that, when their athletic ability diminishes, we get to watch them use their brains. Ichiro, the mortal, should be no different. He must replace his decreasing speed with savvy. There's a level of solid performance that he should find between now and when the credits roll on his career. Surely, he'll get to that place. Right?

That's the way the script reads, at least.

Jerry Brewer: 206-464-2277 or jbrewer@seattletimes.com,

Twitter: @Jerry_Brewer

Originally published July 4, 2011 at 6:06 PM | Page modified July 4, 2011 at 11:30 PM

Michael Pineda impresses catcher Josh Bard and opposing Athletics | Mariners notebook

By Geoff Baker

Seattle Times staff reporter

OAKLAND, Calif. — Michael Pineda hasn't faced much adversity in his fledgling big-league career.

But there was that start before Monday's in which the Atlanta Braves tagged him for five runs — four earned — in a 7-5 loss. And he had won just one game in seven outings since May 17, even though that was due largely to a lack of run support.

Throw in a Hideki Matsui pop-up lost in the sun by Adam Kennedy in Monday's second inning, which led to the game's first run, and Pineda was indeed looking for a bounce-back of sorts. And that's exactly what he provided, holding the A's to just two singles over six innings and securing the win when his team rallied.

"He did a really good job of composing himself," Mariners catcher John Bard, called up from Class AAA last week, said of Pineda after the rookie had thrown 44 pitches the first two innings. "It's been fun to watch these guys from spring training, to come here now and see how they've matured."

Pineda faced the minimum 13 hitters the rest of the way after Kurt Suzuki's two-out single in the second gave Oakland its lone run. The only blemish was a walk in the sixth that Pineda erased on a double-play grounder.

"I felt better," Pineda said. "I felt very strong."

Pineda said he loved the warmer weather, which reminded him of his native Dominican Republic. He said he shrugged off the missed Matsui pop-up, which allowed the Japanese slugger to stay alive and collect a single.

A's catcher Suzuki said Pineda wasn't throwing like a rookie.

"He's got a great arm," Suzuki said. "That fastball just jumps on you. He doesn't make it easy. He had his pitches working, kept the ball down in the zone. He's good. He's young but he's good."

A's manager Bob Melvin also threw some kudos Pineda's way.

"When he's throwing strikes, not only does he have plus stuff, he's difficult to think along with as well," Melvin said. "Because you have to get the bat head out for the fastball and he's not afraid to throw the slider in behind counts."

Kennedy vs. sun

That missed Matsui pop-up wasn't the only trouble third baseman Kennedy had getting to anything hit in the air.

He lost a second pop-up in the third inning and had the ball drop in foul territory about 2 feet in front of him. Mariners manager Eric Wedge said Kennedy had no idea where the ball was and was just trying to get close in hopes he could find it.

"He went to the spot and it about plunked him in the head," Wedge said. "Pretty good job of going to a spot, not knowing where it is and getting that close to it."

Wedge said it was an "impossible sun" to judge anything correctly from third base. He told shortstop Brendan Ryan — who had a better angle facing the sun — to go for anything he could get to on that side of the infield.

The strategy paid off later on in the third inning when Ryan raced over to snag a pop-up in foul territory that Kennedy again couldn't find.

"There was really nothing he could do," Ryan said of Kennedy. "If it was in that sun, it was over. There was a handful of them, it seemed. But after that second one, it was like, 'Hey, if I can get to it, I'm just going to take it.'"

Notes

- Mariners catcher Miguel Olivo missed his sixth straight game after a hamstring injury last week. But Wedge said Olivo has been running better, passed a big pregame test Monday and should be in Tuesday night's lineup. Bard will continue to play in Olivo's spot if he needs more rest.
- Wedge had a sit-down pregame with struggling center fielder Franklin Gutierrez to discuss where he's at. Gutierrez is hitting just .183 and sat out Monday's game in favor of Greg Halman. Wedge said he wanted Gutierrez to put in a good day of work Monday without playing, then would re-evaluate on Tuesday. Though Gutierrez missed all of April and much of May with a stomach ailment, Wedge doesn't feel his struggles are related to the weakened state it initially left him in. "I don't think the physical part's an issue anymore," Wedge said.
- Brandon League has converted his last 14 save opportunities and has not allowed an earned run his last 20 appearances.

Geoff Baker: 206-464-8286 or gbaker@seattletimes.com.

Read his daily blog at www.seattletimes.com/Mariners

For the record: W-L 42-43; W PCT .494; Streak: W2 Home: 23-22 Road: 19-21 vs. AL West: 10-9 vs. L.A.: 3-2 vs. Oakland: 5-3 vs. Texas: 2-4 vs. AL East: 11-8 v. AL Cent: 12-17 vs. NL: 9-9 vs. LHP: 8-14 vs. RHP: 34-29 Day: 11-14 Night: 31-29 One-run: 16-15 Extra inngs.: 4-3

Athletics lose 2-1 in McCarthy's return from DL

JOSH DUBOW, AP Sports Writer

Published 05:01 p.m., Monday, July 4, 2011

The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Brandon McCarthy had everything going in his first start back other than endurance.

McCarthy faced the minimum batters through 5 2-3 innings in his return from the disabled list before allowing single runs in the sixth and seventh that proved to be enough to give the Seattle Mariners a 2-1 victory Monday.

"I got tired pretty early, not having really gotten that high in pitch counts," McCarthy said. "It was a little different. The intensity was ramped up, but I was able to get through it and I just kept battling. After the fifth I started to get a little physically tired."

McCarthy, who had been out since May 19 with a right shoulder injury, struck out two batters in a 10-pitch first inning, whiffed four of the first six hitters overall and retired the first nine batters on 34 pitches. But he wore down a bit after that.

