



Detroit Tigers Clips

Saturday, October 5, 2013

Detroit Free Press

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FOXSportsDetroit.com

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USAToday.com

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OPPOSING TEAM

MLB.com

A's puzzled by Tigers' Scherzer in Game 1 (Lee)
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Daily Transactions

Max Scherzer's mastery of A's in Game 1 underscores importance of stellar Tigers rotation

October 5, 2013

By Drew Sharp / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — The frustration grew on the face of each of the Oakland batters as they dejectedly returned to the dugout. It became a conga line, those baffled with Max Scherzer's mastery. One guy angrily slammed his bat back into the rack, perhaps testing it to see whether his lumber actually was still capable of making contact with anything.

Choose your desired metaphor of pitching dominance.

Scherzer's stuff through seven innings was sick, filthy, nasty.

It was also smart and disciplined.

Scherzer's growth as a No. 1 starter was evident after his lone Game 1 blemish — a two-run Yoenis Cespedes home run in the seventh inning that finally brought to life an O.co Coliseum crowd of 48,401 waiting to explode.

Jim Leyland visited Scherzer at the mound, usually an indication that he's going to the bullpen.

"Usually, he makes a signal if he wants a pitcher pretty early and I didn't see him do that," Scherzer said. "At that time, I felt like I had bullets left and I could execute pitches."

Leyland simply told Scherzer: "It's yours."

In the past, Scherzer would have allowed his adrenalin to dictate his subsequent pitching strategy, consistently pumping fastballs. But he confidently blended change-ups with a mid-90s heater, retiring the next three Oakland batters.

The A's got Scherzer's A-game.

And the Tigers held on for a 3-2 Game 1 victory.

"I thought Scherzer was locked in all night," Leyland said. "He was awfully determined. He was thrilled to get Game 1. I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter which game he pitched.

"And I think he responded like we expected him to respond."

Scherzer probably will capture the Cy Young Award. He certainly deserves it. He won 21 games and started the All-Star Game for the American League. But Friday night was his best performance of the season, considering the stakes involved against an Oakland team many national pundits believe will ultimately win this series.

He lasted 118 pitches over seven innings, yielded only three hits and two walks, and struck out 11.

"How he responded after the home run showed how much he's matured from a thrower to a pitcher," his catcher, Alex Avila, said. "You have to fight the temptation to simply overpower hitters because you have that capability."

Whatever power the Tigers lacked in their bats (only two of their 10 hits went for extra bases), they more than compensated with their arms. Scherzer, Drew Smyly and closer Joaquin Benoit combined for a team playoff record of 16 strikeouts.

The Tigers' starters are picking up where they left off in last year's playoffs. Don't forget that in nine American League playoff games in 2012, the collective ERA of the four Tiger starters was 1.02.

Let's face it. It will be the starting pitching that will carry this team as far as it will go in the playoffs.

As his teammates took their swings in the batting cage prior to the game, Miguel Cabrera spent some extra time stretching his lower body. And there were around a half-dozen cameras capturing the moment.

Cabrera later took a few swings and deposited a couple balls to the deep Raiders football seats nearly 400 feet away in left-centerfield. He certainly appeared to swing the bat a little easier than previously.

There has been plenty of attention on Cabrera's physical state.

But as Torii Hunter told me Thursday — as only the loquacious outfielder can — the Tigers definitely need Cabrera "to eat" for this offense to fully capitalize on its effectiveness. But "he can't eat if you don't put any food on the table."

Translation: If Austin Jackson and Hunter don't regularly get on base, it's not going to matter how much healthier Cabrera appears.

The Tigers jumped on Oakland starter Bartolo Colon at very beginning. Jackson doubled to right. Colon hit Hunter in the elbow, putting two runners on base and forcing the A's to pitch to Cabrera.

He ripped a single up the middle, scoring Jackson.

The Tigers scored three runs in the first inning, momentarily erasing the memories of getting no-hit in that meaningless 162nd and final regular-season game in Miami on Sunday.

It was critical that they got to Colon when they did because after that initial inning he became practically as unhittable as Scherzer.

There were the standard missed scoring opportunities, of course. Third-base coach Tom Brookens sent Victor Martinez home from second after Omar Infante hit a one-out single to right. But Josh Reddick easily gunned down the slow-footed Martinez at home.

Brookens, though, made the right call. The Tigers must be more aggressive on the base paths, especially against a team like Oakland much better at manufacturing runs.

How important of a start was this for the Tigers?

The last five times the A's advanced to a decisive Game 5, they have lost each time. It didn't matter whether it was home or away. They have proven incapable of successfully taking a five-game series to the distance.

That statistic placed even more pressure on the A's in Game 1. This loss means they likely will need a fifth game to win this series. And as tired as the Tigers are about facing endless questions about Cabrera's hip/groin, Oakland doesn't want to deal with countless reminders about its woeful Game 5 history.

And now the A's must face a resurgent Justin Verlander in what has become a must-win Game 2 tonight.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland trusted Joaquin Benoit could get four outs, not five

October 5, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — The Tigers' pitching was so dominant on Friday night that center fielder Austin Jackson had the night off.

No fly balls to catch. No hits to pick up. Nothing.

The Athletics hit only five balls to the outfield. Yoenis Cespedes tripled and homered to left. Leftfielder Andy Dirks caught two balls. Rightfielder Torii Hunter caught one.

In center, Jackson had nothing except a good view of the 16 strikeouts by Tigers pitchers.

It's the most strikeouts the Tigers have recorded in a playoff game. According to Baseball-Reference.com, the previous high was 14, also both times against Oakland — once in the '72 championship series, and then in Game 1 last year (Justin Verlander had 11 of those). It was all a continuation of the regular season, in which the Tigers set a major-league record for strikeouts by one team's pitching staff.

Manager Jim Leyland lifted magnificent Max Scherzer at the clearly logical moment — seven innings, 118 pitches. The manager then needed left-hander Drew Smyly to protect a one-run lead for at least part of the eighth and to create a save opportunity for Joaquin Benoit.

Between pinch hitters and switch-hitters, the A's cut down on late-inning percentage match-ups. The first three hitters of the eighth were switch-hitters: pinch hitter Alberto Callaspo and top-of-the-order hitters Coco Crisp and Jed Lowrie.

With the crowd in an uproar, Smyly struck out Callaspo looking to open the inning. Leyland then opted to have Smyly instead of right-hander Al Albuquerque pitch to the next two switch-hitters.

Smyly got ahead of Crisp 1-2, then walked him. So a fast runner was aboard as the potential tying run. By this point, Benoit was warming up along with Albuquerque.

Smyly struck out Lowrie. Leyland came to the mound to bring in Benoit for what would be a rarity in the regular season: a save attempt of more than three outs. "In playoff baseball, you do things differently," Leyland said.

Benoit was rested. He hadn't pitched since last Saturday. His first batter was right-handed home-run threat Josh Donaldson.

Leyland said that if there had been one out, he would have gone to Albuquerque for Donaldson. He thought a five-out save was too much to ask of Benoit. But he thought he could get four outs. (When Leyland asked Benoit to get a five-out save last week in Minnesota, Benoit blew a save for the first time this year, on a leadoff homer by Brian Dozier in the ninth.)

Donaldson, the third baseman whom Leyland said deserved to be on the All-Star team, popped up on Benoit's 0-2 pitch. So Benoit had gotten out of the eighth with only three pitches.

In the bottom of the ninth, Brandon Moss led off and struck out. Catcher Alex Avila didn't catch it. The ball appeared to hit the home-plate umpire and caromed out to Benoit, who made the necessary throw to first to retire Moss. Put it down as a big break.

Up stepped Cespedes, looking for the tying homer. On 0-2, Benoit struck him out swinging for the second out. Lefty power threat Josh Reddick was next. Benoit struck him out, too. He had struck out the side to save the 3-2 victory.

As in the Tigers' division clincher nine days earlier, the Tigers scored only in the first, Scherzer was the winner and Benoit finished the one-run victory.

Questions from Game 1

■ Why would third-base coach Tom Brookens have sent Victor Martinez home from second on Omar Infante's one-out single to right in the sixth? Brookens knows as well as anyone that Martinez isn't fast and that Reddick, the rightfielder, has a strong arm.

If Brookens had held Martinez, the bases would have been loaded with one out. Instead, Reddick — an incumbent Gold Glove winner — threw out Martinez, and Dirks popped up to end the inning. The hitter after Dirks would have been No. 9 hitter Jose Iglesias, who had grounded out on both at-bats (one on a bunt).

The only possible reason to send Martinez home seems to be that Dirks has been struggling so much at the plate that Brookens liked Martinez's chances to score on Reddick better than Dirks' chance to drive home the run from third with one out with a sacrifice fly or hit. (If it means anything, Dirks then popped up.)

Leyland, a former third-base coach, didn't criticize Brookens. He said it was a play where you second-guess yourself if you send Martinez and he's out, and where you second-guess yourself if you hold him and the A's strand him at third.

Bottom line: It was probably worth the gamble with the Nos. 8-9 hitters coming up.

■ Ramon Santiago took over at third base for the hobbled Miguel Cabrera to begin the Oakland eighth. Was this the right time to pull Cabrera?

Yes. Cabrera had hit in the top of the inning. He probably wouldn't bat again until extra innings, and Leyland wasn't playing for extra innings. Leyland also cited the vast foul territory in Oakland. He said he didn't want to see a foul ball land out of Cabrera's reach that he normally would catch or that Santiago could catch now.

Through so-so season, Tigers' Justin Verlander never gave up

October 5, 2013

By Jeff Seidel / Detroit Free Press

There comes a time in every man's life when he breaks up with a swimsuit model, and he starts to lose command of his 100-mile-per-hour fastball, and that Superman cape falls to the ground, and he is no longer the best pitcher on his own team, much less on the planet.

OK. Wait. Stop right there.

That is not normal. That has happened to only one person in the world this year.

"Obviously, it was one heck of a grind," Justin Verlander said before Tuesday's workout at Comerica Park, in a moment of reflection.

It was difficult to connect with the old Justin Verlander. Sure, you could appreciate his greatness, like staring at a piece of art in a museum. You could cheer for him, but he seemed to be from a different place. The land of kings and super-heroes.

But it's easy to relate to this Justin Verlander. The guy who looked so human and fragile this season. The guy who was knocked down and lost it.

The guy who refused to quit.

The guy who kept working his butt off.

The guy who kept plugging away, even when nothing seemed to work.

The guy who stood at his locker, answering questions with grace and dignity after he was demoted. He is no longer the ace of the Tigers' pitching staff, at least not for this series against Oakland.

He will pitch tonight in Game 2.

Because Max Scherzer was given the honor of pitching Game 1.

"Max is obviously having a magical season," Verlander said, "an unbelievable season."

Theories abound

What went wrong with Verlander this season?

The truth is, there were times when Verlander didn't know.

"At times, I'm sure he didn't understand why," Tigers catcher Alex Avila said. "He was looking for answers and really couldn't find it."

Everybody has a theory.

Some think it is an accumulation of all those innings on his arm, the workhorse finally growing tired.

Some think it's the curse of the supermodel — like Samson getting his hair chopped. Give me a break.

But the real answer is much simpler than that.

It's mechanics.

He was out of whack for most of the season.

"There have been a few things go awry with his delivery," pitching coach Jeff Jones said Tuesday. "Nothing major. It's been a number of different things. It's all been small stuff. A little adjustment here. A little adjustment there. We've worked on a lot of stuff."

Verlander tinkered with his mechanics all year. Sometimes between starts. Sometimes between innings.

Sometimes between pitches.

"He is just like any other pitcher," Avila said. "He has to be able to consistently have the same mechanics with every pitch. That's how you command your pitches. For me, I've told him a bunch of times, I've told a lot of people, his biggest thing this year has been his fastball command. He was behind a lot of hitters. He walked a lot more guys than he normally does."

Verlander walked 3.1 batters per nine innings, his highest total since 2008.

"There were a bunch of times he would get a guy 0-2 and walk him," Avila said. "In the past, that never happened. For me, that was the biggest issue."

Verlander tried to fix it. He watched more videotape of himself this year than he has watched in his entire career. Combined. He tinkered constantly.

“I’m very proud of how he has handled it,” Jones said. “He has such high expectations for himself. Detroit has such high expectations and he had, by his standards, a subpar year. But he has worked his tail off this year. He is so competitive, and he wants to be the best.”

J.V. of old might be back

Now here comes the good news.

It looks like Justin Verlander is back.

The old one.

“I feel like the last couple of starts were a whole lot better and pretty close to where I need to be,” Verlander said.

Verlander threw six innings against Minnesota and didn’t allow an earned run and finished with 12 strikeouts.

He threw six innings against Miami and didn’t allow an earned run and had 10 strikeouts.

“He was unbelievable,” said Brayan Pena, who caught Verlander in Miami. “He was using his fastball to both sides. He had great command with his off-speed.”

Manager Jim Leyland was just as enthusiastic. “I love what I saw out of Verlander.”

But Jones said that he has seen it for a month now.

“Even some of the starts he hasn’t won, his stuff has been a lot better,” Jones said. “Going into the playoffs, he is probably more comfortable than he has been all year.”

What has changed?

His mechanics are better.

To top it off, Verlander has stopped thinking.

“I feel like, the last couple, I didn’t have to focus too much on making adjustments,” Verlander said. “It was just focusing on making my pitches.”

The story flips

So Verlander is Justin Verlander again.

But this is where the story flips.

Jones believes that his experience has changed Verlander.

“I don’t think there is any question,” Jones said. “Guys learn more when they struggle than when they succeed.

I truly believe that. Now, to me, next year, when things aren’t maybe going right or something doesn’t feel right, he will have something to fall back on.”

In the end, Superman has found his cape.

But here’s the cool thing. He’s a lot more human.

Tigers' Joaquin Benoit calls four-out save a career highlight

October 5, 2013

By George Sipple / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — Joaquin Benoit called his save Friday night in Game 1 in the American League Division Series “one of the best moments” of his career.

Benoit got the final four outs for the Tigers as they hung on to beat the Athletics, 3-2, at O.co Coliseum.

Lefty Drew Smyly came on in the eight inning to face three switch-hitters. He struck out Alberto Callaspo, gave up a walk to Coco Crisp, then struck out Jed Lowrie. Benoit came in to get right-hander Josh Donaldson to pop up to Prince Fielder.

“To be honest with you, if it was only one out in the inning, I was going to (Al) Albuquerque for Donaldson,” Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. “But if it was more than two, I was going to go to Benoit.

“So we got two outs before we got to Donaldson, and then we asked Bennie to get four (outs), which I don’t like to do. But playoffs you do things a little bit different.”

Benoit then had to retire the heart of the lineup in the ninth. He got Brandon Moss to strike out swinging.

Next up was Yoenis Cespedes, who already had smacked a triple and a two-run home run off Max Scherzer.

Cespedes fouled off a fastball. Benoit threw a couple change-ups and got Cespedes to strike out swinging.

Josh Reddick then struck out to end the game.

“(Cespedes) was really aggressive tonight, so I was really trying not to give him anything he could handle,”

Benoit said. “Trying to make him swing at my pitch. I threw a pitch and left it over the plate and he fouled it off. And that was to my advantage. He fouled off a pitch that he could hit and drive. I gave him two tough pitches, two change-ups down and in and he swung at it.”

Benoit said the adrenaline was “unbelievable” when he was sitting in the dugout waiting to come back out to pitch the ninth after getting the final out of the eighth.

“Coming out for the ninth, I was already pumped up,” he said. “It’s always tough coming in for four outs. At this stage of the season, you don’t have to think about it. You have to come in and do your job.”

Jhonny on deck for Tigers? More struggles for Andy Dirks could signal leftfield start for Peralta

October 5, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — Tigers manager Jim Leyland didn't offer any hints Friday afternoon about when Jhonny Peralta might start in this series.

But perhaps Andy Dirks' continued struggles in Game 1 will give Leyland the impetus to start Peralta over Dirks in leftfield for Game 2 tonight.

Dirks played left on Friday night over Peralta against Athletics right-hander Bartolo Colon. Peralta was 2-for-11 off Colon in his career, but that's not the match-up number that Leyland cited.

"Dirks is 4-for-8 off (Colon), and he gives us a better defense," Leyland said. "If you're not going to play Dirks (in Game 1), you might as well not play him. The one question there is he's not swinging real well."

That pattern continued.

On Dirks' first at-bat, he struck out swinging. On his second, he flied to left. On his third time up against Colon, with runners on first and third, Dirks popped up on a 2-0 pitch.

The next time he was due up, with one out and nobody on in the ninth, the right-handed Peralta pinch-hit for him against left-hander Sean Doolittle. Peralta flied out to right.

Leyland put Alex Avila in the No. 6 spot and dropped Dirks to eighth, a reversal of their most typical spots. Avila delivered the RBI single for the third run in the three-run first.

There are no match-up numbers for Sonny Gray, the Game 2 starter tonight, because he has never faced the Tigers. Does that make the decision on Peralta harder or easier?

"If you think this guy is going to hang a curve, you play Peralta," Leyland said Friday afternoon. "If you think he's not going to hang a curve, you probably play Dirks."

Leyland said he would be comfortable with Peralta playing shortstop in this series. Peralta could be back at his old position if Leyland used a pinch-hitter for Jose Iglesias. Leyland said Iglesias had recovered from the bruised left hand he suffered with 1½ weeks left in the regular season.

Iglesias was 0-for-4 and didn't get the ball out of the infield.

■ **THE BULLPEN:** Leyland gave some clarity to his playoff bullpen. Left-hander Jose Alvarez likely won't pitch in short relief. That leaves Drew Smyly as the lone lefty reliever for late-inning situations. But Smyly had that role at times this season when Phil Coke was faltering and Alvarez was working the minors. Leyland left open the possibility that Rick Porcello, the starter who has moved to the bullpen, could work in short relief. "I think he could do pretty much anything," Leyland said.

There's a myth circulating that the Tigers' bullpen struggled all season. From late June until late September — half the season — the Tigers never lost a game they led in the seventh inning or later.

■ **TAXI SQUADS:** In an unsurprising maneuver, the Tigers have two levels of "taxi squads" for the 25-man playoff roster. Matt Tuiasosopo and Bryan Holaday aren't on the active roster, but they are with the club in case of an injury. Leyland said four pitchers who were with the Tigers this season are in the Instructional League in Florida to stay sharp if needed at some point in the postseason: Coke and Bruce Rondon (who are coming back from elbow woes), and Evan Reed and Darin Downs.

■ **MORE ROOM:** For the first time in years, the A's have opened the upper deck at the three-deck O.co Coliseum, thereby increasing capacity from about 35,000 to about 48,000. The crowds could be even louder there than during last year's Tigers-A's series, although that is hard to imagine.

"That is the exciting part about postseason baseball — it's great for a city to come together and be excited about something like that," Dirks said. "We appreciate it as players on both sides that people want to come out and enjoy a baseball game and get after it and not just sit there and watch the game, but be an active participant by cheering for their players and making a lot of noise.

"It's exciting for everybody when the atmosphere is like that. Those are special moments in baseball."

Game 1 drew 48,401 fans.

Detroit Tigers' ALDS Game 3 at 1:07 p.m. Monday; Game 4 on Tuesday afternoon at Comerica Park

October 5, 2013

By Brian Manzullo / Detroit Free Press

Starting times for Games 3 and 4 of the Detroit Tigers-Oakland Athletics ALDS series are set.

Game 3 will start at 1:07 p.m. Monday at Comerica Park and will be televised on MLB Network.

Game 4, if necessary, will start at 5:07 p.m. Tuesday on TBS if the ALDS series between the Boston Red Sox and Tampa Bay Rays goes to four games. If there's a sweep in that series, the Tigers and A's will play at 7:07 p.m. instead.

Game 5, if necessary, will begin at 9:07 p.m. on TBS if the Red Sox and Rays go to five games. If that series is over, the Tigers and A's will begin play at 8:07 p.m. instead in Oakland.

Detroit Tigers looking forward to ‘crazy’ atmosphere in Game 1 tonight

October 5, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — For the first time in years, the Oakland A’s have opened the upper deck at the three-deck Coliseum, thereby increasing capacity from about 35,000 to about 48,000. It could be even louder there for Game 1 tonight (9:37 p.m., TBS) than during last year’s Detroit Tigers-A’s series, although that is hard to imagine.

“That is the exciting part about postseason baseball — it’s great for a city to come together and be excited about something like that,” Tigers leftfielder Andy Dirks said. “We appreciate it as players on both sides that people want to come out and enjoy a baseball game and get after it and not just sit there and watch the game, but be an active participant by cheering for their players and making a lot of noise.

“It’s exciting for everybody when the atmosphere is like that. Those are special moments in baseball.

“It was crazy last year,” Dirks said. “But every year is a little different. We’ll know after Game 1 how they’re going to act.”

The Tigers found out in last year’s first-round series how intense the A’s crowd can be. Unlike most baseball audiences in the United States, it didn’t wait for something to happen to cheer, or even for a two-strike count on an opposing batter. It was loud from the first pitch onward. It roared even when the A’s were behind, noted Tigers star Miguel Cabrera.

It was mentioned to Dirks that the crowd in Pittsburgh for the NL wild-card game this week was one of the most overwhelming in a long time in baseball.

“People who were at a game like that will remember that forever,” Dirks said. “So will the players, because in our sport, we play so many games. Throughout the season, the fans can’t go nuts every single night. So when you get to the postseason and it’s boiled down to a few games, rather than an extended period, that’s when they can really come out and cheer and let it all hang out.

“It will be fun.”

Dirks said playing in front of a large and raucous crowd removes one audio distraction. He can’t hear the handful of fans who perhaps have shown up committed to sending one harangue after another in his direction. “When ballparks don’t have a lot of people in them, that’s when you can hear hecklers,” he said. “Ballparks that are packed and rocking, you don’t hear hecklers. You hear everything. So it’s exciting.”

