

Gio Gonzalez has rough outing as Oakland A's fall to Kansas City Royals 7-4

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Gio Gonzalez's recent resurgence took a step backward Tuesday night with his worst home start -- at least statistically -- of the 2011 season.

Gonzalez, who came into the game with a 2.36 ERA at O.co Coliseum, matched his season high with six earned runs allowed in a 7-4 A's loss to the Kansas City Royals.

The Royals batted around twice against the Oakland left-hander (12-12), sending 10 men to the plate in the second inning and scoring four runs, then adding three more in fifth when nine players batted.

Oakland's winningest starter had a roller-coaster night. Coming off seven shutout innings and a victory at Cleveland, he required just six pitches to get through a 1-2-3 first inning but then needed 40 to get through the second and gave up back-to-back home runs to Eric Hosmer and Jeff Francoeur to start the frame.

Gonzalez usually is highly self-critical after a rough start, but surprisingly, other than the home runs he allowed in the second, he thought he pitched way better than the results.

"I felt like I made two mistake pitches the whole game (on the home runs)," said Gonzalez. "Other than that, I felt like I was keeping the ball down and mixing it up. They just got some hits that found some holes."

To wit, after the rocky second, Gonzalez allowed just one scratch single over the next two innings but then allowed three hits and two walks -- one with the bases loaded -- in a fifth inning that finally finished his weird night.

"You break a bat and the guy gets a hit, the next guy gets another hit up the middle," he said. "I felt like I made some quality pitches and located them where I wanted but still came up short on my end."

A's manager Bob Melvin thought the back-to-back homers, Hosmer's 16th of the year and Francoeur's 17th, might have thrown Gonzalez out of whack in his first bad inning.

"When two guys hit two homers like that, you might start trying to be too fine," he said.

The A's got half of the four-run deficit back in the bottom of the third against Kansas City starter Danny Duffy (4-8) but should have had more. Ryan Sweeney and Anthony Recker opened with walks. Jemile Weeks doubled into the left-center gap to score Sweeney, and Cliff Pennington drilled a hit to left that scored Recker.

Pennington advanced to second on a throw to the plate, which gave the A's runners at second and third with nobody out and the middle of their order coming up. But Hideki Matsui hit a short fly to left that wasn't deep enough to score Weeks, Josh Willingham struck out on three pitches and Scott Sizemore grounded to third to end the threat.

The A's never had a better opportunity the rest of the night. Gonzalez, meanwhile, allowed 10 hits in his five innings, and his six earned runs were two more than he had allowed in any of 14 previous home starts.

Duffy, meanwhile, retired 13 straight hitters from the third into the seventh until requiring relief help.

The A's actually made it interesting in the ninth when they loaded the bases on a walk and two singles, the first of which was Stanford's Michael Taylor's first major league hit, a shot up the middle. With two out, Pennington worked a walk against Royals closer Joakim Soria to force in a run, but Matsui came to the plate as the potential winning run and grounded out to end the game.

The aborted rally wasn't enough to wipe the smile off Taylor's face after his first big league hit.

"It was a little surreal and kind of a relief," he said. "A couple of things went through my head as I running to first base; one of them is that I thought it'd never happen. Then I had to snap back and get back into the game."

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Adding to what has been a solid year on the field for Josh Willingham in Oakland, the outfielder will receive the 2011 Dave Stewart Community Service Award before Wednesday's game.

Willingham and his wife, Ginger, raised more than \$100,000 through silent auctions to aid relief efforts in the wake of devastation by tornadoes in the Willingham's native Alabama.

During the All-Star break, Willingham also traveled to Alabama to visit with families affected by the tornadoes and assist in cleanup efforts. During the visit, the outfielder presented personal checks to two high schools from the hardest-hit areas to repair baseball fields that were destroyed.

Willingham's wife led more than 200 volunteers in a cleanup effort of various towns in and around Florence, Ala., where the couple lives with their two children. The Willinghams are also working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to build nine tornado protection shelters around the north half of the state.

On the baseball front, Willingham said Tuesday that he has not had any discussions with the A's about a contract extension and that he would file for free agency at season's end.

