



Minnesota Twins Daily Clips

Thursday, August 7, 2014

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Seesaw finale slips away from Twins

Alex Smith / MLB.com – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS -- Anthony Swarzak screamed "Yeah!" multiple times from the bullpen. Brian Dozier began climbing over the dugout railing. The crowd at Target Field let out a roar reserved only for game-winning hits.

Everybody thought Wednesday's game was over when Eduardo Escobar smashed a deep fly ball to center field in the bottom of the ninth.

But Padres center fielder Alexi Amarista sprinted back and made a diving play that took the air out of the stadium. His catch kept the winning run from coming home and sent the game to the 10th inning, when Seth Smith smacked a towering home run off Swarzak that powered San Diego to a comeback 5-4 win over the Twins.

Afterwards, the Twins were still stunned about Amarista's ninth-inning snag.

"We all thought in the dugout it was a for-sure game-winner, to be honest," Dozier said.

Wednesday's game featured several key plays throughout, but the real drama began in the top of the ninth, when closer Glen Perkins entered with a 4-3 lead.

Attempting to pick up his 29th save of the season, Perkins allowed a deep double to left-center by Yonder Alonso, before walking Yasmani Grandal. A sacrifice bunt from Amarista moved both runners over.

Everth Cabrera then smashed a line drive to right field, where Oswaldo Arcia made a nice sliding catch, but his throw home was not in time to prevent the Padres from tying the game at 4.

"Guys have been swinging a little earlier on me, and I need to make adjustments on that," Perkins said. "They're probably not wanting to get to two strikes, and having to deal with the slider or guessing what I'm going to throw."

Escobar came up against Kevin Quackenbush with runners on first and second in the bottom of the ninth. With two outs and a two-strike count, the San Diego outfield played Escobar very shallow, and he almost made them pay, launching a high fly ball that initially looked as if it would fall for the game-winning hit.

"It was struck well, and we had him shaded," Padres manager Bud Black said. "But then you saw [Amarista's] route and the flight of the ball, and you start thinking, 'Maybe.' It was a great catch."

Minutes later, Smith bashed a 3-1 fastball high over the right-field porch for a 5-4 lead.

"I tried to come in with a fastball there," Swarzak said. "I threw him four pitches away in a row, and tried to come in on one. He was just pretty quick in there."

"I think if I throw up a zero there, we come back and score. Absolutely."

Minnesota didn't provide an abundance of evidence (2-for-14 with RISP on the day) to support that theory, but its lineup did begin the game with a bang.

Behind the red-hot Trevor Plouffe (11 hits in his past 20 at-bats), the Twins jumped ahead early. Dozier dropped a soft liner into right field for a single, and then stole second base. While replays showed Dozier might've been tagged out, Black did not challenge, and Plouffe promptly lifted a 2-2 curveball from Odrisamer Despaigne into the left-field seats for his eighth home run of the year.

Up 2-0, the home team missed a big opportunity to blow the game open in the second. Manager Ron Gardenhire successfully challenged that Despaigne hit Danny Santana with a pitch, and the overturned call loaded the bases with one out.

But Dozier hit into a forceout at home, and then Plouffe popped out to left field to end the threat.

"I know we lost at it the end, but we [also] lost it early," Gardenhire said. "I don't know how many chances we had early to score runs, and we missed opportunities."

Still in the game, the Padres came alive in the fourth. Tommy Medica -- who had fallen face-first on the basepaths while running out a second-inning fly ball -- redeemed himself with a single past Dozier, and Jedd Gyorko scored Medica with a double to the right-field corner.

After the Twins extended their lead to 3-1 in the fifth with Escobar's RBI single, San Diego stormed back in the sixth to tie the game.

Starter Kevin Correia surrendered a single to Cabrera and walked Yangervis Solarte. Smith then yanked a double to the warning track in right-center to score Cabrera. An RBI groundout by Medica brought home Solarte with the tying run.

But Minnesota quickly nabbed the lead back. Despaigne hit Santana for the second time, and he promptly stole his ninth base of the season. That allowed him to come home on Plouffe's single to left.

That was it for the Twins, who did not cross the plate in the final four innings.