He needed a leaping grab by in front of the left-field fence to start a double play to escape the fifth inning and then allowed a solo homer to Josh Bard in the sixth and an RBI double to Justin Smoak in the seventh to lose his career-worst fifth straight decision.

"I thought he was terrific at the start," manager Bob Melvin said. "He gives up a home run to Bard, when in that position you don't want to walk anybody so you have to throw strikes. Then toward the end maybe just a little bit. It was more the ups and downs than the pitches for me. All in all he pitched great, good enough to win. They just got one more hit than we did and when it counted."

McCarthy (1-5) gave up two runs and four hits in 6 2-3 innings and is 0-5 in his last eight starts despite having six quality starts in that span.

"It was good to get back out there," McCarthy said. "I'm disappointed with the way I finished and the way it kind of rolled out but it was good to get back at it."

The latest loss came because the A's managed just three hits off Michael Pineda (8-5) and three relievers.

Pineda gave up one run that was aided by a popup lost in the sun, allowed just two hits and struck out seven in six innings. He allowed just one baserunner in his final four innings, retiring 12 of the final 13 batters he faced, to win for just the second time in his last eight starts.

"He's really maturing," Bard said. "He's becoming that big horse, inning-eater guy that we need him to be. We talked to him hard today making sure he came out ready to pitch in the first inning. Sometimes he gets caught pacing himself a little bit. He did a great job doing that."

Aaron Laffey, David Pauley and Brandon League each pitched one scoreless inning of relief with League getting his 23rd save in 26 chances.

Bard's two-out solo homer to right-center tied the game at 1 in the sixth inning. It was only the second homer McCarthy has allowed all season with Seattle's Adam Kennedy getting the other in April.

Ryan then opened the seventh with a single and scored on Smoak's double into the right-field corner that proved to be enough for the Mariners to win the series opener.

"Luckily Smoaky was able to get the head out and drive me in there for that second run," Ryan said. "Still you can't just assume we're going to not give up more than three hits every game. We still need to put runs up on the board."

The A's did even less offensively, sending up three batters in five of his six innings. Oakland got some help from the sun to score its only run in two games this season against Pineda.

Kennedy lost Hideki Matsui's foul pop near third base in the sun to open the second inning, giving Matsui a reprieve. He followed with a sharp single to right field on the next pitch and later scored on Kurt Suzuki's two-out single to left.

The A's didn't get another hit off until after Pineda left the game on Suzuki's one-out single in the eighth inning off Pauley.

"He's got a great arm," Suzuki said of Pineda. "That fastball just jumps on you. He doesn't make it easy. He had his pitches working, kept the ball down in the zone. He's good. He's young but he's good."

NOTES: Mariners starters have allowed three runs in their past 31 innings. ... A's reliever Grant Balfour will throw a one-inning rehab assignment for Triple-A Sacramento on Tuesday and is expected back from the DL this weekend in Texas. ... Oakland is a major league worst 12-19 in one-run games.

Pineda, Bard lead Mariners over Athletics 2-1

JOSH DUBOW, AP Sports Writer

Updated 04:42 p.m., Monday, July 4, 2011

The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Josh Bard got his first chance to catch Michael Pineda since spring training and saw what the rest of baseball has been seeing from Seattle's overpowering rookie the first half of the year.

Pineda and three relievers combined on a three-hitter and Bard hit his first home run of the season to lead the Mariners to a 2-1 victory over the Athletics on Monday.

"He's really maturing," said Bard, who came up from the minors last week. "He's becoming that big horse, inning-eater guy that we need him to be. We talked to him hard today, making sure he came out ready to pitch in the first inning. Sometimes he gets caught pacing himself a little bit. He did a great job doing that."

Justin Smoak added a tiebreaking RBI double in the seventh inning for the Mariners, who got their first back-to-back wins since June 2-3 against Tampa Bay.

The strong start by Pineda (8-5) helped spoil the return of Brandon McCarthy (1-5) from the disabled list for Oakland. McCarthy faced the minimum batters through 5 2-3 innings but ended up losing his fifth straight

decision. He gave up two runs and four hits in 6 2-3 innings and is 0-5 in his last eight starts despite having six quality starts in that span.

This matchup between the two lowest scoring teams in the American League figured to be dominated by the pitching.

Pineda gave up one run that was aided by a popup lost in the sun, allowed just two hits and struck out seven in six innings. He allowed just one baserunner in his final four innings, retiring 12 of the final 13 batters he faced, to win for just the second time in his last eight starts.

"He looked like a very mature pitcher out there today," manager Eric Wedge said. "He's looked like that all year long. As the year has progressed, you've seen him do some things you love a pitcher to do."

Aaron Laffey, David Pauley and Brandon League each pitched one scoreless inning of relief with League getting his 23rd save in 26 chances.

McCarthy, who had been out since May 19 with a right shoulder injury, was sharp from the start. He struck out two batters in a 10-pitch first inning, whiffed four of the first six hitters overall and retired the first nine batters on 34 pitches. But he wore down a bit after that.

Conor Jackson made a leaping grab in front of the left-field fence in the fifth inning to start a double play and Seattle struck for single runs in the sixth and seventh.

"I got tired pretty early, not having really gotten that high in pitch counts," McCarthy said. "It was a little different. The intensity was ramped up, but I was able to get through it and I just kept battling. After the fifth I started to get a little physically tired."

Bard's two-out solo homer to right-center tied the game at 1 in the sixth inning. It was only the second homer McCarthy has allowed all season with Seattle's Adam Kennedy getting the other in April.

Brendan Ryan then opened the seventh with a single and scored on Smoak's double into the right-field corner that proved to be enough for the Mariners to win the series opener.

