

Oakland A's watch Detroit Tigers celebrate A.L. Central title with 3-1 victory

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

The A's tried everything to delay the Detroit Tigers' clinching of the American League Central title Friday night, even producing a 16-minute light-standard power outage at O.co Coliseum.

Ultimately, though, a crowd of 31,022 on hand to enjoy Star Wars fireworks night also had to watch the Tigers celebrate their first division title since 1987 on the A's diamond after closing out a 3-1 victory over Oakland.

Doug Fister, acquired from Seattle on July 30, shackled the A's on three hits over eight innings, and Jose Valverde converted his 45th consecutive save of the season and 47th overall in the ninth as Detroit wrapped up the Central and became the first A.L. team to clinch a playoff spot.

The Tigers are headed to the postseason for the first time since 2006, when as a wild card, they swept the A's in the ALCS before losing to St. Louis in the World Series.

Detroit last won a division title 24 years ago, though, when they were a member of the A.L. East, so they threw quite a wild party in the visitors' clubhouse.

For a while, it looked as if the Champagne and cigar celebration might not come off. As the teams were preparing to begin the top of the fourth inning, several banks of lights around the stadium went out with the score tied 1-1. It was the first such power outage at the Coliseum since July 28, 2006, against Toronto.

"It was kind of a shocker, because you're not sure what to do or how long it's going to take," said Fister, a Merced native who used to come to A's games regularly as a youth in the early 1990s. "I just tried to treat it like a rain delay. You just sit and wait for a while, then get back up there on the mound and get going again."

Once power was restored, Fister (6-1 with Detroit after going 3-12 with the Mariners) turned out the lights on the A's.

Josh Willingham had led off the second against the Detroit right-hander with his career-high 27th home run over the center-field fence. David DeJesus followed Willingham's blast with a single to center, but after that, the plug was pulled on the A's offense.

Fister retired 17 in a row from the second inning through two outs in the seventh, and after DeJesus finally broke the string with his second single, Fister retired four more in a row before turning it over to Valverde.

Valverde gave up a leadoff double to Coco Crisp but then set down three straight A's hitters to touch off a massive Tigers infield pileup.

Fister, who didn't walk a batter while striking out five, allowed his offense plenty of time to make up the early one-run deficit and finally get to A's starter Trevor Cahill (11-14), who walked a difficult tightrope most of the night.

"(Fister) has been really good since he's been over there," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "I don't think anyone's scored more than a run against him in over a month. He pitched pretty well up in the zone tonight. Usually he's down in the zone, but he had a real good curveball."

While Fister failed to allow more than a run in his sixth straight start, dating to Aug. 20, Cahill was pretty much all over the place and relied largely on some sterling defensive plays to keep it close.

After Willingham's homer, the Tigers tied it 1-1 in the third and kept putting multiple runners on base in inning after inning against the A's starter but couldn't break through until the sixth, when Wilson Betemit tripled home the go-ahead run.

Detroit then added an insurance run on Don Kelly's solo homer with one out in the seventh.

Cahill pitched 62/3 innings, allowing nine hits, four walks and a hit batter while striking out four.

"For the most part, when Trevor needed to make a pitch he did, even though there was traffic out there on the bases," Melvin said. "If we hadn't played well defensively, that game would have gotten out of hand in a hurry."

Oakland A's update: Brandon Allen appreciates support from Bob Melvin

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

No one could have blamed A's manager Bob Melvin if he had told Brandon Allen to take a seat for a few days while he was going through an 0-for-22 spell, but Melvin was intent on letting his first baseman work his way out of it.

It's not as though Oakland has great options at first, anyway, particularly with Conor Jackson now in Boston. Even if Allen struggles, the A's are determined to give him a fair chance to be in the mix for next season.

"You start taking a kid out and benching him and that adds to his doubt," Melvin said. "He's in a position here where he's our first baseman, and we want to make sure that he goes out there every day knowing we have confidence in him."

To take a little pressure off, the A's have moved Allen down in the lineup. He responded by going 4 for 12 with two doubles over the past three games before Friday.

"His at-bats have been a lot better," Melvin said.

Allen said he's thankful for the support from the manager.

"It feels good that he has the confidence in me to believe that I'm going to come out of the little slump I've been in," he said. "I appreciate that, and I appreciate my teammates sticking behind me, too, rooting for me."

Allen said he hasn't been making major adjustments because he feels like he's simply been trying to do too much instead of just reacting to pitches.

"It's easy to get down on yourself when you have 25-30 at-bats and you don't have anything to show for it," he said. "You just want to get out of it that much harder."

Jemile Weeks returned to the lineup after missing two games with hamstring soreness, but in a new slot. After 75 starts in the leadoff spot and nine others as the No. 9 hitter, Weeks batted second for the first time in the majors.

"I don't want Weeks to feel like he has to push it right away," Melvin said.

Melvin said he'd like to get closer Andrew Bailey as many appearances as possible before the end of the season.

"I'd like to get his innings up a little more so you're not uncomfortable the next year increasing it," he said.

