



Detroit Tigers Clips

Thursday, October 11, 2012

Detroit Free Press

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Ace pitchers not always locks in deciding games

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- If you thought the Tigers could afford to lose Game 4 because they had Justin Verlander to pitch Game 5 ...

Well, you might want to talk to a Cardinals fan about 1968 or a Cubs fan about 1984.

Those teams were like the Tigers in this series. They needed to win only one of the three games. If they lost the first two, they had an ace atop his game to pitch the winner-take-all final game.

There are no sure things in baseball. In 1904, New York Highlanders right-hander Jack Chesboro won 41 games, which remains the post-1900 record for one season. But with the AL pennant on the line on the final day of the season, Chesboro threw the wild pitch in the ninth inning that allowed the winning run and gave the Boston Americans the pennant.

Aces have been losing low-scoring must-win games since, including ever since. That includes those games in 1968 and 1984 that are part of Tigers history.

Bob Gibson, 1968: The Cardinals right-hander had an ERA of 1.12 that season. He never got knocked out of a game. Then he overwhelmed the Tigers in the first two games of the World Series. That meant that in Gibson's last seven World Series starts, he had pitched seven complete-game wins.

But in Game 7, the Tigers broke a scoreless tie against Gibson in the seventh. Tigers fans say Jim Northrup won that game by ripping a two-run triple over the head of elite centerfielder Curt Flood. Mickey Lolich, on two days' rest, blanked the Cardinals until the ninth. The Tigers won, 4-1.

Rick Sutcliffe, 1984: The Cubs picked up Sutcliffe from the Indians in mid-June, and he went 16-1 for them in the regular season. In the playoff opener against the Padres, he hit a homer and won, 13-0.

The Cubs took a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five series to the West Coast, just as the Tigers did in this series. And just like the Tigers in this series, the Cubs encountered a fanatical crowd, one that was so loud that it was time to vow never again to use the phrase "laid-back Californians."

The Padres shut down the Cubs in Game 3 with a five-hitter. (That's akin to how the A's pitched a four-hitter against the Tigers in Game 3.)

In Game 4, the Padres posted a walk-off win. (Did someone say the A's were due for a walk-off win in Game 4 Wednesday night? They had 14 in the regular season.)

So the Cubs had to ask Sutcliffe to win Game 5. He led, 3-0, to the sixth. He led, 3-2, into the seventh. With one out, first baseman Leon Durham let a grounder go through him to allow the tying run to score. Three more runs scored in the inning, which Sutcliffe didn't survive. The Padres, and not the Cubs, entered the 1984 World Series to play the Tigers.

UPS AND DOWNS FOR INFANTE: In this American League Division Series with the Athletics, second baseman Omar Infante has shown how quickly the lows can follow the highs. Infante had three hits and scored three runs as the Tigers won the first two games.

In Game 3, Infante went 0-for-4. He struck out three times and grounded into a double play. According to Baseball-Reference.com, he became the second Tiger ever to have at least three strikeouts and ground into a double play in a postseason game. The first was pitcher Denny McLain in Game 6 of the 1968 World Series. McLain won that game, 13-1, to set up the Lolich-Gibson duel the next day.

Infante grounded into his double play on a 3-1 pitch with one out and Miguel Cabrera deck. With Cabrera due up next, should Infante have been as selective on 3-1 as he normally would be with a green light to swing on 3-0?

Did he need to make sure he didn't hit a pitcher's pitch on 3-1 and risk grounding into the double play that would keep Cabrera from batting in the inning?

"I don't think so," manager Jim Leyland said. "He hit it hard. He just hit it right at him (third baseman Josh Donaldson)."

In Game 4 on Wednesday night, he sacrificed, singled, scored a run and struck out.

Tigers blow it; now it's do or die tonight

October 11, 2012

By Drew Sharp / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. – The champagne was returned to storage. Reams of plastic taped onto the lockers as protection were rolled up and stuffed into the equipment manager's office.

The only audible sound in the Tigers' clubhouse in the immediate aftermath of an horrific ninth-inning collapse was the clink of knife and fork hitting the plate as solemn players attempted adding normalcy to situation that'll likely make many in Detroit too angry to eat over the 24 hours.

Jose Valverde sat at his cubicle, eyes sunk and reddened. Phil Coke mumbled expletives as he shook his head in disbelief. Only those proficient in Spanish could effectively understand what boomed from Miguel Cabrera, but suffice to say he wasn't the happiest of campers.

The Tigers might have blown their season as their late-inning bullpen once again failed in maintaining a lead.

The worries were greater when Joaquin Benoit took the ball in the eighth inning considering his recent struggles, but the fingerprints of this 4-3 Game 4 disaster belonged to Valverde.

Everyone's grown accustomed to him making everyone nervous, but eventually finding the path to a save. But his ninth-inning implosion could very well become the enduring image of his three years in Detroit. Relievers need amnesia. But after giving up four hits and three runs to six Oakland batters, it might be every Tiger fan who'll forget his 49-of-49 All-Star worthy perfection.

Whatever momentum gained through their fast series start has crumbled into dust. They must now reassemble their resiliency from the wreckage and win a decisive Game 5 tonight.

"This is the hardest loss I've ever had to deal with," he said. "I don't think my stuff was bad. They just hit it."

Correction: The A's just crushed it.

Josh Reddick led off with a single up the middle.

No problem, right? Valverde often puts the lead-off hitter on base. But then Josh Donaldson smashed a double into the gap in left center field, putting runners on second and third and sending all of Detroit to their medicine cabinets for the requisite Valverde blindfold and tranquilizers. Seth Smith immediately followed with a double to right, scoring two runs and tying the game.

At that moment back in the Tigers' clubhouse, a frantic rush ensued to return the setting to that of a challenger whose resolve gets tested once more as opposed to the conquering champion.

Valverde got two outs, but Coco Crisp's single through the hole at second base sent a delirious Smith home with the winning run after rightfielder Avisail Garcia positioned himself for a potential inning-ending throw at the plate. But he forgot one fairly important thing.

The baseball.

He dropped it.

Game over. Panic starts.

"It looked like we were going to get it, but we didn't," said Jim Leyland. "We didn't quite get the 27 outs."

They must now count on their ace in Game 5 Thursday night. Justin Verlander always wants the ball in this situation.

He may need to go all nine innings, even if his pitch count is at 130 in the eighth inning, because as trusting and faithful has Leyland's been to his often inconsistent bullpen, there's no way he can have full confidence in them now.

"I'm sure there are going to be plenty of people doubting us now heading into this game," said Gerald Laird.

"They've doubted us in the regular season when they thought we wouldn't catch Chicago. But as tough as this loss is, there's still a tomorrow."

One of the sweeter paybacks in sports is tomorrow. Revenge as well as redemption often comes the next day.

Valverde said he hopes to get another opportunity in Game 5. Amnesia is critical in baseball because 24 hours later there's a new game and a fresh opportunity.

"You've got to put it behind you," he said. "That's what my teammates say to me after the game. It happens and you can't let it bother you. It hurts. You want to win. We had chance to win the series, but we get another game. It will be hard getting sleep, but we got another game with Verlander."

Before the ugliness of the ninth inning, the Tigers were headed to their second straight American League Championship Series – thanks largely to Prince Fielder benefiting from the therapeutic powers of tomorrow. Oakland robbed Fielder of a home run in the second inning of the Tigers’ Game 3 loss. Cabrera assured Fielder when the Tigers’ first baseman disappointingly left the Tigers’ clubhouse Tuesday night that tomorrow would be better. Fielder blasted a shot in the fourth inning that only somebody on loan from Krypton could’ve potentially caught. The evening was set up for a happy ending for the Tigers. Instead, they find themselves testing their talent and toughness once more. It’s doubtful that there are many optimistic today that the Tigers can pull this off considering the A’s unquenchable thirst for the unimaginably dramatic. But they usually like it best when their skeptics have already buried them.

Oakland 4, Detroit 3: Tigers kiss ALDS lead good-bye

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Afterward, even as he said he had already forgotten about the loss, Jose Valverde said he was thinking of the Tigers fans.

"I feel bad for all the fans in Detroit," Valverde said. "All those people support us. I feel disappointed for them."

A quintet of Tigers pitchers got a two-run lead to Valverde for the ninth inning. If he could convert the save, the Tigers would be in the AL championship series -- in which Justin Verlander would pitch the opener Saturday on two extra days of rest.

It didn't happen. The A's amazing season wouldn't end.

Before Valverde got an out, Oakland tied the game on Josh Reddick's single, Josh Donaldson's double off the wall and Seth Smith's line-drive, tying, two-run double.

Two outs later, Coco Crisp singled in Smith for a 4-3 win, and now there will be a decisive Game 5 in this division series tonight with Justin Verlander pitching against Oakland right-hander Jarrod Parker.

It looked like rightfielder Avisail Garcia had a chance to throw out Smith at the plate on Crisp's single and force the 10th inning. But Garcia overran the ball.

Even if the Tigers win Game 5 tonight, they'll pay a price for losing Game 4: Verlander won't be able to pitch in the championship series until Game 3 next Tuesday.

But even with Verlander pitching tonight, the Tigers advancement to the championship series is now a definite "if," given how Oakland is playing at home. The A's have won eight straight there, a span in which they've gone from the playoff bubble to division champ to within one game of felling the Tigers. This was their 15th walk-off win at home, a startling total of which manager Bob Melvin said, "What it's done is a give us a sense that we're never out of it until the last out."

It became another night where Valverde relied on his fastball more than he did last season, when his split-finger sinker often came through for him. Then again, Mariano Rivera has hundreds of saves achieved with one pitch, the cut fastball.

"I think all the pitches I threw tonight were good pitches," Valverde said. "I thought my location was perfect. You have to give credit, and the A's are doing well right now."

The Tigers have to hope this is a replay in reverse of the '72 ALCS, when they overcame a two-run deficit on their final at-bat at Tiger Stadium to beat Oakland in Game 4 and force Game 5 -- which the visiting A's won.

"This is baseball. This is why this is greatest game of all," manager Jim Leyland said. "You get tested all the time in this game. This is a good test. I thought we played our hearts out."

Valverde was preceded by Max Scherzer (5 1/3 innings), Octavio Dotel (one out), Phil Coke (one out), Al Albuquerque (seventh inning) and Joaquin Benoit (eighth inning). The only run they allowed was unearned, off Scherzer in the sixth.

Benoit, who has been struggling, allowed a hit and walk with two outs in the eighth. Up came lefty-swinging Brandon Moss, who almost hit a tying homer off Benoit in Game 1. Now Moss represented the potential go-ahead run. Benoit struck him out swinging on an 0-2 pitch that dived low and away.

Leading 2-1 into the eighth, the Tigers added a huge run. With one out, Garcia pinch-hit for Quintin Berry against left-hander Sean Doolittle. On 0-2, Garcia spanked a single through the hole into right and Omar Infante scored easily from second. That meant Oakland could no longer play for one run to tie and that the Tigers didn't need to guard the lines against an extra-base hit.

For the second time in the game, the Tigers had scored a) with the help of a sacrifice and b) with an RBI on an 0-2 pitch.

Scherzer took a 2-0 lead into the sixth on Austin Jackson's RBI single in the third and Prince Fielder's leadoff homer in the fourth.

After Fielder homered, Delmon Young and Andy Dirks followed with singles to put runners at first and second with none out against rookie right-hander A.J. Griffin. Pitching coach Curt Young went to the mound, and the bullpen got busy.

Looking back, this is where the Tigers missed the chance to take complete control of the game.

Jhonny Peralta got ahead 3-1, then took what looked like a good pitch for Strike 2. Then he swung at a pitch that didn't look as good and grounded into a double play. With Young at third with two out, Avila flied to left. Scherzer fanned eight through five innings. Manager Jim Leyland pulled him with one out in the sixth -- an out achieved when Stephen Drew, after lacing an RBI double, tried to make it a none-out triple and was thrown out at third.

Scherzer got four of his first six outs on strikeouts. The Tigers gave him a lead when Alex Avila pulled a double into right to open the third, went to third on Infante's sacrifice and scored when Jackson (with the infield in) lined a single well into left.

Leyland said of Scherzer, "The velocity started to drop."

Three innings later, so did the Tigers' hearts.

Tigers' Alex Avila: We're trained to put past things like Game 4 behind us

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. – Tigers catcher Alex Avila stood at his locker late Wednesday night and listened to some baseball history that had suddenly become relevant for the Tigers.

After Carlton Fisk's famous homer gave Boston its comeback win over the Reds in Game 6 of the 1975 World Series, the Reds won Game 7 in Boston.

Avila chuckled softly at that.

After the Tigers stayed alive against the A's in the '72 playoffs by overcoming a two-run deficit on their final at-bat – just like Oakland did Wednesday night – the A's won Game 5 at Tiger Stadium.

He chuckled softly at that, too.

So history says the Tigers aren't doomed to lose Game 5 because they let Game 4 get away.

Then Avila was asked this question:

“Can you explain how a pro ballplayer is trained to forget whatever happened the day before?”

Avila replied: “We do it for a living. To be a baseball player, you have to have that mentality. We play too many games to be as emotional as everybody else watching.

“As a baseball player, you are programmed to forget about it. If you can't, you won't be in the game. You won't be able to handle it. There are so many games. There are so many times you're going to lose, so many times you're going to fail.

“Yesterday doesn't matter. It's all about tomorrow.”

The Tigers clubhouse was more somber than after the 2-0 loss in Game 3. Perhaps this stemmed from being stunned by this outcome and perhaps it stemmed from resolution for Game 5, or perhaps it stemmed from a vintage October mixture of both. Mix in some exhaustion – it was a thoroughly draining game in which the Tigers had to work for everything.

Asked for his outlook on Game 5, Avila said, “Justin is pitching. Normally we win his games. We were in Game 5 last year in New York. It's not like we're not accustomed to hostile environments and loser-go-home types of games.”

Verlander said: “I'm going to try to treat it like another start, kind of like the last start, as much as I can.

Obviously it's a big game for us. But like I said, this team's been resilient and we allowed ourselves to be in this position.

“You know it's not easy to play here.”

The Coliseum will fill up again tonight with yelling fans wearing one of the A's colors (green) and waving a towel of their other color (gold). Verlander might be all that stands between the Tigers and a fate described in the title of a story by Edgar Allan Poe:

“A Descent into the Maelstrom.”

Jose Valverde plans to shake off Game 4, be ready for Tigers tonight

October 11, 2012

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Jose Valverde's booming baritone is the voice that often fills the Tigers' clubhouse. Yet it was hard to hear Wednesday night in the bowels of O.co Coliseum.

Detroit's closer had just blown the biggest save of his career and couldn't muster much more than a whisper.

Still, he stood before his locker and answered questions for more than 20 minutes.

Give him credit for standing there.

Or don't.

Either way, Valverde remains the Tigers closer -- for at least one more game. And if he gets another chance tonight?

"You have to be ready," he said, "I will be in the game ... 100%."

The charismatic and eccentric reliever has taken Tigers fans -- and his teammates and coaching staff -- on a tumultuous ride this season. After saving all 49 of his attempts a year ago, the 34-year-old struggled to locate his pitches at times this season, giving up too many hits flirting with losses even when he held on.