"Luckily Smoaky was able to get the head out and drive me in there for that second run," Ryan said. "Still you can't just assume we're going to not give up more than three hits every game. We still need to put runs up on the board."

The A's did even less offensively, sending up three batters in five of Pineda's six innings. Oakland got some help from the sun to score its only run in two games this season against the rookie.

Kennedy lost Hideki Matsui's foul pop near third base in the sun to open the second inning, giving Matsui a reprieve. He followed with a sharp single to right field on the next pitch and later scored on Kurt Suzuki's two-out single to left.

The A's didn't get another hit off until after Pineda left the game on Suzuki's one-out single in the eighth inning off Pauley.

"He's got a great arm," Suzuki said of Pineda. "That fastball just jumps on you. He doesn't make it easy. He had his pitches working, kept the ball down in the zone. He's good. He's young but he's good."

NOTES: Seattle has 20 come-from-behind wins, one behind Toronto for most in the AL. ... Mariners starters have allowed three runs in their past 31 innings. ... Seattle C Miguel Olivo sat out a fifth straight game with a hamstring injury but is expected back in the lineup during this series. ... A's reliever Grant Balfour will throw a one-inning rehab assignment for Triple-A Sacramento on Tuesday and is expected back from the DL this weekend in Texas. ... Oakland is a major league worst 12-19 in one-run games.

Published: Tuesday, July 5, 2011

FROGS NOTES: A thin line

Kevin Brown

The Everett Herald

What's the difference between the Everett AquaSox team that lost eight straight games from June 23-30 and the one that won three straight heading into Monday night's contest?

Not much, Everett manager Scott Steinmann said.

The Sox snapped their losing streak with a 4-1 victory at Salem-Keizer on Friday night, then beat the Volcanoes 8-4 on Saturday and 8-7 Sunday to record their first series win of the season.

"That little eight-game skid that we had, we were just one swing, one pitch away from some things," Steinmann said. "We were in a lot of ballgames, very close ballgames. These last three games we've taken advantage of those things."

Despite their struggles the last week of June, the Sox stayed positive, Steinmann said.

"It was eight games, but it wasn't like a miserable eight games, like we were just dejected because we were getting beat everyday," Steinmann said. "We were in ballgames."

Now that some of those key pitches and swings are producing positive results, Steinmann has seen an upswing in his team's confidence.

"We need to just keep building on this confidence," he said.

Don't I know you?

The Salem-Keizer Volcanoes are managed by former major-league skipper Tom Trebelhorn. In seven big-league seasons -- six with the Milwaukee Brewers and one with the Chicago Cubs -- Trebelhorn compiled a 422-397 record.

Living on base

Everett third baseman Danny Lopez had reached base in 13 straight games going into Monday night's contest. He led Everett in total bases (27) and was tied for the team lead in hits (18) and home runs (two), but was not in the starting lineup Monday night.

Dugout chatter

In honor of Independence Day the Sox wore red and white caps for Monday's game. ... The holiday crowd was treated to postgame fireworks.

Kevin Brown, Herald Writer

Updated: July 4, 2011, 11:56 AM ET

MLB's 2011 No-Star Team

This group of players have hurt their respective teams immensely over the first half

By Jonah Keri

FanGraphs

ESPN.com

If you're a .190 hitter or own a 6.00 ERA, you've got a good shot at making the team. But special circumstances help. A player who's having a bad year and getting tons of playing time has a shot at the team. A player who's having a bad year, getting tons of playing time and getting paid superstar dollars is a virtual lock.

Without further ado, here's this year's No-Stars Team:

C Joe Mauer (.244/.298/.291, minus-0.2 WAR, \$23 million)

A consensus top-10 MLB player, and possibly the best player on the planet just two years ago, Mauer has seen persistent leg injuries curtail his power and threaten his longterm outlook. He has just one homer since Aug. 19 of last year and isn't roping line drives like he once did either. Still just 28, Mauer has plenty of time to get healthy and return to elite status. But calls for him to switch positions to avoid further injuries aren't reassuring, especially when Mauer has seven and a half years left on a \$184 million contract.

1B Aubrey Huff (.244/.299/.379, minus-0.7 WAR, \$10 million)

Never overpay for last year's stats. It's a truism that's held true for as long as baseball has been played, yet general managers continue to make this mistake. The Giants acquired Huff on a cheap one-year, \$3 million deal, following a season in which he was nearly two full wins worse than a replacement-level player. He then enjoyed a monster season, putting up an .891 OPS and serving as a key player on the Giants' championship team. The lesson should have been that buying low can pay big dividends. Giants GM Brian Sabean apparently thought it meant that giving a wildly erratic, 34-year-old defensive butcher a two-year, \$22 million deal, even with a top first-base prospect waiting in the wings. Flags fly forever, but postchampionship glow can lead to bad decisions too.

2B Dan Uggla (.175/.241/.330, minus-0.7 WAR, \$9 million)

The Braves have gotten all-world pitching performances from Jair Jurrjens, Craig Kimbrel and Jonny Venters, lead the NL wild card race and have ample minor league depth to bolster the roster as the season wears on. But one can't but wonder what this team would look like if Dan Uggla were hitting like the elite offensive second baseman he'd been during the first five years of his career. He's not terribly far off his 31-homer average from those first five seasons, but his on-base percentage has cratered. His .189 batting average on balls in play will almost surely see some positive regression. But whether it's due to pressing or genuine skills erosion, Uggla's walk rate (11.6 percent in 2010, 7.8 percent this year), isolated slugging (.218 career, .162 this year) and line drive rate (17.8 percent in 2010, 14.1 percent this year) are all way down. Like Mauer, Uggla is just starting a longterm deal (five years, \$62 million), so the Braves have to hope signing a 31-year-old second baseman with old player's skills won't end up looking as bad as it does now.