"This is my first time to do it, and I don't really know what to expect, so I'm going to go into free agency with an open mind and see what happens," he said. "I don't really have a timetable for anything, and as far as next year, I have no idea what's going to happen."

Willingham, who leads the A's with 23 home runs and 81 RBIs, said he would not rule out a return to Oakland based on the good experience he's had here.

Coco Crisp, originally in the starting lineup, was scratched because of right foot soreness suffered when he fouled a ball off his foot Saturday in Cleveland.

Even though the A's are still first in the AL in errors, manager Bob Melvin sees some gradual improvement.

"I'd like to clean it up a little bit more," Melvin said. "We're still last in the league error-wise, but you're seeing some better plays. I think for the most part we're making the routine play a little bit better, but we have to do it consistently."

Chin Music: Willingham gets Stewart award, verifies he'll file for free agency

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune, 9/6/2011 7:36pm
In for Joe Stiglich ...

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Willingham, who leads the A's with 23 home runs and 81 RBIs, said he would not rule out a return to Oakland based on the good experience he's had here.

"We haven't had the on-field success," he said. "Obviously, coming to spring training, we thought we'd have a better record. But my experience has definitely been a positive one. I've built up a lot of good relationships with players and coaches."

The outfielder did admit that playing so baseball so far away from Alabama is a challenge.

"It's difficult to travel with family, especially with two kids," he said. "But I'd say that's the only difficult part, and I don't think it'll impact my decision about next year."

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Even though the A's are still first in the AL in errors, manager Bob Melvin sees some gradual improvement.

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Really, REALLY small crowd at O.co tonight. Might be the smallest in years, although surely it will be announced as more than the 3,000-ish I see.

Michael Taylor gets 1st hit in 7-4 A's loss

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

If Michael Taylor singles to center for his first big-league hit and hardly anyone is around to see it, does it count?

You bet. Confirmed in this morning's box score.

The A's fell 7-4 to the Royals on Tuesday night before an announced Coliseum crowd of 12,064, though the actual number seemed less than half that - and it had significantly shrunk by the time Taylor singled in the ninth inning.

Taylor, a 6-foot-5 prospect out of Stanford, played right field and will play there again in today's matinee when a bigger crowd is expected (some tickets are two bucks). Taylor went 1-for-3 with a walk and made a nice catch in right-center to end the sixth inning, bumming out hitter Johnny Giavotella.

"Honestly, a little surreal and kind of a relief," Taylor said of his hit. "I guess a lot of things went through my head at first base. One of them was, I thought it would never happen. Then you kind of have to snap out of that and get back in the game. It was actually kind of weird."

After Gio Gonzalez put the A's in a 7-2 hole, they found themselves in a winnable position in the ninth against Joakim Soria. Cliff Pennington drew a two-out, bases-loaded walk, but the game ended when Hideki Matsui grounded out.

Taylor is used to bigger crowds, having played for Triple-A Sacramento, where he hit .272 with 16 homers and 64 RBIs in 93 games. On Thursday, in Taylor's last game for Sacramento on the eve of being recalled by the A's, he played before a Raley Field sellout crowd of 14,014.

Gonzalez surrendered all of Kansas City's runs, the first two on back-to-back homers by Eric Hosmer (3-2 fastball up) and Jeff Francoeur (fastball down) in the second inning. Gonzalez didn't get an out in the inning until the seventh batter and was charged with four runs.

He gave up three more (two earned) in the fifth, his final inning.

"Two mistake pitches out of the whole game," Gonzalez said after his worst home start of the year - he had a 2.36 ERA at the Coliseum and hadn't surrendered more than four earned runs in any of his first 14 starts there. "Other than that, I thought I was keeping the ball down and mixing it up."

His counterpart, lefty Danny Duffy, pitched 6 1/3 effective innings, improving his record to 4-8 to accompany a 5.64 ERA. Half the rookie's wins are against the A's.

Jemile Weeks drove in two of Oakland's runs after beginning his day with a batting-practice conversation with Frank White, an eight-time Gold Glove second baseman for the Royals who now broadcasts their games.

