



Rays' bats silent in loss to Angels

By Joe Smith, Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Evan Longoria found a silver lining in a rough week for the Rays in which he admits, "We haven't played well at all."

"We can only go up," Longoria said. "We can only get better."

The Rays will need to avenge another loss, 2-0 to the Angels on Thursday in front of 15,741 at Tropicana Field. They got a solid five-inning spot start from rookie Jake Odorizzi. But they mustered just three hits and squandered another bases-loaded opportunity for their fourth loss in their past five games. It marked the first series loss at home since June 13-16.

"It's very frustrating," manager Joe Maddon said. "This whole day reeked of frustration."

The Rays (75-57) quietly put on their college football jerseys Thursday afternoon before heading to Oakland to kick off a telling 10-game West Coast trip they hope starts another memorable September run. They will face an A's team that, thanks to a walkoff loss Thursday to the Tigers, is still a half-game behind Tampa Bay for the top spot in the AL wild-card chase.

But the Rays trail the East-leading Red Sox by 21/2 games — after the Orioles beat them 3-2 on Thursday night — wanting to narrow the gap before hosting them Sept. 14-16.

"We still have a lead in the wild card and are still within close striking distance of Boston with a month of baseball to play. What more can you ask for?" Longoria said.

"We definitely haven't been playing anywhere near where we're capable of. I think we just go into the road trip with the hope we can figure it out sooner rather than later and get into a nice rhythm. Usually, the teams that end up going the furthest are the ones that get hot close to the end. But we've got to stay positive."

One positive Thursday was Odorizzi, who pitched with added velocity and confidence in his sixth big-league start and allowed just one run over five innings. "He pitched really, really well," Maddon said.

The Rays didn't give Odorizzi any support, going 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position. They had Angels lefty Jason Vargas on the ropes in the first inning, loading the bases with one out. But Sean Rodriguez popped out and Yunel Escobar flied out.

"It was kind of deflating," Maddon said. "And I felt that among the group. I could feel the guys were just not quite right today."

That timely hitting has been lacking for the Rays this month. They are hitting .174 with runners in scoring position in their 13 August losses, including stranding the bases loaded four times this series. The Rays had other opportunities Thursday. In the sixth, Ben Zobrist reached second with no outs. And in the ninth, the Rays put runners on second and third with one out.

It has been a group effort. Longoria and Wil Myers combined to go 0-for-19 in the series, and the starting Nos. 5-9 hitters on Thursday went 1-for-14.

"I think all of us are one pitch away from really turning the corner," Myers said.

Longoria said they need a couple of hitters doing it at the same time, a "spark to get that fire started again." He believes the Rays have the potential for "one or two more good runs where we can really put ourselves where we want to be."

"I'm just looking forward to getting on the road," Longoria said, "and hopefully changing our luck."

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Rays' Odorizzi fares well in spot start

By Joe Smith, Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — RHP **Jake Odorizzi's** latest stint with the Rays is likely a short one with the rookie expected to get sent back down to Triple-A Durham after Thursday's spot start.

But after another solid outing, one run over five innings in a 2-0 loss to the Angels, Odorizzi said he felt a lot different than his first three callups.

"I'm pitching with more confidence and have a better feel for my stuff," he said. "I know it's not like the first time up, when you make your first start for a new team. The nerves are taken care of now. It's a lot easier after your first time up. Now it's just strictly business."

Odorizzi, 23, acquired from Kansas City in the offseason trade involving RF **Wil Myers**, carried the momentum from his last start for the Rays — one run over 5 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings June 18 in Boston — and said his velocity kicked up a little in his past few outings for Durham.

"I feel like I'm getting stronger right now," Odorizzi said.

Manager **Joe Maddon** noticed that "livelier" fastball Thursday as well as a sharp slider. Odorizzi scattered four hits and walked two, saying he "nibbled" more than he needed to with two strikes. But Odorizzi wiggled out of two jams with double plays and his defense playing well behind him.

Odorizzi finished the fifth inning at 83 pitches, and Maddon said he didn't feel any need to push him.

"He was outstanding," Maddon said. "He's got a good look."

WIL POWER: Though Myers is slumping, hitless in past 20 at-bats, he was encouraged after a career-high three walks. "It was probably my best day in a week," he said. "I felt my hands working a lot better (Thursday). Even though I did have the strikeout, I took some swings at balls, so I really could see the light at the end of the tunnel."

GETTING HOT: OF **Matt Joyce** is feeling good at the plate, batting .370 (20-for-54) in August with 11 of his 20 hits going for extra bases. Joyce pinch-hit in the ninth Thursday, popping out.

"When you have some things go your way and you get some hits, you're going to feel a lot more comfortable and be able to relax a little bit more," Joyce said. "I think the biggest thing I've tried to focus on was controlling the strike zone and ... trying not to get away from my game."

For Joyce, that meant not forcing himself to hit to the opposite field. He's also not missing his pitch.

"When I'm not going well, I'm getting pitches in the strike zone and I'll foul it off or pop it up," Joyce said. "But when you're going well, you're getting those pitches to hit and you're hitting it hard somewhere."

Getting started: LHP **David Price** believes the first game of every series is important as a "tone-setter." And Price's start tonight opening a three-game set against a surging A's team that's chasing the Rays in the wild-card standings gives it even more meaning.