3B Chone Figgins (.185/.230/.246, minus-1.3 WAR, \$9 million)

Fun fact, via my FanGraphs and ESPN Insider colleague Dave Cameron: Mariners third basemen have combined for a .464 OPS; Detroit is second-to-last, but nearly 100 points better. Seattle can thank Chone

Figgins for that atrocity. A player who looked like a perfect fit for spacious Safeco Field -- lots of walks, gap power, great speed -- Figgins might now be the worst everyday hitter in baseball. His defense has tailed off sharply from peak levels, and his baserunning skill has also started to wane. Figgins might be the former star who's least likely to bounce back in the entire No-Stars lineup. Two and a half more years to go on his four-year, \$36 million contract, and that assumes his \$9 million option doesn't vest in 2014. Oy.

SS Hanley Ramirez (.227/.318/.351, 0.7 WAR, \$11 million)

Derek Jeter has been nearly as bad and makes more money, and several other starting shortstops fall below replacement level. But Ramirez has been the biggest disappointment by far, given his performance levels heading into this season. Though his numbers dipped a bit in 2010, Ramirez still hit .300/.378/.475, huge numbers at a time when shortstop talent was so thin. Back problems have sapped his effectiveness this year, and that's a red flag given that he's had back issues before. As with Mauer, Ramirez could benefit from playing a less strenuous position; the key would be whether he can reignite his offense if he were eventually moved to a corner or to the outfield. A hot start has turned into another lost season for the Marlins, so they'll have plenty of time to monitor Ramirez and figure out how to handle him in the final three years of his contract.

LF Raul Ibanez (.234/.283/.392, minus-1.3 WAR, \$11.5 million)

The scary thing about Ibanez's performance (he's last among major league left fielders in WAR) is that these numbers look infinitely better than the ones he posted in April (.465 OPS). But after a monster May in which he swatted 16 extra-base hits, Ibanez hit .211/.258/.311 in June and looks like a player who should be cut -- or at least benched, given the Phillies' World Series aspirations. Despite the Tony Batista-like OBP, Ibanez's biggest problem, as ever, is in his defense. He's one of the worst everyday defenders in the majors, so much so that he needs to put up major offensive numbers to become a valuable player. The Phillies are rumored to be shopping for a right-handed bat to bolster their lineup down the stretch. They should be shopping for someone to replace Ibanez, period.

(Vernon Wells warrants an honorable mention here as well, with a minus-0.3 WAR and the Angels on the hook for \$18 million of his preposterous \$23 million salary this season.)

CF Alex Rios (.218/.269/.319, minus-0.3 WAR, \$12 million)

When the White Sox grabbed Rios off waivers from Toronto in August 2009, they did so knowing full well they'd be on the hook for the bulk of his seven-year, \$70 million contract. But in Rios, the Pale Hose saw a legitimate five-tool player, someone who at various points in his career had posted monster numbers in various categories: 74 extra-base hits in 2007, 32 steals in 2008 and strong defensive performances throughout. It was only a matter of time, they figured, before Rios put it all together.

That hasn't been the case this year. As with several other players on this list, Rios has been the victim of some bad luck, sporting a paltry .227 batting average on balls in play. But he's also the same guy who never walks, meaning he needs to hit for a high average and show power to yield positive offensive value. He's the third-best baserunner in the majors according to FanGraphs' advanced measures, but that speed hasn't shown up in his stolen base or defensive results, both of which are way down for him this year.

RF Magglio Ordonez (.212/.279/.285, minus-0.7 WAR, \$10 million)

Never the most durable player, Ordonez played just 84 games last season. He hit well while on the field (.303/.378/.474), but heading into the season at 37 years old and having just missed half a year, a one-year deal at a low price was the only option that made sense. The Tigers got the one-year deal, but the \$10 million contract was a lot for a Detroit team that has carried nine-figure payrolls for the past four years, but has nowhere near the revenue streams that the Yankees, Red Sox and other penthouse-dwelling teams do. With Brennan Boesch, Andy Dirks and other intriguing outfield options around, the deal made even less sense -- and that was before Ordonez stopped hitting entirely.

DH Adam Dunn (.165/.301/.302, minus-1.2 WAR, \$12 million)

Has Dunn fallen off a cliff the way potent sluggers like Dale Murphy and Tim Salmon once did, going from consistent terror to Nick Punto levels in the span of a single year? It's tough to know what to think. Dunn's BABIP is down to .256, the second-lowest figure of his career, but not outrageously low given the falling numbers throughout baseball. The two bigger shockers are his startling drop in power (isolated slugging of .141, vs. .265 for his career) and his abominable numbers vs. lefties (1-for-53!). U.S. Cellular Field traditionally plays as a power hitter's park, and warmer summer weather could help. But for now, White Sox GM Kenny Williams' recent gambles -- including the pickups of Dunn and Rios, and trading away budding ace Daniel Hudson -- look spectacularly bad.

SP Barry Zito (3.81 ERA, 4.56 FIP, 0.1 WAR, \$18.5 million)

We don't mean to pick on Zito, one of the sharpest, most compelling characters in the game. It's not his fault that Brian Sabean looked past his so-so peripherals, fixated on gaudy win totals and a Cy Young award and threw \$126 million at him. But that contract all but guarantees the veteran lefty a regular spot on this list, short of a monster rebound season. Zito was actually a very serviceable back-end starter the past two years, producing two-plus wins above replacement in 2009 and again in 2010. This year, injuries have nullified his chances to meet that fairly modest goal. The good news for the Giants is that Zito's injury opened the door for Ryan Vogelsong to stage one of the most amazing and unlikely comebacks in recent memory. Zito recently returned from the DL, and will get a chance with Jonathan Sanchez on the shelf. If he fails in this go-round, the Giants will face an uncomfortable decision.