Weeks isn't shy about talking with accomplished ballplayers. His brother is Milwaukee's Rickie Weeks, and he pals around with Barry Larkin and Felipe Lopez in offseasons. At the batting cage, Weeks provided White some info for his broadcast.

Then he doubled home a run in the third and singled in another in the seventh. The two-run rally in the third should have been more productive. After Weeks' double, the A's had runners at second and third and no outs but scored just once more on Cliff Pennington's single.

Briefly: Coco Crisp missed his third straight game with a bruised right foot. He was in Tuesday's original lineup but was scratched during batting practice. As a result, Ryan Sweeney got a start in center. ... The A's lost pitcher Jason Rice before the reliever got a chance to pitch for them. Rice was acquired in the trade last week that sent Conor Jackson to Boston. He was placed on outright waivers and claimed by the Indians on Tuesday. ... Josh Willingham will receive the Dave Stewart Community Service Award before today's game. Through his foundation, Willingham raised more than \$100,000 for relief in Alabama in the wake of tornado damage, and he and his wife, Ginger, spent the All-Star break in Alabama assisting in cleanup efforts.

Drumbeat: Josh Willingham numbers at home and on the road (not much difference)

John Shea from the Coliseum with an update on three outfielders who'll be free agents after the season. . . 9/6/2011, 6:27pm

Center fielder Coco Crisp was scratched with a foot injury that shelved him the previous two games (he fouled a ball off the foot on Saturday), and right fielder David DeJesus is out of the lineup because Michael Taylor will be playing the next two games.

The other starting outfielder, Josh Willingham, is hitting cleanup.

Tomorrow, Willingham will receive the Dave Stewart Community Service Award, which goes to an A's player every year for his charity work. Stewart will be in the park to present it to Willingham.

It'll be an intriguing offseason for A's management, trying to put a roster together for next season that'll do much better than 64-77, which is where the A's stand entering tonight's game.

Willingham is hitting .246 with 23 homers and 81 RBIs, and Bob Melvin would love to have him back (if indeed Melvin is back himself, which should be a no-brainer).

"I am where I am right now. If I'm in position to have input on that, we'll see where it goes," Melvin said of bringing back Willingham. "I'm just focused on what I'm doing right now." Of course, Melvin wants to return.

"I want to be here. It's a process that'll work its way out. It either will or won't. My job is to continue to focus on what I'm doing here and now, and if I do that right, it'll take care of itself."

A glance at Willingham's numbers shows he's not intimidated hitting at the Coliseum. At home, he's hitting .258 with 12 homers and 41 RBIs. On the road: .235, 11, 40.

The A's lineup: 2B Weeks, SS Pennington, DH Matsui, LF Willingham, 3B Sizemore, 1B Allen, RF Taylor, CF Sweeney, C Recker.

Gio struggles as A's dip against Royals

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The continual rollercoaster that's been the A's season has too often been mirrored through Gio Gonzalez in the second half.

The A's lefty has lost more games than he's won since the All-Star break, all the while upping his ERA by more than a full run. A few strong outings have come through over the stretch -- he entered Tuesday riding a three-game winning streak -- but more times than not he's labored.

The struggles began early and the damage proved undoable on Tuesday, as Gonzalez surrendered seven runs -- six earned -- through just five innings, while the A's dropped their second straight contest, 7-4, to the Royals.

Gonzalez managed to throw just six pitches -- all strikes -- in the first inning, hinting at a potentially effortless night. But the second inning showcased the opposite, evidenced by the 40 pitches he needed while allowing Kansas City to post a four-spot.

The Royals sent 10 men to the plate in the frame, and the first two -- Eric Hosmer and Jeff Francoeur -- launched homers off Gonzalez, who proceeded to offer up four consecutive singles, the last of which extended Kansas City's lead to three. Alex Gordon's RBI groundout made it 4-0 before Gonzalez found his way out of the inning three batters later without further damage.

Despite the nightmarish elements of the inning, Gonzalez appeared frustrated, not by its entirety, but simply by the pair of home run pitches.

