



# **RAYS CLIPS**

**July 25, 2011**

# ROOKIE ALEX COBB HELPS TAMPA BAY RAYS AVOID SWEEP WITH 5-0 WIN OVER KANSAS CITY ROYALS

*Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — After his previous start Monday at home against the Yankees, Alex Cobb lingered around his locker in case pitching coach Jim Hickey was looking for him with news he was headed back to Triple-A Durham.

Sunday, Cobb had no such concerns.

Not after working seven strong innings — stopped only by a small blister on his right index finger — to lead the Rays to a sweep-avoiding 5-0 win over the Royals.

"I wasn't sitting around too much this time," Cobb said. "I feel a lot better right now."

That seemed to be the feeling throughout the clubhouse as the Rays headed off to the West Coast, their postseason possibilities and trade-deadline availabilities in the balance, reaching the 100-game mark at 53-47, still 6½ games behind the wild-card-leading Yankees and 9½ from the first-place Red Sox in the AL East.

"We have a good run left in us," ever-hopeful manager Joe Maddon said.

The biggest issue in doing so is becoming more productive offensively. And though Sunday's scorecard was marked with their usual wasted opportunities, they found ways — some creative — to score as many as five for the first time in more than a week.

Evan Longoria — who struck out a career high-matching four times — singled with two on in the third to deliver the first run, and Casey Kotchman the second with a sac fly. They were more resourceful after loading the bases (on a single and two hit batters) in the sixth — having failed to score even once in their past six such opportunities — with Johnny Damon drawing a walk from reliever Blake Wood to force in one, then Ben Zobrist getting hit by a pitch for another.

"We finally figured out to accept our walks, and get in the way," Maddon joked. "It's got to start somewhere. These things normally are cyclical."

Cobb (3-0, 2.57) was in a position to work into the eighth and had his sights on a complete game, until the blister surfaced as he warmed up for the seventh. "A big disappointment," he said.

Cobb, 23, has had similar problems in the minors before in humid weather and missed a couple of starts, but with his next start not until Saturday in Seattle, he expects to be fine.

The Rays hope so; several infielders told Maddon that Cobb should come out so he'd be ready for his next start. He allowed only six singles and got out of the only trouble he had, working quickly and confidently. "No panic," Maddon said. "The composure was fabulous."

Said Longoria: "He's kind of the new Jeremy Hellickson."

Cobb, who hadn't pitched above Double A before this season, has now made seven starts — over three stints with the Rays — without taking a loss, the first AL pitcher (with no relief outings in between) to do so since Minnesota's Kevin Slowey in 2007.

Cobb's uncertainty over his status, despite his solid outing against the Yankees, was due to Wade Davis' pending return from the disabled list. But the Rays were willing to adjust, making the unconventional decision to go to a six-man rotation, allowing them to better limit the innings worked by Hellickson and others, and to let Cobb keep starting.

"This is why we went six-man," Maddon said. "You saw it today. This is the exact reason. ... You can't do it unless you have a pitcher that is that effective and big-league ready like Alex is."

"So there's no tapping on the shoulder."

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# TAMPA BAY RAYS: BERT BLYLEVEN REMEMBERED AS MASTER OF THE HOTFOOT; ALEX COBB HAS A SPECIAL GUEST IN THE STANDS

Joe Smith/St. Petersburg Times

## Rays vs. A's

**When/where:** 10:07 tonight; Oakland Coliseum

**TV/radio:** Sun Sports; 620-AM, 680-AM (Spanish)

## Starting pitchers:

### Rays:

RH Jeremy Hellickson (9-7, 3.17)

### A's:

RH Guillermo Moscoso (3-5, 2.96)

## Watch for ...

**Jeremy the kid:** Hellickson is coming off a strong outing against the Yankees and got an extra day's rest after throwing 119 pitches, one shy of his career high. He pitched well at Oakland in August, leaving with a lead in the seventh.

**Unknown quantity:** Moscoso, a former Ranger, has been a nice fill-in for the A's since coming up from the minors. He got knocked around by Detroit in his previous start after four strong ones (1 ER, 242/3 IP). No Rays have seen him in the majors.