RP Joe Nathan (6.52 ERA, 5.22 FIP, minus-0.3 WAR, \$11.3 million)

The Twins were cautiously optimistic that their once-elite closer could start to regain his old form after missing all of 2010 following Tommy John surgery. Yielding nine walks and four homers in 19.1 innings is bad enough, but the bigger concern is the overall drop in command, and also velocity. Nathan's has generated a swinging strike percentage of just 6.8 percent (vs. 13.4 percent for his career) and his fastball velocity's down to 91.6 mph from 93.9 career. Getting sub-replacement level performance from their star catcher and star closer isn't what the Twins had in mind when they guaranteed the pair more than \$34 million this season.

Jonah Keri's new book, "The Extra 2 percent: How Wall Street Strategies Took a Major League Baseball Team from Worst to First," is a national bestseller. Check out the Jonah Keri Podcast at JonahKeri.com and on iTunes, and follow him on Twitter @JonahKeri.

Monday, July 4, 2011 @ 2:04pm

Catchers , more on Beavan and travel notes

Shannon Drayer

MyNorthwest.com

Greetings from a sunny, too sunny for Adam Kennedy, Oakland Alameda County Coliseum. Scratch that. This is now the Overstock.com Coliseum or as the billboard states on the scoreboard O.co Coliseum. Ok.

Beautiful morning. While this place lacks any charm whatsoever it is one of my favorite places to watch pre game for day games. It is usually sunny, they play great music and the stand are empty so it is quiet. It almost has a back field at spring training feel to it. The Mariners did take batting practice today, probably not a bad idea considering how quiet their bats have been.

Before batting practice Miguel Olivo ran a series of running drills under the watch of trainer Rick Griffin and coach Jeff Datz. Miguel was so happy after the drill he gave both big hugs. He's a hugger, no doubt about it.

Why was he so happy?

"Because I can run," he said. "That's big."

Olivo participated in batting practice and caught a bullpen and looks to be very close to a return. Eric Wedge said it could be as soon as tomorrow. So Josh Bard is out there today for a fifth straight game. Hopefully Wedge and crew like what they see from Bard because it is hard to imagine Olivo keeping up the same pace in the second half that he did in the first. Think there is a reason Olivo has always been a first half player? Right now he is on pace to catch 135 games. His history has been to catch the majority of his innings in the first half. Post All Star break his numbers take a huge dive. It would be nice to see him get more days off and Bard looks more than capable of carrying some of the load right now. The pitchers certainly have a good comfort level with him as well.

Moving on...Blake Beavan was my pre game guest and he was still basking in the thrill of his first big league win. Beavan has a very interesting story that I wrote about this spring. The brash teen has been replaced by a mellow twenty-two year old with his eyes wide open.

"I'm going to take it day in while I am up here and soak everything up and pick all these guys brains," he said before today's game. "Fister, Jamey Wright, League, Felix, they all have been around for awhile. Some of the stuff that when they were coming up what they tried to get better at."

It was good to see Beavan's velocity on the fastball at 93 at times yesterday. He was a power pitcher before being drafted by the Rangers. When the Rangers got their hands on him Rick Adair, the organizational pitching coordinator, did not like his mechanics and changed them. The result? His fastball dropped from 95-97 occasionally topping out at 99-100 to 85-87. It has been a slow climb to that 93 but in the process he has learned to pitch. He is still learning.

"I am still trying to develop my curve ball and get confidence with that pitch going forward whether it is in the big leagues or minors. Just trying to get better day in day out at everything," he said.

Whether or not he has one, two or perhaps more starts in Seattle this year remains to be seen. For now he has his first big league win and the trappings that come with that.

"I got the lineup card and my first strikeout ball," he said. "I will have my wife take them home. She gave me one room in our house to put all of my stuff, kind of like a man cave area. It is going to be my video game/memorabilia room (laughs)."

Sounds like a plan.

Strange travel notes...Most areas/cities that have multiple teams avoid having them playing at home at the same time. We rarely run into other teams on the road. That is not the case this week. Not only are the Padres in town to take on the Giants but they are staying at the same hotel as the team. First time in the nine years I have traveled with the team that I have seen that and we are going to see it again. When we return here later in the season the Diamondbacks will be in town playing the Giants. I don't think U2 has anything to do with this.

One other travel note. It is a near miracle we are on the air today. Producer/engineer Kevin Cremin missed the Padres series to attend a family celebration in Oklahoma. His duties were assumed by his substitute but in addition to running the broadcast the sub had to pack the travel cases and send them on the trip. There were several jokes that the equipment could get sent to the wrong park with two trucks for SF loading at Safeco after Sunday's game. That didn't happen but key pieces of equipment were not sent. Like the sound board for starters. Not good. Cremin who had been worrying about opening cases he had not packed for the better part of yesterday got to the park early this morning just in case anything went wrong. Good thing! He was able to borrow the necessary equipment from some of the local sound people here and all is well that ends well. We are on the air. I think.

Olivo set for return - now, who comes up?

Posted By Larry Larue on July 4, 2011 at 5:28 pm

The Tacoma News Tribune Blog

The Seattle Mariners have given seven rookies their major league debut this season, and the whisper-stream of rumors suggests there may be an eighth soon.

C Miguel Olivo has missed six games with a mild strain in his upper right thigh, and could return to the lineup as early as Tuesday night in Oakland. Once he proves healthy, the team has no need for rookie reserve C Jose Yopez.

So, who takes the roster spot when Yopez is sent down?

The Mariners, of course, aren't saying. But one strong possibility apparently is infielder Kyle Seagar, the 23-year-old who was taken in the third round of the 2009 amateur draft. Like Dustin Ackley, he played at the University of North Carolina.