"It's just one of those tough things, you fall behind on a hitter and all of a sudden you make a mistake pitch, leave it up, and they're going to do what they're doing," Gonzalez said. "Then all of a sudden you have an aggressive hitter where he swings at the first pitch, and the next pitch inside, he hits a home run. After that, some of the hits, you look at them, and they're just getting them off the end of the bat and scoring some runs.

"I thought I made two mistake pitches out of the whole game. Other than that, I thought I was keeping the ball down and mixing it up. They got some hits that found some holes."

Following uneventful third and fourth innings, Gonzalez had to throw 29 more pitches in a three-run fifth before rookie reliever Andrew Carignan took over in the sixth. Gonzalez, who ended his night with 98 pitches, walked three while fanning four. He has a 5.25 ERA since the break.

"They got on a couple balls pretty good," manager Bob Melvin said. "He just had two bad innings and seemed like he was a little spotty with command in those two innings, and in the other innings pitched more to form."

"Gio's one of the best lefties in the league and for us to come out and have a big inning against him with [starter Danny] Duffy throwing the way he did tonight was big for us," Hosmer said. "Our offense has a lot confidence right now and we just keep that momentum going game by game, and we're starting to put it all together."

The A's, meanwhile, were held off the scoreboard until the third, when Jemile Weeks and Cliff Pennington each collected RBI hits against Duffy. But they also left two men on base in the frame, as Duffy stranded runners on second and third with no outs by setting down Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and Scott Sizemore -- the heart of Oakland's lineup -- in order.

"We had two situational at-bats where we didn't get runners in, and that can be a momentum shift," Melvin said. "We had potential to tie the game up, and then he got two big outs in the middle of the order. He made pitches when he had to make them."

Duffy went 6 1/3 innings, surrendering three runs -- the last courtesy another RBI hit off the bat of Weeks in the seventh -- while allowing four hits with three walks and four strikeouts.

Oakland rallied for a run in the ninth and brought the winning run to the plate. Weeks delivered a two-out single off Royals closer Joakim Soria to load the bases and Pennington followed with a walk to make it a three-run game.

But Soria retired Matsui on a grounder to second for the final out. Among the baserunners stood Michael Taylor, who was left at third after collecting his first Major League hit -- a ground-ball single up the middle.

"Honestly, a little surreal and kind of a relief," Taylor said of the milestone. "A lot of things went through my head as I was running to first base. One of them was I thought it would never happen. Then you kinda had to snap back out of that and get back into the game. Now you can take a deep breath and just play."

Taylor is slated to get his second straight start on Wednesday, when the A's are scheduled to face Royals lefty Bruce Chen as they look to avoid a three-game sweep.

Moscoso, A's looking to cool down Royals

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

It's been already been quite a week for Kansas City rookie Eric Hosmer.

On Sunday, Hosmer received an intentional walk in the first inning against Cleveland marking the first time a Royals rookie had been intentionally passed in the first inning of game since Sept. 2, 1969, the first season of the franchise.

Hosmer's three-hit game on Monday at Oakland, his third consecutive three-hit road game, also made history. The only other Royals rookie to have three straight three-hit games on the road was catcher Don Slaught in 1983.

On Tuesday, the rookie went 2-for-5, including his 16th homer of the season, in the 7-4 win against the A's.

What's the Kansas City rookie record for home runs?

It's 24 by Bob Hamelin in 1994 when he was the American League Rookie of the Year. Hamelin played only 101 games and had 374 at-bats to reach that total in a season shortened by the strike. Hosmer is also on a shortened season, not starting with the club until May 6, but he's well behind Hamelin's pace.

Hosmer hit No. 16 in his 109th game and 437th at-bat.

It will be up to Oakland starter Guillermo Moscoso to shut the rookie down on Wednesday.

Moscoso rebounded from a slow start to finish seven sharp innings against the Mariners on Friday, retiring the final 13 batters he faced.

He should expect some run support in Wednesday's series finale. The A's scored 37 runs in their last six games.

"I think, in the second half, we've been a pretty good offensive team, where in the first half it was just the opposite," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "I'd like to think that we can keep building on this and create some momentum, and to this point we have."