"That game shouldn't have been where it was," Gardenhire said. "But they did a nice job coming back, and it's frustrating for us."

Vargas' pop helps him carve out a spot

Rhett Bollinger and Alex Smith / MLB.com – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS -- He was just called up Thursday, but Kennys Vargas appears to have solidified his spot on the Twins' Major League roster.

"If he goes, I'm going on the plane with him," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "I like watching him play so far. We're going to try and keep him. I don't think that'll be a problem."

The 24-year-old rookie notched five hits in a weekend series against the White Sox, and then smacked a game-winning three-run homer against the Padres in Tuesday night's 3-1 victory.

Vargas' sixth-inning shot came on a curveball from San Diego's Jesse Hahn that drifted a bit outside.

"You throw a ball inside or outside, and it doesn't matter," Gardenhire said. "When he gets his arms through right, the ball just takes off like you can't believe."

Vargas skipped Triple-A ball as a result of his callup last week. Gardenhire said while the missed experience at that level means Vargas will have a tougher time getting acclimated to breaking balls at the Major League level, the rookie could have enough power to make up for it.

"He's really strong," Gardenhire said. "[His swing] is not a big long thing. It's pretty quick to the ball. He's just so doggone strong."

Mauer, Nolasco off to good starts in rehab

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Twins received positive reports on Joe Mauer and Ricky Nolasco, who both started their rehab assignments with Class A Cedar Rapids on Tuesday night.

Mauer, who has been on the 15-day disabled list with a strained right oblique since July 3, went 1-for-3 as the designated hitter in his first rehab game.

Nolasco, on the 15-day DL retroactive to July 7 with a right elbow strain, tossed 3 2/3 scoreless innings, scattering two hits and a walk while striking out two. He threw 51 pitches, 30 going for strikes.

"Everything went well," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Mauer is healthy and got through his at-bats. I guess it was pretty wild down there -- a mania going on."

"And Nolasco did his thing. He felt great and the velocity was good, so it was a good start for him."

Mauer is expected to remain with Cedar Rapids through the weekend, before joining the Twins in Houston on Monday, if all goes well. Nolasco is slated to make one more start with Cedar Rapids on Sunday. He is expected to throw roughly 75 pitches.

Twins win replay challenge on hit-by-pitch

Alex Smith / MLB.com – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS -- Twins manager Ron Gardenhire made a successful challenge in the second inning that earned his squad an extra baserunner, but the Padres were able to escape the frame without surrendering any runs.

With runners on first and third, one out and Minnesota holding a 2-0 lead, San Diego's Odrisamer Despaigne threw an errant cutter that appeared to hit Danny Santana in the right knee, but home-plate umpire Marvin Hudson ruled that the ball did not touch Santana.

Gardenhire challenged the play, and the call was overturned after a review that lasted two minutes, 17 seconds.

The hit-by-pitch loaded the bases, but Minnesota was unable to capitalize. Brian Dozier grounded into a fielder's-choice forceout at home, and Trevor Plouffe ended the inning with a flyout to left.

Pino prepares for duel with A's, Lester

Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com – 8/6/14

Jon Lester's first start with the A's was a success, and the left-hander is looking to build on it in his second outing with his new club on Thursday in the opener of a four-game set against the Twins at the Coliseum.

After spending nine seasons with the Red Sox, Lester was acquired by Oakland along with outfielder Jonny Gomes on July 31 in a blockbuster trade that sent outfielder Yoenis Cespedes to Boston. Lester, who is 11-7 with a 2.59 ERA in 22 starts this season, gave up three runs on nine hits over 6 2/3 innings on Saturday as Oakland cruised to an 8-3 win over the Royals.

"We get so amped up for our first of everything, whether it's your first start, first postseason start, whatever it is," Lester said after the game against Kansas City. "Now it's just getting back to work and the job at hand and getting used to my surroundings. You want to put a good foot forward, so I'm glad today went the way it did, and I'll go back out there in five days and do it again."

He'll "do it again" Thursday against Twins rookie right-hander Yohan Pino, who will be making his ninth career start.

Pino, who is 1-3 with a 4.57 ERA this season, is coming off a no-decision against the White Sox on Saturday. The right-hander gave up four runs on seven hits in 6 1/3 innings in an 8-6 win for the Twins.

