



RAYS CLIPS

July 26, 2011

TAMPA BAY RAYS BLOW ANOTHER LEAD, LOSE 7-5 TO OAKLAND ATHLETICS

Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times

OAKLAND, Calif. — In talking before Monday's games about the potential for trades and the confidence he still had in his current squad, manager Joe Maddon essentially conceded the division race but said he felt — "very, very strongly" — that the Rays were "still a team that can get into the playoffs this year."

But by the end of the long night, that seemed an increasingly unlikely possibility as well, as the Rays turned another game they seemed to have in hand into a staggering defeat, 7-5 to Oakland.

And in the process, they fell to 53-48 and dropped 7½ games behind the wild-card leading Yankees (and stayed 9½ behind the first-place Red Sox), which could accelerate their effort to make trades, and expand the pool of candidates, before the Sunday deadline for nonwaiver deals as their postseason hopes diminish.

"We know it, man," said reliever J.P. Howell, who took the loss. "We've got to be close enough. We play the Red Sox and Yankees a bunch of times coming up, but we've got to win these games. We've just got to keep truckin' and going. The more we lose, the more steep a hill we're building for ourselves. And you don't want to do that. Especially with time ticking like it is right now."

The Rays led 5-2 after their sixth, getting home runs from Ben Zobrist and Kelly Shoppach, an RBI double by impressive rookie Desmond Jennings and a two-run go-ahead triple by B.J. Upton, who seems the mostly likely to go by Sunday.

But the bullpen, pressed into extra duty after an unimpressive five-plus inning outing by Jeremy Hellickson, failed again. And it was a team effort, with Brandon Gomes, Howell, Joel Peralta and Cesar Ramos all contributing to the losing effort as the game dragged until nearly 1:45 a.m. Tampa Bay time. They've lost nine of their last 13, and 14 of 23.

"We had a chance, we had a really good chance, to win that game. And we did not," Maddon said. "We did a lot of good things. ... Overall it was not a bad game. We just can not give up that kind of a lead."

In their past nine games, Rays relievers are 0-4 with a 5.16 ERA and have walked 28 in 29½ innings. Maddon said though recovered physically, they could still be feeling the effects of the 16-inning July 17 marathon with Boston and the resulting impact on their usage. "We've done some good things and we've done some not-so-good things," Maddon said.

Hellickson's short outing was the real problem Monday, as he forced Maddon to use more relievers for longer than he wanted. Hellickson threw too many pitches early — 70 in the first three innings — that Maddon couldn't let him go any deeper than one batter into the sixth, finishing with 106.

That wasn't much different than his last start, when he threw 66 in the first three innings against the Yankees, though he tightened up and worked seven, totaling 119.

"I've had a few games like this," Hellickson said. "I've tried to nibble a little bit too much and I end up throwing too many pitches and walking guys and going as deep as I'd like to."

After David DeJesus doubled on Hellickson's 106th and final pitch, Gomes allowed him to come around in the sixth, making it 5-3. The seventh was much worse, as Howell and Peralta combined to give up three runs. Howell allowed a one-out single to Hideki Matsui, a walk to Josh Willingham and an RBI single to DeJesus. Peralta didn't provide much relief, giving up a two-run double to Conor Jackson.

Ramos started the eighth with a walk, then allowed an RBI double to Coco Crisp.

The game was 2-2 when the Rays scored twice in the fifth.

Johnny Damon, booed by some of the crowd of 11,053, led off with a double, his 505th to tie Tony Perez for 48th all time. After an Evan Longoria walk, Matt Joyce fielder's choice grounder and a throwing error by second baseman Jemile Weeks, Upton, the subject of extensive trade rumors, delivered what could be a loud farewell, a shot that eluded Crisp and hit the wall for a two-run triple.

The Rays took a 1-0 lead in the first on Zobrist's home run, though the A's responded with Cliff Pennington's two-run shot with two out in the second. The Rays tied it when Sean Rodriguez led off the third with a single and scored on Jennings' double. That was Jennings' fourth extra-base hit in his first three games, more than three members of the Rays opening day lineup had for their seasons — Reid Brignac (three), Dan Johnson (two), Manny Ramirez (none).

The Rays went on to load the bases when Zobrist and Longoria walked (one of his career-high four), and that, as is their wont, turned out badly as Joyce flied out and Upton grounded out. That extended their streak of bases-loaded futility to 0-for-their-last-13, and dropped their AL-worst average to .206.