## Key matchups

### Rays vs. Moscoso

None have faced

### A's vs. Hellickson

Coco Crisp 1-for-4

Cliff Pennington 2-for-3

Kurt Suzuki 0-for-3

## On deck

**Tuesday:** at A's, 10:07, Sun Sports. Rays — David Price (9-8, 3.67); A's — Brandon McCarthy (2-5, 3.74)

**Wednesday:** at A's, 10:07, Sun Sports. Rays — James Shields (9-8, 2.53); A's — Trevor Cahill (8-9, 3.77)

**Thursday:** at A's, 3:37, Sun Sports. Rays — Wade Davis (7-7, 4.46); A's — Rich Harden (2-1, 4.63)

**Friday:** at Mariners, 10:10, Sun Sports. Rays — Jeff Niemann (4-4, 3.86); Mariners — TBA

Marc Topkin, Times staff writer

## Hall of Fame memory of the day

**Joe Maddon** was a minor-league coach for the Angels when **Bert Blyleven** ended his career there 1989-92. Like others, he was impressed with Blyleven's curve and professionalism. But what really stood out about Sunday's Hall of Fame inductee? "He was by far ... the best at lighting somebody's shoelaces on fire. Above and beyond all the necessary requirements regarding pitching performance, that also should be included as Hall of Fame ability. He'd crawl under benches amid the muck and the gum and the spit just to get this done."

## Special guest of the day

RHP **Alex Cobb's** older brother **R.J.** was in the stands. R.J., who won a Purple Heart in an Army assignment in Germany, is stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in the Missouri Ozarks. He flew in for Cobb's May 1 debut, which didn't go well: "I told him if it went badly today, he couldn't come back."

## Stat of the day

39-12

Rays record when scoring first.

14-35

Rays record when not scoring first.

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## UP NEXT FOR TAMPA BAY RAYS: OAKLAND ATHLETICS

Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times

## at A's

Tonight-Thursday

**What's new:** The A's pitch well, with an AL-best 3.33 team ERA, but that's about it. They are a worse offensive team than the Rays, with the fewest homers (56) in the AL; they don't run much; and they have made the most errors and allowed the most unearned runs in

the league. Also, they are an AL-worst 14-20 in one-run games. After a solid first six weeks, they've gone 22-37 since, and while the June 9 change of managers from Bob Geren to Bob Melvin has improved their attitude, it hasn't made much difference in the standings.

**Key stat:** The A's haven't had a three-homer game since May 2.

**Connections:** Rays DH Johnny Damon is a former A's player, as is 1B coach George Hendrick, who was on the 1972 championship team. ... A's RHP Grant Balfour spent the past 3½ years with the Rays; trainer Nick Paparesta is a former Rays assistant.

**Series history:** A's lead 76-46, including 43-18 in Oakland.

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## TAMPA BAY RAYS' B.J. UPTON STILL BIDDING HIS TIME AS TRADE RUMORS SWIRL

*Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — B.J. Upton figures to either have a short final week as a Ray or a long week waiting to find out if he'll remain one.

Speculation over a possible trade mounted again Sunday when Upton was held out of the lineup, though manager Joe Maddon insisted the day off had been planned several days ago.

That followed Upton being removed unexpectedly from Friday's game — though he played Saturday — and the promotion of top prospect Desmond Jennings. (Plus, Jennings played Upton's centerfield spot Sunday though the Rays say the plan is to use Jennings regularly in left.)

Upton reiterated Sunday that he wants to stay with the Rays. But, more than anything, it sounds like he would prefer resolution of the situation as soon as possible before Sunday's 4 p.m. deadline for nonwaiver deals. He also added the Phillies to the list of teams he has heard are supposedly interested.

"I just got the day off (Sunday). I think that's what it is. I hope that's what it is," Upton said. "It's become a comedy to me. So whatever. There's something new every day — San Fran, Cleveland, Washington, Philly. I mean, what is it? I don't know.

"I'm to the point where I don't even care. If it happens, it happens."

Upton said his preference is to stay with the Rays, and he didn't want to say which of the possible destinations was more appealing. "If I had to go? I don't know," he said. "Still nowhere."

**DAZZLING DESMOND:** Jennings had another impressive game, following Saturday's two-extra-base hit, two-walk debut with a two-hit, two-hit-by-pitch game. That makes him the first Ray to reach base four times in his first two games of the season and the second Rays rookie to do so in consecutive games. (The other — for when you're done guessing — was Brent Abernathy in 2001). The last Ray to do so in back-to-back games was Jason Bartlett in 2009. "I feel good at the plate," Jennings said.

