

Oakland A's shut out Toronto Blue Jays behind Rich Harden

By Alex Pavlovic, San Jose Mercury News

The A's and Toronto Blue Jays played for well over two hours Friday night at O.co Coliseum, but for all intents and purposes, the A's 2-0 victory was snagged in a five-minute span that came before much of the crowd had even settled in.

After loading the bases in the top of the first inning, Rich Harden struck out three straight Blue Jays on nine pitches to escape unscathed. In the bottom of the frame, A's left fielder Josh Willingham blasted a two-run homer. Ballgame.

"That kind of set the tone for the entire game," Willingham said. "Obviously we would have liked to score more than two runs, but that's all we needed."

With the way Harden was dealing, even one run would have been enough.

The veteran right-hander turned back the clock for seven dominant innings, showing the form that made him a tantalizing A's prospect nearly a decade ago. Harden allowed just two hits and tied his career high with 11 strikeouts.

Yunel Escobar hit an easy grounder back to the mound on the first pitch, but Harden bobbled it for an error before walking the bases loaded.

Then, as Harden later said, "Everything just kind of clicked."

Adam Lind and Colby Rasmus couldn't catch up to fastballs, and Edwin Encarnacion whiffed on a low change-up. Nine pitches, nine strikes, seven swinging for Harden (4-2).

"He is really the one guy on this team who has the ability to strike out three guys in a row like that," manager Bob Melvin said. "That was a big momentum shift."

Harden on his Houdini act: "That was a big one. It could have gone the other way pretty bad."

Instead, Harden carried the momentum through seven innings, securing his 11th career double-digit-strikeout game and 40th career win as an Athletic.

Harden threw first-pitch strikes to 14 of 28 hitters and finished off five innings with swinging strikeouts.

Harden, who was born in British Columbia, also improved to 2-0 this season with a 0.64 ERA against the Blue Jays. He said the win in Toronto earlier this month meant more, but his stuff was better Friday.

"This might have been the best feeling I've had (this year) as far as command," Harden said. "After that first inning, it came together. I had my command, and I located well.

"It was a good feeling."

Harden settled into such a groove that midway through the game he had many in the crowd of 13,174 thinking no-hitter. But J.P. Arencibia spoiled those thoughts with one out in the fifth inning with a single that dropped just in front of Willingham in left.

Willingham pulled up to play the liner on a bounce -- eliciting groans and boos from many fans -- but said afterward that he didn't have a play on the ball.

Willingham was much more aggressive at the plate. Toronto left-hander Brett Cecil (4-6) pitched seven strong innings but made one crucial mistake, a first-inning sinker Willingham sent soaring into the left-field stands -- Willingham's eighth homer in his past 20 games and 21st of the season.

Oakland A's update: Toronto Blue Jays' Eric Thames, a Bay Area native, has large, loyal following

By Alex Pavlovic, San Jose Mercury News

The A's have had small attendance figures lately, but a visiting rookie is doing his best to increase the crowds this weekend.

Toronto's Eric Thames, a Bay Area native, said he had 30 family members, friends and former classmates at [O.co](#) Coliseum on Friday. A similar group came Thursday to watch Thames' first big league appearance in the Bay Area, and a Saturday barbecue is scheduled in his honor.

"It's been hectic, but it's all worth it," said Thames, a graduate of San Jose's Bellarmine College Prep. "The pass list has been just completely booked. You realize how proud everybody is of you, and that's a great feeling."

Thames attended Saratoga's West Valley College and Pepperdine, and despite serious leg injuries at both levels, he was selected in the seventh round of the 2008 MLB draft.

After a slow start to his minor league career, Thames broke through in 2010 and was brought up by the Blue Jays this May. He made one return trip to the minors but since has solidified a spot in Toronto's lineup with a strong summer.

"I'm only 24, so I'm not old in a baseball sense -- but it's definitely been a long journey," Thames said. "Once they told me I would be an everyday guy for the most part, I took it as a great chance for me to develop into a major league outfielder."

Thames entered Friday's game hitting .272 with eight homers, including three in his past seven games. In front of a large personal cheering section Friday, he hit second in the Blue Jays' lineup and started in left field.

"Being here (in Oakland), everything has come full circle," he said.

Second baseman Jemile Weeks, who leads American League second basemen in errors with 11, has been doing extra defensive work before the A's take batting practice. It's a welcome sight for manager Bob Melvin.

"His offense is ahead of where his defense is," Melvin said, "(But) he's going about this the right way."

Injured right-handed reliever Michael Wuertz (right thumb tendinitis) is "still a ways away," according to Melvin. Wuertz will need at least a couple of bullpen sessions before going on a rehab assignment.