Dirks vs. Colon: If Jim Leyland weighed whether to start Dirks or Jhonny Peralta in leftfield tonight, Dirks had an edge. He enters the game 4-for-8 lifetime off right-hander Bartolo Colon, while Peralta is 2-for-11. Leyland said Dirks will start tonight against Colon, the A’s ace.

“He throws a lot of fastballs,” Dirks said. “He’s not afraid to come after you. He doesn’t give in. He’s not a guy who says, ‘I might need to throw a curveball here.’ He goes with his best pitch when he needs it. His fastball moves a lot.”

Detroit 3, Oakland 2: Max Scherzer fans 11 as Tigers' 1st-inning runs stand up

October 5, 2013

By George Sipple / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — The Tigers jumped on Oakland A's starter Bartolo Colon for three runs in the first inning.

That was all the run support needed for Max Scherzer and the bullpen.

"We jumped 'em real quick and then we couldn't get a lot else going," said Tigers manager Jim Leyland. "And we're going to need to do that better as the series goes on."

The Tigers hung on to beat the Athletics, 3-2, to take Game 1 of the American League Division Series on Friday night at O.co Coliseum.

Max Scherzer allowed three hits, two walks and two earned runs over seven innings with 11 strikeouts for the Tigers.

Lefty Drew Smyly had two strikeouts and a walk in two-thirds of an inning. Joaquin Benoit came on to get the the final four outs to earn the save. He had to face the middle of the A's lineup in the ninth.

"Probably one of the best moments," Benoit said of where this performance ranked in his career. "And we got a win out of it."

Yoenis Cespedes was the only Oakland batter that really gave the Tigers trouble. Cespedes tripled in the second inning and hit a two-run home run in the seventh inning to pull the A's to within a run.

"The first at-bat he caught too much over the plate and the third at-bat, he had a good battle," Scherzer said. "It got to a 2-2 and I didn't know what pitch to go with, and I thought if I went with my fastball, I could make him go away. That pitch caught too much of the plate and he took it deep and that's just something that happens." Leyland came out for a mound visit after the home run, something he rarely does unless he's ready to make a change.

"When I went out there, he told me he was alright. That was good enough for me, and he responded very well getting out of that inning. He stepped up to the occasion."

Scherzer allowed two baserunners through the first five innings. After giving up the triple to Cespedes in the second inning he got Josh Reddick to strike out swinging on a 98 m.p.h. fastball, then Eric Sogard grounded out to third.

Scherzer gave up a two-out walk to Coco Crisp in the third. Crisp went to second on a wild pitch before Jed Lowrie grounded out to second.

Scherzer fanned the Nos. 3-4-5 hitters in the fourth inning. He got Josh Donaldson looking, then Brandon Moss and

Cespedes swinging. That gave Scherzer seven strikeouts through four innings.

Much was made of the lack of Tigers' lack of offense in the final weeks of the regular season.

Over the last week the players were asked repeatedly how they could suddenly turn things around in the playoffs after struggling to score runs in the final week of the regular season.

The Tigers answered Friday with a three-run first inning against the Athletics.

It was the most runs the Tigers have ever scored in the first inning of a postseason game.

A's starter Bartolo Colon hadn't allowed three earned runs in a game since Aug. 13. He allowed a total of five earned runs over his last six starts.

Austin Jackson led off the game with a line drive to right for a double.

"It felt good to get out there early and set the tone," Jackson said. "We were able to capitalize on that in the first inning and Max pitched great tonight and the bullpen came in and did their job."

Colon, who went 190 1/3 innings in the regular season without hitting a batter, hit the second batter he faced in the postseason. Colon's had pitched the most innings in baseball this season without hitting a batter.

After barely missing Torii Hunter on the first pitch he threw to him, Colon hit Hunter on the second pitch to put runners on first and second with no outs for Miguel Cabrera.

Cabrera, who drove in 137 runs in the regular season, followed with an RBI single to center. Hunter went from first to third on A's center fielder Coco Crisp, who doesn't throw very well.

That allowed Hunter to score when Prince Fielder grounded into a double play to short. Victor Martinez hit a double and came home to score on an RBI single by Alex Avila. The ground ball Avila hit deflected off the glove of A's first baseman Daric Barton and into left field.

John Lowe scouts the Tigers-A's Game 2 pitchers

October 5, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

Starting for the Tigers

RH Justin Verlander

The stats: 13-12, 3.46 ERA, 22-for-34 in quality starts (six innings or more, three earned runs or fewer).

The skinny: For the first time since 2008, when he led the American League in losses, Verlander didn't finish at least nine games above .500. For one reason or another, he struggled for most of the year to get into the kind of consistent, dominant groove in which he so often worked the past two years. But he also was a victim of poor support — four times he didn't allow a run, and yet the Tigers lost the game. Two outings came in his last two starts of the regular season, which capped a September in which he had a 2.27 ERA and provided hope he'll resume being his vintage self in the postseason.

The long ball: This is one area in which he didn't drop off from the previous two seasons. He allowed 19 homers, the same as in 2012 and five fewer than his MVP season of 2011.

The running game: It was a problem. Runners were successful on 21 of 25 stolen-base attempts with Verlander pitching.

Key matchups: A's leadoff man Coco Crisp is 8-for-24 off Verlander in the regular season, and he led off Game 1 of last year's series with a homer against Verlander. Crisp is Oakland's top stolen-base threat, so it's the old story: the best way for Verlander to keep him from running is to keep him off base.

Say what? Verlander allowed 43 runs with two outs, a career high. Since the outset of his rookie season in 2006, he has thrown almost 29,000 regular-season pitches — nearly 1,500 more than anyone else in that span. Perhaps all those pitches caught up to Verlander at times this season when he got deep into innings and couldn't make a two-out pitch to get out of trouble.

Starting for the A's

RH Sonny Gray

The stats: 5-3, 2.85 ERA in 10 starts, and 6-for-10 in quality starts. He pitched four scoreless innings in two relief appearances.

The skinny: Gray, 23, made his debut in July and has been part of the rotation since mid-August. He didn't throw 100 pitches in any of his five September starts, so several relievers might be busy in Game 2.

The long ball: Gray has allowed four homers in 64 innings.

The running game: Base stealers are 1-for-2 against Gray.

Key matchups: Gray has never faced the Tigers. Left-handed batters have a significantly higher on-base percentage against Gray than right-handers do — .301 to .231.

Say what? When Verlander beat the A's in the decisive Game 5 of the division series last year, Gray was in the Instructional League in Arizona. Gray's ERA at home (1.99) was about half what it was on the road (3.86).

Former Tiger Carlos Guillen to throw out first pitch before ALDS Game 3

October 5, 2013

By Staff / Detroit Free Press

The Tigers announced early this morning that Guillen, their former all-star infielder, would throw out the ceremonial first pitch Monday afternoon before Game 3 of the American League Division Series at Comerica Park.

Guillen, who turned 38 last week, played with the Tigers from 2004 through 2011.

The national anthem will be performed by Detroit natives Joshua Epstein and Daniel Zott of Dale Earnhardt Jr. Jr. The band's new album, "The Speed of Things," will be released Tuesday.

Game 3 with the Oakland Athletics will start at 1:07 p.m.

Mickey Cochrane tied historically to Detroit Tigers, Oakland Athletics in ALDS

October 5, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — The excellence of Mickey Cochrane looms above this best-of-five attempt by the Tigers and Athletics to get closer to this year's World Series. Cochrane, the Hall of Fame catcher, played a major role in World Series championships for both clubs.

In 1929-30, he caught for the Philadelphia Athletics as they won the World Series.

In the next few years, manager-owner Connie Mack executed his second economically induced dismemberment of a Philadelphia Athletics dynasty. Amid the discarding, he sent Cochrane to the Tigers after the 1933 season. At that point, the Tigers hadn't been to the World Series since 1909.

Cochrane not only became the Tigers' catcher, he became their player-manager. In 1934, the Tigers won their first pennant in 25 years, and Cochrane was the AL MVP. The Tigers lost the World Series in seven games to the Gashouse Gang Cardinals.

The next year, catcher-manager Cochrane led the Tigers to another pennant, and this time for the best-of-seven with the NL they drew the Cubs. The '35 affair marked the fifth straight World Series the Cubs lost in their current streak of seven straight, a streak that hasn't been altered since their most recent World Series appearance, a loss to the Tigers in 1945.

The Tigers' walk-off win on Goose Goslin's single in Game 6 of the 1935 Series gave the Tigers their first Series title and set off a celebration in Detroit perhaps still incomparable. About the time of the '35 Series, Time Magazine reported: "Cochrane's arrival in Detroit coincided roughly with the revival of the automobile industry and the first signs of revived prosperity. His determined jolly face soon came to represent the picture of what a dynamic Detroiters ought to look like." The civic admiration for Cochrane endures in a street named for him that ran adjacent to Tiger Stadium.

After the Athletics traded Cochrane and friends in the early '30s, they plunged into an absence from the World Series that stretched over four decades and three home cities, from Philadelphia to Kansas City to Oakland. In 1972, the A's finally returned to the World Series when, in the AL Championship Series, they beat the Tigers.

Magnificent Max! Scherzer dominates as Tigers beat A's, take Game 1

October 5, 2013

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Ever wonder if managers take time to envision an ideal first inning?

As in Tigers manager Jim Leyland maybe saying to his buddy, bench coach, Gene Lamont, “wouldn’t it be great, Geno, if we get to Bartolo Colon for three runs right off the bat?”

Ask and you shall receive, Jim.

Or better yet, don’t ask and get it anyway — a three-run first inning en route to a 3-2 Tigers’ victory over the A’s in Game 1 of their Division Series on Friday night at the raucous O.co Coliseum.

It was loud. The place was packed.

The Tigers wouldn’t let the gray ol’ yard get completely crazy, though, until late in the game when the A’s drew to within a run.

Then again, three quick runs off an opposing ace tend to quiet a crowd, especially when those runs become the insurmountable building blocks of a lead for a pitcher favored to win the American League’s Cy Young Award. As the Tigers’ Max Scherzer is favored to do, for instance.

Scherzer knew what to do with the three runs he was handed early — meaning he knew how to protect them — but by allowing just one hit until the seventh, he also proved fully capable of doing so.

“He’s always tough,” A’s manager Bob Melvin said. “He won 21 games. If you don’t see him often, the fastball gets on you a bit quicker because of its velocity.”

It was in the seventh that the A’s pulled to within a run on Yoenis Cespedes’ two-run home run. But to say the way Scherzer pitched until that point was outstanding doesn’t do it justice.

“Under the conditions, playoff atmosphere, good-hitting team,” Leyland said, “he was terrific.”

There were times, being the strikeout pitcher he is, that Scherzer toyed with the A’s. After four strikeouts after the first three innings, he struck out the side in the fourth — mowing down the 3-4-5 hitters in the lineup.

Josh Donaldson, looking; Brandon Moss, swinging; Cespedes, swinging.

Getting Cespedes was especially impressive because, in addition to his home run, he had a one-out triple in the second that served as Oakland’s only hit until Moss’s leadoff infield single in the seventh.

But even after Cespedes launched his two-run blast to left with a no outs, a calm and composed Scherzer retired the next three batters, hiking his strikeout total to 11 — and thereby handing the game to the bullpen with a one-run lead.

Drew Smyly struck out two of the three batters he faced and Joaquin Benoit closed it out by striking out three of the four batters he faced.

For their part, the Tigers didn’t feast upon Colon after jumping on his heater in the first — although they had 10 hits in his six innings.

“You saw balls up in the zone that you don’t normally see from him,” Melvin said of Colon’s early problems. Nor did everything go the Tigers’ way when it looked like it had — which is another way of saying that Torii Hunter was safe when he was called out while trying to sneak a steal of second in the fifth.

Dominant pitching has a way of making bad calls inconsequential, though.

Besides, the Tigers already had this on their side: It wasn’t until Colon realized that changing speeds might be advisable that he actually did change.

By then, the Tigers’ ideal first inning was in the books — and here’s how it began: On an Austin Jackson double to right, three pitches into the game.

“Against a pitcher like Colon,” said Jackson, “you have to create some chaos early.”

Two pitches after that, but only one after he had to lean back from a close one, Hunter was hit by a pitch.

And on the first pitch after that, Miguel Cabrera gave the Tigers a 1-0 lead with a through-the-legs single up the middle — Colon’s legs, that is.

Hunter took third on the hit and scored on Prince Fielder’s double-play grounder. But just when the inning began to quiet down, to match the briefly diminishing din of the packed house (48,401), Victor Martinez doubled.

Colon had allowed only two first-inning doubles in 30 starts this season, and the Tigers suddenly had two just five batters into the game.

When Daric Barton, the A's first baseman, didn't get to Alex Avila's bouncer to his right that he should have, Martinez scored from second — an all-important third run.

“He doesn't do that often,” Melvin said of Barton.

Martinez's second attempt to score from second didn't go as well. He was thrown out at the plate in the sixth by Josh Reddick on Omar Infante's one-out single to right.

In the end, it didn't matter, though, if the Tigers led by three or four — considering who started for them.

“Without a doubt,” today's Game 2 starter, Justin Verlander, said of Scherzer, “the best pitcher in the American League.”

Teammates must keep picking up Miguel Cabrera if Tigers are to thrive

October 5, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Some sadist who enjoys watching baseball teams sweat decided to give us the five-game playoff series.

As the folks at M.I.T. will confirm, lose the opening game of a five-gamer and you now are obliged to beat a good baseball team three of the next four matches if you hope to advance in baseball's postseason tournament. It's a pressurized assignment. And manager Jim Leyland's team pretty much confirmed Friday night the degree to which nerves, and percentages, chew at teams in October as they beat the A's, 3-2, in Game 1 of their Division Series at O.co Coliseum.

They were dealing with a stacked deck in Game 1, playing on the road, against an A's team that had ended the regular schedule playing about as well as any club in the big leagues.

But an inning into Friday's contest, the Tigers suddenly had two in the plus column: a 3-0 lead, and Max Scherzer on the mound, pitching like the Cy Young Award winner he probably will be when the ballots are revealed next month.

"He's always tough, he won 21 games," said Bob Melvin, the A's manager, as he tried to suppress the bitterness of losing yet another playoff game to the Tigers and to Leyland. "If you don't see him that often, his fastball gets on you a bit quicker. He has such good extension."

Complementing Cabrera

The Tigers won Friday for two reasons, one of which came as no surprise: Scherzer is the Kentucky Derby winner in the Tigers' starting pitching stable. He is the horse who carried the Tigers the farthest and in the most fabled of fashions in 2013.

And while he did his job Friday, pitching brilliantly through seven innings, it was on offense that the Tigers got their essential lesson.

They must win with extra-base hits from batters other than Miguel Cabrera.

There was the secret to their three-run, first-inning outburst that became their sole assault against A's pitching. They got two doubles in the first, by Austin Jackson and Victor Martinez, which, with the help of a walk and two singles, handed Scherzer a lead he and his bullpen mates wrapped and ribboned into a first-game playoff gift for Tigers owner Mike Ilitch and a few million fans back home.

Those three runs were going to be it for Leyland's guys. They have had their problems with the scoreboard this year, particularly since Cabrera's swing began losing some of its old pop when groin and lower-abdomen ills struck during the past couple of months. And they did nothing but etch zeroes for the remainder of Game 1.

"We jumped 'em real quick, and then we couldn't get a lot else going," said Leyland, whose team has gone five consecutive games minus a home run. "And we're going to need to do that better as the series goes on."

No question.

Cabrera had a single in the Tigers' first-inning uprising. But that was it. It has been his routine of late — singles — because of the groin's bad relationship with Cabrera's bat.

And so it will continue to be incumbent on the Tigers to find other extra-base heroes in Leyland's batting order if they care to build on this victory.

Max effort

The Tigers caught a break Friday night. Three runs doesn't often hold up against the A's. But not often do the A's, or any team in baseball, expect to do much against the blender-blade pitches Scherzer was tossing at the A's in Game 1.

A national audience got to study Scherzer more in detail Friday. And you can expect an end to the chatter about Scherzer's big season, with a 21-3 record on the billboard, being fueled by cushiony games in which Scherzer got a surplus of scoring.

The runs had little to do with 21-3. And they had even less to do with facts that were on display, in living color, Friday. Scherzer throws some of the meanest, nastiest, most unforgiving stuff in baseball. He buried the A's

with a stream of early strikes, which was generally followed by change-ups and sliders that Scherzer turned into mayhem.

He struck out 11 batters in seven innings. He allowed three hits, one an infield single. It was followed by the lone poison dart the A's were able to fling: a seventh-inning fastball that Yoenis Cespedes launched into the balcony in left field for a two-run homer that turned Detroit's 3-0 lead into a 3-2 affair.

Based on some of the Tigers' bullpen mishaps in 2013, you could all but hear knees knocking all across sofas in Michigan.

Drew Smyly and Joaquin Benoit made sure the Wolverine state's trauma wards were not overly taxed Friday when they closed out the A's. Smyly showed his usual poise. And the tribal chief, Benoit, whose age and savvy have made him one of the team's three most valuable players (Cabrera and Scherzer are one and two), was good for a four-out finishing act that allowed the Tigers to survive that all-important, all-vital, and sometimes all-determining, Game 1.

Tigers' Max Scherzer gets tough after Yoenis Cespedes' homer

October 5, 2013

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Go ahead, talk about his strikeouts. Max Scherzer had 11 of them.

And with five more from the bullpen, the Tigers' pitchers struck out 16 on Friday night while winning Game 1 of the American League Division Series, 3-2, against the Oakland A's.

Or be wowed by the fact Scherzer allowed only three hits in seven innings. As the Tigers' starter, he did that, too.

But where he proved the most about himself — even to himself — was after the two-run home run by Yoenis Cespedes in the seventh inning that turned the Tigers' 3-0 lead into a one-run game.

“The wheels could have come off,” Scherzer said about being left in the game at that point.

But they didn't.

After a brief visit to the mound by manager Jim Leyland that lasted only as long as it took Scherzer to tell him “I have something left — and for Leyland to reply “then it's yours” — the Tigers' starter got back to business.

He retired the next three batters, making sure the bullpen took over in the eighth with a lead.

The pitch that Cespedes hit out “caught too much of the plate, and he took it deep, and that's just something that happens,” Scherzer said.

“It's baseball, it's pitching, you move on. But from there, I was able to settle down and get three big outs in that situation,” he said. “The crowd was roaring, the fans were on their feet, and to get those outs was big.”

While Leyland was walking to the mound, though, Scherzer had a feeling he wasn't going to be yanked.

“Usually,” said Scherzer, “he makes a signal pretty early if wants a pitcher and I didn't see him do that. There are times he'll come out and ask you how you're doing.”

This was one of those “how are you doing” times.

“I told him I thought I had something left in the tank, and that I could still execute all my pitches, even though there were three lefties coming up,” Scherzer said.

Leyland said, “When I went out there, and he told me he was OK, that was good enough for me.”

With that, Leyland turned around and walked back to the Tigers' dugout.

“So that was the conversation,” Scherzer said. “I just took the mentality of battling through that inning” — which he did with a fly out, a pop out and a strikeout.

It was a triumphant way for him to exit the game.

“The last 15 pitches indicate how your outing goes,” Scherzer said. “The wheels could have come flying off, but I thought I kept my composure. Like I said, those last 15 pitches mean a lot — and when you can do it in the post-season, that means even more.”

Tigers' steady closer Joaquin Benoit works overtime to put away A's

October 5, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Someone approached Joaquin Benoit in the Tigers clubhouse late Friday night. They dryly suggested that Benoit was like the office guy flipping off the lights, shutting the door, wrapping up another nondescript day on the job.

“Well, if you want to call it that way,” Benoit said, smirking at the suggestion Friday night’s Game 1 Division Series victory, a 3-2 triumph over the A’s at O.co Coliseum, was in any way casual.

Of course, it wasn’t. It’s simply that Benoit, the Tigers closer, so often puts away games in clean, crisp fashion. It’s in mark contrast to a situation the Tigers were dealing with a year ago, when Jose Valverde was in various stages of self-immolation that begot a long stretch of Tigers anxieties.

Benoit had to finish a game and clamp down on a string of A’s hitters who can slam baseballs into the heavens and, in a snap, turn an opponent’s tight lead into a deficit.

But he wasn’t about to let the A’s pull any home-field, home-crowd heroics Friday. Not even during an overtime save assignment that began with two out in the eighth, when Benoit was summoned to take on A’s star Josh Donaldson, whom he put away on a pop-up to third base.

In the ninth, Benoit was asked to deal with Brandon Moss, Yoenis Cespedes (he had hit a two-run homer off starter Max Scherzer for the A’s only two runs) and Josh Reddick.

Benoit all but pulled a couple of Old West pistols from their holsters. He gunned down three mean A’s batters on three consecutive strikeouts, bedeviling them with a fusillade of fastballs and change-ups.

“Today, I changed my approach,” Benoit said as he stood before his locker in the Tigers clubhouse, sifting through iPhone messages and calls that had been received since he nailed down yet another save.

“I tried to keep them off-balance. And to keep them from looking away.”

Benoit tends to stick with a standard mix as he wends his way through late-inning lineups. He throws his fastball, sometimes as fast as 95- or 96-mph, and always with a particular quadrant in mind.

He also loves his slider. It behaves in the manner of his fastball before it veers in a direction that can confound hitters.

But in his Friday night cameo, Benoit bagged the slider. He went instead with his change-up.

The fastball set the tone. It arranged expectations in the minds of A’s hitters, who also had to be wary of Benoit’s slider.

The change-up simply was a third weapon, a different dimension. It helped keep Benoit’s pitches from leaving the ballpark, or, in the ninth inning, from even finding their way into play.

“Good thing to get that first one,” said Benoit, who at 36, is having the finest of his three sterling seasons in Detroit’s bullpen. “Just a great game.”

And not a bad save by a guy who continues to add to an ever-growing collection.

News and Views: Tigers expose Bartolo Colon's fastball

October 5, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — Some News and Views as the Tigers began their drive for a fifth World Series championship late Friday night out in Oakland.