Last year in Class A, he batted .345 with 14 home runs, 74 RBI and .419 on-base percentage in 135 games.

This season, Seagar batted .316 in 66 Class AA games and, in all of 10 games with Tacoma and Class AAA, he's hit hit .489. A long shot? Of course, but the desperation to find a bit more offense in Seattle is growing stronger the longer the Mariners pitching keeps them in the American League West race.

Pineda will try to match Mr. Beavan today

Posted By Larry Larue on July 4, 2011 at 10:30 am

The Tacoma News Tribune Blog

It's not often Michael Pineda has started a game for the Seattle Mariners this season hoping to pitch as well as a rookie pitcher had a day earlier ... in fact, until Blake Beavan's 3-1 win yesterday, it had never happened.

Pineda has more important things on his mind than Mr. Beavan, however. In a week that will see the Mariners take on American League West rivals Oakland and Los Angeles, he has the chance to open up with a win that would get Seattle to 42-43.

Yes, it's Independence Day, and the Mariners are with 2 1/2 games of first place. What the Mariners need now are wins - lots of them. If they can use the Athletics to pick up two or three, all the better.

If they can't, this race could slide away quickly.

Here's today's lineup against RHP Brandon McCarthy:

Ichiro RF
Brendan Ryan SS
Adam Kennedy 3B
Justin Smoak 1B
Dustin Ackley 2B
Jack Cust DH
Greg Halman CF
Carlos Peguero LF
Josh Bard C
Michael Pineda P

July 4, 2011 at 5:54 PM

Justin Smoak, Brendan Ryan took their aggressive chances on basepaths to try to get Mariners a run

Posted by Geoff Baker
Seattle Times Blog

There was some aggressive baserunning today by Mariners trying to help this offensively-challenged team score.

We saw some from Justin Smoak in the fifth as he rounded second on that flyball to deep left center by Jack Cust. Unfortunately for Smoak, the ball was caught and he was doubled-off.

But then, we saw more aggressive baserunning from Brendan Ryan in the seventh. Ryan was on first base and figured Brandon McCarthy was going to throw an off-speed pitch, so he took off for second on a steal attempt.

Turns out, McCarthy threw a fastball. Right down the middle. And Smoak, well, he Smoaked it to the right field corner.

With Ryan on the move already, the M's had themselves a run and went on to win the game 2-1. But no, it was not a hit-and-run. Ryan was going on his own, trying to make something happen. Just as Smoak had been doing earlier on.

Ryan said he thought about Smoak getting doubled off the bag earlier as he broke for second and then kept on going. But he didn't care. He knew he had to make something happen and then score when he had the chance.

"We have to take chances," Ryan said. "We don't have guys who are going to hit 40 or 50 home runs, so, as long as they're logical, smart chances...you can't hang your head too much."

Smoak was pretty much of the same mindset.

"Cust crushed that ball," Smoak said. "I was sure it was going to be off the wall or gone. It's one of those things where, if it's off the wall, I've got a chance to score."

It didn't, though, and he was doubled-off. Get used to it. As long as this offense remains as hamstrung as it's been at scoring, you're going to see these guys take some chances. Some will succeed and some will look real bad when they fail. But the M's needed some runs today. They got two.

Mariners manager Eric Wedge needs more of this from Smoak, who finished the day with two hits after being in a 1-for-32 slump.

"Brendan got a good jump on that steal and then Smoak was able to hit it down to the corner," Wedge said. "That was big for us. I still feel like he's heading in the right direction, like we talked about before the game. And we saw some more of that."

Michael Pineda? Yeah, he pitched OK. Faced the minimum 13 batters after Kurt Suzuki's run-scoring hit in the second. Pineda did walk a guy after that, but erased him on a double play.

Don't take my word for it. Here's what the A's thought.

"He's got a great arm," Suzuki said. "That fastball just jumps on you. He doesn't make it easy. He had his pitches working, kept the ball down in the zone. He's good. He's young but he's good."

A's manager Bob Melvin said: "When he's throwing strikes, not only does he have plus stuff, he's difficult to think along with as well. Because you have to get the bat head out for the fastball and he's not afraid to throw the slider in behind counts."

The teams continue the series tomorrow night and Felix Hernandez has to step up big. No more half-measure starts. His team isn't scoring and needs Hernandez to be a "King" tomorrow night. A "Prince" just won't do. The easier the M's make things on themselves in this series, the more breathing room they buy in Anaheim coming up.

Oakland simply can't score right now. The M's have to keep taking advantage of that if they want to stay alive in the AL West.

July 4, 2011 at 3:50 PM

Mariners hang on to win a battle of no offense...I mean, a pitching duel

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

Once again, the Mariners had to win a game by scoring only two runs. They did indeed manage to do just that, pulling off a 2-1 win over the Oakland Athletics.

Josh Bard hit a tying homer in the sixth off Brandon McCarthy and then Justin Smoak doubled home Brendan Ryan in the seventh.

There are, of course, easier ways for teams to win ballgames.

But not this team. Not unless it gets offensive help. The Mariners had runners at the corners with nobody out in the ninth, but failed to get the insurance marker home. So, Brandon League had to take the mound in the ninth with zero margin for error.

League got it done, which is why he's off to the All-Star Game while no Mariner who wields a bat for a living will be doing the same.

As I said, the M's need offensive help in a big way to win.

Today's offensive help resulted from the fact the Oakland A's are almost as bad as the Mariners when it comes to that thing called scoring.

That helps an offense out immensely. Helped buy the M's time to figure out how to hit a ball straight.

Of course, the same theory works in reverse. The A's had some time bought for them. But they couldn't buy a big hit when it mattered.