**HIT CLUB:** The Rays were hit by pitches a team-record-tying four times, three in a four-batter sequence in the sixth (that led to two runs): Sean Rodriguez and Jennings hit by Felipe Paulino, and Ben Zobrist by reliever Blake Wood. They were the first team to be hit three times in an inning since Sept. 23, 2010 — when they were also the victims, plunked by the Yankees' Javier Vazquez. Those are the only times in the past three seasons a team was hit thrice in an inning.

**ODD STAT OF THE DAY:** 3B Evan Longoria struck out four times for only the second game in his career. And both times, he also knocked in the winning run. "That's pretty obscure," he said.

On Aug. 4, 2009, against Boston, he struck out three times, hit a tying homer in the eighth, was walked and struck out in his next at-bats, then hit a walkoff homer in the 13th. Sunday wasn't as dramatic as he struck out, singled in the first run, then struck out three more times.

**MEDICAL MATTERS:** C John Jaso (oblique strain) is eligible to come off the disabled list today, but he isn't close. He isn't likely to take part in full workouts until the Rays return home Aug. 2 and will likely need a few minor-league rehab games. ... C Jose Lobaton (left knee sprain) will be out even longer. ... RHP Juan Cruz (groin strain) will throw a bullpen session today in St. Petersburg and could make a rehab appearance by the weekend.

**MISCELLANY:** Starters James Shields and Wade Davis were both in the bullpen Sunday for potential duty. ... RHP Alex Cobb hasn't allowed a homer in 40 innings since giving one up to Hank Conger in the second inning of his debut vs. the Angels. ... Rays pitchers combined for their eighth shutout.

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## **RAYS SALVAGE FINALE VS. ROYALS, BUT FACE UPHILL CLIMB**

*Roger Mooney/Tampa Tribune*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Rays manager Joe Maddon believes his team needs one thing right now.

His club needs to get hot.

Although Tampa Bay (53-47) defeated Kansas City, 5-0, on Sunday, the Rays have not claimed many victories lately.

After entering this series 7 1/2 games behind Boston (51/2 behind New York), the Rays are 9 1/2 behind the Red Sox. After sitting atop the American League East in mid-May, Tampa Bay is facing its largest deficit since the final day of the 2009 season.

Tampa Bay's record over its past seven series is 1-5-1. The Rays were 5-1 in their previous six series. Add in that Tampa Bay has scored 411 runs and allowed 386, Maddon knows something needs to change — fast.

"I know it looks not so good right now, but I also know a little bit of a hot streak gets you right back into the thick of things," Maddon said. "We really haven't had one of those, but I still think it's within our abilities."

Tampa Bay's longest winning streak this season is five games, but the Rays are 4-6 since the All-Star break. They also have lost eight of their past 12 games and 13 of their past 22.

While players are not hovering around the panic button, there is a sense of urgency within the clubhouse.

"I don't think Boston is going to start slumping. They have too big off an offense," Rays designated hitter Johnny Damon said. "I'm OK saying this, we have to start thinking about the wild card because Boston is the best team out there."

"We need to concentrate on winning games in each series. We came up short here, but we knew we had a chance to win. We've been losing a lot of close games lately and that's why we're so far back. Everyone in here has faith."

The performance of Tampa Bay's starting pitchers is one reason players remain optimistic.

Alex Cobb (3-0) showed why Maddon expanded to a six-man rotation as he gave up six hits, no runs and struck out two in seven innings. Cobb was pulled because he developed a painful blister on his finger, but Maddon said he could have pitched nine innings if healthy.

Cobb is the first pitcher to begin his career with seven starts and not record a loss since Cincinnati's Mike Leake in 2010.

"Ever since I've been called up, I feel like we've been on the short end of things," Cobb said. "Finally today, everything kind of went our way offensively and defensively. Hopefully, we can put it together the rest of this road trip and put ourselves right back into the race."

If the Rays climb back into the race, rookie outfielder Desmond Jennings could be a contributing factor.

