

Oakland A's fall to Seattle Mariners again

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

There's a question confronting A's fans in the early stages of this season.

Do the wondrous individual works of center fielder Yoenis Cespedes outweigh the fact that the A's are misfiring as a team?

Cespedes continued providing the thrills Saturday night with a three-run home run that injected drama into the A's 8-7 loss to the Seattle Mariners.

But the A's, overall, provided the groans with comically poor defense during a six-run Mariners rally in the fourth inning that gave them a 7-0 lead.

Cespedes became the first player in Oakland history to hit three homers in his first four major league games.

"I feel lucky (because) in Cuba I'd never done that before," Cespedes said through interpreter Ariel Prieto.

There was a dose of drama in the fourth inning, when Mariners starter Felix Hernandez hit Cespedes with a fastball with a base open and Seattle up 7-0. It raised suspicions that it was payback for Cespedes admiring momentarily a homer he hit the night before off Jason Vargas.

Cespedes said he was "100 percent for sure" Hernandez hit him on purpose, though he said he thought it was more because a base was open and not because of Friday's antics.

A's manager Bob Melvin watched video of the play after it happened.

"I don't think he was trying to hit him," he said. "It didn't seem so based on (Hernandez's) reaction."

Hernandez didn't comment on the incident to Seattle reporters.

The A's trailed 8-4 when Cespedes connected in the seventh for a three-run shot off right-hander Steve Delabar.

The Mariners swept the two-game series, and counting two games played in Tokyo, Seattle took three out of four from the A's to open the season.

The A's were charged with just one error, but that didn't reflect their sloppiness with the glove. And it's worth noting Cespedes played a role in the A's defensive mishaps.

With Seattle leading 1-0 and a runner on first in the fourth, Cespedes broke in on Ichiro Suzuki's liner and couldn't recover fast enough. The ball hit off his glove and was ruled an RBI triple.

"I lost the ball a little bit in the stands, and when I tried to go back it was too late," Cespedes said.

Justin Smoak followed with a bloop RBI single off Bartolo Colon (1-1). Two more singles made it 4-0.

With two outs, Munenori Kawasaki singled past shortstop Cliff Pennington, who missed a backhanded stab at the sharply hit ball. Left fielder Coco Crisp made a throw home that was slightly offline, and catcher Kurt Suzuki attempted a swipe tag on Kyle Seager but never even touched the ball.

The throw went to the backstop -- Colon was nowhere in position to back the play up -- allowing runners to advance to second and third. Chone Figgins followed with a two-run double for a 7-0 lead, and the boos rained down.

Colon was nowhere near as sharp as his outing in Tokyo, giving up 10 hits and being charged with seven earned runs in 4 1/3 innings.

"Maybe it was because the first time they hadn't seen me much," Colon said through Prieto. "The second time, they found the best way to make contact."

Colon held the Mariners to three hits over eight innings March 29 in the Tokyo Dome.

□ A's second baseman Jemile Weeks rolled his left ankle getting out of the batter's box on a ninth-inning ground out. He had an ice pack on the ankle afterward but said he thought he would be OK for Monday's series opener against Kansas City.

The A's are off Sunday, a scheduling quirk resulting from their trip to Japan.

□ The A's are no longer acknowledging their ballpark as O.co Coliseum, reverting back to Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum on their news releases although O.co still holds naming rights to the venue.

Under a contract between O.co and SMG -- the company that oversees operations at the Coliseum -- the A's are obligated to refer to O.co Coliseum only three times per game on radio and TV broadcasts.

Last season, the A's negotiated a side agreement with O.co for full promotion rights during games in exchange for advertising revenue. No such agreement was struck this season, according to Ken Pries, the A's vice president of broadcasting and communications.

"We talked to them all during the offseason, and they said, 'We can't do it this year,' " Pries said.

It's unknown how much advertising revenue the A's are losing without a deal.

Oakland Coliseum still bears O.co name

By Angela Woodall, Oakland Tribune

The A's home stadium bears the brand name O.co. But the team referred to it as the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum in their game notes during the home opener Friday night against the Seattle Mariners.

The name switch prompted questions about whether the Coliseum would be looking for yet another corporate sponsor just one year into a six-year deal with online retailer Overstock.com, which gave the stadium the O.co moniker.

SMG General Manager Ron Little said the O.co name would be staying put. SMG oversees operations at the Coliseum, which includes the stadium and the Oracle Arena.

The A's refuse to accept the O.co name, Little said. It's a sticky issue that the lawyers for both sides -- the A's and Coliseum -- are still trying to iron out.

The Coliseum and the Raiders are supposed to split the earnings from the naming deal, worth about \$1 million a year. The A's were not part of the naming rights agreement. But the A's control concessions, pouring rights during baseball and football games and control signage within the stadium.

O.co also has to pay the A's and the Raiders separately for any other promotion of the company's name during games.

It's not clear what the A's agreement with O.co entails.

But the team is only required to refer to it as the O.co Coliseum three times per game in radio and TV broadcasts, A's spokesman Bob Rose wrote in an email Saturday morning.

"Beyond that, the club has no obligations to O.co," Rose continued, "thus we refer to our venue as the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum in all our collateral material."

Inside the Oakland A's: A's, Mariners lineups and pregame notes

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 4/7/2012, 5:43pm

Tonight's lineups as the A's try to rebound against the Mariners:

A's — Weeks 2B, Crisp LF, Reddick RF, Cespedes CF, Smith DH, Suzuki C, Pennington SS, Allen 1B, Sogard 3B; Colon RHP.

Mariners — Figgins LF, Ackley 2B, Ichiro RF, Smoak 1B, Montero DH, Seager 3B, Olivo C, Saunders CF, Kawasaki SS; Hernandez RHP.

–Yoenis Cespedes makes his debut in the cleanup spot. “He’s a power bat, and he continues to swing it well,” A’s manager Bob Melvin said.