News: The Tigers wasted little time perking up an offense that failed to make the trip to Miami for the final series of the regular season.

Views: You just knew this was a distinct possibility.

The Tigers have had success over the years against A's Game 1 starter Bartolo Colon, who, by the way, hadn't pitched in a playoff game since he was a much younger man, and an ever-so-slightly lighter man.

He was off his game in the first inning, and the Tigers took advantage — swinging early and often, and ripping a steady stream of fastballs to open a 3-0 first-inning lead and, for a bit, take a raucous O.co Coliseum crowd out of the equation. They actually scored as many runs that inning as Don Kelly, Ramon Santiago and Co. did in the three forgettable games against the Marlins. Colon, himself, allowed only four earned runs all of September.

Colon even showed some potential jitters in that opening frame, when he nearly plunked Torii Hunter, then actually did on the very next pitch.

He hit exactly zero batters in the regular season.

Colon, 40, wisely changed the game plan after that, going to way more breaking balls. And that worked, as he was rock solid the next five innings — as the Tigers, in turn, did what they so often have before, going cold after an early-game outburst. But the damage already was done, as Colon's counterpart, Tigers ace-2.0 Max Scherzer, was flat-out dealing.

News: Tigers manager Jim Leyland sure looks like a genius for choosing Scherzer to start the playoff opener.

Views: I still argue that it wouldn't have mattered. The Tigers have three horses in Scherzer, Justin Verlander and Anibal Sanchez that are rivaled perhaps only by the Dodgers trio of Clayton Kershaw, Zack Greinke and Hyun-Jin Ryu. Really, the Tigers probably could've started them in any order the first three games, and it might not have made a lick of difference.

But Scherzer, still, rewarded his manager's faith just like he did when he got the nod to start the All-Star Game — with a darting fastball that closed in on 100 mph multiple times in the early innings, and a change-up that was almost unhittable.

The only hit he allowed through five innings was a Yoenis Cespedes triple in the second inning; that come on a rare mistake, a hanging curve. Even then, Scherzer stranded him there, striking out Josh Reddick, then getting Stephen Vogt on a liner to end the threat.

Scherzer's most impressive stretch was the fourth, when he struck out the side — and what a side it was: the 3-4-5 of Josh Donaldson, Brandon Moss (who single-handedly demolished the Tigers during an August series) and Cespedes (who later homered on Scherzer's only other mistake).

The Tigers right-hander had 11 strikeouts through seven wildly impressive innings, utterly frustrating an A's bunch that picked up right where it left off in last year's ALDS: griping at the home-plate umpire.

News: Victor Martinez continued his hot hitting. He's been hotter than pretty much everybody in baseball since July 1.

Views: And you have to feel so happy for him.

In his first year as a Tiger, he was a big part of the team that went to the AL Championship Series against the Rangers.

But last year, with the Tigers in the World Series, he was home, in Florida, still recovering from a freak ACL injury that wiped out his whole season.

That had to have been brutal for Martinez, who then found it best not to be around the team.

In his first postseason at-bat since, he ripped a two-out double up the left-center-field gap and eventually came around to score. In his third at-bat, in the sixth, he lined a single up the middle, went to second on Alex Avila's single, then was cut down at home on another tough-to-fathom waving from coach Tom Brookens at third.

Keeping Martinez at third would've loaded the bases with one out for Andy Dirks, who, granted, is no sure bet these days to deliver. As it was, he popped out to end the inning.

News: Monday's Game 3, a potential clincher, will be on MLB Network, meaning WOW! Cable subscribers, and those who don't have the premium AT&T U-verse package, won't get to see the game.

Views: At least the game is at 1 p.m. Monday, when most folks will be at work, anyway — and settling for ESPN GameCast updates, or a radio stream of Dan Dickerson and Jim Price.

Still, it'd be nice if Major League Baseball accommodated those in Detroit and Oakland by simulcasting the game in those markets on a channel everybody gets. This is the postseason, after all.

It won't happen, of course. I even asked.

MLB Network is correct in saying most in Detroit have the channel — as do nearly 100 million cable customers in the U.S.

I will say this: At least MLB Network knows how to do baseball games. TBS may get it right sometime in 2060 or so.

Who's Sonny Gray? Tigers are about to find out

October 5, 2013

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — So who is Sonny Gray, the pitcher the Tigers will face Saturday in Game 2 of the American League Division Series?

It's a pertinent question — but one that usually doesn't have to be asked during the postseason — because the Tigers haven't faced him before.

Gray didn't make his major-league debut until July 10, which was after the Tigers' only other visit to the Bay Area this year. And Gray didn't start any of the four games the A's played in Detroit, either.

Well, first of all, Gray is a 23-year-old right-hander out of Vanderbilt, who allowed more than two runs in just two of his 10 starts for Oakland. In four others, he allowed two. In the other four, he allowed fewer than two. Right-handed hitters batted just .198 against him; their slugging average was .267.

So he's extremely tough on right-handers. But the A's believe he's capable of being tough, period.

"I think he will do extremely well," manager Bob Melvin said. "We wouldn't have put him in that spot if we didn't think so.

"He's pitched in some big games, whether it's in the big leagues or at school. He's been in some high-profile places and pitched in some high-profile games — in particular the game in which we clinched the division."

"You insulate within our preparation and go out there and pitch whether you're an emotional guy or you're not — which he can be.

"But I think it actually helps him."

Gray said his previous biggest game was in the College World Series for Vanderbilt — and as it could have been in that game, adrenaline might be a factor.

"Just to harness that," said Gray, "and to use it to my advantage is probably going to be a key to the game. Not to try to pitch to their weaknesses, but go with my strengths, go with what got me here ... if I'm able to do that, then it will probably end up going more our way.

"If not, we'll see what happens."

Not knowing Gray is a potential disadvantage for the Tigers.

"We can only go with what we've heard about from our scouts and what we've seen on our video," manager Jim Leyland said. "We know he's extremely talented, but we'll be ready."

What the scouts say is probably more important than the video, though.

"Scouts see his body language," Leyland said. "They see if he gets upset if he gives up a couple of runs or if somebody makes an error.

"You don't really see that on the video."

One more thing about Gray: He was 3-1 at home this season with a 1.99 ERA, compared to 2-2 with a 3.86 ERA on the road — "so at the end of the day," said Melvin, "it was more about comfortability at home when we had to make the decision."

Six-eight change

In Friday night's batting order, Alex Avila hit sixth and Andy Dirks hit eighth. During the regular season, however, Avila hit eighth in 48 games that he started, but sixth only 12 times.

Why the switch?

"I put Alex up a little bit because of his numbers (4-for-8 with two home runs off Bartolo Colon)," Leyland said. "I put Dirks down a little to see if that relaxes him a little."

Dirks finished the season in a 1-for-15 skid in his last five games.

Peralta for Game 2?

That's the decision the Tigers will have to make about left field in tonight's game.

"If you think this guy is going to hang a curve, you play Peralta," Leyland said. "If he's not going to hang a curve, you probably play Dirks."

When asked he would be comfortable with Peralta at shortstop, Leyland said, "absolutely."

From Verlander

About the 13-12 season he had ...

“We aren’t robots, things aren’t always perfect, and this is a season that opened my eyes to that fact,” said tonight’s Tigers starter, Justin Verlander. “The last couple of years came pretty easy to me. This year wasn’t like that.”

Around the horn

The Tigers sent a four-pitcher contingent to the Florida Instructional League — to either stay ready, as in the cases of Evan Reed and Darin Downs, or hopefully get back to throwing, as in the cases of Bruce Rondon and Phil Coke.

“I’m a little disappointed that we don’t have Rondon,” Leyland said. “But I don’t have time to worry about that now.”

... Jeremy Bonderman, meanwhile, is not at the Instructional League. He went home to Washington. ...

Carlos Guillen, local band highlight Tigers' Game 3 pregame festivities

October 5, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — On Monday, it'll be the Tigers' fans turn to make the noise.

When the American League Division Series with the A's shifts to Detroit for Game 3, former Tigers All-Star shortstop Carlos Guillen will throw out the ceremonial first pitch and a local band will perform the national anthem.

"Star-Spangled Banner" honors go to Detroit natives Joshua Epstein and Daniel Zott of the band Dale Earnhardt Jr. Jr., which has a new album ("The Speed of Things") coming out the following day.

Epstein and Zott are indie-pop, got their start playing in a Royal Oak basement — and, yes, Dale Earnhardt Jr. is a fan of theirs, even though the band's name was a joke, and not a pledged allegiance to the race-car driver.

Game 3 is set for 1:07 p.m., and there are tickets — including some pairs of seats — still available for the Jarrod Parker-Anibal Sanchez pitching matchup. All fans will receive a free Tigers rally towel.

Cabrera shrugs, but concerns about his injuries grow as Game 1 vs. A's looms

October 5, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif.

Armchair doctors abound in sports. Most of us have taken our turns there, even if medical school transcripts can't quite be located.

And most of us have gotten involved in assessing Miguel Cabrera's situation, which, in this view, is the player issue that must be overcome if the Tigers this month are to play in another World Series.

Cabrera waltzed into the interview room Thursday at Oakland Coliseum and looked as if he had just finished the season hitting .400.

"It's media time," he chirped as he strode to the podium, wearing an off-white Tigers cap etched in a bright orange "D."

He was upbeat. He smiled as easily as he talked. He looked like anything but a player who for two months has been dealing with a miserably sore lower body.

Cabrera's blue-sky assurances that he was fine gave way to darker words:

"After the season, I can rest," he said, meaning the playoffs are a time to bite the bullet — November and December are a time to heal.

Jim Leyland arrived a half-hour after Cabrera departed and the Tigers manager was a master of balancing competing tasks: leveling about Cabrera's injury, while painting it in the brightest of hues.

Looking in the crystal ball

Leyland said Cabrera is "getting better." And then he said "he's nowhere near 100 percent." In a non-news moment, Leyland acknowledged: "I truly believe, for a while, it was tough for Miguel to use his lower half." This was followed by the skipper's firm view that "he is getting better — but he's nowhere near 100 percent." So, make of that what you will. But when the Tigers and A's opened the Division Series on Friday, we were prepared for about the same Cabrera we have seen since a conveyor belt loaded with lower-body ailments dumped its ills on a Tigers superstar during the regular season's second half.

If he can pull inside fastballs and breaking pitches for power during Game 1, Leyland will have been on to something when he said Cabrera last weekend in Miami was driving the ball with his old flair.

But if he cannot lay into pitches with Cabrera's one-of-a-kind fury, the Tigers artillery will have been reduced, perhaps in series- and season-ending fashion.

Fans are right to wonder just how this situation became so dire. What could have, and should have, been done to protect a man who might go down as the greatest and most important hitter in Tigers history?

We will get — hopefully — a full and detailed account at the end of the season once Leyland, front-office chief Dave Dombrowski, doctors, trainers, and Cabrera tell us in sequential fashion what happened and how an initial back strain led to an injury that has demolished Cabrera's power and left him limping around the bases.

As best as conversations have informed us — they include some pointed questions Thursday to Cabrera and to Leyland — a rough time line can be deduced.

Lingering on

Cabrera had back problems in July that briefly knocked him from the lineup. He next had hip-flexor issues that the Tigers medics said were shared with an abdominal-wall ailment.

Later, as August's maladies moved into September, Cabrera's affliction expanded into the groin.

What is clear, and Cabrera admitted as much Thursday, is he will not recover until a long offseason offers him extended rest and a chance for his body to bounce back.

Hindsight, second-guessing — whatever you care to call it — will invite questions about how this might have been averted. Specifically, should Cabrera have been shipped to the disabled list in July or August, before this injury became all but incapacitating?

The Tigers and their medical team (trainer Kevin Rand, who with the counsel of doctors provides necessary physical facts) had determined in late July and early August that Cabrera did not need the disabled list. His

situation was not serious, they said. A few days rest would be fine, but Cabrera did not require 15 days on the shelf.

It must be mentioned that this coincided with a critical point on the Tigers schedule. They had games on the road against the Indians and Yankees, and the Tigers wanted to avoid any slipups, any forfeiture of a lead they had steadily built and hoped to craft into something much larger, at which time Cabrera would have plenty of time to rest.

Not for one moment, based on their consultations with medical professionals, was Cabrera's long-term health placed in jeopardy by the Tigers. They do not operate in that manner. Nothing in their past dealings, with any player at any level, would invite any doubt about ethics or the responsibility to Cabrera and to his long-term career.

But, clearly, this situation turned more serious and more painful for Cabrera, and more ominous for the Tigers. And when it worsened, it converted a baseball demolitions expert into a singles hitter who for eight weeks has been running the bases as if he were a hobbled thoroughbred.

The world will see beginning tonight if one of baseball's all-time glorious hitters can function at anything close to the celestial level on which Cabrera, when healthy, performs.

If he can come even close, the Tigers have a lovely shot at another World Series bid.

If not, the team will be heading home. Cabrera will retreat to Miami for the healing rest he requires, and could not seem to get during the 2013 regular season.

It's likely Jim Leyland will manage Tigers for another year or two

October 5, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — I don't know how long Jim Leyland will stick as Tigers manager. But a man who turns 69 in December is reaching for his car keys. He's getting ready to go.

That could mean another year with the Tigers, at which time Leyland would be within weeks of 70. It might mean two more seasons, which more likely would sate a man and a manager who loves his job.

Or, he might be here for an indefinite stretch. But I would doubt it, seriously. One or two more years is the guess, even if the Tigers squeeze a world championship out of this autumn's playoffs mystery, which began Friday against the A's at O.co Coliseum.

Leyland will want to end his happiest chapter as a manager, his years in Detroit, on the best possible note. He will try to be fair to the team and himself.

He is objective enough about himself to know that as long as he loves his job and has his health and energy, he is as good as the Tigers can have in the manager's office. Lots of fans will scream, but it's true. You can't do better than Leyland as a manager, and almost any team in baseball will tell you the same.

But he also knows you can stay too long. Players can hang on past the expiration date. And so can managers. He knew a year ago he was close to the threshold there. The Tigers, prior to closing out September with a division-winning surge, were in trouble, and so was the skipper.

Their late comeback and toppling of the White Sox kept Leyland in his job and sent the Tigers to the World Series. It ensured Terry Francona would be managing the Indians in 2013, and not the team he had most hoped to lead if his friend Leyland was no longer around — Detroit.

Recharged and ready

Leyland has been revitalized by his time in Detroit. He did the hard thing 14 years ago when he admitted he was burned out by managing and left Colorado and a few million dollars on the table.

He wanted to be at home with his wife and then-small children. He wanted time to be a person. But after six years away, he was even more ready to manage, especially if the team he adored, the Tigers, happened to call. His boss during their days with the Marlins, Dave Dombrowski, was on the phone and got his answer during a dinner at the Capital Grille in Troy. Leyland was recharged and ready.

He has teamed with Dombrowski to make this the best stretch of sustained baseball quality in Tigers history. The team has won. The stars have flourished. The crowds have been lusty. The franchise has never had a higher profile.

They still lack a world championship. And, as you scrutinize a team that entered Friday with an ailing superstar in Miguel Cabrera, it's a percentage bet Dombrowski and Leyland will never win one here. But the in-season and year-round phenomenon of the Tigers and their hold on Detroit and Michigan is compelling. It's a reality owner Mike Ilitch financed, Dombrowski constructed, and Leyland has overseen.

Throw in the simple fact Leyland loves managing, and he is in no hurry to drive home to Pittsburgh for a baseball-flavored retirement.

Not ready to go

It's the other point that makes you wonder when Leyland might decide enough is enough. He will not pull a Joe Paterno and decide that as long as he likes his job he will hang around, in perpetuity. He understands 70 is 70. His best friend in baseball, Tony La Russa, called it quits when he was 67. La Russa got no more or less from his job than Leyland and it would be difficult to imagine two men of shared spirit not sharing in reasonable fashion the same thoughts on retirement age.

But right now, even if this team managed to steal a World Series, it seems unlikely Leyland would pack it in. His health is cooperating. His love for baseball and for managing the Tigers is obvious. He probably stays for another season, maybe two, if wife Katie says: Go for it.

MLB Network, WOW! Remain at odds, costing some Tigers fans chance to watch Game 3

October 5, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — The third game of the Tigers-A's American League Division Series will be broadcast on MLB Network.

And that means many Tigers fans — the exact number aren't known, though clearly it's significant — won't be able to watch the game.

WideOpenWest! Cable does not carry MLB Network, and AT&T U-Verse only has it on its premium package, meaning only customers who pay more get the channel.

"It's a struggle," said Robert DiNardo, vice president and general manager for WOW! In Michigan. "We're Tigers fans. I'm a big Tiger fan.

"We will not have the game on Monday."

DiNardo said WOW! Has had extensive talks with Major League Baseball, and talks are ongoing. But the parties have yet to agree on a deal since the network launched Jan. 1, 2009.

There are two big reasons for the impasse, DiNardo said. One is the cost, and the other is the level of service the cable company would be expected to put the network on. On a premium tier, those who want the network can pay for it, "and it doesn't punish everyone," DiNardo said.

DiNardo said while WOW! Has many Tigers fans as customers, there also are many who aren't — and, thus, the MLB Network, he said, is a "niche channel," as opposed to the popular NFL Network, which WOW! Recently added to its lineup. MLB Network is in nearly 100 million homes nationwide, but it's not a widely requested channel, he said.

Certainly, though, that will change when customers realize they won't get to watch a Tigers playoff game. The same thing happened a year ago, when a Tigers-A's playoff game also ended up on MLB Network.

"We are extremely disappointed that a portion of the Tigers' fan base may be unable to watch a Tigers postgame game for the second year in a row because WOW! Has refused to carry MLB Network," Lorraine Fisher, MLB Network media relations director, said in a statement. "WOW! Has been offered the same terms to carry MLB Network that 200 other providers have already accepted.

"Almost all providers — including AT&T U-verse, Bright House, Charter, Comcast, DirecTV and Dish Network — in the Detroit market aside from WOW! Make MLB Network available to their customers."

DiNardo wouldn't say exactly how many customers WOW! Has in Michigan, but it's known WOW! Is a top-10 cable provider nationwide. He did say it is big in Metro Detroit (49 communities) and Lansing (100 communities).

He also conceded adding MLB Network wouldn't considerably alter customers' bills, since the average-customer pays more than \$100 a month already. But, no question, there would be an adjustment. He said half of the company's expenses are on programming, and half those expenses are tied to sports networks.

"We do have to care about the existing customers we have," DiNardo said.

WOW! Also does not carry the NHL or NBA Network.

The rest of the Tigers-A's games are on TBS, which is on basic cable and available in the vast majority of homes.

Should the Tigers advance to the American League Championship Series or the World Series, all those games will be on Fox.

Detroit Tigers' Jim Leyland defends third-base coach Tom Brookens' call to wave Victor Martinez home

October 5, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – Oakland A's right fielder Josh Reddick is a Gold Glove winner.

Detroit Tigers designated hitter Victor Martinez found that out the hard way in Game 1 of the American League Division Series.

With runners on first and second with one out, Martinez attempted to score on Omar Infante's single to right field in the sixth inning.

Waved home by third-base coach Tom Brookens, Martinez was gunned down at the plate after Reddick's strong throw reached A's catcher Stephen Vogt nearly five feet before Martinez's arrival.

Said A's manager Bob Melvin: "We've seen (Reddick) do it often, so it doesn't surprise you."

Based on Martinez's reaction when he was called out, it didn't surprise him, either.

"Yeah, I was out," he said. "It was an easy out."

It was a tense moment in Detroit's 3-2 victory over Oakland in the ALDS.

Generally speaking, the Tigers will oftentimes applaud Brookens for his aggressive calls at third base. But this was a decision he likely wishes he could've taken back.

If Brookens had held Martinez at third, the bases would've been loaded with only one out with Andy Dirks and Jose Iglesias due up.

Instead, Detroit was left with runners on second and first and two outs. Dirks then popped out to third to end the inning and the Tigers walked away with no runs, despite three straight one-out singles.

"To me, that's one of those where (if) you send him and he doesn't make it, you wish you'd held him," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "But if you hold him and the next guy pops up and you don't get the run, you wish you would have sent him."

Given Martinez's overall lack of speed, coupled with Reddick's strong outfield arm, it's certainly reasonable to question the call. But Leyland said the correct decision was made.

"If the next guy or two guys pop it up and you don't get the run, you wish he'd have taken the shot," Leyland said.

Game 1 win looms large because difference between Detroit Tigers, Oakland A's appears to be very small

October 5, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – Max Scherzer was a little bit better than Bartolo Colon this season. He also was a little bit better in Game 1 of the American League Division Series.

The Detroit Tigers outscored the Oakland Athletics by a slim margin during the 2013 season. They did so Friday night.

Miguel Cabrera battled through his ongoing injury issues but was not 100 percent throughout the final month of the season. That didn't change in this one.

The Tigers expected their playoff matchup with the A's to be a grind.

That's exactly what Game 1 was.

But that's what makes the 3-2 victory for the Tigers so important. These two teams appear to be as evenly matched as they come. For the Tigers to take Game 1 by such a close margin, on the road in front of a sellout crowd of more than 48,000 fans, well, that says a lot about their performance Friday night.

"This is playoff baseball," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "It was a great game. Maybe you figure the runs were going to be stingy, and they were."

Game 1 set the tone for the series in a good way for fans who love edge-of-their-seats baseball, but it didn't swing the pendulum either way beyond what a 1-0 series lead means. That's not to underestimate the importance of winning the first game. That is huge. But neither team showed any glaring weaknesses that can be exploited in the coming days.

Heading into the series, it seemed possible that Game 1 might be a barometer for the Tigers, who struggled to score runs throughout the month of September.

Would they swing the bats extremely well? Could they pile up some hits? Or would their struggles continue?

The answer was: a little bit of both. The Tigers pounced on Bartolo Colon for three runs in the top of the first inning. That's impressive against a pitcher who should appear on a good number of Cy Young ballots. But the Tigers benefited on an RBI single by Alex Avila that could have been ruled an error on first baseman Daric Barton. That made it 3-0 two outs into the game.