Jennings was recalled Friday and has reached base safely eight times in two games. He is the first player in Rays history to reach base at least four times in each of his first two games of the season.

"I just feel like my job is to get on base, however I can," Jennings said. "If that's walking, hitting, just try to get on base."

The Rays left 11 runners on base but scored more runs than they did in their previous seven games.

Ben Zobrist led the way with three hits and two RBIs. Zobrist has 14 doubles in his past 29 games and went 6-for-14 (.429) with two doubles, four RBIs and two runs scored against the Royals.

Zobrist also is optimistic his team can turn on the heat.

"Obviously, we need to score more runs than we've been scoring and we're capable of doing that," Zobrist said. "It just seems like we've had a tough time putting it all together."

"We hope to get hot here and make a big run and that would be real good for us on this road trip (Oakland and Seattle) and going back into the homestand."

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## AS BASEBALL'S TRADE DEADLINE NEARS, ANXIETY RISES

Joey Johnston/Tampa Tribune

For the next week, baseball's pennant races will be overshadowed by speculation season. The non-waiver trade deadline is next Sunday, so expect plenty of talk about who's going where. In this era of fantasy sports, when some kids actually dream of becoming a general manager, who doesn't like a good trade rumor?

The local conversation: Are B.J. Upton's days numbered with the Rays?

Trades can help both teams. Trades can become one-sided. They can be shocking or predictable. They can tear apart chemistry or bond together a championship run.

"If you're a professional athlete, you can never get too comfortable in one spot," said Rays relief pitcher J.P. Howell, who was traded from Kansas City to Tampa Bay in 2006. "It's part of the gig. You walk in one day and the guy next to you might be gone. Or they might be saying that you are gone."

There are practical implications for players. Homes are put up for sale. Children must change schools.

There are potentially difficult moments for coaches and management.

"You're always trying to make your team better, but the reality is you never get used to these things, at least I don't," Lightning coach Guy Boucher said. "I don't want to get used to it because that means that players are numbers. That's not really my style."

"Whether you're trading a player or cutting a player, which is a lot more common in the NFL, there's the element of ending a relationship, sometimes a long-term relationship," Bucs general manager Mark Dominik said. "What players want is the truth. When you give them the truth about what just happened, it's always a little easier for them to handle."

In the case of Upton, the mercurial center fielder, there are two camps:

\* The Rays should keep Upton for his defense, his base-stealing ability and his streaky power, which was manifested with 24 home runs in 2007, then an American League-record tying seven homers in 16 games during the 2008 postseason.

\* The Rays should deal Upton for prospects because arbitration will drive him out of Tampa Bay's offseason price range anyway. If the tantalizing potential, which led the Rays to select Upton second overall in the 2002 draft, manifests itself elsewhere, so be it. Maybe a change of scenery would do Upton some good.

"Sometimes, when you're at one place for so long or you've only been at one place, there's a negative feel on you," former Detroit Tigers third baseman Brandon Inge said. "You never shake that. You get out of that and it's your opportunity to say, 'I'm free. I can establish myself any way I want.'"

"Sometimes, they want you to stay. Sometimes, they ask you to go."

Inge was asked to go this week, when he was sent to the minors after the team acquired third baseman Wilson Betemit from the Kansas City Royals.

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When trade decisions are made, the news can be exhilarating – or devastating.

"I was in Mexico, when my dad and my agent started calling and saying I was coming home," said Rays All-Star outfielder Matt Joyce, the former Armwood High standout who was traded in 2008 to Tampa Bay from the Tigers, who acquired pitcher Edwin Jackson.

"At first, you think, 'What did I do wrong? Why didn't they want me?' But the other side is, 'The other team is really interested in me. They want me to be part of their future.' Initially, you get knocked out of your comfort zone because you have to learn a new team – and it happens at a moment's notice with no warning – but it obviously turned out very well for me."

Rays left fielder Sam Fuld, then in the Chicago Cubs' organization, was headed to the airport last December to pick up his parents. His cell phone rang and he noticed a Chicago area code.

Uh-oh, he thought.

"I think it was the first time I actually spoke with (Cubs general manager) Jim Hendry on the phone," said Fuld, who was part of a Cubs trade package used to acquire Rays pitcher Matt Garza. "I had been up and down through the minors through my whole career. Moving around was not new to me.