And what mattered today, again, is that the M's managed to find a way to win. They stayed in contention another day. If they go 5-2 on this trip, they'll likely be right in the thick of the division race come the All-Star Break.

Now, they only have to go 4-2 the final six games. And if they can do that and stay within a game or two of the top, that might put some pressure on the M's to loosen the purse strings (or their hold on certain players). Might get them to get some type of deal done to upgrade an offense that -- for a rare occasion today -- did not start anybody with a batting average below the Mendoza-line.

The usual excuse-makers keep saying "Who...who...who?" like a bunch of baby owls. "Who can they get?"

Well, start with Carlos Beltran and work your way down from there.

Hunter Pence, Luke Scott, Ryan Ludwick, Aramis Ramirez, Vlad Guerrero, Jeff Baker (wouldn't that be fun?)...and another dozen more. Maybe you pick up two of those guys if you don't think one will do the trick. At least get one guy. Get somebody with a pulse who hits better than .220, throws straight and stick him in left field. Or put him at third base. That would technically be an upgrade. Because Adam Kennedy can't play five games a week the rest of the season at third.

Anyhow, yet again, for all the owls, there are some names.

Good luck.

I suppose we could have called this a pitcher's duel.

But, well, it featured McCarthy, coming off injury and who hadn't pitched in a big league game since May 19.

And it featured six innings from Michael Pineda plus three bullpen arms after him.

Not exactly pitcher's duel stuff. But hey, who am I to judge? Call it what you want.

Again, great job by Pineda to keep them in it until somebody decided to hit. And outstanding job by the bullpen to slam the door when the M's stopped hitting.

But as much as it was a pitcher's duel, it was a duel of no offense.

And the M's have to keep treading water until somebody gets them some.

July 4, 2011 at 3:11 PM

Mariners at Oakland Athletics: July 4, 2011 game thread

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

Great job by Aaron Laffey in the seventh to get the side 1-2-3. David Pauley takes the mound in the eighth, clinging to a 2-1 lead.

2:51 p.m.: The Mariners strung a couple of hits together in the seventh and it paid off, with Justin Smoak -- mired in an awful slump -- lining one to the right field corner for an RBI double that scored Brendan Ryan after a leadoff single.

That makes it 2-1 for the M's.

Brandon McCarthy issued a two-out walk that left runners at the corners. But Brad Ziegler came on and struck out Greg Halman.

Michael Pineda is done and Aaron Laffey is now on to pitch the bottom of the seventh.

Pineda had allowed just two hits and threw only 92 pitches. But this is part of the price the M's have to pay if they want him pitching in September. Two of the first three batters due up this inning are lefties in any event, so why push your luck?

2:27 p.m: Josh Bard just went deep to right field with two out in the sixth to tie this game 1-1 and perhaps lift a Mariners team that looked like it was about to lose another one of those games with zero offense.

Seattle had been held to one hit prior to Bard connecting off Brandon McCarthy. First home run for Bard since his grand slam last August in Cleveland.

Justin Smoak led off the fifth with a walk, but Dustin Ackley fouled out down the left field line and then Jack Cust skied one to the warning track in left center that was hauled in by left fielder Conor Jackson at the last minute.

Though Cust's ball was hit to the deepest part of the ballpark, Smoak somehow managed to get doubled off first base to end the inning. That can't happen.

Michael Pineda sailed through a perfect fifth with two strikeouts. Now, he's back even again, so let's see how he does.

2:09 p.m.: The fourth inning is done, with the Mariners trailing 1-0. Not bad, four innings played in under an hour. But the Mariners had best start making contact soon.

Ichiro led off the fourth with a single, but that was quickly erased on a 5-4-3 double-play grounder from Brendan Ryan and then a groundout by Adam Kennedy.

Michael Pineda got the side in order with a popout, strikeout and groundout in the fourth.

Both teams have combined for three singles and walk worth of offense so far.

1:57 p.m.: We're through three innings, with the M's still down 1-0. The Mariners have gone nine-up, nine down versus a pitcher, Brandon McCarthy, who hasn't thrown in a MLB game since May 19.

Adam Kennedy is having all types of problems on popups in the sun today. He cost his team a hit and a run in the second inning, then missed another popup in the third inning that dropped at his feet. Fortunately, the M's got an out in the same at-bat. Then, Kennedy lost another popup in the sun with two out in the third, but Brendan Ryan raced into foul territory to rescue him for the out.

1:42 p.m.: Adam Kennedy lost a ball in the sun at third base on a foul popup by Hideki Matsui in the bottom of the second and as a result, the M's trail 1-0. Kennedy couldn't make the catch for the out and Matsui stayed alive to hit a single to right. Chris Carter (not of X-Files or Vikings fame) then followed with a walk, but Michael Pineda looked to almost be out of it on a strikeout and popout.

But Kurt Suzuki (who else?) singled to left and Carlos Peguero made a horrible, offline throw home that enabled the run to score. Even a semi-decently aimed ball would have nabbed the runner, as Josh Bard nearly was able to race back and tag Matsui out. But the throw was just that bad.

1:28 p.m.: Four of the last five Mariners have gone down swinging, which is never a good thing, Dustin Ackley was the only dissenter in the pack, simply grounding out to second base in the second inning.

Seen this act one too many times before.

Still scoreless, heading to the bottom of the second.

1:23 p.m.: The Mariners have made it to Independence Day only 2 1/2 games out of first place. Yeah, they trail two teams, but have four games coming up against one of them by week's end.

Their chances for contention could be all but done six days from now.

Or, they could be right in the thick of it.

The Oakland A's are a lot like the Mariners. Good pitching, but can't hit a lick. The M's like to play teams just like that. Their pitching is set up well for this series. Anything shy of a series win will have the potential for disaster, given what looms in Anaheim.