Bailey has thrown just 362/3 innings this year after throwing 49 a year ago. He missed most of the first two months of the season because of a forearm strain.

Chin Music: Melvin sticking with Allen, Weeks makes return at No. 2, Tigers could be celebrating tonight

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune 9/16/2011 6:42pm

In for Joe Stiglich tonight

No one could have blamed Bob Melvin if he had told Brandon Allen to take a seat for a few days while he was going through an 0 for 22 spell earlier this week, but the A's manager was intent on letting his first baseman work his way out of it.

It's not like Oakland had great options at first, anyway, particularly with Conor Jackson now in Boston. Allen is the guy through the end of the season, and even if he struggles, the A's are determined to give him a fair chance to be in the mix for the job next year.

"You start taking a kid out and benching him and that adds to his doubt," Melvin said. "He's in a position here where he's our first baseman and we want to make sure that he goes out there every day knowing we have confidence in him."

To take a little pressure off, the A's have moved Allen down in the lineup in recent days so he doesn't have to worry as much about being a major run-producer. He responded by going 4-for-12 the past three games with a couple of doubles.

"His at-bats have been a lot better," Melvin said.

Allen said he's thankful for the support from the manager.

"It feels good that he has the confidence in me to believe that I'm going to come out of the little slump I've been in," he said. "I appreciate that and I appreciate my teammates sticking behind me, too, rooting for me."

Allen said he hasn't been making major adjustments because he feels like he's simply been trying to do too much instead of just reacting to pitches.

"It's easy to get down yourself when you have have 25-30 at-bats and you don't have anything to show for it," he said. "You just want to get out of it that much harder. It's just little things, so I don't want to get too sophisticated with it and make it harder by looking at every little thing that's wrong."

Jemile Weeks returned to the lineup after missing two games with hamstring soreness, but in a new slot. After 75 starts in the leadoff spot and nine others as the No. 9 hitter, Weeks batted second for the first time in the majors.

"I don't want Weeks to feel like he has to push it right away," Melvin said.

"I batted second in the minors some," Weeks said. "It's a little bit different strategically from the two hole, but it's still the same game."

Melvin said he'd like to get closer Andrew Bailey as many appearances as possible before the end of the season.

"I'd like to get his innings up a little more so you're not uncomfortable the next year increasing them," he said. "You don't feel like you're adding on 20-25 innings."

Bailey has thrown just 36 2/3 innings this year after throwing 49 a year ago after missing much of the first half with a strained right forearm.

The Tigers can clinch the AL Central title tonight with a win (Cleveland was winning at Minnesota, so it doesn't like the Tigers will back in before the game starts). Kind of surprising considering they went to the World Series in 2006 after knocking out the A's in the ALCS, but the Tigers haven't won a division title since 1987 when they were in the AL East.

"I think our preference would be that somebody else loses," Melvin said, "and we win and they can do it later, not out on the field. I think everybody would rather see it that way. Certainly they are a good team. We were fortunate to hold them off last night knowing that if they won, they would have been celebrating."

Tonight's lineups:

OAK: CF Crisp, 2B Weeks, LF Matsui, DH Willingham, RF DeJesus, SS Pennington, 1B Allen, C Powell, 3B Sogard

DET: CF Jackson, RF Kelly, LF Young, 1B Cabrera, DH Martinez, C Avile, SS Peralta, 3B Betemit, 2B Santiago

A's succumb to pitcher Doug Fister, Tigers clinch

Steve Kroner, Chronicle Staff Writer

-- After Jose Valverde got Josh Willingham to ground to third to end the game and clinch Detroit's first-ever AL Central title Friday night, the Tigers held a fairly mild celebration on the Coliseum infield.

But once the Tigers' players and coaches made their way to the clubhouse following their 3-1 victory over the A's, all hell didn't break loose - but Champagne, beer and cigars certainly did.

Ensnconced in his office, enjoying a cigar, Detroit manager Jim Leyland savored his team's title. The Tigers have won 13 of their past 14 games and have occupied first place since July 19.

Then again, on May 3, they were eight games off the pace. They own a 13 1/2-game edge today. Leyland called his team's turnaround "amazing."

He wouldn't call himself a prophet, though.

Said Leyland: "I'm not going to sit here today and say, 'Well, yeah, I knew we were going to win,' because I did not.

"I knew we had a good team. I thought we'd be very competitive in the Central - and I thought whoever made a run late in the season would probably win it. This year, it just happened to be us."

One man who has made a big difference for Detroit was winner Doug Fister. He held the A's to a run on three hits in eight innings, retiring 17 consecutive hitters in one stretch.

"When you talk about a clinching game," Leyland said, "you can't ask for any more" than what Fister did.

Fister has gone 5-0 with a 0.81 ERA (four earned runs in 44 2/3 innings) in his past six starts. The Tigers acquired the 6-foot-8 Fresno State alum from Seattle on July 30.