Twenty-five outs later, the Tigers still had those three runs.

The Tigers finished with 10 hits. That's pretty good. But getting hits wasn't a problem for the Tigers in September. Scoring runs was. The Tigers need to figure out how to score in more than one inning, how to tack on an add-on run here or there.

A lot of eyes were on star third baseman Miguel Cabrera. How would he fare after five days off? How big of an effect would that have on his health? Would he still be noticeably slowed by his injury issues? Would he be revitalized by the rest? Would his timing be off?

But Cabrera appeared to be about the same as he has been in recent weeks, which is either good news or bad news depending on what each individual Tigers fan expected.

Max Scherzer was spectacular. In seven innings, he allowed just three hits: a two-run home run and a triple by Yoenis Cespedes and an infield single by Brandon Moss. Scherzer struck out 11, walked two and showed why Leyland chose him to start Game 1.

"When you're pitching against a postseason team like the A's, you have to bring your game," Scherzer said.

"Tonight, I was able to pitch effectively and pitch well against their left-handed hitters, and that's the reason I had success."

The bullpen was excellent. Drew Smyly struck out two and walked one before giving way to Joaquin Benoit, who struck out the side in the ninth inning and retired all four batters he faced.

But the A's showed no signs of going away. Of course, Game 2 is huge, especially for the A's, who certainly don't want to head to Detroit trailing two games to none. But it stacks up to be another close game, with Justin

Verlander starting against the team he dominated in Game 5 of the Division Series last season and the Tigers facing Sonny Gray, a pitcher they've never seen before.

So, what was the lesson to learn from Game 1? That this series has the potential to be an absolute grind for both teams.

The A's were three games better than the Tigers during the regular season. The Tigers are one game better than the A's in the postseason. That one game looms large, especially since the difference between these two teams seems so small.

Max Scherzer strikes out 11, Detroit Tigers make early rally stand up in 3-2 Game 1 win over Athletics

October 5, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – The Detroit Tigers couldn't get anything going offensively after the first inning. Max Scherzer made sure the Oakland Athletics never got started.

The Tigers scored three runs in the first inning Friday night and Scherzer turned in an outstanding performance as the Tigers held on for a 3-2 victory over the A's in Game 1 of the American League Division Series.

Scherzer struck out 11 and allowed just three hits in seven innings. He walked two.

The Tigers scored two runs off A's ace Bartolo Colon by the time the game was four batters old, then tacked on another run in the first inning to take a 3-0 lead. Miguel Cabrera and Alex Avila had RBI singles in the inning. Scherzer demonstrated why he's the favorite to win the AL Cy Young Award this season by dominating the A's early on. The A's hit one ball out of the infield through four innings. That ball resulted in a triple by Yoenis Cespedes, the only hit allowed by Scherzer through the first six innings.

After Brandon Moss reached on an infield single – the second hit of the game off Scherzer – to start the seventh, Cespedes crushed a 95-mph fastball from Scherzer for a two-run home run to left field to cut the deficit to 3-2. The sellout crowd of 48,401 lost its collective mind at that point as Tigers manager Jim Leyland made a quick visit to the mound but left Scherzer in the game. Scherzer retired the next three batters he faced before giving way to the bullpen to start the eighth inning.

KEY TO THE GAME

Colon didn't seem to be himself in the first inning, and the Tigers took advantage of it. They were fortunate to do so since Colon settled down and held them scoreless in his final five innings of work. Colon allowed 10 hits, struck out four and did not issue a walk in six innings.

The Tigers got their final run of the first inning on a ball that could have been fielded by first baseman Daric Barton, which gave the Tigers an extra run and a 3-0 lead.

TIGERS HIGHLIGHTS

-- The Tigers got on the board quickly against Colon as the first two hitters to step to the plate in the game eventually scored. Austin Jackson doubled to the corner in right field before Colon hit Torii Hunter with a pitch. Miguel Cabrera followed with a single up the middle to score Jackson. Hunter scored when Prince Fielder hit into a double play. Victor Martinez doubled and scored when Alex Avila singled under the glove of Barton at first base.

-- Scherzer struck out the heart of the A's order in order in the fourth inning to give him seven strikeouts through four innings.

-- Drew Smyly struck out two and walked one in relief of Scherzer. Joaquin Benoit entered with one on and two out in the eighth inning and induced an infield pop-up off the bat of Josh Donaldson, then pitched the ninth to earn the save.

TIGERS LOWLIGHTS

-- Andy Dirks appeared to get a bad jump on a ball sent to deep left field by Yoenis Cespedes with one out in the second inning. Cespedes ended up on third base with a triple, the first hit of the game, but Scherzer retired the next two batters to strand him there. Dirks raced a long way for a high foul ball off the bat of Jed Lowrie in the sixth inning, but the ball bounced off the heel of his glove.

-- The Tigers had three consecutive singles in the sixth inning but did not score a run. With runners on first and second with one out, Omar Infante singled to right field. But Josh Reddick gunned down Martinez at the plate for the second out of the inning. Colon then got Dirks to pop up to escape the jam. Third-base coach Tom Brookens would likely want to have that call back. There was just one out, Reddick has a great arm and Martinez is a plodder.

-- Martinez, Infante and Avila each finished with two hits for the Tigers.

OTHER GAME NOTES

- When Colon hit Hunter with a pitch in the first inning, it was his first hit batsman of the season. He did not hit a batter with a pitch in 190-plus innings in the regular season.
- After Cabrera struck out for the second out of the fifth inning, Hunter thought the A's weren't paying attention and broke for second base. Catcher Stephen Vogt got the attention of Colon, who threw to second base. Hunter appeared to beat the tag by shortstop Jed Lowrie, but he was called out for the final out of the inning.
- Cabrera finished 1-for-4 with the RBI single that scored the first run of the game. He was clearly still bothered by the groin injury and walked gingerly back to the dugout after grounding out to third base to lead off the eighth inning.
- Jhonny Peralta pinch hit for Dirks with one out in the top of the ninth inning against left-hander Sean Doolittle. He flied out to right field and was replaced in the bottom of the inning by Don Kelly.

Blog recap: Max Scherzer dazzles, Detroit Tigers hold off late rally from Oakland A's for 3-2 win in Game 1

October 5, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

FINAL: TIGERS 3, A'S 2

Game. Set. Match. The Tigers take Game 1 of the AL Division Series with a 3-2 win in Oakland after Benoit pitches a flawless 1-2-3 ninth inning to convert a four-out save.

Fresh off a 21-win regular season, Scherzer picked up his first win of the postseason with a seven-inning gem that saw him punch out 11 and give up only two runs.

For those of you who stayed up late in Detroit and followed along live, I tip my cap. You're a trooper. For those morning birds just tuning in, enjoy the game recap below. This game had it all. You won't be disappointed. That's a promise.

EIGHTH INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 2

Smyly put the tying run on base with a one-out walk to Crisp, but struck out Lowrie before being relieved by Benoit, who induced an inning-ending popup.

It's an interesting call to bring in Benoit right here – mostly because Leyland strongly dislikes asking a closer to get four outs. But that's exactly what Benoit will have to do tonight.

As expected, Scherzer was done after seven innings and 118 pitches. Brilliant start. He gave up two runs and three hits over seven innings. Struck out 11. Hard to ask for more.

SEVENTH INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 2

We have ourselves a ballgame, folks. Scherzer tried to challenge Cespedes with a 95-mph fastball and Cespedes sent it over the left-field wall – a two-run shot that cut Detroit's lead to 3-2.

This is exactly why A's manager Bob Melvin was ecstatic to pencil Cespedes in his lineup today. As of yesterday, it was unclear if Cespedes could play today due to a soreness in his right shoulder.

SIXTH INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

Brookens will certainly want this one back. With one out, Brookens waved home Martinez from second on Infante's shallow single to right. Bad idea.

A's right fielder Josh Reddick is a Gold Glove winner. Now we know why. Martinez was a sitting duck at home as Reddick's throw reached Vogt nearly five feet before Martinez. It was an aggressive call by Brookens, and a bad one.

It left the Tigers with two outs and runners on first and second instead of one out and the bases loaded. The next batter, Andy Dirks, popped out to third to end the inning.

FIFTH INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

Apologies to those of you forced to watch the telecast on TBS. They clearly botched a key play in the fifth when Torii Hunter was "caught" stealing second to end the inning. But unless you're at the Coliseum, chances are, you missed it. Here's how it went down: Hunter reached base on a bunt single before Cabrera flied out.

With two outs, Hunter caught Colon napping on the mound and bolted for second. Colon tossed to second and it appeared Hunter slid under Lowrie's tag. Second-base umpire Gary Darling said otherwise and called him out. TBS missed it all – and to make matters worse, the network immediately cut to a commercial.

During the break, Hunter met with Darling for a good minute. Two minutes later, TBS played a replay, which clearly showed Hunter sliding in under Lowrie's tag. It would've put a runner in scoring position for Fielder. Instead, the inning was over.

FOURTH INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

Scherzer has been absolutely nasty through four innings, needing only 63 pitches to work four shutout innings. He's now at seven strikeouts after punching out the side in order – the 3-4-5 hitters – in the fourth.

So far, Cespedes' triple is the only ball that's been hit out of the infield off him. Typically, batters can get a better read on pitchers the second time through the lineup. That doesn't appear to be the case, so far.

THIRD INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

For the second straight inning, the A's have stranded a runner in scoring position. This time, it was Coco Crisp, who drew a two-out walk and moved to second on a wild pitch. But Scherzer got Lowrie to ground out to end the inning.

As for Colon? It's been night and day since the first inning, retiring six of his next seven batters. In the first inning, he didn't throw a single offspeed pitch, relying completely on his fastball. Since then, he's thrown nine offspeed pitches and only 10 fastballs.

SECOND INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

For those of you calling for Jhonny Peralta to start over Andy Dirks in left field based on the way Dirks played Cespedes' one-out rocket, just stop it. There's no way Peralta could've made that catch. I'm not saying Dirks is fault-free – that ball clearly ate him up. But he had a good jump, just a terrible read on it.

Regardless, Cespedes' triple didn't hurt the Tigers because Scherzer dialed it up and blew a 98-mph fastball past Reddick for out No. 2 before getting Vogt to line out to first. Scherzer threw four pitches of 97 mph, one of 98 and one of 99 after giving up that triple. Beastmode has officially been activated.

FIRST INNING: TIGERS 3, A'S 0

Well, that was fast. Detroit takes a quick 3-0 lead after Colon allows the first three Tigers to reach base. Jackson silenced a rowdy Coliseum crowd with a leadoff double and scored on Cabrera's single through the middle.

Avila added to the run-fest with a grounder that rolled under Barton's glove at first base to score Martinez from second. It was ruled a base hit. Not an error. Can't say I agree with that call.

Interesting stat from the Free Press: Colon didn't hit a batter in 190 1/3 innings pitched in the regular season. He hit the second batter he faced (Hunter) in the postseason.

PREGAME

You've waited long enough. Here's your cookie.

Game 1 of the American League Division between the Tigers and A's is finally here, so pull out that "lucky" t-shirt from the dirty laundry and plunk yourself in front of the TV.

The work week is over. It's officially the weekend. Let's watch some baseball, shall we?

I'll be here all night, sitting in the press box at O.co Coliseum, giving you the highs and lows from today's ALDS series opener. But, before I proceed, let's get some predictions.

I'll go first: Tigers 4, A's 2. Now, your turn.

Winning pitcher? I'll take Max Scherzer. Who you got?

ALDS notebook: Detroit Tigers will not work out Sunday after overnight flight from West Coast

October 5, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – The Detroit Tigers have an off-day between Game 2 and Game 3 of the American League Division Series. But they will barely have 24 hours between the time they arrive in Detroit from California on Sunday and the time they need to arrive at the ballpark Monday for Game 3.

“The off-day?” Tigers manager manager Jim Leyland said. “We’re getting home at 8 o’clock in the morning. We’re not working out. I can tell you that right now. I don’t give a (expletive) who tells us we’re working out, we’re not working out.”

Leyland said the Tigers obviously would comply with whatever Major League Baseball requires of them when it comes to media availability and things of that nature.

“If they want the manager and the starting pitcher, we’ll be there,” he said. “But I’m not taking a team that flies all night back from the West Coast out for a workout on Sunday. Now, if they want to work out, they can work out. I’m not doing it. I will be there if it’s a responsibility. We will go along with all procedures that MLB has, but I’m not having the team work out.”

The overnight flight from the West Coast on Sunday will be followed by Game 3 that will start at 1:07 p.m. Monday.

Leyland said he hasn’t settled on a Game 2 lineup. But in the postseason, he’s expected to start the same players every day at all positions but left field.

The Tigers have never faced rookie right-hander Sonny Gray. Leyland was asked whether that might factor into whether he starts Jhonny Peralta or Andy Dirks in left field.

“If you think this guy’s going to hang a curve, you play Peralta,” Leyland said. “If you think he’s not going to hang a curve, you probably play Dirks.”

So, Tigers fans might get some insight into the team’s scouting reports Saturday when the starting lineup is announced.

“We only know what we’ve heard about him and what we’ve got from our scouts and what we’ve seen on tape,” Leyland said of Gray. “That’s what we know. He’s the No. 1 pick out of Vanderbilt. Very talented guy, not a very big guy, but extremely talented.”

Bullpen decisions

Leyland said he doesn’t plan to use left-hander Jose Alvarez in short relief. Instead, the Tigers will go with either left-hander Drew Smyly or right-hander Al Alburquerque in relief against left-handed hitters.

How will Leyland use Rick Porcello?

“I think he can do pretty much anything,” Leyland said. “I’m not sure when we’ll use them. It depends on the score of the game. They’ve obviously stacked a lot of lefties. We don’t have a lot of lefty depth in the bullpen.”

Four in Florida

Right-hander Bruce Rondon and left-hander Phil Coke are in Florida with the organization’s Instructional League working out in hopes that they can help out the team if it advances further into the postseason. Right-hander Evan Reed and left-hander Darin Downs are there, too, just in case.

“I’m a little disappointed that we don’t have Rondon going in, but it is what it is,” Leyland said. “I don’t have time to worry about that now. I’ve got stuff to do.”

Miscellaneous

Question: Would you be comfortable with Jhonny at short? Jim Leyland: “Yes. Absolutely.”

Leyland on Dirks starting Game 1 against Bartolo Colon: “Dirks is 4-for-8 off the guy and it gives us a better defense. I mean, if you’re not going to play him tonight, then you might as well not play him. ... Of course, the one question there is he’s not swinging real good.”

Gray on facing Justin Verlander in Game 2: “I remember (back in college), we were sitting at some restaurant on the road and just watching him pitch and watching him throw 100 miles an hour in the ninth inning. ... We

were just like, 'Wow, he's very impressive.' "

Detroit Tigers' Jim Leyland returns to familiar theme heading into Game 1: 'We've got to score some runs'

October 5, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – Detroit Tigers manager Jim Leyland returned to a familiar theme Friday afternoon during his pregame session with a small group of Detroit media members.

“I think we’ve got to score some runs,” Leyland said before anyone even asked about his offense. “We’ve got to figure out how to score some runs. Pretty simple, really. We’ve got to figure out how to score some runs, we’ve got to figure out how to shut them down.

“There’s really no secrets when you get here. Both teams are here for a reason.”

The Tigers were second in the majors in runs scored this season but finished tied with the Minnesota Twins for 22nd in runs scored in the month of September with 97 runs, well behind the Boston Red Sox and the Oakland Athletics, who tied for the major-league lead with 162 runs last month. The Tigers scored 14 runs in their final seven games of the regular season.

The Tigers receive a lot of attention for how good their starting rotation is, but the A’s have a very good pitching staff, too. The A’s finished second to the Tigers in the American League in team ERA and had the best WHIP in the American League.

Leyland thinks highly of the A’s.

“I’ve been more impressed with them this year because of the fact that their expectations weren’t probably as high as ours, but they met that West head on, slugged it out and they won it,” he said. “That’s pretty good.”

Detroit Tigers Gameday: Tigers, A's release lineups; Max Scherzer battles Bartolo Colon in ALDS opener

October 5, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

GAME INFORMATION

Who: Detroit Tigers (93-69, 1st in AL Central) at Oakland Athletics (96-66, 1st in AL West).

Where: O.co Coliseum in Oakland, Calif.

First pitch: 9:37 p.m. EST

Television: TBS.

Radio: 97.1 The Ticket, ESPN Radio the Detroit Tigers radio network.

Twitter: Follow Chris Iott and James Schmehl.

Live coverage: Look for a live blog hosted by James Schmehl at 9 p.m.

STARTING PITCHERS

Detroit Tigers

Max Scherzer, RHP (21-3, 2.90 ERA)

Lifetime vs. Athletics: 2-1, 4.20 ERA.

Oakland Athletics

Bartolo Colon, RHP (18-6, 2.65 ERA)

Lifetime vs. Tigers: 8-10, 5.40 ERA.

STARTING LINEUPS

(Batters' career statistics vs. opposing starting pitcher)

Detroit Tigers

1. Austin Jackson, CF (4-for-14)
2. Torii Hunter, RF (14-for-58, 2 HR)
3. Miguel Cabrera, 3B (8-for-16)
4. Prince Fielder, 1B (4-for-7, 1 HR)
5. Victor Martinez, DH (6-for-22, 1 HR)
6. Alex Avila, C (4-for-8, 2 HR)
7. Omar Infante, 2B (2-for-7)
8. Andy Dirks, LF (4-for-8, 1 HR)
9. Jose Iglesias, SS

Oakland Athletics

1. Coco Crisp, CF (4-for-11)
2. Jed Lowrie, SS ((2-for-6, 1 HR)
3. Josh Donaldson, 3B (1-for-6)
4. Brandon Moss, DH (3-for-11, 1 HR)
5. Yoenis Cespedes, LF (0-for-2)
6. Josh Reddick, RF (4-for-8)
7. Stephen Vogt, C (1-for-2)
8. Daric Barton, 1B (0-for-4)
9. Eric Sogard, 2B (3-for-5)

GAME NOTES

-- Miguel Cabrera (groin soreness) is in the starting lineup, as expected. Tigers manager Jim Leyland said he'd pinch-run for Cabrera in the eighth inning or later, but not before because running would take a potential at-bat away from him.

-- Athletics outfielder Yoenis Cespedes is in the starting lineup, too. He's been hampered by an injured right shoulder and did not play in the final two games of the regular season. "He told me yesterday he was going to be OK today," A's manager Bob Melvin said Friday afternoon. "There were no decision-making issues."

-- As expected, Andy Dirks gets the start in left field with right-hander Bartolo Colon on the mound. He's 4-for-8 lifetime against Colon. Jhonny Peralta will be available off the bench as a pinch-hitter if needed.

-- Alex Avila will bat sixth tonight. He's hit .500 with two homers against Colon in his career. He had been penciled in the sixth spot 12 times in the regular season this year.

-- Fresh off a 21-win season, Max Scherzer takes the mound for the Tigers. He's started three games at O.co Coliseum, going 1-1 with a 4.15 ERA. Tonight will mark his seventh postseason start. He's 2-1 with a 3.82 ERA and 40 strikeouts.

-- Scherzer gave up one unearned run on three hits in 5 1/3 innings in Game 4 of the ALDS against the A's last year. He struck out eight.

TRACKING THE TIGERS

We've talked about it length this past week. And for good reason. The Tigers' fate in the ALDS could hinge on the health of Miguel Cabrera.

So, let's talk about it again. How will he look after a five-day rest?

It's unlikely Cabrera will be at full strength tonight, but he could still be effective. The question is: How effective? We'll find out tonight.

We asked a similar question in today's poll, but it's worth repeating: Can the Tigers beat the A's if Cabrera isn't at full strength? Let us know your thoughts below.

Game 3 of ALDS set for Monday afternoon at Comerica Park, to be broadcast on MLB Network

October 5, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

OAKLAND – Game times for Game 3 and Game 4 of the American League Division Series at Comerica Park are set. Kind of.

Game 3 is scheduled for 1:07 p.m. Monday at Comerica Park with Game 4 set for 5:07 p.m. Tuesday. But Game 4 would move to 7:07 p.m. Tuesday if the Division Series between the Tampa Bay Rays and Boston Red Sox ends in a sweep.

Game 3 will be broadcast on the MLB Network. Game 4 will be on TBS.

Game 5 is slated for 9:07 p.m. Thursday and will be broadcast on TBS. That game would shift to 8:07 p.m. if the Rays-Red Sox series is complete at that point.

Here is the entire schedule with pitching matchups:

Game 1: Max Scherzer vs. Bartolo Colon, 9:37 p.m. Friday, TBS

Game 2: Justin Verlander vs. Sonny Gray, 9:07 p.m. Saturday, TBS

Game 3: Anibal Sanchez vs. Jarrod Parker, 1:07 p.m. Monday, MLB Network

Game 4: Doug Fister vs. Dan Straily, 5:07 p.m. Tuesday, TBS (Game will be at 7:07 if Rays-Red Sox series is over)

Game 5: Max Scherzer vs. Bartolo Colon, 9:07 p.m. Thursday, TBS (Game will be at 8:07 p.m. if Rays-Red Sox series is over)

Can the Detroit Tigers beat the Oakland A's in the ALDS if Miguel Cabrera isn't at full strength?

October 5, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

OAKLAND, Calif. – This much we know: Miguel Cabrera will be in the Detroit Tigers' starting lineup Friday night.

Whether he'll be at his best remains to be seen.

"He's playable," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said Thursday. "The medical people feel that he's not going to do anything to endanger his future, and he wants to play."

But "playable" isn't exactly what Tigers fans had hoped to hear from Leyland with Game 1 of the American League Division Series now standing on their front step.

After four days of rest, Cabrera has held out hope he could enter tonight's game at full strength. As of now, that seems like wishful thinking. The pain in his groin has lessened, but it certainly hasn't disappeared.