Valverde blew five saves this year in the regular season. None were as painful as the 4-3 loss to Oakland Wednesday night. When he took the mound his team was three outs from the American League Championship Series.

"Toughest loss of my career," he said.

Tougher still will be the mental effort required to get out from under the disappointment and get ready again tonight.

"Will sleep be hard?" someone asked.

"I think for everybody," he said.

He paused for a second, and laid out his plan.

"I leave here. Go to the hotel. (Tell myself) it's over. Get rest. And pitch in (today's) game," he said.

If Valverde gets the chance, he will need to keep his fastball from leaking toward the center of the plate. That's where Josh Donaldson and Seth Smith both found it Wednesday night. Donaldson ripped his first-pitch meatball off the wall for a double, pushing Josh Reddick -- who had singled to start the ninth -- to third and leaving two runners on for Smith.

Smith cracked his center-plate, knee-high offering into the right-center gap, driving in both runners and tying the game. Valverde settled down enough to get Derek Norris to pop up to third and then struck out Cliff Pennington.

Coco Crisp then yanked a down-and-away split-finger fastball between first and second base. Three runs had scored. Game over.

Valverde walked off the mound with his head down. He sat at his locker stall staring at the floor when the media arrived in the clubhouse. He left into a private room for a second and then returned to face the questions. He's a man about it," said Alex Avila. "Everybody handles losses differently. You see what kind of person you are and how you handle it."

Valverde handled it by softly answering questions and formulating a plan to get some sleep and forget about the meltdown. He's a closer.

If the Tigers want to keep playing after tonight, he may have to find a way to close one more time.

Individual honors sweet, but it's time for Tigers to win it all

October 11, 2012

By Drew Sharp / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- The Tigers are the villains in their series.

They're the "1%."

They're Wall Street, champagne and caviar, the team the Occupiers would march against. They're the guys debating whether they should drive the Bentley to the country club because they're bored with the Rolls.

It's a fascinating character study this week listening to Oakland supporters blast anyone rooting for the Tigers in the American League Division Series, suggesting it's the equivalent of collecting playing cards of IRS agents.

Detroit isn't used to this with its sports teams -- even with the Red Wings' sustained NHL excellence and league-high payrolls.

Critics loathed the Pistons' Bad Boys because they too closely resembled the clichéd national perception of a city fraught with wanton hooliganism.

This division series has been as much a cultural battle as a playoff fight. The Athletics believed they should be America's darlings, especially against the high-payroll privileged. They're countering the Tigers' hubris with heart, dollars with determination. Their payroll is around \$80 million less than the Tigers'. They're relying on rookies trying hard to prove themselves, whereas the Tigers are seen as millionaires who already have proven themselves.

As a result, they risk acquiring the stigma of becoming divas -- insulating themselves from any honest self-reflection because they believe their status entitles them to exist with a different set of rules.

That's why Jim Leyland made it unequivocally clear in the aftermath of the Al Alburquerque Game 2 kissing affair that they didn't approve of the reaction, although they also made it clear it was strictly a spontaneous emotional response and not some premeditated act intent on showing up the opposition.

These Tigers don't want to be thought of as fat cats.

Are the Tigers hungry or do they simply expect to be fed?

That has been Leyland's biggest challenge this season, made even more challenging without Victor Martinez's dominating presence in the clubhouse. Leyland expressed it on numerous occasions throughout the season.

There aren't troublemakers or, worse, cancers eating away at the internal fabric of this team. The Tigers are a hardworking group that gets along fairly well with one another, but there hasn't been a Tigers team in Leyland's seven years that so easily lapses into inexplicable funks in execution. It raises concerns that the Tigers just assume everything will work out because of their reputation and résumé.

It's one reason why Justin Verlander keeps hammering away at an important point.

It's great what the Tigers have accomplished the past two years. Consider the list: back-to-back titles for the first time since 1934-35 when they won the American League pennant, quite likely back-to-back MVP winners, a Cy Young Award winner and two Triple Crowns -- Miguel Cabrera this season and Verlander in 2011 when he led the AL in victories, strikeouts and ERA.

"And what's missing from all that?" Verlander recently asked. "It only makes your appetite stronger for what you don't have. It's great that the Detroit Tigers have enjoyed the recognition that we have the last two years. But if you don't have a World Series championship to go along with that, you're going to feel that you fell short."

He wants to make sure the Tigers don't lose that necessary sense of urgency simply because they're piling up the accolades.

A second straight trip to the American League Championship Series shouldn't be diminished regardless of any perceived struggles getting there. Those complaining that anything short of a three-game sweep against an inexperienced, yet energetic Oakland Athletics team is a disappointment are the ones guiltiest of a fatal lack of perspective.

If this season proved anything, it's that it's always dangerous making far-reaching judgments off selective snapshots.

But wearing the black hats is a new experience for the Tigers, representative of the balancing act they have juggled all season between what's deserved and what's destined.

Tigers' Max Scherzer keeps Athletics off balance in Game 4

October 11, 2012

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Max Scherzer threw a strike on his first pitch Thursday night at the Oakland Coliseum. Coco Crisp swung and missed. For the next four innings during Game 4 of the American League Division Series, Scherzer kept throwing strikes.

He pitched to 13 batters in this stretch and welcomed nine to the batter's box with a first-pitch strike. Working in the low-to-mid 90s, Scherzer struck out four of the first seven batters he faced.

He moved his fastball in and out and up and down the zone. He used his slider to freeze them and his change-up -- masterful all evening -- to fool them. For anyone wondering how effective Scherzer would be after injuring his shoulder late in the season, he answered the question in the first inning.

Scherzer pitched four innings in his previous start as the club wanted to slowly bring him back after a deltoid strain in September. And they dropped him a spot in the playoff rotation to give him an extra day to prepare -- Anibal Sanchez took his place Wednesday night in Game 3.

The strategy worked as planned. Sanchez pitched well, but the Tigers just couldn't solve Brett Anderson. Scherzer was dominant early. Not only did this keep the A's off the bases, but it kept the crowd from engaging in the game as it had the night before.

Scherzer got through four innings with fewer than 50 pitches. His velocity stayed in the mid-90s, a few m.p.h. less than he can muster, but because he mixed and located his pitches so well, he didn't need to hit 98.

A's rightfielder Josh Reddick struck out swinging to begin the bottom of the fifth. Third baseman Josh Donaldson was the next batter. He worked it to a full count. Sensing a small opening, the crowd rose to its feet and rumbled, as loud as it had all night.

"I was able to finish the fifth fine. But I could tell I was starting to get tired. I used some bullets there in the fifth to be able to get out of that jam. When you are in a playoff atmosphere you put so much into every pitch. The reality is I haven't pitched as much as I've liked."

Scherzer pumped a fastball up in the zone. Donaldson stood and watched as the umpire rang him up. Designated hitter Seth Smith was the next batter. He also worked the count full.

Again Scherzer tried to nick the high end of the zone. He just missed. It was his first walk of the game.

Now the crowd was roaring. Catcher Derek Norris stepped to the plate and sliced a soft, looping flare over first base. A baseball god hit. Now there were runners on the corners.

Scherzer took a breath, circled the back part of the mound and dug back in. Second baseman Chad Pennington came to the plate. He pushed Scherzer to a 2-2 count.

Scherzer, using a devastating change-up throughout the night, threw another one inside, knee-high and suckered Pennington into swinging early.

He missed. The threat was done.

But so was Scherzer.

He came back in the sixth but had lost a touch of his control. Crisp led off with a sharp grounder to first that Prince Fielder misplayed, allowing Crisp to take second. He scooted to third on a wild pitch.

Stephen Drew then drove him in with a double ripped up the left-center gap. Crisp scored to cut the lead to 2-1 and Drew rounded second, hesitated, decided to take third and was thrown out on the relay throw.

Scherzer didn't face another batter.

But he had done his job. He left with the lead.

Tigers ticker: New plan -- does Justin Verlander have 9 innings in him?

October 11, 2012

By Steve Schrader / Detroit Free Press

Jose Valverde. Ol' reliable, eh? Steady as a rock.

Yeesh. If you were lucky, you already were in bed when it all went down Wednesday night, and Valverde was blowing the save and giving up three runs in the ninth inning.

So instead of an ALDS-clinching victory for the Tigers, the A's won, 4-3, and forced tonight's decisive Game 5. Is that a bad omen?

A few outtakes:

- The Dancing Dead? Before the game, TBS reporter Jaime Maggio had A's fans demonstrate the "Bernie Lean" dance -- inspired by "Weekend at Bernie's" -- that they do when Coco Crisp comes to bat. Just like we do whenever Bernie Smilovitz does the sports.

- What a home run shot by Prince Fielder in the fourth inning. Long gone. Take that, Coco Crisp.

This time it was out of his reach, kind of like Crisp's sixth-inning grounder to Fielder. Instead of kissing the ball, Prince just waved at it as it went by him.

- I know it's a national telecast and not supposed to be a rah-rah hometown effort but, sorry, once again the TBS announcing crew of Don Orsillo and Buck Martinez made the game a snore.

Especially with a 9:30 start. Must stay awake ...

- Maybe they're what lulled the Tigers' bats to sleep. But not in Game 4, when they exploded for -- wow -- three runs.

It didn't work this time and it won't be enough the next series, if there is one.

- So instead of pitching Justin Verlander at the start of the next series, they have to use him at the end of this one. And hopefully he can finish what he starts.

Quit on your own time

It's not that Texas Rangers owner/president Nolan Ryan is opposed to slugger Josh Hamilton giving up another of his vices. He just thinks the timing may have contributed to his and the Rangers' late-season slumps.

"His timing on quitting smokeless tobacco couldn't have been worse," Ryan told ESPN Radio in Dallas. "You would've liked to have thought that if he was going to do that that he would've done it in the off-season or waited until this off-season to do it.

"So the drastic effect that it had on him and the year that he was having up to that point in time when he did quit, you'd have liked that he would've taken a different approach to that."

Chew on that.

Quick tweet

- Erin Cummings: "Dear Tigers, my tv show was cancelled today. I need you to win the series tonight. For real." Sorry. Talk to Valverde.

And her series would be "Made in Jersey," cancelled by CBS. Miss Cummings previously was in "Detroit 1-8-7" and a fine addition to our community.

Quick hits

- Poor Jim Joyce. He botched another call at first base, this time in reverse -- a Nationals runner was actually safe in the St. Louis-Washington game, but Joyce called him out. It gave the MLB Network a chance to show replays of both that call and Joyce's more famous miss, when he called a Cleveland runner safe and ruined Armando Galarraga's perfect game in 2010.

- Headline at sportspickle.com: "A-Rod exceeds fan expectations by fouling off pitch."

And that was before the Yankees lifted him for pinch-hitter Raul Ibanez, who ended up homering twice. It was a big night for Alex Rodriguez haters.

Game 3 shutout not the first, not the worst in Tigers' postseason history

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- The A's 2-0 win in Game 3 was efficient and impressive, but it hardly was the most notable shutout the Tigers have suffered in postseason play.

The combined four-hitter by Brett Anderson and three relievers marked the 13th shutout pitched against the Tigers in postseason play. Among the other 12, these are standouts:

The first: The Cubs wrapped up their first championship by beating the Tigers, 2-0, in Game 5 of the 1907 World Series at Bennett Park in Detroit. Right-hander Mordecai (Three-Finger) Brown pitched a seven-hitter for the Cubs in front of a crowd of 7,370.

The most historic: In 1908, for the second World Series in a row, the Cubs finished off the Tigers in Game 5 with a 2-0 win. This Game 5 gem was a three-hitter by right-hander Orval Overall in a game that took 1 hour, 25 minutes in front of 6,210 at Bennett Park. And from that day to this -- a span of 104 years -- the Cubs haven't won another World Series. The only place the Cubs have won the World Series is Detroit, in 1907-08.

The most overwhelming: In Game 1 of the 1968 World Series, the Cardinals' Bob Gibson struck out 17 and pitched a five-hitter to beat the Tigers, 4-0.

The most lopsided: The most runs the Tigers gave up in a postseason shutout loss came in Game 7 of the 1934 Series to the visiting Cardinals and right-hander Dizzy Dean. St. Louis 11, Detroit 0.

The nearly-as-lopsided: Dean's gem capped the Tigers' first postseason appearance in 25 years, since they lost the 1909 World Series to the Pirates, who took the decisive Game 7 behind right-hander Babe Adams in Detroit by the score of 8-0.

In the first four World Series in which they played (1907-09 and '34), the Tigers not only lost, they lost the final game at home. All four World Series ended with the Tigers getting shut out at home. So the Game 3 loss in Oakland doesn't seem quite so bad, does it?

Tigers vs. A's: John Lowe scouts Game 5 pitching matchup

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

RH Justin Verlander

Season stats: 17-8, 2.64 ERA.

Quality starts: 26-for-34 (including 1-for-1 in the postseason).

The buzz: Verlander is on one of his best streaks in a while. He has allowed three earned runs total in winning his past five starts. In those five games, the opposition is 1-for-27 against him with runners in scoring position. In Game 1, for the third time since Sept. 1, Verlander gave up a homer to the leadoff batter in the first inning (Coco Crisp). For the second of those three starts, he didn't give up another run. He struck out 11, and was on or near the corners consistently because the A's often looked frustrated with the strike zone of umpire Jim Reynolds. Tonight, veteran Wally Bell will be the plate umpire. This marks Verlander's third start in an elimination game. In the first, he lost Game 5 of the 2006 World Series to St. Louis on his own throwing error. In the second, he beat Texas in Game 5 last October to keep the ALCS going.

Key hitter for Verlander: Crisp. It's always important to keep a speedy leadoff hitter like this off base. Crisp had 39 steals in the regular season. With his homer in Game 1, Crisp is 9-for-26 lifetime off Verlander (that's .346) with a pair of doubles and the homer.

RH Jarrod Parker

Season stats: 13-8, 3.47 ERA.

Quality starts: 21-for-30 (including 1-for-1 the postseason).

The buzz: In Game 1, Parker immediately showed the stuff and toughness that has made him formidable in his rookie season. The first two Tigers reached base on hits that went off the gloves of A's infielders. Up stepped Miguel Cabrera for his first at-bat since he won the Triple Crown. With the Comerica Park crowd in an uproar, Parker got Cabrera to ground into a double play. The only time the Tigers really got to Parker (the only time they really got to any starter in the first three games) came when Alex Avila hit a solo homer. Parker lost, 3-1, but he had Verlander more than his own performance to blame for that.

Key hitter for Parker: The obvious answer is Cabrera or Prince Fielder. The less obvious answer is Quintin Berry, presuming Berry remains in the second spot ahead of Cabrera. Getting Berry out with two down forces Cabrera to lead off the next inning with no one to drive in. Allowing Berry to reach means there's at least someone on for Cabrera, and someone who can reach scoring position with a steal. (Berry didn't get thrown out on 21 steal attempts.)

History lesson: Tigers can't bank on Game 5, even with Justin Verlander

October 11, 2012

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

If you think the Tigers can afford to lose Game 4 because they had Justin Verlander to pitch Game 5 ...