–Darc Barton’s DL stint is retroactive to March 24, meaning he is eligible to be activated for Monday’s game against Kansas City. Will he join the A’s then? Melvin said there’s still an issue of whether Barton’s surgically repaired right shoulder can handle the rigors of playing every day, but he wouldn’t speculate on when, or if, Barton might return. Barton’s status still leaves the first base position in limbo, as the A’s seem to be entertaining the idea of plugging him in as the starter once they feel he’s healthy enough. Brandon Allen draws the start tonight, after Kila Ka’iahue got the nod Friday night ...

A's get to Felix Hernandez, but don't earn victory

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Give Felix Hernandez a 7-0 lead in the fourth inning against almost any team, and you figure the Mariners will win about 98 percent of the time.

Give Felix Hernandez a 7-0 lead in the fourth inning against the A's, and you figure the Mariners will win about 99.7 percent of the time.

Saturday night at the Coliseum was not the 0.3 percent of the time, though the A's put quite a scare into Seattle, and the legend of Yoenis Céspedes grew.

Oakland couldn't quite overcome the Mariners' six-run fourth inning and fell 8-7.

Hernandez came into Saturday with impressive career numbers - try 12-4 with a 2.47 ERA - against Oakland. In Seattle's 3-1, 11-inning win on Opening Day in Japan, he limited the A's to a run on five hits in eight innings.

His line Saturday: 6 1/3 innings, eight hits, six runs, all earned. The final two runs on his ledger came after he left the game.

The A's had two on and one out in the seventh when Seattle manager Eric Wedge replaced Hernandez with Lucas Luetge. The left-hander made his major-league debut by striking out Josh Reddick, then gave way to right-hander Steve Delabar.

Céspedes launched a Delabar pitch way, way deep to right-center. The three-run job was Céspedes' third homer in the past three games.

Through interpreter Ariel Prieto, Céspedes said, "I feel so happy. This is not normal because I'm a rookie. I'm just happy because I feel like it's lucky."

Céspedes didn't put the ball in play against Hernandez, striking out twice and getting hit by a pitch. A's manager Bob Melvin appreciated Céspedes' ability to deliver after he had struggled early in the game.

Said Melvin: "What you'd like to see from anybody is, you have a couple of bad at-bats but you're still able to come through later in the game and not let that get you down.

"He certainly looks to be that type of player."

For those who love the notion of "on pace," Céspedes is on pace to hit 121.5 homers this season.

After Céspedes' homer, Seattle's bullpen set down the final seven Oakland hitters.

Seven Seattle hits turned into six runs off loser Bartolo Colon in that fourth inning. Céspedes had a major role in the key play.

After Dustin Ackley's leadoff single, Ichiro Suzuki followed with a liner to center. Céspedes broke in on the ball, then retreated. He got a glove on the ball, but couldn't grab it. Suzuki was credited with an RBI triple.

Chone Figgins (three hits) capped the inning with a two-run double off the base of the right-field wall. That made it 7-0.

Céspedes got hit by an up-and-in Hernandez pitch with runners at second and third in the bottom of the inning. Melvin did not believe Hernandez intentionally threw at Céspedes, but Céspedes did.

In any event, Jemile Weeks did take Hernandez deep to right in the fifth. Weeks was limping on his ninth-inning groundout. Melvin said Weeks had turned an ankle, but the manager did not think the injury was serious.

Céspedes' progress reflected in A's batting order

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Seven, six, five, four ... at this rate, **Yoenis Céspedes** will be batting leadoff Wednesday against Kansas City.

Little chance of that, of course, but the "seven, six, five, four" reference lists the spots in the batting order, respectively, in which the rookie outfielder appeared in the A's first four games.

Manager **Bob Melvin** put Céspedes in the cleanup spot for Saturday's matchup against Seattle's **Felix Hernandez**. So much for easing Céspedes into the big leagues by keeping him lower in the order.

Melvin wouldn't commit to having Céspedes in the No. 3 or No. 4 slot full-time, but the manager acknowledged, "One thing I will tell you about him is he will be a middle-of-the-order fixture at some point in time. Today, he's hitting fourth and he's in the middle of the order. Whether it's fifth tomorrow or whatever, we'll see.

"I say this every day, but he's getting more and more comfortable every day."

Céspedes looked comfortable Friday night when he jolted a **Jason Vargas** pitch an estimated 462 feet.

"I don't think that's the farthest one you'll ever see him hit, either," Melvin said.

Céspedes took a moment to follow the flight of his homer, something that's considered a no-no for most players. After Friday's game, he said he'd try not to do that again.

Melvin's take: "I don't know that I wouldn't admire that for a second, too. But, you could see right away, he caught himself and he ran hard around the bases. It's not like it took him a half hour to get around the bases."

With his homer Saturday, Céspedes is the only Oakland player to hit safely in each of the first four games.

Briefly: Eric Sogard got a start at third base one night after **Josh Donaldson** went 0-for-4 and made a key error. Melvin said Donaldson still will get the majority of the starts at third. ... First baseman **Daric Barton** (shoulder) is eligible to come off the disabled list Sunday, but Melvin strongly suggested Barton will stick with his rehab assignment for Triple-A Sacramento for the time being.

A's On Deck

Sunday

Off

Monday

vs. Royals

7:05 p.m. **CSNCA**

Mendoza (2-0) vs. Milone (1-0)

Tuesday

vs. Royals

7:05 p.m. **CSNCA**

Duffy (4-8) vs. Godfrey (1-2)

Leading off

Meeting of the minds: Talking shop with A's manager Bob Melvin near the end of batting practice was none other than Warriors head coach Mark Jackson. The Warriors faced Denver at Oracle Arena, with tip-off about 90 minutes after the first pitch at the Coliseum.

1990s Braves: Blueprint for building around Big 3

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Draft well. Develop well. Hit the jackpot on some young hitters. Add some established hitters through trades and free agency. Most of all, invest in pitching.