"If we can go and handle business and win those games, those are very big games," Price said.

ON TRACK: LHP **Matt Moore** (elbow soreness) allowed four runs and eight hits over four innings in a rehab start for Durham on Thursday. It was supposed to be the last step before Moore, out since July 29, returns Tuesday.

MINOR MATTERS: DH **Luke Scott** (back spasms) went 1-for-4 with a single, run scored and walk as the DH for Durham in the second of a three-game rehab assignment at Durham. OF **Delmon Young** went 2-for-6 with two singles and a run scored in his sixth game at Double-A Montgomery. Both are set to join the Rays on Sunday. ... Class A Bowling Green clinched its third straight trip to the Midwest League postseason Wednesday night.

Big tab: As part of their "American Legion Week," the Rays picked up the \$1,225.75 bill on Wednesday night for beer and bar sausages for American Legion Hall Post 152 in Town 'N Country.

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Rays: College attire; wine on trip; AL wild card standings

By Joe Smith, Times Staff Writer

Rays at A's

When/where: 10:07 tonight; O.co Coliseum, Oakland, Calif.

TV/radio: Sun Sports; 620-AM (680-AM Spanish)

Probable pitchers:

Rays: LH David Price (8-5, 3.28)

A's: RH Jarrod Parker (10-6, 3.58)

On Price: Has won five decisions in a row spanning eight starts, going 5-0 with a 2.35 ERA. Is 2-1 with a 3.66 ERA over six starts against the A's, including 1-1 with a 3.71 ERA over four in Oakland.

On Parker: Has won his past four decisions, including allowing one run over eight innings at Baltimore on Saturday. Is 0-2 with a 3.44 ERA in three starts against Tampa Bay.

Key matchups

Rays vs. Parker

Matt Joyce 2-for-9, HR

Evan Longoria 2-for-6

Ben Zobrist 3-for-9, HR

A's vs. Price

Alberto Callaspo 6-for-15

Jed Lowrie 4-for-16

Kurt Suzuki 2-for-11

On deck

Saturday: at A's, 9:07, no TV. Rays — RH Alex Cobb (8-2, 2.87); A's — RH Sonny Gray (1-2, 3.18)

Sunday: at A's, 4:07, Sun Sports. Rays — RH Roberto Hernandez (6-13, 4.95); A's — RH A.J. Griffin (11-9, 3.94)

Monday: at Angels, 9:05, Sun Sports. Rays — TBA; Angels — TBA

Rays disabled list

- DH **Luke Scott**, back spasms, 15-day, eligible Aug. 30
- OF **Brandon Guyer**, broken finger, 15-day, eligible Aug. 17
- LHP **Matt Moore**, elbow soreness, 15-day, eligible Aug. 13
- RHP **Jesse Crain**, shoulder strain, 60-day, eligible Aug. 29
- RHP **Jeff Niemann**, shoulder surgery, 60-day, out for the season
- RHP **Juan Carlos Oviedo**, elbow surgery, 60-day, out until September

Salute your school

LHP **David Price** said Vanderbilt was "pumped" after seeing him wear the full Commodores football uniform, including helmet, during Wednesday's bullpen session. "Coach (**James Franklin**) was really happy," said Price, who also wore the full uniform on the flight to Oakland. Home equipment clubhouse manager **Chris Westmoreland** (far left) wore Florida gear while RHP **Fernando Rodney** (left) sported a Gator jersey and orange shoes. RF **Wil Myers** wore South Carolina, where he committed out of high school. 1B **James Loney** sported his hometown Houston. Hitting coach **Derek Shelton** (Southern Illinois) and manager **Joe Maddon** (Lafayette) also donned jerseys. "It's not the exact jersey that I wore in 1972," said Maddon, a quarterback for the Leopards. "But it's pretty close."

Quote of the day

"I've got two really good bottles of wine for the trip, and it's absolutely necessary right now."

Manager **Joe Maddon** on starting a 10-game West Coast trip after Thursday's "frustrating" 2-0 loss to the Angels

AL wild card

Team W-L Pct. GB

Rays 75-57 .568—

A's 75-58 .564—

Indians* 71-61 .538 3½

Orioles* 70-61 .534 4

Yankees 70-63 .526 5

* Late game not included

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Rays-A's preview

By Joe Smith, Times Staff Writer

.Up next

at A's

Tonight through Sunday

What's new: The A's (75-58) are coming off a walkoff loss to the Tigers on Thursday. But they took three of four from the Central leaders (after losing two of three at Baltimore) and are only a half-game behind the Rays for the top wild-card spot. Oakland recently got opening day starter RHP Brett Anderson (stress fracture in his right foot) back, and ace RHP Bartolo Colon (groin) returned Thursday. 3B Josh Donaldson (.294, 19 homers, 77 RBIs) is having a good year with LF Yoenis Cespedes (20 homers) and OF/1B Brandon Moss (25) providing power. RHP Grant Balfour gave up four in the ninth Thursday but has converted 33 of 35 save chances.

Key stat: Moss hit four home runs during the four-game series against the Tigers and already has surpassed his career high (set last season) by four.