Well, you might want to talk to a Cardinals fan about 1968 or a Cubs fan about 1984.

Those two teams were like the Tigers in this series. They needed to win only one of the three games. If they lost the first two, they had an ace atop his game to pitch the winner-take-all final game.

There are no sure things in baseball. Jack Chesbro showed that in 1904. The New York Highlanders right-hander won 41 games, which remains the post-1900 record for one season. But with the AL pennant on the line on the final day of the season, Chesbro threw the wild pitch in the ninth inning that allowed the winning run that allowed the Boston Americans to eliminate New York and clinch the pennant.

Aces have been losing low-scoring must-win games ever since. That includes those games in 1968 and 1984 that are part of Tigers history.

Gibson, 1968: Did any pitcher ever have a better year? The Cardinals right-hander had an ERA of 1.12 ERA.

He never got knocked out of a game. Then he overwhelmed the Tigers in the first two games of the World Series. That meant that in Gibson's last seven World Series starts, he had thrown seven complete-game wins.

But in Game 7, the Tigers broke a scoreless tie against Gibson in the seventh. Tigers fans say Jim Northrup won that game by ripping a two-run triple over the head of elite center fielder Curt Flood. Cardinals fans say Flood would have caught Northrup's ball if he hadn't slipped. Mickey Lolich, on two days rest, blanked the Cardinals until the ninth. The Tigers won, 4-1.

Sutcliffe, 1984: Did any pitcher ever have a better 3 1/2 months after joining his new team? The Cubs picked up Sutcliffe from the Indians in mid-June, and he went 16-1 for them in the regular season. In the playoff opener against the Padres, he hit a homer and won, 13-0.

The Cubs took a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five series to the West Coast, just as the Tigers did in this series. And just like the Tigers in this series, the Cubs encountered a fanatical crowd, one far louder than typically occupied that stadium, and one that was so loud that it was time to vow never again to use the phrase "laid-back Californians."

The Padres shut down the Cubs in Game 3 with a five-hitter. (That's akin to how the A's threw a four-hitter against the Tigers in Game 3).

In Game 4, the Padres posted a walk-off win. (Did someone say the A's were due for a walk-off win in Game 4 Wednesday night? They had 14 in the regular season.)

So the Cubs had to ask Sutcliffe to win Game 5. He led 3-0 to the sixth. He led 3-2 to the seventh. With one out, first baseman Leon Durham let a grounder go through him to allow the tying run to score. Three more runs scored in the inning, which Sutcliffe didn't survive. The Padres, and not the Cubs, entered the 1984 World Series to play the Tigers.

Infante's bad night

In this Oakland series, second baseman Omar Infante has shown how quickly the lows can follow the highs for a big-league player. Infante had three hits and scored three runs as the Tigers won the first two games.

In Game 3, Infante went 0-for-4. He struck out three times and grounded into a double play. According to Baseball-Reference.com, he became the second Tiger ever to have at least three strikeouts and ground into a double play in a post-season game. The first was pitcher Denny McLain in Game 6 of the 1968 World Series. McLain won that game, 13-1, to set up the Lolich-Gibson duel the next day.

Infante grounded into his double play on a 3-1 pitch with one out and Miguel Cabrera deck. With Cabrera due up next, should Infante have been as selective on 3-1 as he normally would be with a green light to swing on 3-0? Did he need to make sure he didn't hit a pitcher's pitch on 3-1 and risk grounding into the double play that would keep Cabrera from batting in the inning?

"I don't think so," manager Jim Leyland said. "He hit it hard. He just hit it right at him (third baseman Josh Donaldson)."

No reason to worry, Tigers fans

October 11, 2012

By Jamie Samuelsen / Detroit Free Press

What went wrong for the Detroit Tigers in Game 3 and how much should fans worry about a possible Oakland comeback?

After what that Tigers put us through for six months, you didn't think this was going to be easy -- did you? After a dominant pitching performance by Justin Verlander in Game 1 and one of the weirdest playoff games any of us can remember in Game 2, the Tigers probably were due for a clunker. And, boy, did they deliver in a 2-0 loss to the A's in Game 3. Other than Prince Fielder and Jhonny Peralta, the Tigers went down rather meekly against Brett Anderson and the Oakland pitching staff. The home stadium was really loud and had a strange collegiate atmosphere to it. I'm not sure that there's any other professional stadium (other than soccer venues in Europe) quite like Oakland, with its flag-waving, rhythmic cheering and sign after sign after sign. I don't know that the crowd got to the Tigers as much as the A's pitching did, but it still is a rather hostile place to play. When things start rolling against you, it can get out of control in a hurry.

But the concern level really isn't very high, even after the loss. The Tigers needed to win one of three games against the Athletics. Now they need to win one of two. And I'd argue that their odds of doing so remain very high.

First, the offense simply can't stay this quiet. The Tigers have hit exactly one home run through three games (Alex Avila's in Game 1). Fielder should have had No. 2 on Tuesday night, if not for a brilliant catch by A's centerfielder Coco Crisp. Miguel Cabrera has been kept off the board. Fielder has been kept off the board. Same for Austin Jackson. The Tigers hit 163 home runs during the regular season (I'll do the math for you: That's slightly better than one per game.) They're averaging a third of a homer a game through this ALDS. Small sample size, but I doubt that will continue.

Second, they face a right-hander tonight (A.J. Griffin) and would get another right-hander Thursday (Jarrod Parker). The Tigers are better against right-handed pitching. Cabrera's numbers are far better in those matchups. Jim Leyland will go with Quintin Berry Alex Avila instead of Avisail Garcia and Gerald Laird. And the Tigers will be able to roll out the lineup they think gives them the best chance to win. When you can do that two consecutive nights, you have a good chance of scratching out a win.

And finally -- and most important -- there's Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander. Scherzer makes me a bit nervous, because it has been nearly a month since we saw the real Max Scherzer. His shoulder issues have either scratched him or limited him to low innings in each of his last four scheduled starts. He insists he's fine. Leyland insists he's fine. And really, neither man has anything to gain by exaggerating. But until we see Scherzer striking out A's hitters and working past the fifth inning, it's a question mark.

Verlander, however, is the ultimate insurance policy in this whole thing. His road numbers in the second half of the season were not very good. And his playoff numbers prior to Saturday night were average, at best. But in his last five starts (including Game 1), Verlander has pitched 35 innings and allowed three earned runs while striking out 38. That's not a bad trend. If there were a winner-take-all game, there's not another pitcher in baseball I'd rather have than Verlander. He just seems like one of those guys who will rise to the occasion.

True, he has the tendency to get too ramped up too early sometimes (as he did when he allowed the home run to Crisp in Game 1). But he also has the amazing ability to settle down quickly and quiet the opposing bats. If you have any doubts or qualms about the Tigers, most should be settled by the presence of Verlander in a Game 5.

Postseason baseball wouldn't be what it is if it weren't for some nervous moments. There are never guarantees. The Cincinnati Reds allowed the San Francisco Giants one hit through nine innings in Game 3 on Tuesday, and San Francisco still scratched out a 2-1 win in 10 innings. Just because the Tigers should wake up offensively and get solid outings from Scherzer and Verlander, it doesn't mean it will happen. But baseball also is a game of averages. The Tigers are a better team than the Chicago White Sox and they, eventually, proved it. The Tigers are stacked with some truly great hitters and starting pitchers, and the odds suggest that will bear out over the next 48 hours.

Tigers' backs up against the wall after devastating defeat

October 11, 2012

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — With plastic up on the lockers, the Tigers' clubhouse was ready. Three, two, one, party. But the shreds of it still on the hooks spoke of how quickly the stunning comeback occurred.

No celebration, no 3-1 victory.

Just a stunning 4-3 loss to the Oakland A's.

With bubbly on ice for the Tigers on Wednesday night, the Oakland A's uncorked a comeback at the expense of Jose Valverde.

At the expense of all the Tigers, actually.

Within three outs of advancing to their second consecutive American League Championship Series, the Tigers move on instead to a fifth and deciding game of their division series.

"That's why it's the greatest game of all," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "It looked like we were going to get it. We didn't do it. We didn't quite get the 27 outs.

"You get tested all the time in this game. This is a good test."

It looked like the Tigers were in control. Most of the night had gone their way. But the bottom of the ninth did not.

Josh Reddick began it with a single barely out of Omar Infante's reach at second.

Then came a couple of statement-making hits: A double off the wall in left by Josh Donaldson, putting runners at second and third, followed by Seth Smith's two-run double to the gap in right-center.

The A's now were guaranteed of at worst taking it to extra innings. But they were out for more. They were out to end it.

It didn't get done right away, though. With Smith at second, Valverde came within an out of keeping it tied. But Coco Crisp, the home-run robber of Game 3, singled to right — and there probably would have been a play at the plate, with Avisail Garcia's cannon for an arm in right making the throw. But the ball got away from Garcia — and Smith scored uncontested.

If the plastic in the Tigers' clubhouse wasn't down already, it came down then. By the time, the crestfallen players got back to the clubhouse — as mentioned earlier, only shreds remained.

The plus of the situation is this: The Tigers tonight will have Justin Verlander on the mound, someone who truly believes that his team plays best when its back is against a wall.

Well, it's up against it now.

"This is the essence of being against the wall," Verlander said. "This is it. Tomorrow is another game we have to win."

Over in the other clubhouse, of course, was a former Tiger who knows both teams.

"Taking nothing away from the Tigers," said Brandon Inge, "there's a heart on this A's team the likes of which I've never anything like in my life."

But is facing Verlander too much of a mountain?

"With the way momentum works," said Inge, "it's the best thing that can happen for us — because they have everything to lose. They're a great ballclub, no question. But Game 5 eliminates a lot. Anything goes now."

The loss definitely was disappointing to the Tigers, but they didn't look devastated.

Heck, Valverde stood at his locker and answered every question asked of him, despite calling it the low point of his career.

It'll only be devastating if the Tigers lose Game 5.

They still have a chance, a good chance, of getting to the ALCS, but what a bump in the road this loss was.

"Obviously it's win or go home now," Verlander said.

Because the A's struck late instead of early, Game 4 was entirely different than Game 3.

There was no first-inning run for the A's to electrify the big Coliseum crowd. Nor was there a spectacular catch by Crisp to rob Prince Fielder of a home run.

If Crisp was going to catch Fielder's booming drive this time, he would have had to be sitting way up in the right-field stands — because that's where Fielder deposited A.J. Griffin's 0-2 pitch in the fourth inning for the Tigers' second run.

Their first was the product of a double-sacrifice-single combination in the third — Alex Avila getting it going with a drive to right, Infante moving him over and Austin Jackson singling him in.

An insurance run was desperately needed, though, and finally was scored when Garcia contributed an RBI pinch-hit single in the eighth.

It wasn't insurance enough.

For five innings, Max Scherzer was outstanding — starting off with strike after strike. Of the 18 batters he faced in through five innings, Scherzer threw a first-pitch strike to 15 of them.

With two outs in the fifth, however, Smith walked on a pitch that just missed the outside corner. Scherzer had been pinpoint until that point, but the walk cost him 10 extra pitches.

Four to Derek Norris the next batter, followed by six to Cliff Pennington.

The walk would also lead to Oakland's first scoring chance when Norris dinked a single into shallow right, advancing Smith to third with two outs

Undaunted, Scherzer struck out Pennington to end the threat. By then, however, he had thrown 75 pitches — the point at which he said he fatigued in his final regular-season start in Kansas City following the two injury interruptions he experienced in September.

As excellent as his five innings were, Scherzer was gone by the sixth after the A's cut the lead to a run.

"His velocity began to drop pretty good," Leyland said.

Capping a 10-pitch, six-foul at-bat, Crisp led off the sixth by reaching second on Fielder's error at first.

Then came Stephen Drew's RBI double to center — which he tried in vain to turn into an RBI triple, a colossal mistake.

From the moment Drew made the turn at second and kept on going to third, it looked like he was going to be out- and he was.

For the A's, it was a lost opportunity.

In the ninth, though, they found another.

Al Alburquerque emerging as potential Tigers closer in 2013

October 11, 2012

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Scrape away the carnage from Wednesday night. Brush aside the bullpen remains of Jose Valverde.

Focus, for a moment, on the future and how a pitcher who nearly helped put the Tigers into the 2012 American League Championship Series could become a high-profile fixture next season.

Al Alburquerque.

Nothing has been decided as the Tigers say goodbye to Wednesday's victim — or villain, as multitudes of Tigers fans would argue — Valverde.

He is a free agent-to-be who would have been pitching elsewhere next season even had he not blown up Wednesday night in Game 4 of the Tigers-A's division playoff series at the Oakland Coliseum.

Valverde engineered and endured one of the more catastrophic innings of supposed relief pitching in modern Tigers history as Oakland slapped him around for three runs in the ninth to beat the Tigers, 4-3, and send Tigers Nation into a furious funk ahead of tonight's Game 5 series finale.

If Tigers fans can erase for a moment their rage, they might look past the debacle and ponder the practical, and perhaps pleasant, matter of who will be anointed the Tigers' 2013 closer.

A high-percentage bet is that the Tigers will shop for a free-agent pitcher who can keep the ninth inning orderly until prized prospect Bruce Rondon is ripe for a takeover.

Or, they could opt for someone on their current roster — Albuquerque, who pitched a brave seventh inning amid scalding jeers from 37,000 fans. It seems Oakland's faithful weren't happy that Albuquerque had spontaneously kissed a comeback one-hopper for the third out during the Tigers' 5-4 victory over the A's in Game 2 of their division playoff series.

Gutsy effort

Albuquerque arrived for the seventh inning Wednesday and was asked to safeguard a 2-1 Tigers lead. As the boos and the screams faded, he confronted A's leadoff batter Josh Reddick and promptly threw three consecutive balls.

In any situation, for any pitcher, a 3-0 count is inviting a walk or a bad-count blast by the hitter who is sitting like a buzzard on a tree limb.

This time, Albuquerque's odds grew exponentially longer because of the nerves he had to have been dealing with, all courtesy of playoff pressure and the boo-blast he received when he stepped to the mound.

Albuquerque, though, pulled the old grace-under-pressure trick.

Fastball: called strike.

Fastball: fouled strike.

Slider: line drive to Omar Infante at second base.

Albuquerque followed by striking out Seth Smith, who had slammed a home run during Tuesday night's A's victory.

He finished off a 1-2-3 frame by getting Derek Norris on an easy ground ball to Miguel Cabrera at third.

The Tigers, of course, went on to lose in cruel fashion as Valverde melted down and helped the A's to yet another of their standard-issue 2012 walk-off victories.

It was nearly an ecstatic night for the Tigers. It was an important one for Albuquerque, who is spurring his employers to at least think about his potential as their soon-to-be-sought closer.

Albuquerque chose not to talk about his experience Wednesday, or his plans for 2012. Approached in the Tigers clubhouse, he seemed certain that his Sunday smooch would be the conversation topic.

Assured that it wasn't, that his pitches Wednesday and his potential role with the Tigers might be a better subject, he politely demurred and headed for the team bus.

But his presence and his potential cannot be ignored as the Tigers stand one game, if things don't go well tonight, from ending their 2012 season.