Fister (9-13 overall, 6-1 with the Tigers) figures to be Detroit's No. 2 or 3 starter in the postseason. He, Cy Young Award lock Justin Verlander (23-5, 2.36 ERA), Max Scherzer (14-9, 4.39) and possibly Rick Porcello (14-8, 4.83) give the Tigers a formidable, albeit all-right-handed, postseason rotation.

And you can't ask for more from a closer than what Valverde has done this season. Friday night was his 45th save opportunity. Friday night was his 45th save.

Wilson Betemit's RBI triple off Trevor Cahill (11-14) in the sixth inning broke a 1-1 tie and put the Tigers ahead to stay.

Leyland took extra pleasure in noting how he and his coaches have made use of players up and down the roster.

"When a coaching staff has the cojones to play everybody and make them a part of it," Leyland said, "I think you win your team over. I believe that."

Briefly: Willingham's 27th homer of the season provided the A's lone run. It establishes a career high; he hit 26 HRs with Florida in 2006. ... There was a 16-minute delay before the top of the fourth inning because the lights from foul line to foul line went out. ... Brandon Allen ended his streak of games with a strikeout at 14. ... A crowd of 31,022 came for baseball and a postgame "Star Wars"-themed fireworks show.

Minor-league update: Two A's farm teams played postseason games Friday night. Triple-A Sacramento got eliminated from the Pacific Coast League championship series as visiting Omaha completed a three-game sweep with an 11-6 rout. ... Class A Stockton lost 3-2 in 10 innings at Lake Elsinore in Game 2 of the best-of-five California League championship series. The Ports, down 0-2 in the series, host Game 3 this evening.

Leading off

Oddly even: Through Thursday, the A's starters owned a 3.78 ERA, fourth best in the American League. Surprisingly enough, the Oakland relievers also had a 3.78 ERA, sixth best in the AL.

Drumbeat: Lights out (now on again)

Steve Kroner from the Coliseum: 9/16/2011 8:07pm

Updating the update: The lights have returned. The delay will have lasted 16 minutes. Back to the game.

This update: The lights from foul line to foul line have gone out. They went dark at 7:51 p.m. as the A's were getting ready to take the field for the top of the fourth. The outfield lights remain on, but they're clearly not enough. The score is 1-1. For how long, who knows?

Here's Bob Melvin's lineup against the soon-to-be AL Central champion Tigers and right-hander Doug Fister: Crisp, CF; Weeks, 2B; Matsui, LF; Willingham, DH, DeJesus, RF; Pennington, SS; Allen, 1B; Powell, C; Sogard, 3B. Trevor Cahill (11-13) will be on the mound for the A's.

Detroit's magic number is one. During his pregame news conference, Melvin was asked about the possibility of the Tigers celebrating on the field at some point this weekend:

"I think our preference would be that somebody else loses," Melvin said, "and we win and (the Tigers) can do it later, not out on the field. I think everybody would rather see it that way. Certainly (the Tigers are) a good team. We were fortunate to hold them off last night knowing that if they won, they would have been celebrating."

Cleveland plays at Minnesota in a game that begins at 5:10 p.m. If the Twins win, the Tigers would become division champs probably while tonight's game at the Coliseum is still going.

Justin Verlander (23-5, 2.36 ERA) is scheduled to start Sunday's game at the Coliseum. Melvin was asked specifically about Verlander's MVP candidacy and in general, whether a pitcher should be an MVP:

Said Melvin: "That's a tough one because he doesn't play the 162 like the player does, but when a guy dominates like he does ... I came up with the Tigers after their World Series year (1984) when Willie Hernandez won the MVP and the Cy Young — and I didn't hear too many guys complain about that, that he had that kind of effect. Certainly you'd have to have a sensational year, which he's having. I could see where there's some sentiment for it, yeah."

A's can't prevent Tigers from clinching

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The folks at the Oakland Coliseum tried with all their might to help the A's distract the Tigers from playing their way to a division-clinching victory on Friday night.

They hosted a pregame wedding ceremony behind home plate, set up a treadmill near the left-field seats for a man attempting to complete a marathon by game's end -- he came up short at 20.1 miles -- and employed a Star Wars-themed affair.

As if that wasn't enough, there was a power outage in the fourth inning that forced a 16-minute delay.

But none of the shenanigans could prevent the inevitable: a 3-1 Detroit victory, forcing a celebration on Oakland's home turf and marking the second straight year such an event has taken stage at the Coliseum, as the Rangers did it last year when they won the American League West.

The latter stung more for obvious reasons, but Friday's scene wasn't one the A's particularly wanted to see, either.

Oakland tried to avoid it for a second straight night, threatening in the ninth when Coco Crisp led off with a double, but Tigers closer Jose Valverde notched the next three outs to start the party.

"It's not something you want to do," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "We would have liked to have won that game in the ninth inning. Certainly if you can take care of that and have them win in a different fashion, whether it's them going to the clubhouse to celebrate after we beat them and somebody else losing, that's how you like to do it."

As has been the case several times this season, Josh Willingham represented the lone offensive force for the A's, who watched the designated hitter homer in the second inning against righty Doug Fister.