Connections: Balfour, C Stephen Vogt and injured C John Jaso are former Rays. A's bullpen coach Darren Bush, 39, was born and raised in Dunedin. Rays OF David DeJesus and first-base coach George Hendrick are former A's.

Series history: The Rays swept a three-game series at the Trop April 19-21. The A's lead overall 86-55, including 47-21 in Oakland.

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Rays' bats silent again in 2-0 loss to Angels

By Erik Eklund, Tribune Staff

ST PETERSBURG — The Rays are set to hit the September stretch run, but are stumbling to get to the starting line.

Tampa Bay dropped the rubber game of a three-game set against the Los Angeles Angels, suffering a 2-0 loss in front of 15,741 for Thursday's get-away day matinee. Jake Odorizzi (0-1) did an admirable job in a spot start, allowing just one run on four hits in five innings of work, but the Rays' offense managed just two hits, only one after the first inning.

Tampa Bay (75-57) has now lost four of the past five games and head to Oakland for an important three-game weekend series.

The three-game series loss for the Rays is the first at Tropicana Field since losing three of four to Kansas City on June 13 to 16, snapping a streak of 10 consecutive home series unbeaten streak.

The Rays had a chance to break through against Jason Vargas in the bottom of the first when Desmond Jennings led off the game by drilling a double to the top of the wall in left-center field - narrowly missing a home run - and Ben Zobrist was hit by a pitch to put the first two runners on base. After Evan Longoria bounced into a fielder's choice, Wil Myers walked to load the bases with one out. But Sean Rodriguez popped up to third and Yunel Escobar flew out to center to end the threat.

From there Vargas was in control of the Rays offense retiring 12 of the next 13 batters he faced. The Angels offense, meanwhile, was able to stake Vargas to a two-run lead, the first coming courtesy of a two-out single by Luis Jimenez off Odorizzi in the second and a two-out base hit by Kole Calhoun off Alex Torres in the top of the sixth.

Tampa Bay finally mounted another offensive threat in the bottom of the sixth when Zobrist led off with an infield single and advanced to second on a throwing error by Jimenez. But Longoria struck out, Myers walked before Rodriguez struck out and Escobar flew out to right to end the inning.

Failing to produce offensively in key situations with runners in scoring position has been a factor in the recent lack of success for Tampa Bay's offense. That was on display once again as the Ray's 3-4-5-6 hitters went a combined 1-for-12 Thursday against the Angels, including 0-for-6 with a pair of walks with runners in scoring position.

Tampa Bay tried to rally in the ninth after Escobar doubled following a lead-off walk by Myers to put runners on second and third with one out, but Kelly Johnson fouled out to the third base side and pinch-hitter David DeJesus flew out to the warning track in right field to end the game.

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Rays notes: Price eager to help set tone

By Erik Eklundsson, Tribune Staff

ST. PETERSBURG — With the Rays in a bit of slump this week, they will turn to ace David Price to help stop the slide.

Tampa Bay has lost four of five heading into a 10-game trip to the West Coast, with the first stop in Oakland to face the team which sits one-half game behind the Rays in the wild-card standings.

Tampa Bay bumped back Price's scheduled start Thursday one day in order to set up the rotation to allow Price to start the series against Oakland, and potentially the first of a three-game series against Boston when the Rays return home Sept. 10.

Since Price returned from a strained triceps muscle that landed him on the disabled list, the reigning Cy Young Award winner has posted a 7-1 record with a 1.97 ERA, issuing only six walks in 82½ innings.

Getting the ball in the first game of a series is a moment Price relishes.

"It's always big. The first game of every series is always a tone setter," Price said. "Whenever you are playing a three-game set, that first game is huge, it takes a lot of pressure off of everybody. You obviously want to be able to win a series and if you can do that on the first two days you can think about a sweep, but winning that first game of a three-game set is very big."

Strong spot start

RHP Jake Odorizzi gave the Rays what they needed Thursday, pitching five solid innings in his first game with the club since a start at Fenway Park on June 18.

One of the pieces acquired in the trade with Kansas City during the offseason, the 23-year-old made his fourth start of the season and allowed just one run on four hits but took the loss.

"It could have been a little better but effective with what I got done," Odorizzi said of his performance. "Overall it went well. I got out of some jams and the defense played awesome behind me. You can't be mad when something like that happens."

Manager Joe Maddon said Odorizzi provided exactly what was needed.

"We were in position to win (and) give Jake Odorizzi credit, he pitched really, really well," Maddon said. "To keep them to two runs is really important on our part. We normally win a game like that, especially at home. I was pleased with the pitching."

Moore rehabs

LHP Matt Moore, out for the past month with elbow soreness, made a rehab start for Triple-A Durham on Thursday against Gwinnett in his final step before returning to the rotation.

Moore allowed three runs on three hits in a 19-pitch first inning and gave up at least a hit in every inning he pitched. His night ended after four innings and 74 pitches, allowing four runs on eight hits, walking two and striking out a pair.

Maddon said Moore will join the team in Oakland.

Before the injury landed him on the disabled list July 31, Moore posted a 14-3 record with a 3.41 ERA in 121½ innings. He is scheduled to start Tuesday's game in Anaheim against the Angels.

College road trip

The theme for the extended road trip saw members of the Rays' traveling party wear the jersey or shirt of a college football team in recognition of the season getting underway.