"This was a little surprising and maybe bittersweet. At the same time, I think it really energized me."

In 1993, former Jesuit High standout Dave Magadan said he thought he had found a permanent home with the expansion Florida Marlins. He was playing well, not far from home, and he never felt better. Then the Marlins acquired Gary Sheffield, then a third baseman, also Magadan's position.

After shifting from regular to platoon player, Magadan requested a trade. He didn't anticipate the fallout after being dealt to the Seattle Mariners.

"One minute, you feel on top of the world," said Magadan, now hitting coach for the Boston Red Sox. "Two days later, you're in a different league, moving your family to the other side of the country with two young sons. It was rough. My world completely changed."

In 2008, pitcher Nick Masset, of Pinellas Park High, felt he was settling in nicely with the Chicago White Sox. He went to bed late after a road game at Minnesota, then was awakened by his cell phone. "What you do think of the trade?" a reporter asked.

"What trade?" Masset said.

He thought it was a prank. Then he switched on ESPN and saw his name on the news crawl.

Masset had been traded to the Cincinnati Reds – for Ken Griffey Jr., his favorite player while growing up.

"I used to have his poster in my room," Masset said. "Later on, I got him to sign a White Sox jersey for me and we even played golf together. It's a big headache to change teams in the middle of a season, but getting traded for Griffey was just wild."

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Sometimes, trades can cement one player to a new city.

After the 1973 season, the Kansas City Royals traded promising outfielder Lou Piniella to the New York Yankees, who had just entered the George Steinbrenner era. Piniella made four World Series appearances and played in 44 postseason games with the Yankees. Eventually, he became the team's manager, then its general manager.

And he had a front-row seat to one of the most volatile and colorful clubhouses.

"It made me a better player," Piniella said. "A town like New York, it's either going to make you or break you. A lot of good players come over and they just freeze up. I think I was able to respond to it. That's a trade that changed my life."

Rick Sutcliffe feels the same way.

In 1984, Sutcliffe was a struggling 4-5 pitcher for the Cleveland Indians, hoping to bounce to his hometown Kansas City Royals as a free-agent after the season. Meanwhile, the Chicago Cubs entered the summer seeking their first postseason appearance since 1945.

Clairvoyant Cubs general manager Dallas Green traded for Sutcliffe, sending away outfielders Joe Carter and Mel Hall to Cleveland, and the results were stunning.

Sutcliffe went 16-1 with a 2.69 ERA for the Cubs, who won the National League East title. Sutcliffe captured the NL Cy Young Award. After being offered a lifetime deal with the Royals, he instead re-signed with the Cubs.

"I owe everything to the Cubs," Sutcliffe said. "That meant something to me. George Steinbrenner called me and said, 'Look, I don't finish second. You get the best deal you can. I'll give you two more years and more money.' It wasn't about that. Wrigley Field is like my second home. I thought I'd be with the Royals. As it turned out, the relationship I had with the Cubs was something I cherished."

Not everyone has a Sutcliffe-like deal, though.

Former University of Florida basketball center Dwayne Schintzius, of Brandon High, was the NBA draft's 24th overall pick in 1990. He liked the San Antonio Spurs and anticipated a long career there. But Spurs general manager Bob Bass didn't care for Schintzius' "lobster" hairstyle.

"He told me to cut it," Schintzius said. "So I got it cut and sent him the shavings in an envelope. I'm not sure he appreciated that. And then, away I went."

After his rookie season, Schintzius was traded to the Sacramento Kings for Antoine Carr, thus beginning an odyssey that saw him play for six teams in an injury-plagued, nine-season NBA career.

"After the first time, it wasn't a big deal to move around," Schintzius said. "Whoever signed my check, as long as I got paid, I was good."

"You're always moving, finding a new place to live, new places to eat and shop, making new friends. All of the above. But you just say, 'Oh well. It is what it is. I'm an professional athlete.' It's part of the deal."

That means trades – or, at the very least, a lot of trade rumors.

And that's the landscape for this week in baseball. Who knows what's ahead for the Rays? In past deadline deals, they have sent away Fred McGriff and Aubrey Huff. They have welcomed Scott Kazmir and Ben Zobrist, who became All-Stars.