The blast left Willingham just three home runs and eight RBIs shy of reaching the 30/100 mark -- numbers that will only boost interest from other teams this offseason who enter play on the pending free agent. The A's are likely to offer the Willingham a contract -- and would do well by keeping him around -- but the veteran has mentioned in the past he's not afraid to explore the open market.

Fellow free agent-to-be David DeJesus, who has struggled for the better part of the 2011 campaign, collected the only other two hits that Fister allowed through eight strong innings.

Fister calmed after the solo shot, allowing a base hit to DeJesus before retiring 17 consecutive batters. He walked none and fanned five en route to carrying his club to its first division title since 1987 -- when it was in the AL East -- and first time since it joined the AL Central in 1998.

"They're deep," Melvin said of the Tigers. "They have a lot of power, late-inning bullpen guys that are very good, and good starting pitching across the board."

A's righty Trevor Cahill, meanwhile, gave up just one run despite dealing with 10 baserunners through the first five innings to maintain a 1-1 deadlock. But he offered up an RBI triple to Wilson Betemit in the sixth and a solo shot to Don Kelly in the seventh to allow Detroit a permanent lead.

"I put myself in tough situations in a couple innings and was able to get out of them, make pitches when I had to," said Cahill, who dropped to 3-7 with a 6.58 ERA since the break. "That's one positive thing I guess you can take out of it."

The Tigers' victory overshadowed a handful of notable plays by the A's defense, including a bullet from Hideki Matsui in left field after he caught Ramon Santiago's fly ball that made its way to catcher Landon Powell in time to snag Betemit at the plate for an inning-ending double play in the sixth.

"Trevor, for the most part, when he needed to make a big pitch he did," Melvin said. "Even though there was some traffic on the bases, it's good to see us play better defensively. If we didn't play that well defensively, that game would have gotten out of hand in a hurry."

Cahill was charged with all three runs on nine hits and four walks while striking out four in 6 2/3 innings. The righty wasn't so much concerned with Detroit's intentions, naturally, as he was with his own club's.

"Obviously, we knew what they were trying to do going out there today, but we're just trying to win a game," he said. "Their winning a division didn't affect us at all, so that's just us trying to win a game and get some momentum for next year."

With the right pieces around him, Cahill -- signed through 2015 -- could potentially experience what Fister did Friday.

"It's an unbelievable feeling," the Detroit pitcher said. "A great group of guys to be around, a great group of guys to fight tooth and nail with. This is what we're living for, this is what we're playing for. Every drop of sweat, every drop of blood, tear, whatever, is what it's all about right now."

Porcello aims to impress with playoffs looming

Right-hander trying to lay claim to No. 4 starter job in October

By Cash Kruth / MLB.com

The Tigers have clinched the American League Central title. Now they can begin their postseason planning.

Fresh off a 3-1 win Friday against the A's that clinched them their first division title since 1987, the Tigers can begin thinking and talking about the roles each guy will play in their quest for the World Series. Perhaps no area has produced more strategic questions than the starting rotation, and how it will fall into place following AL Cy Young Award favorite Justin Verlander.

The first pitcher to make his case for postseason consideration is Rick Porcello, who has won two straight games and tossed three quality starts in his last four outings. The 22-year-old right-hander -- who will take the hill on Saturday in the third game of four at the Coliseum -- could be pitching for the right to be the No. 4 starter in the playoffs. However, he said he isn't focusing on that possibility.

"I'm just going out there trying to pitch now. That's not my decision," Porcello said. "I just want to help this team get into the playoffs, then whatever happens from there happens."

Porcello defeated the A's back on April 15, tossing six innings of one-run ball. He knows that, despite the A's third-place standing, they are nonetheless a solid team.

"It's a scrappy club that has real solid pitching. That's what they are," Porcello said. "They've got a real good rotation, especially when everybody's healthy. Obviously offensively, they've got some scrappy guys and they've got a couple guys that have some pop that can hurt you. That's definitely not a team you can overlook or take lightly."

Good pitching will be on display Saturday as Oakland's Gio Gonzalez take the mound for the A's. The left-hander is fresh off a win against the Angels, in which he held permitted two runs in 6 2/3 innings. Although Gonzalez is 0-3 with a 6.87 ERA in four career starts against Detroit, he tossed six shutout innings against the Tigers in April.

Tigers: Cabrera nearing record book

With 102 runs scored, 97 RBIs and 103 walks this season, first baseman Miguel Cabrera is looking to become only the fifth player in Tigers history to reach the century mark in all three categories in a single season. The others are Hank Greenberg (1937-38), Charlie Gehringer (1938), Rocky Colavito (1961) and Norm Cash (1961).

- Victor Martinez is hitting .339 with five doubles, three home runs and 17 RBIs in 15 September games.

Athletics: End on a good note

The A's, who are 8-7 in September, are looking to break a streak of seven consecutive months without a winning record. Oakland's last winning month came in July 2010, when it went 14-10.

- With 14 home runs, Kurt Suzuki is one shy of tying his career high.
- Hideki Matsui is hitting .317 since the All-Star break.

Worth noting

- Current A's batters are hitting a combined .363 against Porcello in his career.

- Friday was A's outfielder David DeJesus' 1,000th career game.

Lights go out at Coliseum, cause delay

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A power outage forced a 16-minute delay in the fourth inning of Friday's contest between the A's and Tigers at the Oakland Coliseum.

The A's took the field for the top of the fourth before several banks of lights went out, causing them to return to the dugout.

Oakland and Detroit were locked in a 1-1 tie at the onset of the delay, which temporarily halted the Tigers' attempt at clinching the American League Central crown.

Allen playing through rookie travails

OAKLAND -- A's manager Bob Melvin isn't afraid to play rookies -- or any player, really -- through their struggles. In fact, he prefers to.

"You start taking a kid out and benching him, that can make you doubt yourself and so forth," Melvin said.

So when rookie first baseman Brandon Allen began struggling at the plate, Melvin kept running him out there. The offensive woes resulted in a 0-for-22 stretch, but Allen has since collected four hits in his last 12 at-bats.

"He's in a position here where he's our first baseman, and we want him out there each and every day knowing we have confidence in him," Melvin said. "We moved him down in the lineup a little bit to take some pressure off of him, but his at-bats are better. We're starting to see him come out of this thing."

Though Allen entered Friday's contest against the Tigers with 45 strikeouts in 117 at-bats with the A's, 14 of his 27 hits have been for extra bases, including nine doubles, two triples and three home runs.

Magnuson not close to baseball activity

OAKLAND -- Tucked away in a crowded A's clubhouse every day is Trystan Magnuson, his 6-foot-7 frame disguised because he's usually sitting, these days reading.

"I'm very bored," said a smiling Magnuson, who has been stationed on the disabled list with right shoulder tendinitis for nearly a month.

As a result, the reliever has already finished two books and started on two more -- "Blink" and "The Lone Survivor" -- thanks to recommendations by teammate and book fanatic Adam Rosales. Once those are read, he'll attempt to conquer "Moneyball."

"That definitely has to be next on my list," he said.

As for the baseball activity, there won't be any for a while, as Magnuson tried throwing last week only to be shut down again and given new anti-inflammatory medication.

"It didn't feel good at all, so we're going to take a little more time," Magnuson said. "It did not make me want to throw the ball hard. Tossing was all right, but anytime I put force on the ball, it hurt."

"Every day you wake up and expect it to feel perfect, and I don't know if I was surprised by the pain because I could feel it every once in a while, but you always go in hoping it's just going to be minor or a soreness, and then when it turns out to be something a little more serious you're always disappointed."

Magnuson, who was transferred to the 60-day DL on Aug. 23, was in the midst of his third stint with the A's this season at the onset of his injury. Last recalled on July 27, the right-hander made six appearances thereafter, surrendering four earned runs in a combined 8 1/3 innings, for a 4.32 ERA.

The 26-year-old hurler has taken to advice from the likes of Dallas Braden and Rich Harden, both of whom have dealt with shoulder injuries.

"Patience, that's the biggest thing," he said. "I had some really good glimpses of what I think I can do for the team, and that was pretty exciting, so I'm holding on to that."

Worth noting

- Jemile Weeks, back in the lineup after missing two games with left leg soreness, made his first career start in the No. 2 hole on Friday, while Coco Crisp was in the leadoff spot.

"I don't want Weeks to feel like he has to push it right away," manager Bob Melvin said. "Coco can hit anywhere in the lineup, so just a minor tweak, and we'll see where it goes from today."

- Scott Sizemore has been dealing with some shoulder tendinitis, Melvin said, and was given the night off Friday. Eric Sogard started in his place at third base, but Melvin noted Sizemore "certainly could play."

Tigers clinch Central title with 3-1 win over A's

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Newcomer Doug Fister pitched the Detroit Tigers to the AL Central title on Friday night, beating the Oakland Athletics 3-1 to secure the club's first division title in nearly a quarter-century.

Fister (9-13) retired 17 in a row during one stretch to win his third straight start and fifth consecutive decision, and Wilson Betemit hit a go-ahead triple off Trevor Cahill (11-14) in the sixth. Don Kelly hit a solo home run in the seventh.

Detroit is headed to the playoffs for the first time since winning the AL wild card in 2006 and losing to St. Louis in the World Series. The Tigers (88-63) had not finished on top since winning the AL East in 1987, three years after their last World Series championship.

Manager Jim Leyland hopes for another special postseason run with his rebuilt roster.

"It's been pretty much magical this whole second half," Tigers pitcher Phil Coke said. "We've gone out every day and handled our business. We're all hungry. We're all ready for this."

When Josh Willingham grounded out to third to end it, the victorious Tigers sprinted out of their dugout. Closer Jose Valverde pumped both arms, then turned as catcher Alex Avila jumped into his embrace.

Leyland stood some 10 feet from the pitcher's mound and waited for a hug from each of his players.

New faces and old, Detroit made all the right moves.

In the last year, team president and general manager Dave Dombrowski acquired three players from within the division to put his team in position for a sensational September.

Delmon Young came to Detroit in a three-player deal with the Twins on Aug. 15, veteran infielder Betemit from Kansas City for a pair of prospects in July and Jhonny Peralta at the trade deadline last year from Cleveland.

Then there's the reliable Fister, who improved to 6-1 since he joined the Tigers in a six-player trade with Seattle on July 30. He is 5-0 over his last six starts and has given Leyland another front-line starter behind AL Cy Young Award contender Justin Verlander.

Fister has allowed only four earned runs in his last 44 2-3 innings for an 0.81 ERA over that stretch. He was unfazed after giving up Willingham's career-best 27th homer leading off the second. After David DeJesus followed with a single, Fister retired the next 17 hitters in order before another single by DeJesus, who played in his 1,000th game.

Fister allowed three hits, struck out five and didn't walk a batter. Valverde finished for his 44th save in as many chances this season and his franchise-record 45th in a row overall.

Detroit won for the 23rd time in 28 games dating to Aug. 19 and 25th time in the club's last 36 road games. At last, the 66-year-old Leyland could light up a fresh cigar to celebrate a division title that looked like a longshot mere months ago. The sixth-year skipper sported fresh socks and undershorts a day after Detroit's winning streak was stopped at 12 games in a 6-1 loss in Thursday night's series opener.

He'll surely be changing clothes again after a bubbly celebration in the visiting clubhouse at the Coliseum. These Tigers have been on such a roll lately there has been no need for scoreboard watching — even if Leyland has been doing so since April. It's been quite a late-season surge, too, considering Detroit trailed the Indians by eight games and was four games under .500 on May 3.

On Friday, the offense eventually did enough to back Fister.

Detroit missed chances in the fourth and fifth innings after the game was delayed for 16 minutes before the top of the fourth because of an outage to the stadium lights in the Coliseum.

With one out in the fifth and runners on second and third, third baseman Eric Sogard lunged to his right to stop Delmon Young's sharp grounder and Sogard's momentum allowed him to reach out and tag Ramon Santiago, who was off the base. Cahill later loaded the bases with an intentional walk to Miguel Cabrera before retiring Victor Martinez on a grounder.

Betemit was replaced at third by Brandon Inge in the bottom of the seventh after he came up limping after being thrown out at the plate by left fielder Hideki Matsui on a double play to end the sixth.

This is the second straight year a visiting team has clinched the division in Oakland. Reigning AL champion Texas did it last season and visits next week.

NOTES: Willingham hit 26 homers in 2006 with Florida. ... Cabrera reached base four times, with a singles and three walks. ... A's 2B Jemile Weeks returned to the lineup after missing two games with leg cramps. He batted in the No. 2 hole for the first time in his career. "I don't want him to feel he has to push it right away," manager Bob Melvin said. ... LHP Gio Gonzalez starts Saturday looking to improve to 5-1 over a six-start stretch. ... A wedding took place in front of home plate less than an hour before first pitch. ... It was also "Star Wars" night. ... A man on a treadmill in left field failed to run a marathon before the game ended.

'Moneyball' junket: An invitation that's easy to decline

By LOWELL COHN, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

I got an invite to a screening of "Moneyball," the movie. It's always nice to get invited.

The press screening will take place Sunday night at 6 p.m. at an East Bay theater. That would be a good time for the screening if it actually were a good time. It's just that the 49ers play in San Francisco at 1 p.m. on Sunday and when the screening starts I and several million of my colleagues will be pounding out our Niners-Cowboys stories on deadline.

Which leads to several questions:

Did the Moneyball people check the local sports schedules?

Did they expect sportswriters to dump the Niners and write about the A's?

With their current standing as being totally irrelevant on planet Earth, which Bay Area teams do and the A's take precedence over?

How about none?

It gets better. The press release informs us of a press conferences at the Oakland Coliseum on Monday with famous people involved with the film. The press release refers to the press conference as a "junket." I've never attended a junket before. Have you? The press release says the junket starts "at approx 12:30-45 p.m. Please arrive at least 20 minutes prior."

Quite an interesting message contained within those quote marks. No guarantees when the Moneyball people will arrive but we press nerds should get there early and wait because their time is valuable and ours isn't.

Sign me up.

Oh, one other thing. At 12:30 p.m. next Monday when the Moneyball press conferences start, Jim Harbaugh will be holding his own press conference — er, junket — down in Santa Clara to go over what happened vs. the Cowboys.

Me, I'm sticking with Harbaugh. Did the Moneyballers check the 49ers' schedule? Are the Moneyballers aware there's a whole world out there?

For your information there will be two groups of celebs at the Monday news conference I can't attend.

First Group: Brad Pitt, Billy Beane, Jonah Hill, Michael Lewis.

Second Group: the director Bennett Miller, former A's player Scott Hatteberg, and Philip Seymour Hoffman "if he is available to attend." (My wife sometimes gets tongue-tied and refers to Philip Seymour Hoffman as Phillip Hoffmour Seyman or Phillip Sophmore He-man.)

Final public relations note, and I quote: "MONEYBALL, as you know, will be opening that Friday, Sept 23rd, so you'll have a very quick turnaround in getting your pieces done. I do appreciate your efforts."

He appreciates my efforts — in this case no effort. Do I work for Moneyball? Am I on the Moneyball team? Is this how people think in Hollywood?

Disclaimer from Lowell Cohn: I love "Moneyball," the book. Michael Lewis, the author, is a brilliant nonfiction writer, one of the best nonfiction writers in America. His book is astonishing. It is now dated and many of its theories about the nature of Moneyball have been called into question — that takes away nothing from what Lewis did.

I also admire Beane, although his accomplishments have been called into question, too. The A's have not had a winning season in five years and, from my point of view, hardly seem to compete to win their division. They merely try to look respectable — unsuccessfully.

The movie, as I understand it, shows how Beane brilliantly steers his team to a 20-game winning streak in 2002 despite the chintzy and cheap ownership. This is the first baseball movie in which the GM — and not the team — is the focus. But Beane didn't win the pennant that year, never has won the pennant or the World Series. Nothing like that.

So, let me understand what we have. We have a screening and two press junkets that lots of reporters and columnists can't attend because of bad planning. We have a movie about an outdated book about an irrelevant team.

It sure would be cool to meet Brad Pitt, though. Maybe he'll bring Angelina.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Omaha tops Sacramento for PCL championship

Sacramento River Cats

Omaha captured its first Pacific Coast League championship in franchise history with an 11-6 victory over Sacramento on Friday night at Raley Field.

The River Cats' remarkable 2011 season, in which they won the Pacific South Division by 17.0 games and came back from a 2-games-to-0 deficit in the first round of the playoffs to top Reno, comes to an end.

"This is the best team I've been on," said River Cats infielder Wes Timmons, a 10-year veteran. "The chemistry is indescribable."

Omaha starter Mike Montgomery threw 5.0 shutout innings, allowing three hits and striking out six to earn the victory and give Omaha a 3-games-to-0 sweep. Manny Pina and Lance Zawadzki hit back-to-back RBI doubles to give the Storm Chasers a 2-0 lead in the second inning. Omaha tacked on four more runs in the fifth inning to take a 6-0 lead.

Sacramento slugger Chris Carter provided some fireworks for River Cats fans in the ninth inning, hitting his ninth career postseason home run for the River Cats. However, it wasn't enough for the home team, as Omaha closer Kelvin Herrera got Andy LaRoche to ground out for the final out and Omaha celebrated on the pitcher's mound.

Sacramento's 2011 season was one to remember. The River Cats won the PCL Pacific South Division by 17.0 games, the largest margin of victory for a PCL division winner since the league switched to four divisions in 1998. Sacramento matched the franchise's longest winning streak at 10 games, and set the longest losing streak at nine. In the first round of the playoffs, the River Cats overcame a 2-games-to-0 deficit against their Interstate 80 rival Reno Aces to advance to the Championship Series.

They couldn't accomplish the same feat against the Storm Chasers.

Omaha right-hander Luis Mendoza, who had a 2-0 record and 1.29 ERA in the playoffs, was named the PCL Playoffs Most Valuable Player.

Eight-run gap too big for Cats to overcome

Matt Kawahara, Sacramento Bee

In the end, the River Cats simply dug themselves too deep a hole.

Such was the case in this PCL Championship Series, as Sacramento fell behind two games to none on the road. And so it was Friday night, as they tried to rally from that deficit, buoyed by a return to Raley Field, only to find themselves trailing 8-0 in the sixth inning.

Sparks of offense that followed in the 11-6 loss were not enough. And it was the Omaha Storm Chasers celebrating on the field afterward in front of an announced crowd of 10,861, winners of their first Pacific Coast League title in their 14th season in the league, while the home team filed toward the clubhouse beyond the left-field wall.

Sacramento fell short of its fifth PCL title, denied in the championship series for the second time in three years.

It marked the end of a season – Darren Bush's first as manager – in which the River Cats posted their best regular-season record since 2003 and fought back from a similar two-games-to-none deficit in the first round of the playoffs for just the second time in franchise history.

No team, though, had rallied from such a deficit in the league championship series since the league expanded to 16 teams in 1998. And Omaha, with its second double-digit scoring outburst in as many games, ensured it would not be the first victim.

The Storm Chasers jumped ahead in the second inning with a two-run rally that started with a two-out single by Irving Falu. Manny Pina followed with a double to deep left field, driving in Falu, and then scored on a Lance Zawadzki double to center.

Right-hander Travis Banwart, who took the loss for Sacramento, pitched around baserunners in the third and fourth innings. But things began to unravel in the fifth.

With one out, Omaha's David Lough lofted a fly ball to right field. Grant Green, who had played most of the regular season at either shortstop or center field for Double-A Midland, camped under the ball but dropped it, allowing Lough, already speedy and running hard, to slide safely into third.