After the game, Maddon was wearing a No. 12 Lafayette jersey of his alma mater.

"The folks up at Lafayette sent it down," Maddon said.

"It's not the exact jersey that I wore in 1972, but it's pretty close."

RHP Fernando Rodney arrived at the clubhouse wearing a University of Florida jersey along with matching orange tennis shoes, while equipment manager Chris Westmoreland had a full Florida uniform.

Price, who attended Vanderbilt, showed off his full Commodore football garb during a bullpen session Wednesday complete with the helmet, which did not go unnoticed by the school.

"Coach (James) Franklin was really happy. He was pumped up," Price said. "This is a big time for Vanderbilt football right now. Everybody is very excited for it and the job that coach Franklin has done out there. They are really making it a place where people want to go.

"They had a top-20 recruiting class and that doesn't really happen too often, so it's good to see how it's turning around."

Need to know

Single-A Bowling Green clinched its third consecutive playoff berth Wednesday night. Game 1 against either Fort Wayne or South Bend is Wednesday. ... Former "American Idol" winner Scotty McCreery threw out the ceremonial first pitch, which coincided with a donation by the country music artist of \$5,000 to the Rays Baseball Foundation. ... The Rays were shut out for the fourth time at home this season. ... After starting the season 23-11 against left-handed pitchers, Tampa Bay is 2-9 in the past 11.

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Fennelly: Rays' Myers not alone during slump

By Martin Fennelly, Tribune Staff

ST. PETERSBURG — You have to walk before you can crawl, and he did that three times Thursday afternoon, a career-high three bases on balls.

But, again, there were no hits. That's 20 consecutive at-bats without one for Wil Myers.

"I feel better," Myers said. "Today was probably my best day in a week. I felt my hands working better today. Even though I had the strikeout, I took some good swings at balls. So, really, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel."

But it's still a tunnel — the first major struggles of what should be Myers' major career. It now coincides with a serious Rays slump, four losses in five games after a limp 2-0 defeat to the Angels at Tropicana Field, the last thing this club needed as it embarked on a 10-game left-coast swing, with the first-place Red Sox in when the Rays return home.

Right now, the Thrill is gone. It's not about Myers' smashing major-league splash, all those hits, homers and RBIs in just 59 games, the tousle-haired wonder who, if he didn't lift the Rays up single-handed, at least did it barehanded. Right now, he's coming to grips with failure. There's a little less AL Rookie of the Year chatter about him.

This is a slump, and September is coming, Myers' first September in the majors.

"It's been real tough," Myers said. "Not being able to contribute to the team has been the biggest part. When I struggled before, I felt like I was running the bases well ... playing good defense. I haven't really been on base, so I can't do anything."

In his past 12 games, Myers is 5-for-43 (.116) with no extra-base hits and 16 strikeouts. Since Aug. 10, he is batting .145. Myers is still at .286 overall, but he has been flailing of late, looking bad, looking lost. Pitchers are catching up to him. It isn't easy, as if it ever was.

It's time we remember Myers has played just those 59 games in the majors, or that he doesn't turn 23 until December.

It's time we remember that not everyone is the Angels' Mike Trout (even Trout had 40 games in the majors before his astounding 2012 and now astounding 2013).

Myers isn't alone. Evan Longoria, after showing signs of life, is now 0-for-15 in his past four games. Desmond Jennings just snapped an 0-for-18 streak and is just 3-for-29 since coming off the disabled list. James Loney is hitting just .230, with no extra-base hits ... in August.

But Wil Myers is heading into September, his first in the majors.

"I think that first slump in the major leagues is probably the hardest," Rays outfielder Matt Joyce said. "You've had a little success, and then you hit a bump and it kind of brings you back to earth. I told him (Wednesday), 'I can't wait to see you in September,' because I've just got a feeling he's going to do some things that are going to wow some people."

"He's going to come out of it," Longoria said. "I don't doubt that he has the confidence to do it."

I don't see a crisis of confidence, either, because Myers oozes confidence. It's there even now.

"Yeah, honestly, all of us are one pitch away from turning the corner," Myers said. "You know, you go through those in baseball, it's just one of those things. One pitch away, like I said, from really getting going again."

I'd still take him over even Dodgers rookie Yasiel Puig, a shooting star who keeps getting in his own way, as he was yanked from a game Wednesday for nonchalance.

That's not Myers.

But this is new territory.

It's not about accolades at the moment, or his major-league debut at Fenway Park, or his first homer, no less than a grand slam at Yankee Stadium off CC Sabathia. It's not about Myers' first Trop at-bat — another homer.

It's about Wonder Boy fighting it a little.

"I did like the walks," Rays manager Joe Maddon said of Myers' Thursday. "When you're walking, you're hitting. Normally the first sign before somebody starts getting back to normal."

We have no idea how the Rays will emerge from this western swing. The last one was written in blood. We have no idea how Myers will come out on the other side, either.

"I can kind of guess what it's going to be like, going down the stretch in a pennant race, you got to leave it all on the line," Myers said. "I'm excited about it, to be honest. I'm ready to get going."

Away we go.