The game was played in cooler — and by the end actually chilly — temperatures, a welcome respite from the Kansas City heat. First pitch Monday was 63 degrees; Saturday was 101.

The A's were the only AL team the Rays had not faced, and Monday's game was the first of seven in an 11-day window.

TAMPA BAY RAYS SET TO TIE MARK FOR CONSECUTIVE GAMES STARTED BY PITCHERS YOUNGER THAN 30

Mark Topkin/St. Petersburg Times

OAKLAND, Calif. — When LHP David Price throws the first pitch tonight, the Rays will tie an obscure but interesting — and telling — major-league mark, their 704th consecutive game started by a pitcher under 30 years old.

The streak — which started after RHP Jae Seo pitched on his 30th birthday May 24, 2007 — will match the 1913-17 Washington Senators.

The Rays view it as a credit to their organizational philosophies (drafting or trading for young starters, not signing free agents), to their training and medical staff (using an MLB-low 14 starters in that span), and to their scouting and player development departments (the eight used this season were homegrown).

"It's a testament to the organization," said RHP James Shields, the senior member of the staff.

"Pretty special," said Price.

Making the accomplishment more significant, manager Joe Maddon said, is that the Rays have had a winning record in that stretch (377-326, fifth best in MLB) and been in the playoffs twice.

"Anybody could say, we've started a bunch of guys under 30 years of age and we're trying to become competitive," Maddon said. "We've been competitive. We've been there with this group. That's fantastic. I love that."

The Rays likely will extend the record to 764 at the end of the season. But Shields turns 30 in December, so if the Rays pick up his \$7 million option for 2012, their run will end quickly. "Hopefully," he said, "I get to stop that streak next year."

TRADE WINDS: CF B.J. Upton figuratively — and literally — threw up his arms Monday as speculation and rumors spread about possible trade destinations. "I've got nothing," he said.

While Upton's fate, and that of others such as Johnny Damon, could hinge on how the Rays play this week, Shields seemingly remains unlikely to be moved.

Maddon said Monday, as he told Sirius/XM Radio, that he has discussed 64-66 trade scenarios with executive VP Andrew Friedman and none involved Shields. "We have not discussed that," Maddon said.

There seem to be many possibilities for Upton, with the already-mentioned Braves, Giants, Indians, Nationals and Phillies "joined" Monday by the Pirates and (with an eye to 2012) Royals.

If the amount of interest being reported is anywhere close to the reality, and the Rays can get the kind of top-shelf young players they typically want, Upton would seem likely to be traded by Sunday's 4 p.m. deadline for non-waiver deals.

The Rays would have several reasons: His arbitration-driven salary, expected to exceed \$7 million in 2012; his inconsistent play; having Desmond Jennings to replace him.

Also, that the Rays have made several runs at signing Upton to a long-term deal without agreeing, making it likely he would leave as a free agent after next season anyway. So unless the Rays think they can get more in the offseason or next July, it would make sense to act now if they get the proper return.

As of Monday night anyway, it had been just speculation. How wild? In a four-hour span Monday, a Baltimore-area radio reporter posted on Twitter that the Phillies were in talks to get Upton, then that the Phillies had no interest in him, then that he was headed to Washington.

PITCHING IN: RHP Alex Cobb said the blister on his right index finger that forced him from Sunday's game was already healing and he, and the trainers, are confident he will make his next start on Saturday. ... RHP Adam Russell, designated for assignment last week, cleared waivers and will join Triple-A Durham.

MISCELLANY: President Matt Silverman joined the team for the rest of the trip. ... 3B Evan Longoria, after a career-high tying four strikeouts on Sunday, drew a career-high four walks on Monday. ... Price got to hang out Sunday night with fellow Vanderbilt product RHP Sonny Gray, the A's top pick who signed Monday. ... Several players — skirting the Rays usual no-fast food policy — were munching pregame on the west-coast favored In-N-Out burgers.

TAMPA BAY RAYS: NAME OF OAKLAND A'S BALLPARK CERTAINLY STANDS OUT

Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times

Rays vs. A's

When/where: 10:07 tonight; O.co Coliseum, Oakland, Calif.

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

Starting pitchers:

RAYS: LH David Price (9-8, 3.67)

A'S: RH Brandon McCarthy (2-5, 3.74)

Watch for ...

Price check: Price is coming off a solid but unsuccessful start vs. the Yankees, beaten by a two-run HR in the first. Price has allowed long balls in a career-high four straight starts. He is 1-0, 2.63 in two starts at Oakland.

