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Thursday, October 10, 2013

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Daily Transactions

Open letters to Detroit Tigers, Oakland Athletics as Game 5 of ALDS approaches

October 10, 2013

By Jeff Seidel / Detroit Free Press

Dear Coco,

Enough already. You made your point. You are an amazing baseball player. Now stop it, Mr. Crisp.

It seems like you have batted every other inning for the Oakland Athletics in this dramatic, fascinating, gut-wrenching American League Division Series against the Tigers.

You have gone to the plate 17 times and you have three walks and seven hits — including a pair of doubles and a triple — and knocked in two runs.

That's ridiculous.

That's not the work of one man. That's the production of almost half the Tigers' lineup.

Seven hits? That's the same number of hits that Austin Jackson, Torii Hunter, Alex Avila and Jose Iglesias have combined in the same number of games.

It's not fair.

Don't you have union rules, or something, about one guy being forced to do so much work?

The good news? You've stolen only one base in this series. And that's something the Tigers were really afraid about before this started.

The bad news? When you are on base, Mr. Crisp, you are usually already on second or third. So there's that. Which is crazy.

And it's so cruel to Tigers fans.

You are shining like a star, while Jackson, the Tigers' leadoff hitter, is struggling and getting booed by his hometown fans.

Now, Mr. Crisp, if there is some good news for Tigers fans, it's this. You are going to face Justin Verlander on Thursday in Game 5. Good luck with that.

You were oh-fer against Verlander in Game 2. In fact, since 2011, you are only 2-for-9 against Verlander with only one extra base hit.

Mr. Crisp. You are 33 years old. Please start acting like it.

Dear Justin Verlander,

Be careful against Yoenis Cespedes. He's 3-for-6 against you in the last two years.

Dear Skipper,

OK, Jim, so we don't always agree with you.

What the heck were you thinking bringing Al Albuquerque back in the ninth inning in Game 2? That was crazy.

Come to think of it, why did you leave Anibal Sanchez in Game 3 to face Seth Smith?

And why did you have Jose Iglesias try to steal second base with Jackson up in the fifth inning of Game 2?

With Hunter on deck? Even if it was a hit and run, Jackson strikes out too much.

Granted, second guessing is easy, but those decisions just didn't make any sense.

But that's all in the past, Jim.

You made some brilliant moves in Game 4 on Tuesday night.

Using Max Scherzer in relief? That was inspired. Sure, it was rocky, and it sent half of Detroit into a panic attack, but it worked.

Not pulling him with the bases loaded and nobody out? That took some serious guts.

You managed your butt off in Game 4, and everything worked.

Now, we have some suggestions for Game 5 Thursday.

You gotta move Jackson out of the leadoff spot. He is killing your offense. We know, we know. You are loyal to a fault. That's a wonderful quality and that's why your players like playing for you.

But that broken bat blooper was a fluke.

Jackson has nearly a third of the Tigers strikeouts in this series (10 of 32).

But he has been struggling for a while, now. Over the last 28 days, he is hitting .260. Which is more acceptable at the bottom of the lineup. But it kills the top.

So move Omar Infante up to the leadoff spot. He has a .333 on base percentage in this series and needs more at-bats. He needs to get on base in front of Hunter and Miguel Cabrera. Granted, they aren't tearing the cover off the ball either, but maybe Infante can spark this offense.

Jim, I'll give you this: Maybe Jackson will snap out of it. Maybe, that broken bat single will change everything. Maybe, it will give him some confidence.

But this is not the time to wait and see.

This is a one-game season.

And you have to be bold.

Do I think you'll do it, Jim? No. But promise me this: If the A's go to their bullpen and use a lefty, you gotta yank Jackson. He's hitting .213 against left-handers this year. It's a no-brainer.

Dear Miggy,

We know you are in pain. We can see it in your face. Just try to keep that ball on the ground. It's obvious your power is gone, and those long fly balls are staying in the park. So focus on hitting line drives. Go with the pitch. Fight through the pain.

Dear Jhonny,

What can we say? You have been amazing.

OK. Not your defense. That makes us cringe. But your bat has more than made up for it. The Tigers have scored 14 runs in this series and you've knocked in five of them. After a 50-game suspension? You've given this team a huge lift.

Dear Tigers fans,

Admit it. You gave up on this team. Midway through Game 4, you assumed the worst. So try to enjoy Thursday, even if that sounds impossible. You never know when this team will get back to this point. The Tigers are built to win now, and that window is closing.

Justin Verlander, Detroit Tigers have one night to rewrite the ending

October 10, 2013

By Mitch Albom / Detroit Free Press

We do not remember what we choose to forget. Jhonny Peralta was, for much of the season, a cheat, a rule-breaker, suspended from the game as a persona non grata. But Tuesday night, he was a hero. With one home run, he breathed life back into our baseball team. “Jhon-ny! Jhon-ny!” the fans screamed.

Austin Jackson was, for much of the year, a catalyst, a jump-starter, until this Oakland series when his bat became a noodle, and he struck out 10 times in four games. They were booing him noticeably Tuesday. Booing Jackson? The home crowd? Then, with one cracked-bat swing in the seventh inning, all was forgiven.

Justin Verlander spent much of the season fending off critics. Why wasn't he dominating? Where did his velocity go? He went 13-12, his ERA was up, and some felt he should step back in the rotation. A few suggested he go to the bullpen. Yet here he is, tonight, in the decisive Game 5 in Oakland, donning the Superman cape and being trusted to catch the Tigers and fly them into the next round.

Remember. Forget. It is the part of sports where “lately” means last inning and all is forgiven as long as all is won. Tonight, a Tigers team that began as a World Series favorite, has a chance to forget a late-season slumber or be long remembered as a major disappointment.

One game.

It hardly seems fair.

“How do you balance ‘it’s just another game’ with ‘it’s not just another game’ in these situations?” someone asked Verlander Tuesday night.

“It’s not just another game,” he said. “This whole season, the way we battled and played as a team, comes down to one game.”

And one memory.

Will it be good or bad?

What might have been

For all the great moments in Tuesday’s 8-6 victory at Comerica Park, it’s amazing how close the Tigers came to a season-ending defeat:

If Victor Martinez hits the ball 6 inches shorter in the seventh inning, fans in the stands might miss bobbling it, Josh Reddick might catch it, and the Tigers still trail, 4-3.

If Jackson’s bloop single hangs a half-second longer, Reddick gloves it and the inning is over. No lead. The score remains 4-4.

If Max Scherzer doesn’t get Reddick to swing at a clear ball in the dirt in the eighth, he walks in the run and it’s 5-5.

If Jackson doesn’t shift a few feet left, Alberto Callaspo’s pinch-hit liner might drop to the ground, two runs might score and the Tigers are losing, 6-5.

If this, if that. Perhaps that’s why most of the Tigers do not dwell on Peralta’s second chance with the team after a 50-game suspension for violating baseball’s policy on performance-enhancing substances.

“Without Jhonny in the first half (of the season) we probably wouldn’t have won the division,” rightfielder Torii Hunter said. “When we lost him it was tough on us. Just to have him back was awesome.”

No debate. No inner turmoil. What matters now is what gets you a victory. Remember the goal.

Forget what doesn’t help you achieve it.

Meaningless chatter

And so it comes to Verlander in this American League Division Series finale. Gone is the debate of his postseason positioning that was so sizzling just a week ago. Nobody cares whether he is the No. 1 starter or No. 2 behind Scherzer. No one even seems to be wondering whether Verlander still has what he had the past few years. He is the man on the throne tonight, the commanding king who might determine the Tigers’ fate. It’s as if this were meant to be.

Fans are talking as if he’s the least of their worries. Historians are pointing to last year’s amazing Game 5 start, where Justin shut down the Athletics, in Oakland, allowing no runs and raking 11 strikeouts en route to a Detroit shutout.

We hope history repeats. But it leapfrogs over the recent past that suggests Verlander this year is not Verlander of last year — or the year before. His ERA in 2013 was a run higher than in 2012. His wins and losses were pedestrian.

Does any of it matter? Not this morning. Not to fans. And seemingly not to Verlander, who has rounded into excellence lately.

“I just pitched there my last start,” he said. “So I guess you know what you expect a little bit. ...

“It’s going to be fun. ... This is what you dream of as a kid, to be on the mound in a clinching game.”

Jackson. Peralta. Verlander. Others. We don’t remember what we choose to forget. Around midnight tonight, we’ll either have more baseball games to be played in Detroit this year, or lots of blame as to why we do not.

The difference might be only a few inches.

But the memory will stretch a long, long way.

Detroit Tigers should have edge in tonight's elimination game

October 10, 2013

By Drew Sharp / Detroit Free Press

The Athletics have played in five ALDS Game 5's since the round began in 1995, but have yet to win one:
2000

Moments like these are precisely why baseball, despite its often interminably monotonous stretches, remains a beautifully poetic exercise in patience and perseverance. Just when you think you've got it figured out —BAM! — there's a long fly ball to deep rightfield that might miraculously be within the extended reach of a desperate rightfielder.

But an equally desperate fan lunges for the ball.

A home run that could have been fan interference — and a series trending downward for the heavily favored Tigers suddenly got a dramatic momentum shift.

Just when you think you've got it figured out — WHIFF! — there's the anointed ace of the starting rotation pressed into emergency relief duty because there's no guarantee that he'll see the mound again in these playoffs. Bases loaded and nobody out, and the future Cy Young Award winner mines a little deeper into that resolve that distinguishes the distinguished.

No runners score. And a team that needed an emotional jolt got an electrical charge.

History might deem Victor Martinez's Game 4 home run and Max Scherzer's Game 4 relief effort as merely delaying the inevitable should the Tigers fall in Game 5 tonight in Oakland before what promises to be a rowdy, raucous Oakland Coliseum crowd. It'll be a failed season if they're scheduling tee times Friday morning.

The Tigers know that. They accept that. But it shouldn't be forgotten how this team over the last three years thrives on the doubts and derision. Regardless of how bad everything appears, the Tigers have never once doubted their faith in themselves.

"You and I have talked about this before," Alex Avila told me following the Tigers' 8-6 Game 4 victory. "We expect to win. That doesn't change. It doesn't matter if we're not playing at the level we expect from ourselves. We never lose confidence that we're going to do what we need to do to win."

They're confident approaching Game 5. Why shouldn't they be? They've won road Game 5s in the last two American League Division Series. Has there ever been a team that has won three consecutive Game 5s on the road in a best-of-five division series?

"I guess that it helps that we've gone through that," said Austin Jackson, "but you also have to remind yourself that the past doesn't really matter. I mean, we struggled offensively through the first three games of this series. But we knew that Game 4 was a fresh start, and we took advantage of that."

That fresh start was the basis of a players-only meeting prior to Game 4. Martinez and Torii Hunter called the meeting. They reminded everyone to not lose that confidence, don't lose that expectation that the truly good teams usually find that path toward salvation. Have fun. Have some fire.

That's interesting because this has been a team occasionally criticized for not showing too much emotion. They Tigers maintained that equilibrium through the ebbs and flows of a challenging 162-game season. Some indict Jim Leyland for not instilling more of that fire. But as the team meeting proved, that's got to come from within the clubhouse and not from the manager's office. You must craftily pick your spots. And it can't come artificially, simply for show.

"It's got to be genuine and that's what you saw out there," Hunter said following Game 4, referring to the repetition of fist pumps from ecstatic Tigers as a dire situation evolved into a potential moment of series-winning destiny. "But nights like these remind you why this is such a great game."

You can't figure out this game. The uncertainty makes it fun.

The Tigers might have the advantage tonight. They've been through this before, although this is different than 2011 against the Yankees and last year against the A's. Both times, the Tigers went into Game 4 with an opportunity to close out the series and lost. It was especially agonizing last year in Oakland when Jose Valverde couldn't hold what should have been a comfortable ninth-inning lead.

And the A's are 0-5 in division series Game 5s since 2000.

Think you've got Game 5 figured out?

Forget it. Just sit back and enjoy how it'll unfold.

Tonight's Game 5 could come down to Justin Verlander vs. Coco Crisp

October 10, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

He's a dynamic performer, and as the regular season concluded, he soared to a peak. It was almost as if he were willing his team into the playoffs. He looked unstoppable and unbeatable.

Then the playoff series between the Tigers and A's began, and he only got better. He suffused the entire game. The electricity of decisiveness crackled out of him, as if he had more voltage than anyone else on the field. Even someone who had never seen him in action could tell how vital he was. The other team had faced him often, but it didn't seem to have an answer for him.

And when the decisive Game 5 begins tonight in Oakland, he will be centrally involved as soon as the A's bat in the first inning. Yes, that Coco Crisp is something.

The fact that all of the above descriptions also apply to Justin Verlander is why tonight's game might come down to Verlander, the Tigers starter, against Crisp, the Oakland leadoff hitter. Whoever wins the duel has a good chance of leading his team to victory. A review of the recent, urgent weeks of the season shows why. Verlander finally found his consistency in September. He posted a 2.27 ERA and averaged 11 strikeouts per nine innings. He would have won several games that month if he had even marginally decent run support. But three times in September, the Tigers lost a game in which Verlander didn't allow a run.

That also happened in Game 2 of the American League Division Series in Oakland. Verlander was back to his vintage form that night, his curveball sharply augmenting his fastball. He looked ready to challenge Max Scherzer, the pending incumbent, for next year's Cy Young Award.

Verlander retired Crisp all three times he faced him in Game 2. Against each of the other three starters in this series, Crisp has reached base at least twice.

It's not that Verlander did anything special to Crisp. When Verlander is pitching well, he evokes the memory of Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers ace left-hander of the 1960s: best fastball in the league, best curve in the league. A lot of hitters who face Verlander might feel like Hall of Famer Frank Robinson did when he faced Koufax: "I looked for the fastball. I couldn't hit the curve."

Game 5 in Oakland last year was the first time Verlander pitched a winner-take-all game. He didn't just shut out the A's — he overwhelmed them. He went the distance on a 6-0 win, and there was never a sense in the game that the A's were close to scoring.

As Verlander said Tuesday night about this winner-take-all start tonight: "You can't treat it just like another game, you know. It's a little bit different. There is more to it. This is what you dream of as a kid, be on the mound in a clinching game."

How could the A's rock Verlander right away? Well, he has given up some homers to the first batter in the first inning — including Crisp in the first game of last year's playoffs. What if he goes deep to open the first tonight? In the final six weeks of the season, Crisp hit 12 homers. This would be impressive for Miguel Cabrera. But Crisp is a leadoff hitter with tremendous speed.

Once Crisp heated up in mid-August — a cortisone shot in an ailing left wrist seemed to help — he led the A's from a lagging second-place team to a supercharged offensive machine that not only overtook first-place Texas but clinched the AL West with a week to go.

Crisp finished as a 20-20 player — a career-high 22 homers, 21 steals. His base-stealing ability is all the more reason for Verlander to keep him off base tonight. Verlander has trouble containing the running game.

Opposing runners are 21-for-25 in stolen-base attempts against him this season, but no one on Oakland tried to run on him in Game 2, in large part because Crisp never got on base and not many of his colleagues did.

Crisp put on a show in Games 3 and 4 at Comerica Park. He began Game 3 with a double and Game 4 with a triple.

"Coco Crisp, always the party's first guest, quickly helping himself to the spread," in the words of Bruce Jenkins of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Crisp kept feasting. In his subsequent at-bats in Game 3, he singled, hit a sacrifice fly, made his only out of the game and doubled.

And in Game 4, he followed that leadoff triple with a long fly-ball out for his only out of the game, and then singles on his remaining three at-bats, each against a different pitcher. His final single, to begin the ninth with the A's four runs down against Joaquin Benoit, triggered a rally that allowed the A's to bring power hitter Seth Smith to the plate as the potential tying run. That is the havoc Crisp initiates.

Moments later, in the postgame interview room, Tigers manager Jim Leyland said of Crisp, "He's in a good groove. He's a terrific player, and he's a catalyst."

Crisp's batting average in the series is .500, which among players still in the playoffs ties him for the lead in hitting with Jacoby Ellsbury of the Red Sox. Crisp's on-base percentage in this series is .556, which ties him for the playoff lead with Ellsbury's teammates David Ortiz and Shane Victorino. Whoever wins tonight will have a cross-country trip to Boston and a formidable foe awaiting in the championship series.

Leyland acknowledged that the Tigers are grateful they haven't already lost the series, considering how Crisp has played. "We're fortunate we're 2-2 because we haven't shut him down," he said.

"Shut" will be a key word for Verlander and Crisp and their colleagues in tonight's drama.

Verlander will try for that most awesome postseason feat, just like last year in Game 5 — shutting up a lineup and a crowd.

Someone is going to lose and be shut in for the winter. Maybe there will be a shutout. The most important thing Verlander has to do is shut down Crisp.

Shut be fun.

Three Tigers questions with Rod Allen: Austin Jackson's at-bats important tonight

October 10, 2013

By Anthony Fenech / Detroit Free Press

Will the Tigers carry over the hot hitting to Game 5?

I think the biggest carryover will be for Austin Jackson. I think Jackson's first at-bat on Thursday night is going to be a huge at-bat because it's going to set the entire tone for the game. He might not get a hit, but I'm just talking about the at-bat. I think Jackson is going to come up huge and, as many runs as they scored late in the game the other day, the Jackson hit was the most encouraging because they really need him to get going and score a couple of runs if they're going to win the game. He is the key to the game for me, along with Justin Verlander.

Was Jhonny Peralta the spark the offense needed?

Absolutely. He has driven in five runs, so how can you say he hasn't sparked the offense? The Tigers knew that he could spark the offense, that's why they brought him back, so he could help out in this particular situation. It's turning out to be a wonderful story, for him to get applauded the way that he got applauded (Tuesday) just kind of shows how great Tigers fans are and how forgiving the fans are and, Jhonny, I know he felt good about it.

Who's going to win?

I like the Tigers' chances. Verlander, what he has done against Oakland in the postseason the last two years, they really haven't scored against him. They might score a run or two, I'm not saying he's going to shut them out, but he's simply been dominant against them, and they know that. I think that, psychologically, he has the edge in that regard. He has pitched in that ballpark twice in the playoffs the last couple years, and he's really kept that crowd quiet, which is hard to do. I think the Tigers will win.

Detroit Tigers notes: Jhonny Peralta in left, Max Scherzer unavailable tonight

October 10, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — Jhonny Peralta, yes. Max Scherzer, no.

Austin Jackson and the rest of the lineup: We'll find out today.

Peralta, who has five RBIs in two games since joining the lineup, will start in leftfield tonight in Game 5, Tigers manager Jim Leyland said Wednesday night.

Leyland said Scherzer won't be available to pitch in relief, as he did spectacularly in Game 4.

Leyland also said he hadn't figured out his lineup against right-hander Sonny Gray, who about an hour earlier had been announced as Oakland's starter.

Leyland didn't say which lineup moves he was weighing. In Game 2, Gray — who has an extraordinary curveball — struck out Jackson all four times he faced him. Leyland might be tempted to drop Jackson in the order (who would hit leadoff?) or even put left-handed-hitting Don Kelly in his place in center. Kelly could have hit for Jackson in the seventh inning Tuesday night if Oakland manager Bob Melvin had replaced left-hander Sean Doolittle with right-hander Dan Otero.

Jackson and Kelly each has delivered the hit that put the Tigers ahead to say in Game 5 in the division series — Kelly with a homer two years ago at Yankee Stadium, and Jackson with a double last year in Oakland.

"A lot of guys had a tough time with Sonny Gray in Game 2 — I wouldn't single out anybody in particular," Leyland said.

It was remarked to Leyland that he'd have trouble fielding a full lineup tonight if he excluded everyone who struggled in Game 2 against Gray. "It would be Eddie Feigner — the King and his Court," Leyland said, referring to the four-man softball team that played all over the world for decades.

If Leyland is looking to get another left-handed bat in the lineup to combat Gray's curve, he could consider switch-hitter Ramon Santiago for Omar Infante at second base. Infante went 0-for-2 against Gray in Game 2 with a strikeout and a walk.

In the series, Jackson is 2-for-15 with 10 strikeouts. He delivered the winning hit in the seventh inning Tuesday night, and Leyland said after the game, "I hope that gets him going."

Peralta will play his sixth career game in the outfield in a winner-take-all playoff game.

■ **A'S LINEUP:** Melvin didn't rule out replacing Eric Sogard (0-for-9) at second base with switch-hitting Alberto Callaspo, who has looked good on two of his three pinch-hit at-bats for Sogard — including the liner that would have put Oakland ahead against Scherzer in Game 4 if Jackson hadn't zoomed over to catch it. ... It appears unlikely that either Game 3 starter, Anibal Sanchez or Jarrod Parker, will pitch in relief tonight.

MIGGY'S MARK: Miguel Cabrera has reached base on a hit, a walk or a hit-by-pitch in all 28 of his postseason games with the Tigers and has thereby set an all-time major league record for postseason play. As reported by baseball researcher Bill Chuck, Cabrera set the mark at 28 when he singled in the sixth inning Tuesday night. Phillies second baseman Chase Utley held the old mark with 27 straight games reaching base. Reaching on an error doesn't count toward these streaks.

Don't ignore how good Jim Leyland was in Game 4 win

October 10, 2013

By Jamie Samuelsen / Detroit Free Press

What stands out to you about the Tigers Game 4 win over the A's?

There's a lot to remember about Tuesday's 8-6 win over Oakland.

If the Detroit Tigers are able to advance past the ALDS, it could go down as one of the most pivotal games in recent Tiger history. But even if the Tigers lose Game 5, Tuesday still will go down as one of the most entertaining nights ever at Comerica Park.

There were heroes like Victor Martinez and Max Scherzer. There was redemption for players like Austin Jackson and Jhonny Peralta. There was nail-biting in the ninth, thanks in large part to Joaquin Benoit. We had controversy on Martinez's borderline homer in the seventh. And there was the pain of continuing to watch Miguel Cabrera defy his ailing body and do anything to push his team forward.