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Clearwater paramedic honored for helping Rays pitcher

By Tampa Tribune Staff

A Clearwater firefighter-paramedic was honored Wednesday at Tropicana Field for helping Tampa Bay Rays pitcher Alex Cobb when he was struck in the head with a line drive.

Steve Colbert, who has worked for the City of Clearwater since 1994, received the Liberty Mutual Firemark Award For Heroism before the Rays played the Los Angeles Angels at Tropicana Field. He also got to spend time with Cobb.

Colbert was working off-duty with the St. Anthony's medical team on June 15 when Cobb was struck in the head by a line drive off the bat of Royals first baseman Eric Hosmer.

Colbert rushed to the mound to give aid to Cobb as he lay on the field.

"As a direct result of Steve's actions, authority and ability to remain calm in those very tense moments, the medical team was able to effectively mobilize and prepare Alex for transport to the hospital," representatives of Liberty Mutual said.

Colbert, who is assigned to Station 46 on the beach, will be considered as one of two 2013 national Firemark Award winner who will each received \$10,000 for their fire departments.

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Rays have chances, but take shutout vs. Angels

By Bill Chastain, MLB.com

ST. PETERSBURG -- Jason Vargas delivered a major mood kill to the 15,741 Rays fans attending Thursday's matinee at Tropicana Field.

The Angels' left-hander held the Rays to no runs on two hits through seven innings to lead a 2-0 win, handing the Rays their first home series loss since June 13-16 vs. the Royals -- a stretch covering 10 series. The Rays have lost four of their last five games after winning eight of their previous 10.

"Frustrating is a great word for today," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "The whole day reeked of frustration."

Tampa Bay (75-57) began the season on a 21-19 roll against left-handed starters, but Vargas' win put the Rays at 2-9 since then.

Vargas is no stranger to success at Tropicana Field. In his previous start in the building on July 21, 2012, he held the Rays to one run in six innings to pick up the win for the Mariners.

Some of Maddon's frustration stemmed from the first inning, when the Rays loaded the bases with one out and came away empty-handed.

After the first inning, "[Vargas] settled in and pitched great," Maddon said. "He had us chasing all day. ... Early on we were kind of on him. And then all of a sudden we started chasing the changeup away. We did not attempt to use the opposite side of the field, we just kept trying to pull the ball or do too much with it, and that's exactly what he wants. And so we kind of played into his hand a bit."

Vargas allowed that the first-inning escape was critical to his second consecutive start against the Rays without allowing an earned run.

"I felt good," Vargas said. "I felt like I was able to execute. After getting out of that first inning, it kind of starts to push momentum your way. You get out of something like that early, and it gets the guys fired up."

Jake Odorizzi was recalled from Triple-A Durham to start Thursday's game and gave a solid effort. The 23-year-old right-hander took the Rays through five innings, allowing just one run on four hits, but took his first loss of the season.

"I'm pitching with more confidence," said Odorizzi, whose start marked his fourth stint in the Major Leagues this season. "I have a better feel for my stuff. It's not like the first time up with a new team. The nerves are taken care of now. Just pitch with more confidence, I'm able to attack the zone and work on stuff. It's just a lot easier after the first time up and you get that out of your way. Now it's strictly business."

Alex Torres took over for Odorizzi to start the sixth with the Rays trailing, 1-0. In two innings, he gave up an RBI single to Kole Calhoun to push the Angels' lead to 2-0.

Jamey Wright and Wesley Wright held the Angels scoreless in the eighth and ninth innings, but Dane De La Rosa and Ernesto Frieri followed Vargas with two scoreless frames to finish off the Angels' win.

"Give Jake Odorizzi credit today, he pitched really, really well -- Torres, and Jamey Wright in the bullpen and Wesley," Maddon said. "So to keep them to two runs today is really important on our part. We normally win a game like that, especially at home. So I was really pleased with the pitching and the overall defense."

The Rays did make things interesting in the ninth, when they had runners at second and third with one out, but Frieri managed to retire Kelly Johnson on a foul pop then got pinch-hitter David DeJesus on a deep fly to right to end the game.

Tampa Bay had just three hits while stranding eight and going 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position en route to suffering their seventh shutout of the season. Personifying the Rays' frustrations at the plate were Evan Longoria and Wil Myers, who went a combined 0-for-19 in the series.

"They did have a tough series, Longo and Wil did, but I did like the walks," said Maddon, noting Myers' three on Thursday. "When you're walking, you're hitting. The walks are the first sign before somebody starts getting back to normal."

Myers conceded that he has been frustrated by not contributing offensively, but added that he's feeling better at the plate.

"I felt like today was my best day in a week," Myers said. "I felt my hands working a lot better today, even though I did have the strikeout. I took some good swings at balls."

The Rays remained a half-game ahead of the Athletics for the top spot in the American League Wild Card standings as they head to Oakland for a three-game weekend series, followed by stops in Anaheim and Seattle.

"The one positive is we still have a lead in the Wild Card, and we're still within striking distance of Boston [in the AL East] with a month of baseball to play," Longoria said. "What more could you ask for? We haven't been playing anywhere near what we're capable of. We're going into this road trip hoping to figure it out sooner rather than later and get into a nice rhythm. The teams that end up going the furthest are the ones that get hot closest to the end. We'll continue to stay positive."