"He's handicapped a little bit, obviously, although I think he is better," Leyland said. "Probably the last few days have helped him out a little bit. He's still not going to be running at full speed."

For now, Leyland said he'd pinch-run for Cabrera in the eighth inning or later, but not before because running would take a potential at-bat away from him.

"You've just got to be willing to live with the fact that he's not going to run very well, and that pretty much sums it up," Leyland said.

Cabrera doesn't appear as concerned about his status. Injured or not, he's ready to play.

"I wish at game time I'm 100 percent," he said. "But I don't think it's going to be an issue for the playoffs.

Anything can happen. I'm ready to give everything on the field."

There's no denying Cabrera's determination. His willingness to play through pain is certainly commendable and should be applauded. He wants to play. He wants to win.

But if he's not 100 percent, the Tigers' chances of winning lessen. And right now, it appears he will not be at full strength – which leads me to today's poll question:

Prognosticators like Detroit Tigers' chances to reach World Series, but Boston Red Sox get the most love

October 5, 2013

By Gillian Van Stratt / MLive.com

It's that time of year when we all pack up the hoverboard and head to the future, so we can find out who will win the 2013 World Series. But if your Mr. Fusion is in the shop, you'll have to rely on the prognostications of baseball's experts.

Of the six analysts polled by CBSSports.com, three have the Detroit Tigers making it all the way to the World Series. Two of them (MLB insider Danny Knobler and senior columnist Scott Miller) have them winning it all. Of the 35 analysts ESPN polled, eight have the Tigers winning the World Series. Interestingly, every ESPN analyst who predicted the Tigers to reach the World Series had them winning it. Not one analyst sees them getting there and then losing to the NL champ.

Fifty percent of ESPN baseball writers asked say the Detroit Tigers have the best starting rotation in the postseason.

Most see Detroit's rotation as their biggest advantage in the postseason. But in terms of weaknesses, Detroit's bullpen and defense are the two issues causing some to lean toward Oakland in the divisional series.

"Unlike last year, Tigers skipper Jim Leyland does have a couple of reliable arms he can call on – Drew Smyly from the left side and Joaquin Benoit at closer," writes CBS' Dayn Perry. "With that said, the depth isn't there, even with Rick Porcello likely working out of the pen (and he'll be a serious asset there).

"My guess is that most observers are siding with the Tigers because of the strength of their rotation. And that's certainly defensible. However, I'm leaning toward Oakland because of home-field advantage, the potency of their offense away from O.co Coliseum, the superiority of the bullpen and the health concerns regarding Cabrera. A's in five."

ESPN senior baseball writer Jayson Stark is one of those observers. Stark – who thinks the Tigers will win the whole shebang over the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games – absolutely believes that the Tigers rotation is the key.

"When we size up what we're looking for in a potential World Series champ, what's always the first item on our list? Not just this October – every October," Stark asks. "We always ask ourselves: 'Who has the most dominant, most October-ready pitching?' Don't we? And, specifically, we ask: 'Who has the most dominant, most October-ready rotation?'"

"Well, if the answer isn't the Tigers, I'm not sure which sport you've been watching the past six months."

Stark took it upon himself to poll 24 general managers, executives and scouts before picking a winner. Of those 24, 11 had the Tigers winning the American League Championship and reaching the World Series. They got six votes to win the World Series.

In both Stark's poll as well as the ESPN poll, the Boston Red Sox received the most votes to win the World Series. Only in the CBS projections did the Tigers receive more votes (2) than the Red Sox (1), but just as many analysts in that poll favored the Oakland A's.

Scherzer superb as Tigers top A's for Game 1 victory

Righty fans 11 over seven innings; three-run first inning key in win

October 5, 2013

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND – The Tigers' postseason plan isn't complicated, and it isn't a secret. Jim Leyland laid it out Friday afternoon as their playoff drive was about to begin.

"It's pretty simple, really," the Tigers' manager said. "We've got to figure out how to score some runs, and we've got to figure out how to shut them down."

Save for a Yoenis Cespedes home run, it worked pretty well to script. And after Max Scherzer's seven innings converted a three-run opening inning into a 3-2 win over the A's to open the American League Division Series on Friday night, the Tigers are hoping the rest of the best-of-five set proves the same way.

The Tigers have not lost a postseason series under Leyland's reign as manager after winning Game 1. That includes two series sweeps after winning the first two games on the road. Justin Verlander, who shut out the A's here in Game 5 of last year's series, will take the mound in Game 2 Saturday (9 p.m. ET, TBS) to try to put them in position to clinch the series in Detroit next week.

Most likely, they'll try the same formula to get there.

"We want to do the same thing. Every day's not going to be the same," said Miguel Cabrera, whose RBI single opened the scoring in a three-run first inning that provided all of Detroit's offense. "The important thing is we feel comfortable with any pitcher we have on the mound."

Scherzer's ability to chew up innings made Friday's opener a much easier opening night for the Tigers. In the process, Scherzer made a statement: There was a lot more to his potential Cy Young Award-winning season than 21 wins and just three losses.

"He was awful determined," Leyland said. "He was thrilled to get Game 1. I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter which game he pitched. And I think he responded like we expected him to respond."

It was Scherzer's usual result when he gets his usual early run support. However, from the raucous sellout crowd creating a canyon of noise to an A's team increasingly desperate to create offense, it was far from a usual outing.

The same Tigers offense that topped three runs just once over its final seven games in the regular season, including three runs total in a three-game series at Miami, produced three runs by the time Scherzer took the mound. It did nothing to quiet the crowd, but it did plenty to spark the Tigers.

Scherzer, meanwhile, denied the early ignition for an A's offense that roughed him up in August at Comerica Park. If not for Cespedes, there would have been no spark at all.

Not only was Cespedes' second-inning triple over left fielder Andy Dirks the lone hit Scherzer allowed over the first six innings, it was the only ball the A's hit out of the infield until the fifth. In between were ground balls and strikeouts, the latter in abundance.

The same A's lineup that swung and missed just eight times against him at Comerica Park five weeks ago did so 20 times on Friday, seven times in the first few innings alone. Instead of a 29-pitch bloodletting in the first inning like August, Scherzer needed just 14 to get through the opening frame this time.

Four A's struck out the first time through the order. The next time through, Scherzer fanned four in a row from the fourth inning into the fifth, three of them on offspeed pitches.

"I threw strike one tonight," Scherzer said. "I looked inside and I was 18 of 26 [first-pitch strikes], and that's always a good percentage. I thought I had a great changeup tonight. I thought that was the difference. I was able to keep them off balance, and it allowed me to pitch deep into the game."

He wasn't simply pitching deep, he was cruising. Once he sent down AL MVP candidate Josh Donaldson swinging to end the sixth inning, he had 10 strikeouts, tying his career postseason high. But two swings from the A's brought the crowd back to life in the seventh.

The first was a slow roller from Brandon Moss that nearly saw shortstop Jose Iglesias duplicate his tumbling highlight throw from August. Only a high throw prevented what would've been an acrobatic out. The second,

from Cespedes, left nothing for Dirks to do but stand and watch a two-run homer sail well into the left-field seats.

“You don’t look for that, it just comes,” Cespedes said. “He threw me a strike, I just tried to hit it, and it went out.”

The 95-mph fastball over the plate, after Cespedes had fouled off back-to-back pitches, was Scherzer’s one regret of the night.

“I didn’t know what pitch to go with, and I thought if I went with my fastball, I could make him go away,” Scherzer said. “That pitch caught too much of the plate and he took it deep, and that’s just something that happens.”

Suddenly, a shutout bid was a one-run game, and the Tigers’ bullpen was on alert. With the crowd of 48,401 at fever pitch, however, Scherzer regrouped to retire the A’s in order, capped by a changeup past Daric Barton for Scherzer’s 11th strikeout of the night.

For Scherzer, who calls his final 15 pitches his biggest each game, his final 13 took Friday’s game back.

“The wheels could have come flying off,” Scherzer said, “but I thought I kept my composure and was able to continue and execute.”

“Those last 15 pitches mean a lot, and when you can do it in the postseason, that means even more.”

In this case, it meant the game. Once Drew Smyly and Joaquin Benoit took care of the final six outs, it meant momentum in the series, just as the Tigers had scripted.

“This,” Leyland said, “is playoff baseball. It was a great game.”

With Benoit closing, it's substance over style

Unlike predecessors, revamped Tigers 'pen is all business, no flash

October 5, 2013

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

OAKLAND – Gone are the days of the dizzying Motown amusement park rides orchestrated by Fernando Rodney and Jose Valverde, stylists of the highest order. When the Tigers go to the bullpen to close out a game, they call on a guy who is all substance – and all business.

Joaquin Benoit turns out the lights emphatically, without any dance moves, in the Valverde fashion, or imaginary arrows piercing the sky, Rodney style.

Striking out the side in the ninth inning after getting the final out of the eighth, Benoit finished off the dangerous A's, 3-2, on Friday night in Game 1 of the American League Division Series at O.co Coliseum. The Tigers zapped the hometown crowd with three first-inning runs against Bartolo Colon and held on behind the brilliance of Max Scherzer and his buddies in the bullpen.

"I feel like we're on the verge of the World Series again," an elated Benoit said, his Tigers having snatched home-field advantage away from the AL West champions.

It's a long way to the Fall Classic, but the Tigers have the weaponry to make a repeat appearance. Miguel Cabrera lashed a first-pitch RBI single in the first and lined out in his second at-bat, alleviating concerns about a groin diminishing his effectiveness. The offense will put up runs, and the starting pitching is perhaps without equal.

In any evaluation of the Tigers, the bullpen surfaces as the primary concern. Its 4.01 ERA was 12th in the league this season, but it began to blend into a solid unit late – and it was lights out as the postseason lights came on at O.co Coliseum in front of 48,401 fans.

With Drew Smyly, the angular lefty from Arkansas, getting the first two outs of the eighth, the Tigers' 'pen closed it out for Scherzer, the 21-game winner who held the A's to two hits until Yoenis Cespedes' two-run blast in the seventh inning.

"I've faced Benoit for years, when he was in Texas and with Tampa Bay, and he's nasty," the Tigers' Torii Hunter said. "He's all business out there. He doesn't try to show anybody up; he just goes out and gets the job done, a true professional. "Smyly's like that, too. Good stuff, good pitcher, very professional. That's what you want late in games."

If the Tigers are to take it the distance, they'll need quality work from their well-armed bullpen. Joining Benoit and Smyly in the restructured cast are Jose Veras, Al Albuquerque, Jose Alvarez, Luke Putkonen and temporary addition Rick Porcello, the fifth starter.

"I take it like I'm just doing my job and helping the young guys," Benoit said, "so they can learn to attack the strike zone and don't allow the hitters to attack them. We've got some good arms in our bullpen. We can get the job done."

Benoit, a setup reliever for most of his 11 seasons, moved seamlessly into the closer role this season and, in the words of Austin Jackson, "pitched like he's been closing for years."

The 36-year-old right-hander from Santiago, Dominican Republic, was 4-1 with a 2.01 ERA in 66 games, notching 24 saves. He walked only 23 while striking out 73, with a 1.030 WHIP. In his previous 11 seasons, he'd saved a total of 13 games.

Smyly, in his sophomore year, flourished with a 6-0 record and 2.37 ERA in 63 appearances. He struck out 81 in 76 innings while walking just 17.

The firm of Smyly and Benoit is planning to deliver more happy endings this month.

"I never was too excited to be a closer," Benoit said. "I felt comfortable in that [setup] position. If they needed me to jump in, I'd take advantage of the opportunity to close."

Benoit certainly has the stuff to close. His fastball is consistently in the 93-95 mph range, and he has a wicked changeup that acts like a split-fingered fastball. There's also his "secret weapon" – a slider that was virtually untouchable this year. A .091 batting average was all the opposition could manage against it.

"They don't know when it's coming," Benoit said, grinning. "That's why it's so good."

Benoit enjoyed the Valverde show, as his accomplice, and respects Rodney, the performer.

“Everybody has their style,” Benoit said. “I admire everybody; they all bring something to the table. I’m not like Valverde, and Fernando, he has his things. Those things work for them. I’m more laid-back. It’s all about business.”

He calls his changeup his “signature pitch,” using a slight forkball grip that gives it the sharp sinking action that left the A’s swinging at air. Benoit struck out Brandon Moss, Cespedes and Josh Reddick to end the game.

“That was a big lift, especially with the game the way it was late,” said Jackson, whose leadoff double jump-started the three-run first. “It kind of puts you at ease when you see even-keeled guys like Benoit and Smyly come in like that and don’t get rattled.”

When it comes to the late innings, entertainment yields to production. Style is good, but substance is better.

Scherzer validates Tigers' choice to give him Game 1

Righty dominates A's for nearly all of seven-inning, 11-K outing in win

October 5, 2013

By Paul Hagen / MLB.com

OAKLAND – As well as Max Scherzer pitched in Game 1 of the American League Division Series on Friday, he probably didn't need any help. The Tigers' lineup gave it to him anyway, scoring three in the top of the first before he threw his first pitch of the night.

That turned out to be all he needed. Giving up just one hit through the first six innings, Scherzer ended up striking out 11 in seven innings as the Tigers took an early advantage in the best-of-five series with a 3-2 win at O.co Coliseum. Game 2 is here on Saturday night (9 ET on TBS).

Scherzer was undefeated this season when getting at least three runs, so there's that. It also helped quiet the largest Oakland baseball crowd in nearly a decade, at least for a while. But there was also a sense that, on this night, he would have been dominant no matter how the game played out.

"Certain times, certain situations, you might pitch to what the scoreboard is saying. But, for the most part, you're trying to execute the game plan no matter what the score is," catcher Alex Avila said.

Jim Leyland thought that getting the honor of starting the season opener might have given Scherzer a little extra boost.

"He was locked in all night," the Tigers' manager said. "He was awful determined. He was thrilled to get Game 1. I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter which game he pitched."

Afterward, Scherzer said, in so many words, that it didn't matter which game he pitched.

"It was the same as always. I don't get caught up in the hoopla, worry about where I'm pitching or if I'm pitching Game 1 or Game 5," he said.

No matter what the reason, he was sharp.

"That was vintage Max right there. A lot of strikeouts," Avila said. "He walked three guys, which he's probably ticked off about. But he pitched great. A real live fastball. And everything kind of worked off that.

"He did a very good job of [pitching to the game plan]. He did a good job of being able to make the adjustments he needed to when he started to get out of whack. It's a little tough when there are that many lefties. He does have a really good changeup that's something that those hitters will try to take away. So being able to throw the breaking ball in there a couple times was a key, and he was able to do that. But his fastball was just electric."

The first hit Scherzer gave up was a one-out triple to Yoenis Cespedes in the second. Leyland kept the infield back, in part because one run wouldn't have been the end of the world at that point. And partly because Scherzer has the kind of ability to pitch out of that situation. Sure enough, he struck out Josh Reddick, and Stephen Vogt lined out to end the inning.

"Our staff is built to strike people out," Avila said. "When there's a guy on third base, that's why [Leyland] has the confidence to play the infield back. It depends [on the situation], but he knows our guys have the stuff to get strikeouts. When I saw that, that didn't surprise me. And when there are guys on base, Max definitely tries to take it up a little bit and make sure he makes quality pitches."

The only pitch that hurt Scherzer came in the seventh after Brandon Moss led off the inning with an infield single, bringing Cespedes to the plate. Scherzer had struck him out on a changeup in the fifth and had him out in front of a changeup in this at-bat before the Athletics' left fielder hammered a 2-2 fastball for a home run that pulled Oakland to within a run.

"I didn't know what pitch to go with, and I thought if I went with my fastball, I could make him go away," Scherzer said. "The pitch caught too much of the plate and he took it deep, and that's just something that happens. It's baseball. It's pitching. And you move on."

That blast also brought the crowd back into the game, but Scherzer easily disposed of the next three hitters.

"The crowd was roaring and on their feet," Scherzer said. "To get those outs was big, because I was then able to pass [the lead] on to the pen."

It's possible the outcome would have been exactly the same if the Tigers hadn't gotten to Athletics starter Bartolo Colon for three runs in the top of the first, considering how well Scherzer was throwing the ball. But the

Tigers are just as happy they didn't have to find out.

Verlander feels he's rounding into form at right time

Coming off impressive September, righty aims to give Tigers 2-0 lead in ALDS

October 5, 2013

By Paul Hagen / MLB.com

OAKLAND – The Tigers' decision not to lead with Justin Verlander in their American League Division Series against the Athletics naturally attracted a lot of attention. The big right-hander, after all, has one of the most glittering resumes of any starting pitcher.

The bottom line, though, is that for all his accomplishments, Verlander wasn't Detroit's best starter this season. Max Scherzer was. And Verlander is the first to admit it.

"Max is the best pitcher in the American League. The only reason this is being brought up is what I've done over the last couple of years," Verlander said Friday night at O.co Coliseum. "He absolutely earned this."

So the 2011 AL Cy Young Award and MVP award winner, a guy who had a 2.64 ERA last season, will have to wait until Game 2 (Saturday, 9 p.m. ET, TBS) to make his first start of the series. A quick look at his numbers – a 3.46 ERA, the Tigers' 3-11 record in his last 14 starts – doesn't seem that impressive.

But in his last two starts, Verlander didn't allow a run. His September ERA was 2.27. Sometimes it's not how you start, it's how you finish. And he believes it might all be coming together for him at just the right time.

"I honestly don't look at myself any differently. We aren't robots, things aren't always perfect, and this is a season that opened my eyes to that fact," Verlander said. "The last couple of years came pretty easy to me, right from the Spring Training, from the jump street, it was like, 'OK, my pitches are good, go from here.'

"This year wasn't like that. I would fix something and that would cause a kink in the chain, and I would fix that. It was a matter of getting myself to where I need to do be. It was a year-long battle. I'm not going to lie. This is something I worked on from early in the season until a couple of weeks ago, and I felt like the last couple of starts were where I needed to be. It's funny that it took all year, but hopefully I figured it out and peaking at the right time."

Game Breakdown

Why he'll win: Verlander was dominant against the A's in last year's playoffs, going 2-0 with a 0.56 ERA and 22 strikeouts in 16 innings. Why he'll win: Gray has pitched well at home, posting a 0.93 WHIP and striking out 38 in 40 2/3 innings while only giving up nine earned runs.

Pitcher beware: Verlander hasn't pitched at his usual elite level, ending the year with his highest ERA (3.46) and WHIP (1.31) since 2008. Pitcher beware: Gray has never pitched in the postseason and his last five starts were against teams with losing records.

Bottom line: Verlander must get ahead in counts. When he falls behind, hitters have a .995 OPS against him compared to a .453 OPS when he's ahead. Bottom line: It's important for Gray to set the tone early. This season, he owns a 5.10 ERA over the first three innings. Afterward, his ERA drops to 0.53.

Manager Jim Leyland said Verlander's season was "pretty good" and that it only paled in comparison to how high he had set the bar with his previous excellence.

"I think some of it probably was that it was not up to the standards that the national media and everybody was used to. So that probably comes as a little bit of a surprise," Leyland said. "Probably a little bit of it was lost in the fact that Scherzer has been unbelievable with his [21-3] record and everything. But he's still been an excellent pitcher for us. Anytime you can put him out there, we feel real good about that. He's been a lot better than his record shows."

Even more than the numbers, Verlander has been encouraged by the way hitters have reacted to his pitches.

"That's what you talk about, and it comes down to execution," he said. "I definitely felt like the adjustments I made helped me to pitch better. I've been working hard on figuring stuff out, tweaking stuff here and there because I knew I wasn't right. And I felt like the last couple starts, I was able to get to a point where I didn't have to think about anything out there on the mound except for execution and that let me clear my mind.

"Obviously the game plan is to not worry about anything but execution, but when you're working on so many things, that is in the back of your mind and you're trying to do the things you're working on. But once that

muscle memory gets ingrained and you don't have to think about that any more at all, the only thing on my mind was the right pitch and to execute it."

Now that they won Game 1 behind a dominant performance from Max Scherzer, the Tigers love their chances with Verlander pitching Saturday and then the series moving to Comerica Park.

"Trust me, Verlander's going to try to match [Scherzer]," said right fielder Torii Hunter. "He's a competitor and he's going to give his best. And his best is always goood for me. He's not pitching bad. He's pitching OK. But for him, it's just not Verlander. It's not Verlander-type pitching and I definitely think [Game 2] is going to be a different scene. He steps up when he needs to."

Added catcher Alex Avila: "Justin's stuff has never been the question mark. With him it's always been the command of his fastball. He needs that first and foremost. Everything has to play off the fastball. That's the best pitch with guys who throw mid- to upper 90s.

"When he's got his command with the fastball everything falls into place and then you'll see good games out of him. He had his stretches during the season where you could tell, 'He's got it.' Then some other times he just didn't have that command with it and you're having to battle with trying to find what works. And trying to get him back on track during the game."

During the season, Verlander walked an uncommonly high 3.1 batters per nine innings, suggesting command issues. At times his pitch count also rose because hitters were able to foul off pitches, something the A's are adept at.

"I don't think you can come up with a game plan to combat guys fouling off pitches. I think you just go out there and attack the strike zone, force them to be aggressive and put the ball in play," he said. "I don't think their game plan is to go up there and foul stuff off. That's not what they're looking to do. But these guys are patient hitters. They don't chase a lot and they don't swing and miss that often, a lot of them. So you're going to get foul balls, but it's not like I'm writing up a game plan to avoid foul balls.

"I want early contact and early outs, and when you get two strikes you want strikeouts. But you can't expand too much all the time trying to get a strikeout with two strikes either because like I said, these guys are patient. The main game plan really is to attack the strike zone and pound the strike zone as much as you can."

At times this year, Verlander said his deadline to get himself back on track was the postseason. There's evidence to suggest he met it.