Quite a comeback

What impresses the Tigers all the more about Alburquerque is what he has done since returning from nine months of recovery following elbow surgery last December. He arrived Sept. 1 and has pitched in nine games, spanning 14.2 innings. He has allowed a single run (ERA: 0.61). He can raise the pulse-rate of his manager, Jim Leyland, thanks to eight walks in those 14.2 innings. But he has struck out 19 batters during that same stretch. He has been touched for all of six hits. The Tigers aren't sure what to make of Alburquerque's potential as a closer. It's not a job for everyone. The pressure and expectations are immense. Failure can be traumatic. What's more, the very promotion of a late-innings closer to that firewall position can begin to churn at his mind. It can have demonic effects. Or, in the case of Alburquerque, who tends to treat life on and off the field with a certain tranquility, it could be just another stage in a career that has flourished since he came to Detroit. What the Tigers know also is that his fastball has not approached that old 97-98-mph range it knew before he had elbow surgery last winter. Velocity should be better next season, a full year-plus into his recovery. Alburquerque as closer? His candidacy might have grown warmer Wednesday, even if the Tigers' dream of cracking the World Series was, at the very least, postponed 24 hours.

Celebration denied, but Tigers know they still have a good shot

October 11, 2012

By Bob Wojnowski / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — They had played with the flame for a long, long time, and they were bound to get burned. The Tigers' bullpen makes people nervous, and on this night, Jose Valverde turned anxiety into devastation. Valverde blew a 3-1 lead in the bottom of the ninth, and the A's rallied for a stunning 4-3 victory that pushed this series to a decisive Game 5. It was quick and it was crushing, as the first three Oakland batters got hits in the ninth. Seth Smith tied it with a two-run double, and Coco Crisp won it with a two-out single.

The Tigers were thoroughly fried after this one and now turn to their ace, Justin Verlander, to save them. He pitches Thursday night, and who knows what shape the bullpen will be in. The A's pulled out another miraculous comeback, and you wonder if they've truly been kissed by karma.

Once again, the Tigers couldn't tack on enough runs to make it comfortable. And the oft-rocky Valverde couldn't do the job, not even close. He might get another chance, but Jim Leyland will have tough decisions to make in crunch time.

The Tigers were pushed to the max again, and for a while, pushed back with Max. One more time, they were tested, and Max Scherzer was clutch on what looked like clinching night. Instead, it's crushing night, and the Tiger's biggest test of the season awaits.

This one looked on its way to being sealed when Al Alburquerque, the reliever who'd ticked off the A's by kissing the baseball during Game 2 in Detroit, got his chance to kiss farewell. He entered to raucous boos in the seventh and exited untouched, the Tigers' 2-1 lead intact.

Leyland kept throwing arms out there, and keeps showing faith in veterans Joaquin Benoit and Valverde. They make people nervous, and on this night, Valverde made them nauseous. Benoit had struck out Brandon Moss with two on and two out in the bottom of the eighth, and the Tigers dodged danger temporarily.

The way this postseason is going, there's plenty of tension ahead. When Game 4 began, the Tigers were just looking for a few good runs. In this scoring-scarce series, a 1-0 lead felt like a 5-0 lead, especially with Scherzer on the mound. The Tigers were hoping this was a fortunate confluence of circumstance, based on this: Scherzer strikes out batters as proficiently as anyone, and A's hitters strike out as prolifically as anyone.

Scherzer hadn't pitched in a week, after slightly twisting his ankle in the division-clinching celebration in Kansas City. He said his ankle was fine and his shoulder was fine. Leyland said all was fine. Scherzer looked fine, and then took the mound and was more than fine.

He struck out five A's in the first three innings, and just like that, the Tigers began to squeeze the breath out of the upstarts. Prince Fielder knocked some wind out of them with his home run leading off the fourth, a rocket that was due for launch. The Tigers led 2-0, and already had more RBI hits (two), than they collected in the first three games combined.

But once again, the Tigers failed to deliver the decisive blow. They had rookie A.J. Griffin pinned to the ropes, and Tigers hitters were pining to make a pitcher pay for mistakes. They couldn't do it.

Of course, it never can be that simple. It rarely is with the Tigers, who hit into two more double plays and declined to pull away. The margin for error is so narrow in these games, one error can drastically alter the margin. Fielder committed one in the sixth, botching a grounder by Crisp, and it led to a run that sliced the Tigers' lead to 2-1.

The A's countered with their own error, as Stephen Drew kept running on his RBI double and easily was thrown out at third. That was over-exuberance by the A's, and a wisp of good fortune for the Tigers.

It didn't last. It rarely seems to last long for the Tigers, always tempting fate. On this night, their arms were maxed out and Valverde was burned, and now we see what they do with one shot at redemption.

By sixth inning, Tigers starter Max Scherzer's velocity had plummeted

October 11, 2012

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — He was sailing along so smoothly.

Five innings of first-pitch strikes.

Five innings of shutout ball.

Five innings — with a two-out threat in the bottom of fifth as the only blemish.

Yet Tigers starter Max Scherzer was out of Wednesday night's game two batters into the sixth inning. What happened?

"Well, if you watched," said manager Jim Leyland, "the velocity started to drop pretty good. To 90 to 91.

"He hasn't really pitched that much lately. It looked like he was pretty much spent (after 91 pitches). I didn't want him to make a mistake and have (Yoenis) Cespedes hurt us.

"That's why we made the move. Max wanted Cespedes, but I could see his velocity was dropping."

Still, he allowed just one unearned run on three hits in the Tigers' 4-3 loss to the A's.

Still Scrappy

He's an adviser for the Athletics — not in uniform — but former Tigers manager Phil Garner still has the same fiery personality.

All it took to find that out was a conversation with him Wednesday about how he loses every Wii game he plays against his 7-year-old grandson.

"I was finally beating him in something, maybe it was bowling," said Garner, "and suddenly the game reset. I might have gotten a little upset."

Did his grandson eject him from the game?

"No, but he probably could have."

Garner, now 63, was Tigers manager from 2000 through the first six games of 2002. They were not good years for the Tigers, nor particularly for him.

But Bob Melvin, the A's manager, was his bench coach in Detroit, and Garner had long since, even then, identified managerial qualities in Melvin.

"He knew the game, had passion for the game, but was very detailed oriented," Garner said. "Some like the glory of being a manager, but passion for the job is going to make you the best manager.

"He also checked his ego at the door. He doesn't try to upstage players."

Even in Detroit, Garner talked about Melvin being a stickler about details.

"For me he was," Garner said. "And that's what I needed. When you're managing a game, it's not rocket science, but there's a feel for how the game flows. As slow as a baseball game can be, the interesting thing is that when things begin to happen, there's a flash moment that if you don't make the move, it's over. You're done.

"You get a chance with your bench coach, in what he says or does, to see if he gets it. I knew from Bo as my bench coach that he was going to do a good job."

Next new manager?

Another former Tigers catcher whose managerial future Garner feels is certain is Brad Ausmus.

"He'll be a major league manager somewhere," Garner said.

"I just don't want him to begin a rebuilding job somewhere and have someone else go to glory by finishing it."

A's focus on Justin Verlander's pitch count

October 11, 2012

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — They were one game from ending their 2012 season. Or, they were one game from pushing the Tigers to a climactic Game 5 of a division series that had featured gold-star pitching throughout the first three games.

Here's what the A's were saying Wednesday a few hours before Game 4 of their divisional series against the Tigers at Oakland Coliseum:

Facing the ace

Justin Verlander would be the Tigers' starter and lead sled-dog if a Game 5 were needed. A's manager Bob Melvin knows about Verlander's habits — how enemy teams tend to get him early in a game, if they get him at all.

Melvin also understands the merits of kicking up Verlander's pitch-count in a bid to get him off the field and the bullpen into session.

"Well, we have to get there first," Melvin said as he and the A's prepared for an evening assignment against the Tigers and starter Max Scherzer .

Verlander and the Tigers beat the A's, 6-2, on Sept. 19. Verlander pitched six innings, allowed five hits, no runs, and threw 122 pitches.

"There's more than one way to beat a good starting pitcher," Melvin said. "If you can wear him down, run the pitch count up, try to get him out of the game sooner than later, stay with him — that has a little effect, too.

"Trying to get a starter early in the game before they get in their rhythm, that's another way.

"But I think there are a lot of teams that try to do that with him. The problem is that he'll throw 130 pitches in a game. Even if you get his pitch-count up, it doesn't mean he's going to come out of the game at 100 or 105 pitches.

"He's a tough customer."

Coliseum crowds

There are home-field advantages of different degrees. The A's have done a nice job of making their residence one of the meanest, loudest places in big-league baseball.

Melvin talked about the high-decibel distinction to Oakland Coliseum's rooters.

"It's a true blue-collar fan base, if you ask me," said Melvin, and those familiar with the Bay Area may forget that Oakland is far more industrial and middle-class than the Bay region's tonier zip codes.

"They're very loud. Our writers have often heard me talk about how it sounds like double the attendance here. If it's 10 (thousand), it sounds like 20. If it's 20, it sounds like 40. We had, what — 37 (thousand) last night?

"It sounded like well over 50."

Familiar foe

Jarrod Parker , another of the A's rookie starters, was to get the start in Game 5.

Parker knows all about the Tigers. And about the Midwest. He's an Indiana native.

"Obviously, I followed the American League Central growing up," said Parker, who was born in Ft. Wayne, Ind. "I was a White Sox fan growing up, so I knew about the tradition in Detroit.

"And I went to a couple of games at Comerica Park when I was growing up."

On Wednesday, he was hoping to go to another Tigers game — today. This time against his team, the Athletics, who were attempting Wednesday to keep their season alive.

Once-flamboyant Dennis Eckersley: Tigers' Al Alburquerque will 'live and learn'

October 11, 2012

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — With his long hair and his "gotcha" grin, Dennis Eckersley was among the flashiest relievers of his day. And more than once, he admittedly went over the top in celebration.

So he's not about to chastise Tiger Al Alburquerque for his smooch heard 'round the world, like others have the past few days.

"It's stupid," Eckersley, a TBS postseason analyst, said Wednesday, speaking on the phone from the studios in Atlanta. "I try to defend the kid. I'm not saying he didn't mean it, but that's not premeditated. And I guarantee you he never will do it again."

Asked about a specific moment he regretted from his Hall of Fame career, Eckersley, 58, is quick with a doozie. It was July 4, 1988, and his Oakland A's were in the 16th inning in Cleveland — a day after they went 16 innings in Toronto — and Eckersley was on the mound for the save, after Mark McGwire and Stan Javier homered for the lead in the top half of the inning.

Eckersley got the first two batters, and up stepped Indians infielder Ron Washington, now the manager of the Rangers. Three pitchers later, Washington was a strikeout victim.

"I punched him out on three pitches, and waved him away," Eckersley said. "But it was a 16-inning game, I was like, 'Get the (heck) out of here.' So he didn't like that, and I don't blame him. I have done some stupid stuff, and I apologized to him."

In the end, it came down to a fired-up reliever simply showing some emotion — just like Alburquerque did when he got Yoenis Cespedes to ground back to the mound in a pivotal situation in Game 2 of the American League Division Series on Sunday afternoon.

He gave the ball a kiss before throwing to first — an act that almost certainly was done more out of relief than to show up a foe.

"Live and learn," Eckersley said. "But it's natural."

The TBS analysts, by the way, had some fun discussing the Alburquerque topic on air this week. David Wells even showed off a baseball with a lipstick stain on the sweet spot.

During his interview with The Detroit News, while taking a break from show prep, Eckersley touched on a number of other topics.

Among them:

What makes the Tigers World Series contenders: "(Max) Scherzer, right? And (Doug) Fister, hey, hello! And, oh, then you got the man (ace Justin Verlander). They can beat anybody. They probably have the best starting pitching (of teams left in the postseason)."

What are the Tigers biggest liabilities? "I don't think their lineup is all that great. Beyond, obviously, (Miguel) Cabrera and Prince (Fielder), they don't scare you."

Anything else? "Hopefully (reliever Joaquin) Benoit got that (crap) out of him. ... Normally if you have one bad outing as a reliever, you may never get the chance to redeem yourself the rest of the series."

World Series prediction: "I told somebody, Washington-Detroit, but do I have to say that to you now?" he said, chuckling, moments after the Nationals gave up a three-run home run en route to an 8-0 loss to the Cardinals in Game 3 of the NLDS. "So I think Cincinnati-Detroit."

And the winner of an I-75 World Series ...: "Man, that's tough. I guess I'd have to take Cincinnati. I don't know. I could change daily, or hourly!"

The 2012 American League MVP: "Cabrera. I've been defending him forever. (That there's a debate) just goes to show you how great (Mike) Trout's season was. But I'm an old-schooler on that." Translation: Triple Crown equals MVP.

The volume at the Oakland Coliseum on Tuesday: "I don't remember it being that loud," said Eckersley, who pitched for the A's from 1987-95. "I think it's a matter of when we used to play, they expected (success). Now, it's like, 'Oh, my God, it's so exciting,' because they didn't expect it. There's more energy. There's something about not expecting something."

The loudest stadium he ever played in: "The Metrodome. You'd literally be shaking."

Here's a few answers to your burning Tigers questions

October 11, 2012

By Bob Wojnowski / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — You're angst-ridden, I know. Every playoff game teeters on every pitch, and every at-bat looks like an all-or-nothing endeavor. The Tigers keep you up late and sometimes roust you awake. So much seems possible, and yet so much is uncertain.

I get it. Sometimes the Tigers look exactly like a World Series team, such as when Justin Verlander is on the mound or Miguel Cabrera is at the plate. And sometimes they look considerably shakier, like when the bullpen doors open or the bottom of the order is at the plate.

If you're looking for guarantees here, oh please. Have you watched the baseball postseason lately? But the Tigers have as good a shot as anyone, and a better shot than most. And I say that before a huge Game 4 Wednesday night against the A's.

To win it all, this is what you must endure. There are no easy answers, only lots of dumb questions. I've posed a few for your reading pleasure:

Q: Are the Oakland crowds as wild as they sound?

A: It's as loud and festive here as anywhere. The music blares. The towels wave. They're sort of like Raiders fans, only older and saner and less likely to be dressed like Darth Vader.

Q: No waffling on this. Do the Tigers have what it takes to win the World Series or not?

A: Yep, they do. That's why some Vegas odds nudged them into the favorite's position over the Yankees. They have the starting pitching and the middle-of-the-order stars in Cabrera and Prince Fielder. Even the fielding has improved to the point you can watch it without wincing.

Q: So you're saying they're going to win it all?!

A: Slow down, Tiger. This is a very good team, but not a dominant team. It needs some breaks, it needs Verlander to win every start and it needs at least one ancillary hitter to get hot. The Rangers would've been tough, but they're gone. The Yankees are still tough, even if the Tigers always beat them in the playoffs, and by "always" I mean, "every time since 2006." In the National League, a team like the Reds would be very tough.

Q: So what's your answer?

A: Let me get my calculator out, punch in a few numbers, double-check the biorhythms, make sure Ryan Raburn didn't get slipped onto the playoff roster and — done. Chances the Tigers win the AL: 58.4 percent. Chances they win the World Series: 41.9 percent.