In other words, Michael Pineda has to get it done today. And his offense needs to score some runs. Four would be just right.

One inning done so far and both clubs are living up to their reps as the worst offensive units in the league and possibly all of baseball.

The M's went 1-2-3 with Ichiro groundout and two strikeouts.

Pineda got a groundout, strikeout and foul popout.

July 4, 2011 at 11:56 AM

Miguel Olivo sitting out again for Mariners, as is Franklin Gutierrez

Posted by Geoff Baker

Seattle Times Blog

Happy Fourth of July everybody! Two Mariners regulars won't be in the lineup today, but for entirely different reasons.

Miguel Olivo is still feeling the effects of that sore hamstring from six days ago, while Franklin Gutierrez is still waiting to officially launch his 2011 season at the plate.

Olivo told me he feels well enough to play, but the team is just taking advantage of Josh Bard's strong play to give him a bit of a rest until he's completely healed. M's manager Eric Wedge said that should happen tomorrow, with Olivo playing out the duration of this series here against the Oakland A's.

Gutierrez's case is a bit longer-term. And his malaise at the plate was enough to earn him a discussion with the manager this morning prior to Greg Halman getting another start in center field.

Wedge isn't sold on arguments that Gutierrez, hitting a paltry .183 with a .448 on-base-plus-slugging percentage going on nearly seven weeks, is still regaining his strength after that bout with a stomach ailment that sidelined him all of April and half of May.

"I don't think the physical part's an issue anymore," Wedge said.

The mental part is something else. Gutierrez has been putting in the work, but Wedge said he can be extremely hard on himself at times.

That pressing is something the two of them discussed today. Wedge wants to see Gutierrez put in a good day of work, sit the game out, then come back tomorrow.

Wedge has seen Gutierrez before. And like many in Seattle, he's still trying to figure out exactly what Gutierrez can be.

Gutierrez has a strong final part of the season in 2007 to help the Indians make the playoffs and nearly the World Series in his first big league action.

That gained him a starting job in 2008, but Gutierrez faded badly with extended playing time.

In 2009 with the Mariners, Gutierrez again faded down the stretch -- which the team and player attributed to sore knees at the time.

Last year, Gutierrez again faded badly in the second half. That was attributed to his stomach ailment, since diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome.

This year, the stomach problem kept him out the first six weeks. Now, halfway through the season, the M's are still waiting for Gutierrez to get it going yet again.

Wedge was asked whether he sees anything different from the present-day Gutierrez versus the one he worked with in 2007 and 2008 in Cleveland.

"He's in a stronger position to hit," Wedge said. "He's in a stronger position to approach the baseball and to hit the baseball."

But approach is one thing. Getting the job done something else.

And the reality is that, for all of Gutierrez's defensive prowess, he's never been able to put together a consistent full season at the plate. This is his fourth full year trying.

So, indeed, there are plenty of eyes on Gutierrez this season. Not only because he's become the worst hitter on a team that desperately needs offense and has been let down by many of the position players earning the most money.

The Mariners would like to see the "real" Gutierrez step up.

If he doesn't, they might have a much better idea at season's end of what the "real" Gutierrez actually is. And then, as with other holes throughout this lineup, they'll have a better idea on how to proceed.

The lineups:

Mariners (41-43)

51 Ichiro Suzuki - L RF
26 Brendan Ryan SS
4 Adam Kennedy - L 3B
17 Justin Smoak - S 1B
13 Dustin Ackley - L 2B
29 Jack Cust - L DH
56 Greg Halman CF
8 Carlos Peguero - L LF
3 Josh Bard - S C

36 Michael Pineda RHP

Athletics (38-47)

19 Jemile Weeks - S 2B
29 Scott Sizemore 3B
4 Coco Crisp - S CF
55 Hideki Matsui - L DH
22 Chris Carter 1B
12 David DeJesus - L RF
28 Conor Jackson LF
8 Kurt Suzuki C
2 Cliff Pennington - S SS

32 Brandon McCarthy RHP

Originally published July 4, 2011 at 6:37 PM | Page modified July 4, 2011 at 11:33 PM

Travis Snider smacks three doubles in return to majors | Baseball notebook

By The Associated Press

BOSTON — Travis Snider looked as if he'd forgotten how to run the bases on his first hit and later didn't realize everyone was waiting to talk to him after the game.

Everything must seem new when you've been in the minors for a couple of months.

Snider, recalled from AAA Las Vegas on Sunday, had three doubles and drove in a pair of runs, leading the Toronto Blue Jays to a 9-7 win over the Boston Red Sox on Monday.

The 23-year-old from Jackson High School in Mill Creek had been sent to Las Vegas of the Pacific Coast League on April 29 after hitting only .184 in 25 games for the Blue Jays.

In his first game back in the big leagues, he doubled in his first three at-bats, finishing 3 for 5.

"I think I was so excited I could barely run," said Snider, who stumbled twice rounding first base after his first double against the Red Sox. "I don't know if you saw the baserunning."

Then, still talking to reporters, he said: "It's good to be back and see all of your faces."

Blue Jays manager John Farrell said Snider's dedication to improving his swing showed.

"You could see the work and commitment he made when he went down to Las Vegas," Farrell said. "I think we've seen him get in a much better place to get to balls down over the plate."

Notes

- Cardinals 1B Albert Pujols could be back in the lineup as early as Tuesday, beating the initial timetable for his return from a broken left wrist by a month.
- Derek Jeter was 0 for 4 in his return to shortstop for the Yankees after being activated from the DL. He remains six hits short of 3,000 in his career.
- Bryce Harper, the Nationals' prize 18-year-old prospect, was promoted to AA Harrisburg after hitting .318 with 14 homers, 46 RBI and 19 stolen bases in Class A.