Miggy feels good, says 'no time to complain or worry' **Sluggger drives in run, removed for defense in eighth inning of Game 1**

October 5, 2013

By Paul Hagen / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In his first at-bat Friday, Miguel Cabrera singled sharply up the middle. His second time up, he lined out to center.

Going into Game 1 of the American League Division Series against Oakland, there had been some question about how nagging groin and abdominal injuries would impact one of baseball's best hitters and, by extension, the Tigers' postseason chances.

If Detroit's 3-2 win over the Athletics is any indication, he should be just fine.

"I felt good. We won the game. I think that's the most important thing right now," the slugging third baseman said. "It's not an issue. We try to do the best we can, and that's it. This is no time to complain or worry. We want to play."

Cabrera came out of the game for defense in the bottom of the eighth after grounding out to third in the top of the inning.

"He tried to kick it in and it looked like it bothered him a little bit," manager Jim Leyland said. "I wasn't comfortable taking him out in a one-run game, but there was a little more to it.

"As you know, this is a ballpark with a lot of foul territory, and I felt like at that point, if they hit a popup over there and he can't get to it ... that's an out we might give up. So it was a combination of a lot of things. Take away the bunt a little, obviously. And, like I say, the foul territory."

Scherzer, Tigers take Game 1 from A's

October 5, 2013

By Steve Kornacki / FOXSportsDetroit.com

Max Scherzer and Clayton Kershaw could very well win the Cy Young Awards in their respective leagues, and both have shown just how valuable a dominant pitcher can be in their first post-season starts.

Each of them put the clamps on a tough offense to win Game 1 on the road in front of roaring, packed houses. In doing so, both pitchers quickly negated the home-field advantage of their opponents.

Scherzer both over-powered and baffled Oakland A's batters who were not named Yoenis Cespedes. And that was enough to get the Detroit Tigers a 3-2 win in Friday night's ALDS opener at the Oakland Coliseum.

"Scherzer was terrific," said Tigers manager Jim Leyland, who won his 40th post-season game on the eighth anniversary of his hiring in Detroit.

The dominating right-hander gave up only three hits in seven innings: an infield hit to Brandon Moss and a triple and a homer to Cespedes.

Unfortunately for Scherzer, the round-tripper came after Moss beat out a high-hopper on which shortstop Jose Iglesias nearly made a spectacular play. That made it a game in the seventh inning, and ended Detroit's 15-inning scoreless streak in the ALDS against Oakland.

Justin Verlander, who starts Game 2 on Saturday night, started that streak with a complete-game shutout in the deciding Game 5 last year in Oakland.

Fortunately for Scherzer, he escaped a run in the second inning after Cespedes clubbed a one-out triple that got over left fielder Andy Dirks near the foul line and rattled around.

Scherzer blew away Josh Reddick with a 98 mph fastball for the second out, and then Stephen Vogt lined out to first baseman Prince Fielder to end the threat.

Scherzer used one of his better changeups of the season and a fastball that only Cespedes was able to catch up to in beating Oakland.

TBS analyst Buck Martinez noted that Scherzer's arm action was identical on both his fastball and changeup to perfectly deceive hitters.

Scherzer fanned Reddick in the fifth on a rare changeup that caught way too much of the plate.

"This guy is filthy," said TBS analyst Dennis Eckersley, a Hall of Fame pitcher. "He doesn't even have to paint (the corners) on the changeup. That's how good that is."

Scherzer struck out 11 and walked two. He dropped his earned run average in three ALDS starts to 1.37.

Tigers catcher Alex Avila, who had a big RBI, said Scherzer's heater, routinely between 95 and 98 mph with plenty of movement, was the difference.

"His fastball was electric today and heavy," Avila told FOX Sports Detroit's John Keating.

Scherzer thought the key was his off-speed stuff. He credited his curveball in addition to the change.

"I thought I had a great changeup tonight," Scherzer told TBS. "That was the difference."

Cespedes was all that kept Scherzer from blanking the A's. The Cuban slugger, who won the Home Run Derby at this summer's All-Star Game, had struggled recently with right shoulder tendinitis.

He was 1-for-14 in his final four games of the season and questionable coming into the series. But the fact that Oakland manager Bob Melvin started him in left rather than making him the designated hitter was a good sign in regard to his health.

The 48,401 at the Coliseum roared on and on after Cespedes homered, cutting the lead to one run. But Leyland decided to stay with Scherzer after visiting the mound at that point.

"I still felt I had some bullets left," said Scherzer, who told that to his skipper.

Scherzer repeated Leyland's closing response before leaving the mound: "You earned it; it's yours."

And Scherzer used off-speed stuff to set down the next three batters in order to close out the seventh with 118 pitches. The frenzied crowd was hushed once more.

"To get those outs was big," Scherzer said.

Then Drew Smyly got strikeouts for the first two outs of the eighth, and Joaquin Benoit got his first postseason save by getting the final four outs.

Benoit struck out the side in a 1-2-3 ninth, getting the heart of the Oakland batting order with Moss, Cespedes and Reddick each going down swinging.

The three-run first inning provided all the scoring required.

Austin Jackson led off the game with an opposite-field double and then Bartolo Colon hit Torii Hunter. Miguel Cabrera hit a single through the five-hole of Colon that reached center field to score the first run. Then another run scored as Fielder hit into a double play.

However, Victor Martinez laced a two-out double, and Avila came up with a clutch single to right to score what ended up being the winning run.

Scherzer, who was 21-3 with a 2.90 ERA in the season, saw to it that the lead didn't get away.

Kershaw on Thursday night went seven strong innings, allowing one run and striking out 12 Atlanta Braves, to get the Los Angeles Dodgers the one win that was needed in the first two road games. It was a nearly identical showing to what Scherzer would achieve one night later.

That's what aces do.

Run support no big deal for Scherzer

Tigers rightly shows why he's the likely AL Cy Young winner in Game 1 victory

October 5, 2013

By Jim Caple / ESPN.com

OAKLAND -- Hmm. Apparently, Max Scherzer can also win when he doesn't get great run support. Funny how good pitchers can do that.

Scherzer received the third-highest run support in the majors -- nearly six runs per game -- during the regular season, leading some critics to complain that his 21 wins were as much a testament to his teammates' bats as his pitching. That is, if they gave any credence to wins at all.

And sure enough, the Tigers looked like they would provide Scherzer with the run support equivalent to an all-you-can-eat buffet by giving him a 3-0 lead Friday night before he even took the mound. As it turned out, however, those three runs were the only runs Detroit scored against Oakland and Bartolo Colon all night in Game 1 of the AL Division Series, leaving it to Scherzer to make certain those three runs were enough.

The likely AL Cy Young winner did. For the first six innings, Scherzer shut down Oakland's lefty-heavy lineup as if it was the federal government -- or the O.com Coliseum plumbing system -- striking out nine and allowing only one hit in that span. Scherzer struck out 11 total -- he fanned Josh Donaldson, Brandon Moss and Josh Reddick two times apiece -- and gave up three hits in seven innings as Detroit went on to a 3-2 victory in a rematch of last year's division series.

"Max is one of the best pitchers in the game," right fielder Torii Hunter said. "Twenty-one wins? Don't think it's the run support. He can hold it down if he wanted to. And today he showed that.

"He had all his pitches working. He had an explosive fastball today. And he put it out there early. Usually, he's throwing 92, 93 early and preserving the 96-97 mph for the eighth inning, ninth inning. And he was blowing it past those guys, and they're a good fastball-hitting team. He showed he doesn't need a lot of run support to get it done."

"[Scherzer] was awful determined," manager Jim Leyland said. "He was thrilled to get Game 1. I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter much which game he pitched. And I think he responded like we expected him to respond."

Scherzer showed that resolve in the seventh inning. Yoenis Cespedes, who tripled in the second inning, blasted a home run nearly to the Oakland hills in the seventh. That made the score 3-2 with nobody out, Scherzer at more than 100 pitches, and the largest Oakland crowd in nearly a decade on its feet and roaring. But no matter. Scherzer retired the next three batters.

"The last 15 pitches indicate how your outing goes and the wheels could have come flying off," Scherzer said. "But I thought I kept my composure and was able to continue and execute curveballs and changeups to those left-handed batters to help generate some outs. Those last 15 pitches mean a lot, and when you can do it in the postseason, that means even more."

Detroit's pen came through as well, especially closer Joaquin Benoit, who retired one batter in the eighth and struck out the side in the ninth.

Then again, the Athletics didn't have any success against anyone. While they were third in the American League in runs during the season, they struck out 16 times in 34 plate appearances Friday. It must be fun taking a four-day break and then trying to get things going against the likely Cy Young winner.

The only real concern for the Tigers continued to be about probable MVP Miguel Cabrera and his sore groin. Cabrera has only two extra-base hits since Aug. 26, and he looked even slower than a Molina running to first base on a groundout in the eighth inning. Leyland removed him when the Tigers took the field in the bottom of the inning.

"It looked like it bothered him a little, to be honest with you," Leyland said. "I wasn't comfortable taking him out of a one-run game, but there was a little more to it. This is a ballpark with a lot of foul territory and I felt, at that point, if they hit a popup over there that he can't get to that someone else could get to easily. That's an out we might give up."

Still, the Tigers have a 1-0 lead in the series with former Cy Young winner Justin Verlander on the mound Saturday night against Oakland rookie Sonny Gray, who has pitched only 12 games in the majors. Verlander struggled some over his usual form but had three scoreless outings in September, including his final two. "Trust me, Verlander is going to try to match [Scherzer's performance]," Hunter said. "He's a competitor. He's going to go out and give his best. And his best is always goooood."

Scherzer dominates in Tigers win

October 5, 2013

By Staff / ESPN.com

Max Scherzer stole the show in Game 1, as the Detroit Tigers ace dominated the Oakland Athletics.

He struck out 11 and allowed three hits in seven innings, becoming the first pitcher with 11 strikeouts and three or fewer hits in a postseason road win since Cliff Lee in 2010. Kerry Wood and Roger Clemens are the only other pitchers to do so in the last 15 postseasons.

Scherzer tied Justin Verlander (three times) for the third-most strikeouts by a Tigers pitcher in a postseason game. Only Joe Coleman (14 in 1972) and Bill Donovan (12 in 1907) have had more than 11 strikeouts among Tigers pitchers.

Those 11 strikeouts are tied for the fourth-most by any pitcher against the Athletics in a postseason game. Only Coleman -- whose 1972 performance listed above came against the A's -- along with Tom Seaver (12 in 1973) and Jim Palmer (12 in 1973) had more.

Scherzer now has the second-most career strikeouts per nine innings pitched (11.5) in MLB postseason history. Only Adam Wainwright (11.6) has more among pitchers with at least five postseason starts.

It was Scherzer's fastball-changeup combination that powered his success against Oakland.

All but 11 of his 118 pitches were either a fastball or changeup. Six of his strikeouts came via fastball while the other five were with his changeup.

He threw a season-high 35 changeups overall and the A's were 1-for-11 against the pitch Friday.

As a team, Detroit's pitchers tallied 16 strikeouts, the most by an American League team in the postseason since 2004, when the Boston Red Sox and Minnesota Twins each had 16 against the New York Yankees.

The only teams to strike out more than 16 in an AL postseason game were the Baltimore Orioles in 1997 (21 vs. Indians) and the Cleveland Indians in 1996 (23 vs. Orioles).

The 16 strikeouts by Tigers pitchers are the most for the Tigers in a postseason game. The 16 strikeouts by Athletics batters are the most for the A's in a postseason game.

Chess match: Tigers versus A's

October 5, 2013

By Christina Kahrl / ESPN.com

Our final look at the managers ...

Detroit Tigers versus Oakland Athletics

What Jim Leyland likes to do: While the Tigers stole the fewest bases in baseball, barely averaging an attempt every three games, Leyland has been exceptionally aggressive trying to compensate for his regulars' lack of foot speed, getting his runners moving with the pitch 180 times (only Mike Scioscia had his Angels doing that more often).

What Leyland doesn't do is sweat pitch counts, you should also know by now -- Tigers starters went past 110 pitches an MLB-leading 50 times (and perhaps to some statheads' consternation, the world did not end). He also doesn't have to freak out over his bullpen. Maybe he did earlier this year, leading to the brief comeback of Jose Valverde, but these days Joaquin Benoit and Drew Smyly are working out just fine as the Tigers' tandem in tight spots. With the Tigers' starters routinely get into the seventh inning, Leyland may not need more than that.

The one interesting roster addition is Jhonny Peralta, back from his suspension. He's been working out in left field, although with Oakland having an all right-handed rotation does that mean Andy Dirks stays out there?

What Bob Melvin likes to do: Get the platoon advantage, since he managed to do that with his lineup cards an MLB-leading 77 percent of the time. And as a function of that, Melvin has been one of the most aggressive managers in the AL when it comes to sending up a pinch-hitter, second only to the hyperkinetic Maddon. And as a function of that Melvin uses his bench enough to blur the distinctions between starters and reserves:

Alberto Callaspo and Eric Sogard double up as the team's starting second basemen and utility infielders, Brandon Moss backs up in right, and fourth outfielder Chris Young started in half the A's games.

Melvin may very well be the perfect A's manager: He doesn't bunt (just 21 successful sac bunts on 32 attempts) and he doesn't run (with an MLB-low 74 occasions runners moved with the pitch). With Melvin's readiness to pinch-hit, even with three catchers on the roster it's unlikely that he'll burn a position player on a pinch-running assignment -- no AL skipper used fewer than Melvin's 14 Herb Washington specials.

In part because of his young rotation, he doesn't ask too much of his starters. He's the perfect antithesis to Leyland in his starting pitcher usage pattern, because with just seven outings with more than 110 pitches thrown, Melvin's A's tied with Clint Hurdle's Bucs for fewest in the majors. In the bullpen, he won't stick with any reliever too long, leading to a lot of switching things up; all five of his top pen men averaged less than an inning per appearance. Ryan Cook struggled in September so we'll if Dan Otero instead joins Sean Doolittle and Grant Balfour as the late-inning trio that Melvin likes to employ.

Advantage: Another tough matchup between another good pair, but I'd favor Melvin just slightly because he might be able to steal a late run or two in a tight game.

Max Scherzer takes Game 1 start and turns it into work of art

October 5, 2013

By Scott Miller / CBSSports.com

OAKLAND – Strangest sight of the postseason so far? Not David Price celebrating with Silly String. Not Wil Myers dropping a routine fly ball or Dusty Baker getting canned. And nope, not even the cartoonish shrubbery obscuring Brian Wilson's face.

Try the Tigers handing the Game 1 ball to Max Scherzer.

TIME TO PANIC?

Down 1-0, A's have a major uphill battle

Yes, he's had a fantastic 2013, started the All-Star Game, is going to win a Cy Young award and blah, blah, blah. All of those things. But after the past few years, still ... Scherzer as Game 1 starter over Justin Verlander?

"I don't think there was too much surprise, given some of Justin's struggles and given Max's dominance this year," Tigers catcher Alex Avila was saying after Scherzer stuffed the A's 3-2. "We feel like we have No. 1 starters throughout the rotation. Our guys have stuff that good.

"We've been pitching that way all year long."

Close your eyes Friday night, and you could have sworn that was Verlander, circa 2011, out there throwing the lighting bolts.

Close your eyes Saturday night, and who knows? Verlander on the mound, maybe you'll see Scherzer from the night before.

Only time Scherzer looked even remotely vulnerable to the A's was in the seventh, when Yoenis Cespedes smashed a two-run homer to trim the Tigers' 3-0 lead and briefly give the sellout crowd of 48,401 – largest at O.co Coliseum since June 27, 2004, hope.

But even at that. ...

"Whatever Scherzer's game plan was, he executed it to a T," A's third baseman Josh Donaldson raved. "Even on the Cespedes homer, it was a 96 mile-an-hour heater down in the zone. That's a strong fellow."

And Scherzer was a steely presence.

No question, starting him was the right thing to do.

But had it blown up in manager Jim Leyland's face ... can you imagine the debate that would be raging today over talk radio and Twitter and probably even Instagram?

Now, the A's already are in a hole and must take down Verlander in Game 2 just to pull even.

"He was awfully determined," Leyland said of Scherzer. "He was thrilled to get Game 1. I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter which game he pitched."

That the Tigers could even consider shoving Verlander back to Game 2, let alone actually do it, emphasizes both the staggering strength and depth of their rotation.

Even with groin strain hobbling Miguel Cabrera, these Tigers are legit threats to win their first World Series title since 1984. Just understand, the degree of difficulty is greater than it was a month ago, because poor Cabrera can hardly move.

Though he drilled a sharp RBI single on the first pitch he saw in the first inning Friday, moments like that belie the fact that he's just a shell of what he was earlier this season. He's got no foundation underneath him with the groin injury, which saps his power and was the overriding reason why he had just one home run in 86 plate appearances in September.

"A guy going out and doing that with a nagging injury, that's pretty impressive," center fielder Austin Jackson said of Cabrera's putting Detroit on the board just three batters into the game against Bartolo Colon. "He's definitely seeing the ball."

But not thumping the ball.

QUICK HITS

Scherzer wasn't perfect but he was still the hero

So what you've got is the baseball equivalent of an automobile (Motown license plates, incidentally) roaring down the freeway with the "check engine" light blinking. It is painful watching Cabrera attempt to run, but with this pitching, the Tigers can still get to their exit.

Verlander looked spent for much of this season, as if he had thrown way too many pitches over the past few seasons. But then came September, when he posted a 2.27 ERA with 48 strikeouts over six starts.

Leyland admitted this week that he and his coaches secretly have been discussing (agonizing?) over how to slot Scherzer, Verlander and the rest since before they even clinched.

Scherzer made them look like a group of baseball Einsteins. He absolutely overwhelmed the A's through six brilliant innings, before Cespedes beat him on his one misplaced pitch in the seventh. His fastball popped into the high 90s, he struck out 11 over seven innings and generally had the A's eating out of his hands like friendly horses in a pasture.

He fanned Brandon Moss to start the second by going up the ladder with his fastball, 93 then 94 and, finally, 96. Two batters later, he blew a 98 m.p.h. fastball past Josh Reddick, and then he hit 99 one batter later, just before Stephen Vogt said "uncle" with a liner to first.

Over the fourth and fifth innings, Scherzer fanned four in a row and five out of six hitters. In this, his second time through the order, he dialed things back, fanning four of these five hitters on changeups between 84 and 87 m.p.h.

"That was exactly the plan," Avila said. "With Max, you always want to establish his fastball, make sure he's in a good groove."

Then, out comes the slider, curve and changeup which, as Avila dissects, are able to "lengthen out the game for him."

Scherzer is a cerebral pitcher who goes into each game – each inning – with a plan and strongly believes that the last 15 pitches a starter throws are the key to the whole deal.

To that end, when things got especially dicey after Cespedes' home run, following Brandon Moss' leadoff single in the seventh, made it 3-2 ... Scherzer regrouped and got Reddick to fly to left and Vogt to pop to short before striking out Daric Barton. To those three hitters, Scherzer threw the final 13 of his 118 pitches.

"The last 15 pitches indicate how your outing goes, and the wheels could have come flying off," he said. "I thought I kept my composure and ... was able to continue and execute curveballs and changeups to those three left-handed hitters."

This side of a no-hitter or perfect game, it was as complete and dominant a pitching performance as you'll see. It was a clinic.

And now the A's get Verlander, who wasn't exactly pouting while Scherzer was dealing.

"Justin handled it beautifully," Leyland said the other day. "You couldn't handle it any better."

Said Verlander: "The four guys we're throwing out there are four of the best pitchers in the league. And we were all year."

He's right. And if Oakland doesn't prove him wrong over these next few days, then this Division Series will end the same way it did last October, covered in Tiger stripes.

Tigers beat A's in Game 1 of ALDS: Quick hits

October 5, 2013

By Matt Snyder / CBSSports.com

The Tigers took a 1-0 lead in the best-of-5 ALDS Friday night with a 3-2 win over the Oakland Athletics.

Hero: Though he was not perfect, it's Max Scherzer. The Tigers spotted him three runs in the first inning and that's all they'd need. Scherzer could well have been more efficient -- needing 118 pitches to get through seven innings -- and coughed up the two-run homer to Yoenis Cespedes to make Tigers fans sweat it out in the late innings. But overall, if you look at the most important person to the Tigers' win, it's Scherzer. He only allowed three hits in seven innings while striking out 11. His final line: 7 IP, 3 H, 2 ER, 2 BB, 11 K. Against a good, playoff-caliber offense. That's your Cy Young winner. That's your hero.

TIME TO PANIC?

Down 1-0, A's have a major uphill battle

Goat: While Bartolo Colon coughed up three runs in the first inning, he settled in after that. So I'm not saying him. Instead, I'm gonna go with a combination of Jed Lowrie and Josh Donaldson -- the A's two- and three-hole hitters. Leadoff man Coco Crisp got on base three times but only advanced to second base once (on a wild pitch). It's time to get things done, second and third hitters. Coco did his job while Lowrie and Donaldson failed to do theirs. In all, the duo went 0-for-8 with three strikeouts.

Turning point: What a tough category for this game. The Tigers led 3-0 after the top of the first inning and the A's were able to cut it to 3-2, but then never really flirted with tying the game. Had the A's come back to win, this easily would've been the Cespedes homer, but they didn't. Let's go with Scherzer quieting the A's after said homer. There were no outs in the seventh when it happened. It was a big opportunity for Oakland to get him out of the game and get into the Detroit bullpen. The crowd in Oakland was rocking. Instead, Scherzer needed 11 pitches to retire the next three hitters and send it to the eighth, quieting the rowdy A's fans.

It was over when: One-run game with Joaquin Benoit needing to record a four-out save? C'mon. It was over when it was literally over. Out number 27, when Benoit struck out Josh Reddick.

Next: We'll do it again tomorrow night. At 9:07 p.m. ET/6:07 Oakland time it'll be Game 2, with Justin Verlander (13-12, 3.46 in regular season) getting the ball for the road Tigers and Sonny Gray (5-3, 2.67) on the hill for the home A's. The A's really, really need this one, otherwise they're going to Detroit in need of two wins there before having to take down Scherzer at home in Game 5.