The Royals will send Bruce Chen to the mound.

Royals: Chen looking to bounce back

Chen's career-best streak of five straight wins came to an end last Friday against Cleveland. In six innings, he gave up five runs on eight hits, two of them homers. He walked just one but threw 115 pitches, matching his season high.

- The Royals are in the middle of a 20-game stretch, in which 17 are on the road. The club's final homestand runs from Sept. 13-21 against the Twins, White Sox and Tigers.

Athletics: Matsui blooming in second half

Hideki Matsui went 1-for-5 on Tuesday to leave his batting average at .261. He is hitting .333 in the second half after hitting .209 before the All-Star break.

- The A's are 17-24 in one-run games this season.
- Coco Crisp missed his third straight game on Wednesday because of a bruised right foot.

Worth noting

- The A's have committed 110 errors this season, the most since they had 125 in 2001. Eighteen of the errors in 2011 have been committed by the pitchers.
- Oakland is 25-25 since the All-Star break.

Crisp scratched with lingering foot issue

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A's outfielder Coco Crisp made an appearance on the lineup card for all of two hours on Tuesday before being scratched with a bruised right foot, which has kept him out of three straight games.

Crisp fouled a ball off of his foot in each of Friday and Saturday's games and left in the fifth inning of the latter contest.

"He could have played, but just talking to him, I actually made the decision," manager Bob Melvin said. "He just didn't look like he was moving around quite as well as I would like to see. I just felt like if we gave him a couple more treatments and one more night, that he'd be that much more able to play."

In his stead, Ryan Sweeney has drawn action in center field, as he did again on Tuesday against the Royals once Crisp was removed from the lineup. Cliff Pennington, originally batting seventh, was moved up to the No. 2 slot.

Pennington entered Tuesday batting .340 with five doubles, two home runs and 15 RBIs, along with six multi-hit games, over his previous 12 contests.

He went 1-for-4 with a pair of RBIs in the A's 7-4 loss.

Taylor, Recker getting chance to succeed

OAKLAND -- As promised, Michael Taylor received his first of what is expected to be two consecutive starts in the outfield on Tuesday.

A's manager Bob Melvin is hoping to ease the September callup and highly touted prospect onto the big league scene, and part of that idea is starting him against lefties, as was the case on Tuesday with Kansas City southpaw Danny Duffy on the mound.

"When someone comes up, not only do you want to get a decent look at them, not only do you have to get them in there, but you have to get them in there multiple games, so you want to pick some good matchups in particular times to get them started on the right foot," Melvin said.

Taylor, who was hitting .272 with 16 home runs and 64 RBIs upon his promotion from Triple-A Sacramento, appreciates his new skipper's willingness to create such circumstances.

"It's a nice feeling knowing they're trying to put me in the best possible situations early in my career," Taylor said. "I've been through a lot in the past couple of years and, right now, am very familiar with my game, and hopefully I can go out there and play that way, and to a way that's acceptable up here."

Taylor made his Major League debut last Friday, going 0-for-3 with a walk. Joining him in Tuesday's affair with the Royals was fellow rookie Anthony Recker, who earned a start behind the plate across from lefty Gio Gonzalez based on his most recent work with the southpaw -- seven shutout innings against Cleveland on Thursday.

In Tuesday's 7-4 loss, Taylor recorded his first Major League hit -- a ground-ball single up the middle in the A's ninth-inning rally.

Recker went 0-for-3 with a run scored.

A's righty Rice claimed by Indians

OAKLAND -- The A's traded for right-hander Jason Rice only to watch him depart without a single appearance less than a week later.

Rice, who was acquired by Oakland from the Red Sox for Conor Jackson and cash considerations on Wednesday, was placed on outright waivers by the A's two days later and claimed by the Indians on Tuesday morning.

Rice did not pitch in a game with Oakland, as he was the victim of a crowded bullpen, which still boasts 10 members following his leave. He heads to Cleveland with a 4-5 record and 3.69 ERA with four saves in 44 Triple-A relief appearances this season.

Athletics lose to Royals

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Eric Hosmer and Jeff Francoeur hit back-to-back home runs in the second inning, Danny Duffy won for the first time in more than a month and the Kansas City Royals beat the A's 7-4 on Tuesday.

Salvador Perez added three hits while six players drove in runs for the Royals, who have scored 29 runs in their last three road games.

Jemile Weeks had three hits and two RBIs for Oakland, which has dropped two straight after sweeping Seattle over the weekend.

Duffy (4-8) allowed only four hits and had four strikeouts over 6½ innings in what is likely his final start of the year. Joakim Soria worked the ninth for his 26th save.

Gio Gonzalez (12-12) gave up a career-high 10 hits and walked three for the A's.

Duffy, who has already logged more than 147 innings this season between the big leagues and minors, threw a season-high 119 pitches. That ended a six-game winless skid for the rookie, who earned his first win in the majors here on June 14.

The 22-year-old left-hander even survived getting hit by a line drive off the bat of Scott Sizemore in the sixth. Duffy hopped off the mound, calmly retrieved the ball then made an underhand toss to first for the out.

In the ninth, Oakland loaded the bases and Soria walked Cliff Pennington to force in a run before getting Hideki Matsui to ground out to end it.

Gonzalez had won his previous three starts and needed only six pitches to get through the first inning against Kansas City. It turned out to be the highlight of his night.

After Hosmer and Francoeur went back-to-back, Johnny Giavotella and Perez both hit sharp singles. Yamaico Navarro followed with a long fly ball that sailed over the head of right fielder Michael Taylor but Giavotella waited at second to tag up and only advanced to third.

Alcides Escobar's infield single drove in Giavotella, then Perez scored on Alex Gordon's groundout to make it 4-0.

Duffy almost gave it all back when he walked the first two batters in the third and gave up an RBI double to Weeks. Pennington added a single to drive in Anthony Recker and cut the gap to 4-2.

Kansas City, which batted around in the second, did it again in the fifth to chase Gonzalez, who had allowed only nine hits over two previous starts against the Royals this season. Perez and Navarro both had RBIs in the inning while Gordon drew a bases-loaded walk to give the Royals a 7-2 lead.

Francoeur finished with three hits while Hosmer went 2 for 5. Hosmer fell one hit shy of becoming the first rookie in Royals history to have three or more hits in four consecutive road games.

Weeks added an RBI single in the seventh.

NOTES: A's CF Coco Crisp was scratched from the starting lineup about an hour before the game. No reason was given by the team why Crisp was removed but he missed the previous two games because of a sore right foot. Crisp fouled a ball off the foot during Saturday's game against Seattle. ... LHP Bruce Chen (10-6) pitches in the series finale for Kansas City on Wednesday. Chen allowed five runs over six innings in his previous start against Cleveland, snapping a career-best five-game winning streak. RHP Guillermo Moscoso (7-8) goes for the A's. Moscoso has allowed one earned run or fewer in eight of his 17 starts this season. ... Home plate umpire Bob Davidson was hit near his right wrist by a pitch from Duffy in the second inning but stayed in the game after being looked at an A's trainer. ... Oakland Raiders linebacker Quentin Groves was among the announced crowd of 12,064.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Godfrey to start Game 1 for Sacramento

Sacramento River Cats

The Sacramento River Cats today announced the starting pitching rotation for the Pacific Coast League Pacific Conference playoff series, with right-hander Graham Godfrey taking the mound for the series opener Wednesday night against the Reno Aces at Aces Ballpark.

Godfrey posted a 14-3 record and 2.68 ERA for Sacramento, matching a franchise single-season record with his 14 victories. Two-time Major League All-Star Justin Duchscherer also won 14 games for Sacramento in 2003. Godfrey, who also spent time with the Oakland A's this season, has been most impressive down the stretch for the River Cats, winning his last three decisions of the season.

Oakland-native Tyson Ross (3-2, 7.61) will start Game 2 for Sacramento in Reno. The right-hander, who began the season in Oakland, has won three of his last four decisions entering the playoffs. Right-hander Travis Banwart (9-9, 4.63), who is second on the team with nine wins, will start Game 3 on Friday night (7:05 p.m.) at Raley Field. The Wichita, Kansas, native has won his last three starts.