Pino will face the A's for the first time on Thursday.

"I don't change anything," Pino said. "Just what I've been doing. Just the same plan. Throw strikes, work the counts."

Twins: Mauer, Nolasco begin rehab assignments

The Twins received positive reports on Joe Mauer and Ricky Nolasco, who both started their rehab assignments with Class A Cedar Rapids on Tuesday night.

Mauer, who has been on the 15-day disabled list with a strained right oblique since July 3, is tentatively scheduled to rejoin the Twins on Monday. And Nolasco, on the 15-day DL retroactive to July 7 with a right elbow strain, is scheduled to make one more rehab start on Sunday before rejoining Minnesota's rotation.

"Everything went well," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Mauer is healthy and got through his at-bats. I guess it was pretty wild down there -- a mania going on. And Nolasco did his thing. He felt great, and the velocity was good. So it was a good start for him."

A's: Lowrie expected to be back Thursday

The A's concluded their three-game set against the Rays on Wednesday without Jed Lowrie, but they're expected to have their infielder back in the lineup on Thursday.

Lowrie was prepped for a lengthy run of starts with backup Nick Punto (right hamstring strain) resigned to the disabled list, but instead was forced to miss two consecutive games because of a bruised right index finger.

Manager Bob Melvin said Lowrie was "better" Wednesday morning.

"He felt much better swinging the bat today," said Melvin. "He still felt it a little throwing, but he'll be in here early tomorrow, and we'll get a read on that. Much better chance than we had today."

Eric Sogard has been manning shortstop in place of Lowrie, who is batting .337 with 10 multi-hit games over his last 24 contests.

Worth noting

- The Twins and A's played earlier this season, with Oakland sweeping a three-game series at Target Field on April 7-10. The A's won six of seven against Minnesota in 2013.
- Minnesota hasn't announced a starter for Saturday's game against the A's, a vacancy created after left-hander Logan Darnell was optioned to Triple-A Rochester on Sunday to make room for outfielder Jordan Schafer. The Twins could stay in-house and start long reliever Anthony Swarzak, or they may decide to bring up top prospect Trevor May from Triple-A. May, who has a 2.93 ERA in 17 outings with Rochester, last started on Monday and would be on regular rest.
- The Twins will see a familiar face in outfielder Sam Fuld, who they traded to the A's before the non-waiver Trade Deadline on July 31. Minnesota received left-hander Tommy Milone in return, but Milone is at Triple-A Rochester. Milone made his first start with Rochester on Tuesday, giving up just one run over seven innings while taking a hard-luck loss.

Twins' loss to Padres comes late, but early miscues set tone

La Velle Neal / Star Tribune – 8/7/14

Glen Perkins thought he could get a nice, easy first-pitch strike over to Yonder Alonso in the ninth inning Wednesday. Anthony Swarzak thought Seth Smith wouldn't look for an inside fastball in the 10th.

They were both wrong. Perkins gave up a leadoff double, then lost the lead. Swarzak gave up a leadoff homer and lost the game as San Diego rallied to beat the Twins 5-4 in 10 innings at Target Field.

But the reason this is one of the Twins' worst losses of the season was because they were inept during so many times earlier in the game. Their lack of execution killed them. When San Diego needed to execute, Alonso doubled, Rene Rivera walked, Alexi Amarista bunted them over a base and Everth Cabrera hit a sacrifice fly to tie the score in the ninth as if it was as natural as tying shoelaces.

When the Twins attempt those things, it makes for bad reality television — a show you know is bad but you keep watching to see what else could go wrong.

"I know we lost it at the end," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said, "but we lost it early."

The Twins should have scored six, seven, eight runs on Wednesday for their fourth victory in a row. Instead:

Jordan Schafer was called out in the second inning when he bunted the ball hard off the ground and it bounced up and hit him. Bunting in the second inning against the Padres is questionable in itself. After Eric Fryer doubled to lead off the eighth, Schafer failed to get a bunt down again and ended up grounding out to third. Schafer did get a bunt down in the 10th, moving pinch hitter Kurt Suzuki to second.