Any one of those things is a story in itself. And any one of them will be discussed and analyzed over and over until the first pitch is thrown in Game 5.

But lost in the shuffle is the fact that Tigers manager Jim Leyland had himself a pretty good night.

Leyland's job for the most part is to get out of the way. When the Tigers win, it's because the payroll is \$148 million and they should win. When the Tigers lose, it's normally Leyland's fault; He pulled a pitcher too soon or too late, he gave a green light when he should have given a red, he let a guy swing away when he should have bunted. Plenty of Tigers fans appreciate Leyland for what he's accomplished here and the fact that the players clearly enjoy playing for him. But plenty of fans dislike him because the Tigers haven't won the World Series under him and because they've meandered through lackluster regular seasons.

Most of it is overblown. The manager's job is to keep an even keel and to get his players to play. And Leyland succeeds in this area far more than he fails. In terms of in-game decisions, the bottom line is if it works, the manager is right and if it fails, the manager gets second-guessed.

Leyland left himself open to plenty of second-guessing last night if any of his bold moves had failed. None of them did. And as a result, the Tigers are still very much alive heading to Oakland for Game 5. If you look at the game rationally, you already know this to be true. If you look at the game cynically, consider what buttons Leyland pushed.

The boldest move involved Scherzer to start the seventh. Leyland hinted at this before the game and given the availability of Justin Verlander to start tonight, it made complete sense. The bold move actually came when Leyland stuck with his ace. After allowing a run during a choppy seventh, Scherzer was downright scary in the eighth. He allowed a leadoff walk to Brandon Moss and then a double to Yoenis Cespedes. Leyland ordered Seth Smith to be walked intentionally bringing the left-handed-hitting Josh Reddick to the plate with the bases loaded and nobody out. With the lefty Drew Smyly warming in the bullpen, I figured Scherzer was done -- Smyly struck out Reddick the only time he faced him. But Leyland ignored the lefty-lefty matchup and trusted his ace. And Scherzer delivered with two strikeouts and a liner to Jackson to end the threat. I would have gone to Smyly. Leyland didn't. And he turned out to be right.

He also stuck with Jackson when most of the stadium had turned on him. Jackson was 0-for-last 13 with 10 strikeouts. He fanned in his first three at-bats Tuesday. And the fans boos grew louder after each K. But in the seventh, with two men out and the Tigers looking to take the lead, Jackson fisted a single to right that brought home Andy Dirks and gave the Tigers the lead, a lead that they'd never relinquish. Leyland could have benched Jackson prior to Game 4, and he certainly would have had to consider it for Game 5 if he hadn't come through in that situation. But he stuck with his guy and it paid dividends.

Leyland also pushed the right buttons when it came to substitutions. He inserted Dirks as a pinch runner for Peralta. Dirks scored on the Jackson base hit. And he pinch-ran Hernan Perez for Martinez in the eighth, looking for an insurance run. Perez got that run by scampering home on a wild pitch from Brett Anderson. That led to two more Tiger runs, which turned out to be crucial given Benoit's struggles in the ninth.

Perhaps neither pinch runner was needed or the slower options would have scored. But if Leyland gets second-guessed when moves go wrong, he deserves to get some praise when things go right.

He's not perfect. And if the Tigers lose tonight in Oakland, there is a small chance that Leyland has managed his final game in Comerica Park. I doubt that's the case, but if it is, give him credit. He may have managed his best game yet in a Tiger uniform. And it came at the most important moment of this season.

Oakland Athletics notes: Rookie pitchers can cook under pressure

October 10, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

OAKLAND, CALIF. — It happened as long ago as 1909 and as recently as Wednesday night: a rookie pitcher started a winner-take-all postseason game.

It will happen again tonight when right-hander Sonny Gray, who didn't make his first big-league start until August, faces Justin Verlander in Game 5 of the AL Division Series.

The Tigers faced a rookie pitcher in their first winner-take-all postseason game. In Game 7 of the 1909 World Series, Pittsburgh right-hander Babe Adams beat the Tigers, 8-0.

It might seem extraordinary that Oakland manager Bob Melvin chose Gray over an established veteran, right-hander Bartolo Colon.

But Pittsburgh manager Clint Hurdle made the same type of move for the decisive Game 5 against St. Louis on Wednesday night. He opted for rookie Gerrit Cole, the decisive winner in Game 2, over A.J. Burnett, the veteran who got hit hard in Game 1.

Cole went five innings and allowed two runs. St. Louis' Adam Wainwright out-pitched him, and the Cardinals eliminated the Pirates.

Gray won't even be the first rookie pitcher from Vanderbilt to be summoned into a winner-take-all postseason game when his manager could have gone with a veteran.

In Game 7 of the 2008 AL championship series, Tampa Bay manager Joe Maddon used David Price as his closer. Price — who came out of Vanderbilt as the top pick in the previous year's draft — had pitched in only seven previous big-league games. He blanked Boston for the final 1 1/3 innings (with three strikeouts) to save Tampa Bay's 3-1 pennant-clinching victory.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland knows full well how well a rookie can pitch in a winner-take-all game.

In Game 7 of the 1997 World Series, Cleveland right-hander Jaret Wright blanked Leyland's Marlins into the seventh. He would have gotten the win if the Indians had held a 2-1 lead in the ninth. The Marlins tied it in the ninth and won the world title in the 11th.

Rick Porcello was only 20 when, as a rookie, Leyland started him in the tiebreaker game in Minnesota for the Central Division title in 2009. Porcello left with a lead in the sixth inning; the Tigers lost in the 12th.

In the Tigers-A's Game 5 last year, rookie Jarrod Parker started for Oakland. Justin Verlander beat him, 6-0. This is hardly a full list of rookies who have pitched well in a winner-take-all game. It's just a short list that came to mind with the news that Gray will join the group that Babe Adams helped form more than 100 years ago when he held Hall of Famers Ty Cobb and Sam Crawford each 0-for-4 in his shutout win in Game 7 at Detroit's Bennett Park.

Baseball playoff grit belongs on field, not on face

October 10, 2013

By Shawn Windsor / Detroit Free Press

Jim Leyland likes to say chemistry is overrated. He prefers talent.

I understand why Leyland says this. He has a veteran, low-key, task-oriented team without an easily identifiable trait. Heck, even his oversized slugger is understated, despite a name designating royalty and dreadlocks that flop in the wind as he runs.

Prince Fielder blended into the Tigers' clubhouse as soon as he arrived. He avoids cameras and, when cornered for an interview, rarely looks at the lens.

I'm not suggesting Fielder change his manner. I am saying he found the right place to hide in plain sight. The most colorful quality the team exudes is the occasional string of profanity that spews from the manager's mouth. That or the chatty, smiling persona Miguel Cabrera reveals while playing third base or hanging out on first base after a hit.

Meanwhile, Oakland has its tattoos and beards. Boston has its ... tattoos and beards. Pittsburgh has its underdog tale and the irrepressible Andrew McCutchen. The Dodgers have Magic Johnson and Yasiel Puig and a galaxy of Hollywood onlookers. The Cardinals have the shadow of Tony La Russa.

Here, the narrative is devoid of personality. It's about numbers and money: Cabrera's Triple Crown or Max Scherzer's win total or Mike Ilitch's infinite pockets and his quest to buy a World Series.

Where's the romance in that? Well, quite a bit, actually.

The stories inside this clubhouse are as compelling as any other. But this isn't a question of who has the most interesting narrative. It's a question of the cues we take from things we see on the surface.

Why is this year's version of the Red Sox described as scrappy while the Tigers are viewed as imperial, despite Boston's larger payroll?

I'm glad you asked, because I have a theory — beards.

That's right, facial hair. I'm talking long, unkempt, woodsy manscapes — or unscapes, as they may be — that obscure all but the nose and eyes.

Whiskers, after all, induce certain connotations. A man lets his beard grow way out, and the first thing we think is he's busy — as in damn, he's working so hard at this game he doesn't have time to shave. We also think: serious, focused.

At the same time, beards conjure free spirits, hipsters, musicians, hockey players and, yes, chefs. In other words, the unencumbered growth makes us subconsciously think of creativity, which, to many around here, means the opposite of Leyland.

Without unkempt facial hair, the Tigers, compared to the Red Sox or the A's or even last year's Giants, come off as unimaginative and unfocused. This, I know, is ridiculous.

Yet in the past three days, I can't count how many times I've heard the A's described as a grind-it-out team at the plate. The implication is that the Tigers are not.

Yes, Oakland has three more hits through the first four games of the American League Division Series. And, yes, the A's have three more home runs. But Detroit led the league in batting average and was sixth in walks. Just as important, only Kansas City and Texas had fewer strikeouts.

The Tigers are struggling at the plate. I wouldn't argue otherwise. But they didn't morph into an undisciplined team in a matter of weeks.

Sure, these Tigers aren't a demonstrative group. Then again, Victor Martinez recently charged the mound to address a mouthy closer. And Scherzer howled after escaping a no-out, bases-loaded jam. This team aches to win. We saw that Tuesday night, when the bats heated up and the competitive inferno raged.

Leyland is right. Talent is what matters. But I disagree with him about chemistry. Fortunately, the Tigers have both. It's just not always so easy to see.

Blame the rise of the playoff beard.

Media gives thumbs up to Victor Martinez's controversial homer

October 10, 2013

By Steve Schrader / Detroit Free Press

So did Comerica Park fans interfere with Oakland outfielder Josh Reddick as he tried to catch Victor Martinez's home run Tuesday night?

This is not a tough question, not like who's going to start for the A's tonight? (It took manager Bob Melvin long enough to answer that: Sonny Gray.)

Sure, Reddick says he's "100% certain" he would have caught the ball. But the media reaction to the play was mostly a resounding, ah, maybe, but probably not. And most said the umps got it right. How often do you hear that?

A few samples:

■ David Schoenfield, ESPN.com: "With no definitive answer, the umpires made the right call, especially since you certainly could not have assumed Reddick would have caught the ball."

■ John Kruk, ESPN, said it was the right call but didn't blame Reddick for complaining: "Yeah, you gotta sell it. ... You know what happens with replay. Sometimes they make some strange decisions in that little replay booth."

■ Jesse Spector, Sporting News, blamed it on Comerica: "Baseball is the only sport where things like this happen. Football fields are ringed by copious amounts of open space between the field and the stands. Hockey has glass around the rink. Maybe a fan could interfere with an NBA game, but you'll never see Jack Nicholson trip LeBron James as he goes down the court for a lay-up."

■ Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle: "In the end, there wasn't much to discuss. It looked like a home run, it was ruled a home run, and replays confirmed it was a home run."

Press clipping

■ Mark Purdy, San Jose Mercury News: "Tuesday was a lost journey to glory that instead took a turn down a dank canyon full of starving wolves, poison-dart-wielding monkeys and chubby guys in windbreakers who reach up to steal baseballs and crush hearts."

Quick hits

■ Doug Glanville, ESPN, on the Red Sox setting up their rotation for the ALCS: "Meanwhile, Oakland and Detroit, they have to basically eat each other to try to get to the right spot. They're going to throw Verlander, Jack Morris, whoever they got. They're going to have to throw everybody and, as a result, they're going to be a lot more thinned out, and Boston is just sitting there waiting."

■ Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle, via Twitter: "Athletics are encouraging fans to take public transportation to Game 5 because of Pink's concert next door at same time."

■ In honor of the kid starting for the A's tonight, Sonny Gray, our favorite Sonny's: Eliot, Jurgensen, Grandelius, Corleone, Chiba, Liston and And Cher.

What the heck, our favorite Grays, too: "Fifty Shades of."

Game 5: Three keys for Detroit Tigers, Oakland A's

October 10, 2013

By John Lowe / Detroit Free Press

Free Press sports writer John Lowe breaks down the keys to today's Game 5 for the Tigers and Athletics:

Three keys for the Tigers

J.V. goes deep

Manager Jim Leyland doesn't seem to have any relievers he trusts right now besides closer Joaquin Benoit.

Keep Coco Crisp off base

The Tigers did that in only two of the leadoff hitter's plate appearances the past two games. Crisp led an offense that in each of those two games scored six runs. During the season, the A's went 62-38 when Crisp reached base, 11-12 when he didn't.

Keep the ball in the park

The A's have lived by the homer throughout their late-season surge. Hitting with runners in scoring position gets extra difficult in the postseason. When the A's hit at least one home run during the season, they went 80-28. Without a dinger, they were 16-38.

Three keys for the Athletics

Get an early lead

And get the crowd fully involved — and that could mean bunting to play for the first run, as manager Bob Melvin did with seldom-seen bunter Josh Reddick in Game 2.

Forget about the past

The A's have a stronger team than the one Verlander blanked in Game 5 last year. And these Oakland players had nothing to do with 2000-03, when in four straight years the A's lost this decisive Game 5 of the division series, the last two at home by one run.

Don't wait for homers

The A's hit more this season than any other playoff team, but they can't expect to hit one off Verlander. They should risk putting some runners in motion because a) they can't assume they'll get that many and b) Verlander has had trouble preventing stolen bases.

Justin Verlander reclaims role as Tigers ace as season's drama builds

October 10, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Studying him as he navigated the 2013 season was like watching a ship's captain steer a freighter past rocky shoals.

It was not an easy year for Justin Verlander.

He had too many interludes. There were stretches when the fastball wasn't there, or the location was off, or the curveball wasn't kneecapping hitters who, in seasons past, had to prepare for his 98-mph heater and who often stood there, paralyzed, by the tight bite from his second deadliest pitch.

Verlander, of course, would brush off the meanderings as a forgettable slice of history. What counts in Verlander's world is tonight's game, which happens to be at O.co Coliseum, scene of his Game 5 masterpiece a year ago that sent the Tigers to the American League Championship Series. As fate has ruled, it's again the site for a return engagement that will ship either the Tigers or the A's into this year's ALCS.

"I'm sure the commissioner (Bud Selig) is happy it's going five," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said Tuesday after the Tigers had revived to win Game 4 and set up tonight's Division Series finale.

When it comes to appreciating baseball's big moments, Leyland could have mentioned Verlander just as easily as Selig. Tonight is his pitcher's shot at doing what an ace has been delivering for the Tigers since he began a phenomenal two-season run of starting pitching mastery in 2011.

Tonight, should he help beat the A's, Verlander's fan club will say it is all back in place: His role as the team's Top Gun. His status as a world-stage, right-handed maestro who is at his best when his team most needs one player to be transcendent.

"Well, you don't pretend," Verlander said Tuesday after he was asked how a pitcher balanced competing needs: to not make so much of a start that it becomes its own straitjacket, while keeping in mind that this competitive moment is grand and decisive.

"It's not just another game. The season is on the line. It's a little bit different."

Inconsistent early

You could see Verlander draw his own level of distinction in Game 2 last weekend at Oakland. Verlander had been gearing for weeks to have his particular pitching art and repertoire intact by the time Detroit hit the playoffs.

He was dead on schedule last Saturday night as he whipsawed the A's with an artisan's mix of fastballs, curveballs, change-ups, and even a few sliders that more and more have become part of his mix in 2013.

He struck out 11 batters in seven shutout innings. He walked one. He gave the A's a stingy four-hit ration. He and the Tigers didn't win, but Verlander was the same pitcher he had been during any of those dazzling months of 2011 and '12 when he was either winning a Cy Young Award and MVP trophy (2011) or finishing runner-up by a hair to David Price (2012 Cy Young).

That his pitching so often was off-key this season made no sense. He pitched unevenly early, with few strikeouts, and never found much consistency as summer arrived and more mystery ensued.

During one disturbing stretch from June 18-July 25, Verlander never struck out more than five in a game. This, from a guy who might have struck out five in two innings during his 2011-12 siege.

With the national media crowd growing each game, Verlander is now being asked to explain what no one can yet quite understand. What happened to a pitcher who was like an Olympic athlete in his ability to deliver consummate performances at a prescribed time?

He turned 30 eight months ago, hardly an advanced age for superstars. How had it reconnected late in the season, almost as if Verlander had programmed it to kick in?

"Nice question," he answered Tuesday, having some fun with himself, and with the media interrogator who wanted to know more about his twists and turns. "If I could tell you, I wouldn't have had them (problems)."

Getting it together

Verlander acknowledges adjustments were part of the healing process — "one of maybe a thousand that I tried to make this year," he said Tuesday, keeping the conversation playful. "I knew it wasn't going to be a quick

process. I set a date that I needed to be ready at all costs for the postseason. The last month, I think I found some things that really benefited me: my locations, just my stuff in general.”

The layperson’s explanation is Verlander was dealing with a basic realignment to his pitching delivery and body motion. Earlier this season, he was not in the tight, synchronized flow that had made nearly every pitch, for hundreds of innings, an exercise in pure artistry.

His fastball was prone to being fouled off — or swatted — rather than missed. His curveball lost its downhill crunch. Spots he had earlier nailed in the fashion of a rifle-range marksman began to drift and to veer as Verlander fired away.

Then, on cue, came September. He won only once, and his performances were anything but breathtaking, but his repertoire began to look familiar. Better fastball. Sharper curve. More deft placement of his pitches also became the norm.

He has not yet overtaken Max Scherzer as this year’s best Tigers pitcher. Not by a mile. Nor does he care, not in the holistic way team players must always hold as their greater goal. He appreciated, in unique ways, what Scherzer did Tuesday in pitching with such splendor as a reliever, with the season at stake.

With the same awareness, he knows who he is. He knows why he is pitching tonight. He understands who will be watching, which will be most of the baseball cosmos, which understands this series, and this guy pitching for Detroit, promise an evening of entertainment only sports and sports excellence tend to craft.

The man loves this stuff. He wants one more chance to push some earlier, bewildering games into the trivia bin. To once again, tonight in Oakland, prove his and his team’s mettle with a playoff series crescendo.

Game 4 thriller won't mean much if Tigers don't finish job tonight

October 10, 2013

By Bob Wojnowski / The Detroit News

It turns very quickly in the playoffs, and for the Tigers, it turns again. After a long trip from Detroit to Oakland, they must make the short trip from relief to resolve. The Tigers escaped once in an all-time thriller, but that's reduced to a footnote if they don't finish it off.

They get one quick exhale, one deep inhale. And then they put reputations back on the line, and Justin Verlander back on the mound.

All in all, not a bad place to be, considering how they got here. The Tigers have been here before, playing a Game 5 in a raucous park against an A's team as tenacious as billed. The Tigers earned a second chance with an 8-6 comeback victory that featured enough drama to fill an entire postseason. And for whoever survives tonight, more drama awaits in the American League Championship Series against the Red Sox.

The Tigers have to like their chances with Verlander facing A's rookie Sonny Gray, although Gray won the Game 2 duel 1-0, striking out nine. Of course, the A's liked their chances when they led 3-0 in Game 4 and the Tigers were swinging at air. The point is, there's a reason these teams are clashing in a decisive game for the second straight year, and there's a reason Jim Leyland maneuvered his pitching staff to have Verlander ready. The Tigers have prepared for this moment. Verlander insists he was preparing for it throughout a bumpy season, and the way he's cranked it up, he wasn't blowing smoke, even when he wasn't throwing smoke. These are the moments he loves, and you can bet he wants to seize it like Max Scherzer has. Scherzer did it again in Game 4, escaping one of the tensest innings imaginable, preventing a run in the eighth after the A's loaded the bases with nobody out.

It takes something like that to lift doldrums, something like Jhonny Peralta's redemptive home run, something like Austin Jackson's slump-shattering, bat-shattering hit to break a tie. And it takes something like what Verlander did in Game 5 last year, an 11-strikeout, nine-inning domination in the 6-0 clincher in Oakland.

There are reprieves and there are reprisals, and Verlander relishes this one.

"You don't pretend — it's not just another game," Verlander said. "This whole season, the way we battled and played as a team, comes down to one game, may the best team win."

Turn up the volume

This scenario looked unlikely the more the Tigers bats cooled, and the more Miguel Cabrera limped. There was a moment in Game 4 when he charged a ground ball and made a strong throw, then hopped in pain. His groin and abdominal strains are limiting but not debilitating, and he has gutted it out with four hits, all singles.

This is not on Cabrera, after nearly two full seasons of everything being on Cabrera. For the Tigers to scrape up enough offense, it's on other hitters, and some have shown hints of revival. Prince Fielder has four hits in the series but none for extra bases. Jackson was 1-for-14 with 10 strikeouts before his clutch single. Torii Hunter is 2-for-14.

The Tigers are in this spot because they already wasted one superb outing by Verlander. He struck out 11 in seven shutout innings in Game 2, but the A's won on a ninth-inning single by Stephen Vogt.

Victor Martinez has been the hitting star, including the seventh-inning home run Tuesday night that was nearly caught by three people — A's right fielder Josh Reddick and Tigers fans John Bendzinski and Mark Beauchamp. The ump's rightly allowed the home run because Reddick wasn't clearly about to catch the ball before the fans touched it. But hey, everyone talks about home crowds making a difference, and you know the noisy throng in Oakland will be a factor.

Before the series, Tigers catcher Alex Avila called the O.co Coliseum "the loudest and craziest venue I've ever played in." The Tigers silenced it with three runs in the first inning of Game 1, then went silent themselves the next 20 innings. Like I said, they've been there before, and so have the A's.

"I don't know if (the fans) can get any louder than they were when we played last time," A's center fielder Coco Crisp told reporters. "It would be amazing if they did."

Pressure cooker

The Tigers haven't won anything yet, except another chance to win something huge. The A's aren't beaten yet either, and the way Crisp is igniting them, Verlander will be severely tested.

The stakes are painfully evident. Late Tuesday night in a basement corridor of Comerica Park, workers wheeled boxes of unopened champagne past the visitor's clubhouse, presumably back to storage. The only thing missing from this series is the cork popping, and for the Tigers, it has to begin with Verlander putting a cork in the A's. "He's Justin Verlander, so you feel pretty good you're gonna have a chance to win," Avila said. "You don't want to be in that (do-or-die) situation but it's playoff baseball, you can't be surprised by any situation. In years past, we've been able to win on the road when we need to. So I think we feel just as confident going there as if we were gonna play here."

After the giddy relief of a comeback victory, the noisy truth returns. If the Tigers are to win this thing, they'll have to enter the cauldron again, and do what they've done before.

Will broken-bat single help Tigers' Austin Jackson fix postseason problems?

October 10, 2013

By John Niyo / The Detroit News

Somebody has to set the table, otherwise this dinner party will be over well before the main course.

Austin Jackson's trying, but watching him at the plate this week it seemed as if he wasn't sure what to do. Knife here, fork there, napkin ... where?

Something's out of place, that much is obvious. Maybe it's just a timing issue. Maybe he's simply not seeing the ball well. Maybe he's pressing. But for all the talk about the Tigers' extra-base power vanishing prior to Tuesday night's season-saving rally in Game 4 of the American League Division Series, Jackson's struggles in the leadoff spot may have been the team's biggest problem.

And they may yet be, as the Tigers face another win-or-else scenario tonight in Game 5 of the Division Series at Oakland's rowdy O.co Coliseum.

Jackson's broken-bat single that scored the go-ahead run in the seventh inning Tuesday night at Comerica Park gave the Tigers new life, just as it gave Jackson an emotional lift.

"Hopefully that gets him going," manager Jim Leyland said. "Sometimes that's the magic that gets a guy going."

We'll see if it does. But there's certainly no guarantee Jackson is done swinging and missing at A's pitching. After a leadoff double in Game 1 — on the third pitch in the series — Jackson began beating a rather pathetic path back and forth between the dugout and home plate. He went hitless his next 14 plate appearances, with 10 strikeouts, including his first three at-bats Tuesday as the home crowd's impatience with Jackson quickly turned to boos.

Asked if that bothered him, Jackson insisted otherwise, though we all know better. Repeated failure does take a toll, eventually.

"Nah, it doesn't affect me," he said. "I'm trying to win a ballgame. If I let that affect me, then my head's not in the game. ..."

"It's the playoffs. You're trying to get a win. It's no time to really get down on yourself. You gotta keep going out there and grinding at-bats."

When that's not enough, you keep going inside to the batting cage and looking at video of your swings — and misses — looking for clues. That's what Jackson was doing with his hitting coach again Tuesday. And while Lloyd McClendon didn't care to share the details of any of their dugout chats, the two did spend time working out a few timing issues with his swing in Minnesota at the end of the regular season.

Strikeouts not helping

Jackson, who has a tendency to run hot-and-cold, emerged from an 8-for-47 slump in mid-September with a solid final week — 7-for-18 with three extra-base hits. But the A's quickly had him out of sorts this series, flailing at fastballs, late with his swings, and seemingly baffled by it all.

"It was very tough for Austin," McClendon said. "That's certainly not indicative of the type of season he's had."

That's not a new playoff look for Jackson, who now has 45 strikeouts in 106 postseason at-bats the last three years. And that's another reason why the Tigers could — and should — reevaluate the need for a better leadoff option this offseason.

Jackson and Torii Hunter, the No. 2 hitter who is signed through next season, are a combined 4-for-29 at the top of the lineup in the series. It's a big reason why the offense, already hobbled by Miguel Cabrera's injury and Prince Fielder's power shortage, has had such a hard time generating any serious rally threats.

Eight of Jackson's 10 strikeouts against Oakland have come as the leadoff hitter in an inning, including his first three trips to the plate in Game 4 — each progressively worse than the last. He struck out swinging on five pitches in the first inning, swinging again on four pitches in the fourth and then looking on three pitches in the sixth.

Reaction 'gave me chills'

Yet, that seventh-inning at-bat against Sean Doolittle, the A's left-handed setup man, offered a glimmer of hope, at least. Doolittle's a strikeout guy who's tough on right-handed batters and he had Jackson fooled badly with his first pitch.

"I was just trying to relax, just trying to calm myself down and take some deep breaths up there," Jackson admitted.

He did well to foul off the next pitch — a 95-mph fastball up high — before getting a better look at a third 96 mph heater, shattering his bat to send a looping single into right field. That scored pinch runner Andy Dirks from second base to give the Tigers a 5-4 lead, and it allowed Jackson the chance to finally exhale.

"You don't even know," Jackson said. "I was just happy that it fell. Looking over in the dugout and seeing how pumped up the guys were for me, it kind of gave me chills."

If that's an ice breaker, the Tigers will be even more excited.

Tony Paul's five keys for the Tigers in Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Stop me if you've heard this one ...

The powerhouse Tigers and the resilient A's are getting ready to play a winner-take-all Game 5 at the O.co Coliseum, where Detroit sends Justin Verlander to the mound with the order to save the season.

Ah, yes, so nice, they're doing it twice.

The Tigers prevailed a year ago (actually, 364 days ago), in the exact situation.

What will happen Thursday night? Nothing is certain, though if we've learned anything from the first four games, fans of both teams are in for a treat.

Here are five keys to a Tigers victory:

1. Top can't flop

Offenses always turn to the top of the order to light the fire, but it's really important Tigers leadoff man Austin Jackson and No. 2, Torii Hunter, are on the bases a bunch. With Miguel Cabrera hurting more than fans know, he's essentially a singles hitter, so Jackson and Hunter need to reach a whole lot more than they have, which, through four games, is six times in 31 appearances.

2. Keep scoring

The Tigers, too often, score early, then act content, rest on that total — and it too often burns them. It nearly did in Game 1, when they scored three in the first inning, zip after that, and won by one. They need to keep battling and grinding all nine innings, like they did in Game 4, when they scored in three innings. The add-on runs late, too, proved monstrous when Joaquin Benoit struggled in the ninth.

3. Contain Crisp

Justin Verlander has owned this lineup the 23 innings he's faced it in the playoffs. And if there's one guy he has to stop, it's A's leadoff maestro Coco Crisp. So far, the Tigers haven't done it. He's reached base 10 times this series in 17 appearances. The Tigers, thus, are very fortunate he a) has stolen one base, and b) has scored four runs. If he reaches another four times Thursday night, that'll be a big problem.

4. Don't skimp on defense

Expect Jhonny Peralta to play left again, as his bat (five RBIs the last two games) is too valuable to be sitting idly on the bench. But with a one- or two-run lead in the middle to late innings, Jim Leyland can't hesitate to turn to his defensive lineup — Don Kelly or Andy Dirks in left field, and Ramon Santiago in for Miguel Cabrera at third. Issues at both positions cost the team Game 3.

5. Close the door

There's a chance this series comes down to Joaquin Benoit, who wasn't even the Tigers closer until late June after the Jose Valverde reboot failed. There is a heap of pressure on Benoit, who's a playoff vet, but not as a closer. He struggled to close out Game 4, and the A's also got to him in the 2012 ALDS. Can he silence them with that nasty change-up when it matters most?

News and views: Tigers' Miguel Cabrera deserves MVP for playing with such pain

October 10, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — A sullen worker wheeled a cart of unopened bubbly through the lower reaches of Comerica Park on Tuesday night, telling the whole story: The American League Division Series isn't over.

Here's looking back and looking forward to what should be an epic finish to a marvelous playoff series between the A's and Tigers.

News: The Tigers offense perked up, finally, in Game 4, though, again, not with help from their biggest bat, Miguel Cabrera.

Views: Tigers fans don't fully appreciate the amount of pain this guy is in.

I would not be surprised if after the season ends, the Tigers brass meets the media to give us the full picture.

And I suspect it won't be pretty.

So you have to give Cabrera a boatload of props for continuing to go out there every day as the team continues its quest to bring a world championship to Detroit for the first time since 1984.

The numbers at the plate haven't been pretty. He's had four singles in 16 at-bats, and has one RBI. Of course, if Austin Jackson and Torii Hunter had been getting on with any regularity, Cabrera would have more RBIs than that.

But his power has been absolutely eliminated. Balls traveling to the warning track in right center would've been many rows deep this year. He's sluggish on fastballs he typically murders.

On defense, he's just as limited, though he still is hustling after pop fouls near the stands, even sliding to try to make a play.

He's in so much pain, Cabrera, who, since July, has been dealing with back, then ab, then oblique, and finally groin injuries. Jim Leyland probably would've fainted had he seen Cabrera quickly hoist one of his adorable young kids while meeting with the media mob after Game 4 – for fear he was about to throw something else out. But he's on the field, trying, grinding, just to help a team that, even if he's not hitting to his MVP potential, desperately needs his mere presence in the lineup.

When this season is all said and done, you just might learn how remarkable that truly is.

News: The Tigers have had their share of memorable playoff games over the years, from Kirk Gibson's two-homer Game 5 of the 1984 World Series, to Magglio Ordonez's walk-off homer in the 2006 ALCS against the A's, to Willie Horton's throw home to barely beat Lou Brock in the pivotal Game 5 of the 1968 World Series.

Views: But it's tough to imagine a playoff game with more twists and turns, plots and subplots, highs and lows than what went down at Comerica Park on Tuesday night. Just think about it.

There was Dan Straily, no-hitting a seemingly lifeless Tigers team through four innings.

Then there was Jhonny Peralta, redeeming himself from a 50-game PED suspension with a mighty three-run home run — the Tigers first ball even close to a homer in two weeks.

There was Victor Martinez, going where he so rarely goes – opposite field while batting right-handed – for a home run, a day after he and Grant Balfour almost came to blows.

And there were the two Tigers fans, John Bendzinski and Mark Beauchamp, reaching over to grab said home run, to the disgust of A's oft-grumpy right fielder Josh Reddick.

There was Doug Fister getting through six gritty innings, when it looked like he might not even get out of the second. Then there was Max Scherzer, the Tigers ace-turned-reliever, getting himself in trouble and electrifying the crowd by getting out of it.

There were the A's with the early lead, and the Tigers tying it, and the A's taking it right back, and the Tigers answering just as quickly – rapid-fire, like some heavyweight fight.

Austin Jackson had a huge hit, when a precious few in the park thought he could. Omar Infante, with a clutch hit for some typically elusive add-on runs. Andy Dirks with a big, yet overlooked walk. Joaquin Benoit with an, uhhh, interesting ninth.

Whew!

“This game today was probably one of the best games I've played in,” Torii Hunter said afterward. “It gave me so much energy, so much excitement.

“We definitely have a heartbeat.”

So what if a few Tigers fans’ hearts skipped a beat in the process.

News: The Tigers are one win away from being in the League Championship Series for a third consecutive year, something no American League team has done since the Yankees from 1998-2001.

Views: At some point, maybe Tigers fans will give a little credit to the men at the top — general manager Dave Dombrowski and manager Jim Leyland.

This isn’t 1984, when the Tigers had to win seven games to win a World Series. Now, with three rounds — plus a one-game wild-card playoff in each league — a team must win at least 11 games or as many as 12 to hoist the Commissioner’s Trophy.

This is not, at all, easy.

Baseball also is an interesting sport in which only a third of the teams can qualify for the playoffs, and the best team doesn’t always win in the end. More often than not, in fact, it doesn’t. Hello, 2006 Cardinals anyone?

But the Tigers, at least, have been in the game each of the last few years, a remarkable achievement regardless of how awful you think the AL Central is. Where are the Yankees? The Angels? The Phillies? Where were the Red Sox last October? The Dodgers? The Angels again? The Phillies again?

Nothing’s a given, despite the firmly fair expectations the Tigers have played with.

I don’t agree with every move Dombrowski has made. For instance, I thought he left Leyland in a bind by ignoring the closer role this offseason, a situation that, lucky for the team, has righted itself with Joaquin Benoit stepping up.

I also don’t always see eye to eye with Leyland’s in-game maneuvering. I think it was absurd to be flashing the bunt sign to Alex Avila in the seventh inning of Game 4 when Avila isn’t much of a bunter, but is capable of grounding the ball to second, which would’ve accomplished the same goal.

In the end, it all worked out.

Tigers have overachieved, even if they lose Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Personal feelings ran deep entering this A's-Tigers playoff series. They were born of a conviction the Tigers were too compromised by Miguel Cabrera's sore groin to beat a team as well-rounded as the A's.

But here they are, waltzing into Thursday night's Game 5 showdown at O.co Coliseum. And I think the Tigers already have overachieved.

They have done well to push this American League Division Series to five games, no matter what happens Thursday night. They have played well, particularly when you consider the gallantry of Max Scherzer and the old-time ways of Justin Verlander in Game 2.

Those pitchers, as well as designated hitter Victor Martinez and left-fielder Jhonny Peralta, have helped soothe fans irked by Prince Fielder and Austin Jackson and any other player who hasn't quite played up to his paycheck or potential in October.

It still gets back to Cabrera. He is not the best player in baseball. Mike Trout of the Angels wins there. But the Tigers third baseman is baseball's best hitter. And if there is any doubt as to why he was last year's MVP — and why he could win another MVP trophy next month — it has been vanquished by the steady, everyday realization a healthy Cabrera is the single most effective game-changer in either league.

Minus the sore groin that has chopped in half his power, this series would have ended in Detroit. There would have been no 1-0 loss last Saturday. There might not have been an A's victory in Game 3. You can make no such assumptions about any other team in playoff games as well-played and well-pitched as these, all because no other team has Cabrera's one-of-a-kind offensive majesty.

But this team isn't the 2013 Tigers. It's a hollow version of that baseball club. And, on a daily basis, it is mystifying how little national media appear to understand the depth of Cabrera's pain and the manner in which it has sabotaged his power and this team.

Playing with pain has a price

Some, of course, say if Cabrera is hurt, he shouldn't be playing. And if he is playing, he should be hitting. But it's not that simple. Jim Leyland, the Tigers manager who is only one of many voices involved in the Cabrera issue, said it best a couple of weeks ago: Just the presence of Cabrera, who can still lace a single, has an effect on pitchers and on a game.

He is playing with pain that prevents him from swinging with force. That same grinding abdominal grief leaves him to trot rather than run on the basepaths. And while you can argue someone else should be playing third when Cabrera is so obviously in misery, doctors say he can play if he can live with the discomfort.

It is his decision — accepted by the Tigers — to play.

But it comes with a price, either way. And that price ultimately makes Detroit a diminished playoff contestant, and no match for Boston, even if the Tigers prevail Thursday night.

Bigger-picture questions will be asked after this season ends, beginning with how Cabrera's condition was allowed to deteriorate during the season's closing weeks and months.

No sure thing

Along with questions about Cabrera's condition will come grievances from fans who expected a world championship in 2013.

They believe it was their right, and this team's duty, to win a World Series. They will say it is the fault of Leyland. They will argue it rests on a manager, blessed with a big payroll, to overcome a bullpen that never quite had sufficient pieces at any one time, and to compensate for Cabrera's power-outage and no production from left field.

But the protests ignore simple facts. Twenty-nine other teams, some of which carry heavier payrolls, are all trying to win. They have good rosters, most of them, anyway. They are well-run. And in baseball, where victory is difficult purely because more things can go wrong than right, it's extremely noble to win 90 games. The Tigers won 93.

I think the payroll argument is fundamentally flawed. That's because a few players (Cabrera, Justin Verlander, Fielder, Anibal Sanchez, Victor Martinez) account for the brunt of this team's salary load, and only Fielder (who still had 106 RBIs in 2013) is out of whack in terms of value and compensation. Outfitted with the Cabrera, who devastates opposing pitchers, this team would have just enough going for it to beat the Red Sox, even with Boston owning an almost-prohibitive advantage playing four games at home. That won't happen, even if the Tigers win Thursday night. Not when Cabrera is so disabled. But it takes nothing away from what a team has accomplished in 2013, and what it could just as easily pull off next year if an extraordinary hitter simply is healthy in October.

Tigers well set for ALDS Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Tom Gage / The Detroit News

Oakland, Calif. — Boston's waiting.

A one-game trip means one of two things: a makeup of a rainout.

Or something far more important.

The Tigers are facing the latter, something far more important Thursday night in Game 5 of the American League Division Series against the A's at O.co Coliseum.

They face the either/or — moving on in the postseason or moving into the offseason.

Awaiting the winner of this series are the Red Sox, who host Game 1 of the American League Championship Series on Saturday.

If it's the Tigers, you care. Absolutely, you do.

If it's the A's, unless you bleed yellow and green, you don't.

Can the Tigers get there? Sure. They'd never be happier to fly cross-country again.

But to get there, they won't have Max Scherzer to start after he threw 47 pitches in relief and was the Game 4 winning pitcher.

As long as he didn't break any hands high-fiving teammates after getting out of a bases-loaded jam in the eighth inning, it was a heck of a scene as the Tigers could sense they were about to extend the A's series to the limit.

Hope boosted

Back to the question of whether they can take the next step, though, and to the answer: Sure.

They can for several reasons more than why they can't.

That alone is a big difference in the way of looking at Game 5 after the less promising challenge of having to win two in a row.

When the Tigers were down 2-1 in the series, they weren't hitting. The need was for someone, anyone, to step up and deliver a big hit.

When they were down 3-0 in the fifth inning Tuesday and, one by one, were going quietly at the plate, the outlook still was bleak.

Jhonny Peralta changed all that with his three-run home run.

The Tigers held onto their hope, but suddenly there was life alongside the hope. And you know the difference.

You can still hope for a birdie when you've been hitting bad shots all day. But the real hope comes when you're 5 feet from the pin.

Peralta's home run got the Tigers on the green, close to the pin.

There was plenty of work to be done after that, though.

Undaunted, the A's took a 4-3 lead off Scherzer. The Tigers came right back to tie it on Victor Martinez's home run.

Austin Jackson, who'd struck out four consecutive times the last two games and was 1-for-14 with 10 strikeouts in the series, put the Tigers in front with a broken bat single to right in the seventh.

One of the lingering questions was why A's manager Bob Melvin stuck with left-hander Sean Doolittle against Jackson when right-handers had been eating him up, but the answer to that is left-handers had been, too.

"Doolittle is our guy," Melvin said. "It's his inning. I brought him into the eighth the other day against right-handed hitters."

But he had just walked Jose Iglesias before Jackson's at-bat.

"He's our guy," Melvin said.

Verlander on his game

The A's were disappointed, but didn't seem particularly shaken by the loss. That's because they don't feel overmatched.

Even if they did, the solace of returning home makes them feel better about prevailing than probably they should.

After all, they'll be going up against Justin Verlander, who's been vintage Verlander three consecutive starts and blanked the A's on four hits and 11 strikeouts in seven innings of Game 2.

In his last 19 innings, all of which have been scoreless, Verlander has 33 strikeouts.

He's tweaked everything that can be tweaked in his delivery, having to settle for a 13-12 record, but whatever his last tweak was seems to have worked.

He was, however, lights-out in Game 2 and the Tigers still lost 1-0, so Game 5 will be about this: Will one productive game lead to another for the Tigers?

For the first 31 innings of the A's series, they scored six runs.

In the last four innings of Game 4, they scored eight.

"You just dream to be in this position," Jackson said. "We're going to be pumped, and we know they're going to be pumped, as well. It's going to be fun."

Moneyball, Detroit style

Pulling for the Tigers, but worst case, can we have A's home games?

October 10, 2013

By Neal Rubin / The Detroit News

If the Tigers can't win it all, I hope the Oakland A's do. But if that turns out to be the way the ball bounces tonight — if it's Oakland that moves on to the next round of the playoffs — would it be a terrible inconvenience to have them play a few home games in Detroit?

I like that the A's are small-market and low-interest and stuck on the gritty side of San Francisco Bay. I like that sewage occasionally overflows in their dumpy ballpark, O.co Coliseum.

I like that they wrote the book on moneyball, the art of using analytics to cadge maximum value out of minimal budgets — or anyway, had it written about them. I like that their entire roster earned less in 2013 than the \$64.1 million the Tigers paid Prince Fielder, Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander.

But I like Nemo's better. And Harry's and P.J.'s. And the homeless guys who gather themselves enough on game days to wave cars into parking lots with orange flags. And the airplanes that circle the stadium towing ever-elegant ads for strip clubs.

In our bankrupt burg, I like the excitement of playoff games — and the revenue stream. So since the Tigers were gracious enough to use Wiffle bats for three games and assure that Oakland could host a game five, it seems only reasonable to ask the A's to upgrade to Comerica Park.

It's always nice to win a World Series. We all certainly enjoyed the one in 1984. But that can be a crapshoot, a question of who gets doinked by a bad call, who gets helped, and whose broken-bat blooper falls in.

Home games are a sure thing.

\$4M in direct spending

Economists have examined this before. They've crunched a few numbers, factored in the average windspeed, multiplied by the size of Max Scherzer's hat, and come up with an estimate of \$4 million in direct spending every time the Tigers sell out.

But that's for a Wednesday night in July against Kansas City. Things get magnified in the postseason. The prediction last year for three frigid home games in the World Series was \$30 million, even if the Tigers got swept and played only two.

At the DoubleTree Suites downtown, five of six people in the check-in line Monday morning were wearing Tigers gear. On Tuesday at Harry's Detroit Bar on Clifford Street, an attendant in an orange T-shirt that read "Free Parking" was on duty five hours before game time, asking people if they were just stopping for lunch or getting shuttled to the ballpark.

For the best illustration of what an economic driver the playoffs are, go to Nemo's on Michigan Avenue and watch the buses.

After Tiger Stadium closed in 1999, co-owner Tim Springstead bought three retired school buses for less than it cost to repaint them white and green. Hauling people to downtown sporting events became such a draw that he now has six.

On Monday, Springstead says, for a 1:07 p.m. game on a workday, Nemo's transported 700 people at \$3 each. Most of them ate, drank and were merry first — if not later, since the Tigers lost.

"There's a trickle down," he says. A real one. More staff on duty, more tips, more burgers at the Mercury Burger & Bar, more coneys at Lafayette.

Playoff games are a bonus

P.J.'s Lager House is typically a music joint, albeit with an unusually eclectic menu — a place to find the Red Elvises and Quasar Wut-Wut, not baseball fans.

Between its own regulars and spillover from a block away at Nemo's, says bartender Paul Maiale, "we were busy as hell Monday."

"I came in a little early, rolled some extra silverware, put a little extra shine on the place," he says. "I had a certain mindset, even the night before. Better get to bed early and be prepared. You have to make money while you can."

The Mercury, in the gaunt shadow of the train station, starts the year with checkmarks next to 81 baseball games, 45 hockey games and 10 Lions games, exhibitions included. Playoffs are a whomping bonus. “The meter man was going crazy yesterday,” says co-owner Dave Steinke, “giving out tickets.” OK, not every bonanza is a good thing, but I’ll be rooting hard for the Tigers tonight — and for some Oakland generosity if things don’t work out.

Tigers' Game 5 lineup up in air, but Miguel Cabrera, Jhonny Peralta are locks

October 10, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — Jim Leyland still was fiddling with his Game 5 lineup in his hotel room Wednesday evening, and he wasn't ready to offer any solid plans to the media.

But there are two certainties:

* Miguel Cabrera will play third base;

* And Jhonny Peralta will play — though he didn't specify where.

The last-minute pondering is understandable, since Leyland, the Tigers manager, didn't know until Wednesday afternoon his team would be facing A's rookie Sonny Gray for the second time this series.

"I'm not really sure what my lineup's gonna be, just yet," Leyland said.

He's started Peralta in left the two games he's been in the lineup, and Jose Iglesias has been at shortstop all four games.

But Iglesias isn't hitting much, and Peralta hasn't started in left at vast O.co Coliseum there — and was slow getting to a Coco Crisp gapper in Detroit in Game 4, turning a typical double into a triple. So a switch, theoretically, could be in order. Still, Leyland talked about the difference between playing left in Oakland and at Comerica Park.

"Left field is left field, there's a big difference in a lot of ballparks," he said. "There's a lot of foul ground here. It does shorten up a little bit once you get to the outfield.

"It shouldn't be a problem."

Leyland, it's worth noting, also was asked about Austin Jackson, who has 10 strikeouts in the series. Like the rest of the lineup, Leyland wouldn't commit to Jackson's place in it — at leadoff, or at all.

Rays' Maddon impresses Leyland

Leyland was mighty impressed with Rays manager Joe Maddon's maneuvering Tuesday night — even though the Rays were eliminated by the Red Sox.

Maddon went to his bullpen in the second inning, and ended up using nine pitchers.

"I think he did a tremendous job mixing his pitchers in and out," Leyland said. "It was a pretty smart plan. I don't think he wanted Boston to see the same pitcher very much.

"I thought it was brilliant."

It's not that unusual to see interesting uses of the bullpen this time of year — especially in elimination games.

There, as they say, is no tomorrow.

"I used a guy that had (21) wins out of the bullpen," Leyland said of his Game 4 relief star, Max Scherzer. "We were desperate.

"You do whatever it takes."

Around the horn

As for his bullpen for Game 5 of the American League Division Series, Leyland said Scherzer would not be available again in relief.

Leyland also ruled out Anibal Sanchez from appearing out of the bullpen.

... Leyland on Gray, the 23-year-old right-hander who shut down the Tigers in Game 2: "His poise and everything, really, was unbelievable. He didn't ruffle at all. Just a really, really good-looking young pitcher.

... The Tigers will counter with Justin Verlander, who's had his ups and downs this year, but also was brilliant in Game 2 — as well as Game 5 of last year's ALDS. "We feel comfortable anytime Justin Verlander goes out there," Leyland said.

A's rookie Sonny Gray lands start for decisive Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Tony Paul / The Detroit News

Detroit — Sonny, boy, you're on the spot now.

Sonny Gray, all of 23 years old, is the A's choice to pitch the winner-take-all Game 5 of the American League Division Series against the Tigers in Oakland on Thursday night.

It wasn't an easy decision for Bob Melvin, given the other choice was veteran Bartolo Colon, Oakland's best regular-season pitcher.

But in the end, it came down to what we all saw in Game 2: a stunningly confident and poised Gray dominating the Tigers lineup, which looked no more comfortable against him late in the game than it did early.

"We looked at it from a bunch of different angles," Melvin said on a conference call with reporters Wednesday night. "And the short of it is, it came down to Sonny's last game that he pitched.

"So that's the route we're gonna go."

Melvin told Gray about his decision a couple of hours before his 5 p.m. Pacific call with reporters.

The reaction sounded priceless.

"He was excited, the same type of look he had when we told him he was gonna pitch the second game," Melvin said of Gray, who threw eight scoreless innings in Game 2, while allowing just four hits and striking out nine.

"He had a smile on his face, and you could see his mind doing its preparation right then and there."

As for the conversation with Colon, 40, Melvin said that was tough for him.

Colon had a big-time case to get the ball, but he responded to the decision with class.

"He just looked at me and said, 'OK, I just want to win,'" Melvin said. "He definitely could've had a gripe, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he did."

Colon will be available out of the bullpen in Game 5, though Melvin is not sure he would turn to him — given Colon has a specific routine ahead of his planned starts.

The entire bullpen, of course, will be on call. It's "all hands on deck," Melvin said — given the loser of the game will be going home.

Solving Verlander

Gray, again, will match up against Justin Verlander — who's on some kind of roll of his own, with 23 consecutive scoreless innings against the A's in the postseason.

He threw a complete-game shutout in last year's Game 5, and shut down the A's again in Game 2 this year — matching Gray zero for zero.

So what's the plan of attack there?

"The strength of our offense all year has been to trust everybody, up and down the lineup, and not try to do too much," shortstop Jed Lowrie said. "And I think that's the easiest way to get to a guy like Verlander, is just give yourself as many opportunities to score as possible. Get guys on base, get him to throw some stress innings, stress pitches, so he's just not able to cruise through innings."

Melvin understands Verlander — who has struck out an eye-popping 33 in his last three playoff starts against Oakland — has had his team's number, though he believes eventually the tables will turn.

Perhaps, he hopes, as early as Thursday night.

"He's one of the best pitchers in all of baseball and he's a big-game postseason pitcher, and we've just run into him at the wrong time, too many times," Melvin said. "We still have to have confidence.

"We feel like we have a better chance to turn the tide.

Around the horn

Given the good at-bats he's had in the series, including a duel with Max Scherzer late in Game 4, Alberto Callaspo is being considered for the start at second base in Game 5.

Melvin, though, is hesitant to do that, because it takes a weapon out of his hands for late — when he likes to bring in Callaspo in a matchup situation. Callaspo is a switch-hitter, with some pop.

Regular second baseman Eric Sogard doesn't have a hit in nine at-bats this series.

... As for pulling Dan Straily after six innings and just 76 pitches in Game 4, Melvin shed some light on that.

He said Straily pitched the last three innings with back tightness, perhaps attributed to the cold conditions.

... Game 3 starter Jarrod Parker might be available out of the bullpen, though Melvin said he was a little sore after his start. "I'm sure he'll be willing to," Melvin said.

Max Scherzer captures Comerica Park's electricity in two thrilling innings of relief

October 10, 2013

By John Niyo / The Detroit News

Detroit — Max Scherzer described the events as surreal. But that was only after he'd had an hour or so to piece together his story.

In the immediate aftermath of Tuesday night's climactic eighth inning at Comerica Park, as the Tigers used the ace up their sleeve to thrill a full house, Scherzer was a bit too pumped up to process much of anything. He'd just come charging off the mound with a double-barrel fist pump after working out of a no-outs, bases-loaded jam, with the Tigers clinging to a 5-4 lead in a must-win Game 4 of the American League Divisional Series. And he'd nearly torn the \$200-million right arm off of Justin Verlander, among others, when his teammates greeted him at the top of the dugout steps.

"That's why I give him that nickname 'Mad Max' — sometimes he has that different level he goes to," catcher Alex Avila said. "But that kind of emotion? The occasion called for it."

After what he'd just done? Of course.

But what was it he'd done, exactly?

"Asking him afterward, he was kind of in a daze and doesn't really remember it," laughed Doug Fister, the Game 4 starter who'd lasted six innings and left with the score tied, 3-3, right before the real fireworks show began. "I think that's just pure adrenaline."

Wild night

That's what it was, all right: Pure adrenaline. That's what the Tigers needed Tuesday night, and that's what they found when they needed it most, jolting to life and then rallying in the late innings with some heart-stopping drama.

Not the least of which was Scherzer's improbable Houdini act, called on in relief on three days' rest and then earning the win with two of the wildest innings — literally, at times — we've seen here in Detroit in quite some time.

"We overuse adjectives like incredible, awesome and big-time, so they lose meaning," Avila said. "But what Max did was all of that and then some."

What he did first, though, was play a game of catch Tuesday afternoon. Just to see if his arm felt good enough to pitch out of the bullpen.

It did, he said, "So I told (manager Jim Leyland), 'I've got a couple of innings in me if you want it.' "

Want it? Actually, Leyland knew he'd need it, given the dire straits and his bullpen's limitations. And sure enough, he did, with Fister needing 50 pitches to get through the first two innings before settling in and giving his team — and Scherzer — a chance.

"I was ready," Scherzer said, though the hardest part, admittedly, was pacing around the bullpen as the shadows lengthened and the lights came on.

By the time he came in, he was probably a bit too ready. He gave up a lead-off single in the seventh, then another to Coco Crisp that put the A's ahead, 4-3.

"I was wild tonight," Scherzer admitted. "I didn't have my best command."

Clearly, he didn't. In the eighth, after the Tigers had taken their first lead on Victor Martinez's disputed home run and Austin Jackson's broken-bat single, he quickly found more trouble.

Scherzer walked the first batter he faced, Brandon Moss, on five pitches, missing repeatedly with his fastball. Yoenis Cespedes followed with a sharp liner to right field that Torii Hunter misplayed — it was generously scored a double — putting runners at second and third. And that forced Leyland's hand, as he gave Seth Smith an intentional pass to load the bases with no outs.

"I hated to load him up, but Smith has been so hot and Max is a strikeout guy," Leyland said, "so you take your shot."

That's all Scherzer wanted, really.

"This is the stuff you dream of," Scherzer said. "Maybe it's not the ninth inning, but that's the stuff you dream about. Bases loaded, no outs ... and I was able to do it."

A-O-'K'

Josh Reddick was up first, and he didn't go quietly, fouling off a 3-2 fastball. Avila called for another, but Scherzer shook him off. He wanted to throw his change-up, so he did. Only it didn't go where he'd intended it to.

"I bounced it on the wrong side of the plate — I pulled it," he said.

But Reddick swung — and missed — anyway.

"That was a huge out," said Scherzer, who then struck out Stephen Vogt as the sellout crowd of 43,958 worked itself into a frenzy.

The next one was even bigger, though, as pinch-hitter Alberto Callaspo worked another full count. He'd fouled off a pair of 96-mph fastballs early in the count, but Scherzer went after him with another — "I had to challenge him with my best pitch," he said — and the crack of the bat made it sound like he'd made a crushing mistake.

"Off the bat, it looked like a hit," Avila said.

"I thought it was down," Scherzer agreed. "But Austin made a great play."

Jackson did, though he gave some of the credit to his coaches. He'd looked to Tom Brookens for a positioning signal "at the last second" and "he told me to shade him in the gap, opposite side." The thinking was the switch-hitting Callaspo, batting from the left side, would take a fastball away to left field if he got good wood on it, which he did.

"It worked out perfectly," Jackson said.

For Scherzer. For the Tigers. For their fans. For everybody but the A's, who had champagne ready but instead headed home wondering. And maybe worrying, just a bit, with Justin Verlander, who blanked them in a winner-take-all Game 5 in Oakland a year ago, ready to take the ball on his regular rest Thursday night.

This wasn't the way they drew it up, obviously.

"But it made for a great story, didn't it?" Verlander said, grinning. "That was intense."

And the best part? It's not over yet.

Tigers' Doug Fister finds relief in Max Scherzer's sterling work

October 10, 2013

By Rod Beard / The Detroit News

Detroit — Tigers manager Jim Leyland said before Game 4 of the American League Division Series on Tuesday that Game 1 winner Max Scherzer would be available in relief, if needed.

Doug Fister, however, made sure Scherzer wasn't needed — at least early — going six innings to keep the Tigers close until the offense broke things open in the eighth inning and sealed an 8-6 win, forcing a deciding Game 5 on Thursday in Oakland.

“It certainly was eventful and it's a tremendous thing for us as a team to go through something like that and battle for so long and just come to life, both defense and offense,” said Fister, who allowed three runs. “It's a matter of everybody playing together and that's what we do.”

Fister ran into trouble early, allowing a leadoff triple to Coco Crisp, who scored on Jed Lowrie's RBI single in the first inning. And things didn't get easier the second inning, as Fister worked out of another jam, stranding runners on first and third.

Through two innings, Fister had thrown 50 pitches and looked to be on the ropes.

“It's one of those things where it's the same game plan — attack and try to get as much bat contact early as possible and get as deep as I can,” Fister said. “You have to keep battling through no matter the situation is or what pitch it is.

“The first couple innings were a little bit of a struggle for me but after that, I got into a rhythm a little bit. There were some goods and bads.”

Among the bad was allowing hits to the leadoff hitter the first three innings.

In the fifth inning, Fister gave up a one-out single to Crisp, who scored on Lowrie's two-run home run that gave the A's a 3-0 lead.

“It's a 0-0 ballgame always when I'm pitching; that's my mindset,” Fister said. “For our hitters, they're putting together some good at-bats and it just wasn't coming through. All of a sudden, they broke out and let it loose.” The Tigers offense broke through for three runs in the fifth, and Fister responded with a 1-2-3 inning, setting the stage for Scherzer.

“I had no idea,” Fister said about his availability to pitch. “Not until they said Scherzer's in. It's one of those things I'm staying focused.”

And he responded, escaping from a bases-loaded, no-out jam in the eighth.

“Everybody in the dugout, everybody in the stands — everybody anywhere rooting for the Tigers — is pulling for him,” Fister said. “Everybody is doing everything they can.

“Physically, we're not out there helping but we're right there behind him.”

Looking up: Tigers revive bats to force decisive Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Bob Wojnowski / The Detroit News

Detroit — It was never impossible, but it was looking improbable. And then the unlikeliest scenarios started lining up, and the Tigers emerged from the deepest danger, gasping but resuscitated.

There was Max Scherzer, newly crowned clutch reliever, pumping his arm in wild exultation after a narrow escape. There was Jhonny Peralta, once banished, now basking. There were Tigers suddenly circling the bases, as the huge crowd roared half in relief, half in disbelief.

The Tigers were pushed to the brink and nearly past it. And then in the flick of a swing, they were back in the game, back in the series, back in the mood. The Tigers rallied to edge the A's 8-6 Tuesday night to force a decisive Game 5 of the ALDS, and the throaty cheers at Comerica Park told the story.

Baseball is a game of improbabilities, and the Tigers proved it with clutch feats from improbable guys. On a redemptive night, Peralta took a mighty cut and erased more than a 3-0 deficit. His three-run homer in the fifth inning eased the sting of his suspension and just might have saved the season. Austin Jackson, who struck out three times, broke his bat on his fourth attempt and poked the ball to right field to knock in the go-ahead run in the seventh.

From the hard-luck guys to the hard-throwing ace, this was terrific theater, if you don't mind numbing tension. Jim Leyland gambled and Scherzer delivered with two innings of gutsy relief, somehow slipping out of a bases-loaded jam. Even when Victor Martinez clubbed the tying home run in the seventh, it required a replay review to make sure a fan didn't interfere with right fielder Josh Reddick.

The hitting drought ended in a flourish, and Peralta and Jackson showed what to do when given another chance. Jackson was booed after his strikeouts and mired in a 1-for-14 slump before his hit. At that very moment, I'm not sure which was more palpable — the cheers of the crowd or the sigh from Jackson.

"It felt great, a relief to just get something going," Jackson said. "I wasn't worried about the booing, to be honest. I'm still confident in myself, and my teammates kept my head up and kept pumping me up."

Peralta was one of those teammates talking with Jackson between innings, and if anyone could appreciate the difficulty, it's him. Peralta served a 50-game suspension for steroid use and returned in the final week, willing to accept any role. He moved to a new position, said all the right things, then grabbed a bat and delivered the hit of the year, so far.

When he returned to his left-field spot in the bottom of the inning, the fans cheered madly, and one threw the home-run ball back to him. Peralta is a man of few words, but it struck him deep.

All's forgiven

"The fans feel really good to me," he said. "I tried to do my best for the team and the fans. I feel grateful for the opportunity."

No one ever feels comfortable in the playoffs, and the Tigers certainly aren't safe yet. Game 5 is Thursday night in Oakland, and you know the A's aren't going meekly. But the Tigers have another ace, Justin Verlander, ready to start, eager for a reprisal. It was Verlander in the same situation a year ago, shutting the A's out in Game 5.

The way things looked, there was no way the Tigers were heading back to Oakland. Everything was silent — the crowd, the bats — and the Tigers didn't have a hit until the fifth inning off rookie Dan Straily. Sometimes it's as simple as this: One swing, one pitch can change everything, and the Tigers got a few of each.

Scherzer took everyone to the wild side when he relieved Doug Fister, then loaded the bases with nobody out in the eighth as the Tigers clung to a 5-4 lead. Desperate times? Uh, no problem. Scherzer struck out Reddick on a 3-2 pitch that was in the dirt, then struck out Stephen Vogt. Then on another 3-2 pitch, he got Alberto Callaspo to line to Jackson in center, and danger finally dissipated, for the moment.

"To be able to get out of that jam, that's something I'll never forget," Scherzer said. "That's something I'm not really asked to do, and obviously Skip had the confidence in me to stick with me."

It was an incredible escape for the presumptive Cy Young winner with the 21-3 record, and it wasn't even the strangest turn of the night. Once again, the Tigers couldn't stop the A's pesky leadoff hitter, Coco Crisp. Once again, the A's grabbed the lead, 1-0, and the foreshadowing matched the late-afternoon shadows.

Not looking good

Jackson and Torii Hunter struck out in the first. Then Miguel Cabrera sent a towering flyball that two months ago would've been a home run. With his groin injury sapping his leg strength, it was a deep out, and as the slugger limped, the signs were ominous.

By the bottom of the fifth, Oakland was on top 3-0 and Detroit still was seeking its first home run of the series. It looked dire before a bloop hit by Prince Fielder, and another hit by Martinez. Then came the Peralta blast that cleared the left-field fence to tie the game 3-3 and send the fans into delirium.

There was nothing conflicted about it, either. Peralta paid his penance and is back mainly because the Tigers need his bat. But the fans also welcomed him back, and so did his teammates.

"That home run couldn't have come at a better time, and couldn't have happened to a better guy," Jackson said. "Jhonny's been awesome, and for him to do that in that situation, it shows what kind of player he is."

It showed what kind of night this was. Finally, several players grabbed a bat and swung the heavy lumber. It was crazy and tight to the end, and you can expect more of the same in Game 5, when the Tigers again will try to turn the improbable back to reality.

Could Jhonny Peralta start at shortstop in Game 5? Jim Leyland still mulling over Detroit Tigers' lineup

October 10, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

Jhonny Peralta will be in the Detroit Tigers' lineup in Game 5 tonight. Whether he will be starting in left field or at shortstop remains to be seen.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland confirmed in a conference call Wednesday that Peralta "will play" in Oakland tonight, but suggested he was still mulling over his lineup.

"I'm really not sure what my lineup is going to be just yet," Leyland said. "Originally, we weren't sure who was going to pitch. We were a little suspicious that we might get (Sonny) Gray, so I was fooling around with it in my room just before the call."

The A's officially announced Gray -- the A's Game 2 winner -- as their Game 5 starter about an hour before Leyland spoke with reporters.

"I'll think about it (Wednesday night) as I'm watching the Cardinals/Pirates game and as I'm off to dinner," he said. "I'll come up with something."

Peralta started both games at Comerica Park in left field earlier this week, driving in five runs -- capped by the game-changing, three-run home run he hit in Game 4 on Tuesday. It was his first homer since Aug. 3 -- two days before he began serving his 50-game suspension.

It's entirely possible Peralta could make a third straight start in left field, or Leyland could consider putting him at shortstop in place of Jose Iglesias, allowing Andy Dirks or Don Kelly to start in left at O.co Coliseum -- a stadium with potentially problematic dimensions.

"Left field is left field, but there is a big difference in a lot of ballparks," Leyland said. "There's a lot of foul ground here in the Oakland stadium.

"It does shorten up as you get into the outfield, but Andy Dirks ran over and almost made a heck of a play the other night, went a long way for that ball."

Moving Peralta back to short in Game 5 would allow the 31-year-old to play at his natural position in a critical game, and it would give the Tigers a defensive upgrade in left field.

Kelly started in left field in Game 2 and recorded two of the team's four hits off Gray, who worked eight shutout innings in Oakland's 1-0 win. Iglesias, meanwhile, has struggled at the plate as of late, hitting just .083 with a pair of strikeouts in 12 at-bats this series.

QUICK HITS

-- Other than Game 5 starter Justin Verlander, no other Tigers starters (with the exception of Rick Porcello) will be available to pitch Thursday. Leyland confirmed both Max Scherzer and Game 3 starter Anibal Sanchez will be unavailable out of the bullpen.

-- A's manager Bob Melvin named Gray, the Game 2 winner, as the starter for Game 5. Melvin said he wasn't sure if Bartolo Colon, who started Game 1, would be available to pitch out of the bullpen if needed.

-- Leyland on Gray: "Gray the other night, his poise was unbelievable. He didn't ruffle at all. Just a really, really good looking young pitcher."

-- A's shortstop Jed Lowrie on his team's overall approach against Verlander: "Give yourself as many opportunities to score as possible. Get guys on base and get him to throw those stress innings and pitches where he's not able to cruise through innings."

-- Melvin said there's "definitely a chance" Alberto Callaspo, who has served as a pinch-hitter for the A's in three games this series, could get a start Thursday night.

A's rookie Sonny Gray named Game 5 starter, set to battle Tigers' Justin Verlander in decisive rematch

October 10, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

Neither starting pitcher from Game 1 of the AL Division Series between the Detroit Tigers and Oakland A's will be starting the winner-take-all fifth game Thursday night.

The A's officially named Sonny Gray the team's starter in Game 5 of the best-of-five series, bypassing veteran Bartolo Colon, their Game 1 starter.

"We had two great options," A's manager Bob Melvin said during a teleconference Wednesday. He added that the decision "came down to the last game Sonny pitched in similar conditions in our ballpark."

The 23-year-old Gray was sensational in his start last Saturday, outdueling Justin Verlander in the A's Game 2 victory in Oakland.

Oakland's first-round pick in the 2011 draft, Gray struck out nine in eight dazzling innings, allowing four hits. Verlander, meanwhile, tossed seven shutout innings of four-hit ball. He struck out 11 in Detroit's 1-0 loss.

The two will meet each other at the O.co Coliseum in Oakland once again Thursday night in a must-win game for both teams.

"This kid is a great-looking young pitcher, so it will be better for us than it was the other night, hopefully," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said of Gray.

The Tigers never had seen Gray before Saturday.

"With the stuff he was featuring, it certainly does not mean we're going to be in a comfort zone," Leyland said. "But it makes you a little more comfortable, now that you know the action on the ball, the great breaking ball that he has."

The Tigers didn't initially plan to start Verlander in Game 5, but Leyland used Game 1 winner Max Scherzer out of the bullpen Tuesday in a win-or-go-home Game 4. The move forced the Tigers to go with Verlander, who will pitch on his regular four days' rest.

"That's kinda why we pitched him Game 2, so we would have an option, depending on what Scherzer did," Leyland said. "Scherzer would have pitched a Game 5, but we run a tougher zone with Justin Verlander and we had to use him (Tuesday)."

Colon's potential availability out of the bullpen in Game 5 will be a game-time decision, Melvin said. But he stressed that Colon, an 18-game winner, is "willing to do anything."

Colon hasn't defeated the Tigers since 2003, going 0-7 with a 6.93 ERA in his past 14 regular-season starts. He gave up three runs early in Game 1, but buckled down the rest of the way, shutting out the Tigers for the next five innings.

"He was great about it," Melvin said. "I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with his routine. We'll see (Thursday)."

Detroit Tigers' Max Scherzer saves game by working out of no-out bases-loaded jam in eighth inning

October 10, 2013

By Chris Iott / MLive.com

DETROIT -- Max Scherzer got himself into a giant mess. Jim Leyland felt that he was the best pitcher to get out of it.

Scherzer did. And that is one of the biggest reasons the Detroit Tigers are still alive in the American League Division Series.

Scherzer replaced Doug Fister to start the seventh inning Tuesday night in an eventual 8-6 victory for the Detroit Tigers over the Oakland Athletics in Game 4. He surrendered the go-ahead run in the top of the seventh only to see Victor Martinez and Austin Jackson drive in runs in the bottom of the inning to give the Tigers a 5-4 lead.

But Scherzer got into all sorts of trouble in the eighth. Brandon Moss drew a leadoff walk. Yoenis Cespedes, who homered off Scherzer in Game 1, doubled to put runners on second and third. Scherzer intentionally walked Seth Smith to load the bases with nobody out.

But there was no help coming from the bullpen. Scherzer was on his own. And it seemed likely at the time that how Scherzer fared in the inning would play a key role in which team would win the game.

"Max is a strikeout guy, and that's what you're looking for obviously early in the situation," Leyland said. "If you can get the first two guys on strikes, that's huge, which is what he did. That's what you're looking for." Scherzer did the job. Josh Reddick worked the count to 3-2 before swinging at a changeup that was inside and well out of the strike zone. Reddick bailed Scherzer out a bit. Instead of drawing a game-tying walk, he was the first out of the inning.

"I just thought at that point in time -- I shook Alex (Avila) off -- that if I executed a changeup, that there was a chance I could get a swing and miss," Scherzer said. "I bounced it on the wrong side of the plate. I pulled it. But it still had the effectiveness of looking like a fastball, because it got the swing and miss.

"That was a huge out for me to be able to get in that situation."

Scherzer struck out Stephen Vogt for the second out of the inning before pinch hitter Alberto Callaspo put a couple scares into him.

Callaspo sent a line drive toward left field that seemed bound for extra bases, but it sliced just foul.

"He put a good swing on it and I thought I gave up the hit," Scherzer said. "I thought the ball was down and it tailed just enough foul. I was so happy that that happened."

Callaspo eventually worked the count to 3-2 before lacing a line drive to the left field side of Austin Jackson. But Jackson tracked it down to preserve the 5-4 lead.

"I know he's a great fastball hitter," Scherzer said. "But I had to come with my best, and he put a good swing on it and hit it hard. I thought it was down, but Austin made a great play to be able to run that play down."

Scherzer, who was pitching on short rest, didn't have his best outing. He allowed one run on three hits and two walks in two innings. But he got out of the jam when he needed to.

Scherzer had been scheduled to start Game 5 for the Tigers. Instead, Justin Verlander will pitch. Due to the off-days in the postseason, Verlander will be able to make the start on his regular number of days of rest.

Detroit Tigers' Austin Jackson comes up with clutch RBI single to end lengthy strikeout binge

October 10, 2013

By Chris Iott / Mlive.com

DETROIT -- It wasn't a home run or a gapper. It wasn't a double or a triple. It wasn't a line drive.

But it was a hit. A big hit. And Austin Jackson was thrilled to get it.

Jackson had a broken-bat single in the seventh inning Tuesday night that gave the Detroit Tigers the lead for good in their season-saving 8-6 victory over the Oakland Athletics in Game 4 of the American League Division Series.

"You don't even know," Jackson said of the relief he felt. "I was just happy that it fell. Looking over in the dugout and seeing how pumped up the were for me, it kind of gave me chills a little bit."

It had been some time since Jackson's previous hit. He led off Game 1 with a double and scored the first run in that game, a 3-2 win for the Tigers. Between that double and the broken-bat single, Jackson went 0-for-13 with 10 strikeouts.

He struck out in each of his three at-bats Tuesday against starter Dan Straily before facing reliever Sean Doolittle in the seventh inning. He dug himself into an 0-2 hole vs. Doolittle, then fouled off the next pitch before his game-changing single to that fell safely to the ground in front of right fielder Josh Reddick.

There were plenty of runs scored from that point forward, but the Tigers never surrendered the lead that Jackson gave them.

"Hopefully that gets him going," Tigers manager Jim Leyland said. "He's struggled in this series a little bit, but sometimes that's the magic that gets a guy going."

Jackson said he did his best not to get down on himself during his string of 13 consecutive at-bats without a hit.

"They're making good pitches," he said. "I think the main thing is really to just keep going up there with confidence, not get down about the strikeouts, whatever. It's baseball. I'm going to keep going out there and battle for my team and try to get those wins."

Leyland often calls Jackson the catalyst of the Tigers offense. It's no coincidence that the Tigers are 2-0 in the Division Series when he gets a hit and 0-2 when he does not.

In Game 1, Jackson got things started for the Tigers. In Game 4, he helped finish off the A's.

Was it a homer? Detroit Tigers, Oakland A's react to Victor Martinez's controversial tying homer

October 10, 2013

By James Schmehl / MLive.com

DETROIT -- When Tigers outfielder Torii Hunter walked back out to right field in the top of the eighth inning, he pointed to the fans seated in the front row beyond the right-field wall.

"I told them, 'Good job, way to go!'" he said.

In Hunter's eyes, those fans deserved to be recognized. After all, they played a big role in helping the Tigers pull out a must-win 8-6 victory over the A's in Game 4 of the ALDS.

"Those are our fans, man," Hunter said. "I'm excited that they reached over and caught that before he did."

Hunter, of course, was referring to the controversial incident that occurred in the seventh inning when a couple fans reached out to try to reel in Victor Martinez's disputed homer.

One fan bobbled the ball as he reached over the railing above the wall. A's right fielder Josh Reddick came up empty-handed as he attempted to make the leaping catch.

"Free sodas for everybody out there," Hunter joked. "Next year."

Below is a roundup from a half-dozen A's and Tigers players reacting to the play. If you haven't watched a replay of it, check out the video above.

VICTOR MARTINEZ: "I thought it was a homer. I hit it hard. I tied the game up and gave ourselves a chance to take this game. ... I don't know (if it was catchable). I know that I hit it good, but other than that, I just didn't know."

BOB MELVIN: "Reddicks' reaction was that he thought he could have potentially caught it. The explanation was it was over the yellow line and it wasn't fan interference even though I guess a fan touched it."

JIM LEYLAND: "I usually wait for the guys to come out of the video room and let me know, but in this case, I went down there to look at it. I was actually pretty relaxed because I saw the first replay they showed and I knew it was definitely a home run."

TORII HUNTER: "I remember Derek Jeter doing that in the postseason and a fan reached over and it was a home run. So, no, it shouldn't change. ... I told (the fans), 'Good job, way to go!' Those are our fans, man. I'm excited that they reached over caught that before he did. ... Free sodas for everybody out there -- next year."

SEAN DOOLITTLE: "I saw the ball bounce back onto the field and I saw Reddick's reaction. My initial thought was that, OK, they're going to review this. But I didn't have a good enough angle. I was too far away to really see what happened. I was just standing out there hoping that someone had interfered with it enough to put him at second base."

JOSH REDDICK: "The ruling that I understand is once it goes over the yellow line, it's anybody's ball. It clearly was over the fence and I guess that's the argument you can make. What's it's out of the ballpark, anybody can touch it -- whether it's me or some Joe Schmoe up in the stands. It's just the advantage of being at home field. It's a big situation where the momentum changes for them in a huge way and drops for us in a big way."

COCO CRISP: "(Reddick) is a Gold Glove outfielder. He knows his distance from the wall, he knows what he can potentially get and he felt like he could have got that one. I haven't looked at it on the replay, so it might be a little different than how we felt. But, it's home-field advantage. They've got the fans there. They're going to reach over. It had enough distance to be a home run, but I thought he could have pulled that one back. Instead, the fans pulled it over. It is what it is."

PRINCE FIELDER: "We just cheered again. We thought it was a home run at first, and then when they said it again, we had the same reaction."

Detroit Tigers' Justin Verlander on starting critical Game 5: 'You can't treat it just like another game'

October 10, 2013

By James Schmehl / Mlive.com

Detroit Tigers manager Jim Leyland took a big gamble when he decided to pitch Max Scherzer out of the bullpen in Game 4 of the American League Division Series.

But it was a risk he could take, thanks to Justin Verlander.

With Verlander able to start Thursday's winner-take-all fifth game against Oakland on full rest, Leyland was afforded a chance to use Scherzer, the Game 1 winner, in a must-win spot Tuesday.

"We took our best shot," Leyland said. "We had to because we were behind the 8-ball a little bit."

By doing so, it prevented Scherzer from starting tonight's series-deciding Game 5 in Oakland -- but it certainly didn't put the Tigers in a tight spot.

Verlander has arguably been the best pitcher in the American League the past two weeks, throwing a combined 19 shutout innings and striking out 33 batters over his past three starts.

He's also been equally effective against the A's, in particular, having shut them out for 22 straight innings over his past three playoff starts. That scoreless streak, of course, includes his masterful Game 5 start in the ALDS last year when he struck out 11 in a four-hitter, pitching Detroit into a second straight AL championship series.

"It worked out good for us," said Leyland about starting Verlander. "We took that shot and, hey, both teams are going to have a good pitcher going."

With Scherzer's relief appearance Tuesday, Verlander is now the only pitcher in Detroit's rotation that will have received a full four days' rest before tonight's series-deciding game.

Leyland has oftentimes repeated he'd be comfortable with any of his starting pitchers taking the mound in Game 1 of the ALDS. But only Verlander can pitch Game 5 as the other three starters aren't expected to be available Thursday -- even out of the bullpen.

"We knew it was an option," Leyland said of Verlander starting Thursday. "I don't want to sit here and tell you we planned on doing it, but it was an option."

Verlander knew when the pitching order was announced last week that there'd be a slight chance he could pitch Game 5. That's why he began preparing himself to pitch for the decisive game immediately after dominating the Athletics in Game 2 earlier this week.

"I didn't know what anybody had planned or what the plans were coming in, but I knew there was a chance," Verlander said after Game 4. "So I just threw my (bullpen session) on my normal day and prepared as best I could."

Verlander will return to Oakland where he most recently threw seven shutout innings, while giving up just four hits in a thrilling pitchers' duel with rookie Sonny Gray last Saturday.

He walked away empty handed in a 1-0 loss, but will get a shot to personally even things up after Oakland manager Bob Melvin announced late Wednesday that Gray, not Bartolo Colon -- the team's Game 1 starter -- will start Thursday.

"(Gray) has a little bit of a bulldog, he's scared of nothing," Melvin said about Gray, who struck out nine in eight dazzling innings, allowing four hits in Game 2.

"The season is on the line," Verlander said. "This whole season, the way we battled and played as a team, comes down to one game, may the best team win. You can't treat it just like another game, you know. It's a little bit different. There is more to it."

Call to arms: Tigers know winning formula in Game 5s

In each of last two years, Detroit's pitching key to victory in decisive ALDS contests

October 10, 2013

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Maybe we should have expected the Tigers to be back here all along. After all, this is where the last two Detroit trips to the American League Division Series have ended up, the Tigers needing to win a Game 5 on the road to advance or go home.

Both of the previous Game 5 matchups -- two years ago at Yankee Stadium and last October in Oakland -- the Tigers went back to their strengths. Both times, pitching carried them through, taking offense from different sources and rolling.

ALDS

Two years ago, Detroit took advantage of home runs from Don Kelly and Delmon Young. Last year, leadoff man Austin Jackson drove in two runs and scored another. Both times, Tigers pitching ensured they never trailed.

Even after the long-awaited outburst from the Tigers' offense on Tuesday in Game 4 that sent this year's ALDS back to the Bay Area for a deciding game, the Tigers will most likely have to pitch their way out of here.

Fortunately for them, they have some experience with this.

"It's not just another game. The season is on the line," said scheduled starter Justin Verlander. "You can't treat it just like another game, you know. It's a little bit different. There is more to it."

There's a lot more to the pitcher who starts it.

It was Verlander who set the tone for the Tigers in Game 5 at the Coliseum last year, taking a team that had just suffered a walk-off loss the previous night to force a deciding game and carrying the squad on the strength of his gifted right arm. Verlander stranded a runner in scoring position in the opening inning and overcame a two-out walk in second before retiring 15 of 16 after Jackson doubled in a run and scored another in the third inning. Verlander's complete-game four-hitter lasted 122 pitches. He struck out 11 batters, yet reached just four three-ball counts, none of them after the sixth inning. Going by the metric of Game Score -- adding and subtracting points for innings, strikeouts, hits, walks and runs -- it was the highest-rated performance by a pitcher in a win-or-go-home game in postseason history, barely topping Sandy Koufax's complete-game three-hitter against Minnesota in Game 7 of the 1965 World Series.

There was no all-hands-on-deck atmosphere like so many teams take in elimination games. There was just Verlander.

"He was determined," manager Jim Leyland said that night. "He had a complete-game look in his eye."

A year earlier, by contrast, Game 5 in the Bronx was a community effort. Because Verlander's Game 1 outing in that series was pushed back by rain, he returned in Game 3 and couldn't pitch at all. Doug Fister, who took over Game 1 when the game resumed, fell in line for Game 5 and delivered five innings of one-run ball.

It wasn't necessarily dominant -- Fister stranded six Yankees on base along those five innings -- but it established the tone for the rest of the night. Max Scherzer, making his most recent relief appearance before Tuesday night, rebounded from a bases-loaded walk to strand the tying run at third by striking out Nick Swisher. Jose Valverde retired the middle of the Yankees' lineup in order in the ninth, capped by an Alex Rodriguez strikeout, to finish it off. And the Yankees, who scored 10 runs in Game 4 to force the deciding game, produced just two runs off 10 hits in the finale.

"This will be a game I'll remember for the rest of my life," Leyland said.

Add together the performances, and Tigers pitchers have produced 18 innings of two-run ball in Game 5s over the last two years, allowing 14 hits, one home run and four walks while striking out 21. They've stranded 15 runners on base and held opponents to 2-for-11 with runners in scoring position.

The pattern across all teams in 13 winner-take-all contests since 2011 -- including Wild Card games -- isn't quite so strong, but it follows. Ten games have been decided with the losing team scoring two runs or fewer. In five games, the winning team has been held to four runs or fewer.

The only two games in which both teams topped four runs both happened in Game 5 of the National League Division Series last year. One was the Cardinals' wild comeback in Washington for a 9-7 win, the other was the Giants' 6-4 victory over the Reds.

Three games ended in shutouts, including Chris Carpenter's duel over Roy Halladay for a 1-0 Cardinals' win over the Phillies in Game 5 of their 2011 NLDS.

Teams obviously try to throw their best possible pitching on the mound when everything is on the line, some fully rested, some not. But teams also put trust in their pitching to hold a lead if they can produce a few runs. The Tigers had pitching at the forefront of their game plan all along, this year more than ever. Now Verlander, the only pitcher in postseason history not to get a win out of seven shutout innings and 11 strikeouts, is right where he was last year.

"It's what you play the game for," he said. "It's exciting. This is what you dream of as a kid, to be on the mound in a clinching game."

Tigers hoping to solve Gray second time around

October 10, 2013

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Tigers thought they had prepared themselves for A's rookie Sonny Gray as well as they could before Game 2 of the American League Division Series. They weren't ready for what they witnessed in person.

"It's completely different," utility man Don Kelly said last week after Gray shut them down. "You can sit there and watch the video as much as you want and try to pick up what he's trying to do to hitters and figure things out. But then you get in the box."

ALDS

Or as Austin Jackson put it, "You go over film as much as you can, but once you get out there, you're pretty much just trying to see it and hit it."

As the Tigers prepare for Gray in Game 5 on Thursday, they now have more than scouting reports and video. They now have their own experience, frustrations and all.

"I'm not really sure we liked what we saw," manager Jim Leyland said Wednesday evening. "It was pretty good. But at least we have seen him now. It does make some difference.

"With the stuff he was featuring, it certainly does not mean we're going to be in a comfort zone, but it makes you a little more comfortable, now that you know the action on the ball, the great breaking ball that he has." How they work off of that could be the difference in whether the Tigers can pull out an ALDS Game 5 on the road for the third consecutive year. It'll be a game of adjustments accelerated, and it's something the Tigers have done in the past.

The way the Tigers' regular-season schedule played out, it wasn't something they did a lot this year. Six different starting pitchers faced Detroit twice in a span of two weeks or less this season. Three of them were White Sox, thanks to so many second-half series between the two teams.

The one example with someone the Tigers hadn't seen before came in May. Astros young lefty Dallas Keuchel baffled Tigers hitters for four innings in relief May 2 before wearing down in a four-run rally. Two weeks later, Detroit ruined his start with a four-run second inning.

How the Tigers and Gray adjust, A's manager Bob Melvin said, is to be determined.

"That's what starting pitchers always have to do, is make adjustments," Melvin said. "They also saw him two and three times around the lineup during that game. So usually once you see a pitcher once or twice, you have an idea of what he's going to do to you, but second time around a little more so. He's able to make adjustments as well, and he has very good stuff on top of it."

In fact, Gray was tougher against the Tigers the longer he pitched. Detroit put three runners on base against him the first time through the order, then three runners the next two times through the lineup combined.

"At some point, yeah, I think we looked a little bit like we were guessing, because it was the first time we faced him," Miguel Cabrera said. "The way he threw the ball, he wasn't giving us a break to try to figure him out."

One thing Kelly mentioned about Gray last week that caught him by surprise was the cutting motion on his fastball, making a 94-mph heater seem quicker. Another factor was the arm angle at which Gray delivers from his 5-foot-11 frame.

"He's not real tall, and those guys when they throw real hard, sometimes it jumps on you," Kelly said. "And then he's got his curveball working, too. That's a pretty tough combination."

The curveball, and Gray's ability to throw it for strikes, was a big factor, Jackson mentioned.

Leyland ready to let Verlander loose vs. A's

October 10, 2013

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Don't expect Tigers manager Jim Leyland to put more starters in the bullpen for Game 5 of the American League Division Series vs. the A's. It worked in Game 4, when Max Scherzer followed Doug Fister in a tie game, but a Justin Verlander start is another story.

"I used a guy that had 22 wins last night out of the bullpen," Leyland said on a Wednesday conference call. "We were desperate. There was no tomorrow. You do what it takes. Hopefully, I'm not going out to the mound in the second inning tomorrow taking out Justin Verlander, because if I am, we're in trouble."

It was a reference to Game 4 of the Red Sox-Rays ALDS, in which Tampa Bay manager Joe Maddon used nine pitchers and pulled starter Jeremy Hellickson after four outs. Had David Price been starting, Leyland said, it probably would've been different. In the case of Hellickson, however, Leyland thought Maddon handled it well.

"I thought he did a terrific job pitching his pitchers in and out," Leyland said of Maddon. "I think there was a plan to that. I think there was more to it, that he had to use a bunch of guys. I think it was smart.

"I don't think he wanted Boston to see the same pitcher very much. I think he wanted to get a guy in there and not let them go into a guy two or three times. I think he did absolutely tremendous."

Miggy to start at third, Peralta in left for Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Jason Beck / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Jim Leyland often likes to stick with a regular lineup when he can, but the Tigers manager can sometimes be a tinkerer. When Detroit makes an offseason acquisition, Leyland inevitably sits down and starts writing out batting orders and positions to figure out a fit.

As of Wednesday evening, Leyland gave the distinct impression he's still going over potential lineups for Game 5 of the American League Division Series on Thursday vs. the A's.

"I'm really not sure what my lineup is going to be just yet," Leyland said on a conference call. "Originally, we weren't sure who was going to pitch. We were a little suspicious that we might get [Sonny] Gray, so I was fooling around with [lineups] in my room just before the call, but I don't have a lineup just yet."

Miguel Cabrera definitely will be in his usual spot, batting third and playing third, Leyland confirmed. Cabrera looked noticeably affected at third base by his lingering groin injury, leading to some speculation whether he could get a game at designated hitter.

"He will play Game 5 at third base," Leyland said.

Jhonny Peralta will also be in the lineup, Leyland confirmed. Peralta started both games at Comerica Park in left field, driving in five runs and giving Detroit's lineup a desperately-needed jolt.

Verlander: Game 5 start 'not just another game'

Righty to pitch deciding ALDS game in Oakland for second straight year

October 10, 2013

By Paul Hagen / MLB.com

DETROIT -- After dominating the Athletics in Game 2 of the American League Division Series -- seven shutout innings, four hits, 11 strikeouts -- Tigers right-hander Justin Verlander began preparing himself to pitch the decisive Game 5 if this playoff matchup got that far.

Which is kind of interesting since he wasn't supposed to start Game 5. Max Scherzer was.

Well, things change. Facing a must-win situation in Game 4 on Tuesday night at Comerica Park, manager Jim Leyland used Scherzer, a 21-game winner, to pitch the seventh and eighth out of the bullpen in the Tigers' 8-6 win. Which meant that Verlander gets the assignment in that must-win Game 5 matchup Thursday night at O.co Coliseum (8 p.m. ET on TBS).

ALDS

"I prepared myself like it was possible," Verlander said after Game 4. "I didn't know what anybody had planned or what the plans were coming in, but I knew there was a chance. So I just threw my [bullpen session] on my normal day and prepared as best I could.

"It's not just another game. The season is on the line. The whole season, the way we battled and played as a team, comes down to one game. May the best team win. You can't treat it like another game, you know. It's a little bit different. There is more to it. It's going to be fun. It's what you play the game for. It's exciting. This is what you dream of as a kid, to be on the mound in a clinching game."

Tale of the Tape: Game 5

Justin Verlander

Tigers Sonny Gray

Athletics

2013 regular season

Overall: 34 GS, 13-12, 3.46 ERA, 75 BB, 217 SO Overall: 12 G, 10 GS, 5-3, 2.67 ERA, 20 BB, 67 SO

Key stat: Verlander extended his postseason scoreless-innings streak against the A's to 22 innings in his Game 2 no-decision -- the longest streak against the A's since 1905. Key stat: Gray became the second pitcher in A's postseason history with at least eight scoreless innings, nine strikeouts and four or fewer hits in Game 2.

At O.co Coliseum (reg. season)

2013: 2 GS, 1-0, 0.69 ERA

Career: 11 GS, 5-4, 2.16 ERA 2013: 7 GS, 3-1, 1.66 ERA

Career: 7 GS, 3-1, 1.66 ERA

Against this opponent

2013: 3 GS, 1-1, 2.00 ERA

Career: 16 GS, 8-6, 2.31 ERA 2013: 1 GS, 0-0, 0.00 ERA

Career: 1 GS, 0-0, 0.00 ERA

Loves to face: Eric Sogard, 0-for-9, K

Hates to face:: Coco Crisp, 8-for-28, 2 2B Loves to face: Austin Jackson, 0-for-4, 4 K

Hates to face:: Don Kelly, 2-for-3, 2 1B

Game Breakdown

Why he'll win: Verlander pitched in this spot last year, tossing a complete-game, 11-strikeout outing that sent Detroit to the ALCS. Why he'll win: Gray has a 1.85 ERA over his last seven outings.

Pitcher beware: Verlander struggled down the stretch with his highest ERA (3.46) and WHIP (1.31) since 2008.

Pitcher beware: He's a rookie making his 12th career start in a win-or-go-home deciding game of a playoff series.

Bottom line: Verlander pitched well enough to win in Game 2 with seven shutout innings but was outlasted by Gray. Even one run by the Tigers could be enough to get the win. Bottom line: Gray will need to be as sharp as he was in Game 2 if he wants to outlast Verlander again for the A's, who are 1-11 in possible clinching games since 2000.

When the Tigers decided to start Scherzer in Game 1, it wasn't a surprise. Scherzer is probably the front-runner to win the AL Cy Young Award this season. Verlander, by his own admission, struggled to find himself all year.

It was, however, noteworthy. Because it meant that Verlander, who prior to this season had been the undisputed ace of the staff, wouldn't start the all-important Game 5 if it came to that. And it was Verlander who, almost exactly a year earlier, started in the same situation in the same stadium and fired a four-hit shutout to eliminate the Athletics. The Tigers eventually went all the way to the World Series.

The planets had to align for Verlander to be in this situation, of course. First, the Tigers had to win Game 4 to extend the series. Then the game had to unfold in such a way that Leyland would activate his plan to use Scherzer out of the bullpen. That happened when starter Doug Fister needed 104 pitches to get through six innings. The Tigers' manager had said he wouldn't bring Scherzer in if Detroit was trailing; the score was tied when Scherzer came out for the top of the seventh.

With that, Verlander slipped into the open spot in the rotation. And because there are two travel days built into the schedule, he'll be pitching with full rest.

While Verlander's overall numbers for the season aren't up to his usual level, he pitched extremely well in his last two starts of the regular season, and then underlined the fact that he was back in top form in his first start of the playoffs, albeit in a 1-0 loss to the A's.

"I think it's just some of the adjustments I made, one of the maybe a thousand that I tried to make this year," he said. "It was definitely a grind all year. Then it reached a point where I realized it was going to take awhile, that it wasn't going to be one thing I had to fix.

"I knew it wasn't going to be a quick process, and I set a date for myself that I needed to be ready at all costs for the postseason. The last month of the season, I think I found some things that really benefited me. My location, just my stuff in general."

Now Verlander will have an opportunity to marshal all that in the game that will determine whether Detroit advances to the AL Championship Series or has all winter to think of what might have been. It wasn't supposed to work out this way, but the Tigers feel pretty good about their chances now.

"We used a 21-game winner out of the bullpen and now we can pitch a Cy Young winner in his place," marveled center fielder Austin Jackson. "How many teams could do that?"

Tigers-Athletics Game 5 ALDS preview

October 10, 2013

By Steve Kornacki / FOXSportsDetroit.com

Justin Verlander carries into Thursday night's series-deciding game a streak of 16 consecutive scoreless innings against the A's in their raucous Oakland Coliseum. Verlander has also blanked the A's 22 innings in a row of ALDS play. It was Verlander who beat them in the deciding Game 5 last year 6-0.

Oakland has been a virtual lock to lose an elimination game and a playoff series over the last 24 years. The A's are 1-11 when they have a chance to clinch and are 1-8 in those series, dating back to their sweep by the underdog Cincinnati Reds in the 1990 World Series.

With all of that positive mojo going the way of the Tigers, what hope does Oakland have?

There are two reasons why the A's can win:

- Sonny Gray, who blanked the Tigers over eight innings in Game 2, is taking the hill for the A's.
- Oakland's tough top of the batting order is very capable of making the difference in a close game.

Although everyone not named Coco Crisp or Yoenis Cespedes is batting .183 in the first four games, those two have been run-producing machines.

Crisp is batting .500 (7 for 14) with a .556 on-base percentage. He's scored four runs and knocked in two more. Cespedes is hitting .389 (7 for 18) with four RBI and three runs scored, while batting for the cycle. And it's hard to walk Cespedes with left-handed slugger Seth Smith on deck. Smith is hitting .417 (5 for 12) in the series.

Crisp, Cespedes and Smith are a combined .250 against Verlander over their careers with two homers and four RBI in 68 at-bats.

Verlander is relishing this opportunity to move Detroit into an ALCS showdown with the Boston Red Sox, and to show everyone he's still the ace and the most-feared pitcher in a winner-take-all game.

He paced around the clubhouse after the Tigers won Game 4 on Thursday night, already wearing his game face. At the postgame news conference, he was asked about returning to the scene of what has been the signature performance of his brilliant career. On Oct. 11, 2012, Verlander pitched a complete-game, four-hit shutout in Oakland to send Detroit to the ALCS.

"Yeah, and I just pitched there my last start," said Verlander, referring to Game 2 in which he tossed seven scoreless innings of four-hit ball and struck out 11. "So, I guess you know what to expect a little bit, what the crowd is going to be like, and it's going to be fun.

"It's what you play the game for. It's exciting. This is what you dream of as a kid, being on the mound in a clinching game."

Verlander has regained the game's best curveball and located his lively fastball, and no longer looks like the pitcher who finished an uncharacteristic 13-12 with a 3.46 ERA in the regular season.

In his last three starts, he's pitched 19 scoreless innings with 33 strikeouts and a 0.95 WHIP. The Verlander who either won or finished second for the Cy Young Award in the last two seasons is back.

"Verlander is just so focused," Tigers right fielder Torii Hunter said. "He knows how to be a big dog when it's time to be. He pitches like there is a runner on third base the whole game.

"He's going to bring some noise in this game and show you why he's Verlander."

Alex Avila caught Verlander's second no-hitter, in 2011, and Game 5 in 2012. The catcher has an up-close view of one of baseball's best and most intense pitchers.

"He's a big-game pitcher and he's done it a lot," Avila said. "He seems to rise to the occasion, and not let the energy of the situation override him.

"He's pitched plenty of these games. He knows how to control himself. And along with having really great stuff, that's a tough combination to beat."

Trying to beat him in the 8 p.m. ET game on TBS will be Gray, one of the hottest young pitchers in the game. After joining the rotation, Gray, 23, was 5-3 with a 2.67 ERA and struck out 9.4 per nine innings. He blanked the Tigers on four hits with nine strikeouts and two walks, but didn't factor into the decision in a 1-0 Game 2 Oakland victory.

"This is a game where if you lose, you go home," A's right fielder Josh Reddick told Bruce Jenkins of the San Francisco Chronicle. "Can't leave anything out there."

View From The Stands: Tiger Fans Were “Into It” From The Beginning

October 10, 2013

By: Eric Thomas / CBS Detroit

Men and women stand shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk waiting for the light; they're facing north toward the ballpark. Some took the long walk from the casino parking structures; others spent the last few hours drinking beer from cans in fenced parking lots behind the Fox Theater. They all walk with heads down, the only sound around them the normal cityscape: aging brakes whine, a horn in the distance, the steam escaping manhole covers and the siren in the distance. No claps or happy chatter or whoots; no optimistic tones as the walk sign lights and the procession moves across the street.

Inside the park, the faces are the same. They move through the concourses and aisles knowing what is at stake. The buzz and chatter is an octave lower, the motions are a step slower. A man turns to his friend on the concourse, “Man, some of these dudes are drunk,” nodding for emphasis, holding his own aluminum Coors bottle as he says it.

“I understand man,” says his friend. “This team is tough to watch right now.”

They don't sell tickets to a funeral because no one would buy them.

Some vendors have started selling hot apple cider—they ladle it into cups from large black pots. There's no one waiting in line because the sun still warms one half of the seats, the only chill in the air is from the people around the park as they move toward their seats. The woman behind the cider pots stares at the passing people with a blank look on her face.

The Anthem is sung. Fans take their coats off and sit on them. It's good weather for baseball. They've all been handed white towels with advertising printed on them; they spin them dutifully above their heads. It looks good on television.

Coco Crisp hits a triple. A few batters later he scores from third. Doug Fister's having trouble finding the strike zone, and the inning goes a little longer than fans had hoped.

The Tigers top of the order goes down 1-2-3. A few fans leave their seats to go smoke. There are a few groans around—hands cradle faces. They trade knowing looks, the shared experience of bearing witness to the end of a season that opened with such promise.

There are signs printed in all capital letters around the park in prominent places, thanking three million fans for their support in 2013.

Oakland pitcher Dan Straily hasn't given up a hit through the first four innings.

Conversations overheard include “Not again,” “World Series,” and “This was supposed to be the year.”

Jed Lowrie hits a fly ball to right field; it goes over Torii Hunter's glove and into the seats.

The crowd stares at the concrete between their feet. The seed of hope that was planted at some point in the past—maybe this spring, maybe two years ago when Prince was signed—is now embalmed in public. They walked into the stadium with the knowledge that this could be the end. It looks like it will be. Deep breaths are the first step toward acceptance.

Prince Fielder hits a single at the top of the fifth inning. The crowd stands and cheers, some tension relieved. If it ends today, at least it won't be embarrassing like the last game of the regular season.

Peralta to the plate; some murmured whispers in the crowd. The disgraced former shortstop spent fifty games under an ignominious cloud, his mea culpa delivered in a press release, he answered questions from reporters choking back his pride... wouldn't be amazing if he—swing. It looks like a line drive at first as the crowd comes to their feet, but Cespedes is looking up.

Peralta rounds the bases to the sound of resurrected fans, hearts in throats and smiles on faces in almost every green seat—but none wider than the man who touches third and trots to home plate. His name is chanted in left field, then from a few other places, those who don't shake their heads in disbelief.

Max Scherzer trots from the bullpen, the crowd roars when they hear his name. He gives up a run in the fifth inning. Victor Martinez hits a home run in the top of the fifth but the scoreboard goes blank. It's under review; possible fan interference. A hush over the crowd. This would be a lousy way to lose. Umpire emerges and twirls his finger in the air. Peralta to the plate. Can he do it again? He does. He leaves this game under a cloud of redemption.

Austin Jackson to the plate, frustrated fans boo at the announcement of his name. Leyland should have replaced him. He's struck out in ten of the last fourteen times he's had a chance. He swings, bat shatters, ball lifts and drops into right field. Tigers take the lead.

Scherzer back to the mound; he loads the bases. Audible prayers are heard in the seats. Every fan will remember forever what happens next.

An hour later, under the bird's nest of stairwells in the belly of Comerica Park, music throbs in the Tigers clubhouse. Joaquin Benoit is talking to reporters. "That's one of the things that we love about going to Oakland," he says. "The fans are into it from the first inning no matter what happens in the game and that's what we want...I mean, it's really good when the fans are cheering for you."

In the view from the stands, it's hard to figure out what the hell he's talking about.

Red Wings admire Detroit Tigers' playoff win

October 10, 2013

By Chuck Pleiness / The Macomb Daily

DETROIT – Big pressure moments are nothing new to the Detroit Red Wings, which made watching the Detroit Tigers' Game 4 Tuesday night against the Oakland Athletics that much more exciting.

"It's way more nerve wracking to watch them play than to coach us I can tell you that," Wings coach Mike Babcock said. "(Anibal) Sanchez started the night before and then I had to laugh when they asked (Jim) Leyland and it's, 'well he's my guy.' When Howie's getting bombed 6-1 in the playoffs what do you do? He's our guy. And I thought it was awesome bringing (Max Scherzer) off the bench yesterday because if you don't win Game 4 forget about saving a starter for Game 5 then you have (Justin) Verlander. To me it was exciting stuff."

The Tigers forced a Game 5 after beating Oakland in Game 4, 8-6.

"The other thing, attitude is contagious, work ethic is contagious, hitting's contagious, scoring is contagious and once they got a couple of hits the guys got confidence, it's exactly the same thing in our game," Babcock said. "Then you get feeling it, you get some swagger back and you get up there and the ball looks big again. That's what I watch when I'm watching the game. It's the same thing, it's a bunch of guys competing. The other team's competing too.

"Last year in the playoffs when Howie had Corey Perry's number," Babcock continued. "It's not like Corey Perry didn't have 100 chances, Howie had him. It's like a pitcher that's got you. Yesterday when they got to the bullpen to me that's a sign of good things to come. Go Tigers."

Babcock also is a big fan of Tigers manager Jim Leyland.

"One of the best stories I have of Jim Leyland, I was asking him about walking out there and saying you're done (to a pitcher and how it felt) and he said, 'I've pulled better pitchers than that,'" Babcock recalled. "The reality of what he's telling you it's not about the guy, but he's making decisions for the team. What I like is he does what's right. He doesn't let the fans coach the team, he doesn't let the media coach the team, he does what he's supposed to do. To me that's what it's all about you make these decisions based on experience and you go with your gut and your gut is based on a track record of being steady on the rudder and winning. You don't win over and over again, you don't become a serial winner like he is by accident so you do the right things and good things happen."

Jimmy Howard was at Game 4.

"It was a blast," Howard said. "Let me tell you, in those situations, it's fun being a fan. Just sitting there cheering and now the one being in that situation. It was just fun cheering them on. That game was awesome to be a part of last night. It was amazing to watch Scherzer pitch out of that jam."

Howard faced the same situation in Game 7 last season against the Chicago Blackhawks that the Wings eventually lost in overtime.

"Usually when I'm out there I just play and whatever happens happens," Howard said. "I wasn't nervous (in Game 7 last year). Just one of those things you go out there and you play. You play hard and leave it all out there on the ice. For me, being in Game 7s and in overtimes, I just don't get nervous. It's a lot tougher to watch, just being in the stands and sitting in the stands I think it's more nerve wracking watching than it is playing."

'Bulldog' Sonny Gray gets Gm. 5 nod

ALDS Game 2 start led A's manager to choose rookie over veteran Bartolo Colon

October 10, 2013

By Jim Caple / ESPN.com

OAKLAND -- And so with the season once again on the line in the American League Division Series finale against the Tigers and Justin Verlander, the Athletics have chosen to start a 23-year-old rookie with exactly 13 major league games under his belt -- and a pretty thin mustache above his lip -- over their 40-year-old former Cy Young winner who was their ace this season.

Fans of great pitching will cross fingers that both Sonny Gray and Verlander can duplicate the classic they delivered in last Saturday's 1-0 shutout. And if Gray doesn't repeat, starting the rookie over Bartolo Colon is a decision Oakland fans will surely second-guess.

"We looked at it from a lot of different angles," manager Bob Melvin said of picking Gray over Colon. "We have a lot of smart people in our front office and our baseball operations, and the short of it is it came down to Sonny's last game that he pitched in similar conditions in our ballpark, so that's the route we're going to go." Gray was spectacular in that Game 2, pitching eight scoreless innings, striking out nine and allowing just four hits -- three of which never left the infield. Verlander was so impressed by the performance that he congratulated Gray when the two passed each other on the field that night.

ALDS Game 5: Tigers at Athletics

Justin

	Verlander	Sonny Gray
W-L	13-12	5-3
ERA	3.46	2.67
WHIP	1.32	1.11
SO/BB	2.89	3.35
BA vs. RHB	.275	.198
BA vs. LHB	.237	.226
WAR	4.6	1.4

Tigers-Athletics series home »

"He was executing and throwing strikes and getting guys to chase his curveball when he wanted. So that was a big indicator to me that it was going to be a tough night for our guys," Verlander said that night. "He doesn't have a huge sample size of major league experience, but what he's done since he's got here has been very good. So you know he's not just going to go out there and hand the game over to you."

Including his Game 2 start, Gray has pitched a total of 72 innings in the big leagues. Colon has thrown 2,583 $\frac{2}{3}$. But it was those eight innings Saturday that convinced Melvin the kid has the experience for a clinching game. "He's a bulldog. He's scared of nothing," Melvin said. "He right away established what he wanted to do in that game. He's pitched in big games, and when you talk about experience in this type of game, he really does have that experience -- pitching just five days ago. Not too long ago, he pitched in the same venue against the same team with the same type of crowd we're expecting, and he looked pretty comfortable."

Still, the Tigers were facing Gray for the very first time in Game 2. The conventional wisdom is that a pitcher usually has the advantage in such a situation. The key is how he fares after the hitters get to know him and make some adjustments. Gray has a good fastball that also seems to explode on batters because of his arm motion.

Will the Tigers fare better having seen it Saturday?

"They saw him two and three times around the lineup during that game," Melvin said. "So, usually, once you see a pitcher once or twice, you have an idea of what he's going to do to you, but the second time around, a little more so. Sonny's able to make adjustments as well, and he has very good stuff on top of it."

It's not like Colon wasn't capable of a big game, though. After all, he was 18-6 with a 2.65 ERA this season. He started Game 1 and the Tigers jumped on his fastball early with three runs in the first inning. The veteran quickly adjusted with a mix off-speed pitches and held Detroit scoreless the next five innings.

Colon took the news well, Melvin said, but won't necessarily be available for bullpen duty. "He's open for anything, but he does have a little different routine, and I'm not sure how I'm going to handle that yet."

ALDS: Tigers-A's

Melvin said the Athletics did not consider Colon's availability for a possible ALCS in the decision-making process. He said that while you're always considering all variables, "this is a win-or-go-home game, and we're trying to do the best we can. If we feel like there is an incremental edge one over the other, we feel like that's what we have to do, because it is win or go home."

While the Tigers used likely Cy Young winner Max Scherzer in relief in their come-from-behind, Game 4 win, they could hardly ask for a better pitcher than Verlander in an elimination situation. In fact, in the exact same situation last October -- Game 5 in Oakland -- Verlander threw a four-hit shutout for a 6-0 victory.

Verlander struggled some this season. He entered September with a 3.73 ERA but has pitched more like his old dominant self since then, holding opponents scoreless in four starts, including his past three.

"I think it's been some of the adjustments I made. Well, one of maybe a thousand that I tried to make this year," Verlander said. "It was definitely a grind all year. Then you know it reached a point where I realized it was going to take a while; it wasn't going to be one thing that I had to fix.

"I knew it wasn't going to be a quick process, and I set a date for myself that I needed to be ready at all costs for the postseason. The last month of the season, I think I found some things that really benefited me -- my location, just my stuff in general. I felt like I pitched better, especially the last three, four starts."

Verlander has also dominated the Athletics in the past two Octobers. In three postseason starts against Oakland, he's allowed just one run and 11 hits in 23 innings while striking out 33 batters, 11 in each game (he also beat Oakland in less impressive fashion in Game 2 of the 2006 ALCS).

As Melvin said, "We've run into him, for whatever reason, at the wrong time too many times, but we have to feel confident we're going to do well against him and be successful."

So get the radar guns, the "K" cards and the champagne handy at the Coliseum. It's the kid versus the veteran, with one team advancing to the ALCS and the other heading home.

"I just pitched there my last start, so I guess you know what to expect a little bit -- what the crowd is going to be like -- and it's going to be fun," Verlander said. "It's what you play the game for. It's exciting. This is what you dream of as a kid, to be on the mound in a clinching game."

Must-Read: Breaking down Max Scherzer's escape job in Game 4

October 10, 2013

By Mike Axisa / CBSSports.com

The Tigers avoided elimination with an 8-6 win over the Athletics in Game 4 of the ALDS on Tuesday afternoon, but they were dangerously close (on several occasions) to having the game change dramatically in favor of Oakland. The win required timely hitting and clutch pitching, especially from staff ace-turned-setup man Max Scherzer.

Manager Jim Leyland used his Game 1 starter out of the bullpen -- a move made easier by having Justin Verlander in reserve for a potential Game 5 -- because, frankly, he's a much better option than his middle relievers. Scherzer entered a tie game in the seventh and allowed a run to give the Athletics a 4-3 lead, but his offense battled back and handed him a 5-4 lead in the eighth.

Scherzer loaded the bases on a walk, a double and an intentional walk with zero outs in that eighth inning. According to Baseball Prospectus, the A's would be expected to score more than two runs after having the bases loaded with no outs. Almost anything, including a ground ball double play, ties the game. Almost anything except a strikeout, however.

The likely AL Cy Young Award winner escaped the massive jam without allowing a run thanks to two strikeouts (Josh Reddick and Stephen Vogt) and a line out to center (Alberto Callaspo). The Tigers went on to tack on some insurance runs and survive another Athletics rally in the ninth to finish off the win and force a Game 5, but Scherzer's escape job was the critical moment of the game (and the series).

Over at Baseball Nation, Grant Brisbee broke down all 17 pitches Scherzer used to record those three outs with the bases loaded, complete with screen shots of each pitch. You get to see both the brilliance and overpowering dominance of Scherzer as well as a look at just how close he was to total disaster. For an example, see the pitch at the top of this post.

Brisbee is one of the very best baseball writers out there and his breakdown of Scherzer's inning gets EOB's highest level of recommendation. Check it out.

This one's black and white: Gray right decision for A's in Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Scott Miller / CBSSports.com

Apologies to Athletics fans who despise all things across the Bay, but where is former Giants manager (and Tigers pitching coach) Roger Craig when you need him? Humbaby! Emphasis on the baby.

The Athletics are going Sonny Gray in Thursday's advance-or-else Game 5. It is the bold choice. It is the right choice. It is ... the only way to go in a postseason that should be sponsored by Pampers.

Did you watch Cardinals rookie Michael Wacha take a no-hitter into the eighth inning of St. Louis' Game 4 win in Pittsburgh the other day?

Did you see Pirates rookie Gerrit Cole dominate the Cardinals in Game 2 in St. Louis? And then get the ball for Game 5?

Houdini act

Breaking down Scherzer's escape job in Game 4

And most of all ... were you watching Gray grab the Tigers by the tail in Game 2 Saturday in Oakland?

Oh, baby.

Absolutely, Gray is the way to go. And with Justin Verlander starting for Detroit, a nation of baseball fans will spend most of Thursday in early Thanksgiving as anticipation builds for Gray-Verlander II.

This is going to be some kind of fun.

A's manager Bob Melvin calls him "a bit of a bulldog" and notes that he's "scared of nothing." Put those two together, and he sounds far more junkyard dog than bulldog.

Even when Torii Hunter snarled at him after Gray chucked one up and in to the Tigers' right fielder in Game 2, Gray didn't back down. Afterward, Hunter admitted that the pitch wasn't overly close, he was simply trying to get into Gray's head. Because clearly, nothing else was working for Detroit.

Hunter's barking didn't either. Gray, 24, threw eight shutout innings, whiffing nine hitters, walking just two and allowing only four hits. Then he sat back and watched the A's scratch out the 1-0 win in the ninth.

"Right away, he established what he wanted to do in that game," Melvin says. "He's pitched in some big games.

When you talk experience in these types of games, he really does have experience in that game five days ago.

"It was not too long ago, against the same team in front of the same kind of crowd we're expecting."

Every time you change the channel this month, it seems, another rookie is growing up in front of us. Peach fuzz matures into a full-on beard. Why, wasn't it only yesterday when he got his drivers' license? Now look.

Wacha, rocking a killer change-up.

Cole, throwing pure cheese.

Gray, with a curveball that is a hammer from the gods.

And all three showing poise and wisdom far beyond their years.

"I do believe this: Some of these young pitchers, young players come out of these major college programs and they spend time and get the experience and exposure they do in these programs, and they make the trip to Omaha," Pirates manager Clint Hurdle says. "I do think it just prepares them better for this type of environment, the major-league type of environment, of what they're going to be exposed to.

"I think that's helped."

Gray and Cole both went in the 2011 draft. Cole, 23, was the first pick overall by the Pirates. Oakland took Gray with the 18th overall pick.

Omaha? Cole pitched in the College World Series for UCLA. Wacha, St. Louis' first-round pick in 2012 (19th overall), did the same for Texas A&M. And Gray said over the weekend that the biggest start of his career prior to Game 2 against Detroit was for Vanderbilt University in the CWS.

After Gray blew through Detroit like a blizzard, skipper Jim Leyland, now in his 23rd year managing, said he cannot ever recall seeing so many young starters throwing so well – and being so leaned on -- in October.

"You at least expect to see a young guy like Gray show maybe not all that much composure in every situation," Leyland says. "But he was unbelievable.

"It's like they're coming up quicker. I guess, and they have no fear. ... he looked like a guy that's pitched three games in the World Series already. I really don't know how that happens."

Not only is it happening, but the Athletics clearly are banking on it reoccurring in Game 5. At least, they have every confidence that it will, and watching Gray-Verlander I, there's no reason to doubt them.

Leyland admitted that both Gray's poise and stuff were the talk of the Detroit coaches' office. Oakland brought him along slowly (and smartly) this summer, giving him a taste of the bigs in a couple of July relief appearances before summoning him for good from Triple-A Sacramento in early August.

In 14 appearances (12 starts), Gray went 5-3 with a 2.67 ERA.

Now, the A's are placing their season in his right hand. They chose him over Bartolo Colon, who made the AL All-Star team at 40 this summer and started Game 1.

"We looked at it from a bunch of different angles," Melvin says. "We have a lot of smart people in our front office and baseball operations and, the short of it is, it came down to Sonny's last game that he pitched in similar conditions in our ballpark."

The way Melvin talked Thursday, though Colon is willing to pitch in relief, he may not get the call. Melvin says he's not sure Colon's "routine" is conducive to the bullpen, even in a Game 5 when it's "all hands on deck."

As for Gray, opposing scouts rave about his curve, but he also throws a fastball in the mid-90s and, as we saw the other night, is as cool as the air conditioning in an ice cream truck.

Melvin gave him the Game 5 news Wednesday and says Gray "was excited. Same type of look he had when we told him he was going to pitch the second game of the series.

"He's a confident guy, and he had a smile on his face and you could see his mind starting to do its preparation right then and there."

Kids these days. They even dive right into their homework.

Humbaby, bring on Game 5.

Athletics hope Game 5 is Sonny's day

Oakland pits rookie against Verlander with season on the line

October 10, 2013

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The top baseball minds of the Oakland A's have decided to pin the team's immediate future in this postseason on the right arm of Sonny Gray. He's 23 and will be making his 12th big league start, this one against the Tigers on Thursday in climactic Game 5 of their American League Division Series, airing at 5 p.m PT on TBS.

For the second time in five days at O.co Coliseum, Gray will be facing veteran Detroit right-hander Justin Verlander, the former AL Cy Young Award winner who has owned the A's in his last three ALDS starts during the past two postseasons.

ALDS

The best-of-five series is tied at two games apiece. The Tigers defeated the A's last year in Game 5 of the ALDS and swept them in the 2006 AL Championship Series. The winner this year will go on to face the Red Sox in the ALCS, beginning at Fenway Park Saturday on FOX.

In choosing Gray to pitch the crucial ballgame, the A's bypassed Bartolo Colon, another former winner of the AL Cy Young Award and victorious in 18 games this season at 40 years old. Behind Colon, the A's lost Game 1, 3-2, against Max Scherzer here after having allowed all three runs in the top of the first.

"Obviously, we had two great options there with Bartolo," A's manager Bob Melvin said during a late-afternoon conference call Wednesday. "We looked at it at a bunch of different angles. We have a lot of smart people in our front office and in our baseball operations and the short of it is it came down to Sonny and the last game he pitched in similar conditions in our ballpark. So that's the route we're going to go."

That was Saturday night in Game 2. Gray, making his first playoff start, matched Verlander zero for zero into the late innings. Verlander came out of the scoreless tie after seven innings, having allowed four hits with a walk and 11 strikeouts. Gray made it through eight and also gave up only four hits. He walked two and whiffed nine.

Tale of the Tape: Game 5

Justin Verlander

Tigers Sonny Gray

Athletics

2013 regular season

Overall: 13-12, 3.46 ERA, 75 BB, 217 K Overall: 5-3, 2.67 ERA, 20 BB, 67 K

Key stat: Verlander extended his postseason scoreless innings streak against the A's to 22 innings in his Game 2 no decision - the longest streak against the A's since 1905. Key stat: Gray became the second pitcher in A's postseason history with at least eight scoreless innings, nine strikeouts and four or fewer hits in Game 2.

At O.co Coliseum (reg. season)

2013: 1-0, 0.69 ERA

Career: 5-4, 2.16 ERA 2013: 3-1, 1.66 ERA

Career: 3-1, 1.66 ERA

Against this opponent

2013: 1-1, 2.00 ERA

Career: 8-6, 2.31 ERA 2013: 0-0, 0.00 ERA

Career: 0-0, 0.00 ERA

Loves to face: Eric Sogard, 0-for-9, K

Hates to face:: Coco Crisp, 8-for-28, 2 2B Loves to face: Austin Jackson, 0-for-4, 4 K

Hates to face:: Don Kelly, 2-for-3, 2 1B

Game Breakdown

Why he'll win: Verlander pitched in this spot last year, tossing a complete-game, 11-strikeout outing that sent Detroit to the ALCS. Why he'll win: Gray has a 1.85 ERA over his last seven outings and rose to the challenge in Game 2.

Pitcher beware: Verlander struggled down the stretch with his highest ERA (3.46) and WHIP (1.31) since 2008.

Pitcher beware: He's a rookie making his 12th career start in a win-or-go-home game.

Bottom line: If Verlander pitches as well as he did in Game 2, one run by the Tigers could be enough to send Detroit back to the ALCS. Bottom line: Gray will need to be as sharp as he was in Game 2 for the A's, who are 1-11 in possible clinching games since 2000.

Grant Balfour pitched a perfect ninth and was credited with the win when Stephen Vogt lined a bases-loaded single for the 1-0 victory. Melvin is counting on Gray to do it again.

"He's a veritable bulldog and he's scared of nothing," Melvin said. "Right away, he established what he wanted to do in that game. He's pitched in some big games, and when you talk about experience in those games, he really does have that kind of pitching experience, pitching just five days ago. He pitched in the same venue against the same team with the same type of crowd we're expecting. He looked pretty comfortable with it." Two years ago, Gray pitched his Vanderbilt team into the College World Series and lost an elimination game to Oregon State. He was the A's top pick in the 2011 First-Year Player Draft, No. 18 overall. Gray was brought up for good from Triple-A Sacramento on Aug. 10 after a two-game trial out of the A's bullpen earlier in the season.

He made 10 starts and was 5-3 with a 2.67 ERA in 12 big league appearances. But nothing could prepare the world for the composure he showed against Verlander, who has defeated the A's twice during the past two postseasons, allowing one run and striking out 33 in the three starts.

It was Verlander over Jarrod Parker in the clincher last Oct. 10, a year to the day of Thursday's big game.

Verlander pitched a 6-0 shutout, allowing four hits and striking out 11.

Gray again is going to have to match him pitch for pitch.

"He's got a power arm and lot of talent, but it's hard to know -- like in Game 2 -- how a young guy is going to react," A's shortstop Jed Lowrie said about Gray. "But he went out there with all the confidence in the world and performed pretty well."

Melvin said "it's an all hands-on-deck situation" and his available pitchers will be ready to go out of the bullpen behind Gray. He didn't discount Colon in a relief situation, although the manager said he might be hard-pressed to use him in that vein. Melvin said Parker came out of his start after five innings and 73 pitches on Monday in Detroit because of undefined soreness and disclosed that Dan Straily was removed on Tuesday after six innings and 76 pitches because of another nagging injury. Neither should be available.

"[Straily] actually pitched with a little bit of back tightness, just a mild cramp from the cold, for the last three innings he pitched," Melvin said. "He pitched effectively, but it was there and once we got to the seventh inning we thought it was a good time to take him out."

The two injuries caused Melvin to overuse his relief corps, although Dan Otero, Sean Doolittle and Balfour, pitched shutout ball after Parker was pulled in a 6-3, Game 3 victory. Matters didn't work out so well in Game 4 as Straily left with a 4-3 lead and four A's relievers were hammered for four runs on five hit in the 8-6 loss.

The A's can ill-afford a short starting stint on Thursday or Colon allowing a few runs early with Verlander on the mound. That was certainly all part of the equation when it came to pitching Gray.

Melvin said that telling Colon about the decision was one of the toughest things he's had to do, considering Colon's resume and stature.

"He made it easy on me," Melvin said. "He's a man of a few words as it is. He definitely could have had a gripe. I wouldn't have been surprised if he did. He just looked at me and said, 'OK, I just want to win.'"

In the end, the A's big baseball wigs determined that Gray gives them the best chance to do just that.

A's strive for happier end to Game 5 trend

Oakland on wrong side of ALDS finale in five of past six attempts

October 10, 2013

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In searching for that elusive Game 5 victory, the A's are attempting to defy history. Again. Oakland's decisive affair with the Tigers at what's expected to be a deafening Coliseum on Thursday evening (8 ET/5 PT on TBS) will mark the seventh time in 13 years the A's have played in an American League Division Series Game 5. Five of the previous six ended in a loss. Talk about heartbreaking.

And the postseason woes go back even further, all the way to 1990, when they lost the World Series to the Reds. They haven't been back, going 1-11 in potential clinch games -- Tuesday's 8-6 deficit in Detroit included.

ALDS
Oakland also lost Game 5s in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2012. Three times the A's held a two-game lead before dropping the next two. Perhaps there is solace in knowing Oakland dropped back-to-back games just once in its last 35 regular-season contests this year. But this is the postseason, a different kind of animal.

Still, the A's are keeping their heads high entering Thursday's elimination game, hoping for a better ending -- even after handing away Tuesday's game by way of one too many missed opportunities that could haunt the franchise much like past blunders have, notably the infamous "Slide, Jeremy, slide!" play of 2001.

The A's will turn to rookie Sonny Gray, just 23 years old, to try to turn the tables on Detroit's Justin Verlander, who won Game 5 in Oakland last year.

"I think we have confidence, especially knowing we're playing at home," Jed Lowrie said on Wednesday. "We know what we're up against in Justin Verlander, but I think we're all prepared and know that it's a winner-take-all scenario and everybody will be ready to go."

"We have gone through a lot of difficult losses over the last two years and we've been able to respond," said manager Bob Melvin. "That shows me it's a resilient group that's intent on winning on any particular day."

The A's didn't score off Verlander in Game 2 on Saturday over seven innings, and they failed to get a run off him in last year's Game 5, when he notched a complete-game victory with 11 strikeouts. But they have beaten him, and not too long ago, tagging him for five runs (three earned) on four hits in five innings in Detroit on Aug. 27.

Oakland forced Verlander to throw 44 pitches in a two-run first and 104 in all. Getting to him early is paramount.

"I think the strength of our offense all year has been to trust everybody up and down the lineup and not try to do too much," Lowrie said "That's the easiest way to get to a guy like Verlander, give yourself as many opportunities to score as possible. Get guys on base and get him to throw those stress innings and pitches where he's not able to cruise through innings."

"He's been beat before I think, so we're going to try to go out and do it again," Josh Donaldson said. "He's a good pitcher. We have a good lineup. And we get to play at home."

Last season, the Division Series was oddly structured, with the higher-seeded team opening on the road, as the A's did in Detroit and dropped the first two games. Only then did they return to Oakland to force and, ultimately, lose Game 5.

So not even home-field advantage has been able to save the A's in the past. In fact, they had it in their last four postseason defeats: the 2002 ALDS vs. Twins, the 2003 ALDS vs. the Red Sox, and the 2006 ALCS and 2012 ALDS vs. the Tigers.

"But this is a different team," noted lefty Brett Anderson. "It's the same situation but a different team. I like the way we've been playing and feel confident we can get the job done at the end. We get a chance to be home and celebrate at home."

Tigers and A's return to Oakland for decisive Game 5

In a rematch, Verlander set to face off against rookie Gray

October 10, 2013

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

DETROIT -- Play it again, Sonny and Justin.

Fittingly, an American League Division Series distinguished by brilliant pitching comes down to a rematch of one of the most compelling duels in recent postseason history.

Oakland's Sonny Gray, the kid with the golden arm, and Detroit's Justin Verlander, the decorated veteran, match power and precision components in Game 5 on Thursday night in O.co Coliseum at 8 p.m. ET on TBS.

The winner moves on to face the Red Sox in the AL Championship Series.

Verlander, the 2011 AL Cy Young Award winner and AL Most Valuable Player Award winner, blanked the A's across seven innings with 11 strikeouts in a Game 2 showdown with Gray that went to the A's, 1-0, on catcher Stephen Vogt's RBI single in the bottom of the ninth.

Gray, a 23-year-old Vanderbilt product with 11 starts on his Major League resume, matched Verlander in yielding just four hits across his eight innings, striking out nine.

Part of the wave of great young arms in the game, Gray was Oakland's choice over veteran Bartolo Colon, who worked Game 1. The Tigers won that game, 3-2, with three first-inning runs.

"It's not like Bartolo has done anything to warrant not pitching in this game," A's manager Bob Melvin said of his 40-year-old ace, an 18-game winner. "It's just that Sonny pitched so well."

The Tigers, having never faced him before, came away duly impressed with Gray's 94-96 mph fastball and knee-buckling hook.

"Sonny has one of the best curveballs I've seen in a while," said Torii Hunter, who expressed his distaste in the batter's box of one of Gray's up-and-in fastballs that sent him reeling in Game 2. Bad blood also boiled over in a Game 3 verbal spat between Victor Martinez and A's closer Grant Balfour.

The big question is whether Gray can replicate his magic against an offense now familiar with his delivery and the movement on his pitches.

"They also saw him two and three times around the lineup during that game," Melvin noted. "He's able to make adjustments as well, and he has very good stuff on top of it."

Tigers manager Jim Leyland isn't expecting his hitters to fall into a "comfort zone" against Gray, "but it makes you a little more comfortable, now that you know the action on the ball, the great breaking ball that he has."

The A's, 0-5 in Game 5 ALDS showdowns, are bidding to avenge their elimination loss to Verlander and Co. last October in the Coliseum. The Tigers prevailed, 6-0, with their ace going the distance in one of the signature performances of his career.

In three postseason starts against the A's the past two seasons, Verlander has yielded one run in 23 innings. That was a leadoff homer by Coco Crisp in Game 1 of the 2012 ALDS, won by the Tigers in Detroit.

"The hardest thing to do in sports is hit a baseball," Crisp said. "Verlander is a tough pitcher; their whole pitching staff is a great staff. He is who he is. We've got to go out and beat him."

"We're a one-through-nine lineup. We need everybody to chip in in a collective effort. If we swing at our pitches, I think we'll have a good chance to beat them."

Crisp is the hottest hitter in the series. With seven hits in the two games in Detroit, the A's center fielder is batting .500 with a .556 on-base percentage.

In contrast, Tigers leadoff man Austin Jackson is batting .133 with a .188 OBP, striking out 10 times in 15 at-bats. Detroit is hoping his big RBI single in the seventh inning of Game 4 will serve to lift Jackson out of his funk.

A major issue for the Tigers has been the absence of thunder from Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder, who have not produced an extra-base hit in 31 combined at-bats. Fielder is hitting .267, Cabrera .250.

The 2012 Triple Crown winner and 2013 batting champion, Cabrera said he has grown "tired of questions every day" about groin and abdomen ailments draining his power.

After managing just six runs in the first 31 innings of the series, the Tigers busted out with eight runs in the final four innings in Game 4.

Jhonny Peralta, returning at the end of the regular season from his 50-game suspension, and Martinez unloaded the first two homers of the series by the Tigers.

Peralta and Martinez are hitting .375 in the series and have accounted for seven of the team's 12 RBIs. Peralta has five in just eight at-bats.

The A's, who launched four home runs in the two games in Detroit, were third in the Majors in homers (186) during the regular season, producing 10 more than the Tigers.

The A's have tasted some success in the regular season against Verlander, who is 5-4 in the Coliseum with a 2.38 ERA in 10 starts.

A's shortstop Jed Lowrie, hitless through three games, busted out in Game 4 with a homer, single and three RBIs.

"I think the strength of our offense all year has been to trust everybody up and down the lineup and not try to do too much," Lowrie said. "That's the easiest way to get to a guy like Verlander. ... Get guys on base and get him to throw those stress innings and pitches, where he's not able to cruise through innings."

Josh Donaldson (.176, no extra-base hits) has been quiet, but Yoenis Cespedes has been a force, batting .389 with a double, triple, homer and team-high four RBIs. Designated hitter Seth Smith is hitting .417.

It's Gray vs. Verlander in a fascinating finale that will extend one team's season and bring a numbing end to the other's.

Road to the World Series: Oct. 10, 2013

Cards move on to host Dodgers in NLCS; Tigers-A's on tap for Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Meet them in St. Louis.

In what now seems like an annual procession through the postseason, the 2011 World Series champion and '12 National League runner-up Cardinals are back where they always seem to be: playing for another pennant. And starting the series at home.

NLDS

The Road to the World Series made a few familiar turns in the decisive Game 5 of the NL Division Series between the Cardinals and Pirates, the only playoff game on Wednesday night.

The combination of a raucous Busch Stadium crowd bathed in red, Cardinals ace Adam Wainwright on the mound and the momentum from Michael Wacha's sterling Game 4 near-no-hitter proved to be too much for even a game Pittsburgh club to handle, and the Bucs' dream season of rebirth finally came to an end in a 6-1 loss.

The big hits came from the 2011 postseason hero, Cardinals third baseman David Freese, who belted a two-run home run in the second inning off Pittsburgh's impressive rookie starter, Gerrit Cole, and another two-run homer by Matt Adams in the eighth.

Wainwright had it under control the whole time, finished with a complete-game victory and now St. Louis has a date with the Dodgers for a best-of-seven set that will decide the NL pennant, beginning on Friday on TBS.

"I've got to put it right up there with the most fun and one of the greatest moments of my career so far, no doubt," Wainwright said. "Just incredibly blessed to be here today, to be able to start that game in the first place, but to pitch a game like that was one of the highlights of my baseball life, no doubt."

Now the Pirates head back home for the winter but not with a bit of shame. They had a spectacular season -- the first winning year and postseason appearance for the franchise since 1992. Their growing fan base noticed and rode it out with them all the way, even until Wednesday's bitter end.

The 2013 pennant drive, the NL Wild Card Game and the NLDS battle by the Pirates was a gutsy, inspired run from a talented team that reignited a city's passion for baseball. It also was a learning experience for a young club that should keep improving.

That's what manager Clint Hurdle was focusing on in the clubhouse after Game 5.

"We were able to take a huge step forward this year in restoring the pride and the passion of the Pittsburgh Pirates' organization and rebonding our city with a ball team," Hurdle said. "It was evident during the Wild Card Game and through the playoffs of the hunger and the passion that our fans have for their local team.

"So as I shared with the men in the locker room, their futures, individually and collectively, are in good hands. All they've got to do is look at the end of their arms, because that's where their hands are. They've worked their backsides off this year, and I'm proud of each and every one of them."

In the shadow of the Gateway Arch, the Cardinals are gearing up once again for a shot at the World Series, and they'll have home-field advantage against the Dodgers, who are well-rested after beating the Braves in four games in the other NL Division Series.

Cardinals manager Mike Matheny said his club will be ready.

NLDS

"We'll be looking forward to that Dodgers series," Matheny said. "I know they've got a strong club, too. Everybody we're going to see, anybody you see from here on out this time of year, they're going to be very well-rounded, and they've got the pitching and obviously an explosive offense. It's going to be a tough assignment for us, but we'll start preparing for that tomorrow."

The Road to the World Series will finally exit the Division Series round after Thursday's much-anticipated Game 5 between the Tigers and A's in Oakland on TBS at 8 p.m. ET.

ALDS

With the NL Championship Series set with the Dodgers and Cardinals and the Red Sox waiting at Fenway Park to meet the winner of this game, all eyes will be affixed on the O.co Coliseum diamond as Detroit's Justin

Verlander takes the ball against A's rookie Sonny Gray in a rematch of their unforgettable Saturday night Game 2, in which Gray matched Verlander pitch for pitch through shutout inning after shutout inning and the A's won, 1-0, on a Stephen Vogt single in the bottom of the ninth inning.

On Thursday, Game 5 won't just be a rematch of that game. It'll be a rematch of Game 5 of the American League Division Series between these two clubs last year, when Verlander threw a shutout to punch his team's ticket to the ALCS.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland is happy to have the services of Verlander after using his other ace, Max Scherzer, in relief in the must-win Game 4 on Tuesday.

"We feel comfortable anytime Justin Verlander goes out there," Leyland said.

A's shortstop Jed Lowrie, who heated up in Game 4 with a pair of hits, including a home run, said the key to attacking Verlander might be to just trust the lineup and not try to do too much.

"That's the easiest way to get to a guy like Verlander -- give yourself as many opportunities to score as possible," Lowrie said. "Get guys on base and get him to throw those stress innings and pitches where he's not able to cruise through innings."

Easier said than done, especially after the A's quiet efforts the last two times they had to face Verlander, but the Tigers have a tough assignment against Gray, too. That's why Oakland manager Bob Melvin decided to start the rookie, who doesn't even have a full season in the Major Leagues under his belt, in Game 5 instead of veteran Bartolo Colon.

"He's a bit of a bulldog," Melvin said of Gray. "He's scared of nothing. Right away, [he] established what he wanted to do in that game. He's pitched in some big games, and when you talk about experience in these type of games, he really does have this type of experience pitching just five days ago.

"So not too long ago, he pitched in this same venue against the same team with the same type of crowd we're expecting, and he looked pretty comfortable with it."

Gray impressed the opposition while doing it, striking out nine in eight scoreless innings and looking a lot older than his 23 years and 12 regular-season big league appearances.

"I'm not really sure we liked what we saw," Leyland said of Gray. "It was pretty good. But at least we have seen him now. It does make some difference. With the stuff he was featuring, it certainly does not mean we're going to be in a comfort zone, but it makes you a little more comfortable, now that you know the action on the ball, the great breaking ball that he has.

"This kid is a great looking young pitcher, so it will be better for us than it was the other night, hopefully."

The A's will head to the plate with the same thoughts about facing Verlander, hoping they can finally break through.

"You go back and try to figure out what you did wrong or how he pitched you," Melvin said. "We do have some experience with him, and we feel like we have a better chance to turn the tide. It's tough to go out there each, and every time and consistently beat a team in the past, and he has with us. So you have to give him credit. He's one of the best pitchers in all of baseball, and he's a big-game postseason pitcher.

"We've run into him for whatever reason at the wrong time too many times, but we have to feel confident we're going to do well against him and be successful."

Thursday's AL Division Series game

Tigers (Verlander) at A's (Gray), 8 p.m. ET (TBS) Preview >

2013 MLB POSTSEASON MATCHUPS

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Division Series: Red Sox beat Rays, 3-1 | Tigers at A's

Championship Series: Tigers/A's at Red Sox

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Division Series: Cardinals beat Pirates, 3-2 | Dodgers beat Braves, 3-1

Championship Series: Dodgers at Cardinals

2013 postseason schedule

NL Division Series

Game 1: Cardinals 9, Pirates 1

Game 2: Pirates 7, Cardinals 1

Game 3: Pirates 5, Cardinals 3
Game 4: Cardinals 2, Pirates 1
Game 5: Cardinals 6, Pirates 1, Cardinals win series, 3-2
Game 1: Dodgers 6, Braves 1
Game 2: Braves 4, Dodgers 3
Game 3: Dodgers 13, Braves 6
Game 4: Dodgers 4, Braves 3, Dodgers win series, 3-1

AL Division Series

Game 1: Red Sox 12, Rays 2
Game 2: Red Sox 7, Rays 4
Game 3: Rays 5, Red Sox 4
Game 4: Red Sox 3, Rays 1, Red Sox win series, 3-1
Game 1: Tigers 3, A's 2
Game 2: A's 1, Tigers 0
Game 3: A's 6, Tigers 3
Game 4: Tigers 8, A's 6, Series tied, 2-2
Game 5: Tigers at A's, Thursday, 8 p.m. ET (TBS)

NL Championship Series (All games on TBS)

Game 1: Dodgers at Cardinals, Friday, TBD
Game 2: Dodgers at Cardinals, Saturday, TBD
Game 3: Cardinals at Dodgers, Monday, TBD
Game 4: Cardinals at Dodgers, Tuesday, TBD
Game 5*: Cardinals at Dodgers, Wednesday, TBD
Game 6*: Dodgers at Cardinals, Friday, Oct. 18, TBD
Game 7*: Dodgers at Cardinals, Saturday, Oct. 19, TBD

* - if necessary

AL Championship Series (All games on FOX)

Game 1: Tigers/A's winner at Red Sox, Saturday, TBD
Game 2: Tigers/A's winner at Red Sox, Sunday, TBD
Game 3: Red Sox at Tigers/A's winner, Tuesday, TBD
Game 4: Red Sox at Tigers/A's winner, Wednesday, TBD
Game 5*: Red Sox at Tigers/A's winner, Thursday, Oct. 17, TBD
Game 6*: Tigers/A's winner at Red Sox, Saturday, Oct. 19, TBD
Game 7*: Tigers/A's winner at Red Sox, Sunday, Oct. 20, TBD

* - if necessary

World Series begins: Oct. 23

Callaspo may start at second base in Game 5

October 10, 2013

By Jane Lee and Jeff Kirshman / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- If A's manager Bob Melvin makes a change to his postseason lineup -- a matter he's discussed but mainly elected to avoid through the first four games of the American League Division Series -- the change will come at second base.

The lone difference between Tuesday's Game 4 lineup and the lineup for Game 5, airing at 5 p.m. PT Thursday on TBS, would be whether Alberto Callaspo gets the nod instead of Eric Sogard.

Sogard has started every game of the postseason, going 0-for-9 with one walk, and has been pinch-hit for by Callaspo in three of those games. In his role as pinch-hitter, Callaspo has gone 1-for-3 with a leadoff double in the eighth inning of Game 2 and a hard-hit flyout against Max Scherzer with two outs and the bases loaded in the eighth inning of Game 4.

ALDS

Through the first four games of the series, Melvin has said he likes having Callaspo on the bench for vital situations. The utility infielder, who was acquired from the Angels earlier in the year at the trade deadline, offers Melvin a switch-hitting option who rarely strikes out.

"The balance always with him is can you pick a spot in a game where it's a leverage situation and you know you're going to get your matchup with him," Melvin said on Wednesday. "He hits well both left- and right-handed, so that's what we weigh because we typically make in-game moves and he's a big part of those.

"There is definitely a chance that he could start. If not, you may look at him the same as we always do, looking to put him in in a big spot. I don't look to any other changes."

Melvin mulling Colon, Parker for relief roles

October 10, 2013

By Jane Lee and Jeff Kirshman / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The choice not to start Bartolo Colon in Game 5 of the American League Division Series was difficult enough for Bob Melvin. Deciding whether to use him out of the bullpen for Thursday's elimination affair against the Tigers at 8 p.m. ET on TBS may prove even harder.

Detroit had no problem using its Game 1 starter in relief on Tuesday, and Max Scherzer's outing proved significant for the winning Tigers. But Melvin would prefer to stay away from his ace unless absolutely necessary.

ALDS

"Bartolo's willing to do anything and he was great about it, but I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with his routine in that type of situation," Melvin said during a conference call on Wednesday. "We will see tomorrow.

"He's open for anything, but he does have a little different routine and I'm not sure how I'm going to handle that yet."

Melvin opted to go with rookie Sonny Gray as Thursday's starter, and if the A's can win it without using Colon, they'd be able to pitch him against the Red Sox in Game 1 of the AL Championship Series at Fenway Park on Saturday.

Either way, Melvin said Colon took Wednesday's news well.

"First of all, imagine how difficult it was for me," the skipper said. "This guy has 18 wins and has been our ace, and been as consistent as you could ever be. And he's an All-Star on top of it, 40-year-old veteran. He made it easy on me. He looked at me and said, 'OK, I just want a win.'

"He's a man of few words as it is, but it made the conversation difficult on me because he could have had a gripe, and I would not have been surprised if he did. But like I said, he made it easy on me and said, 'I just want to win.'"

So if not Colon, does Game 3 starter Jarrod Parker become available in relief?

That's debatable, too, since the righty made just 73 pitches before exiting Monday's victory after five innings. There's a sense Parker could be dealing with fatigue issues.

"Let's see how he is tomorrow," Melvin said. "He was sore after the game he pitched and we don't want him going out there when he's not close to 100 percent. I'm sure he will be willing to, because it will be an all-hands-on-deck-type situation, but we will have to see how he feels tomorrow."

Sonny Gray the bold, correct call for A's

October 10, 2013

By Tim Kawakami / Mercury News

Sonny Gray made this decision for the A's, not literally but in every imperative, do-or-die October way.

Greatness and electricity made this decision. Raw urgency made this decision.

The need to throw the A's best guy on the season's most important night, and to avoid the cautious, careful play ... that was the entire decision.

That's what led Bob Melvin and Billy Beane to pick Gray over veteran Bartolo Colon for Thursday's monumental Game 5 start against Detroit at the Coliseum.

The bold and correct call: Go with the sky-high talent over a known commodity, with everything riding on the decision.

The subtext: The A's brain trust also has the ability and fortitude to live with the consequences.

Simply, in Game 2 Gray proved that he's the A's most scintillating pitcher right now, which means he has to be the guy with the entire season coming down to Thursday's game.

When the ultimate choice is between the solid guy and the young guy who might be starting a Hall of Fame career, you have to pick the young magic.

"It came down to Sonny's last game that he pitched in similar conditions in our ballpark," Melvin said on a conference call Wednesday.

"So that's the route we're going to go."

Obviously, going with Gray over the battle-tested Colon comes with the vast potential for second-guessing.

If Gray blows up early, there will be heads shaking across the nation and fingers pointing to Colon's 18 victories and veteran savvy.

Yes, Colon, who was OK but not great in the A's Game 1 loss in this series, is the model of a calm, consistent pitcher unlikely to get derailed by the moment.

And the Tigers were facing Gray for the first time in Game 2 -- when he threw eight shutout innings and struck out nine -- so they will absolutely be studying the tape and readying adjustments.

So, Colon is the safer call, based on his experience and body of work this season.

(I don't think Colon's winless record against the Tigers since 2003 is that big of a deal. This season Colon has faced them three times and pitched relatively well each time. The most recent history is the most relevant history.) But Gray is the best call, because October is not about a body of work, it's about what works now.

And who fits the magnitude of the moment now.

"He's a bit of a bulldog," Melvin said of Gray. "He's scared of nothing."

Gray also fired 94 mph fastballs on the corners and dropped an exploding curveball that Detroit simply couldn't touch last Saturday.

I asked Melvin if he was already thinking of Gray as a Game 5 option in the moments after Gray delivered that Game 2 performance?

"You don't want to get too far ahead of yourselves, but you couldn't help not think about it given the way (Gray) pitched," Melvin said.

"It's not like Bartolo has done anything to not warrant not pitching in this game, it's just that Sonny pitched so well."

Gray, 23, has pitched well since he came up this season (and then went back down to the minors for a bit), but that's not why he's getting this start.

He's getting this start because of the way he pitched last Saturday, and the look in his eye while he did it.

He's getting this start because you have to believe that he's the last guy Detroit wants to see pitching with their season on the line.

On that stage, Gray not only matched the great Justin Verlander, he was better than Verlander. And that's the matchup for Game 5 once again.

By the way, Verlander's the man who beat the A's at the Coliseum in last year's Game 5 of the ALDS, but that was against Jarrod Parker, last year's A's young gun.

But Gray seems to exist on a whole other level -- at least he did in Game 2, and the A's are betting he can get there again Thursday.

It's not the safe bet, but it's the right one, amid the urgency and the electricity and the largest moment of the season.

Oakland A's try not to dwell on lost opportunity

October 10, 2013

By Mark Purdy / Mercury News

DETROIT -- For the A's, lost opportunity does not begin to describe Tuesday.

What would be more accurate? Tuesday was a lost journey to glory that instead took a turn down a dank canyon full of starving wolves, poison-dart-wielding monkeys and chubby guys in windbreakers who reach up to steal baseballs and crush hearts.

Yup. That pretty much expresses it.

"Look, you gotta finish it out for nine innings," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "Just because we had the lead doesn't mean you're going to win the game."

No, but for the bulk of Tuesday's game, the A's were poised to clinch their best-of-five playoff series against the Detroit Tigers with a Game 4 victory. The Athletics led 3-0 after their half of the fifth inning. The Athletics led 4-3 after their half of the seventh inning.

And then it all fell apart, in three separate crucial sequences that led to an 8-6 Tigers victory that sends the series back to Oakland for a decisive Game 5 on Thursday.

Josh Reddick, the A's right fielder who was involved in both a controversial fielding play and an agonizing plate appearance that saw him strike out with the bases loaded, admitted that flushing away the might-have-beens will be a challenge.

"It's going to be hard," Reddick said in a quiet A's locker room. "You think about the at-bats and the other plays that could have been different. But once I get on the plane tonight, I put my headphones on and my country music and try to let it go, treat it the same way as if we got beat by 10 runs or won by 10 runs."

Somebody could write an entire country music album full of sad songs about Tuesday's game and those three soul-sapping sequences that undid them. Let's review.

SOUL SAPPER ONE: After taking that 4-3 lead into the bottom of the seventh inning, Melvin turned to usually reliable reliever Sean Doolittle to retire Tiger batters. The first was Victor Martinez. Doolittle threw him one of his best fastballs -- and Martinez sent it flying over Reddick's head in right field.

The next few seconds after that were in dispute because as the ball reached the fence, a fan reached out clumsily and watched the ball thud into his upper arms before falling onto the turf. Umpires ruled it a home run and confirmed it on a video replay -- which showed that under the letter of the rule, the fan did not interfere.

A bigger problem was that Doolittle allowed three more baserunners and another run, on a broken-bat single by Austin Jackson. Doolittle wasn't second-guessing any of his pitch choices, tipping his cap to the Tigers.

"I feel like, for whatever reason, it was their day," said Doolittle. "They did just a good enough job to put the runs up there."

SOUL SAPPER TWO: With the Tigers now holding a 5-4 lead, the A's still had a terrific comeback window in the top of the eighth inning against an unlikely suspect -- Detroit pitcher Max Scherzer, the ace starter who was brought out of the bullpen owing to the Tigers' desperate situation.

After the first two A's batters reached base, Detroit manager Jim Leyland walked the bases loaded for the bottom of Oakland's batting order.

First up was none other than Reddick, who fought off some Scherzer fastballs until whiffing on an 86 mph changeup that was way inside.

"If I sit on an 86 miles per hour changeup, there's no way I can catch up to a 97 mph fastball," Reddick explained. "So I was sitting on the fastball and adjusting -- and I was on it, he just threw a good pitch. Looking back, I wish I would have taken it."

Next came catcher Stephen Vogt, who also went down swinging as Scherzer bore down and seemed to find another gear.

Finally, Melvin sent up pinch hitter Alberto Callaspo, known as a contact hitter, hoping for a better result. Callaspo also battled before smashing a line drive to center field that didn't get down fast enough and was caught by a charging Jackson.

"I thought it was a hit off Callaspo's bat," said Detroit catcher Alex Avila. "Then I saw Austin moving ... and realized Callaspo had hit it too hard. It's almost an impossible situation, to get out of there without any runs scoring. But we did."

SOUL SAPPER THREE: By this point, raucous Tigers fans were ready to immediately build a statue to Scherzer on the plaza outside. His performance will live in legend if Detroit wins the series. But the A's remained in position to battle -- until the Tigers scored three more runs in the bottom of the eighth off A's relievers Ryan Cook and Brett Anderson.

"One of the reasons that we are where we are is because of our bullpen," Melvin said. "It just didn't happen tonight."

So here we go again, to face Detroit nemesis Justin Verlander, who beat them in this same situation a year ago. Meanwhile, Melvin said he had not decided on the A's starter. The decision is between rookie Sonny Gray and veteran Bartolo Colon -- with Gray the likely and better choice because of his shutout performance against the Tigers last Saturday. He will be out to break the A's well-known elimination-game curse: Including Tuesday's defeat, the A's are 1-11 in their last 12 opportunities to clinch a series.

Avila also knew those numbers but discounts them in looking at the current A's roster.

"They're a little bit deeper now than they have been," Avila said. "And that's all in the past. Anything can happen now."

As the A's know only too well.

Wednesday, October 9, 2013

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Chicago Cubs	Zach Putnam	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago Cubs	Zach Putnam	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Right elbow soreness)
Chicago Cubs	J.C. Boscan	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago Cubs	Rafael Dolis	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Strained right forearm)
Chicago Cubs	Rafael Dolis	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago Cubs	Darnell McDonald	Outrighted to Minors
Chicago Cubs	Thomas Neal	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Dislocated right shoulder)
Chicago Cubs	Thomas Neal	Outrighted to Minors
Texas Rangers	Jeff Baker	Designated for Assignment
Texas Rangers	Matt West	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Recovery from right elbow surgery)

Tuesday, October 8, 2013

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
Chicago Cubs	Ryan Sweeney	Signed, (2014-2015; Opt 2016)(two-year contract extension)
Colorado Rockies	Jorge De La Rosa	Signed, (2014)(team option exercised)
Los Angeles Angels	Andrew Taylor	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Left labrum tear)
Los Angeles Angels	Robert Coello	Outrighted to Minors
Los Angeles Angels	Andrew Taylor	Outrighted to Minors

Miami Marlins	Kevin Slowey	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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Seattle Mariners	Henry Blanco	Designated for Assignment
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St. Louis Cardinals	Victor Marte	Outrighted to Minors
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Monday, October 7, 2013

TEAM	PLAYER	TRANSACTION
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Cleveland Indians	Clay Rapada	Outrighted to Minors
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Miami Marlins	Kevin Slowey	Removed From 60-Day DL, (Right forearm discomfort)
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Miami Marlins	Zach Phillips	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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Miami Marlins	Zach Phillips	Outrighted to Minors
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Miami Marlins	Koyie Hill	Declared Free Agency
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Minnesota Twins	Shairon Martis	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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Philadelphia Phillies	Michael Martinez	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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Philadelphia Phillies	Zach Miner	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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Philadelphia Phillies	Pete Orr	Refused Minor League Assignment - Free Agent
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