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Moore returns to mound in Triple-A start

By Eric Single, *MLB.com*

GWINNETT, Ga. -- Rays left-hander **Matt Moore** knew the road to recovery would be unfamiliar. After missing a month with a sore left elbow -- his first career trip to the disabled list due to an arm problem -- the 23-year-old made a rehab start with Triple-A Durham on Thursday night ahead of his projected return to the Tampa Bay rotation during next week's series against the Angels.

Moore, who allowed four runs on eight hits in four innings in a 7-6 victory over Gwinnett, was encouraged by the way his arm felt and by his comfort level on the mound in his first live action since the injury.

"Between pitches, I was thinking, 'What do I have to do with this pitch to make it not do what that last one did?' Those in-pitch adjustments," Moore said. "When my arm wasn't feeling right, I wasn't thinking about what I was doing in-pitch. I was thinking about how not to make it hurt and different things just to kind of try to stay away from that particular signal."

Moore (14-3, 3.41) threw 74 pitches, 43 for strikes, and endured his share of bad luck in the form of two infield singles by Gwinnett's speedy leadoff man Jose Constanza and a bloop single to right field off the bat of **Todd Cunningham**. His concerted effort to attack the inner half of the plate backfired when several inside offerings ran back over the middle, leading to consecutive sharply hit balls -- a ground-rule double and a line-drive single to left -- that pushed across three Gwinnett runs in the first inning. Back-to-back doubles in the fourth from Constanza and Sean Kazmar accounted for the Braves' other run off Moore.

"When things are going well, I think I'm able to add and subtract from pitches a little bit better, I can throw a breaking ball for a strike and I can throw a breaking ball for a chase pitch," Moore said. "The timing and the rhythm of that isn't quite there, but it's one of those things that takes repetitions in the game and with the competition up to bat to really get that feel back, to get comfortable having those thoughts about those pitches."

Moore also had to regroup after committing an unusual two-base throwing error following the two-run single by Gwinnett catcher Jose Yopez in the first. After both runs had scored, the ball was relayed back into the infield and caught by Moore, who tossed it into the dugout in anticipation of a new ball from the home-plate umpire. Time had not been called, however, and Yopez was awarded two bases on the error charged to Moore.

"Honestly, I didn't care -- there were two outs, I'm trying to get the guy at the plate," Moore said. "I just tried to ask him, 'What was the call? What's the call, period?' Because I hadn't ever seen that before. He didn't explain it to me, but I guess somebody else knew what went on. It was a little weird."

Moore responded with an inning-ending three-pitch strikeout of designated hitter Joe Leonard, capped off by a 95-mph fastball. He hit 96 mph once in the next inning, but mostly stayed in the low-90s while mixing in plenty of changeups to reestablish his confidence in the pitch that had first brought on the discomfort.

The month away from the field allowed Moore to assess the way he takes care of his body, a process that rarely drew criticism when he opened the 2013 season 8-0 with a 2.29 ERA on the way to earning his first All-Star selection. Moore had won six consecutive starts with an ERA of 1.50 since mid-June before he felt discomfort in his elbow during his July 28 start against the Yankees.

"What goes into each day's preparation now to get my arm ready to throw is nothing like it was before," Moore said. "I think maybe I took for granted my youth a little bit. There's things that I just didn't have to do to warm my arm up because it felt good when I'd get out there. I'd do a few calisthenics, a few warmup stretches and then I'm good to go, whereas now we're working with a hot spot in my elbow. We're really trying to make sure that each time I go out there that we've had enough treatment and enough of those things that are going to get me to a good spot when I'm playing catch, when I'm actually getting into it."

Moore planned to fly to Oakland to rejoin his teammates, who are locked in a hotly-contested American League East race and need consistent contributions from the leaders of their rotation, a challenge Moore is eager to meet. Barring an unforeseen bout of soreness on Friday, he will take up the Rays' playoff push with a start in Anaheim next week.

"It makes you miss the game a lot, seeing guys out there," Moore said. "I've been very fortunate that while I've been down, we've not really skipped a beat with [Chris Archer] doing his thing and [Alex Cobb] coming back from his injury. It makes it much easier to watch when you've got a Cy Young on the mound and those two guys to follow him. It definitely makes you want to get back quicker rather than later."

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Notebook: Peralta's success forged by craft, deception

By Bill Chastain and Sam Strong, MLB.com

ST. PETERSBURG -- Tampa Bay right-hander Joel Peralta entered Thursday's contest among the American League's leaders in appearances (65, tied for first) and holds (34, first).

Peralta also leads AL relievers with 212 appearances since joining the Rays in 2011.

What makes Peralta a marvel to watch is the fact he's not a hard thrower like many late-inning guys, but he finds a way to get the job done.

Rays manager Joe Maddon credited Peralta's success to a combination of "want to, which is guile" and the fact the ball he throws "does move."

"I mean, there's a little ride on that fastball that makes it difficult for a lot of hitters to catch up," Maddon said. "But then he's got two really good other pitches, with the split and the curveball."

"Furthermore, don't underestimate the importance of deception. When you go out and you're scouting guys all the time, everybody's looking for that beautiful, clean delivery. And that's all right. But I really dig funk and deception in the bullpen. And I think a little bit of the success he's had is the funk he's got."