Q: Really, how did you come up with that?

A: I used the controversial WAR statistic. Wojo Average 'Rithmetic.

Q: Speaking of baseball's advanced metric stats, where do you stand on the whole Nerd-versus-Neanderthal debate?

A: Listen. I'm not into name-calling. Nerds are people too, and Neanderthals used to be people. Cabrera's Triple Crown should have clinched the MVP, in my opinion. But I guarantee Angels center fielder Mike Trout will get a ton of support. My basic dispute comes down to this: The Nerds grossly under-value RBIs and the Neanderthals (also known as traditionalists) under-value statistics with more than two numbers after the decimal point.

Q: OK, we know you're a Cabrera guy. But what's the one thing that could swing it in Trout's favor?

A: Well, two things. People are enamored with speed. And Trout makes for much better puns. (Trout's so good, he can hit any pitcher's hook, line or sinker.) That's catchier than the Cabrera puns. (Getting Miggy with it.)

Q: Let me get serious for a second. Do you think Jim Leyland will be back as Tigers manager? Do you think he should be?

A: Yes. And yes. Of course he wants to keep managing a loaded team, even at the age of 67. On the flip side, when Mike Ilitch spends a couple hundred million on his team, he's certainly allowed to demand more and see how the season plays out.

Q: Why hasn't he given Leyland an extension yet?

A: Because late in the season, I do believe Leyland's job was in jeopardy. If the Tigers didn't win the division, a change was possible. To award the extension before the Tigers even win a playoff series would make it appear

the division title was the only goal. It's not. But in my opinion, Leyland is the best manager for this team, which has more egos than people realize.

Q: Sounds like you think it's a given that Leyland is back?

A: It's a given if he reaches the World Series. Obviously, it's not a given yet, and I'm sure Ilitch will have discussions with Dave Dombrowski before it happens.

Q: We all know the Tigers' stars. Who's an under-the-radar player that could make an over-the-radar difference?

A: Frankly, too many Tigers hitters stay under the radar. But I like what I've seen out of Omar Infante the past month or two. At the No. 2 spot, he's just as important a setup hitter as Austin Jackson. And he apparently has fixed his fielding foibles at second base.

Q: Which Tiger makes fans the most nervous?

A: Too-easy answer: Jose Valverde, who actually handles the pressure very well. Better answer: Joaquin Benoit, who needs to handle the pressure like he did in last year's postseason.

Q: Off topic: Since you're in the Bay Area, is it acceptable to eat sushi at a ballgame?

A: No it is not. Not even if you smear it with onions and yellow mustard.

Q: Hot dog or bratwurst or bust?

A: Always. I'm not even in favor of burgers at a ballpark. Most Neanderthals agree with me.

Tigers still have advantage, but bats' blackout must end

October 11, 2012

By Bob Wojnowski / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — It's the nagging flaw the Tigers just can't shake. For all their gains the past few weeks, they're still prone to bouts of flailing.

Oakland's yellow towels were waving Tuesday night and the Tigers waved along with them. A's lefty Brett Anderson dominated in a 2-0 victory that nudged the Tigers closer to real danger. Detroit hitters struck out 11 times, waving and wavering, especially in the late innings.

This was the script the Tigers were wary of, and have been wary for a while. Tough place to play. Tough opposing pitcher. Loud crowd and quiet bats. Shhhh, but there's a series brewing here, as we suspected.

The A's are too pesky to be swept. The Tigers have been too inconsistent to sweep. It's not necessarily a fatal flaw — they lead the series 2-1, and with Max Scherzer on the mound tonight, you still like their chances. But the way the A's pitched and played defense, the Tigers' tight offense isn't loosening up. Prince Fielder must have gone to bed muttering after losing a home run on one great catch, and at least a single on another.

The Tigers declined to lament, opting to acknowledge the A's terrific performance. Manager Jim Leyland said Oakland "played a perfect game," and he was about right. The crowd was electric, which was expected.

Anderson was electric, too, which wasn't totally expected. He hadn't pitched in three weeks because of a muscle pull, but the Tigers couldn't do anything, finishing with four hits.

"We knew what we were coming into, we knew they were a great team, the No. 2 seed," catcher Gerald Laird said. "This kind of environment is fun, and we knew they weren't going to roll over. We know we can hit, and if we can just scrape up some runs, with our pitching staff, that could be enough."

I suppose it could be enough if Scherzer — or Justin Verlander in a possible Game 5 — completely stymies the A's. But Oakland is 51-31 at home mainly because of its pitching, and through three games, runs are scarce.

Miguel Cabrera and Fielder are without an RBI yet, although they've hit the ball hard.

'Credit their pitching'

This felt like one of those classic hockey playoff games from the West Coast, where the Red Wings make an opposing goalie look even better than he is. The Tigers collected two singles in the second inning and then not another hit until the seventh, and by then it was 2-0 and too late to pull the goalie. (Stretched the hockey metaphor too far?)

It's too bad because Tigers starter Anibal Sanchez was good enough to win. Now suddenly, the A's must believe a three-game rally is possible, as it was when they swept the Rangers to complete a miraculous run to the division title and become one of baseball's stirring stories.

The Tigers had a chance to stop the stir and couldn't do it. The opponent Tuesday night was the A's, but for the Tigers, it was a series of Q-and-A's. For instance: Could they end this thing before it got real tense?

And: Could they keep winning without prolific hitting?

Fair question. Leyland was posing it himself before the game, noting that of the Tigers' eight runs in the series, only one — an Alex Avila home run — came on a hit. It might be a minor distinction, but against Oakland's top-notch pitching, it's relevant.

"We just didn't do much offensively, and you credit their pitching," Leyland said. "Their bullpen is really nasty. And their starter gave them what they needed."

'That's why they're here'

For the Tigers, it usually circles back to the hitting. Their pitching is very good, and they're even playing crisp defense right now. That's different than what Oakland did, playing Crisp defense. In the second inning, Fielder hit a drive up the gap and centerfielder Coco Crisp chased, leaped and swiped it just inches above the wall.

That seemed to ignite the A's and their fans. Sanchez said it was the loudest crowd he'd heard all season. Fielder had reason to shake his head, but like most of the Tigers, wasn't doing it.

"You can't do nothing about it," he said. "That's why they're here, they make those plays from time to time. It happens."

In Game 2, Crisp had dropped a two-out fly ball that allowed two runs to score. But back in their unique ballpark, the A's looked considerably more comfortable.

The Tigers rarely have looked comfortable on the road this season, with a 38-44 mark. They're going to have to win one here somehow, and the next shot goes to Scherzer, who hasn't pitched in seven days. Pitching is rarely the problem for the Tigers, although Sanchez had a problem initially. The first three Oakland hitters reached base, and just like that, it was 1-0.

Sanchez settled down but the Tigers couldn't crank it up, not against Anderson. He's only 24 but supremely talented, one of those fuzzy, scruffy Oakland stories. He missed most of the season after elbow surgery, starting only six times, then pulled an oblique muscle Sept. 19 against the Tigers and didn't return until Tuesday night. Here he was, moving them down, allowing only two hits and striking out six in six innings. Another 24-year-old A's pitcher, rookie A.J. Griffin, will start tonight, and the Tigers should have a significant advantage with Scherzer. But you wonder if the A's are just too young to be intimidated.

There were no theatrics or dramatics in this one, just Oakland pitchers flinging and Detroit hitters swinging. The A's spent the first two games striking out and the Tigers struck back, so to speak. Their offense needs to make a lot more noise quickly, before it really gets loud out here.

Detroit Tigers' Avisail Garcia has clutch hit, plays key role in Game 4 of Division Series

October 11, 2012

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Avisail Garcia had an eventful night for a guy who didn't enter the game until the eighth inning.

Garcia was involved in two key plays late in the game Wednesday night as the Detroit Tigers suffered a 4-3 loss to the Oakland A's in Game 4 of the American League Division Series.

The Tigers held a tenuous 2-1 lead and had a runner at second base with one out in the eighth inning when Garcia entered the game as a pinch-hitter to face A's left-hander Sean Doolittle.

Garcia sent an 0-2 fastball from Doolittle to the opposite field to score Omar Infante to give the Tigers a 3-1 lead. The RBI for Garcia gave the Tigers what appeared to be a huge insurance run, but the A's overcame the two-run deficit in the bottom of the ninth inning.

Avisail-Garcia-mug.jpg Avisail Garcia

Garcia was involved in that rally as well.

The A's tied the score and had a runner on second with two outs in the bottom of the ninth when Coco Crisp sent a single to right field.

Garcia has a cannon for an arm. He showed that off early in the series when he threw out Crisp on a play at the plate. The crowd at the Oakland Coliseum cheered when Crisp singled, then seemed to freeze for a moment in anticipation of a play at the plate.

That play never happened. Garcia charged the ball, but it skipped underneath his glove as he started to get into position to make the throw just a split-second too early. It would have taken a perfect throw to get the runner, but a play at the plate at that point would have added another layer of excitement to an already-amazing game. Garcia started the season in Single-A Lakeland, so it says something about how highly the Tigers think of him that he is a regular player against left-handed starters in the playoffs for the Tigers.

It also says something about the Tigers: They don't have any other options.

Really, the Tigers would have much preferred to use Ryan Raburn as a right-handed hitter in a corner outfield spot, but he posted awful numbers this season. They would have preferred to have Jeff Baker, obtained in a late-season trade, play in that spot, but they quickly moved on from that trade when he struggled.

When the Tigers needed a right-handed hitter for the stretch drive, they asked their minor-league people and found that Garcia was their best option.

"I had no idea he was ready," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said this week. "I'm still not sure he's ready. ... They thought he could handle it, so we did it. You've got to believe in your people, and I certainly believe in them. So we brought him up and we played him.

"He's done fine. He hasn't tore it up, but he's done fine. He's done a good job."

Garcia has done fine. He has one clutch hit and has made one excellent defensive play in his first playoff series. That's a pretty good debut for a guy no one really expected to see in the big leagues this season.

Detroit Tigers' Jose Valverde takes Game 4 loss, calls it 'toughest moment' of his 10-year career

October 11, 2012

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- For nearly 15 minutes, Jose Valverde stood tall at his locker and answered question after question about his ninth-inning meltdown.

He was asked by a group of national and local media members what went wrong Wednesday night.

"I threw my pitches," he said. "They just hit them."

And, how tough was this loss to swallow?

"It's the toughest moment in my career," he softly answered.

When the cameramen eventually got their money shots, another hoard of reporters approached. It was their turn to grill the 34-year-old about his Game 4 collapse.

He was asked if he had changed his delivery.

"No," he said. "Everything was the same."

And, what about the sinkerball? Was it abandoned?

"I threw my sinker," Valverde said. "And, my split -- everything."

And, lastly, will you be ready for Game 5?

"I'll come back," he said. "And, I'll be 100 percent."

After the question-and-answer session came to a close, when he finally had a moment to himself, Valverde sat down on the stool in front of his locker and hung his head in disbelief.

"He was a man about it," Avila said. "He lost the game and you have to answer questions whether you win or lose."

Moments later, manager Jim Leyland walked by -- and without saying a word -- rubbed Valverde's shoulder in passing. It was a simple gesture, but it was telling.

"He has my back," Valverde said. "My manager is behind me 100 percent."

And, that was made even more apparent Wednesday night after Valverde blew a save opportunity that would've sent the Tigers to their second straight American League Championship Series and have a rested Justin Verlander for Game 1.

"I really believed Jose was going to be able to get it done tonight," Max Scherzer.

Instead, Detroit is now one loss away from being eliminated after Coco Crisp capped Oakland's rally with a two-out, walk-off single to stave off elimination for a second straight night.

"I thought we played our hearts out," Leyland said. "We just didn't close it out."

Two runs up and three outs away, Detroit turned to Valverde, who was perfect in save chances last year, converting all 49 attempts. This year, it's been a much different story.

Josh Reddick led off the ninth with a single on the fourth pitch that rolled under the glove of diving second baseman Omar Infante. The base hit brought the tying run to the plate.

There was reason to be nervous, starter Max Scherzer said. But it wasn't the first time Valverde had worked himself into a ninth-inning jam and Scherzer wasn't sweating just yet.

"I really believed Jose was going to be able to get it done," he said.

But he didn't.

Josh Donaldson followed with a double off the wall in left-center, and both runners scored on Seth Smith's double. Two outs later, Crisp lined a walk-off single, scoring Smith easily after the ball rolled under right fielder Avisail Garcia's glove.

"They just hit him," Leyland said. "They basically charged him and hit him."

As a result, the plastic sheets that had lined the walls and covered the floor only 10 minutes earlier were frantically torn down and shoved into the visiting clubhouse manager's office.

There would be no celebration Wednesday night. And much of that burden rests with Valverde.

"To be honest, everybody handles a loss differently," Avila said. "But you can see what type of person you are and what kind of character you have by how you respond after that."

The Tigers and A's will now go to Game 5 on Thursday night, when Verlander, the reigning AL MVP and Cy Young winner, will try to put the finishing touches on Oakland. And, in the event the Tigers find themselves carrying a slim lead in the ninth inning, expect Valverde to be right back on the mound. "I really believed Jose was going to be able to get it done tonight," Scherzer said. "He didn't, but I'll still believe in him tomorrow, so hopefully he'll get it done in Game 5."

Detroit Tigers face ultimate must-win situation against never-say-die Oakland A's

October 11, 2012

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Pieces of tape hung here and there on the walls of the visitors' clubhouse at the Oakland Coliseum.

Fragments of ripped plastic hung above a few locker stalls. In a room just off to the side was a pile of plastic sheeting, ostensibly torn from the walls as a series-clinching victory for the visitors turned to a series-extending win for the home team. Cases and cases of chilled champagne couldn't have been far away.

The Detroit Tigers may yet celebrate an American League Division Series-clinching win in Oakland. But it was not to be Wednesday night.

The Tigers were just three outs away from clinching a spot in the AL Championship Series for the second consecutive season Wednesday before the Oakland A's beat up closer Jose Valverde for three runs to hand the Tigers a shocking 4-3 defeat.

"It's baseball," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "I mean, that's why this is the greatest game of all. It looked like we were going to get it. We didn't do it. We didn't quite get the 27 outs. That's part of the game."

The Tigers had no trouble getting the first 24 outs. The A's managed just four hits in the first eight innings against starter Max Scherzer and four Tigers relievers. But they rocked Valverde for four more hits -- and three runs -- in the ninth inning.

I thought we played our hearts out. Tonight, we just didn't close it out."

Josh Reddick led off with a single to right that was just out of reach of second baseman Omar Infante. Josh Donaldson followed by lacing a double to left-center. With two runners in scoring position and no outs for the A's, it would have taken a minor miracle for Valverde to escape the inning unscathed.

But there were no miracles for Valverde on this night. Those were reserved for the A's.

Seth Smith doubled to center -- the third consecutive hit off Valverde -- to tie the game at 3-3. Valverde retired the next two batters he faced before Coco Crisp, who has his fingerprints all over this series, singled to right. A play at the plate seemed inevitable. Avisail Garcia, who has the best arm of any Tigers outfielder, charged the ball. Anticipation grew. But the ball slid just under Garcia's glove. He quickly turned and started to chase it, but reality set in moments later and he stopped. The game was over.