This isn't an indictment on Schafer. Nope, it's the entire team. The Twins were 3-for 16 with runners in scoring position, which has been a season-long problem. After Schafer bunted into himself, Danny Santana was hit with a pitch to load the bases with one out in the second. Brian Dozier tapped into a force play at the plate and Trevor Plouffe flied out to end the inning. Dozier, recently ranked as the top player on the roster during a staff meeting, stranded runners on first and third in the fourth. Fryer was stranded at second after his leadoff double in the eighth.

Plouffe led off the ninth with a walk and was replaced by pinch runner Eduardo Nunez. Kennys Vargas who hit a three-run homer Tuesday, struck out on a fastball right down the middle from reliever Kevin Quackenbush — a pitch Vargas could have crushed. The Twins later had two on with one out in that inning, before Chris Parmelee struck out and Eduardo Escobar was robbed of a game-winning hit by Amarista.

The Twins left 14 runners on base. That's how you lose a game in which the opponent walked seven batters and was 1-for-11 with runners in scoring position.

"It comes down to execution and getting the hits when you have to," Gardenhire said. "That game should not have been where it was. A frustrating game for us."

The timing for such a game couldn't have been worse.

On Thursday, the Twins open a four-game series in Oakland, and the Athletics have a World Series berth on their minds after trading for big-name pitchers Jon Lester and Jeff Samardzija.

The A's have the most victories in the majors but are trying to find their way since trading outfielder Yoenis Cespedes to Boston in the Lester deal. But their pitching staff is good enough to win 2-1 and 3-2 if it has to. And the Twins run into Oakland's top three starters — Lester, Samardzija and Scott Kazmir — during the series.

The Twins must be efficient on offense, something they weren't Wednesday.

"It doesn't get any easier," Dozier said. "I promise you that."

Postgame thoughts: Perkins, Swarzak, Fryer

La Velle Neal / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

Here are three thoughts following this clunker:

PERK FAILS TO CONVERT: Yonder Alonso led off the ninth with a double to center, jumping on Glen Perkins' first pitch. Alonso ended up scoring on a sacrifice fly to tie the game in the ninth. Perkins was trying to get ahead in the count so he could put away another hitter with his nasty slider, but he never got to the point with Alonso. Perkins has noticed a change in how hitters approach him. `` ``Recently guys have been swinging a little early (in the count) on me and I need to make adjustments on that," Perkins said. ``They are probably not wanting to get to two strikes and having to deal with the slider. It's on me to adjust back and figure out a better process of putting guys away."

SWARZAK THOUGHT HE MADE THE RIGHT PITCH: Well, that was before Seth Smith deposited his pitch into the seats in right field with what turned out to be the game-winning hit. With the count 3-1, Swarzak had not come inside yet and felt the time was right. Smith, however, was all over the pitch and hit it an estimated 414 feet. "I tried to come in there 3-1 because he hadn't seen anything close to him yet," Swarzak said. "I got in there, but he was quick in there and got it." Swarzak thought two of his pitches to Smith should have been called strikes, but looked at replays after the game and said home plate umpire Marvin Hudson made the right calls.

FRYER FIRES DOWN TO SECOND: Eric Fryer picked off Alonzo in the seventh, firing a throw after catching a Jared Burton pitch. He said it was in the back of his mind that he had a shot at Alonzo, and decided to take chance when he saw enough daylight between Alonzo and shortstop Eduardo Escobar, who caught the throw. "A lot of times in the past I double clutch because I'm not thinking about it," Fryer said. "This time I made sure I was mentally ready in case (the hitter, Alexi Amarista) bunts through or takes high. Once I saw the clearance I'm throwing down there."

Escobar's would-be game-winner turns into long out

La Velle Neal / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

For a few seconds in the ninth inning Wednesday, it looked as if the Twins were going to beat the San Diego Padres despite being awful on offense for most of the afternoon.

With the score tied 4-4 and Twins runners on first and second with two outs, Eduardo Escobar put a nice swing on a Kevin Quackenbush pitch and drove it to center. Fans in Target Field started screaming.

"I was climbing over the rail to be honest with you," Brian Dozier said.

Twins manager Ron Gardenhire noted that with two strikes, San Diego had its outfielders play more shallow. It looked as if Escobar was going to burn the outfield, two runs were going to score, and the Twins were going to win.