The Giants' recent blueprint?

Actually, we're referencing the **John Schuerholz/Bobby Cox** Braves.

"Start with outstanding pitching and try to maintain it as long as possible," Schuerholz said in a phone interview.

It's what Schuerholz pursued in his 17 years as the Braves' general manager and what **Brian Sabean** turned to when the **Barry Bonds** era was winding down.

With **Tim Lincecum**, **Matt Cain** and **Madison Bumgarner**, who replaced **Jonathan Sanchez** as the resident lefty, it has been a nice ride, but nothing like the gold standard set by those Braves, who had **Greg Maddux**, **Tom Glavine** and **John Smoltz** together a magical 10 years.

From 1993, when Maddux signed as a free agent, to 2002, the year before Glavine signed with the Mets, there was no better threesome in any rotation, and no trio since has matched the longevity, productivity and sheer dominance. Lincecum, Cain, Bumgarner? They'd need another eight years together.

Cox had the easy job, penciling his Big Three into his lineup. Schuerholz's was a little tougher, paying them top dollar while having enough money left over to remain competitive - in those 10 years, the Braves made the playoffs annually (except strike-shortened 1994) with the Big Three collecting four Cy Young Awards and 18 All-Star assignments, staying relatively healthy through it all.

"Fortunate is the best word," said Schuerholz, who realized the importance of a solid rotation and farm system when breaking into management with the Orioles of the late '60s. "John was a great athlete out of high school. Glavine was drafted into the NHL. Greg Maddux was Greg Maddux. You felt confident committing to them. You also held your breath and hoped and prayed those decisions are right."

It's a dilemma the Giants' Sabean now faces, investing heavily in Lincecum and Cain while piecing together a roster that's playoff-caliber. Lincecum makes \$18.5 million this year (including his \$500,000 signing bonus). Cain makes \$18 million (including \$3 million of his \$5 million signing bonus). Bumgarner makes \$560,000.

That's 29 percent of the \$130 million payroll for the top three starters. Throw in Barry Zito's \$19 million, and it's 43 percent of the payroll.

Next year, it gets dicier. Lincecum will make \$22 million, as will Cain (\$20 million salary plus the rest of his signing bonus), and Bumgarner has a chance for arbitration for the first time, though one recent estimate for the "Super 2" provision suggests Bumgarner will miss eligibility by one week.

Even without Bumgarner, the Giants are committed to \$64 million to Lincecum, Cain and Zito - 49 percent of the payroll, assuming it remains \$130 million.

In the decade of Atlanta's Big Three, they averaged 35 percent of the payroll - from a high of 41 percent in 1998 to a low of 31 percent in 2002.

Their first year together, Maddux made \$5.9 million, Glavine \$4.9 million, Smoltz \$2.7 million. Their final year, Maddux made \$13.1 million, Glavine \$8.6 million, Smoltz \$7.7 million.

Shea Hey

A few days into the 2012 season, and already it's upside down.

Who would have thought that after a perfect 2011, **Jose Valverde** would be imperfect in his first try of 2012?

How to explain **Mariano Rivera**, the best closer who ever lived, blowing a save opportunity in the Yankees' opener?

Was that really a home run trot by **Adam Dunn**?

Can anyone clarify how **J.P. Arencibia** struck out six times in two games, the same J.P. Arencibia whose three-run homer lifted Toronto to a 16-inning victory, history's longest season opener?

Yoenis Céspedes, major-league home run leader?

Wait a minute, **Ryan Sweeney** and **Cody Ross** hitting back to back in the Red Sox lineup? And Sweeney hitting a triple to hand Valverde his first blown save since 2010?

No season-opening victories for **CC Sabathia**, **Justin Verlander** or **Tim Lincecum**, yet Valverde gets credit for a win?

Just confirming: **Josh Outman** went on the DL with a strained oblique because of vomiting?

Mark DeRosa, Nationals starting left fielder. Who called that?

Why do the A's get two home openers before the Mariners get one?

Was that really a "Wait til next year" banner flying at Wrigley after the Cubs lost their opener?

Albert Pujols, fresh off signing a \$240 million deal, hits into a double play to begin his Angels career?

Did the Marlins really open the season in their new ballpark, then fly to Cincinnati and arrive at 3 a.m. for an afternoon game against the Reds?

What a wacky start. It all makes **Jamie Moyer's** return to the majors at 49 seem so normal.

The Bullpen

-- Amid offseason chatter that **Matt Cain** and **Cole Hamels** were entering their final seasons before free agency, we heard little about a third guy on the list: **Zack Greinke**, who was representing himself and supposedly was quoted as saying, "I'm very impressed with my client." Greinke finally has hired an agent, **Casey Close**.

-- The Hamels issue is complex for the Phillies. If they match Cain's new deal (\$112.5 million five years), they'd pay more per season to Hamels than **Roy Halladay** (\$60 million over three years), and they're already on the hook to **Cliff Lee** for \$120 million over five years.

-- Way to go, **Travis Ishikawa**, who survived the Brewers' final cut and made the team over **Brooks Conrad**. "It honestly feels like being a rookie again," said Ishikawa, 28.

-- **Jamie Moyer** learned he made the Rockies' roster on March 30, and what a special day for the 49-year-old pitcher - he was celebrating the 20th anniversary of being released by the Cubs.

-- **Brandon Crawford** was the fifth shortstop to start a Giants opener in six years. Compare that with the Indians, who have had only three Opening Day shortstops (**Omar Vizquel, Jhonny Peralta, Asdrubal Cabrera**) during their 19-year Progressive Field era.

-- Though the Cubs reportedly inquired, the Nationals insist they're keeping pitcher **John Lannan**, who requested a trade after being optioned to the minors despite a \$5 million salary.