The series is not. It is tied 2-2. Game 5 is Thursday night.

"You get tested all the time in this game," Leyland said, "and this is a good test ... I thought we played our hearts out. Tonight, we just didn't close it out."

The Tigers spoke confidently about their chances in Game 5, but turning the page could be difficult.

"We have no choice," Prince Fielder said once, then twice, then a third time in the matter of a very brief interview.

Valverde is never at a loss for words, but he spoke very quietly while answering questions for 15 minutes or so as wave after wave of media members visited his locker stall. He said it was the toughest loss he's ever had to deal with. He said he wants the baseball in his hands at the end of the game. He is confident his team will win. To start, the ball will be in the hands of Justin Verlander, which should put Tigers fans at ease. But is there really any "ease" at this point? Can anyone involved in this series breathe easy right now? Can anyone breathe at all?

"We've, in essence, been there the last month of the season," Verlander said of being in a must-win situation.

"We beat the White Sox when we had to beat them. Tomorrow is another game that we have to win, obviously." Champagne will be spilled Thursday night at the Oakland Coliseum. Cigars will be smoked. Players will dance and hug and celebrate and dream of what could be to come in the next round of the playoffs.

With Verlander on the mound, the Tigers have to be the favorites. But they are not overwhelming favorites. Not even close. No one is at this point of the season. Not when both teams won played well enough to win their divisions. Not in a one-game, winner-take-all scenario.

Not in an environment like the Oakland Coliseum, which is hosting baseball played at decibels usually reserved for World Cup soccer matches.

"We're in a one-game playoff right now, and anything can happen," Scherzer said. "We've got our best pitcher going. We like where we sit, but this is a hostile place right now.

"It's one game, so anything can happen."

Anyone who watched Game 4 has proof of that.

Leyland often repeats the saying that "momentum is the next day's starting pitcher." The Tigers certainly hope that is true.

That's because momentum -- by every other definition of the word -- appears to be in the hands of the Oakland A's right now.

Detroit Tigers blow two-run lead in bottom of ninth, will head to decisive Game 5 against Oakland A's

October 11, 2012

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- The Detroit Tigers had three chances to eliminate the Oakland A's. Now they are down to one.

The Tigers were three outs away from wrapping up their American League Division Series, but the A's rallied for three runs in the ninth inning off Jose Valverde to pull out a 4-3 victory and force a decisive Game 5.

The A's had just four hits in the first eight innings, but they greeted Valverde with three consecutive hits to start the ninth. After a single by Josh Reddick and a double by Josh Donaldson, Seth Smith doubled to right-center to drive in two runs and tie the game at 3-3.

Valverde retired pinch-hitter George Kottaras on a foul ball near third and struck out Cliff Pennington to bring Coco Crisp to the plate. Crisp singled to right field and it appeared that there would be a play at the plate. But the ball got past Avisail Garcia and Smith raced home to score without a play.

KEY TO THE GAME

Tigers pitchers combined for eight impressive innings of work, but Valverde was hit hard repeatedly in the ninth inning. He retired just two batters and allowed four hits, two of them for extra bases.

TIGERS' HIGHLIGHTS

-- The Tigers got on the board first with a run in the third inning. Alex Avila led off with a double, went to third on a sacrifice bunt by Omar Infante and scored on a single to left by Austin Jackson. That made it 1-0. The single by Jackson was just the second run-scoring hit of the series for the Tigers.

-- Prince Fielder was 1-for-13 with no RBIs in the series when he stepped to the plate to lead off the fourth inning. He crushed an 0-2 fastball from starter A.J. Griffin well over the wall in right field to make it 2-0.

-- Max Scherzer retired the A's on just five pitches in the fourth inning and was extremely efficient in the early innings. Yoenis Cespedes singled with two outs in the first inning, but he was the only A's hitter to reach base through 4 2/3 innings against Scherzer.

-- The Tigers scored an important insurance run in the eighth inning when Avisail Garcia delivered a clutch pinch-hit single to right field to score Infante from second base. Infante singled to lead off the inning and went to second on a sacrifice bunt by Jackson.

TIGERS' LOWLIGHTS

-- After Fielder hit the home run in the fourth to make it 2-0, Delmon Young and Andy Dirks singled to put two on with nobody out. But Jhonny Peralta grounded into a double play and Avila flied out to left field to end the threat.

-- Scherzer was cruising with a 2-0 lead in the sixth inning when Crisp sent a hard-hit ball to first base to lead off the sixth inning. But Fielder misplayed the ball and allowed Crisp to go all the way to second base. He was charged with an error on the play.

-- Crisp went to third on a wild pitch, then scored on a double by Stephen Drew to make it 2-1. But Drew bailed the Tigers out when he tried to stretch a double into a triple and was an easy out at third base for the first out of the inning.

OTHER NOTES

-- Scherzer struck out the first two batters he faced in the fifth inning before issuing his first walk and surrendering a bloop single to Derek Norris to put runners at first and third. But he got Pennington to swing at strike three on a ball that was low and inside. That gave him three strikeouts in the fifth inning and eight for the game.

-- Griffin allowed two runs on seven hits in five-plus innings. He struck out one and did not issue a walk.

-- Scherzer allowed one run -- it was unearned -- on three hits and one walk in 5 1/3 innings. He struck out eight.

- The rowdy crowd at the Oakland Coliseum, who clearly remember the baseball-kissing incident Sunday, let Al Alburquerque have it when he entered the game to pitch the seventh inning. Alburquerque threw three consecutive balls to the first batter he faced but ended up pitching a 1-2-3 seventh inning for the Tigers.
- The A's put runners on first and second with two outs in the eighth against Joaquin Benoit. But Benoit struck out Brandon Moss to end the inning and preserve his team's 3-1 lead.

Detroit Tigers, Oakland A's have received excellent performances from starting pitchers in ALDS

October 11, 2012

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Excellent pitching or struggling offenses?

Take your pick. But it is clear that runs are at a premium in the American League Division Series between the Detroit Tigers and Oakland A's.

The Tigers and A's head into Game 4 of the ALDS tonight having combined for 15 runs in three games. The Tigers have scored eight, the A's seven.

"Both sides would probably be pretty happy with how the pitching has been," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

"That's typically how it is in the postseason. You're always going to get a tough starter, and usually there's two, three, four guys in the bullpen that come in in games when you're ahead or tied, and those guys are used quite often in the postseason. I think that's been that way with both teams."

Both sides would probably be pretty happy with how the pitching has been."

Starting pitchers for the Tigers have been excellent. Justin Verlander, Doug Fister and Anibal Sanchez have combined to go 1-1 with a 2.21 ERA and have struck out 22 in 20 1/3 innings pitched. The A's are hitting .200 against Tigers starters, who have a 1.08 WHIP in the postseason.

But A's starting pitchers have been even better. They are a combined 1-1 with a 1.47 ERA and have struck out 17 in 18 1/3 innings. They have issued half as many walks (four) as Tigers starters (eight) and have an 0.98 WHIP.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland was asked if the series so far has been a case of great pitching or struggling hitters.

"I think it's a combination of both," Leyland said. "All six pitchers who have pitched so far have pitched good.

Their bullpen came in last night, they were lights out, which they've been a lot this year."

The Tigers still have just one run-scoring hit through three games of the series, a solo home run by Alex Avila in Game 1. Other than that, they have three runs on errors and one each on a sacrifice fly, a wild pitch, a dribbler to first and a double-play grounder.

The Tigers had just four hits -- all singles -- in a 2-0 Game 3 loss Tuesday night to the A's and had just two at-bats with runners in scoring position. Both took place in the second inning.

Fielder had a home run stolen by Coco Crisp and a double taken away by Yoenis Cespedes, but the Tigers didn't hit very many balls hard.

"I thought we hit some balls pretty decent early, but not late," Leyland said. "Fielder obviously hit two balls pretty good and didn't get anything to show for it. (Miguel) Cabrera hit a ball sharply to short, (Omar) Infante to third, but that was pretty much it."

The Tigers are hitting .176 (3-for-17) with two RBIs with runners in scoring position in the series. The Tigers led the majors with a .286 average with runners in scoring position in the regular season, but they quite often struggled during the regular season to get a clutch, game-altering hit with multiple runners on base.

One advantage the Tigers have in Game 4 and, potentially, in Game 5 of the ALDS is that the A's will start right-handers in both games. The Tigers had a .395 slugging percentage and a .724 OPS against left-handers during the regular season compared with a .434 slugging percentage and .771 OPS against right-handed pitchers.

Miguel Cabrera had an amazing season and won the Triple Crown, the first time that has been accomplished since 1967. But he hit just four home runs in 159 at-bats against left-handers. That's one home run for about every 40 at-bats.

He hit 40 home runs in 463 at-bats against right-handers. That's one home run for about every 12 at-bats.

Detroit Tigers lineup: Jim Leyland won't limit Max Scherzer in Game 4 start vs. Oakland A's

October 11, 2012

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Max Scherzer was limited to 75 pitches in his last start.

This time around, he doesn't expect to be on a short leash.

"The way I've recovered over the past 10 days has been really good," he said after Tuesday's loss to Oakland.

"There shouldn't be any limitations on me."

Scherzer missed his next-to-last start of the regular season because of soreness in the deltoid area of his right shoulder. He was initially scratched from the team's regular-season finale, but he wound up throwing four scoreless innings in Kansas City.

"See how I was able to respond to it and pitch at 100 percent, it's recovered fine," Scherzer said. "And, I've been good ever since."

For the second straight day, the Tigers will have a chance to clinch a second-round berth after coming up short in Game 3. They were held to just four hits in a 2-0 loss Tuesday.

With right-hander A.J. Griffin slated to start for Oakland tonight, manager Jim Leyland will run out a left-handed heavy lineup. It's the same lineup he used in Game 1 when Detroit pulled out a 3-1 win Saturday.

After sitting out the past two games, Alex Avila is back behind the plate, batting eighth in front of second baseman Omar Infante. Quintin Berry and Andy Dirks will bat second and sixth, respectively, and occupy the corner outfield spots.

The A's, meanwhile, will trot out the same lineup they used last night with Seth Smith at designated hitter and Derek Norris behind the plate. It's a lineup they will have used in three of four games.

Here's tonight's starting lineup:

DETROIT TIGERS

1. Austin Jackson, CF
 2. Quintin Berry, LF
 3. Miguel Cabrera, 3B
 4. Prince Fielder, 1B
 5. Delmon Young, DH
 6. Andy Dirks, RF
 7. Jhonny Peralta, SS
 8. Alex Avila, C
 9. Omar Infante, 2B
- Max Scherzer, RHP.

OAKLAND ATHLETICS

1. Coco Crisp, CF
 2. Stephen Drew, SS
 3. Yoenis Cespedes, LF
 4. Brandon Moss, 1B
 5. Josh Reddick, RF
 6. Josh Donaldson, 3B
 7. Seth Smith, DH
 8. Derek Norris, C
 9. Cliff Pennington, 2B
- A.J. Griffin, RHP.

Despite Game 3 loss, Detroit Tigers still among favorites to win World Series

October 11, 2012

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Less than a month ago, the Detroit Tigers were considered long shots to even make the playoffs.

Today? They're one of the favorites to win it all.

Despite the Game 3 loss, the Tigers have the second-best odds to win the World Series, with 10-to-3, according to Bovada's sports books.

As of Wednesday, only Cincinnati had better odds, with 3-to-1.

Both the Reds and Tigers were co-favorites (11-to-4) to win the title before both suffered Game 3 losses Tuesday.

Of course, of the eight playoff teams, Detroit and Cincinnati were the only clubs one win shy of claiming a berth into the Championship Series, before the books closed today.

The New York Yankees are listed behind Detroit at 4-to-1, followed by another division winner -- the Washington Nationals at 5-to-1.

As far as the American League goes, the Tigers sit at 7-to-5 odds to win the pennant, slightly better than the 8-to-5 odds New York received. The Orioles and A's, 11-to-2.

Prior to Game 3, Bovada's sports books saw Oakland as a long shot to overcome a 2-0 deficit, listing them at 25-to-1 -- worst in the AL. Today? The A's sat at 10-to-1.

Surprisingly, Oakland was favored to win Game 3 -- and tonight's game appears to be leaning towards a pick'em depending on the oddsmaker.

Tigers need to take advantage of A's starters and avoid bullpen to win series, say national analysts

October 11, 2012

By Brendan Savage / MLive.com

The Oakland A's bullpen was less-than-stellar Sunday in a 5-4 loss to the Detroit Tigers in Game 2 of the ALDS.

But if the Tigers want to win the series, they're going to have to keep the game out of the hands of the A's relievers and do some damage against Oakland's starting pitchers, according to a pair of national baseball analysts.

After dropping the first two games in Detroit, the A's climbed back into the series Tuesday night with a 2-0 victory in Oakland. Starter Brett Anderson allowed just two hits in six innings before Ryan Cook, Sean Doolittle and Grant Balfour came out of the bullpen to finish it off.

"If you're Detroit, you have to realize 'We better beat the starters because they couldn't beat Anderson and they're not hitting that bullpen,'" ESPN analyst John Kruk said on Baseball Tonight. "They're dominating the Tigers lineup."

Well, at least they did in Game 3. Not so much in Game 2, however.

During Game 2, all three of the aforementioned relievers allowed at least one run as the Tigers rallied for a 5-4 victory to sweep both games at Comerica Park.

But seeing the bullpen respond in Game 3 changed the mind of ESPN analyst Doug Glanville.

"I picked a sweep for the Tigers" after Game 2, Glanville said. "But after watching their bullpen respond after falling apart in Game 2 – they gave up runs in the seventh, eighth and ninth innings to lose in Detroit – I liked what I saw from Balfour.

"Everybody is fired up. I think they can squeeze out a Game 4 victory. Going to Oakland is a nightmare. Those fans are hard core. If you can get that momentum going it can change things."

Glanville's analysis is spot on, according to Balfour, who recorded his 19th straight save after facing Omar Infante, Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder in the ninth inning.

"We didn't get the job done the other day," Balfour said in the Oakland Tribune. "But we're back home, we feel comfortable here, and it's great pitching in front of these fans."

Detroit Tigers' Jim Leyland in favor of naming A's Bob Melvin, Orioles' Buck Showalter top AL managers

October 11, 2012

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. -- It's only happened once in the last three decades, but given the success of the Oakland Athletics and Baltimore Orioles, it could very well happen again.

Bob Melvin and Buck Showalter are considered the favorites for this year's Manager of the Year Award, and picking a clear-cut winner seems nearly impossible.

Which is why Tigers manager Jim Leyland is in favor of awarding the league's top managerial honor to both. "Not to put the cart before the horse, but I hope that Buck Showalter and Bob Melvin are Co-Managers of the Year this year," Leyland said before the Tigers tried for a three-game sweep at Oakland in the ALDS on Tuesday night.

Since the BBWAA initiated the manager's awards in 1983, the voting has only ended with a tie once. It happened in 1996 when Joe Torre and Johnny Oates shared the AL award.