Peralta smiled when asked how he sees himself.

"Smart pitching, I would say," Peralta said. "Once, a friend of mine told me, 'If you want to be successful, try to get in the hitter's mind, keeping them off balance.' I'm trying to get in the hitter's mind every time I throw a pitch. So I'm trying to guess what he's guessing. I'm trying to guess what he's waiting for. Scouting reports help, and just being aggressive. Probably the most important thing is to not be afraid."

Peralta believes that fear disables a lot of pitchers.

"I know guys that are afraid of getting the pitch for contact," Peralta said. "And that doesn't help. If you don't want to pitch to contact, you are afraid of getting hit. And if you're afraid of getting hit, something bad is going to happen because you're going to live outside the strike zone -- and when you come in, they're going to get you."

Despite the many reasons cited, Peralta said he has been surprised by his success.

"I work really hard, but the fact that I'm not a hard thrower and I don't have that great stuff like a lot of guys do, especially in this division and this league -- for three straight years, it's really tough to do," Peralta said.

Rays' reliable defense reaching record status

ST. PETERSBURG -- The Rays have always prided themselves on defense, but the 2013 team may be good enough to be headed for the record books.

Through 131 games, Tampa Bay's 48 errors are the second fewest in Major League history -- behind the Orioles, who have just 39. Both teams are on pace to break the all-time record set by the 2003 Mariners, who had just 65 errors.

"Everybody is always going to focus on the team's offense because it's cool to do that, but we're only here because of our pitching and defense," manager Joe Maddon said. "You can't separate one from the other. They're good at the same time, and they help one another. That's who we are. We hit the jackpot regarding our acquisitions at shortstop and first base. [Ben] Zobrist has played his best second base, and [Evan Longoria] has been really good. We're pitching well because our defense has been outstanding."

Maddon has managed some impressive fielding teams since taking over in 2006, but he thinks this could be his best yet, and the numbers agree. The franchise record of 73 errors in a season was set in 2011. The Rays are on pace for just 59.

"I've seen us really good, but I have not seen us this good," Maddon said. "Part of being this good is making the routine play routinely. The spectacular play has been made, but a lot of it plays into our positioning and the work we do in advance to get the guys in the right spots. All of those things have led us to our great defensive year."

College elective: Rays sport football gear on trip

ST. PETERSBURG -- The Rays have never been afraid to stray from conventional Major League practices, so it came as no surprise when manager Joe Maddon asked his players to wear the jersey of their favorite college football team on their upcoming 10-game road trip to the West Coast.

"I would like to promote wearing it on each leg, and if you want to promote more than one team, that's fine," Maddon said. "I'm working on my Lafayette jersey."

Prior to Thursday's game -- which coincided with the start of the college football season -- 15 different jerseys could be spotted in the Rays' clubhouse, ranging from local teams like South Florida and Florida to hometown favorites like Sam Fuld representing New Hampshire.

Pitcher and Vanderbilt alumnus David Price spared no expense by throwing his Wednesday bullpen session in a full Commodores uniform, complete with a helmet and authentic ankle tape.

"I would play somewhere between water boy and long snapper, probably," Price said. "I played for two years before I wised up and figured it's best I left that alone."

Alabama natives Desmond Jennings, who had a football scholarship offer to Alabama, and Auburn fan Wesley Wright fell on opposite sides of the "Iron Bowl" rivalry, but a clubhouse fight did not erupt.

"There could be some brawling going on, there's no question," Maddon said. "I'm all for that. A nice friendly brawl within the clubhouse once in a while is OK when it comes to fighting over your favorite collegiate football team."

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Time to get Wild: Duel begins Rays-A's clash

By Cash Kruth, MLB.com

In one corner: Rays left-hander David Price, who is 7-1 with a 1.97 ERA and 62 strikeouts in his past 11 starts.

In the other: A's right-hander Jarrod Parker, who is 8-0 with a 2.48 ERA and .202 opponents' average over his last 16 outings.

Let the head-to-head battle for the American League Wild Card begin.

The Rays travel to Oakland on Friday to begin a pivotal three-game series with the A's, who trail Tampa Bay by a half-game in the AL Wild Card standings. The Indians are four games back of the A's.

"It's good. This time of year, when you're down a couple games, you want to play the guys that are ahead of you so you can gain a full game," Price said of the matchup. "We're not watching them play and hoping they lose. If we handle business, those are very big games."

It begins Friday with what should be an exciting pitchers' duel. Price was originally scheduled to pitch Thursday but was pushed back because of Matt Moore's expected Tuesday return.

Price was fine with the extra day of rest, noting it's always good to get one this time of year. It also sets him up to face a potent A's lineup that surprised manager Bob Melvin in scoring 34 runs in four games against the Tigers.

"I never would've expected that. We've been talking about quality at-bats and moving the line. We've been doing that to an extent, but this series, I don't know that anyone could've forecasted that," Melvin said. "As far as turning the corner, I think you need to do it more than three games. If we can win a few more, get home and start winning in the fashion that we have for the better part of the season, then you feel like you turn a corner. But it's a good start to it."

The A's look to continue Friday against Price, who knows full well the potential of Oakland's bats.