"It's impossible to completely remove emotion, but you must try to do that," said Rays executive vice president Andrew Friedman, speaking in generalities about deal-making, not specifically about any players. "If the industry is running one way, we have a responsibility to almost run the other way. We can't be dogmatic. We have to be fluid. Our margin for error is less than other teams in our division, so we're always looking to creatively seek some kind of competitive advantage."

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## **RAYS NOTES: UPTON WATCH CONTINUES**

*Anwar Richardson/Tampa Tribune*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The list of coincidences associated with Rays CF B.J. Upton continued to grow Sunday.

Upton was pulled from Friday's series opener against the Royals to give him some rest. After the game, the Rays recalled OF Desmond Jennings, who is expected to eventually replace Upton in center.

Then on Sunday, Rays manager Joe Maddon rested Upton and had Jennings start in center field. The latest move only fuels speculation that Upton could be moved by the July 31 trade deadline, something he is getting used to.

"It's becoming comedy to me. Whatever," Upton said. "I hear something new every day. I'm going to San Fran, Cleveland, Washington, Philly. I don't know. I'm at the point where I don't even care. If it happens, it happens."

Maddon stuck to his guns Sunday and maintained the moves were not made because an Upton trade is imminent.

"I love it," Maddon said. "Again, there is no deviousness about it. I had this planned, again. The other day was totally innocent. This was planned. ... When you work with pure intentions, you never are really concerned about potential ramifications."

Maddon said he intends to have Upton back in the starting lineup tonight in Oakland. Regardless, Upton knows speculation about his future will not end.

"I'm at the point now where I really don't (care)," Upton jokingly said.

### **A spitting image**

When Maddon looks at the Royals, he is reminded of his own organization.

Kansas City is building its roster with young players, much like Tampa Bay has done successfully under Maddon. The Royals are led by young standouts such as 3B Mike Moustakas and 1B Eric Hosmer, and Maddon believes Kansas City will be a force in the future.

"They have some interesting folks over there, no question," Maddon said. "Being a developmental guy, I like what they're doing. I know it's going to pay off. You got to be patient. The key is to be patient. Once you are patient, eventually the rewards are going to come back to them."

"They have a great tradition. I think they have one of the best baseball venues in all of baseball right here. I love this place (Kauffman Stadium). I love what they originally had. I love the redo. It's tremendous. It's a great place to play baseball. They'll be good again."

### **One bad pitch**



Rookie RHP Jeremy Hellickson (9-7) has pitched well this season, sporting a 3.17 ERA and 75 strikeouts, but has struggled in one area recently.

He has allowed eight home runs during his past six starts after allowing only one in his previous six outings. Fifteen of the past 19 runs Hellickson has allowed have come as a result of home runs.

Hellickson will attempt to correct his recent trend tonight in Oakland.

"It's very frustrating," Hellickson said. "It just seems like one pitch, one swing. The last six or seven games, it's been one mistake. It's one of those things where I have to keep the ball in the ballpark.

"I really can't explain it. Got to keep the ball down. It's really frustrating right now."

### **Zobrist has heart and hustle**

Rays INF Ben Zobrist recently received the Rays' "Heart and Hustle Award," given to one player from each major-league team by the MLB Players Association and voted on by alumni players.

Rays senior adviser Don Zimmer presented Zobrist with the award before a recent home game.

"I heard about the award before a couple of years ago and I thought it was a neat award," Zobrist said. "I was really honored to be selected from our team to represent the club and community. To have Don Zimmer present it to me was pretty cool. It was a blast for me."

### **News and notes**

The Rays were hit by pitches four times Sunday, tying a club record. This is the fourth time Tampa Bay's batters have been hit four times in one game (Aug 15, 2005, vs. New York Yankees; June 6, 2001, at Toronto; and May 22, 1999, vs. Anaheim). ... Maddon said C John Jaso (right oblique strain) could rejoin the team this week in Seattle. He is on the 15-day disabled list. Maddon said if Jaso does rejoin the team this week, he does not expect him to play. ... RHPs James Shields and Wade Davis warmed up in the bullpen Sunday. Maddon said it was because they were given the morning off, so they worked out during the game.