Back-to-school shopping spree gives homeless children something to smile about

By Janko Tietz, Oakland Tribune

OAKLAND -- Some attend elementary and middle schools in Oakland and Alameda, a few are still in kindergarten and others are in preschool. All of them can't wait until school starts again.

They are no different from other children. And like other children, Keith, 11, and his sister, Kyreese, 9, and Kershaw, 8, and Angel, 5, want to get ready for the upcoming school year. They need new backpacks, new pencils, new folders, new clothes and new shoes.

But unlike other children, their parents cannot afford to buy them what they need. They are homeless and live in the Salvation Army shelter in Oakland.

With the help of the Oakland A's, the Salvation Army made it possible for eight of the disadvantaged children to go on a back-to-school shopping spree at Wal-Mart with a \$100 gift card. The A's donated the money.

"This partnership between us and the A's exists since Christmas last year," said Audra Whipple, lieutenant with the Salvation Army's Oakland Garden Corps Center.

Last Christmas, the A's invited the children to celebrate the holiday with them; they signed autographs and invited them to games, Whipple said. Last week, she asked the A's if they would donate money for the back-to-school shopping spree. They did.

Excited and happy, the children browsed through the store Friday morning looking for school folders and trying on the latest jeans.

Some of the girls tried on pink sneakers, and the boys checked out the black Converse sneakers.

The reason for their homelessness varies. Some found their way to the shelter because of a house fire, others had parents who lost their jobs and are facing financial difficulties, while others have a single parent who cannot work because they need to care for their children.

The Salvation Army offers a 30- to 60-day program that helps these families get back on their feet and find new homes.

"We work with those people because we want the children to grow up healthy, educated and protected," Whipple said.

The shopping experience was also a learning moment for the kids. With the help of four volunteer companions -- Virginia Oxley, Sean O'Brian, Trina Pocket and Harryette O'Brian, who each have children -- the children learned their clothing sizes so they could find their own pants and T-shirts.

They also had to figure on a calculator the items that they'd be getting for the \$100.

"It allows them to learn how certain things have value," said Whipple's husband, Dan Whipple, also a lieutenant with the Oakland Garden Corps Center.

Sometimes, their calculations were a little off.

When Angel arrived at the cash register with his \$100 gift card, his merchandise added up to \$89.19. He quickly ran back and got two red polo shirts, each for \$ 4.97.

Now his total came to \$99.23. Perfect.

A's Rich Harden baffles Blue Jays in 2-0 win

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Rich Harden was still in warm-up mode when Friday night's game began, or so it seemed when he made an error on Yunel Escobar's comebacker and then walked the next two batters to load the bases.

A bad situation to be in right out of the gates, but Harden briskly got out of it, no problem, by striking out the side on nine pitches. From there, he baffled the Toronto hitters the rest of the evening in Oakland's 2-0 victory at the Coliseum. Harden worked seven innings and matched his career high with 11 strikeouts.

"It was kind of an ugly start," Harden said. "I started feeling better with guys on base. Awful start."

And then? "Everything kind of clicked. ... It could have gone the other way. It could have been pretty bad."

The Blue Jays didn't record their first hit off Harden until, with one out in the fifth, J.P. Arencibia hit a soft single to left field; Josh Willingham said he didn't feel he would have gotten it with a dive, so he played it safely.

The only problem with all the Ks was that Harden's pitch count shot up. He had 83 after five innings and finished with 115 in seven innings, including 75 strikes. He ended five innings with swinging strikeouts, and Blue Jays second baseman Aaron Hill said of Harden's split-finger fastball, "It's the best out there."

The A's had a deal in place to sent Harden to the Red Sox before the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline, but it fell apart after Boston looked at Harden's medical records and withdrew a player to be named from the original proposal, which also included Triple-A first baseman Lars Anderson. But that failed deal didn't scare off contenders - there have been scouts from potential playoff teams at each of Harden's past several starts, and the Yankees, who need starting pitching, have attended the past two.

Were New York to make the A's a significant enough offer to obtain Harden, it potentially would make for a fascinating scenario of Harden throwing against the Red Sox during the stretch run.

Teams may still acquire players if they have cleared waivers. Any new player must be on the roster by Aug. 31 in order to be eligible for the postseason.

Oakland was fortunate to put some runs on the board early against Brett Cecil, because Cecil was fairly stingy himself. Jemile Weeks walked to open the first, and Willingham homered with two outs to put the A's up 2-0, quite a change of pace from how things looked initially.

"The swing from bases-loaded, nobody out to two runs, that was key, obviously," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

"We were able to come back and score a couple and set the tone for the game," Willingham said. "Obviously, we wanted to score more - but that's all we needed tonight."

Willingham has a team-high 21 homers, five more than last year's team best by Kevin Kouzmanoff, and his 71 RBIs are as many as last season's team high by Kouzmanoff and Kurt Suzuki.

Brian Fuentes turns it around in A's bullpen

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Brian Fuentes had such a poor start to the season, he still leads major-league relievers with eight losses - but the left-hander actually is pitching just about as well as anyone in the Oakland bullpen recently.

Over his past 18 games, Fuentes has allowed two runs, putting up a 1.10 ERA, and manager **Bob Melvin** said this week that he is moving Fuentes back into a prominent role. Fuentes and right-hander **Fautino De Los Santos** are now the primary options in the seventh inning.

Fuentes said he looked at video during a 10-game stretch in which he had an 8.31 ERA and couldn't find anything specific to fix.

"It was just a matter of riding it out," he said. "It wasn't an adjustment I made. I just wasn't pitching well. I've been around long enough to know I just had to ride it out and stay positive, and Bob has been really good giving me some opportunities to pitch through some tough times. In games we were up a lot or down a lot, he just kept plugging me in there. I was thankful for that opportunity and able to help the team out in whatever task I was capable of doing."

Melvin said he liked the fact that Fuentes kept his head up and kept plugging away. "Sometimes, with premier guys like that, you have some struggles and see that won-loss record, that could wear on you," Melvin said.

Wuertz's progress: Reliever **Michael Wuertz** said that he'll throw a side session, probably Sunday, as he returns from right thumb soreness.

Melvin said that Wuertz is likely to throw several side sessions before going on a rehab assignment. It's unlikely that Wuertz will return until the end of the month, possibly when rosters expand Sept. 1.

Briefly: A's pitchers have 18 errors, the most by an Oakland staff since 1999 (also 18). ... The A's have made 12 errors in 10 games, and 102 overall, tied for the league lead. ... **Andrew Bailey** earned his eighth save in eight chances since the break. Lifetime, Bailey is 31-for-31 after the break.

Leading off

Bad since the break: Tonight's starter, Gio Gonzalez, is 0-5 with a 7.90 ERA and a .304 opponents' batting average in his past five starts, and he is tied for the major-league lead in losses since the All-Star break. He is 0-6 with a 5.85 ERA against the AL East.

Drumbeat: Rich Harden goes against Blue Jays again: Wuertz update

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 5:58pm 8/19/2011

It's a slow news day here at the Coliseum. Michael Wuertz (thumb) told me he'll throw a side session this weekend, probably Sunday, and manager Bob Melvin said Wuertz is likely to do that several times before going on a rehab assignment. At this point, it's safe to say Wuertz won't be back until rosters expand.

Rich Harden had a terrific outing against Toronto two starts ago - he was very happy about that because the Canadian never had beaten the Blue Jays before.

Even though that Red Sox deal for Harden fell through right before the deadline, don't discount the possibility that he could go to a contender. There's an uptick in scouts every time he starts, and that's the case again tonight. The A's obviously were looking for a potential first baseman in return for Harden at the end of July, but after acquiring Brandon Allen, maybe they ask for a third baseman or outfielder. They're looking at potentially losing three outfielders this offseason, four if you count outfielder/first baseman Conor Jackson.

Harden is one of the A's pending free agents who will not be a Type-A or B free agent, and he wouldn't bring back a pick if he signed elsewhere this offseason, so the team has little reason not to move him if they get a decent offer. Harden also be happy to come back to Oakland next season, even were he to be dealt away this month. He's got a great relationship with pitching coach Ron Romanick (if Romanick is back, which I'd think is a safe bet no matter what happens with the rest of the staff) and he loves pitching here, plus Harden has family in the area.

Here's the lineup behind him: Weeks 2b, Crisp cf, Matsui DH, Willingham lf, Allen 1b, Jackson rf, Suzuki c, Sizemore 3b, Pennington ss.

So it's David DeJesus' night to come out of the lineup so Allen remains in. I think this could be a sort of rotating thing: each of the outfielders get a day, Hideki Matsui, Allen probably will get a day off somewhere. Jackson might be the guy to sit tomorrow night against right-hander Henderson Alvarez; maybe Allen gets a rest Sunday against lefty Luis Perez - unless he is still on a tear.

Harden shuts down Jays as A's even series

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Rich Harden pulled off quite the Houdini act in the A's 2-0 victory over the Blue Jays on Friday.

The A's righty appeared geared for a repeat performance of his last start, a forgettable four-inning outing against a Rangers team that tagged him for three runs in the first frame.

Those first-inning blues again nearly haunted Harden again after he made a fielding error to put the leadoff hitter on and then issued two walks to load the bases.

But nine consecutive strikes later -- seven of them resulting in swings and misses -- Harden made his way to the dugout, a potentially nightmarish inning brought to a quick finish.

"You're in a situation where you have to strike somebody out if you don't want to give up a run, most likely two, and he ends up striking out three," manager Bob Melvin said. "He is the one guy really on the team that has the ability to strike three guys out in a row like that."

Harden didn't look back, instead denying the Blue Jays their first hit until there was one out in the fifth. And despite throwing 23 pitches in the first inning, he lasted seven, fanning a career-high-tying 11 in the victory -- his second in as many weeks against his homeland's team.

"My last game, I got off to a start like that, and it could have gone the other way," Harden said. "That was probably the best feeling I've ever had as far as command, after that first inning. I felt like I could pitch the way I wanted to, hit my spots, locate, throw my offspeed."

Essentially, he felt -- and looked -- like the Rich Harden of old, the one who combined to go 10-2 with a Major League-best 2.07 ERA in 25 starts while he was with the A's and Cubs in 2008.

"That went through my mind," he said. "It's a good feeling."

The Blue Jays swung through 25 of Harden's 115 pitches, and they collected hits on just two of them, with a lone runner advancing past second base all night. Of his 28 batters faced, exactly half fell victim to first-pitch strikes.

"He's got such a gap between his fastball at times -- he'll throw one at 88 and another at 93 -- so it's tough, even if you're looking fastball, to track those," Melvin said. "And you couple that with a gap with his changeup and they swing and miss, and that's why you see so many strikeouts when he's on."

It marked Harden's fourth career game of 11 strikeouts, but the first since July 31, 2009, and the 11th time he has struck out at least 10. Moreover, he entered the contest with a slightly deceptive 4.50 ERA and exited with a more telling 3.91 mark, along with 60 strikeouts in 53 innings through nine starts this season.

The British Columbia native was winless against the team from Canada before this year but has now improved to 2-0 with a 0.64 ERA in two starts against the Blue Jays this season, his last one a similar performance -- one run in seven innings.

"He has been outstanding," Toronto manager John Farrell said. "You can take the year-long stats and the record and set that aside. The way he pitched against us in Toronto, back home, and then again tonight. When he's on, he's as good as anybody we'll face."

In the midst of Harden's mastery, Toronto lefty Brett Cecil held his own, surrendering just four hits in seven innings. But one big one made all the difference, as Josh Willingham's two-run homer to left field in the bottom of the first inning -- his team-leading 21st long ball of the season -- gave the A's and Harden all they needed.

"Bases loaded, nobody out, you're just trying to get out with minimal damage, and he was able to bear down and strike out the side, and we were able to come back and score a couple and kind of set the tone for the game," Willingham said. "It was pretty awesome what he did. To be able to go seven and pitch the way he did was incredible. He's been impressive."

So has the A's outfielder, who homered off Cecil during the two clubs' last meeting on Aug. 9. Friday's represented the sixth home run the southpaw has surrendered in his past five starts. Otherwise, he's been tremendous, posting a 2.95 ERA over his past nine outings.

"With Cecil, he's been pitching really well, and it just seems like home runs have been his Achilles' heel the last few games," Melvin said. "He's pitched well for the better part of a month. The shift from bases loaded, nobody out, to two runs for us in the bottom half was key, obviously, as the game went on. And there was no stopping Harden."

"Things just kind of clicked," Harden said, simply.

A's, Blue Jays turn to young arms in Oakland

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

The Blue Jays are hoping for the best from young starter Henderson Alvarez.

Oakland starter Gio Gonzalez expects more from himself.

On Saturday, the pitchers will square off in the third game of the series between two teams in search of a change for the better.

"First of all, [Alvarez] has an outstanding arm," Blue Jays manager John Farrell said. "A very live fastball, a good changeup, a slider that has the foundation to be a solid Major League pitch in time, but the thing that stands out is his mound presence, his willingness to pitch to contact, and not try to pitch to the fringe or the edge of the strike zone."

As for Gonzalez, he is 0-5 with a 7.90 ERA and .304 opponents' average over his last five starts. He is 0-6 with a 5.85 ERA in seven starts against American League East teams this year, compared to 9-5 with a 2.43 ERA in 17 outings against all others.

"There are so many tools, and to be able to pinpoint certain things is difficult," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said.

"Sometimes it may be a matter of finding one little thing that not only is maybe applicable during the game but gives you more confidence. This game is all about confidence. Sometimes, one thing just clicks and you're off to the races again. They're constantly searching, constantly trying to figure out what the problems are. We just haven't figured those out yet."

Alvarez allowed four runs in five innings during his second Major League start on Monday against the Mariners. He continues to impress with an upper-90s fastball and an above-average changeup, but his slider remains a work in progress.

"There has been a couple of innings where things could have unraveled on him and he has remained composed and doesn't create any more issues by walking people," Farrell said. "He throws a lot of strikes."

Blue Jays: Bautista walks to rare feat

Jose Bautista went 1-for-1 with three walks Friday and has reached base in 105 of 113 games this season. He's walked 102 times this year and is the first player since Barry Bonds to reach 100 walks in 115 or fewer games. Bonds accomplished the feat in 2007.

Overall, Bautista has walked 202 times since the start of the 2010 season.

- Right-hander Frank Francisco is riding a 10-inning scoreless streak, his longest stretch of the season.

Athletics: Cahill still struggling

Gonzalez isn't the only member of the A's pitching staff struggling. Trevor Cahill is 3-12 with a 5.31 ERA since May 14.

"He's working diligently to try to figure out why the inconsistencies are there, and that's basically where we are," Melvin said. "I know he's always encouraged and confident that the next time out is going to be the time he gets past it. We just haven't done that yet.

- The A's have committed 12 errors in their last 12 games and rank among the AL leaders in the category with 102 on the season.

Worth noting

- The Blue Jays have hit 23 home runs this month. Their streak of 12 consecutive games with a home run ended Friday.
- The A's have hit two home runs or fewer in each of the last 96 games. They have 79 home runs on the season.

Melvin stumped by Cahill's struggles

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- One day removed from watching his No. 1 starter struggle yet again, A's manager Bob Melvin remained without any concise answers to an increasingly familiar question.

How do we fix Trevor Cahill?

"I was watching a lot of video today," Melvin said. "His first inning was terrific -- late bite, good sink, good slider. I think he still had a little trouble with his curveball. It's not like you're looking up at the board and looking at reduced velocities or he's missing by 10 feet with pitches or struggling to one side of the plate. It just seems like he's having trouble staying consistent from outing to outing and during the course of the game."

Why, though, is a mystery. On May 14, Cahill was 6-0 with a 1.72 ERA, tied for the Major League lead in wins. Now, he leads the Majors in losses over 19 starts since, going 3-12 with a 5.31 ERA, and has been reviewing video from his 2010 season, when he was 18-8 with a 2.97 ERA.

"He's working diligently to try to figure out why the inconsistencies are there, and that's basically where we are," Melvin said. "I know he's always encouraged and confident that the next time out is going to be the time he gets past it. We just haven't done that yet.

"There are so many tools, and to be able to pinpoint certain things is difficult. Sometimes it may be a matter of finding one little thing that not only is maybe applicable during the game but gives you more confidence. This game is all about confidence. Sometimes, one thing just clicks and you're off to the races again."

Cahill's next start is next week in New York against the Yankees, a team that hasn't been kind to any A's pitcher this year. During the club's last visit to the Bronx, Cahill was tagged for 10 earned runs in just two innings.

Wuertz won't likely return until September

OAKLAND -- The seventh inning has seen an array of A's relievers grace the mound in the last month, primarily because of the absence of Joey Devine and Michael Wuertz.

Devine is solving command issues in Triple-A Sacramento, with his return date yet to be determined. Wuertz, meanwhile, is gradually returning to full health after hitting the disabled list on July 30 with right thumb tendinitis.

Wuertz is expected to throw his first bullpen session in the next week and is likely to need a few before embarking on a Minor League rehab assignment, meaning the righty won't be back until September.

"I think it would be at least a couple of sides, and then try to get him into a game or two," manager Bob Melvin said. "It's not like we have to stretch him out to 40 pitches for us to be comfortable bringing him back. The process leading up to it is more important, making sure he feels good in all his bullpens, and once we get through two or three of those, then get him in a couple of games."

In the meantime, Melvin will mainly rely on lefty Brian Fuentes and right-hander Fautino De Los Santos in the seventh, with Jordan Norberto another option. Overall, the A's bullpen has a 4.54 ERA over the last 26 games after posting a 1.80 mark in its previous 21.

Harden strikes out 11 in vintage performance

By JANIE McCAULEY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — As the night wore on, Rich Harden found himself reflecting on his old dominant days in Oakland.

This was vintage Harden — against the club from his home country, too.

The hard-throwing Canadian matched his career high with 11 strikeouts and didn't allow a hit until the fifth, Josh Willingham hit a two-run homer, and the A's beat the Toronto Blue Jays, 2-0, on Friday night.

"That was fun," Harden said, smiling. "That was close to how I felt back then. I hope to continue to build on that."

Harden quickly recovered from a shaky start and Willingham's drive in the first off Brett Cecil (4-6) held up as the A's bounced back a day after being shut out 7-0 in the series opener. They won for just the third time in eight games.

J.P. Arencibia singled to left with one out in the fifth for the first hit off Harden (4-2), who recorded his 11th career 10-strikeout game and first since Sept. 5, 2009, at the New York Mets.

Aside from the first three batters, Harden looked much like the pitcher he was in 2008 during his first stint with the A's. He went a combined 10-2 that year with a 2.07 ERA in 25 starts between Oakland and the Chicago Cubs.

He dazzled with a nasty fastball-changeup combination and won consecutive decisions for the first time this season, and both came against the Blue Jays. He pitched seven strong innings at Toronto on Aug. 9.

Blue Jays slugger Jose Bautista walked in the first, third and eighth innings to give him a majors-leading 102. He reached 100 in his 113th game, fewest by a Blue Jay. The last major leaguer to reach 100 walks in 115 games or fewer was former San Francisco slugger Barry Bonds in 2007, the year he broke Hank Aaron's home run record.

"A lot of guys are going to try to come after me no matter what, but there's times when I know when they're trying to walk me," Bautista said. "I don't think that was the case today. I take pride in going up to the plate and trying to hit balls hard but at the same time I'm trying to swing at strikes, not balls."

Harden struck out 11 for the fourth time. He last did it on July 31, 2009, at Florida. Oakland (56-69) avoided falling to a season-worst 15 games below .500, where the club was Monday. The A's are 3-5 on this 10-game homestand.

"When he's on, he's as good as anybody we'll face," Blue Jays manager John Farrell said. "He's been outstanding. You can take the yearlong stats and the record and set that aside."

Willingham hit his 21st homer with two out in the first and it was all Harden needed. Willingham's 71 RBIs match the A's season high from last season done by Kevin Kouzmanoff and Kurt Suzuki.

Harden looked to be headed for a rough night after committing a fielding error on the first play of the game only a day after the pitchers went through pregame fielding drills. Then, Harden allowed back-to-back walks before striking out the side to leave the bases loaded.

"That's hard to do with the bases empty, let alone with them loaded," Bautista said.

Harden beat Toronto for only the second time over 10 career starts. Harden, who didn't pitch until July 1 after a stint on the 60-day disabled list, allowed two hits in seven innings and walked four in an impressive 115-pitch outing.

"Kind of an ugly start," Harden said. "I started feeling better with guys on base. That was an awful start and then everything just kind of clicked."

Grant Balfour pitched the eighth and Andrew Bailey finished the three-hitter for his 16th save in 18 opportunities. The Blue Jays had their streak of 12 straight games with a home run snapped.

Cecil, who lost to Harden and the A's in that Aug. 9 matchup but also won at Oakland on May 10 for his first major league victory, had his winless stretch reach four starts after three straight winning decisions. He walked a season-high five.

Oakland tied the season series at 4-4 and is trying to avoid losing a fourth straight season series with the Blue Jays.

Rich Harden perfect on the mound

Malaika Bobino, Oakland Post

Oakland, CA – It wasn't the best start but as time went on he made up for it before too much damage occurred. In fact, Rich Harden shutout the Toronto Blue Jays 2-0 with seven strong innings. He matched his career-high with eleven strikeouts, his fourth time, the last being on July 31, 2009 at Florida.

"My last game, I got off to a start like that and it could have gone the other way," Harden said. "That was probably the best feeling I've ever had as far as command. After that first inning, I felt I could pitch the way I wanted to, hit my spots, locate, and throw my off speed."

In the first frame, Rich loaded the bases with his own error, advancing Yunel Escobar to first then gave up two walks to both Eric Thames and Joe Bautista. After that he struck out the next three batters to end the inning. Harden prevented any runs scored which could've been a bad start for Oakland.

Bottom of the first, Jemile Weeks got on base with a walk before Josh Willingham blasted a two-run home run on a 2-0 pitch. It was his 21st home run of the season and tenth since the All-Star break. He's a player that has been a great addition to this struggling offense.

"That kind of set the tone for the entire game," Willingham said. "Obviously we would have liked to score more than two runs, but that's all we needed."

Resembling his old self, the righty once combined going 10-2 with a Major League best 2.07 ERA in 25 starts while he was with the A's and Chicago Cubs in 2008. Throwing 115 pitches and 72 strikes, he brought his ERA down to 3.91 ERA. But has improved to 2-0 with a 0.64 ERA against Toronto.

"He's really the one guy on this team who has the ability to strike out three guys in a row like that," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "That was a big momentum shift."

Close to a no-hitter, Harden almost accomplished that feat except J.P. Arencibia ended that hope when he hit a single to right field that dropped in front of Josh in the fifth. The bullpen backed him to secure the win and combined Oakland's pitchers threw 13 strikes and held the Blue Jays to only three hits.

"He's been outstanding," said Toronto's manager John Farrell. "You can take the year long stats and the record and set that aside. The way he pitched against us in the Toronto, back home and then again tonight. When he's on, he's as good as anybody we face."

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Carter's blast lifts Cats before sellout crowd

By Kyle Tucker / Sacramento River Cats

Behind a stellar effort from left-hander Carlos Hernandez, the River Cats blanked the Albuquerque Isotopes 7-0 on Friday night in front of a sellout crowd on a beautiful night for baseball at Raley Field.

Sacramento couldn't ask for a better way to end the homestand and head out on the road.

The River Cats got ahead early and never looked back, giving left-hander Hernandez plenty of run support en route to his seventh win of the season.

Hernandez toed the rubber for the River Cats, looking to boost his record over the .500 mark for the season and send Sacramento on the road with some momentum. Hernandez had struggled in his last three starts, surrendering 16 runs in 16.0 innings pitched.

Former River Cat and Oakland Athletic Dana Eveland got the start for Albuquerque. Eveland entered the game tied with Sacramento starter Graham Godfrey with a share of the PCL lead in wins with 12.

Chris Carter put the River Cats out in front in the first inning with a two-run bomb over the 403-foot marker in center field, his 12th of the season. Carter has now hit four of his 12 homers as the Sacramento designated hitter.

Eveland settled down after the homer and held the River Cats scoreless until his night unraveled in the fifth inning. Adrian Cardenas started the rally with a line drive single to right field and swiped second base, his sixth steal of the season. Carter then drew a walk followed by a Josh Donaldson single, loading the bases with one out.

With Michael Taylor at the plate, Eveland walked in a run, giving the River Cats a 3-0 advantage. After a visit to the mound by the Isotopes pitching coach, Eveland walked Anthony Recker to score Carter and set off a verbal argument with the home plate umpire who eventually ejected Eveland, cutting his night short.

In 4.2 innings of work, Eveland surrendered four runs (all earned) on seven hits, walked four and struck out nine.

Hernandez, on the other hand, was brilliant for Sacramento, throwing 7.0 innings of four-hit ball allowing no runs with two walks and five punch-outs on 108 pitches. He is now 7-6 with a 4.96 ERA for the season.

"He had one of his best outings of the year," Sacramento pitching coach Scott Emerson said. "He kept the ball down and hit his spots and went out there and threw a tremendous ballgame. It was his ballgame and we were planning on letting him go the distance if need-be."

Veteran reliever Vinnie Chulk came in from the bullpen for Sacramento and pitched a perfect inning in the eighth.

The River Cats added a couple insurance runs in the bottom half of the inning. Recker lined a solo homer over the left-field wall, his 16th, extending the lead to 5-0.

Cardenas followed with his third hit of the night, bringing up Kevin Kouzmanoff, who laced a double into the right-center gap, scoring Cardenas for the sixth run of the game for the Sacramento offense.

Left-hander Jerry Blevins came on in the ninth to shut things down for the River Cats by working a perfect frame. In his last five relief appearances, Blevins has thrown 4.2 innings of shutout baseball and has only allowed one hit.

With Friday night's victory, the River Cats are now 33-1 when holding their opponents to two or less runs this season.

Second-place Las Vegas was defeated Friday night and is now 11.0 games back of Sacramento in the PCL South with 17 games left to play, bringing the magic number to seven to clinch the division for the River Cats.

Sacramento now hits the road for a four-game set in Tucson followed by a five-game series with Fresno.

RockHounds swept by Drillers

Staff Reports, Midland Reporter-Telegram

TULSA, Okla. -- The Tulsa Drillers completed a three-game sweep of the Midland RockHounds by scoring four runs in the fifth inning in a 4-2 victory at ONEOK Field on Friday night.

With San Antonio defeating Springfield 4-1, the RockHounds fell six games back of the Missions in the Texas League South Division standings.

The RockHounds had a 2-0 lead after four innings after scoring single runs in the third and fourth innings. In the third, Grant Green singled home Jason Christian, who hit a leadoff double in his return to the RockHounds.

Then in the fourth Matt Sulentic had an RBI single to score Ryan Ortiz.

Sonny Gray had another solid start for the RockHounds, but once again, didn't go deep into the game because of a pitch count. Oakland's top draft pick from June's draft allowed just two hits in 3 2/3 innings and 59 total pitches.

But then the game turned in the fifth as the Drillers took the lead for good. Lars Davis hit a leadoff double against Jason Bergmann (1-7), then both Mike Mitchell and Erik Wetzel were hit by pitches to load the bases. Hector Gomez (3 for 4) then singled to shortstop to score Davis but a throwing error by Tyler Ladendorf allowed both Mitchell and Wetzel to score. Gomez later scored on a Ben Paulsen single to give Tulsa the 4-2 lead.

The RockHounds couldn't get much offense after the fourth as they were just to just four hits the rest of the way by the Drillers pitching staff.

Midland heads to Springdale, Ark., to begin a three-game series with Northwest Arkansas at 7 p.m. today.

Ports Drop Second Straight To Lancaster

Stockton Ports

The Ports missed another golden opportunity, falling to the Lancaster JetHawks 4-2 on Friday evening.

Ports starter Jacob Brown (4-6) took a perfect game through 4.0 innings before giving up a three run bomb to Erik Castro in the fifth. The Perfect game was broken up to start the fifth inning as Jonathon Singleton hit a single that bounced off Brown. Those three runs in the fifth were all it took for Brown to take the loss in the outing.

The Ports looked like they might have pulled off a win up until that fateful fifth inning as they put two runs on the board in the third by way of back-to-back jacks courtesy of Michael Gilmartin and Anthony Aliotti off of JetHawks starter Robby Donovan (4-13).

The JetHawks tacked on a run in the seventh. Castro began the inning with a leadoff double, advanced to third on a bunt single from Simunic. Castro scored as the Ports turned a double play for the first two outs of the inning.

Brown took the loss, Donovan earned the win, and Kirk Clark earned his 19th save of the season. The Ports now look to try and get a series split beginning tomorrow with Rob Gilliam on the mound at 7:05 p.m.

Kernels Salvage Series Finale

By Jon Versteeg, Burlington Bees

BURLINGTON, IA-The Cedar Rapids Kernels (21-32) scored five runs on 10 hits to earn a 5-3 win over the Burlington Bees (21-32) before 1,628 fans at Community Field on Friday night.

The Bees scored two runs in the first inning against Cedar Rapids RHP Seth Fowler (2-3). C Beau Taylor (3-4) singled and went to second base on a walk issued to 1B A.J. Kirby-Jones (0-2). DH Tony Thompson (1-4) followed with a two-run double for a 2-0 Burlington lead.

The Kernels scored a run in the second inning. 1B Ricky Alvarez (1-4) doubled and moved to third base on a groundout by RF Randal Grichuk (1-4).

Burlington scored a run in the third inning. CF Jose Crisotomo (2-4) tripped and scored on a single by Taylor for a 3-1 Burlington lead.

The Kernels scored three runs on five hits in the fourth inning to take a 4-3 lead. Cedar Rapids added an insurance run in the seventh inning against Burlington RHP Pedro Vidal. SS Rolando Gomez (1-3) hit a one-out double and scored on a single by LF Jeremy Cruz (2-5).

RHP Josh Bowman (7-6) pitched four innings and allowed three earned runs on eight hits to suffer the loss.

The Bees welcome in the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers, the Midwest League affiliate of the Milwaukee Brewers, to start a four-game series on Saturday at 6:30 p.m. It's Iowa National Guard Night with any currently serving Iowa National Guard member getting into the game for free. There will be a special fireworks show after the game sponsored by Fleck Sales and Miller High Life. There will also be 2 for \$5.00 Miller High Life Cans available at the game. It's also "Friends and Family Night" with everyone running the bases after the game. RHP Matt Miller (5-6, 4.50) gets the start for Wisconsin against RHP Jose Macias (5-3, 4.45) for the Bees. Pre-game coverage starts at 6:10 p.m. on AM 1490 KBUR and online at gobees.com.

Rickles' Bat and Arm Lead To 3-1 Win

By Paul Stanfield / Vermont Lake Monsters

BURLINGTON, VT --- Nick Rickles went 1-for-3 with a two-run single in the fifth inning and an RBI safely squeeze in the seventh inning, while Drew Granier tossed five scoreless innings for his first Lake Monsters win as Vermont beat Mahoning Valley 3-1 in New York-Penn League action Friday night at historic Centennial Field.

Granier (1-1) allowed just two hits, a first-inning single and two-out single in fourth, with four walks and a season-high tying seven strikeouts. Granier was helped out behind the plate by Rickles, who threw out two runners trying to steal second and also picked a runner off first base for another caught stealing.

Sam Roberts led off the fifth with a single to center and the Lake Monsters loaded the bases with a one-out walk to Aaron Shipman and two-out walk to Bobby Crocker before Rickles blooped a two-run single to center for a 2-0 Vermont lead.

Then in the seventh with the Lake Monsters leading 2-1, Shipman led off with a walk and moved to second on a Chad Oberacker bunt single. After a Crocker forceout put runners on first and third with one out, Rickles laid down a bunt along the first baseline that easily scored Shipman from third with Vermont's third run.

The Scrappers got its only run back in the sixth on two singles to leadoff the inning and a Jordan Smith RBI groundout off reliever Ryan Hughes. Eric Potter took over for Hughes in the seventh and tossed two scoreless innings before Tanner Peters picked up his league-leading 11th save with a 1-2-3 ninth inning.

Winners in five of its last six games, Vermont (30-28) remain 1 1/2 games in front of the Connecticut Tigers for first-place in the Stedler Division. The Lake Monsters will open a three-game series at Centennial Field against the Hudson Valley Renegades on Saturday beginning at 6:05 pm. It is FairPoint Communications Night and the first 1,000 fans will receive a Bruce and Hobbes (92.1 WVTM) bobblehead doll.