Branded: McCarthy, 28, joined the A's this season after four in the Texas organization and five with the White Sox. Injuries and inconsistency are usually issues. He is 1-4, 4.28 in seven appearances vs. Rays.

Key matchups

Rays vs. McCarthy

Johnny Damon 1-for-5, HR

Casey Kotchman 4-for-8

Kelly Shoppach 3-for-6, 2 HRs

A's vs. Price

Coco Crisp 1-for-4

David DeJesus 1-for-5

Kurt Suzuki 0-for-2

On deck

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 — Blake Beavan (1-2, 3.04) or Erik Bedard (4-6, 3.00)

Saturday: at Mariners, 4:10, Ch. 13. Rays — Alex Cobb (3-0, 2.57); Mariners — Michael Pineda (8-7, 3.64)

Odd name of the day

Since June, the official name of the Oakland stadium is the O.co Coliseum. The O is for the sponsor, Overstock.com. The .co is a newly available domain chosen — literally — to get customers to the site more quickly.

List of the day

The 14 under-30 starters used by the Rays during their 703-game run, with their number of starts:

Pitcher Starts

James Shields 142

Matt Garza 94

Andy Sonnanstine 80

David Price 76

Jeff Niemann 73

Scott Kazmir 71

Edwin Jackson 54

Pitcher Starts

Wade Davis 53

Jeremy Hellickson 22
Jason Hammel 19
J.P. Howell 10
Alex Cobb 7
Casey Fossum 1
Mitch Talbot 1

Number of the day

25 Rays games started by rookie pitchers, most in the majors this season.

DESMOND JENNINGS MAKES INSTANT IMPACT WITH TAMPA BAY RAYS

Marc Topkin/St. Petersburg Times

OAKLAND, Calif. — Desmond Jennings insisted he was not growing frustrated with his extended three-season stay at Triple-A Durham.

But he is sure playing like he is making up for lost time.

Finally called up Friday and put atop the Rays lineup, Jennings is off to a sensational start, going 6-for-11 with four extra-base hits, stealing three bases and showing off his blazing speed with a dazzling dash to score from first Saturday.

Manager Joe Maddon, who will read as much into a player's look as his actions, said he could tell from the first moment he saw Jennings on Saturday afternoon in Kansas City that he was prepared to grasp the opportunity.

"When he walked into the clubhouse in K.C. I could see in his face that he was ready," Maddon said Monday. "That's really an abstract comment, but he just looked comfortable. He looked confident. Ready to go. I just saw that. There was no fear, apprehension, anything about him. He demonstrated that in the (first) two games. And I think it's going to continue."

In his first three games, Jennings, 24, has exceeded his production from his 17-game introduction to the majors last September (when he was 4-for-21, hitting .190), impressing with his instincts and his athleticism.

Obviously he has a better idea what to expect, and he's coming off a better season with the Bulls. But he is also more comfortable, with both the opportunity to play every day the Rays are providing and the role — as the leadoff hitter — he is used to filling.

"I've felt good at the plate," Jennings said. "That's what I've been doing pretty much my whole career. And doing that here, that's made me feel better. I just feel like my job is to get on base, however I can."

And he said knowing he will be in the lineup every day allows him to play more relaxed.

Maddon said the key to success for Jennings is working at-bats — taking balls, swinging at strikes and fouling off borderline pitches. He did it well during his breakout 2009 season in the minors — when he hit a combined .318 between Double-A Montgomery and Durham with an .888 OPS (on-base plus slugging percentage) — and last year not so much (hitting .278 at Durham with a .755 OPS).

"That's what he's supposed to be," Maddon said. "Last year the at-bats weren't as brisk. This year he started getting the ability to work the at-bat back."

Jennings said there wasn't any major change in his approach either season, but he knew what the Rays were looking for and was trying to show them.

"I figured I'd get here when they felt like it was time for me to be here," he said.

Jennings started in left again Monday but is considered a natural centerfielder, which makes him the heir apparent if the Rays trade B.J. Upton by Sunday's deadline for non-waiver deals.

"Absolutely he's got centerfield qualities — the speed, the range," Maddon said. "Probably the arm is not what you would consider above average, but it's definitely average or right around there. So if he had one tool that doesn't necessarily fit all the way it might be his arm strength, but everything else plays at a very high level."

The explosive speed invites comparisons to former Rays All-Star Carl Crawford. "Kind of a similar skill set," Maddon acknowledged.

HELLICKSON, BULLPEN STRUGGLE AS RAYS FALL 7-5 TO A'S

Roger Mooney/Tampa Tribune

About the only positive coming out of Monday's Tampa Bay Rays game was most of the fan base was asleep when the bullpen melted down against the Oakland A's.

Oh, and Desmond Jennings continues to hit and Ben Zobrist added to his major league-lead in doubles.

Starter Jeremy Hellickson has a chance to be the first rookie pitcher in the major leagues this season to win 10 games, but struggled to get through five innings.

But the Rays' bullpen allowed the final five runs as the A's rallied for a 7-5 victory at O.co Coliseum in front of 11,053 very noisy A's fans.

Still, Hellickson turned a 4-2 lead over to the bullpen.

But J.P. Howell and Joel Peralta couldn't make it stand, as Howell was tagged with his second loss of the season.

The Rays are now 1-3 on this cross-country, 10-game road trip.

After going seven games scoring four runs or less, the Rays offense managed to score at least five times for the second straight game.

Zobrist got things going with his 12th home run of the season, a solo shot over the right field wall with two outs in the top of the first inning. Zobrist doubled in his final two at-bats, and now has 33 two-base hits this season.

Hellickson allowed a two-out, two-run homer to Cliff Pennington in the second inning that put the A's up 2-1.

Hellickson, coming off a gutty, seven-inning performance against the Yankees in his previous outing, needed 106 pitches to get through five innings.

He allowed three runs on four hits and walked four. Pennington's home run was ran Hellickson's streak of games in which he allowed at least one home run to seven. He's allowed nine homers over that stretch.

The Rays tied the score at 2-2 in the third inning when Sean Rodriguez reached on a leadoff single, and Jennings followed with run-scoring double to left field. That was third double for Jennings in as many games since his call-up Saturday from Triple A Durham.

Johnny Damon's leadoff double in the fifth started a two-run inning. He eventually scored when Matt Joyce hit into a fielder's choice. Joyce, who went to second on a throwing error by A's second baseman Jamile Weeks.

Joyce scored when B.J. Upton smacked his first triple of the season, a drive to center field that eluded Coco Crisp, who slammed into the wall trying to make the catch.

The Rays made it a 5-2 game in the sixth when Kelly Shoppach hit his sixth home run of the season.

But the A's, who swung the bats well over the weekend despite losing two of three to the Yankees in the Bronx, pecked away at the lead until Conor Jackson tied the score in the seventh with a two-run double that short-hopped the wall in left-center field.

David DeJesus doubled and scored in the sixth to make it 5-3.

The A's went ahead with three in the seventh.

A single by DeJesus off Howell drove in Hideki Matsui to make it a 5-4 game. It also put runners on the corners, and with the right-handed Jackson coming to the plate, manager Joe Maddon called for Peralta.

All three runs were charged to Howell, who has allowed 21 runs/18 earned in 17 2/3 innings this season.

RAY'S NOTES: PRICE IN SEARCH OF TURNAROUND

Roger Mooney/Tampa Tribune

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Tampa Bay Rays LHP **David Price** starts tonight against the A's, bringing more losses into the game than he had during either of his first two seasons.

Price, 19-6 with a 2.72 ERA last season when he finished runner-up in the AL Cy Young Award voting, is 9-8 with a 3.67 ERA.

"It happens," Price said. "I happened to (**Matt**) **Garza** in '09. It happens. (**James**) **Shields** is one game over .500, he's a Cy Young contender. That's how it happens sometimes. Obviously you wish it could change, that we could score 15 runs a game, but that's not going to happen."

Price, who allowed two runs on a first-inning home run against the Yankees during his previous start, is 9-2 this season when the Rays score three or more runs. He's 0-6 when they don't.

That home run by **Curtis Granderson** — only the fourth homer Price has allowed during his career to a left-handed batter — made it four straight games in which Price has allowed a home run. That's a career-long for Price.

"It stinks," Price said, adding he wants to do a better job of moving his pitches around the strike zone to keep the ball in the park.

Roll Ray!

Both Price and manager **Joe Maddon** said Monday they believe the Rays are very much in the hunt for a playoff spot but acknowledged the immediate need for a winning streak.

"We got to start winning, put some games together, put some series together, hopefully mix in some sweeps," Price said. "In order for us to get back in this thing we have to start winning more games. I feel everybody in here knows that, and I feel everybody in here knows that we need to step it up a little bit."

The Rays, who began Monday night 9 1/2 games behind the first-place Red Sox and 6 1/2 games behind the wild card-leading Yankees, were looking to win two straight for the first time since July 6-7. The Rays haven't had a three-game winning streak since winning four straight from June 22-26.