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## **RAYS LOOK LIKE SELLERS AS TRADE DEADLINE APPROACHES**

*Joe Henderson/ Tampa Tribune*

We just discovered another admirable trait about veteran Tampa Bay Rays designated hitter Johnny Damon. In addition to his leadership, hustle, classiness and clutch play, the man knows how to speak the truth.

In Monday's Tampa Tribune, Damon was quoted by Anwar S. Richardson as saying, "I'm OK saying this. We have to start thinking about the wild card because Boston is the best team out there."

OK, so Damon didn't really say anything we didn't already know about the plight of the Rays. Even after Sunday's 5-0 win at Kansas City, the Rays are 9½ games behind the Red Sox in the American League East and another 6½ behind the New York Yankees for the wild card.

I'm sure Rays manager Joe Maddon, the most optimistic man on the planet, spit up a gulp of merlot when he heard what Damon said, but Damon was actually being kind. Forget catching the Red Sox. A couple of more hiccups like they had over the weekend at Kansas City and the Rays will be out of this thing completely - if they aren't already.

The excellent website [coolstandiangs.com](http://coolstandiangs.com) gives the Rays about a 5 percent chance of making the playoffs right now.

They actually are much closer to fourth place than they are second, and they have just 62 games to make up that gap on the Yankees. Even if they can do that, it presumes they could beat out the Los Angeles Angels for the wild card or even hold off Toronto for third.

All this is a preamble to what should be a rather obvious point: If there is a deal out there this week that will put this club in better position next season and beyond, SELL!

There is so much chatter about which Rays might stay or go before Sunday's nonwaiver trade deadline, it's hard to decipher fact from idle speculation. In that spirit, here are a few guesses.

This is just my opinion, but anyone who thinks it's a coincidence that outfielder Desmond Jennings just happened to join the Rays eight days before the deadline probably also believes NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's stance that the lockout is really for the fans' benefit.

Jennings was electrifying in his redux debut over the weekend. His speed out of the leadoff spot is stunning, and he appears much more confident in that short sampling than he did last season when the Rays brought him up.

He had a couple of doubles, a triple, stole two bases and was such a force that the Royals finally gave up trying to get him out and just hit him twice instead.

So, bye-bye B.J. Upton?

Maybe.

No one is cagier than Rays executive vice president Andrew Friedman when it comes to making trades, and there's a reason for that. He comes from Wall Street, where it's all about maximizing value.

There is no pressing need for the Rays to trade Upton at the moment, since Jennings is already here and Upton is the team leader in homers, RBIs and stolen bases.

This will send trade-niks' heads spinning, but what's the harm keeping him until the offseason? That would give the Rays two full months to assess Jennings at the big-league level and, theoretically, it would increase the number of potential suitors for Upton - assuming they want to deal him at all.

For all of his flash, Jennings has had injury problems and remains unproven as an everyday player in the majors. So if you're Friedman, you have to consider the effect on your club if you deal Upton in a rush at the trade deadline.

Eventually, Jennings will be flanked in the outfield by Brandon Guyer and whoever the Rays decide to put in right on a given day. Unless a contender decides Upton is the piece it needs and is willing to pay appropriately, there's no need to rush that day.

The same goes with starting pitcher James Shields, about whom there is increasing trade speculation.

We know how flush the Rays are throughout the organization with pitching, and young Alex Cobb sure looks like the real thing. Several more top young pitchers will soon be pounding on the door.

Shields would be a race-changer for a contender, but as with Upton there is no need to seriously entertain trading the team's top starter this season. Friedman would certainly demand a haul similar to the five-player bonanza he received from the Chicago Cubs for Matt Garza.

We know how desperately the Rays need help up and down their lineup (particularly in the middle), so if they could flip Shields into a couple of power bats and/or a top catcher, then maybe they'd have to consider it.

Yes, in my mind the Rays are sellers.

Maybe it's this week, maybe not.

But they're not going to catch the Red Sox, and they probably can't catch the Yankees. They're almost certainly going to miss the playoffs.

The selling season is about to commence.

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## **COBB STAYS UNBEATEN AS RAYS TOP ROYALS**

*Bill Chastain/MLB.com*

KANSAS CITY -- Tampa Bay badly needed a win on Sunday. And after a weekend's worth of miscues and misfortune, the Rays secured a 5-0 win over the Royals before a crowd of 23,735 at Kauffman Stadium.