-- No wonder the Angels signed **Albert Pujols**. The past two years, they outscored opponents by a total of 13 runs. The division rival Rangers outscored theirs by 278.

Play it again

Yoenis Céspedes is new to the majors and has zero minor-league experience, so he knows little about opposing batters, but the center fielder can rely on first-base coach **Tye Waller**, who stands in front of the A's dugout when the team is on defense and, based on scouting reports, helps Céspedes position himself.

"The names don't mean anything to him. Basically, he's trusting me and looks at me before every batter," Waller said. "Then again, he can run enough where we could be a little off and he's still OK."

Céspedes learned something about Seattle's **Michael Saunders** in Friday's Coliseum opener. Saunders doubled over Céspedes' head to open the fourth inning, later scoring, so Céspedes doesn't need direction to move back a couple of steps for future Saunders at-bats.

The Drumbeat: And now batting cleanup ...

Steve Kroner subbing for Susan Slusser at the Coliseum, 4/7/2012, 4:55pm

It didn't take long for manager Bob Melvin to put Yoenis Céspedes in the fourth spot in the order. The rookie center fielder hit seventh and sixth, respectively, in the A's two games against Seattle in Japan.

Céspedes hit a two-run homer from the five spot in the A's 7-3 loss to Seattle in the home opener Friday night.

And now Melvin has Céspedes in the cleanup spot for Saturday's matchup against Felix Hernandez.

"He's a power bat," Melvin said of Céspedes. "We'll continue to move it around a little bit, but I think he's swinging pretty well. You're going to see some strikeouts, but you're also going to see a guy who's going to run into one and when he does, and somebody's on base, it's usually worth a couple. So, he'll hit fourth today."

Melvin would not commit to having Céspedes as either the No. 3 or No. 4 hitter full-time, but the manager did acknowledge, "One thing I will tell you about him is he will be a middle-of-the-order fixture at some point in time. Today, he's hitting fourth and he's in the middle of the order. Whether it's fifth tomorrow or whatever, we'll see. I say this every day, but he's getting more and more comfortable every day."

The A's lineup:

Weeks, 2B; Crisp, LF; Reddick, RF; Céspedes, CF; Smith, DH; Suzuki, C; Pennington, SS; Allen, 1B; Sogard, 3B

And in a meeting-of-the-minds moment, Melvin spent some time near the end of batting practice talking with Warriors head coach Mark Jackson. The Warriors face Denver at Oracle Arena later Saturday night.

Céspedes-led rally falls short against Mariners

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 4/8/2012 2:30 AM ET

OAKLAND -- The A's were never interested in hosting a pity party for themselves, never mind a cruel schedule that has them facing Seattle's Felix Hernandez three times in the first two weeks of the season.

Meeting No. 2 took place Saturday at the Coliseum, Hernandez coming out the victor in an 8-7 A's defeat. It marked his 13th career victory in 23 tries vs. Oakland, but the right-hander hardly stole the show.

Manager Bob Melvin's club, for a second straight night, appeared out of sync on nearly all cylinders in the early goings, until the A's rallied for six runs off Hernandez -- the most they've ever tallied against him -- and witnessed Yoenis Cespedes notch his third homer in four games.

But by the time A's starter Bartolo Colon's teammates put up their first run, he had already surrendered seven, and despite a strong comeback attempt, Oakland couldn't save the veteran right-hander from picking up his first loss of the season.

"Disappointing," Melvin said. "We like the fact we rallied and certainly played better in the second half of the game than we did in the first half, but there are really no moral victories there."

Colon, coming off a stellar eight-inning outing against the Mariners in Tokyo last week, proved all too hittable this time around, following eight days of rest. He quickly surrendered a run in the first and proceeded to retire nine straight before a nightmarish fourth inning -- "It's certainly not an inning you use as a teaching clinic," Melvin quipped -- unfolded. The Mariners sent 10 men to the plate and scored six runs in the frame, and by the fifth, with just one out, Colon was done for the night.

He didn't get much help from his defense, though. After Dustin Ackley led off the fourth with a single, Ichiro Suzuki lined a ball to center field, where Cespedes broke in before watching it sail over his head, allowing Ackley to score and Ichiro to make his way to third for a triple.

Playing in just his fourth Major League game, Cespedes said afterward he saw the ball well off the bat but lost sight of it as its path lengthened and, by the time it appeared within reach, he was already too far behind.

"That's the toughest ball for a center fielder, a line-drive ball right at you," Melvin said. "He knows that Ichiro doesn't drive a lot of balls over the center fielder's head. He came in the way he thought the ball would end up, and [Ichiro] squared it up a bit more and it ended up over his head. You're going to see some center fielders do that."

Justin Smoak's ensuing bloop single to right field kept the rally going and, after Jesus Montero tallied the first out with a flyout, Kyle Seager and Miguel Olivo restarted the hit parade with a single apiece, as another run scored. Following Michael Saunders' popup to shortstop, Munenori Kawasaki grounded a sharp ball to left that deflected off Cliff Pennington's glove, and Coco Crisp's throw home was offline, not only allowing a runner in but giving Olivo and Kawasaki the chance to reach third and second, respectively.

The damage continued when Chone Figgins followed with a two-run double, before Ackley grounded out to end the fateful inning.

"I think a few pitches were up a little more than we've seen," Melvin said of Colon. "He threw a lot of fastballs like he normally does, but I'm guessing some balls were in the middle of the plate, more so certainly than last time."

Colon agreed, noting one too many balls were elevated but, overall, felt no better or worse than he did in Japan. Either way, the A's were left staring down quite the task, as a seven-run deficit, combined with Hernandez's presence, could have easily

equated to a deflated dugout. But Oakland proved unmoved by the recent happenings and, over the next four innings, combined for seven runs.

Cespedes was responsible for three of them, as he launched a three-run shot off Mariners reliever Steve Delabar with two outs in the seventh inning to center field. Jemile Weeks also homered for the A's in the fifth, and Kurt Suzuki collected a two-run double an inning later.

None of it was enough to lift the A's (1-3) past the Mariners, who exit Oakland having taken three of the clubs' first four meetings, but at the very least it shook Hernandez, who gave up six runs just three times in 33 starts last year.

"I have to make an adjustment," he said. "I have to. That is not going to happen again. I gave up six runs. That is not going to happen again."

Too many more repeat performances by the 2010 Cy Young winner are likely to be had, yet the A's are hoping for just that from Cespedes, whose three home runs outnumber his club's win total this season. He is the only A's player to hit safely in each of the first four games and has in no way shied away from swinging the bat.

He struck out in two of his previous three plate appearances of the night -- he was hit by a pitch in the other and said he was "100 percent sure" Hernandez did it intentionally, since a base was open with men on second and third -- before launching yet another long ball.

"To be able to strike out a few times like he does and then come up and hit a home run like that, which at the time is the biggest hit of the game and gets us back into it, shows you a little bit about his makeup," Melvin said.

Milone draws Royals in A's debut

By Zack Meisel / MLB.com | 4/8/2012 3:00 AM ET

Tom Milone hasn't yet produced the resume that Gio Gonzalez has, but he pitched well enough in Spring Training to earn a spot in Oakland's starting rotation.

Part of the Athletics' haul in the deal that sent Gonzalez to the Nationals over the winter, Milone posted a 2-1 record and 4.91 ERA in five spring outings (four starts).

Milone is scheduled to make his A's debut Monday in the opener of a three-game set against the Royals.

"What we've seen out of him all spring is a guy who has great command," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "He seems to read hitters really well. He's got four pitches he throws to both sides of the plate, has a great changeup and his command's always good."

In his final two exhibition starts, Milone tossed six perfect innings against Oakland's Triple-A team and followed up that performance with five scoreless frames against the Giants.

Melvin appreciates Milone's propensity to make hitters work.

"He's a very consistent guy who makes you string hits together in a row to make you have to beat him," Melvin said. "You're going to have to take what he gives you if you're going to go about beating him."

Milone made five starts for Washington last September, compiling a 1-0 record and 3.81 ERA over 26 innings.

The Royals are expected to counter with righty Luis Mendoza, who dazzled during Spring Training to the tune of a 4-0 record and 0.47 ERA in six outings spanning 19 1/3 innings.

"I've just been trying to make my pitches with a purpose and just trust them," Mendoza said.

Sixteen of Mendoza's 38 career appearances have been in a starting role. The 28-year-old sports a career ERA of 7.36.

Royals: Catchers paired with specific pitchers

Manager Ned Yost assigned each of his two catchers certain starting pitchers to match up with every game.

Brayan Pena will typically catch when Bruce Chen or Mendoza is on the mound. Humberto Quintero will don the catching gear when Luke Hochevar, Jonathan Sanchez or Danny Duffy takes the hill.

"You try to keep them balanced," Yost said. "You try to keep them both in there."

Pena and Quintero are filling in for Salvador Perez, who is sidelined following knee surgery.

Athletics: Cespedes off to scorching start

Rookie outfielder Yoenis Cespedes hit cleanup Saturday, after batting fifth, seventh and sixth in his first three games.

The native of Cuba hit his third home run in four games on Saturday night. Overall, he's batting .308 (4-for-13) with seven RBIs and seven strikeouts.

"He's a power bat, and we'll continue to move [the lineup] around a bit, but I think he's swinging pretty well," Melvin said.

- First baseman Daric Barton, who has been sidelined with a shoulder injury, is eligible to come off the 15-day disabled list on Sunday. When the A's choose to activate him, they'll likely have to designate for assignment one of the two first basemen already on their roster.

Brandon Allen and Kila Ka'aihue have each started two games at first base. Allen is 0-for-7 with five strikeouts and Ka'aihue is 3-for-8. Both are out of options.

Barton is playing with Triple-A Sacramento, as Oakland waits for him to feel comfortable with playing multiple games in a row before bringing him back to the Major League club.

Worth noting

- Oakland won five of its nine meetings with Kansas City last season.
- A's second baseman Jemile Weeks hit his first home run of the year on Saturday. He hit just two last season in 97 games.

Melvin moves Cespedes into cleanup spot

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- As if he needed one at all, manager Bob Melvin kept his explanation for placing Yoenis Cespedes in the cleanup spot Saturday rather brief.

"What the heck?" he said, smiling.

His grin proved contagious with surrounding reporters, considering everyone was still thinking about the outfielder's second home run in three games Friday night -- a tape-measure shot calculated by ESPN at 462 feet.

"He's a power bat, and we'll continue to move [the lineup] around a bit, but I think he's swinging pretty well," Melvin said. "You're going to see some strikeouts, but you're also going to see a guy that's going to run into one, and when he does and there's somebody on base, it's usually worth a couple, so he'll hit fourth today."

Against one of the game's best, no less. For the second time already this season, the A's on Saturday were forced to face Seattle ace Felix Hernandez, who has a 2.47 ERA with 148 strikeouts in 22 career starts against Oakland. Cespedes is responsible for one of those strikeouts, but he also doubled off the righty in his other at-bat in Tokyo last week.

Elsewhere in the lineup, Josh Reddick made his second straight appearance in the third hole, while Brandon Allen got the nod at first base and Eric Sogard started at third. Melvin said Sogard will continue to see action against right-handers but that Josh Donaldson will still receive the majority of starts at the hot corner.

"Our whole lineup is still a work in progress," Melvin said. "We're trying to find the right mix. We have a lot of new guys here that have not played together before, and we had a shortened spring. This is the first time we're able to get the same group out there, so it's going to be mix and match."

A's face Barton decision on Sunday

OAKLAND -- The A's on Sunday will have to decide whether to activate Daric Barton from the disabled list, a move that would likely lead to the designation of one of the other two first basemen already on the roster.

Left-handed hitters Brandon Allen and Kila Ka'aihue, both out of options, have alternated at first base in Oakland's first four games -- a scene not likely to change until Barton's arrival. But manager Bob Melvin said Saturday he's not quite sure whether Barton, who is strengthening his surgically repaired right shoulder via a rehab stint with Triple-A Sacramento, is prepared for big league action. He's eligible to be return from the DL on Sunday, when the A's are set to enjoy an off-day before beginning a three-game home series with the Royals on Monday.

Barton played in an exhibition game with Sacramento on Tuesday and, since the River Cats' off-day Wednesday, has played in each of their games since, going 3-for-9 with one walk and three strikeouts.

"It's all about playing multiple days in a row with him and feeling comfortable with it, knowing he can go out there, whether it's a week in a row, and not worry about his shoulder," Melvin said. "I think it's just as much mental right now as it is physical, because you don't want to go out there playing when you're thinking about something. So I think that's the last hurdle for him."

Ka'aihue started Friday's home opener at first base, going 2-for-4 with a pair of base hits -- numbers that would normally influence a manager to keep him in the lineup the next day, except most managers aren't trying to get two left-handed hitters playing time at the same position, as Melvin is. So Allen got the start Saturday, with the game of musical chairs expected to continue until further notice.

"That was the toughest decision today, not putting Kila in the lineup again," Melvin said. "We'll see how it goes, and you can use them off the bench, too."

Major Lee-ague: Melvin: "I don't know that I wouldn't admire it..."

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 4/7/2012, 7:22pm

Bob Melvin, when asked before the game if he anticipated the Mariners to budge on Yoenis Cespedes after he admired his homer last night, had this to say:

I don't think so. You watch, and 90 percent of guys watch them, and it seems like the more stature they have, they watch it some. You could tell he caught himself. I don't know that I wouldn't admire it for a second, too. But you could see, he ran hard around the bases, and it wasn't like it took him a half hour to run around the bases. I think they also understand over there this is a guy that's learning a lot here at the big-league level. I don't foresee that being a problem.

Well, after Cespedes struck out against Felix Hernandez in the first, he was hit by a pitch that brushed his shoulder on a 1-0 count in the fourth with two runners on base. The base runners would normally signal the question, Did he really mean to board another, then? But with a 7-0 lead at the time, it wouldn't surprise me if he did.

A's lineup -- Cespedes elevated to cleanup

Nate Stuhlbarg, csnbayarea.com

Managers Bob Melvin and Eric Wedge have released their lineups for the second and final game of the short series between the Mariners and A's at O.Co Coliseum.

Yoenis Cespedes continues his ascent through the A's lineup. Melvin has stated numerous times he doesn't want to anchor Cespedes in the four-hole, for fear of loading up too much pressure on the newcomer to America.

In Game 1, Cespedes hit seventh. Game 2, sixth. On Friday night he hit fifth. Saturday, he'll swing out of the cleanup spot for the first time in his MLB career.

Cespedes is 3-for-his-first-10, and he is yet to hit a single. He has two home runs in his first three career games, joining fellow Cuban national Bert Campaneris as the only two players in A's franchise history to do so.

Seth Smith also gets his first start of the season. He was called upon to pinch hit in the eighth inning of Friday night's game and fouled off two pitches in a 1-2 count before turning around a 96-mph fastball for a bast hit.

Brandon Allen gets the start at first, facing right-handed pitcher Felix Hernandez. For now, the A's plan to platoon Allen with Kila Ka'aihue, with Ka'aihue handling the lefties as he did Friday night.

Here are the A's and Mariners' lineup for their 6:05 p.m. game tonight:

Oakland A's

1. Jemile Weeks (S) 2B
 2. Coco Crisp (S) LF
 3. Josh Reddick (L) RF
 4. Yoenis Cespedes (R) CF
 5. Seth Smith (L) DH
 6. Kurt Suzuki (R) C
 7. Cliff Pennington (S) SS
 8. Brandon Allen (L) 1B
 9. Eric Sogard (L) 3B
- Bartolo Colon -- P

Seattle Mariners

1. Chone Figgins (S) LF
 2. Dustin Ackley (L) 2B
 3. Ichiro Suzuki (L) RF
 4. Justin Smoak (S) 1B
 5. Jesus Montero (R) DH
 6. Kyle Seager (L) 3B
 7. Miguel Olivo (R) C
 8. Michael Saunders (L) CF
 9. Brendan Ryan (R) SS
- Felix Hernandez -- P

A's comeback falls short, as Mariners win, 8-7

Sam McPherson, examiner.com

After some bad defense and poor pitching buried them in a 7-0 hole, the Oakland Athletics showed some spunk in fighting back to lose to the Seattle Mariners tonight, 8-7.

But in the end, a loss is still a loss, and A's lost two very winnable games at home against the Mariners because of some poor defensive decisions.

Last night, it was a throwing error by third baseman Josh Donaldson that led to three unearned runs. Tonight, it was a misplayed fly ball by Yoenis Cespedes in the fourth inning that opened the floodgates to a six-run inning for the light-hitting Mariners.

While Cespedes was not charged with an error, he probably could have been: Ichiro Suzuki hit a rising liner that the Cuban outfielder first charged before then turning on his heels to retreat.

The triple scored the second Seattle run, and A's starter Bartolo Colon -- clearly unsettled by the "error" -- proceeded to give up four more hits and four more runs in the inning, which was also aided by left fielder Coco Crisp's throwing error.

When the nightmare was over, the Mariners had a 7-0 lead, and all looked dark for Oakland.

But the A's fought back: even though they only managed one run out of a bases-loaded, no-out situation in the bottom of the fourth, Jemile Weeks and Cespedes -- again -- hit home runs, and suddenly, it was only 8-7 heading into the eighth inning.

But the Seattle bullpen did its job and sent the A's to their third loss in four games to open the 2012 season.

Generally, Oakland will have to play error-free baseball to beat even the Mariners, and they didn't get it done this weekend in front of the hometown fans.

But they showed some pluck again in coming back against Felix Hernandez tonight: anytime you can score six runs in 6.1 innings against The King, you're having a good offensive night.

It's just a shame the defense and the pitching let the team down on Saturday evening.

Mariners survive late rally to beat A's 8-7

Antonio Gonzalez, AP Sports Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Felix Hernandez sweated out most of the last three innings from the dugout, watching the seven-run lead he once held on the mound dissolve.

For a change, though, King Felix had room for error.

Chone Figgins finished a home run short of the cycle and every Seattle Mariners starter had a hit, overcoming a shaky outing from Hernandez and a late rally to beat the Oakland Athletics 8-7 on Saturday night. The drama was more than enough for the 2010 AL Cy Young Award to bear.

"It's not going to happen again," Hernandez said. "I'm not going to give up six runs."

If Seattle can keep hitting like this, the staff ace might be able to breathe easier.

Figgins' two-run double off Bartolo Colon (1-1) highlighted a six-run fourth - helped by center fielder Yoenis Cespedes, who misplayed a ball earlier in the inning - to give Seattle a 7-0 lead. Ichiro Suzuki also had two hits and an RBI and Kyle Seager singled twice as the Mariners took the season-opening series 3-1, splitting the first two in Japan and taking both in Oakland.

"They've all been tough ballgames, tight balls and different types of ballgames. I think that's a good indicator for us," Mariners manager Eric Wedge said.

Cespedes atoned for his mistake with a three-run homer against reliever Steve Delabar, the third long ball in four games by the powerful Cuban defector. He also hit a towering shot to center a night earlier in his stateside debut.

Hernandez (1-0) gave up six runs on eight hits in 6 1-3 innings, striking out seven and walking one. Brandon League pitched a scoreless ninth for his second save this season, one of four Seattle relievers to hold off Oakland's comeback.

A night after chasing Brandon McCarthy in five innings, Seattle quickly pounced on another A's starter.

Colon allowed seven runs on 10 hits in 5 1-3 innings, struggling to keep the ball down against a patient Mariners offense. He still seemed to be in control early, striking out three and walking none.

"Maybe it was because the first time (in Japan), they don't see me too much," Colon said. "And now, they see me again, and they probably checked a lot of videos and find out the best way to make contact."

One misjudgment is all it took to spark the Seattle offense.

With a runner on first in the fourth, Cespedes broke in two steps on a line drive to center by Suzuki until he realized the ball was carrying fast in the thin Bay Area air. He hustled back, leaped for a catch and the ball clipped the top of his glove for a run-scoring triple that started a Seattle surge.

"I saw the ball well of the bat, but the way the ball was coming, I lost it a little bit in the stands," Cespedes said. "And when I tried to go back, it was too late."

The Mariners sent 10 batters to the plate during the six-run inning. The last came when Figgins lined a two-run double to right that extended Seattle's lead to 7-0, bringing out boos for the second straight night from a frustrated fan base that's letting out its displeasure even earlier this season.

This time, Oakland didn't go out with a whimper.

Hernandez hit Cespedes in the back - the Cuban said he was "100 percent sure" it was intentional after he stared at his homer a night earlier - to load the bases in the bottom of the fourth, then forced three fly outs to end the inning. Seth Smith's sacrifice fly to center put Oakland on the board.

The 2010 AL Cy Young Award winner never looked in rhythm, and the A's finally made him pay late.

Jemile Weeks sent an 0-1 fastball over the left field fence in the fifth, and Kurt Suzuki doubled to drive in a pair of runs in the sixth, slicing Seattle's lead to 8-4 after Michael Saunders hit a solo home run in the top of the inning.

Hernandez was lifted with an out in the seventh after allowing a pair of singles, giving Oakland's only power source a chance to bat with baserunners. And he didn't disappoint - again.

Cespedes clobbered a three-run homer to right-center - not quite the soaring shot he clocked off the second-deck facade in center field Friday - off Delabar to bring Oakland with a run. But the A's never even put another runner on base over the final seven outs.

NOTES: Munenori Kawasaki's RBI single in the fourth was his first major league hit. He replaced SS Brendan Ryan, a late scratch because of a stiff neck. Mariners manager Eric Wedge said Ryan's neck stiffness is not related to last season's neck injury. "He just slept wrong," Wedge said. ... Golden State Warriors coach Mark Jackson attended Oakland's batting practice with two of his young children. ... Both teams are off Sunday. Seattle will start RHP Hector Noesi on Monday at Texas, which has Japanese sensation Yu Darvish set to make his major league debut. LHP Tom Milone is scheduled to start for the A's on Monday when they host Kansas City, which will have righty Luis Mendoza on the mound.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Taylor Leads River Cats Over 51s, 10-8

Sacramento River Cats

LAS VEGAS -- Michael Taylor's three-run home run in the third inning propelled the River Cats to a 10-8 victory over the Las Vegas 51s on Saturday night at Cashman Field.

After being held to just three runs in Friday's extra-inning loss, the River Cats offense woke up on Saturday, pounding out 17 hits, including seven that went for extra bases. Derek Norris was one of six Cats hitters with a multi-hit effort on the evening, finishing two-for-four with a home run, a double and two RBIs.

Brad Peacock (1-0) started and earned the win for Sacramento, getting through six innings and allowing just two earned runs. Peacock struck out six and walked two in his first game since coming to the Oakland system in last offseason's Gio Gonzalez trade. Merkin Valdez struck out two in 1.1 innings of relief to pick up his first save of the season.

Las Vegas starter Bill Murphy was tagged with the loss after allowing five runs-four earned-in 3.2 innings. Murphy struck out three and walked two.