Reno counters with left-hander Zach Kroenke (10-3, 5.89) in Game 1, right-hander Barry Enright (9-5, 5.21) in Game 2, and right-hander Kevin Mulvey (4-9, 6.64) in Game 3. Both teams' starters for games 4 and 5 are to be determined.

This is the Interstate 80 rivals' first meeting in the playoffs. Sacramento won the 2011 season series against Reno, nine games to seven.

Lack of quality pitching hurt 'Hounds this year

Oscar LeRoy, Midland Reporter-Telegram Midland Reporter-Telegram | 0 comments

A season filled with promise at its beginning turned into frustration for the Midland RockHounds during the 2011 season.

A bad first half of the Texas League season turned into a losing overall record of 63-77. It was the lowest win total for the franchise since the 1996 season when the Midland Angels won 58-82, and it is the lowest win total in the 13 years the franchise has been affiliated with the Oakland A's.

In fact, there have been only three sub .500 seasons since the A's Double-A franchise has been here, which is a lot better than when the Angels were here. You do remember the Angels, don't you? I remember the final years of the Angels affiliation, and some of them weren't so pretty because the organization was struggling from top to bottom in the 1990s. Hey, at least we got to see Troy Glaus for 50 games before he got called up.

The A's have been better for Midland, and the big league club enjoys having Midland as an affiliation.

Under the A's, the Midland franchise broke a 10-year drought of missing out on the Texas League playoffs, and let's not forget two Texas League championships in 2004 and 2009 and a league championship appearance in 2010.

We've had some good years here with the A's. This, unfortunately, was not one of them.

It started off pretty good as the RockHounds won their first four games and their first six out of seven.

But slowly but surely, the lack of quality starting pitching began to show, and the RockHounds started losing games. It equaled a 27-43 first half record, and it pretty much guaranteed the RockHounds had to win the second half division title and overthrow that juggernaut known as the San Antonio Missions to get back in the playoffs.

Because of the lack of quality starting pitching, it ended up putting a strain on a solid bullpen and placed pressure on young hitters seeing their first Double-A action to produce.

David Forst, A's assistant general manager, acknowledged there was a gap in quality pitching from the major league level down to the Single-A level on his visit to Midland in mid July.

That's unlike the A's from years past when the RockHounds had the pitching even though many times they didn't have the big bats in the lineup. Barry Zito, Tim Hudson, Aaron Harang, Joe Blanton, Rich Harden, Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson are just a few of the pitchers who have come through Midland on their way to the big leagues.

But trades and questionable drafts have contributed to that gap. The A's drafted Sonny Gray in the first round of June's draft, but because he was limited in his pitch count after having thrown so much at Vanderbilt, we hardly got to see him at all.

You have to give credit to manager Steve Scarsone and the players for not giving up in the second half. But as hard as they fought, they still finished 36-34 in the second half -- nine games back of the mighty Missions and in third place in the South Division.

Now I know for most folks, the RockHounds' success is secondary to fireworks, half-price drinks and free stuff for the kids. But for some of us baseball diehards and those who show up to Citibank Ballpark on a regular basis, we would just like to

see a little bit more consistency out of our professional baseball team. Did we get a little spoiled with the past few years of success? Maybe we did, and now we expect more out of the A's.

But I would think the A's organization would want their players down at the Double-A level -- which is arguably considered the toughest level in minor league baseball -- to have success. That way they know what winning against quality competition is like.

Let's hope A's general manager Billy Beane and his staff make the right player moves for next season because "moneyball" doesn't appear working too well these days -- neither in Oakland nor Midland.

Your Burlington Bees are in the Playoffs!

Burlington Bees

The Bees are in the 2011 Midwest League Playoffs and will take on the Kane County Cougars starting Wednesday in Kane County. Game Two of the series will be at Community Field Thursday at 6:30pm!

The Bees won the West Division in the first half with a 45-25 record, giving them an automatic bid into the postseason. Kane County finished 37-33 in the second half of the season which clinched the second half Wild Card spot. The Bees and Cougars will play a best-of-three series.