Then Alexi Amarista turned into Keenan Allen hauling in a Phillip Rivers bomb.

Amarista, who entered the game as a pinch hitter in the seventh, turned to his left and raced back to deep center. The ball hung up just enough for him to run it down. Fans groaned. Escobar jumped and threw his helmet to the ground.

"When he hit it, I thought, 'Game over,'" Gardenhire said. "We thought he had no chance to catch that ball, but he made a heck of a play."

Replay problems

San Diego wanted umpires to look at replays of Dozier's stolen base in the first inning. And replays suggested that Dozier was out.

But there was a technical problem with the replay system, and it was unavailable at the time. Umpires were unable to take another look at the play.

After the Padres batted in the second, crew chief Hunter Wendelstedt put on the headphones and spoke with replay officials for a few minutes, delaying the start of the bottom of the inning as they continued to work through technical problems.

Nolasco getting closer

Righthander Ricky Nolasco, who pitched 3⅔ scoreless innings at Class A Cedar Rapids on Tuesday, will make a second rehab start Sunday and could rejoin the Twins after that.

Nolasco, on the disabled list because of a flexor pronator strain, threw 51 pitches during his outing Tuesday. Twins General Manager Terry Ryan said Nolasco will throw, "seventy-something," pitches Sunday.

If the Sunday outing goes well, Nolasco could start Aug. 15 against Kansas City.

Twins, Kernels agree

Ryan met with the press before Wednesday's game wearing a Cedar Rapids Kernels shirt. That was the giveaway.

The Twins announced that they have extended their player development contract with Cedar Rapids for four years. This is the second year the Twins have had a Class A team in Cedar Rapids. The Kernels are getting big crowds this week with Joe Mauer there on a rehab stint.

"We have a great relationship with that outfit," Ryan said.

Mauer went 0-for-3 Wednesday.

More work needed

Head groundskeeper Larry DeVito and his staff were able to get the grass at Target Field in enough shape for two games against the Padres, but they plan to address it more while the team is on the road at Oakland and Houston.

The grass took a beating over the weekend during the Paul McCartney concert, especially in center field, where the main stage was built. There also are signs of stress on each side of home plate, where speakers were positioned.

DeVito and his staff replaced the damaged grass in those areas, but the crew will lay more new sod while the team is on the road.

Etc.

- Fans laughed as Padres designated hitter Tommy Medica tripped and fell after rounding first base while running out pop out to third base. And the Padres ribbed him in the dugout.

Broadcaster Gladden criticizes Twins 'opposite-field' strategy

Michael Rand / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

We happened to have the Twins game on the radio as we drove home from an important event Tuesday night. It was the fourth inning of a fairly uneventful game against the Padres, with Cory Provus and Dan Gladden doing the call as per usual.

In the midst of describing the action, though, we were struck by some commentary from Gladden and quickly snagged a recording of it. Josh Willingham, Kennys Vargas and Oswaldo Arcia were the batters due up, and Gladden was describing a conversation he had pregame with Willingham about why so many of his home runs go to left field. Willingham, per Gladden, said it has to do with his top hand — that his swing style made him a pull hitter — and Gladden concluded that part by telling Willingham to keep doing what he is doing and not worry about going to right field. That led into this exchange between Gladden and Provus:

Provus: "I wonder for a young hitter coming up in today's game, if they're labeled as a dead pull hitter, if that's a label they are eager to change as their careers kind of blossom?"

Gladden: "You know what, here's one thing I hope can kind of get rooted or maybe even changed to an extent, and that is the philosophy of the Twins. ... You've heard it: 'You've got to hit the ball the other way.' It's almost like everybody who puts a Twins uniform on, they're taught to go the other way. ... A guy like Arcia right here, what are we hearing? 'He's trying to pull the ball. He's trying to pull the ball. We need to have him go the other way.' Arcia to me is a dead-red pull guy, so let's teach him to pull the ball rather than try to teach him to go the other way and hit doubles and singles — which he can do, but that's not his game. ... We had Jim Thome here, kind of a one-dimensional, one-field type guy. David Ortiz, when we heard after he left, they told him to pull the ball and that's what he's done. I think the philosophy — you need to be able to evaluate the player. Vargas is a guy that should have opposite-field power."