The Rays ended a two-game skid against the Royals and moved to 53-47 on the season and to 1-2 on the current 10-game road trip that includes stops in Kansas City, Oakland, and Seattle. Boston and New York both won, leaving the Rays 9 1/2 games behind the first-place Red Sox and 6 1/2 behind the Wild Card-leading Yankees.

The Rays turned to starter Alex Cobb on Sunday, a start that manager Joe Maddon recently enabled by expanding the rotation to include six instead of five. Given the rookie right-hander's performance, one had wonder if the Rays skipper might consider going to seven starters in the future.

"This is why we went six-man," Maddon said. "This is the exact reason. Because we talked about the other things, but you can't do it unless you have a pitcher who is that effective and big-league ready, and Alex is."

Cobb pitched seven scoreless frames to notch his third win in seven starts and is the first Rays pitcher to go undefeated in his first seven starts. He is the first pitcher in the Major Leagues to begin his career with seven starts (without a relief appearance in between) and not record a loss in any of them since Cincinnati's Mike Leake (12 starts, April 5-June 8, 2010).

"He was really good, I would have left him out there, but he developed a little bit of a blister and I had to get him out of there," Maddon said. "That's it. He would have pitched deeper into that game, which would have been great. It would have saved more of the bullpen and it's just unfortunate because his pitch count was in great shape at that point. But he had to come out."

Cobb cruised through the first five innings, using just 59 pitches before encountering trouble in the sixth and seventh innings. In both innings, Cobb allowed singles to the first two batters before escaping with zero runs scored.

"No panic," said Maddon in complimenting Cobb. "He threw strikes and let the defense play. Made the hitters swing the bat, wasn't getting in bad counts. That's why he was able to get through that relatively easy. No walks either."

While Cobb posted his fifth quality start and is 3-0 with a 1.44 ERA in his last five starts, he was disappointed not to have gone deeper into the game, particularly since he threw just 83 pitches.

"I would have loved to have gone out there at least eight, maybe nine," Cobb said. "Give our bullpen a big rest that's needed. We're a little shorthanded in the bullpen and I would have liked to have helped that out by giving them a day's rest."

Cobb noted that his two-seamer and his changeup were working well.

"I was just getting a lot of ground balls," Cobb said. "I felt like every time they put the ball in play it was a ground ball or a jam shot that was up in the air. My whole game plan was to go deep into the game and the best way to do that was to get them to ground out early and not work the counts too deep."

Cobb left a favorable impression on the Kansas City hitters.

"He left a couple over the plate, but it's the fact that he was able to throw his secondary pitches, keeps guys off his heater, since he's able to throw his other stuff for strikes as well," Mitch Maier said.

Tampa Bay's offense, which had scored just 17 runs in its previous seven games, got busy early on Sunday.

Evan Longoria singled home the Rays' first run in the third when he poked a single into left field off Felipe Paulino to drive home Johnny Damon. Matt Joyce added a sacrifice fly to put the Rays up 2-0.

Paulino appeared to be in good shape after retiring the first two batters in the sixth before Sam Fuld singled through the right side of the infield. The Royals right-hander then hit the next two batters, Sean Rodriguez and Desmond Jennings, to load the bases and prompt a call to the bullpen.

Blake Wood took over for Paulino and walked the first batter he faced, Damon, to force in the Rays' third run. Wood then hit Ben Zobrist to score another run to put the Rays up 4-0.

Tampa Bay became the first Major League team this season to have three hit batters in one inning. Oddly, the Rays were the last team for which such an occurrence took place. Yankees pitcher Javier Vazquez hit three Rays in the seventh inning of a game on Sept. 23, 2010 at Yankee Stadium.

Jennings was one of the three to get hit that night as well.

Zobrist singled home another run in the eighth to put the Rays up 5-0. Jennings also got hit by a pitch in the eighth inning. Four hit batters in one game tied a club record, which has occurred four times in Rays history.

Even though the Royals reside in the basement of the American League Central, Maddon was complimentary of Kansas City's club. Meanwhile, Royals manager Ned Yost lamented about not being able to pull off the three-game sweep.

"Always. You win the first two games, you want to take the third game," Yost said. "We just matched up against a guy [Cobb] -- their guy pitched better than our guys today and that's plain and simple what happened."

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