Max Scherzer proves he's Tigers' new ace in ALDS Game 1 win vs. A's

October 5, 2013

By Phil Taylor / SI.com

OAKLAND -- There has been a great deal of debate about Max Scherzer most of the season. Do his 21 wins really mean much, since the win is such an imprecise statistic? If you consider advanced metrics, was his season really that far above the performances of the other elite pitchers in the American League? But the postseason is no time for debate, it's the time for performance, and Scherzer's effort in Detroit's 3-2 win over Oakland in Game 1 of the AL Championship Series could only be judged as near impeccable, whether you're old school or new.

He allowed just three hits and struck out 11 in his seven innings, and his only real mistake was serving up a 95 mph fastball that Yoenis Cespedes sent into the left field stands for a two-run home run in the seventh. The sellout crowd at O.co Coliseum, which proved the A's made the right decision in taking off the tarp that usually covers the upper deck, desperately wanted more reasons to wave their yellow towels, but Scherzer gave them none. Other than the pitch to Cespedes, he was masterful, blowing away A's hitters with his high 90s fastball the first time through the order, then tantalizing them with a devastating changeup in the 80-mph range in the later innings. "He has a pretty big gap between his fastball and his offspeed pitches," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "If you don't see him that often, that fastball seems to get on you a bit quicker."

The A's might see Scherzer again quite soon -- in the deciding Game 5 of this series, if it gets that far. A year ago, these two teams met in the ALDS and the difference was the Tigers' ace, Justin Verlander, who shut them down in Games 1 and 5. Scherzer has been this year's Verlander for the Tigers in many ways -- their security blanket, their most trusted starter.

That role means a great deal to him, according to everyone but Scherzer himself. "I don't get caught up in the hoopla, worrying about where I'm pitching or if I'm pitching Game 1 or Game 5," he said. That's not how Tigers manager Jim Leyland saw it. "He was thrilled to get Game 1," he said. "I think it meant a lot to him, even though he said it didn't matter which game he pitched. I think he responded like we expected him to respond." He had the right response for Leyland after giving up the bomb to Cespedes in the 7th, on his 106th pitch of the night. The Tigers manager visited the mound, ready to make a pitching change depending on what he heard from his pitcher. "I still have something left in the tank, if you want it," Scherzer told him. "It's yours," Leyland said. "With the season he's had, he's earned the right to keep going if he says he can keep going," Leyland said afterward.

Scherzer rewarded Leyland's faith by inducing an easy flyout to left from Josh Reddick and a pop to short from Stephen Vogt. Then he struck out Daric Barton. The inning was done and so, essentially, were the A's. Relievers Drew Smyly and Joaquin Benoit got the last six outs for the Tigers, five of them on strikeouts. That brought the strikeout total for the A's batting order to 16, including three each from Reddick, Barton and Brandon Moss. Oakland obviously has to make better contact going forward, which might not be that easy against Verlander -- still formidable even in a down year -- in Game 2 on Saturday.

The A's are lucky there is a Game 2 and beyond, that this wasn't one of those nonsensical one-game wild card playoffs. If it had been, their postseason would have been effectively over after the first inning. Tigers leadoff hitter Austin Jackson opened things up by slicing a double down the right field line, and after A's starter Bartolo Colon hit Torii Hunter, Miguel Cabrera hit the first pitch he saw from Colon back up the middle, giving the Tigers a 1-0 lead after only six pitches.

Hunter came home on a double-play grounder by Prince Fielder, but the Tigers weren't done. Victor Martinez doubled to left center and Alex Avila's roller trickled under the gloves of both first baseman Daric Barton and second baseman Alberto Callaspo, allowing Martinez to score for a 3-0 Detroit lead.

From there it was all about Scherzer, doing what he has done all season. Both clubhouses were reciting the "it's only one game" and "it's going to be a long series" platitudes afterward, with the exception of the excitable Benoit. "It feels like we're on the verge of another World Series," he said. It's still a little early to say that, but Benoit's enthusiasm was understandable. Having an ace like Scherzer to turn to can make a team feel like anything is possible.

After years of close calls, Tigers time to win a title is now

October 5, 2013

By Michael Rosenberg / SI.com

The Detroit Tigers may have more chances to win the World Series. They will never have a better one. Of the eight teams left in baseball's postseason tournament, the Tigers stand out, not for being the best (though they might be) but for needing it the most. Players on other teams want to win just as much, of course. But as a franchise, the Tigers need this more than anybody else.

Look around. St. Louis won the World Series two years ago. The Pirates could all get arrested on the way to the stadium and this would STILL be a feel-good year. Atlanta has been so good for so long, and has so many gifted young players, that this feels like so many Octobers in the past and the future. Four months ago, the Dodgers represented the old and the dead; now they stand for both dominance and (thanks to phenom Yasiel Puig) youthful exuberance, and they will surely keep spending their way to contention.

The Red Sox are both relatively recent World Series champions and a revived franchise. Win or lose this month, most Boston fans will be pleased about 2013. Tampa Bay's playoff contention is an annual miracle, and anyway, there aren't enough fans there to take any postseason complaints seriously. Oakland's entire franchise identity is built on not being the favorite.

The Tigers? They are expensive and in their prime. They have been sniffing and circling around a championship since 2006 but haven't won one since 1984. The last two postseasons have given Detroit a sense of progression: American League Championship Series loss leads to World Series loss leads to well, it could lead to anything, of course. That's how baseball works.

"We don't live by expectations," Miguel Cabrera said this week. "People can say a lot of things. They say Toronto is going to win the division. They say Washington is going to win the division. And they don't do it. So it doesn't matter what people say, what people expect."

Cabrera was asked if there is anything different about the Tigers' clubhouse this year, and he said "the paint." Manager Jim Leyland was asked a similar question, and he dismissed it; the Tigers want to win, but hell, they wanted to win last year, too.

Still, the questions themselves tell you that people in Detroit think this is their year. And that means this team faces a different kind of pressure from everybody else in the postseason. Even with Cabrera gamely playing through severe pain, as he often has, the Tigers are set up as well as anybody.

Consider the starting rotation. Likely AL Cy Young award winner Max Scherzer will start Friday night's Game 1 against Oakland. The Game 2 starter is Justin Verlander, who would have gotten a lot of votes for best pitcher in baseball in March. The Game 3 starter is Anibal Sanchez, who led the AL in earned-run average this year. And the Game 4 starter is Doug Fister, who is so calm that his blood pressure is probably four over two. Fister has a postseason ERA of 2.97, and has only allowed one home run in 26 1/3 playoff innings.

Of course, the rotation looked dominant last year, too, right up until the San Francisco Giants swept them.

The point here is not that the Tigers will win. The point is that the clock is ticking, the way it ticks on every nucleus. The Tigers themselves might not even realize it -- players usually overestimate their own longevity. But winning gets harder from here on out. By 2016, the team will owe \$68 million to just three players: Prince Fielder, who will be 32, Justin Verlander (33) and Anibal Sanchez (32). If they sign Scherzer and Cabrera to market-value contract extensions, the Tigers would owe more than \$115 million to five players that season, some of whom will surely be past their prime. And if they don't sign Scherzer and Cabrera, their best pitcher and hitter this season, the picture probably won't be pretty either.

Just two years ago, the Phillies were the National League version of the Tigers. They had the best starting pitching in the game and talent all over the diamond. Now look at them. Tigers general manager Dave Dombrowski has deftly infused his team with young talent in the past, but that's hard trick to keep pulling off. In the American League Central, the Cleveland Indians made the playoffs, the Kansas City Royals are coming, and the Minnesota Twins are probably only two years behind the Royals. And looming over Detroit's run is this: 84-year-old owner (and former Tigers farmhand) Mike Ilitch is willing to spend beyond reason to win his first

World Series. Will Ilitch keep spending if his team finally wins it? What will the Tigers' payroll look like in five years?

These questions, like everything about these Tigers, have been put off until tomorrow. They have an endearing go-for-it mentality that runs counter to all the talk these days about club control and cost efficiency. They recognize that you can't hold a parade to celebrate your farm system, just as NBA teams can't raise a banner for having the most salary-cap space. The Tigers and their city are ready to win a championship right now. But will they?

Scherzer, Tigers top A's in Game 1 with Verlander on tap

October 5, 2013

By Jorge L. Ortiz / USAToday.com

OAKLAND — Most visiting teams in the postseason are happy to split the first couple games of a series, reasoning they'll make hay at home.

The Detroit Tigers aren't buying into that line of thinking, not with Justin Verlander raring to go in Game 2. Manager Jim Leyland's decision to tab Max Scherzer as his starter for Game 1 of the Division Series paid off Friday when the AL Cy Young Award favorite tossed seven innings of two-run ball in a 3-2 victory over the Oakland Athletics, and it may yield further benefits Saturday night.

After striking out 16 times against Scherzer and two relievers on Friday, the A's get to face a three-time strikeout champ who has recently regained his form. Verlander closed out the season with two scoreless starts of six innings each that showed him at his overpowering best, striking out a total of 22.

That's not good news for an A's team that managed all of one run against him in last year's postseason, when he beat them twice.

"Justin's stuff has never been a question mark," catcher Alex Avila said. "For him, it's always been command of his fastball. He needs that first and foremost. When Justin has his command with the fastball, everything else falls into place."

Asked whether Verlander was psyched up to prove he's still a No. 1 starter, Avila responded, "Without question."

There were plenty of reasons for Leyland to go with Scherzer in Game 1, chief among them his status as arguably the top pitcher in the AL this season and the majors' only 20-game winner.

He responded with a brilliant performance. Scherzer alternated between blowing away the Oakland hitters with his mid-to-high 90s fastball to baffling them with his changeup and slider.

He struck out five of six batters between the fourth and fifth innings and finished with 11 K's. The right-hander cut through the teeth of the A's lefty-swinging platoon, fanning Brandon Moss, Josh Reddick and Daric Barton a combined seven times.

Scherzer's lone blemish came in the seventh, when Yoenis Cespedes tagged him with a two-run homer, one of only three hits Scherzer surrendered, to trim Detroit's lead to 3-2.

"The starting pitcher dictates the game," A's catcher Stephen Vogt said. "When a guy has that kind of stuff coming at you, it's tough to string together a bunch of hits. But at the same time, we know we can play better, and we'll be ready tomorrow."

Max Scherzer strikes out 11 as Tigers take Game 1 of ALDS

October 5, 2013

By Staff / Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- After watching Max Scherzer breeze through a spectacular playoff opener, Detroit closer Joaquin Benoit began talking big.

"We took the first step," Benoit said. "It's great. I feel like we're already on the verge of the World Series again."

The Tigers sure looked ready for another special October run, using a dominant performance by Scherzer to beat the Oakland Athletics 3-2 in the American League Division Series on Friday night.

[More Tigers-Athletics Coverage](#)

The Tigers' Max Scherzer also can win when he doesn't get great run support. Funny how good pitchers can do that, Jim Caple writes. [Story](#)

Scherzer overpowered the A's with his blazing fastball and then baffled them with his off-speed stuff. The right-hander struck out 11 over seven innings as the Tigers grabbed Game 1 of this playoff rematch from 2012.

Miguel Cabrera helped stake Detroit to an early lead before the banged-up slugger left in the eighth as a precaution.

"We won the game; I think that's the more important thing right now," Cabrera said. "For us, it's not an issue. It's no time to complain, no time to worry."

The only guy who could get anything going against Scherzer was Yoenis Cespedes -- and that wasn't enough with the way the likely Cy Young Award winner was pitching.

The A's struck out 16 times in all, a franchise record in a postseason game.

"Today we noticed that my fastball seemed pretty good and my changeup seemed pretty good. That's why I thought I was able to get into a groove and pitch deep into the game because of those two pitches," Scherzer said. "I thought I did a good job of attacking the zone and throwing first-pitch strikes, which I pride myself in." Cabrera, hindered by a groin strain late in a season of injuries for last year's Triple Crown winner, didn't have to overextend himself on defense thanks to Scherzer's 118-pitch gem. But he did look uncomfortable running out a grounder in the eighth.

"I wasn't very comfortable taking him out of a one-run game, but there was a little bit more to it," manager Jim Leyland said.

Cabrera and Alex Avila each hit first-inning RBI singles against 40-year-old All-Star Bartolo Colon, whose winless stretch against the Tigers extended to 10½ years.

Scherzer retired 16 of his first 18 batters and was nearly untouchable before Cespedes hit a two-run drive in the seventh for his first career playoff home run. The strikeouts were his most in seven postseason starts.

Cespedes struck out in the ninth against Benoit, who retired the final four batters for the save.

Leyland opted for Scherzer for the postseason opener over Justin Verlander, who goes Saturday night against 23-year-old rookie Sonny Gray in just his 11th career start. Verlander beat the A's in Games 1 and 5 of their postseason series last October, helping Detroit survive on its way to the World Series.

"I don't get caught up in the hoopla, where I'm pitching," Scherzer said.

The A's missed early chances in Game 1 of the rematch -- and there was little the raucous, yellow towel-waving sellout home crowd of 48,401 could do until Cespedes finally energized the ballpark.

Scherzer received an AL-best 6.80 runs of support per nine innings over his 32 starts this season, but he didn't need anything more than those three first-inning runs in shutting down the AL West champions.

The majors' lone 20-game winner, Scherzer (21-3) allowed three hits and walked two.

"He's always tough; he won 21 games," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "Scherzer's a strikeout guy; he's a swing-and-miss guy."

Scherzer issued a two-out walk to Coco Crisp in the third and then retired his next eight batters in order before Crisp drew a full-count free pass in the sixth. Scherzer struck out the side in the fourth and recorded two more K's in the fifth.

Oakland had the tying run aboard in the eighth but Josh Donaldson popped out against Benoit.

"Scherzer was terrific, and the bullpen came in and did a fine job," Leyland said. "He was awfully determined. I think he was thrilled to get Game 1."

Omar Infante added a pair of singles for a Tigers team determined to take this postseason run one step further after being swept by the San Francisco Giants in the 2012 World Series.

Detroit nearly added a run in the sixth but Gold Glove right fielder Josh Reddick threw out Victor Martinez at the plate.

Colon put himself in a hole from the start, surrendering Austin Jackson's double to lead off the game and then hitting Torii Hunter with a pitch. Cabrera singled up the middle for the first run, and then Prince Fielder grounded into a double play to bring home another. Avila added an RBI single.

Cespedes hit a one-out triple over Andy Dirks' head in the second but Oakland was unable to drive him in.

Leyland went with Dirks in left over Jhonny Peralta, who made the playoff roster a week after completing a 50-game suspension for ties to the Biogenesis lab accused of distributing performance-enhancing drugs. Peralta lined out as a pinch hitter in the ninth.

Colon had hoped for a triumphant return to the playoff stage eight years after his previous appearance, with the Angels. The right-hander's 10 hits allowed were his most in 10 career postseason starts.

"Bartolo threw an outstanding game," catcher Stephen Vogt said. "He made a couple of mistakes early, and they took advantage."

Colon, who wasn't part of the A's playoffs last season while serving a 50-game suspension for a positive test for elevated testosterone, won 18 games this season but couldn't break out of his decadelong funk against the Tigers.

The burly right-hander is winless -- going 0-8 -- in 14 starts against the Tigers since a victory on April 13, 2003. Cespedes was back in left field after missing the final two regular-season games at Seattle with a right shoulder injury.

Game notes

Both catchers took hard foul tips off the mask. ... The crowd was the largest at the Coliseum since 53,974 on June 27, 2004, against the San Francisco Giants. ... Hunter was Colon's first hit batsman all year. "The only ball I feel bad about is the one that hit Torii," Colon said. ... Fielder snapped an 0-for-13 stretch in the postseason with a third-inning single. ... First-pitch temperature was 77 degrees.

A's puzzled by Tigers' Scherzer in Game 1

Cespedes' late homer isn't enough to offset bats' struggles

October 5, 2013
By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Of all the habits the A's picked up in the second half of the season, beating some of the game's best pitchers proved to be the most momentous. Watching 40-year-old Bartolo Colon beat everyone was a close second.

That's why Oakland's 3-2 loss to the Tigers in the opener of a best-of-five American League Division Series at the Coliseum on Friday evening went against nearly everything the A's had done to get to this point.

The same team that averaged more than six runs in its final month of play struck out 16 times, a new A's record in postseason play, and Colon's rare early woes, all under the scrutiny of October's magnifying glass, were too much to overcome.

"I felt like we were a little rusty in some areas, especially myself, having a couple days off," said Josh Donaldson, who fanned twice. "We're going to come back here tomorrow with a positive attitude ready to win the game."

The A's find themselves in a familiar position, having also dropped Game 1 to the Tigers in an eventual ALDS loss last year, but this one was perhaps even more critical.

The A's believed a veteran like Colon, a weapon they didn't have at this time last year, could change their Game 1 fortunes. Now they must turn to a rookie in Sonny Gray to try to even the series on Saturday against another pretty good pitcher: Justin Verlander, who ended the A's season last year.

Game 2 airs at 6 p.m. PT on TBS.

"We just have to forget about this as fast as we can," said Coco Crisp. "That's been working for us all year. It's unfortunate, because we almost pulled it off, but we let this go and start worrying about Mr. Verlander."

"It doesn't get any easier with Verlander on the mound tomorrow," added Josh Reddick. "We know it's a tough task to beat those guys back-to-back, but we can't dwell on this."

Yoenis Cespedes tried to salvage the opener with a monster performance, despite playing with a bum right shoulder, but he couldn't do it on his own. The Cuban slugger was responsible for two of the A's three hits off an absolutely dominant Max Scherzer, the first a triple in the second inning and the second a two-run homer in the seventh that ignited a once deflated crowd.

But the 48,401 in attendance, the largest baseball crowd the Coliseum has seen since 2004, were silenced by night's end, as a potential momentum shift granted by Cespedes' first postseason long ball amounted to little else, even after Scherzer's departure.

Detroit's 21-game winner, a favorite to take home the AL Cy Young Award, had a three-run lead before he even stepped on the mound, but he also did plenty work on his own against a team that tagged him for five runs on eight hits in five innings just five weeks ago.

Take away Cespedes, and Scherzer allowed only one hit -- an infield single to Brandon Moss in advance of the homer -- and two walks, both to Crisp, in seven innings. Scherzer had tallied seven swings and misses by the end of the second inning and finished with 11 K's.

"We were able to jump on some of his mistakes the last night, and he didn't make any mistakes this time," said Stephen Vogt. "He was putting his fastball on the corners. He wasn't missing over the middle of the plate. His fastball-changeup fastball is one of the best in baseball. Good pitching will always beat good hitting."

Scherzer's teammates, meanwhile, were in attack mode from the start, spraying Colon's fastballs every which way in a three-run first inning. Oakland's righty, who had given up three runs total in his final three regular-season starts, spotted a first-pitch strike to leadoff man Austin Jackson. But his next four pitches were all the Tigers needed to take control of Game 1.

Jackson lined a double to right field, and the normally unflappable Colon proceeded to nearly hit Torii Hunter, before he actually did with his next pitch -- this from a hurler who had not hit a single batter in 190 1/3 innings this year.

Colon still had a chance to get through the frame unscathed, but a miracle was in order, with Miguel Cabrera stepping to the plate and Prince Fielder waiting on deck. Cabrera jumped on the first pitch, driving a single up the middle to bring home Jackson and allow Hunter to reach third.

Hunter's hustle proved significant, as the outfielder scored on Fielder's ensuing double-play ball. Not that it mattered, since Victor Martinez and Alex Avila extended the early rally with a double and then a single for a three-run lead they would never give back.

First baseman Daric Barton, who typically showcases outstanding range, initially appeared to have a handle on Avila's ball. Ditto Omar Infante's sixth-inning single. But both went passed him, even though "he does usually get to those," said manager Bob Melvin.

"Barton tried to get to the ball and almost made a good play," said Colon, "but you have to give credit to Avila." Colon, who became the oldest pitcher in Oakland history to start a postseason game, threw nothing but fastballs to his first 10 batters, before greeting Hunter with a changeup to christen the third inning. He soon showed his other cards, too, flashing his slider some in six innings of work.

He found his groove, but Scherzer kept his, and Colon remained winless against the Tigers since April 13, 2003. "We're still in this thing," said Vogt. "We still have a long way to go, but we've got some good arms throwing in this series against their good arms. This is still going to be a great series."

Cespedes is lone bright spot as A's bats struggle

October 5, 2013

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The problem for the A's on Friday night in Game 1 of their American League Division Series against the Tigers was obvious.

Yoenis Cespedes had two of their three hits, including a long seventh-inning, two-run homer off starter and winner Max Scherzer, and Coco Crisp had three walks. That was the extent of the offense as Oakland whiffed 16 times against three Detroit pitchers in a 3-2 loss at the O.co Coliseum.

ALDS "Cespedes was huge. He was our whole offense tonight aside from Coco getting his three walks," said right fielder Josh Reddick, who struck out three times in four at-bats. "He was everything. That homer was huge for us, pulling us back to one run at that point.

"Nobody else executed, really. Aside from those two guys, we never seemed to get into a rhythm like we have been all year. Cespedes picked us up big time, which he has done with the long ball in his whole career."

A best-of-five series is a very small sample size and the A's offense must get untracked quickly, beginning in Game 2 here on Saturday night (9:07 p.m. ET, TBS). The A's, obviously, are already down 1-0 with the scene shifting to Comerica Park for games on Monday and Tuesday, the latter only if necessary.

Cespedes, who has been battling a sore right shoulder for the past month, said the A's can't count on him to carry the offense every game.

"It doesn't depend on me only," the Cuban-born player said in Spanish through his interpreter after the game.

"This is about the whole team. Today I was good, but let's hope everyone is good tomorrow."