While we've certainly heard Twins radio broadcasters critique bad pitches or poor at bats, we couldn't recall hearing such a strong commentary on a general philosophy. While it's not particularly controversial — and to be honest, it's refreshing — it did catch our attention.

But truth be told, we don't listen to the Twins on the radio often — usually just if we have some errands to run at night, or if we happen to have a long drive within the region during a game.

In that regard, maybe folks who more regularly listen to the Twins on the radio can help us out: Was that in character with what Gladden might typically say, or did it branch into different territory?

Wednesday's Twins- San Diego game recap

La Velle Neal / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

IMPACT PLAYER

Seth Smith, San Diego

The outfielder's home run in the 10th inning won the game.

BY THE NUMBERS

2 Home runs since the All-Star break for Trevor Plouffe.

4 Blown saves for Glen Perkins this season.

4-5 Record for the Twins in extra innings.

4-14 Padres' record against the Twins.

7-10 Record for the Twins in interleague play.

2:17 Time it took for the replay in the second inning that proved Danny Santana was hit by a pitch.

Series preview: Twins at Oakland

La Velle Neal / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

FOUR-GAME SERIES AT O.CO COLISEUM

Thursday, 9:05 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM

RHP Yohan Pino (1-3, 4.57) vs. LHP Jon Lester (11-7, 2.59)

Friday, 9:05 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM

RHP Kyle Gibson (10-8, 3.93) vs. LHP Scott Kazmir (12-4, 2.53)

Saturday, 8:05 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM

TBA vs. Jeff Samardzija (4-8, 2.91)

Sunday, 3:05 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM

RHP Phil Hughes (11-8, 4.01) vs. RHP Jason Hammel (9-9, 3.70)

TWINS UPDATE

The Twins have not announced a starter for Saturday's game. Righthander Anthony Swarzak is the in-house candidate. Righthander Trevor May is in line to pitch Saturday and could make his major league debut in a pitcher's park against a playoff-bound team. ... The Twins are starting a seven-game road trip and are in a run during which they play 13 of 15 games on the road. ... The Twins tied a season high with four stolen bases Wednesday against San Diego and are 4-2 in games in which they steal at least three. ... Brian Dozier is 2-for-18 in his career against Kazmir. ... Josh Willingham is batting .313 against Hammel with a home run and four

RBI. ... Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said he'll use Jordan Schafer in left and right field some, but the goal is to get him to play center so Danny Santana can move to shortstop.

ATHLETICS UPDATE

Oakland has won 11 of the past 12 games played between the clubs, going back to 2012. That includes a three-game sweep at Target Field in April. ... The last time the teams met in Oakland, the Athletics swept the Twins in a four-game series last September, outscoring them 39-14 in the process. ... Shortstop Jed Lowrie didn't start Tuesday or Wednesday because of a swollen right index finger, but it has improved enough that he is expected to start Thursday against the Twins. ... Former Twin Nick Punto is on the disabled list because of a strained right hamstring. ... Outfielder Sam Fuld, traded by the Twins to Oakland on July 31, is batting .220 through his first 12 games of his second stint with the A's. ... Lester got the win June 17 against the Twins in Boston's 2-1 victory. He was dealt to Oakland on deadline day.

Five Twins who need to finish strong

Michael Rand / Star Tribune – 8/7/14

Twins prospects such as Kennys Vargas and Danny Santana are auditioning for the future. But these final two months of the season are not important for them in the same way they are important for these five position players, who seem to be at critical junctures with the organization:

Trevor Plouffe: He's been hot lately, including a homer and RBI single Wednesday. But while he looks like a more polished hitter at the plate than in previous seasons, his overall numbers look pretty similar to 2012 and 2013. By the end of the year, barring injury, he will have had about 2,000 MLB plate appearances. That's enough for the Twins to decide where he fits.

Chris Parmelee: Just when we're ready to give up on Parmelee, he shows signs of life. And as soon as we concede he could be a useful player, he goes in a funk. He has a decent glove at first base and isn't completely lost in the outfield. But he'll be closing in on 1,000 career PAs by season's end. Does he have a role on a better team, particularly if Vargas sticks and Joe Mauer is healthy?