"They just continue to get better," Price said. "Their guys buy into their system. They have good role players, and they've really done well. Josh Donaldson has had a breakout year. Jed Lowrie is playing really well. [Yoenis] Cespedes does what he does. I don't know what their weakness is, if there is one. They're solid. It will be a tough series."

Rays: Going back to college

This road trip's theme for the Rays centers around the opening of the college football season, as manager Joe Maddon asked his players to wear the jersey of their favorite college team for their 10-day trek to the West Coast.

Price, who went to Vanderbilt, was hoping to get out of St. Petersburg quickly and land in the Bay Area early enough to watch the Commodores' season opener Thursday night against Ole Miss.

"They were pumped about it. Coach [James] Franklin was pumped up. This is a big time for Vanderbilt football," Price said of the opener. "It's the best feeling we've had in forever. They're making it a place where people want to go. It's good to see it turning around."

- Rays catchers Jose Molina and Jose Lobaton have hit a combined .321 with two home runs, four doubles and 10 RBIs in their last 15 games.

A's: Lowrie streaking

Lowrie extended his career-long hitting streak to 11 games in Thursday's 7-6, walk-off loss to the Tigers. He's now batting .413 in that stretch, with seven multi-hit efforts.

- The A's are 12-13 in the month of August with two games remaining. They need to win their next two games to keep their streak of consecutive months with a winning record alive, which dates back to last June.

Worth noting

- Rays outfielder Wil Myers is hitless in his last 19 at-bats and is 5-for-43 (.116) over his last 12 games, with no extra-base hits.

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Rays hit road for West Coast swing with work to be done

By Andrew Astleford, Fox Sports Florida

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- There is work to do out West. There are problems to fix, focus to regain.

The Tampa Bay Rays leave to start a 10-game swing against the Oakland Athletics, Los Angeles Angels and Seattle Mariners after a week so far that's short on anything good and long on questions.

The Rays' record since Sunday: 1-4.

The Rays' opportunity ahead: Still plenty.

"It's definitely not what we want," said Rays third baseman Evan Longoria, after Tampa Bay's 2-0 loss to the Angels on Thursday. "But it's what we have at this point. I think one positive is we still have a lead in the wild card, and we're still within close striking distance of Boston with a month of baseball to play. What more could you ask for? We definitely haven't been playing anywhere near what we're capable of."

That's a fair assessment, and the latest loss followed the week's theme. For seven innings, Angels left-hander Jason Vargas baffled Tampa Bay batters. Rays manager Joe Maddon said he "could just feel it" as early as the first inning that it was going to be Vargas' day.

Vargas allowed two hits and three walks. The Rays stranded eight runners, including Wil Myers on third and Yunel Escobar on second when David DeJesus flew out to right field, ending a frustrating series for anyone in a home uniform.

Lately, here's how rare that feeling has been here: The Rays lost a home series for the first time since June 13-16 against the Kansas City Royals, snapping a streak of 10 unbeaten series at the Trop. (Tampa Bay's series record in that span: 9-0-1.)

Life for the Rays in this slide has included a grab bag of misfortune. There was an 11-inning loss to the New York Yankees on Sunday that could have been a victory and sealed a sweep. There was the drubbing in Kansas City on Monday in which right-hander Jeremy Hellickson was yanked after 2 2/3 innings. There was Hellickson's optioning to Class A Charlotte on Tuesday to rest. There were the bullpen woes in a blown game against the Angels on Tuesday in which a 5-1 lead evaporated after the sixth inning. There were the struggles Thursday against Vargas.

Maddon has said his team spends 30 minutes enjoying a victory or worrying about a loss. That same brief memory must be embraced after this most recent five-game stumble.

As the Rays fly to California, thoughts of this blip must be lost by the time they cross the Rocky Mountains. Even better, the Mississippi River.

"Frustrating' is a great word for today," Maddon said. "The whole day reeked of frustration. We had the opportunity early, gave it up. He (Vargas) really settled in and pitched great. He had us chasing all day."

The Rays have chased a lot recently, including themselves. There is no single area to blame for the skid. Sometimes, it's hitting. Sometimes, it's starting pitching. Sometimes, it's the bullpen.

The Rays, at their best, look like this: A group with a solid, swarming offense, sure, but also one that leans on its rotation and sharp defense to keep the arrow pointed upward.

"I think all of us are one pitch away from really turning the corner," said Wil Myers, who is hitless in his last 20 at-bats. "You go through those in baseball. It's just one of those things. We're just one pitch away, like I said, from really going again. ... You can't take the night before into the next day."

Still, the Rays are in a good spot. If they right their ways on the road, they remain in strong shape. The Oakland series will be interesting, with the A's trailing the Rays by a half-game in the wild-card chase. Meanwhile, the Red Sox led the American League East by three games before their series finale against the Baltimore Orioles on Thursday night.

With that clear, the Rays must avoid another West Coast letdown. The last time their plane was gassed for a cross-country trip, the returns were far from pretty: They lost five consecutive games against the Arizona Diamondbacks and Los Angeles Dodgers from Aug. 6-11. That can't happen again. Not with their margin for error small.

"It's a really good time to go through what we're going through, with the potential of having a really good September for all of us," Longoria said. "Having one or two more good runs, we can really put ourselves where we want to be."

There's that chance. But work must be done.

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