"I think this would be a year there should be two guys getting the award," said Leyland, who has been voted manager of the year three times.

Showalter, in his second full season at the helm in Baltimore, led the Orioles to a 93-win season and their first playoff appearance since 1997. It was their first winning campaign in 14 years.

If the Tigers advance to the American League Championship Series, there's a chance they could face the Orioles, who are tied at one game apiece with New York.

Melvin, meanwhile, helped the A's to a 94-win season, erasing a 13-game AL West deficit and overtaking two-time reigning AL champion Texas on the season's final day.

"The job they've done all year has been remarkable," Leyland said. "They've had the best record in baseball for a long, long period of time now."

Oakland became the first team in major league history to win the division or pennant after trailing by five or more games with fewer than 10 to go.

"It's just -- it's an unbelievable job what's happened here," he said, "with what (Oakland general manager) Billy Beane and Bob Melvin have done."

Valverde, Tigers stunned by A's in ninth

Closer gives up three runs, setting stage for decisive Game 5

October 11, 2012

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Tigers stood three outs away from a return to the American League Championship Series. All the ups and downs of the season, all the times they seemed out of it, were three outs away from character building.

Now, they'll need nine more innings, many of them from Justin Verlander, before a raucous A's crowd to get there. As tough as these last two nights have been for them, they probably haven't seen anything yet.

"Yeah, well, it's baseball," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said after a three-run A's rally off Jose Valverde in the ninth inning sent the Tigers to a 4-3 loss Wednesday night. "I mean, that's why this is the greatest game of all. It looked like we were going to get it. We didn't do it. We didn't quite get the 27 outs, that's part of the game."

As a result, their AL Division Series is headed to a Game 5 on Thursday night. It's the situation they coveted coming into the series, a winner-take-all matchup with the reigning American League MVP and Cy Young Award winner on the mound. The setup, however, is nothing like what they could have anticipated.

"We're in a one-game playoff right now and anything can happen," said Max Scherzer, whose five-plus innings Wednesday night set the Tigers up to close it out in Game 4. "Granted, we have our best pitcher going tomorrow, so obviously we like where we sit, but this is a hostile place right now."

If Leyland's long-held theory holds that momentum is only as good as the next day's starting pitcher, the Tigers should feel confident. Yet after a Game 4 rally off their closer, it's hard not to feel some momentum on Oakland's side.

"Yeah, they're pressing," A's outfielder Josh Reddick said, "but they know they've got their best pitcher on the mound. It's going to be an interesting game, and we know we've got to battle and they know they've got to battle because he threw a heck of a game over there."

What had been eight stingy innings from Tigers pitchers, including five dominant ones from Scherzer, went to waste within a three-batter span in the ninth inning. The last of them, Seth Smith's two-run double, tied the game before Coco Crisp's walk-off single sent the Tigers to their second loss in as many nights.

It came together so quickly that there was hardly time to react. By the time Crisp's ground ball through the right side crept under the glove of charging right fielder Avisail Garcia, allowing Smith to dash home unchallenged, it was almost too loud to think.

"I think this is one of the toughest moments I've had in all my career," Valverde said. "It's tough, but you have to be ready for tomorrow. You have to be serious for the game."

A year after Valverde finished perfect in save chances, he has spent much of the year struggling to follow it up. He has had his share of big pitches in tough situations and come through, but after a 49-for-49 campaign last year, this season's 35-for-40 looks like a letdown.

Wednesday felt different, from what looked like undulating mechanics in his delivery -- Valverde insisted it was the same motion he has done all year -- to an arsenal that consisted almost entirely of fastballs until his final couple hitters.

Reddick's ground ball barely eluded Omar Infante's outstretched glove through the right side for a leadoff single, awakening the sellout crowd of 36,385. Once Josh Donaldson lined Valverde's next offering off the left-field fence to put runners at second and third, the crowd was on its feet.

"We were in Detroit last time and he blew me away with three fastballs," Donaldson said. "I wasn't going to let it happen again. He threw me a fastball over the heart of the plate, and I was able to get a good piece of wood on it."

Smith swung and missed at one fastball but didn't miss the next, finding the gap as both runners scored to tie the game at 3.

Valverde nearly took the game into extra innings, getting a foul popup from pinch-hitter George Kottaras and a called third strike on Cliff Pennington.

All he had to worry about was Crisp, who went from goat to hero from Game 2 to Game 3 in the series.

"It was a split-finger down and away," catcher Alex Avila said of the first pitch, "and Crisp just caught it out in front and found a hole."

With that, the plastic coating that had lined Detroit's clubhouse lockers quickly went down, and the intensity for Game 5 went up. While A's players talked about the magic they've had all through this past month, the Tigers talked about the consistent approach they've had through their challenging times all season.

For a team that didn't take over the division race until the last week and a half of the season, it might be fitting.

"You draw on the talent we have, the fact that we know we belong here and we have our best pitcher going,"

Avila said. "There's a lot games you're going to lose. You're going to lose a lot of close games. They're definitely tough, but we're professionals for a reason. You've just got to come back and get them tomorrow.

That's it.

"Yeah, it's tough. I'm upset right now. But you don't cry about it. I'm going to get ready. That was a great game."

Endurance Scherzer's only issue in Game 4

Right-hander regains form following bout with shoulder soreness

October 11, 2012

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- That's the Max Scherzer that led the American League in strikeouts for most of the summer and loomed as a second Tigers ace for teams to face in October.

He wasn't that way for as long as he would've liked, but that was an endurance question, not an arm question. His stuff, two weeks after shoulder soreness put his season in doubt, was as close to midseason form as he has been since missing his start down the stretch.

A's vs. Tigers

He has no idea whether he'll get to use it again this season. But if the Tigers can overcome their 4-3, walk-off loss to the A's in Game 4 of the American League Division Series and advance, Scherzer looks ready to team up with Justin Verlander to make Detroit a formidable threat in the AL Championship Series.

"I was able to pitch pretty well, I thought," Scherzer said. "I did a good job working my fastball to offspeed. I thought the slider, change and curveball were all really good and effective. So from where my stuff is at, it's really as good as ever."

Or as catcher Alex Avila put it, "Stuff-wise, he's good to go."

Though Tigers officials had every reason to believe in Scherzer's health after elbow and ankle injuries hampered him over the past couple weeks, they had no idea how effectively or how long he'd pitch. His fastball had been a tick under his midseason velocity since he returned from deltoid problems at the front of his shoulder.

It didn't take long to build. He fired fastballs at 92, 93 and 94 mph for a three-pitch strikeout of Stephen Drew, the second batter he faced. Once he hit 95 mph on back-to-back fastballs to Brandon Moss for an inning-ending strikeout, he was on.

With a fastball he could crank up to 96 and a slider that A's batters just couldn't hit, Scherzer rolled off 12 consecutive outs, including four swinging strikeouts in a five-batter span between the first and third innings. After Prince Fielder's mammoth home run built a 2-0 lead, Scherzer responded with a five-pitch shutdown inning. As big as it was to light up the radar gun, to quiet the Oakland crowd might have been a bigger feat, even it was temporary.

"His velocity was up in the last start he had in KC," Avila said. "Obviously, his slider's been tremendous this year. So has his changeup. The thing he didn't have in his last start, just because he hadn't pitched in a while, was the location on his fastball. When he could really spot up with his fastball today, he was setting everything else up."

His command began to waver in the fifth, but his deceptiveness remained, getting Josh Reddick to swing and miss at a slider for the second time and spotting a slider on the edge to Josh Donaldson with a full count.

Scherzer was a pitch away from striking out the side and cruising into the sixth, having put Seth Smith in an 0-2 hole. But he couldn't get Smith to offer at a fastball off the plate, running the count full, then missed again for a walk.

Another 0-2 count to Derek Norris got away from him with a bloop single to right, putting Scherzer in his first serious test. Again, Scherzer got an 0-2 count, this time finishing off Cliff Pennington with a nasty offspeed pitch down and in.

The extra pitches Scherzer had to throw, though, cost him going into the sixth.

"I was able to finish the fifth, but I could feel I was starting to get tired," Scherzer said. "I used some bullets there in the fifth inning to be able to get out of that jam, and when you're in a playoff atmosphere, you're putting so much on every single pitch. You prepare for it as much as you can, but the reality is I haven't pitched as much as I'd like. I just didn't have the same oomph in the sixth inning as I did in say the second or third."

He still should have had a leadoff out, having gotten a ground ball to first base from Coco Crisp. Fielder's error handling it put Crisp on second. Once Drew doubled him in, that was it.

"I think he wanted to face [Yoenis] Cespedes," manager Jim Leyland said, "but at this point I could see that his velocity was dropping. I didn't want him to make a mistake and have Cespedes hurt us. That's why we made the move. Max wanted Cespedes, but he was pretty much spent."

Scherzer didn't argue.

"I wanted to face one last hitter, but I understood where he was coming from," Scherzer said. "He wanted the matchup. That's his decision and I don't disagree."

Valverde must rebound from 'toughest moment'

October 11, 2012

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Jose Valverde sat on the stool in front of his locker deep within the confines of the O.co Coliseum, his head down, for what seemed like some very, long minutes on Wednesday night.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland came by, and without saying anything, tapped him on the shoulder and was gone. A's vs. Tigers

"He has my back," Valverde said as he faced the media, the stand-up guy, win or lose, that he always is. "My manager is behind me 100 percent. I've never played for anybody like him."

It was an American League Division Series-clinching situation when Valverde came on in the ninth inning to face the A's with a two-run lead. But in a blur of six batters, it was over and Oakland had the stunning Game 4 win, 4-3, forcing Game 5 on Thursday night at 9:30 p.m. ET in a game slated to be broadcast on TNT.

"This is the toughest moment of my whole career," the man called "Papa Grande" said. "It's tough. I've got to be ready for tomorrow and hope it goes our way. But to be three outs away from clinching a series, I've never been involved in anything like that. I will be here. I will be here for my team."

Valverde enjoyed his usual routine. He strode out of Detroit's bullpen in the corner beyond first-base and began his dash across the infield dirt once he crossed the foul line. At the lip of infield grass, he abruptly stopped, threw his arms up toward the heavens and walked to the mound.

Valverde's so superstitious that that's the way he's entered a game 597 times in his 10-year career.

This time he was met by an onslaught from that little Oakland team that never seems to quit. A base hit and two doubles tied the game before Valverde could even break a sweat. Two outs later, Coco Crisp launched a single to right field that sent Seth Smith charging around from second toward the plate. Avisail Garcia charged the ball and ran right by it, leaving that special white sphere on the ground as a stark metaphor for a night when a major opportunity was cast away.

"Yeah, well it's baseball," Leyland said. I mean, that's why this is the greatest game of all. It looked like we were going to get it. We didn't do it. We didn't quite get the 27 outs. You get tested all the time in this game and this is a good test. We're down to it like the Wild Card situation -- one game. It's pretty simple. I thought we played our hearts out. Tonight we just didn't close it out."

Valverde has been near perfect for the last two seasons in Detroit. Last year, he was 52-for-52 in opportunities at crunch time when the game is on the line -- 49-for-49 during the regular season and another 3-for-3 in the postseason.

That led Leyland to make this assessment about Valverde before Game 3 on Tuesday: "When you're 49-for-49, you can't do anything but go downhill a little bit."

That happened in 2012, if five blown saves in 40 opportunities is a steep decline. Valverde was letter perfect in saving Game 1 of this series. He faced the minimum of three batters, striking out two, and saved the victory for Justin Verlander. Wednesday night was the sixth time in his career he's been called upon to save a postseason game. It was the first time he's blown one.

"Valverde has been great for us and that's just the nature of it," said Verlander, who will have the weight of the series on his shoulders when he starts Game 5 on Thursday night. "Those things happen. Obviously, you don't want it to happen on a night like tonight. But it did. Turn the page and get ready for tomorrow."

That's exactly what Valverde said he intends to do. Even the Yankees' Mariano Rivera, considered the top closer in baseball history, has had his up and downs. He holds the record with 42 postseason saves, but Rivera has also blown five of them, including Game 7 of the 2001 World Series to the D-backs, and Game 4 of the 2004 AL Championship Series to the Red Sox.

Like Wednesday night, in both of those games the Yankees were on the brink of winning, but wound up losing a World Series title and a pennant. Rivera has always bounced back.

Valverde said there was nothing different about his array of pitches once he took the mound on Wednesday.

"I had everything," he said. "These guys hit it. There was nothing I could do. I just made one mistake."

When asked to pinpoint that mistake, Valverde couldn't do it. "I have no idea because I threw too many pitches," he said.

The A's, though, seemed to be sitting on his four-seamed fastball. Josh Reddick hit one for single that just eluded the dive of second baseman Omar Infante. Josh Donaldson hit another one that slammed against the left-field fence for a double, placing runners on second and third. Smith did the same on his two-RBI double to right-center. Crisp finally ripped into a splitter for the game-winner.

"He had a really good fastball," Tigers catcher Alex Avila said about Valverde. "A couple of them leaked a little toward the middle rather than nip the corner. When they got those guys on, sometimes you just try to limit the damage, but Smith got the big hit there."

The damage wasn't limited. The damage was done. Now it's on to Game 5. Will Valverde be ready?

"He's our guy and that's just the way it is," Leyland said. "I certainly feel comfortable with Jose coming in in that situation. Tonight he just didn't get the job done."

Tigers move past loss quickly to gear up for Game 5

October 11, 2012

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The sounds of celebration in the visiting clubhouse at The Coliseum, the popping of corks and the spraying of champagne were replaced by silence.

There were no cheers, no bear hugs and absolutely nobody was smiling.

It was less than 15 minutes after the A's had stunned the Tigers by scoring three runs in the bottom of the ninth inning for the 4-3 victory in Game 4 of the ALDS to tie the series at two games apiece. The most audible sound was the clanking of forks on glass plates as stunned players finished their postgame meals at the two round tables in the middle of the clubhouse.

A's vs. Tigers

The Tigers would be on their way to the American League Championship Series if closer Jose Valverde had somehow found a way to protect the 3-1 lead in the ninth. Instead, the Tigers were beaten twice on Wednesday. Once by the A's players in dramatic walk-off fashion and then by the A's clubhouse staff that had to rush the champagne out of the visiting locker room and tear down the sheets of plastic in front of their lockers.

The Tigers said all of the right things when they finally broke their silence and Valverde was the first to say them. The closer emerged from the kitchen, stood in front of his locker and answered every question from the swarm of media that had surrounded him.

Nobody had to tell Valverde what was at stake. All he had to do was look at the shard of plastic hanging above his head if needed a reminder of how close he had come to victory.

"This is tough but this series isn't over yet," Valverde said. "We will leave it here and go to the hotel. This game is over."

In the other corner of the clubhouse, Catcher Alex Avila was the next to address the hordes of media. A few feet behind him stood a bewildered Delmon Young with plastic still draped on one side of his locker like a shower curtain. Somebody had forgotten to completely rip off the plastic and take it to the storage area.

"There are no effects," Avila said. "This is baseball and we have 162 games and it's easy to forget one and go on to the next one."