Wes Timmons-playing in his 1,000th career minor league game-went two-for-three with a run scored and an RBI. Taylor finished three-for-five with four RBIs, and Daric Barton went three-for-six with a triple, raising his average to an even .400.

The Cats go for the series victory Sunday afternoon at Cashman Field, as RHP Tyson Ross (0-0, no ERA) will face off against 51s RHP Tim Redding (0-0, no ERA). First pitch is set for 12:05 p.m.

The River Cats open the 2012 home slate on April 13 at 7:05 p.m. against the Reno Aces, in a rematch of the 2011 PCL Pacific Conference championship series.

RockHounds use 9-run inning to beat Travelers

Midland Reporter Telegram

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark. -- The Midland RockHounds rebounded from a three-run deficit by scoring nine runs in the eighth inning to take an 11-5 victory against the Arkansas Travelers on Saturday.

The RockHounds (2-1) were down 5-2 entering the eighth as Arkansas scored three runs in the fourth and followed with two in the fifth inning.

But in the eighth, the RockHounds sent 14 batters to the plate and slapped six hits and the inning included three wild pitches by Arkansas pitchers, one hit batter and two walks.

The big hit during the inning was a two-out double by Michael Spina that scored three runs, including Michael Choice scoring for the second time during the inning on the hit.

Pinch hitter Anthony Aliotti had a two-run single, and Shane Peterson and Ryan Lipkin each had RBI singles.

RockHounds starter Sonny Gray gave up five runs on six hits in five innings and also had four strikeouts.

But the RockHounds bullpen came through to shut down the Travelers as Brett Hunter and Trey Barham combined to throw four hitless innings. Hunter took the win as he had two strikeouts, and Barham had four.

Midland will continue its road trip at 4:08 p.m. today with the first of three games against Springfield.

Walz Impresses In Debut As Ports Win 7-2

LAKE ELSINORE, Calif. - The one element for the Stockton Ports that's been consistent on opening weekend has been pitching. T.J. Walz (1-0) kept that going on Saturday night in Lake Elsinore. Stockton's righty retired 13 of the final 16 batters he faced as he helped the Ports to a 7-2 win over the Storm, giving Stockton a two-games-to-one lead in the four-game set.

For the second straight night, the Ports scored in the first inning. With Michael Gilmartin at second and two outs, Miles Head tripled to the gap in left-center field to give the Ports a 1-0 lead. Head would score on an ensuing RBI single from Petey Paramore to make it a 2-0 advantage.

Lake Elsinore countered with a run in the bottom half of the frame. Cory Spangenberg tripled to open the frame and scored two batters later on an RBI single from Rymer Liriano to make it a 2-1 ballgame. Walz, however, would settle in and record back-to-back strikeouts of Luis Domoromo and Michael Wing en route to retiring the final three batters of the frame.

The Ports would pull away in the fifth. With one on and one out, Gilmartin launched a two-run homer over the 36-foot high right field fence to give the Ports a 4-1 cushion. Josh Whitaker came up next and homered to right-center to make it a 5-1 lead.

The back-to-back homers spelled the end of the night for Storm starter Burch Smith (0-1), who took the loss after going 4.1 innings and allowing five runs on nine hits.

Walz would pitch into the seventh as he allowed a leadoff single to Bryan Altman. After getting Rocky Gale to ground out, Walz was removed in favor of Jose Guzman who allowed an infield single to Rico Noel, then a sac-fly to Spangenberg that scored Altman and made it a 5-2 game.

The run was charged to Walz, who would go on to earn the win after going 6.1 innings, allowing two runs on five hits while striking out seven.

Stockton added two runs over the final two frames. In the eighth, Rashun Dixon scored on a wild pitch uncorked by Yefri Carvajal, and in the ninth, the Ports took advantage of two walks and a catcher's interference as Dixon drove in a run with a sac-fly to right to make it a 7-2 ballgame.

Zach Thornton came on in the ninth and set the side down in order to end the game, recording back-to-back strikeouts of Tyler Stubblefield and Altman to end the game.

Stockton and Lake Elsinore will play the finale of their four-game set on Sunday afternoon at The Diamond. Blake Hasebrock (0-0, 0.00 ERA) will make his Cal-League debut for the Ports, opposed by Storm right-hander Mark Pope (0-0, 0.00 ERA). First pitch is set for 2:05 p.m. PDT.

Bees Fall Short of Sweep

By Daniel Trivinos / Burlington Bees

CLINTON, Iowa - The LumberKings defeated the Bees 7-1 on Saturday night. After starting the 2012 season with two wins, the Bees couldn't hold the LumberKings down in the third game of a potential sweep.

Right-hander, Jose Macias started for the Bees and looked sharp through his first four innings. Despite allowing a double and hitting a batter, Macias managed to face the minimum 12 batters in the first four frames.

The fifth inning was a different story as Macias was forced to field a dribbler between the mound and first base. Macias was able to snag the ball, but first baseman, Chad Lewis had vacated first base in his attempt to field the grounder. With a runner on first, Macias looked out of his groove and instead grooved a pitch to left-handed hitting, Guillermo Pimentel for a two-run home run.

After Seth Frankoff pitched the sixth inning, left-hander Chaz Mye took the ball trailing 3-1 in the bottom of the seventh. Mye struggled with spotting his pitches and eventually gave up four hits, loaded the bases and allowed four runners to score.

Despite having good records and numbers heading into Saturday's game, Macias and Mye allowed two bad innings that put the game out of reach.

The offense had runners on base at different times in the first five innings, but only managed to score once on a fly ball by B.A. Vollmuth. Chad Oberacker scored on the play.

Overall the Bees won the series by taking two of three on the road to start the season. They return to Community field for the home opener on Monday, April 9th against the Wisconsin Timber Rattlers (1-2). The Bees young right-hander, Raul Alcantara will toe the rubber for the Bees in the first game of the home stand.