Banwart coaxed a groundout from Lorenzo Cain for the second out, and the River Cats chose to walk cleanup hitter Clint Robinson to face Kila Ka'aihue, mired in an 0-for-10 slump. The strategy backfired. Ka'aihue – the hero in the Storm Chasers' clincher over Round Rock in the conference championships – singled to right, driving in Lough.

Falu then drove in Robinson with a double, and a Lance Zawadzki single scored Ka'aihue and Falu, putting Omaha up 6-0. All four runs scored in the inning were unearned.

By the time Lough launched a two-run home run to right-center in the sixth, it felt almost like a footnote.

Storm Chasers starter Mike Montgomery, a lanky, lauded pitching prospect, earned the win after allowing no runs in five innings. He struck out six and had hitters waving at a big, slow breaking ball.

Sacramento mounted rallies in the late innings, scoring three times in the sixth and twice more in the seventh. But each time, Omaha tacked on runs in the next half-inning.

First baseman Chris Carter hit a long home run to left field to lead off the ninth – his fourth of the playoffs – but it was too little, too late.

Ports Pushed To The Brink In 3-2 Loss In Extras

Stockton Ports

LAKE ELSINORE, Calif. - The Stockton Ports will look back on Game 2 of the 2011 California League Championship Series as a game of missed opportunities. Stockton went 1-for-11 with runners in scoring position and stranded 11 baserunners as the Lake Elsinore Storm notched a come-from-behind 3-2 win in 10 innings to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five series. With the

series shifting to Stockton for the final three games, the Ports find themselves on the brink of elimination, while the Storm are on the brink of claiming their third Cal-League title.

Stockton, after being shut out in Game 1, wasted no time in getting on the board in Game 2. With two outs and the bases empty in the 1st, Michael Choice homered to left, his third of the post-season to give the Ports a 1-0 lead.

The Ports would go on to squander an opportunity to add to their lead over the next few innings. In the 2nd, Stockton had runners at first and second with one out and failed to score. In the 4th, the Ports wasted a leadoff double from Anthony Aliotti, who never advanced past second base.

Meanwhile, Ports starter Rob Gilliam was in the midst of an outstanding effort. Gilliam retired 15 of the first 16 batters he faced and faced the minimum through 5.1 innings.

Stockton did add a run in the 5th off Storm starter Jerry Sullivan. With two outs in the inning, Myrio Richard doubled to right and scored on an ensuing single from Conner Crumbliss to make it a 2-0 advantage.

Sullivan would record the first out in the 6th and after walking Ryan Lipkin, he'd be lifted for Hayden Beard. Beard faced Michael Gilmartin who reached on an error made by shortstop Judy Valdez, but then struck out Dusty Coleman for the second out. With two on and two out, Storm manager Phil Plantier again went to the bullpen and got lefty Jeff Ibarra, who struck out Mitch LeVier to end the inning.

Sullivan would not factor into the decision after going 5.1 innings and allowing two runs on six hits while striking out three. Ibarra would toss 1.1 scoreless innings for the Storm.

Lake Elsinore got their first run across in the 6th. With a runner at third and two away, Reymond Fuentes legged out an infield single, resulting in the Storm's first run of the contest and a 2-1 ballgame. It was the only run allowed by Gilliam, who went seven strong innings and allowing just four hits while striking out seven.

The Storm would tie it in the 8th facing Ports reliever Connor Hoehn. Jake Blackwood led off the inning by drawing a walk. He would then be advanced to second on a sac-bunt and score on an ensuing double from Edinson Rincon to tie the game at 2-2. Hoehn, after striking out Rymer Liriano with the infield in, would be lifted for Jose Guzman, who got Fuentes to pop to short to end the inning.

Guzman would pitch around a jam in the 9th with the possible winning run in scoring position to send the game into extra innings.

In the top of the 10th, former Stockton Port Jason Ray (2-0) began his second inning of work for Lake Elsinore. Ray walked Crumbliss to start the inning, and then surrendered a single to center to Choice, putting runners at the corners with nobody out. After intentionally walking Aliotti to load the bases, Ray got Lipkin to pop out to short, Gilmartin to strike out, and Coleman to ground out back to the mound to end the inning and escape the jam unscathed.

Lake Elsinore came back in the bottom of the inning with the winning run. Jonathan Galvez led the inning off with a double off A.J. Huttenlocker (2-1), and then moved over to third on a sac-bunt from Danny Payne. After Liriano was intentionally walked, Fuentes came up and hit a sac-fly to shallow left to score Galvez, who slid across home plate as the throw from Richard came in off-line.

Huttenlocker suffered his first post-season loss after allowing the winning run.

Ray was credited with the win for the Storm after tossing two scoreless innings.

With Stockton needing to win three games in a row for the Cal-League title, the best-of-five series shifts to Banner Island Ballpark for the final three games. On Saturday, A.J. Griffin (5-3, 3.57 ERA) will try and keep Stockton's title hopes alive. He'll be opposed by Storm left-hander Andrew Werner (5-2, 3.03 ERA). First pitch is set for 7:05 p.m. PDT.