Gerald Laird echoed the sentiments as he stood near Valverde's locker.

"We win and lose as a team. He's our closer and he just didn't get it done tonight," Laird said. "I know he will be ready if we hand the ball to him. There is not one guy that we blame on this team."

Third baseman Miguel Cabrera entered the scene, he playfully slapped a pair of male reporters on their rear ends and smirked. It appeared the Triple Crown winner was already over the loss and ready for Thursday's finale. But the mood in the clubhouse took a serious turn and tension surfaced when veteran Octavio Dotel told Cabrera to address the media because it was his job as the leader of the team.

Cabrera turned down all interview requests and sat at one of the tables in his dress clothes with his arms crossed. Dotel, still in uniform, sat at the other table and shook his head.

In the interview room, Tigers manager Jim Leyland talked about the beauty of baseball.

"Well, it's baseball. I mean, that's why this is the greatest game of all," Leyland said. "It looked like we were going to get it. We didn't do it. We didn't quite get the 27 outs, that's part of the game."

Tigers ace Justin Verlander, who is scheduled to start Game 5 against Oakland rookie Jarrod Parker, also took the podium. He carried himself the way you think a Cy Young Award winner and AL MVP would.

"I'm going to try to treat it like another start, kind of like the last start, as much as I can. Obviously it's a big game for us. But like I said, this team's been resilient and we allowed ourselves to be in this position.

As for Valverde, he admitted he will have a hard time sleeping Wednesday night but said he will be ready if called upon in Game 5. He had one last reminder of the forgettable night on his way out of the clubhouse, a pile of plastic near the exit door.

"If I have it tomorrow, I'll be in the game. It doesn't matter what happened," Valverde said. "I have the confidence of my team. I have a lot of big guys here -- myself, Cabrera, Prince [Fielder], all these guys, Octavio, [Joaquin] Benoit. I'll be in the game tomorrow 100 percent. The A's will do the most they can, and my team will do the most it can."

Verlander sticking to plan in ALDS finale

October 11, 2012

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- With right-hander Justin Verlander on the mound in a "do or die" Game 5 of their American League Division Series against the A's at 9:30 ET Thursday night on TNT, the Tigers are pretty well situated. The reigning AL Cy Young Award winner and Most Valuable Player was dominant in a 3-1 victory in Game 1 on Saturday night at Comerica Park, and he's the pitcher the Tigers certainly would like to have on the mound a night after having a series-clinching win slip through their fingers. It will be a rematch against Oakland rookie right-hander Jarrod Parker.

"I'm going to try to treat it like just another start, kind of like the last start, as much as I can," Verlander said after the A's came back to stun Tigers closer Jose Valverde with three runs in the ninth to win Game 4 of the best-of-five series, 4-3. "Obviously, it's a big game for us. This team has been resilient and we allowed ourselves to be in this position.

A's vs. Tigers

"We won the first two games at home. You know it's not easy to play here. We put ourselves in position where we need to win just one. Whatever game that is it doesn't matter. So hopefully it's the fifth one."

Verlander set the Tigers off on the right paw by whiffing 11 hitters in Game 1, matching the mark he set in a victory over the Yankees in Game 3 of the ALDS a year ago. The Tigers also were pressed to win that series in five games.

Verlander is the only Major Leaguer to record double-digit strikeouts in a postseason game since Tim Lincecum whiffed 10 Rangers in Game 5 of the 2010 World Series, helping the Giants close out their first world championship since 1954.

"They're all important, but you have to win when Justin's on the mound. That's the bottom line," said Alex Avila, the Tigers catcher who homered in Game 1.

A's center fielder Coco Crisp opened that game with a homer off Verlander, who seemed beatable in the early going, but the A's stranded five baserunners during the first five innings.

A's manager Bob Melvin used the tactic of making Verlander work deep into counts. He tossed 90 pitches through five innings.

"There's more than one way to try to beat a good starting pitcher," Melvin said. "You don't always have to beat him. If you can wear him down, again, run the pitch count up, and try to get him out of the game sooner than later, stay with him. That has a little bit of effect, too. Trying to get a starter early in the game before he gets in his rhythm is another way. You don't necessarily have to beat that particular starter to win a game."

In the end, the tactic didn't lead to a win. Verlander grew stronger as the game went on. He struck out five consecutive Oakland batters -- all three in the sixth and the first two in the seventh -- leaving after 121 pitches with only three hits allowed.

"There are a lot of teams that try to do that with him," Melvin said about trying to work the count on Verlander.

"The problem is that he'll throw 130 pitches in a game. Even if you get his pitch count up there, it doesn't mean he's going to come out of the game at 100 or 105 pitches. He's a tough customer."

Verlander has been on one of his patented runs. He gave up two earned runs over 28 innings in his final four starts of the season, including six scoreless innings on five hits with five strikeouts on Sept. 19 against the A's at Comerica Park. He won AL Pitcher of the Month honors for September as a result, and he played no small role in Detroit's second consecutive AL Central title.

That streak is now three earned runs over 35 innings in his last five starts, heading into Thursday night.

Verlander, though, has no intention of stopping there. The Tigers lost the AL Championship Series in six games to the Rangers in 2011, and there is certainly a sense of unfinished business.

"I want to win a World Series. I don't care what I do," Verlander said. "I think, obviously, I want to be a big part if we do win the World Series, but I don't care if I give up five if we score six and win. Who cares? If we score two, I'd like to give up zero."

In Game 1, the Tigers scored three and Verlander allowed one. Close enough. Game 5 beckons.

"Obviously, it's win or go home," Verlander said. "But I'm not going to try to do anything more than I've done all year."

It's up to Verlander now

October 11, 2012

By Steve Kornacki / FOXSportsDetroit.com

Justin Verlander sat in the Tigers dugout during the ninth inning Wednesday night in Oakland, hands in his jacket pockets and a look of anticipation on his face.

He most likely was thinking about the celebration about to erupt at the Oakland Coliseum and starting the American League Championship Series opener on Saturday.

Instead, after watching closer Jose Valverde surrender three runs in the ninth inning, Verlander will be required to be the stopper in Thursday night's winner-take-all Game 5.

"Obviously, it's win or go home," Verlander said after the Athletics rallied for a 4-3 victory, evening the AL Division Series at two games apiece.

With the way the Detroit bullpen has caved recently, it makes you wonder if Verlander must pitch his first postseason complete game to advance the Tigers.

"We've got our best pitcher going, so I like where we sit," Game 4 starter Max Scherzer said. "I like where we sit, but this is a hostile place right now."

Verlander is capable of taking a crowd out of the game. He's the defending league MVP and Cy Young Award winner, and was 17-8 with a 2.64 ERA and a league-leading 239 strikeouts this season.

"It's obviously a big game for us," Verlander said. "But, like I said, this team's been resilient. We've put ourselves in a position where we have to win just one."

The Tigers were three games down to the Chicago White Sox with 12 to play and ended up winning the Central Division by three games.

"We beat the White Sox when we had to beat them," Verlander noted.

Verlander beat the A's, 3-1, in Game 1 at Detroit. He went seven innings, allowing one run on three hits and striking out 11. The four walks were the lone chink in his armor.

Oakland has batted .214 against Verlander over his career, and he's posted a 2.38 ERA against the A's.

He has the number of most of their hitters — with the exception of Game 4 hero Coco Crisp, who's batting .346 against him. Cliff Pennington (.067), Josh Reddick (.167), Smith (.111) and Josh Donaldson (.125) have been sent back to dugout empty-handed by Verlander on a regular basis.

The A's are sending out another rookie, Jarrod Parker (13-8, 3.47), who allowed three runs (two earned) in 6 1/3 innings in his Game 1 loss. Alex Avila hit a homer, and Quintin Berry had two hits against the right-hander. Parker has never pitched in a game like this.

Verlander beat the Rangers last year with Detroit facing elimination in the ALCS, and this will be his 10th postseason start, including a pair in the World Series.

If you must have your back to wall, there isn't a better pitcher to have there with you than Justin Brooks Verlander.

Tigers turn to Verlander in Game 5

October 11, 2012

By Phil Taylor / SI.com

OAKLAND -- The insurance policy sat on a metal folding chair in the corner of the Detroit Tigers' quiet clubhouse on Wednesday night. The jersey in the nearby stall had "Verlander 35" on the back of it, because that's the name and policy number of the Tigers' insurance, their piece of the rock. Maybe you prefer Allstate, but the Tigers prefer to be in the good hands of Justin Verlander.

Detroit's clubhouse was quiet but not a funereal after the Oakland A's gut-punched them with a three-run ninth inning that gave the crazy-ridiculous-magical A's a 4-3 victory, tied the best-of-five AL Division Series at 2-2 and shoved the corks back in the Tigers' champagne bottles. Detroit's postgame mood wasn't as dark as it could have been, and that was surely in part because the Tigers know they have their ace, Verlander, the Game 1 winning pitcher, to start Game 5 against Oakland rookie Jarrod Parker and turn Wednesday's devastation into just a meaningless memory.

Detroit entered the ninth on Wednesday with previously lights-out closer Jose Valverde on the mound and visions of a few days of rest before the AL Championship Series dancing in their heads. But before they knew it, Josh Reddick had singled, Josh Donaldson and Seth Smith had followed with doubles to tie the game, and Coco Crisp had singled in the game-winner. Suddenly here were the good-time A's jumping around again with another walk-off win, and Oakland fans happily turning the stands into a sea of waving gold towels while watching the ritual that has become as common as the seventh-inning stretch for this remarkable, dramatic team -- Reddick mashing another celebratory shaving cream pie in the face of the latest hero, this time Crisp. Being so close to a series victory only to have it disappear with another abracadabra A's comeback might have been enough to permanently rattle most teams, but that's where the insurance policy comes in. The Tigers came to Oakland with a 2-0 lead in the series and the knowledge that even if the worst happened and the A's did exactly what the A's have done, they would have Verlander, perhaps the best pitcher in baseball, the league leader in strikeouts, innings pitched and complete games, to restore some sanity to the series. "You never want it to get to that point, and all the rest of us still have to do our jobs," said catcher Alex Avila, "but that's about the best security blanket you could ask for."

And so there was the Tigers' human insurance policy, looking carefree and confident in the clubhouse after the game. Verlander wore a Tigers hoodie, shorts and sandals as he sat in front of his stall with his legs crossed, looking utterly stress-free. He politely waved off a few reporters who approached him, telling them he would be headed to the interview room to for a short press conference a bit later. While Valverde answered questions about his ninth-inning meltdown, Verlander got up and walked past the cluster of reporters surrounding the closer without even looking over, as if unfazed by the night's failure.

He grabbed a bottle of water, then headed out of the clubhouse and down the hallway toward the interview room, passing Smith and Crisp on the way and seemingly not even noticing them, as calm and carefree as if he was walking down the street to the corner store. When he sat down at the podium table, the first question was about whether the Tigers' near-miss had made him angrier, more determined to right things in Game 5. "No," he said. "Obviously that was a tough one. But it's not the first time we've lost like that, just on a bigger stage." But what about the responsibility of carrying your teammates' hopes on your shoulders? I feel like it's about the same as the responsibility in Game 1," he said. "I'm not going to change my mentality. I'm not going to try to do anything more than what I've done all year." If the Tigers needed someone or something to hearten them -- and they clearly did -- Verlander's confidence should do the trick. It's easier to be confident, of course, when you own a Cy Young award from 2011 and a 17-8 record, but Verlander hasn't exactly been a dominant postseason pitcher, with a 4.96 ERA and 1.47 WHIP in nine playoff starts. Game 5 has individual meaning for him -- it's his chance to build his resume as big-game, clutch pitcher.

In Game 1, Verlander gave up a leadoff homer to Crisp and little else, going seven innings, allowing three hits and striking out seven. There's no telling whether that will be enough to finally drive a stake through the heart of the A's, but you got the feeling that Verlander believes that he's immune to whatever cosmic forces are driving Oakland's amazing run. Everything about his demeanor Wednesday seemed to say, "Don't worry guys, I got this."

"I've got faith in our guys and we'll go out there and see what happens," Verlander said. His guys have even more faith in him. Can a great pitcher overcome a team that has become a great story? Can a 95 mph fastball cut through all that good A's karma? We will have our answers soon enough. But here's something to keep in mind: When you looked closely at Verlander as he went about his postgame business on Wednesday night, you could see just a hint of a smile.

ALDS Tigers-A's Game 5 preview: Justin Verlander vs. Jarrod Parker

October 11, 2012

By Dayn Perry / CBSSports.com

After a white-knuckled Game 4 comes ... Game 5.

One game in Oakland will determine whether the Tigers or A's will advance to the ALCS. Taking up the Detroit cause will be the great Justin Verlander (17-8 2.64), and going for the A's will be Jarrod Parker (13-8, 3.47).

It's a fool's errand to make predictions regarding anything involving the 2012 A's, but here's a best guess at how Thursday's action will unfold ...

Verlander vs. A's

He's Justin Verlander, and he's almost certainly the best pitcher in baseball. In Game 1 against the A's, Verlander worked 7.0 innings and allowed only one run on three hits. He also struck out 11 and walked four. So he was fairly dominant, per usual.

In 2012 (and not counting Game 1), Verlander has an ERA of 0.69 in two starts against the A's. In a somewhat related matter, current Oakland hitters for their careers have hit a punchless .167/.240/.259 in 122 plate appearances against Verlander. Coco Crisp has touched him for an OPS of .885, but it's been across a sample of just 27 PAs.

Considering how much trouble the A's have had making contact this series (39 whiffs in four games), Verlander, not surprisingly, poses a challenge.

Parker vs. Tigers

Like Verlander, Parker also started Game 1 of the ALDS, but unlike Verlander he was "merely" solid: 6 1/3 IP, 3 R, 7 H, 5 K, 1 BB. In the regular season, Parker faced the Tigers only one time, and in that start he limited them to two runs on six hits in 5 2/3 innings. Detroit hitters have combined for a career slash line of .262/.340/.381 in 47 plate appearances.

Also worth noting: Parker's ERA at home this season is almost two full runs lower than his ERA on the road.

Wednesday, October 10, 2012

Team	Player	Transaction
Chicago White Sox	Ray Olmedo	Outrighted to Minors
Toronto Blue Jays	Jesse Litsch	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Toronto Blue Jays	Jesse Litsch	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Right shoulder tendinitis)

Tuesday, October 9, 2012

Team	Player	Transaction
Boston Red Sox	Jason Repko	Declared Free Agency
Cleveland Indians	Luke Carlin	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Cleveland Indians	Shelley Duncan	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Toronto Blue Jays	Robert Coello	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Right elbow inflammation)
Toronto Blue Jays	Jim Hoey	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Toronto Blue Jays	Robert Coello	Outrighted to Minors
Toronto Blue Jays	Robert Coello	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent

Monday, October 8, 2012

Team	Player	Transaction
New York Yankees	Dellin Betances	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Right shoulder injury)
New York Yankees	Cory Wade	Designated for Assignment
Pittsburgh Pirates	Doug Slaten	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
San Diego Padres	Ross Ohlendorf	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Tampa Bay Rays	Brooks Conrad	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Toronto Blue Jays	Shawn Hill	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent