

Oakland A's lose fourth straight game

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- At least the A's lineup looked different Friday, as shortstop Cliff Pennington and right fielder David DeJesus returned to action against the Tampa Bay Rays.

The final outcome?

All too familiar to manager Bob Melvin, after the A's lost 8-4 at Tropicana Field for their fourth straight defeat to start a nine-game road trip.

"We dig ourselves some holes on the road that we have to come back from, and that's not a good recipe for success," Melvin said.

The A's fell behind 4-0 before Coco Crisp's two-run homer pulled them to within two runs in the top of the sixth. Then the Rays struck for three runs in the bottom half against reliever Craig Breslow to break things open, 7-2.

Oakland fell to 7-30 in its past 37 road games. Their 18-39 overall road record is the major leagues' worst based on winning percentage.

However, the A's were happy to welcome back Pennington, who missed two games after being diagnosed with Bell's palsy on Monday night, and DeJesus, who missed four games with a right thumb injury.

Pennington had an RBI triple in the A's two-run ninth, with the outcome well-decided.

He is still feeling minor effects from Bell's palsy, a nerve condition that causes partial facial paralysis. He still doesn't have full movement on the left side of his face, and he will remain on medication for now.

Pennington also is wearing protective glasses while playing defense. The A's ordered the glasses from Nike, and Pennington took the field wearing a black-framed pair.

"It's not gone," Pennington said of the Bell's palsy. "The glasses are just for protection since the blink reflex (in my left eye) isn't quite right."

Pennington had never experienced any symptoms of Bell's palsy before Sunday night, when he began having trouble closing his left eye.

By Friday, he was feeling fortunate that the condition appears under control.

Many Bell's palsy patients continue experiencing some degree of paralysis for several months.

"The trainers did a great job, and the doctor in Seattle (Mariners team physician Mitch Storey) was awesome about getting medicine to me quick," Pennington said. "I think that was the key to the whole thing."

Pennington made all the plays that came his way at shortstop. After striking out twice and popping up, he tripled down the left-field line to drive in the A's final run in the ninth.

Hideki Matsui, who went 2 for 4 and lifted his average to .268, hit a solo homer earlier in the inning. Matsui extended his hitting streak to 13 games, and his .479 average after the All-Star break leads the major leagues.

Rays starter Jeff Niemann (6-4) was denied a complete game when manager Joe Maddon pulled him with two outs in the ninth.

Melvin talked before the game about his team needing to be more aggressive on the road and "take it to the other team more."

Rookie leadoff man Jemile Weeks tried to do just that in the top of the first, but it snuffed out a potential rally.

Weeks, a native of Orlando, Fla., about 100 miles up Interstate 4, drew a walk and stole second with Coco Crisp hitting. He immediately tried to steal third and was thrown out by Rays catcher Robinson Chirinos.

"With nobody out and a left-handed hitter up, you've got to make sure you can steal it," Melvin said. "We want to be aggressive in the first inning, but that probably goes too far."

A's starter Guillermo Moscoso (4-6) lasted just 42/3 innings and is 1-2 with a 7.40 ERA in his past four starts.

Shaky Breslow gets hit from both sides of plate

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Left-handed hitters have given A's reliever Craig Breslow the most headaches this season.

On Friday, it didn't matter which side opponents were batting.

Breslow surrendered three runs on four hits in the bottom of the sixth, an eight-batter rally that helped the Tampa Bay Rays break things open and send the A's to an 8-4 loss.

All three runs were unearned, courtesy of Breslow's error on a comebacker.

There haven't been many clean innings lately for the left-hander, who has allowed 12 hits and eight runs (five earned) in his past eight outings, covering six innings.

Three of the four hits he surrendered Friday came against right-handers, including Ben Zobrist's two-run single and B.J. Upton's RBI single.

"He just couldn't put hitters away. The ball was up in the zone," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "With Zobrist he had a 2-2 count, he's gotta make a better pitch."

Breslow's biggest struggles have come against lefties, surprising considering they hit .181 off him in 2010.

Breslow is allowing lefties a .409 average (27 for 66) this season as opposed to .258 (23 for 89) to right-handers.

"They're hitting fastballs when I'm thinking about getting ahead, as opposed to letting it get deeper in the count where I can throw a breaking ball and get them to chase it," Breslow said of lefties.

Tropicana Field has some of the quirkiest characteristics, so Melvin said it was important for players to track fly balls during batting practice.

"The roof, the catwalks (that ring the stadium) ... the pinball machine-type stuff is a little bit of an issue," he said. "But everybody has to deal with it."

Sure enough, Matt Joyce's pop-up to shallow right in the second inning turned A's second baseman Jemile Weeks in a circle and fell for a hit.

One player who said he looked forward to returning to Tropicana Field was reliever Grant Balfour, who spent the previous three seasons with the Rays before signing a two-year deal with the A's in the winter.

He entered in the eighth inning and was charged with a run in two-thirds of an inning, though Upton's run-scoring triple came off Andrew Bailey.

Chin Music: Turning back time at Tropicana Field

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 8/5/2011 3:31pm

Well, it's 80's night at Tropicana Field, and since I was off the day the A's held their 80's night, I'm glad I'm here for this one. I graduated from high school in 1993, but my music taste is hopelessly stuck in the prior decade. The Go-Go's are playing a postgame concert, and I'm actually excited to see them. I'm feeling absolutely no shame in that last sentence. I make no apology for being a fan of the 80's hair bands, so admitting I get into the Go-Go's ain't nothin'. And the Goo-Goo Dolls are playing a postgame show Saturday night, so we'll get our 90's fix too.

–As I've written before, it's always a quirky scene at the Trop. It's baseball under a tent, and there's always the chance of a homer hitting one of the catwalks. A's manager Bob Melvin referred to it as "pinball machine-type stuff." Well put ... On a serious note, Melvin said it's crucial that outfielders take enough fly balls during batting practice so they get used to tracking the ball.

–Shortstop Cliff Pennington returns to the lineup. He's still feeling the effects of Bell's palsy (the blink reflex in his left eye still isn't normal), but he said he's good enough to play. He does have to wear protective glasses while on defense. The lenses are clear and non-prescription. The A's ordered them from Nike, and Pennington had black and white frames to choose from. "We'll see what the guys think," he said. I saw him taking the black ones out to batting practice.

–Right fielder David DeJesus is back from a sore right thumb too.

Here's the lineups:

A's — Weeks 2B, Crisp CF, Matsui DH, Willingham LF, DeJesus RF, Jackson 1B, Pennington SS, Suzuki C, Sizemore 3B; Moscoso RHP.

Rays — Jennings LF, Damon DH, Longoria 3B, Zobrist 2B, Kotchman 1B, Upton CF, Joyce RF, Chirinos C, Rodriguez SS; Niemann RHP.

**POP QUIZ: Who can name more than two Go-Go's songs without turning to Google? There's no prize if you're able to, just a boatload of respect from yours truly

Another slow start for A's in 8-4 loss to Rays

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Before Friday's game, manager Bob Melvin noted that, on the road, his team seems to be slow to get going - passive, almost - and then often stages comebacks that are just not quite enough.

That was just the formula the team followed at Tropicana Field in an 8-4 loss to the Rays, and Oakland has dropped the first four games of a nine-game, 6,544-mile road trip. The A's got little offense early on, and after a strong first few innings, their own starter, Guillermo Moscoso, hit a bump.

"We dig ourselves holes we have to come back from," Melvin said after the game. "That's not a great recipe."

Jemile Weeks had tried to get the team going a little too much in the first inning, stealing second but then getting thrown out trying to steal third with nobody out. Melvin said that it was his fault for failing to put on the red-light sign.

"I tried to do a little too much," Weeks said. "It wasn't the right time."

The A's first hit off Tampa Bay starter Jeff Niemann didn't come until the fourth inning, when Hideki Matsui singled with one out. In the fifth, Weeks singled to open the inning and Coco Crisp drilled a homer down the line in right. Crisp is batting .344 over the past 16 games.

Matsui hit a solo homer in the ninth, giving him 10 for the season, and Cliff Pennington, after missing the previous two games with Bell's palsy, cracked a two-out RBI triple.

Moscoso kept up a trend of stifling opponents one time through the order or so and then tailing off. The A's starter didn't give up a run in the first three innings Friday but allowed four runs in the next 1 2/3 innings. Overall, he has allowed just five runs in the first three innings of games, an ERA of 1.24, but from the fourth inning on, his ERA stands at 6.29. Melvin thought Moscoso "hit a wall," that his stuff was up a little bit and he wasn't finishing as well.

In the sixth, the Rays added three more against left-hander Craig Breslow, but none were earned because of his error on a sharp comebacker by Johnny Damon. Breslow said he thought the ball was hit harder than it was and closed his glove before he had it.

"If something could go wrong, it probably did," Breslow said of his inning.

A wild pitch put men at second and third, and Breslow allowed three consecutive two-out singles; Ben Zobrist's sent in two runs and B.J. Upton's one.

Melvin said of the 2-2 pitch to Zobrist, "He has to make a better pitch, and he knows that. He left the ball up over the plate. ... We need to get him right. We need him when we get ahead in the seventh."

Pennington has improved each day, but he was wearing clear lenses in the same sunglasses he usually wears in the field on bright days, a precautionary measure to protect the left eye.

Outfielder David DeJesus was wearing a pad on his right thumb while batting after missing four games with soreness in that area.

A's reliever Grant Balfour dislikes 'tough spot'

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Grant Balfour would have returned to the Rays if it had worked out last winter. The Oakland reliever enjoyed his time with Tampa Bay, which included a trip to the World Series.

He signed a two-year deal with the A's during the offseason in part because he felt Oakland would be a contender. After a taste of winning with the Rays, Balfour wants to go back to the postseason.

"I definitely signed here for that reason," Balfour said Friday. "Looking at this team, I thought we'd be better in the standings than we are, and now we're in a tough spot. But we can't worry about it; we'll just take each day as it comes and see what happens at the end of it all."

Like everyone, Balfour is baffled by the team's inability to get the various parts of the game in sync. When they pitch, they don't hit, and vice versa.

"When we did get it together a few times, we've showed what kind of team we are," he said. "But you have to do both at the same time. If we did, we'd be good, no doubt about it."

Balfour had a 14 2/3 -inning scoreless streak, tied for the longest of his career, come to an end Friday. He has allowed only two runs in his past 20 games.

Weeks weekend: Jemile Weeks jokingly estimated that "a third" of Orlando, his hometown, would be at the games at Tampa Bay, the rookie's first big-league appearance in his home state.

Weeks' grandfather, **Victor Weeks**, a former Negro Leagues player, was in attendance. Victor Weeks is blind, but his grandson said he knows exactly what's happening in the game.

"Pretty much all I know about baseball is from him," Jemile Weeks said. "It went from him, to my dad (**Rickie Sr.**), to my brother (**Rickie Weeks** of the Brewers) to me. That's big."

Weeks entered Friday batting .180 in his past 11 games, but he said, "That's part of the game. You make do."

Manager **Bob Melvin** said at some point he might move Weeks in the lineup, but he's not considering it right now.

"He's a guy who doesn't back down, he doesn't fear a whole lot," Melvin said. "I look for him to pick it up here."

Weeks had a single and a walk and scored a run on Friday night.

Leading off

Where is Lady Gaga? They're calling it the "Go-Go/Goo-Goo weekend" at Tropicana Field, where the Go-Go's played postgame Friday and the Goo Goo Dolls play tonight. All five Go-Go's threw first pitches at the same time, wildly, sending Rays players scrambling.

Drumbeat: A's lineup includes Cliff Pennington, David DeJesus

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Tropicana Field 2:43pm 8/5/2011

Cliff Pennington is back after missing two games with Bell's Palsy - he's much improved, although he still can't move all the muscles on the left side of the face. He raised his eyebrows for us and he looks like half of a Botox ad - one side just doesn't move. He's wearing clear lenses in his usual sunglasses as protection for his left eye, but he can blink so it doesn't sound as if the glasses are anything more than cautionary, especially considering the climate-controlled dome.

Of course, specs-wearing infielder Eric Sogard is in favor. "It's helps the look," he said of Pennington's glasses.

David DeJesus also is in the lineup after missing four games with right thumb soreness. He is wearing a pad on the thumb, and he's still getting a little accustomed to it. He's worn the pad for two batting practices, and he said it cushions the area that had discomfort well. He had surgery on that same thumb last year, but he said it's unclear if this soreness is any way related.

When I asked him how he was doing, I had to laugh, because DeJesus replied, "Dec." I was wondering how to make that appear in print - "deece"? - and Coco Crisp suggested "dec(ent)." Put that man on the copy desk!

Jemile Weeks has most of his family in attendance, including his grandfather, Victor, who played in the Negro Leagues. Weeks is from Orlando and he said, jokingly, he expects about "a third of the town" to be here.

Weeks has been in a little funk lately, hitting .180 in the past 11 games, and he said it's just one of those baseball things, a sting of fouling off the best pitch in an at-bat, lining out, having a great play made against him. He said pitchers are working him different than when he first came up - but he said that started about two weeks into his big-league career.

Manager Bob Melvin said that Weeks is an aggressive player who likes a challenge, and, he said, "I look for him to pick it up here." With a third of Orlando rooting him on, that would be some good timing.

Melvin said that moving Weeks in the lineup could be an option at some point (as it could with anyone, he was quick to note), but it's not something he's considering right now.

Here's tonight's lineup behind Guillermo Moscoso: Weeks 2b, Crisp cf, Matsui DH, Willingham lf, DeJesus rf, Jackson 1b, Pennington ss, Suzuki c, Sizemore 3b.

It's 80s Night here at Tropicana Field, and much as I loved the A's 80's weekend and MC Hammer, I'm even more excited for tonight, because the Go-Go's are playing postgame. We didn't get any concert from Hammer, plus... the Go-Go's! They're also all throwing out the first pitch, multiple throws to multiple catchers, and I hear that the pre-game throwing practice wasn't entirely smooth - a little bit of wildness, and not the effective sort.

It's the Goo Goo Dolls here tomorrow night, and they're calling it the Go-Go/Goo-Goo weekend. Yes, the standard joke for the series is, "but they couldn't get Lady Gaga for Sunday."

A's fall in early hole and can't dig out

Moscoso touched for four runs before exiting in fifth inning

By Anthony Chiang / MLB.com

ST. PETERSBURG -- Bob Melvin looked like a prophet after Friday's game.

In his pregame media session, the Oakland manager gave his reasoning behind his team's struggles on the road: a lack of aggressiveness that translated into early deficits.

Hours later, Melvin looked to be right as the A's fell behind in the fourth and eventually lost to the Rays, 8-4, on Friday in front of 15,168 at Tropicana Field. Oakland has now lost 30 of its past 37 road games.

"We just keep plugging away," Melvin said. "We dig ourselves some holes on the road that we have to come back from, and that's not a great recipe for success. It's one of the reasons we're struggling on the road."

Oakland tried to take an aggressive approach early, it just didn't work. After Jemile Weeks earned a walk to lead off the game, he stole second but was caught stealing third with no outs.

"Ultimately, that's my fault because I didn't put a red light on," Melvin said. "I want him to be aggressive, we wanted to be aggressive in the first inning, but that probably goes a little bit too far."

Three scoreless innings ensued, but the A's fell behind in the fourth and never recovered -- something that has become a trend.

The Rays pulled out to the early 1-0 lead with Robinson Chirinos' seventh career RBI. After grounding out with runners in scoring position in his first at-bat, Chirinos earned some redemption in the fourth when he hit a sharp grounder back to pitcher Guillermo Moscoso with the bases loaded. The ball deflected off Moscoso's foot, allowing Ben Zobrist to score from third, before Chirinos was thrown out at first base.

However, Moscoso escaped the inning with just one run after inducing a groundout by Sean Rodriguez.

Moscoso wasn't so lucky in the fifth.

Tampa Bay scored three in the frame. Evan Longoria drove in the first run after roping a double into the left-center field gap. Moscoso wasn't able to limit the damage this time. Casey Kotchman pulled a two-out double down the right-field line to bump the Rays' lead up to three runs.

Kotchman's hit chased Moscoso. But with a runner still on base, he was charged with another run when Matt Joyce hit a single off reliever Fautino De Los Santos to left field, scoring Kotchman.

After his start, Moscoso said his stuff was there Friday, but the execution was missing.

"My velocity was good and my breaking ball was down," he said. "Everything was good, I just didn't make the right pitch -- that's all."

Melvin echoed his pitcher's comments.

"I thought his stuff was pretty good, and then it looked like he hit a wall," he said. "Everything was up a little bit and he couldn't finish his breaking ball."

Moscoso lasted 4 2/3 innings and allowed four runs on six hits. The right-hander has posted a 1-2 record and a 7.40 ERA in four starts since he was recalled on July 19.

The A's eventually scored their first runs of the game in the sixth on a two-run homer by Coco Crisp -- his fifth of the season.

It was too late, though. The Rays added three runs in the sixth with a pair of two-out singles from Ben Zobrist and B.J. Upton. Oakland reliever Craig Breslow helped set up the threat by committing an error on a ball hit up the middle, causing the three runs to be unearned.

"I thought it was coming at me a little harder than it was," Breslow said. "So, I kind of reacted and put my glove out, and started to close my glove before the ball got there. It just kind of kicked off the heel of the mostly closed glove."

That was more than Jeff Niemann would need. The 6-foot-9 right-hander dominated for most of the game, allowing four runs in 8 2/3 innings and striking out eight.

Rays manager Joe Maddon opted to pull Niemann in the ninth after he allowed a pair of Oakland runners to cross the plate -- one on a home run from Hideki Matsui and another on a triple by Cliff Pennington.

"It was tough, but Joe gave me every chance possible to try and finish that game," Niemann said. "It just wasn't in the cards."

Matsui was 2-for-4 at the plate and extended his hitting streak to 13 games Friday.

"Once again, we continue to put some better at-bats on later in the game when we're down." Melvin said, "But we need to find a way to do it earlier in the game when we can get a lead."

The A's will have to wait another day to break their trend of digging an early hole.

"It's not in our heads," Weeks said. "We've just got to pick it up. We have to come up in the first inning and try to make a mark."

Balfour returns to mound where he thrived

By Anthony Chiang / MLB.com

ST. PETERSBURG -- Friday did not mark the first time Grant Balfour reunited with his former teammates since signing with Oakland in the offseason, but it was the first time he returned to Tropicana Field.

Balfour played against Tampa Bay, his former team, during Oakland's last homestand, making two appearances out of the bullpen to pitch two scoreless innings. However, the ex-Rays reliever was excited to take the mound at Tropicana Field -- a place he remembers fondly.

Balfour was called into duty during the eighth inning of an 8-4 loss on Friday, to face the heart of the Rays' order. He retired Evan Longoria but allowed a double to Ben Zobrist. Balfour recovered to retire Casey Kotchman, but he was lifted for Andrew Bailey with two outs. Bailey allowed a triple to B.J. Upton, which scored Zobrist, a run charged to Balfour.

"I had some good times," Balfour said of his time with the Rays. "I think this team is a good team, with a lot of comeback wins and things like that. They never die, and they always play hard. I had some really good teams. It started with a team that didn't have much success to a team that had a lot of success."

A big part of that success stemmed from the job Balfour did out of the Rays' bullpen. In 2008, the season Tampa Bay earned a trip to the World Series, he posted a career-best 1.54 ERA and 0.89 WHIP in 51 appearances.

Balfour's tenure with the Rays ended after four seasons, when the right-handed reliever signed a two-year contract with the A's, but his house in Clearwater, Fla., still remains. With it being just 30 minutes from Tropicana Field, Balfour opted to stay at his house with his wife and daughter for the three-game series, instead of sleeping at the team's hotel.

It's pretty clear that his admiration for Tampa Bay's organization is still there, too.

"They build from within, and they really do stock their farm system," Balfour said. "I think they seem to go out and find the right players, and they usually seem to put a good team out there with what they've got. If anyone goes down, they always got a good farm system they can go to. It's a pretty strong organization, overall."

Balfour has pitched well in his first season with Oakland. Finishing the day with 44 appearances out of the bullpen, he was sporting a 2.06 ERA. However, looking at the bigger picture, the A's were stuck at the bottom of the American League West.

"I've enjoyed it," he said. "It's been a good time. I signed here on the thoughts of the team having a lot of success, and we've had parts of that. But it's been, maybe, a little frustrating for us. But I've enjoyed my time and I've got to keep on going here and keep playing out the games. Hopefully, something good can come of it at the end of the year."

Returning to lineup, A's duo keys late rally

ST. PETERSBURG -- The Athletics' lineup got a bit of a boost in an 8-4 loss on Friday, with the returns of David DeJesus and Cliff Pennington.

DeJesus, who did not play in the recently completed three-game series against Seattle because of a sore right thumb, was hitting fifth Friday.

"Just talking to him today, he's ready to go," manager Bob Melvin said before the game. "He took some early work in the [batting] cage and feels good. I think we're past that."

With Pennington, Melvin looked toward others to help him decide if the shortstop would play Friday. On Monday, Pennington was diagnosed with Bell's palsy, a disorder of the nerve that controls the movement of the face muscles, and hasn't played since.

"I'm relying on him, the training staff and the doctors," Melvin said. "They said he's good to go and he's chomping at the bit to get in there. He did some work early and he feels good."

Oakland doesn't expect Pennington's condition to deteriorate any time soon, either.

"They're comfortable with the fact that he's progressing to the point where he is right now, and it's going in the right direction and getting better and better," Melvin said. "It's past the point where it might go back the other way. If there was any concern along those lines, he certainly wouldn't be in there."

DeJesus and Pennington were in the middle of the A's rally in the ninth inning, when DeJesus doubled and, two batters later, Pennington tripled him home.

Extra bases

- With the A's beginning a stretch of six consecutive games on artificial turf, manager Bob Melvin said that Hideki Matsui "might" play in the outfield once in that time to protect Matsui's knees.

After leaving St. Petersburg, the A's travel to Toronto for a three-game series.

- Entering Friday's game, Oakland was batting a Major League-leading .304 since the All-Star break.

A's trying to solve road woes against Rays

By Cash Kruth / MLB.com

The A's have dropped their last three road games, are 7-30 in their last 37 away from home and haven't won a road series in their past 12 tries.

Oakland manager Bob Melvin said he feels his team is aggressive when playing at home. Away from Oakland Coliseum, not so much.

"It seems like when we're on the road, we're a little passive and wait to see where the game is going," Melvin said. "We have to come back a lot, which we do, sometimes not enough. I just feel like it's a little different on the road."

Maybe facing a rookie starter will do the trick.

On Saturday, the A's face Rays rookie right-hander Alex Cobb. As is to be expected, the 23-year-old has faced unfamiliar hitters in seven of his eight starts, with the Angels being the only team he has faced more than once. Cobb -- sporting a 1.86 ERA and .214 opponents' average in three starts since he was recalled in mid-July -- said he believes he has the advantage in the matchups against hitters who are unfamiliar with him.

"I would think so, since they haven't seen my stuff," Cobb said. "I think it's easier to figure out what kind of hitter they are versus them figuring out what kind of stuff I have."

Cobb suffered his first career loss in his last outing against Seattle. A big reason for that was Mariners second baseman Dustin Ackley, who homered and doubled against his fellow rookie. Afterward, Cobb said Ackley had worn him out in the Minor Leagues.

When asked Friday if there was a similar player on the Oakland roster, Cobb smiled and said, "I don't think I've ever faced an Oakland affiliate. We'll find out tomorrow."

Athletics: McCarthy on the mound

- Right-hander Brandon McCarthy starts for Oakland on Saturday, going for his third consecutive victory. In his last start against the Twins, McCarthy allowed three runs on eight hits while striking out a season-high nine batters in six innings. He is 2-2 with a 3.57 ERA in eight career games (seven starts) against Tampa Bay.
- The A's have hit two home runs or fewer in each of their last 83 games, the third-longest such streak in Oakland history and longest since 1979.

Rays: Hellickson will make next start

- Rookie Jeremy Hellickson will, indeed, start on Monday, manager Joe Maddon said Friday. The 24-year-old Hellickson has thrown 122 2/3 innings this year, his first full season in the Majors. He has already eclipsed 150 innings twice, in 2008 and 2010, but the Rays still want to protect the youngster's arm.

"We had different scenarios where we were going to give [Hellickson] a lot of rest, but we chose to go this way," Maddon said. "We expect to get back in this thing and go to the playoffs. If it looks as though you're not, you can just really back off at that point."

- The Rays Wives and Waste Management Co., are teaming up for a backpack and school supplies drive to support the PACE Center for Girls this weekend. Fans are encouraged to bring any new or used backpacks or school supplies to Tropicana Field. Fans who donate items also can register to win Rays prizes and tickets.

Worth noting

- Oakland's Hideki Matsui has a 13-game hitting streak in which he's batting .529.
- Rays designated hitter Johnny Damon is tied with Babe Ruth with 506 career doubles.
- Oakland's Josh Willingham has 16 home runs, which is already tied with last year's team high.
- This is the first time in Oakland history the A's have played in all domes on a three-city road trip (Seattle, Tampa Bay and Toronto).

Oakland's road woes continue

Rays' Niemann takes four-hitter into ninth inning

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The Oakland Athletics couldn't end their road woes.

Jeff Niemann took a four-hitter into the ninth inning en route to winning his fifth consecutive decision and the Tampa Bay Rays beat the Athletics 8-4 on Friday night.

Coco Crisp and Hideki Matsui homered for the Athletics, who have lost 30 of their last 37 games away from home. Oakland entered hitting an AL-low .232 on the road.

"It just feels like, to me, we're more aggressive at home," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "It seems like on the road, maybe we're a little passive."

Niemann (6-4) allowed four runs and seven hits over 8 2/3 innings. The right-hander was replaced by Kyle Farnsworth after giving up a pair of runs and three hits in the ninth. Niemann improved to 5-0 in eight starts since returning from a strained lower back on June 20.

"We gave ourselves some holes on the road that we have to comeback from, ... not a great recipe for success," Melvin said.

Athletics shortstop Cliff Pennington was back in the starting lineup, after missing two games because of Bell's palsy, and tripled in four at-bats. He left Monday's game against Seattle because of the condition that can cause partial facial paralysis.

"He did some work early," Melvin said. "He wanted to play. I think they're (the team medical staff) comfortable with the fact that he's progressing to the point where he's going in the right direction and getting better and better."

Oakland right fielder David DeJesus, slowed by right thumb soreness, also returned after missing the previous three games. He struck out with a runner on second with two outs in the fourth, and wound up 1 for 4.

Evan Longoria and Casey Kotchman both had run-scoring doubles, and Matt Joyce hit an RBI single in the fifth that put the Rays up 4-0.

Niemann has won all three of his career starts against Oakland. He was looking for his first complete game since a two-hitter against Toronto on June 8, 2010.

Crisp cut the Oakland deficit to 4-2 with a two-run homer in the sixth. Tampa Bay responded with three runs in the bottom half of the inning when Ben Zobrist drove in a pair on a single and B.J. Upton added a run-scoring single.

Upton also had an eighth-inning RBI triple.

Matsui hit a solo shot and Pennington had an RBI triple in the ninth.

The Rays took a 1-0 lead on a bases-loaded RBI grounder by Robinson Chirinos — that deflected off Guillermo Moscoso — with one out in the fourth. The Rays' rookie catcher has driven in seven runs over his last three games after having none in his first 11 big league games.

Moscoso (4-6) gave up four runs and six hits in 4 2/3 innings.

"I was feeling really good," Moscoso said. "I was mixing it up the first three innings and I was able to command the zone. Then, for some reason, I didn't mix it up well when I was ahead in the count."

NOTES

- * Matsui extended his hitting streak to 13 games with a fourth-inning single. He is hitting .529 over the stretch.
- * Oakland RHP Brandon McCarthy (4-5), Saturday's scheduled starter, is 3-0 with a 3.70 ERA in four outings since the All-Star break.
- * Rays rookie RHP Alex Cobb (3-1) will face Oakland for the first time Saturday.
- * Crisp has five homers this season. The first four were solo shots.
- * Texas senior adviser Tom Giordano, who played for the 1953 Philadelphia Athletics, was at the game.

These Questions 3: Brandon McCarthy

By [Rob Neyer](#), Baseball Nation 8/5/2011

Aug 5, 2011 - *[Brandon McCarthy](#) pitches for the [Oakland Athletics](#). After struggling for years with various injuries, the 27-year-old right-hander is enjoying the best season of his career. McCarthy also happens to have one of Major League Baseball's more interesting [Twitter feeds](#). Earlier this week, McCarthy was kind enough to answer a few questions via e-mail ...*

Rob Neyer: After you were drafted in the 17th round by the White Sox in 2002, you were a strikeout machine in the minors for three seasons, leading Baseball America to rank you as the 49th-best prospect in the minors prior to the 2005 season. Upon reaching the majors that year, your strikeouts went way down and your walks went up. Were the hitters that much tougher, or was something else going on?

Brandon McCarthy: It's a combination of a lot of things really, but the jump in talent is probably the jump off point for the other issues. My stuff back then was OK, but definitely not dominant, so I got by on command. I could work my fastball off the edges of the plate (which is often a strike in the minors) and my curveball generated a lot of swings and misses. Both of those things changed when I got to the big leagues. I lost the 1-2 inch margin off the plate and big league hitters just don't get fooled by CBs very often. So instead of being 1-2 on a hitter and then throwing a CB in the dirt for a strikeout, I found myself in a lot of 2-1/3-1 counts and having to pitch carefully. Also, big league hitters are really good at hitting foul balls, so when I did throw a pitch I expected to get a K with, it got fouled off much more often (it's the biggest difference between the minors and majors IMO). Those factors early on led to less Ks and more BBs. In time, that led to a lack of confidence and a loss of my pitching identity.

Neyer: This season, your control has been brilliant. You entered 2010 having walked 3.4 batters per nine innings in the majors, but this year you've walked only 1.4 per nine innings. Among the 141 pitchers with at least a dozen starts this season, that 1.4 figure is fourth best. Is there any particular reason for this massive improvement in your walk rate?

McCarthy: Confidence. Once I overhauled everything, I was sort of rejuvenated mentally. Where I used to throw a straight 4 seam FB and fear it getting crushed, I can now throw a FB that moves and trust that more often than not the contact won't be damaging. Honestly, that realization in itself is probably the biggest factor. From there I've been able to build everything back on top of that, but just feeling like I have the stuff to compete at a higher level has removed the fear of contact. Everything you do in this game stems from your mental fortitude or lack of it, and throwing strikes might be the place in which that's most noticeable.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

River Cats a season-high 26 games over .500

Sacramento River Cats

Brandon Allen hit his first River Cats home run as Sacramento topped the host Omaha Storm Chasers 2-1 on Friday night.

First-place Sacramento, which has won 12 of its last 14 games, is a season-high 26 games over .500 with a 70-44 record. No Pacific Coast League team has as many home wins as Sacramento (37-17 on road) has road victories.

Holding on to a 2-1 lead in the seventh inning, Sacramento first baseman Chris Carter came up with a clutch defensive play. With runners on first and second, Carter made a diving play on a ball hit down the first-base line. The first baseman made the stop and tossed to pitcher Vinnie Chulk for the out, saving possibly two runs.

Adrian Cardenas doubled home Michael Taylor to give Sacramento a 1-0 lead in the second inning. Allen gave Sacramento a 2-0 lead with his first River Cats home run since being acquired in a trade Tuesday. Allen had hit 18 homers earlier this season with Reno, the River Cats' possible first-round playoff opponent.

With his 11th win, Sacramento starter Graham Godfrey moved into a seven-way tie for fourth place on the River Cats' single-season wins list. Justin Duchscherer has the franchise record of 14 wins in 2003.

Chulk pitched 1.2 scoreless innings, and Fernando Cabrera pitched a scoreless ninth inning for his sixth save of the season.

Michael Taylor, who went 2-for-4, has multiple hits in his last three games.

On Saturday night in Omaha, Sacramento left-hander Josh Outman (7-1, 3.21) faces Omaha right-hander Jeff Suppan (10-5, 4.42) at 4:35 p.m. to conclude the series.

Barfield's homer lifts RockHounds over Hooks

From staff reports, Midland Reporter Telegram

CORPUS CHRISTI -- With one swing of the bat, Midland RockHounds right fielder Jeremy Barfield turned what could have easily been a hitless performance into a heroic one on Friday night.

After going hitless in his first three at-bats, Barfield hit a two-run homer in the top of the ninth inning, delivering a 4-3 victory for the RockHounds against the Corpus Christi Hooks at Whataburger Field.

It was Barfield's ninth home run of the season and it came with one out and second baseman Wes Timmons, who had just drawn a walk, on first.

It was the second two-run homer for the RockHounds on Friday, which is how they accounted for all of their runs. In the top of the sixth with the Hooks up 3-0, first baseman Adam Heether hit a two-out two-run homer -- his 12th of the season -- to cut Corpus Christi's lead to 3-2.

The Hooks also did most of their damage with the long ball. After left fielder Brandon Barnes hit a RBI single to center, scoring shortstop Jonathan Villar, first baseman Kody Hinze followed with a two-run shot to left for a 3-0 Hooks lead.

Brett Hunter (1-2) picked up the win for the RockHounds, pitching two scoreless innings of relief in the seventh and eighth before handing the ball over to Jared Lansford, who recorded his fourth save of the year.

Jason Stoffel took the loss for the Hooks, blowing his first save in four chances during his short tenure with the Houston Astros double-A club.

Midland and Corpus Christi meet at Whataburger Field for Game 2 of a four-game series at 7:05 p.m. today.

Strange Night In Stockton Ends In 8-2 Ports Win

Stockton Ports

The Stockton Ports ensured a series win with an 8-2 victory in game three of four against the visiting Visalia Rawhide. In his first start since coming back from Double-A Midland, A.J. Griffin pitched a strong six innings and gets a win, backed by a big five-run offensive effort by the Ports in the fourth.

Visalia would strike first, center fielder Keon Broxton and shortstop Chris Owings hitting back-to-back singles to begin the game. Broxton would score on a one-out sacrifice fly by first baseman Bobby Borcherding.

Stockton put a run up in the first as well. Rawhide starter Diogenes Rosario began with the strike out before walking his next two batters. First baseman Anthony Aliotti singled to bring in an answering run, tying things up at one a piece.

In the top of the second, shortstop Brent Greer had a one-out single, which would be nullified two batters later, as he was caught stealing by Griffin and tagged out by second baseman Jason Christian to end the inning.

After both teams went down in order, center fielder Conner Crumbliss would come to the plate in the bottom of the third and drive just his third home run of the season over the right field wall, giving the Ports their first lead of the night.

Griffin would throw his second one-two-three inning in the fourth, bringing the Ports up for a huge offensive inning. Christian opened the inning with a single, followed by a double off the wall in right center by Rashun Dixon.

Designated hitter Mitch LeVier popped out for the inning's first out, bringing up third baseman Leonardo Gil who crushed a home run out over the center field wall to clear the bases. Crumbliss then stepped up to the plate and hit a ball out toward the wall in right center, which was caught, not by right fielder Alfredo Marte, but by a fan reaching over the wall, resulting in a ground-rule double.

Crumbliss would score on single by left fielder Myrio Richard. Michael Gilmartin would draw a walk, and that would spell the end for Rosario.

Kevin Munson would be the new Visalia pitcher. Munson struck out Aliotti before giving up a single to catcher Petey Paramore, allowing the seventh Ports run to score. Rosario would be charged with all seven runs, as well as eight hits in 3.1 innings of work.

The Ports continued to play efficient defense into the fifth. With one out, Greer singled to left field, but was thrown out by Richard as he tried to extend it to a double.

Stockton would extend their lead to 8-1 on another RBI single by Richard in the fifth.

In the bottom of the sixth, in an unusual turn of events, A.J. Griffin stepped up to pinch hit for Jason Christian. Christian had sustained an injury attempting a barehanded play at second in the top half. Griffin did not swing and managed to draw a walk.

Defensive changes for the Ports in the seventh included Crumbliss moving from center to second, Richard moving from left to center, and LeVier taking the left field position. After back-to-back Visalia singles, Griffin's night would end and A.J. Huttenlocker would take his place on the mound. Facing Huttenlocker, Greer would single to load the bases. Catcher Rossmel Perez would line out to first base for the first out. A sacrifice fly by left fielder Ryan LaPensee scored a run, but Huttenlocker struck out Broxton to prevent any further damage.

Mike Belfiore would replace Munson on the hill for the Rawhide in the seventh. He retired the Ports in order. Huttenlocker returned the favor by retiring the Rawhide in order in the eighth.

The Ports would face Adam Worthington in the eighth and came up with no hits and no runs, taking their 8-2 lead into the ninth.

Scott Deal would be the Ports' closer. Marte reached on an infield single before third baseman Raoul Torrez popped out to shortstop. Greer singled, bringing Perez to the plate. Perez grounded to second, which was bobbled by Crumbliss but recovered and thrown on to second for one out. Gilmartin went to turn two and the throw hit Greer's arm as he slid into second, and the Ports got the game's final out on runner interference.

The Ports look to sweep the Rawhide out of Stockton tomorrow as RHP Dan Straily faces off against RHP Eric Smith at 7:05 p.m.

Chiefs Close Out Series With Win

By Jon Versteeg, Burlington Bees

PEORIA, IL - The Peoria Chiefs (15-25) scored six runs on 13 hits to earn a 6-2 win over the Burlington Bees (13-27) at O'Brien Field on Friday night.

The Bees scored a run in the first inning against Peoria starter Austin Kirk. DH Beau Taylor (2-4) led off the game with a single and scored on a double by RF Josh Whitaker (1-3).

The Peoria Chiefs pushed across a run in the first inning against Bees starter Blake Hasebrock. CF Taiwan Easterling (4-5) singled and stole both second and third base. 1B Richard Jones (0-2) lifted a sacrifice fly to center field to score Easterling and make it 1-1.

Hasebrock tossed five innings and allowed one run on six hits. He walked two and struck out three. Kirk was equally effective, allowing one run on four hits over six innings pitched. Both starters received no decisions on Friday.

The Chiefs scored two runs in the seventh inning against RHP Zack Thornton (3-4). Easterling singled and went to third base on a single by 2B Rubi Silva (1-5). Jones walked to load the bases and SS Rafael Valdes (1-4) singled to score both Easterling and Silva for a 3-1 lead.

The Bees scored a single run in the eighth inning to make it 3-2 before the Chiefs exploded for three runs in the eighth inning to make it 6-2.

The Bees return home to start a four-game series with the Clinton LumberKings on Saturday at 6:30 p.m. It's "Friends and Family Night." Everyone gets to run the bases after the game. We'll also celebrate the Cubs and Cardinals rivalry with special trivia and contests throughout the night. The Bees will also host the annual Brew Fest from 2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. at Community Field with over 200 beers available for sampling and classic rock music provided by Dungeon Jeep. Tickets to the event and game are just \$25.00 in advance at HyVee and \$30.00 at the gate. LHP Tony Butler (1-4, 2.41) gets the start for Clinton against RHP Jonathan Joseph (2-4, 6.52) for Burlington. Pre-game coverage begins at 6:10 p.m. on Newsradio 1490 KBUR and online at www.gobees.com.

3-run 8th Hands Vermont 3-1 Loss

By Paul Stanfield / Vermont Lake Monsters

TROY, NY --- The Tri-City ValleyCats scored three runs, including two runs off Vermont closer Tanner Peters, in the bottom of the eighth inning for a 3-1 New York-Penn League victory over the Lake Monsters at Bruno Stadium on Friday night.

The ValleyCats trailed 1-0 in the eighth when Justin Gominsky led off with an infield single off Drew Bailey. Peters came on in relief and got a flyout before allowing a Zach Johnson single to center and a Rafael Valenzuela RBI double to leftcenter tying the game. After an intentional walk to load the bases and a strikeout for the second out, Ryan McCurdy bounced a two-run single down the leftfield line to give the ValleyCats a 3-1 lead.

Vermont's only run of the game came back in the second inning on a one-out solo homer from Jordan Tripp for his fourth home run of the season. It was the first home run since July 30th and just the second since July 23rd for the Lake Monsters, who have hit the fewest homers in the league this season.

Drew Granier tossed 5 1/3 scoreless innings with four walks and seven strikeouts in his third start for the Lake Monsters. Peters (0-1) was charged with his first blown save of the season and has now allowed three runs on five hits over two innings in his last two outings after 16 2/3 scoreless innings on six hits in his first 12 outings.

Daylan Diaz (5-2) gave up two hits and struckout five in two scoreless innings for the win in relief of starter Juri Perez, who struckout five in six innings. Ryan Cole allowed the first two batters in the ninth to reach on a single and hit batter, but struckout two of the final three Lake Monsters for his sixth save.

Sean Jamieson and Nick Rickles both had two hits for the Lake Monsters, who have scored just one run in their last two games and have scored one run or less in seven of the last 13 games.

Vermont (24-23) plays at Tri-City against on Saturday at 7:00 pm before the series switches to historic Centennial Field for single games on Sunday at 1:05 pm and Monday at 7:05 pm. Those two games are the only home games for the Lake Monsters until August 17th.