Reddick agreed, noting that "it doesn't get any easier" with Justin Verlander on the mound against rookie Sonny Gray, who is making his first postseason start, coming after only 10 starts since he was elevated to Oakland for good from Triple-A Sacramento on Aug. 10. Detroit's former Cy Young Award-winning right-hander defeated the A's twice in the ALDS last year as the Tigers prevailed in five games.

"We know it's a tough task to beat those guys back-to-back," Reddick said. "We didn't do it tonight. Hopefully we can make the adjustments necessary and don't dwell on this game."

Verlander hasn't been the pitcher of old as he has struggled for much of the season, but in Game 5 last year on Oct. 11, he pitched a shutout against the A's at the Coliseum. He struck out 11, walked one and allowed only four hits.

Likewise, Scherzer struck out 11 in seven innings on Friday night. Relievers Drew Smyly and Joaquin Benoit whiffed the other five with Benoit striking out the side in the ninth inning as the lefty-swinging Reddick ended it, flailing at air.

The A's don't have the propensity of striking out. They were 20th among the 30 big league teams this past season with 1,178 whiffs. In comparison, the Astros led the Major Leagues with 1,535. The Braves, who struck out 16 times against the Dodgers in a Game 1 loss that opened their National League Division Series on Thursday, finished the season tied with the Mets for third overall at 1,384.

So what happened to the A's on Friday night?

"Scherzer does what he does," Reddick said. "He throws 96, 97 [mph]. He pushed it up there and he's got some sink at 93. And he's got a great changeup. It's not like he's going to come out there firing fastballs every time. His changeup has a splitter action. He does a good job of mixing it up. He keeps us off-balance really well. And Benoit is in that closer's role for a reason this year. Striking out the side speaks for itself."

The A's haven't had much trouble this season generating offense. They were fourth in all of baseball in both runs scored (767) and RBIs (725), plus third in homers with 186. This during a season when Cespedes was in and out of the lineup and batted .240 with 26 homers and 80 RBIs in 135 games.

Cespedes has had continuous problems with his shoulder, limiting him to only three innings in the outfield since Sept. 14, all of them coming at Seattle on Sept. 27 during the final road series of the season.

Cespedes was questionable for the playoff opener until manager Bob Melvin said on Thursday that he'd be starting in left field. He claimed after the game on Friday night that the shoulder isn't really bothering him.

He proved it with a second-inning triple. And with Scherzer starting to struggle at the 100-pitch mark in the seventh inning, he followed a Brandon Moss infield single with a bolt into the left-field seats. It was his first postseason homer, and suddenly Detroit's 3-0 lead had narrowed to 3-2, which is where it ended.

"I feel good," said Cespedes, who lost a Victor Martinez liner in the lights in the top of the eighth inning, turning the catchable ball into a two-base error. "I'm not 100 percent, but I feel good enough to play."

That's good news for the A's. Right now he's the nexus of their offense.

Colon recovers after three-run first, but A's can't

A's ace struggles with fastball command against aggressive Tigers lineup

October 5, 2013

By Jeff Kirshman / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- For a moment Friday, Bartolo Colon seemed more likely to fool his catcher than the Tigers' hitters.

The A's Game 1 starter lacked his normal pinpoint accuracy in the top of the first inning, repeatedly firing fastballs high in the zone. The Tigers feasted on Colon's offerings, scoring all three of their runs in the opening frame before Colon settled down to throw five scoreless innings and exit after six with no further damage. Colon's resurgence, however, came only after catcher Stephen Vogt received a foul tip off the mask, and in the end it didn't matter, as the A's lost 3-2 to fall behind Detroit in the best-of-five American League Division Series. Game 2 is here on Saturday night (6 PT, TBS).

Colon, widely known for relying on well-located fastballs, didn't throw an offspeed pitch until the 11th batter he faced. Seven Tigers batters came to the plate in the first, with Austin Jackson doubling, Torii Hunter reaching on a hit-by-pitch -- Colon's first of the season -- and Miguel Cabrera singling up the middle for Detroit's first run of the game.

"After that, I thought I threw a good game," Colon said through interpreter Ariel Prieto.

The Tigers scored twice more with a double by Victor Martinez and single by Alex Avila in consecutive at-bats to cap off the inning, and they would've scored once more if not for a fantastic run-saving throw by Josh Reddick -- Oakland's reigning Gold Glove Award-winning right fielder -- in the sixth.

A similar defensive showing by first baseman Daric Barton in the first inning may have prevented the Tigers' third run from scoring. Avila's two-out single snuck under Barton's glove into right field, a play that, compared to others he's made this season, seemed almost routine.

"I think if I dove, I could have caught it," Barton said. "The ground was a little bit quicker than normal. It was just one of those balls where it was hit in between. I went after it standing up and just ran out of room."

Colon, the A's 40-year-old ace, hasn't defeated the Tigers since April 13, 2003 -- when he was a spirited 29-year-old. The 18-game winner became the oldest pitcher in Oakland history to start a postseason game with his ninth career Division Series start Friday, but, at least for an inning, the ageless spark that has carried Colon and the A's throughout the season was not to be found.

Colon gave up three runs total in his final three regular-season games. On Friday, he matched that total in the first inning.

"They got some key hits and took advantage of a couple mistakes in the first inning. Other than that, he was the same Bartolo we've seen this year," Vogt said. "Obviously, it looks different when you put up a three-spot in the first inning. People are going to ask, 'What's wrong with Bartolo?' Nothing's wrong with Bartolo. They had a good game plan. They were uber aggressive and took advantage of a couple pitches up in the zone."

Gray has skipper's confidence heading into Game 2

Impressive right-hander has big-game experience from Vanderbilt days

October 5, 2013

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Due to injury and circumstance, Sonny Gray, a 23-year-old rookie right-hander, will be making his 11th Major League start on Saturday for the A's against veteran Tigers ace Justin Verlander in Game 2 of the American League Division Series at O.co Coliseum (6 p.m. PT on TBS).

With A.J. Griffin out for the series because of a sore right elbow, A's manager Bob Melvin had to juggle the rotation behind Game 1 starter Bartolo Colon. When asked why he decided to start Gray on Saturday and Jarrod Parker in Game 3 if the best-of-five-series on Monday, Melvin expressed confidence in all his pitchers.

"We like all of [our starters] and they're going to pitch at some point in time, anyway," Melvin said. "Jarrod had the experience of pitching in Game 1 [in Detroit] last year, so we're comfortable with that. You would prefer to pitch Sonny in a home game to start, even though he has the stuff to pitch there."

Parker did indeed work Game 1 at Comerica Park last year, losing to Verlander and the Tigers, 3-1, in a series Oakland lost in five games. Gray has been a fixture as the No. 5 starter in the A's rotation since he was recalled for good from Triple-A Sacramento and made his first Major League start on Aug. 10 at Toronto.

Now, he finds himself throwing the second game in the playoffs only two years removed from starting for Vanderbilt in the College World Series.

Why he'll win: Verlander was dominant against the A's in last year's playoffs, going 2-0 with a 0.56 ERA and 22 strikeouts in 16 innings. Why he'll win: Gray has pitched well at home, posting a 0.93 WHIP and striking out 38 in 40 2/3 innings while only giving up nine earned runs.

Pitcher beware: Verlander hasn't pitched at his usual elite level, ending the year with his highest ERA (3.46) and WHIP (1.31) since 2008. Pitcher beware: Gray has never pitched in the postseason and his last five starts were against teams with losing records.

Bottom line: Verlander must get ahead in counts. When he falls behind, hitters have a .995 OPS against him compared to a .453 OPS when he's ahead. Bottom line: It's important for Gray to set the tone early. This season, he owns a 5.10 ERA over the first three innings. Afterward, his ERA drops to 0.53.

"It's something you really look forward to, growing up, and hopefully someday you get a chance to do it," Gray said. "Fortunately for me, this is my second, maybe third month in the big leagues and I'm getting to start a playoff game. There are a lot of guys in this game who said they wished they'd gotten the opportunity and they just haven't been on a playoff team. I'm very fortunate and I'm just going to try and go out there and make the most of it."

Nerves?

"I'm sure I'll have butterflies, but I don't think there's anything I'm going to do to take those away," Gray said.

"It's a good feeling to have that. It adds to the excitement a little bit more. Maybe I'll take a Tums or something. I wasn't surprised, no, about starting Game 2. I had a little bit of a feeling. I expected to pitch somewhere in the postseason rotation. I'm just glad to have the opportunity."

Gray is one of a group of former Vanderbilt players involved in this postseason, joining Rays left-hander David Price, Pirates third baseman Pedro Alvarez and Braves hurler Mike Minor. In his junior season, Gray was 12-4 with a 2.43 ERA and 132 strikeouts in 2011 as he helped pitch Vanderbilt into the College World Series for the first time.

Gray lost the opener as his school was eliminated by Oregon State and the A's drafted him 18th overall in that year's First-Year Player Draft. Gray said that experience gave him a glimpse of playoff pressure.

"I mean, the College World Series tournament is very similar," Gray said. "You have to do some things off the field that you normally wouldn't do for a regular game. I would say leading up to the game, it's probably very similar."

About pitching at home rather than on the road, Gray added:

"I think for every pitcher, it's more comfortable pitching at home. For the guys here, it's great to pitch in the Coliseum. The fans are great. You have the field that you can use to your advantage. I think that every pitcher

would rather pitch at home, no matter where they're at. It's just more comfortable and you do it a lot more. You're comfortable with the mound and what the scenery is. I think it's just a comfort thing."

Gray was brought up from the Minors for the first time this season on July 10 and was used twice out of the bullpen before being sent back down to continue his development as a starter. In his 10 starts since returning to the big club, he's 5-3 with a 2.85 ERA and 61 strikeouts with a 1.13 WHIP in 60 innings.

When asked about Gray's evolution, Melvin said he was comfortable enough to start him in a playoff series.

"I haven't seen any evolution at all," Melvin said. "He's gotten here and been good. I think the right thing to do earlier in the season was bring him up and get a taste of the big leagues. We used him in a relief role and he did well. Then he went back down in a starting role. And he's been good since we brought him back up in a starting role. He mixes it up. He has a great breaking ball that moves on top of a fastball and it moves every which way. "And the fact that he played in big-time games in college, you can see he's a competitor. He gets better as the game goes along. A lot of things play into being [just] out of college, bringing him to the big leagues and expecting him to perform in a role like this, his competitiveness plays into that."

Aiming to even series, A's face another ace

Oakland rookie Gray opposes Detroit's Verlander in Game 2

October 5, 2013

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- On the heels of Max Scherzer's dominating Game 1 effort, here comes Justin Verlander. The Tigers are armed and dangerous in the American League Division Series, but that's no news bulletin to the A's. The AL West champions knew what they were facing coming in, and now the urgency heightens for Game 2 on Saturday (9 p.m. ET/6 p.m. PT, TBS) as young Sonny Gray, in his 11th Major League start, engages Verlander, the 2011 AL Cy Young Award winner and Most Valuable Player.

"I like facing Verlander," said A's leadoff man Coco Crisp. "He's a competitor. I like facing guys who are really good -- and he's been the best pitcher in the game."

Crisp has a fond memory attached to Detroit's superlative right-hander. Leading off Game 1 of the 2012 ALDS at Comerica Park, Coco homered against Verlander. It was the only run he allowed in the game and in the series.

"It's always a shock to lead off a game with a home run, but especially against a guy like Verlander," Crisp said. "That was a shocking thing."

The A's need to find some offense, fast. They managed only six baserunners while striking out 16 times against Scherzer and relievers Drew Smyly and Joaquin Benoit in Game 1, taken by the Tigers, 3-2. Crisp walked three times, but Jed Lowrie and Josh Donaldson were a combined 0-for-8 behind him.

"We need all our components in this series," Crisp said. "We need everybody."

Yeonis Cespedes' two-run homer in the seventh got the A's back in the game, but Scherzer restored order, and the bullpen nailed it down. Brandon Moss' single and Cespedes' second-inning triple were the only other A's hits. Scherzer struck out Josh Reddick and retired Stephen Vogt to leave Cespedes stranded.

"This doesn't depend on me only," said Cespedes, who has been hindered by a sore shoulder. "This is about the whole team. [Friday] I was good, but let's hope everyone is good [Saturday]."

The Tigers came out with aggression against Bartolo Colon, and it paid off with three first-inning runs that stood up. Austin Jackson doubled on Colon's third pitch, and Torii Hunter was hit on the arm with a fastball. Miguel Cabrera slammed a first-pitch RBI single to center. After Prince Fielder grounded into double play to cash in the second run, Victor Martinez doubled and scored on Alex Avila's single.

Scoring early enabled the Tigers to take some of the energy out of the largest crowd in Oakland since 2004. But the fans roared to life when Cespedes went deep in the seventh.

"It's just loud," Jackson said. "That's what you get in the playoffs, that type of atmosphere. You want to try to take some of that away from them if you can."

Gray, with high-octane stuff, will try to keep the Tigers quiet in his matchup with Verlander. Gray, a standout at Vanderbilt while Verlander was building his reputation as the game's premier starter, has a killer curveball to go with his 93 mph heater, changeup and slider.

"The problem with Sonny Gray," said Tigers manager Jim Leyland, "is we don't know much about him, other than what we've seen on TV."

Verlander had an uncharacteristic season, going 13-12 with a 3.46 ERA and ceding his role as the ace to Scherzer. His teammates expect Verlander to be in prime form with so much on the line.

"He's going to step up for us," Hunter said. "Trust me, Verlander's going to try to match what Scherzer did. He's a competitor."

The 96-win A's have had an amazing season. They don't want to go down 0-2 heading to Detroit.

Oakland A's lose Game 1 of ALDS, 3-2 to Detroit Tigers

October 5, 2013

By John Hickey / Oakland Tribune

OAKLAND -- The A's are going from a guy who threw like a Cy Young winner to a guy who's already won the Cy Young.

To say that things don't get easier for Oakland in the wake of a 3-2 loss to Detroit's Max Scherzer in Friday's Game 1 of the American League Division Series is like saying water is wet.

Justin Verlander is next up Saturday at 6:07 p.m. at the Coliseum, and the 2011 Cy Young winner was pretty much the reason why the Tigers beat the A's in the ALDS last year. He threw 16 innings and allowed one run. "Scherzer had Cy Young stuff tonight," third baseman Josh Donaldson said. "He had a fastball from 93 to 99 (mph) and a changeup he could throw at will."

The A's saw Scherzer six weeks ago in

Motown and ran him out of the game after five innings, having scored six times.

"This was two different pitchers," Donaldson said. "Unlike the other game, we didn't get anybody on base.

When you do, you can make things happen, even when the guy is throwing great. Tonight that didn't happen."

So A's rookie Sonny Gray, who has never faced the Tigers before, much less pitched in the postseason, is charged Saturday with the task of doing what Bartolo Colon couldn't quite do Friday and keep the Tigers offense from jumping out early. Detroit got three runs in the first inning off Colon, who hadn't allowed three in the first all year.

That was all it took. Yoenis Cespedes hit a two-run homer in the seventh, but the A's got just one more base runner after that.

Does anything change for Gray, whose biggest start before this, he says, was Vanderbilt's first game in the College World Series a couple years ago?

"I have to approach it the same, no matter," Gray said. "So, no (nothing changes)."

Something has to change for the A's, who got just three hits and who struck out 16 times and walked just three, all of them from leadoff man Coco Crisp.

"It is what it is," Crisp said. "It's unfortunate. We almost pulled it off. We just need to let this one go and start worrying about Mr. Verlander."

That the A's came back at all was thanks to Cespedes, who tripled in his first at-bat and homered in his third, both of them lasers to left field off Scherzer. He was happy that his troublesome right shoulder held together, but he was subdued beyond that.

"This is not just about me," Cespedes said. "It depends on the team. I was good today, but the rest of the team will be good tomorrow."

The A's had better hope so.

Buoyed by the largest crowd to see a baseball game in the Coliseum since 2004 -- 48,401 -- the A's limped for six innings before Cespedes struck in the seventh. In the eighth, Crisp walked with one out, but Jed Lowrie struck out and Donaldson popped out. Then in the ninth, Detroit closer Joaquin Benoit struck out Brandon Moss, Cespedes and Josh Reddick to close it out.

Colon had allowed only 10 runs in the first inning all year, just two in the first inning of his September starts. But he gave up a double to leadoff hitter Austin Jackson on a high fastball, then hit Torii Hunter with a pitch after having not hit a batter all season.

Miguel Cabrera singled and Prince Fielder hit into a double play, each man getting a run home. When Alex Avila got a single past Daric Barton at first base, the A's were in a huge hole.

"The Cabrera ball was on a good pitch," catcher Steven Vogt said. "But Bartolo got a couple of balls up in the inning, and that almost never happens."

Enter Verlander. And Gray.

"This team has been good at putting games like this behind us," Reddick said. "We need to do it again."

Cespedes and Rickey Henderson (Game 4 of the 1989 World Series) are the only players in A's history with a triple and a homer in the same postseason game.

The A's 16 strikeouts are the most for an Oakland team in a postseason game. Reddick, who threw out Victor Martinez at the plate in the sixth, has thrown out runners five times in the last eight games.

Yoenis Cespedes lone bright spot in Oakland A's loss

October 5, 2013

By Carl Steward / Oakland Tribune

OAKLAND -- If there was consolation to the A's 3-2 loss to the Detroit Tigers on Friday night, it's that Yoenis Cespedes looks primed to put the team on his back offensively for the rest of the series.

Unfortunately, on this night, Cespedes didn't get support from anyone else in the lineup. He was the only A's player who appeared to have any clue against Tigers starter Max Scherzer, although he was bested by closer Joaquin Benoit with a chance to tie the score in the ninth inning.

Cespedes smacked a laser triple over the head of left fielder Andy Dirks in the second inning, then crushed a two-run home run in the seventh to provide the A's their only runs.

It could have been an even more explosive night

for Cespedes when he came up with one out in the ninth against Benoit. He just missed connecting on the first pitch, fouling it high into the seats behind third base before swinging through the next two pitches.

Nonetheless, it was an encouraging start for a player the A's weren't sure would be ready to play by Game 1 of the American League Division Series because of an ailing right shoulder. But Cespedes not only was able to hit, he played left field.

"The last month has been one of the best for me all year, and I am still feeling good," Cespedes said through interpreter Ariel Prieto.

Cespedes doesn't think he will have to carry the whole load offensively now that the A's have a game under their belts after four days off.

"This is not just about me," he said. "It depends on the team. I was good today, but the rest of the team will be good (Saturday)."

Manager Bob Melvin has been careful to bring Cespedes along through the course of the week.

"He looked very good," Melvin said. "The first time up he put a pretty good swing on it. Obviously his home run, he put a pretty good swing on it. His shoulder feels good."

Perhaps not so much defensively, however. Cespedes misplayed Victor Martinez's fly ball in the eighth inning for an error, although it didn't wind up costing Oakland.

"The ball got into the lights," Cespedes said of Martinez's sinking liner that caromed off his glove.

Perhaps more worrisome, Cespedes seemed tentative throwing the ball. He never had to make a strong throw, but on two plays he soft-tossed the ball back to the infield. On his misplay, he deferred to center fielder Coco Crisp to make the throw back to the infield.

Cespedes maintained the shoulder was feeling much better, good enough to make the start in the outfield.

"It's not 100 percent, but I'm ready to play left field," he said.

If Cespedes does become a liability in left field, the A's will settle for his bat. Scherzer

had his way with the rest of the A's lineup -- the only other hit against him was Brandon Moss' chopper over the mound preceding Cespedes' homer.

Crisp said it was promising for the A's to see Cespedes swing the bat the way he did.

"He's just a big part of our lineup, and if he continues to swing like this, I think we have a good chance to pull off some needed wins," he said.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2013

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Arizona Diamondbacks	Alex Sanabia	Acquired Off Waivers From, Miami
Chicago White Sox	Bryan Anderson	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago White Sox	Ramon Troncoso	Outrighted to Minors
Los Angeles Angels	Josh Wall	Acquired Off Waivers From, Miami
Minnesota Twins	Doug Bernier	Outrighted to Minors
Toronto Blue Jays	Mike Nickeas	Outrighted to Minors
Toronto Blue Jays	Ricky Romero	Outrighted to Minors

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2013

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Arizona Diamondbacks	Matt Langwell	Outrighted to Minors
Baltimore Orioles	Eric Beaulac	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago Cubs	Mat Gamel	Acquired Off Waivers From, Milwaukee
Chicago White Sox	Brian Omogrosso	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Strained right triceps)
Chicago White Sox	Brian Omogrosso	Outrighted to Minors
Cleveland Indians	Omir Santos	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Houston Astros	Matt Paganzzi	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent

Milwaukee Brewers	Taylor Green	Outrighted to Minors
Milwaukee Brewers	Taylor Green	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Left hip labral injury)
Milwaukee Brewers	Josh Prince	Outrighted to Minors
New York Yankees	Mike Zagurski	Outrighted to Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Pete Orr	Outrighted to Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Mauricio Robles	Outrighted to Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Michael Martinez	Outrighted to Minors
Philadelphia Phillies	Zach Miner	Outrighted to Minors
St. Louis Cardinals	Joey Butler	Acquired Off Waivers From, Texas
St. Louis Cardinals	Victor Marte	Designated for Assignment
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2013		
TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Boston Red Sox	Alfredo Aceves	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
Cleveland Indians	Tyler Cloyd	Acquired Off Waivers From, Philadelphia
Cleveland Indians	Clay Rapada	Designated for Assignment
Houston Astros	Matt Pagnozzi	Outrighted to Minors
Houston Astros	Philip Humber	Outrighted to Minors
Houston Astros	Jon Singleton	Purchased From Minors

Houston Astros Cody Clark Outrighted to Minors

Houston Astros Raul Valdes Acquired Off Waivers From, Philadelphia

Houston Astros Brandon Laird Outrighted to Minors

Minnesota Twins Shairon Martis Outrighted to Minors

Minnesota Twins Josh Roenicke Outrighted to Minors

Minnesota Twins Clete Thomas Outrighted to Minors

Minnesota Twins Cole De Vries Outrighted to Minors