"We're still a team that can get into the playoffs this year," Maddon said. "I feel very, very strongly about that. We have a good run in us yet."

The trade front

Despite dozen of rumors, the Rays have yet to make a trade.

When asked if he had heard anything from executive vice president of baseball operations **Andrew Friedman**, Maddon said, "I have not spoken to Andrew at all (Monday), so I have not heard anything new or exciting."

Maddon did tell XM/Sirius sports talk radio host **Jim Bowden** that he had "65" conversations with Friedman and none involved Shields.

"I don't know if I said 65," Maddon said. "It might have been 66. It could have been 64."

Starters in the 'pen

Shields and RHP **Wade Davis** threw their bullpen sessions during Sunday's game in Kansas City, and Maddon said that might be something that continues as he moves forward without a long man in the bullpen so he can use a six-man rotation.

Nice start

OF **Desmond Jennings** is the first player in team history to reach base four times during his first two games of the season.

He joined **Brent Abernathy** as the only rookies to do that during any point of the season.

The last Ray to reach base four times in consecutive games was **Jason Bartlett** (Aug. 4-5, 2009).

Kids are alright

The Rays have used 13 rookies this season, which is the most in the majors and only three shy of the team record 16 used in 2001. The eight rookie pitchers are tied for the major-league lead. Six of those rookies made their major-league debut this season.

RHP **Jeremy Hellickson** (17 starts) and RHP **Alex Cobb** (seven) have combined for 24 starts, tied with Seattle for the most by rookie pitchers.

Noteworthy

RHP **Adam Russell** cleared waivers and will report to Durham. ... The A's are the last team the Rays have faced this season.

YOUTH SERVES RAYS WELL ON THE MOUND

Roger Mooney/Tampa Tribune

OAKLAND, Calif. -- There was seven innings from James Shields and not exactly a shutdown job from the bullpen on May 25, 2007, and the game turned into another loss in another last-place season. But what Shields did that night in Chicago continues today.

It was the first of what are now 703 consecutive Rays games started by a pitcher who has yet to celebrate his 30th birthday.

The streak reaches 704 tonight when David Price faces the A's in O.co Coliseum, tying the Washington Senators for the longest such streak in Major League Baseball history. The Senators, led by Hall of Famer Walter Johnson, set the record from 1913 to 1917.

"I don't think this would mean as much to me if we had lost 100 games every year," said Shields, who will pitch the record-breaker Wednesday. "I don't think it would really matter. But the fact that we won two American League titles over the last three years, the fact we went to the World Series in 2008, it's pretty special. We have a special group of guys that have gone through this organization. I'm just glad to be a part of it."

The Rays used 14 pitchers during the streak. But two — Casey Fossum and Mitch Talbot — made one start each, so the streak really was compiled by a dozen pitchers.

"That's pretty good to use that (few) pitchers regardless of their age, in that many seasons," manager Joe Maddon said.

Jae Seo turned 30 on May 24, 2007. He started that day against the Mariners at Tropicana Field.

That was Seo's last start for Tampa Bay. If he had not started that day, The Big Train and his mates would already be in the Rays' rearview mirror, and the streak would be about to reach 835, stretching to a start by Mark Hendrickson on June 25, 2006, against Atlanta.

Price said the credit goes to the Rays' training staff, head athletic trainer Ron Porterfield and his staff and strength and conditioning coordinator Kevin Barr.

"They do a great job of getting our arms ready to the point where we're ready for a full season," he said.

Shields agreed.

"We pride ourselves in trying to stay healthy," he said. "We pride ourselves in getting the work in and staying healthy and the trainers are a big part of it. As far as I'm concerned, I haven't been anywhere else, but they're the best."

Tonight will be Shields's 143rd start during the streak.

Matt Garza is next with 94. He's followed by Andy Sonnanstine (80), Price (76), Jeff Niemann (73), Scott Kazmir (71), Edwin Jackson (54), Wade Davis (53), Jeremy Hellickson (21), Jason Hammel (19), J.P. Howell (10), Alex Cobb (seven), Fossum and Talbot.

Eight of those 14 were drafted by the Rays, including all seven to start games this season.

Three — Kazmir, Price and Shields — were All-Stars. Price finished second in 2010 Cy Young Award voting after winning 19 games. Six have started postseason games.

"Anybody can say we started a bunch of guys under 30 years of age and we're trying to become competitive, Maddon said. "We've been competitive. We've been there with this group. I think that's fantastic."

The streak will continue through the end of the season.

"Hopefully I get to stop that streak next year," Shields said.

He turns 30 on Dec. 20.

"Trade him," Price said.

"I wouldn't go that far," Shields said.

Price had another idea.

"If he breaks camp with us next year just put him in the five-hole so we get four extra ones," Price said. "Maybe would can skip him his first couple of starts. I'm sure he'll be fine with that."

RAYS' BULLPEN STUMBLES IN LOSS TO A'S

Bill Chastain/MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Tampa Bay could not hold a three-run lead Monday night while dropping a 7-5 contest to Oakland at O.co Coliseum with 11,053 watching.

The Rays have now lost nine of their last 13 games after losing the opener of a four-game series against the Athletics, the only American League club they had not played this season. In addition, they moved to 1-3 on the current 10-game road trip, in which the schedule makers appeared to provide the Rays a nice opportunity to get back into the pennant race with stops in Kansas City, Oakland, and Seattle.

Instead, Kansas City, which resides in last place in the Central, and Oakland, which entered Monday night's contest 13 games under .500, have extracted their pound of flesh from Tampa Bay, which fell to 53-48 on the season.

With the series loss in Kansas City, the Rays are 1-5-1 in their last seven series after going 5-1-0 in their previous six series. Monday night's loss did not bode well for reversing that troubling trend.

Oakland remains a graveyard for Tampa Bay, which is now 18-44 all-time at the Coliseum.

Jeremy Hellickson started for the Rays and pitched into the sixth inning, but he got lifted due to his elevated pitch count of 106 pitches.

"We didn't get our normal pitching tonight," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "I mean [Hellickson] with better command had a chance to go a lot deeper in that game. We needed him to do that to set up the bullpen properly. I couldn't let him go any longer than what we did."

Brandon Gomes took over for Hellickson after David DeJesus doubled to open the sixth. Scott Sizemore's sacrifice fly off Gomes cut the Rays' lead to 5-3. J.P. Howell replaced Gomes with two outs and got the final out of the inning, but he ran into trouble in the seventh when he allowed a one-out single to Hideki Matsui then walked Josh Willingham. DeJesus followed with an RBI single to right that cut the Rays' lead to 5-4.

"Getting behind, that's a no-no with me," Howell said. "If I attack them, if I'm in the zone, the hitters don't want to see me in the zone early on. If I get behind they get a little more confident naturally. And that does a lot as you saw tonight."

Joel Peralta replaced Howell to face Conor Jackson, who ripped a double to deep center field to drive home two and give the Athletics a 6-5 lead.

Jackson pointed to better plate discipline for helping to fuel the Athletics' offense lately.

"I think that's what's been helping us turn around our offensive woes," Jackson said. "I think it's just apparent everybody's not chasing like they have in the past. We're working counts, we're taking our walks and we're swinging at pitches in the zone. When you do that, it makes it a little bit fun. Obviously, I think our offense is definitely starting to turn around. "

Maddon said he still had faith in Howell and Peralta.

"It's just one of those nights where it didn't work," Maddon said. "Overall it was not a bad game. We just can't give up that kind of lead."

Once Oakland took the lead, it employed an old Tampa Bay friend, Grant Balfour, to pitch an immaculate eighth. Andrew Bailey got the final three outs to preserve the win and earn his 12th save of the season.

Sadly for the Rays, they did not pitch on a night when they got some offense.

Ben Zobrist got the Rays off to a good start with a solo home run in the first on a 2-1 pitch from Guillermo Moscoso. Cliff Pennington answered for the Athletics in the second with a two-run homer off Hellickson to put the Rays behind a run.

Hellickson has now surrendered 14 home runs on the season and at least one home run in each of his last seven starts.

Desmond Jennings had an RBI double in the third to tie the game at 2. But typifying the Rays' recent offensive woes, they loaded the bases with one out and could not push home any more runs.

Matt Joyce hit into a fielder's choice to drive home a run in the fifth and B.J. Upton added a two-out RBI triple to give the Rays a 4-2 lead. Kelly Shoppach hit his sixth home run of the season in the sixth to put the Rays up by three.

On the bright side for Tampa Bay, first-place Boston did lose, leaving the Rays 9 1/2 games out of first. But clearly, the season feels like it's slipping away for the Rays.

"We play the Red Sox and Yankees a bunch of times coming up," Howell said. "But we've got to win these games. We just have to keep truckin' ... the more we lose, the steeper hill we're building for ourselves. Especially when time is ticking like it is right now."