Game One will be in Kane County on Wednesday at 6:00pm. The action can be heard on 1490 KBUR or www.gobees.com. Then Game Two comes to Burlington on Thursday at 6:30pm. Game Three would be played in Burlington as well but would only be played if the first two games are split.

Game One: Bees @ Kane County, 6:00pm. Listen on 1490 KBUR or www.gobees.com

Game Two: Kane County @ Bees, 6:30pm. Thirsty Thursday - 2-for-\$3 Pepsi products and 2-for-\$4.50 on select beer!

Game Three (if necessary): Kane County @ Bees, 6:30pm. Big Fun Friday - Enjoy 16 oz. cans of Bud Light and Busch Light for just \$3.25!

For tickets or more information, please contact the Bees at (319) 754-5705.

Granier gives Vermont win in opener

By Ashley Marshall / Special to MLB.com

Oakland A's farmhand Drew Granier had the jitters before his first postseason start Tuesday, but he took a deep breath and embraced the pressure.

Granier allowed one run on two hits and three walks while striking out nine batters over five innings as short-season Vermont defeated Auburn, 7-1, in Game 1 of the New York-Penn League semifinals.

"I was a little excited and nervous because it's the first time we've been in the playoffs for like 15 years," he said. "I've not been here too long, but I felt good going into the game. It was good to get the nod to be the first guy in the playoffs."

"The crowd was in it the whole game and they were all supportive. It means a lot, it was fun. This has probably got to be my biggest game so far."

Selected in the 32nd round of this year's Draft, Granier combined with three other pitchers to fan 16 Doubledays and complete a three-hitter.

The right-hander struck out the side in the first inning, before working into and out of trouble in each of the next four frames in front of 2,296 people at Centennial Field. Granier worked around a leadoff walk in the second, and he kept Auburn off the board in the third despite hitting first batter Billy Burns and then throwing a wild pitch that moved Burns into scoring position.

In the fourth, Granier issued a free pass to Matthew Skole and an infield single to Justin Miller before recording an out, but he was not able to extinguish the threat this time. Russell Moldenhauer advanced both runners with a ground ball to first base, and Angelberth Montilla plated a run when he grounded out to second.

"I put them on base. I've been doing that pretty much all season," said Granier, selected as a senior out of University of Louisiana-Monroe. "There is something about that first batter, but I'm trying not to worry about it too much. We had a four-run lead and I just wanted to keep it as big as I could."

Granier hit Burns for the second time in the fifth, and the Doubledays' No. 8 hitter stole second base and moved to third on Caleb Ramsey's base hit to left field. After striking out Bryce Ortega, Granier -- who went 1-1 with a 1.91 ERA in seven starts for Vermont in the regular season -- walked Skole to load the bases before whiffing Miller with his final pitch of the night.

"I felt pretty confident because I knew what I wanted to do," said Granier, who finished one short of his career-high 10 strikeouts.

"The catcher [Nick Rickles] was calling a good game and I was hitting my spots. I wanted to [pitch in the sixth], but I was up to about 98 pitches, so I knew there was no chance. I'm usually around 80 or 85, but they let me go longer because it's the playoffs."

Drew Bailey struck out four batters over two perfect innings and Jeff Urlaub worked around a one-out walk in the eighth. In the ninth, Tanner Peters yielded a leadoff triple to Montilla, but he struck out the next three batters to wrap up the victory.

It gave the Lake Monsters -- who won the Stedler Division with a 39-35 record -- a 1-0 lead in the series as they head to Auburn for Game 2 and potentially Game 3 in the best-of-3 series.

"The bullpen has been really good. Bailey has been pitching great all year, and Urlaub and Peters have been putting up big numbers in the eighth and ninth," Granier said. "They attack the zone and if we can get it to them, the game is pretty much over."

"I've been enjoying it here so far and hopefully we can keep playing good baseball and take it all. It would be nice to get a little ring and a league title in my first season."

Vermont's Chad Lewis went 3-for-4 with a homer and a three-run triple, and Chad Oberacker reached base safely three times.