Eduardo Escobar: He's been a pleasant surprise holding down shortstop since Pedro Florimon lost the job. But this is Danny Santana's spot long-term, just as Santana is holding down Byron Buxton's spot in center field. Escobar has shown he can be a very useful utility infielder and spot-starter/injury replacement. But he will need to sustain his good work over the final stretch to make the Twins more confident in his long-term value.

Oswaldo Arcia: Though it seems like he's been here for a while, he just turned 23. There is time for him to go from a tantalizing streak hitter to a consistent threat. We had high hopes for Arcia, and while his numbers right now aren't really that far off from his encouraging rookie season, he has arrived here in fits and starts that makes it feel like a disappointment. He has the talent to be in the lineup many days a week on a good team.

Joe Mauer: He's been at his career-worst at the plate, and as soon as he's shown signs of life, he's gotten hurt. Mauer will turn 32 early next season. He has four years left after this one on his massive contract. If he can come back from his injury soon and at least finish this season strong, it would provide some hope for the future. If not, there will be a nagging concern that the old Mauer is gone and instead Mauer is just old.

TwinsCentric: Will Alex Meyer pitch for Twins this year?

Nick Nelson / Star Tribune – 8/6/14

With the Twins once again buried in last place and their starting pitching staff once again ranking among the worst in the league, fans have been asking the same question for much of the summer.

When will Trevor May and Alex Meyer get the call?

By all appearances, both of the highly rated pitching prospects have been MLB-ready for some time. May and Meyer rank fifth and sixth, respectively, on the International League ERA leaderboard, and they're both in the top three for strikeout rate.

Yet, both have been left to dominate in Triple-A while the Twins give starts to lesser talents like Kris Johnson, Logan Darnell and Yohan Pino. We're now almost a week into August, and still there's no clear indication that either May or Meyer is even on the verge of a promotion.

It's not hard to see why people are frustrated, but at the same time, there are circumstances at play with both pitchers that need to be recognized.

May is very, very close. When he was seemingly nearing a call-up in June, he suffered an ill-timed calf injury that cost him a month, and he's been working his way back. Just now has he finally returned to a normal workload; he threw 99 pitches in his last start, the first time since mid-June that he's gone over 80.

He's already on the 40-man roster. Bringing him up is a simple move at this point. I have to imagine that May will be on the Twins within the next turn or two through the rotation.

The wait for Meyer will probably last longer. He might not even debut in 2014. And while that's unfortunate to hear, it's not something to get riled up at the organization over.

Last year, Meyer missed two months -- more than a third of his season -- with a sore throwing shoulder. It was very scary, especially when you consider that his size and delivery always elicited injury concerns from scouts.

Fortunately, the shoulder has been fine this year. He hasn't missed a start and has been making mincemeat of minor-league hitters. But when you look at this pitch count from start to start, it's obvious that the Twins are being very cautious with him.

Here are Meyer's inning totals and pitch counts for each outing with Rochester this season:

4/6: 5.0 IP, 79 pitches
4/12: 5.1 IP, 83 pitches
4/18: 3.2 IP, 77 pitches
4/23: 6.2 IP, 100 pitches
4/28: 6.0 IP, 100 pitches
5/4: 4.2 IP, 92 pitches
5/10: 4.0 IP, 92 pitches
5/15: 5.0 IP, 69 pitches
5/22: 5.1 IP, 79 pitches
5/28: 6.0 IP, 88 pitches
6/2: 5.0 IP, 78 pitches
6/7: 6.0 IP, 81 pitches
6/13: 2.0 IP, 51 pitches
6/18: 3.0 IP, 78 pitches
6/23: 3.2 IP, 73 pitches
6/28: 6.0 IP, 77 pitches
7/3: 6.0 IP, 86 pitches
7/8: 6.0 IP, 96 pitches
7/18: 6.0 IP, 88 pitches
7/23: 6.0 IP, 86 pitches
7/29: 5.0 IP, 96 pitches
8/3: 5.2 IP, 91 pitches

Looking at the game log, a few things stand out. First, he's only been allowed to pitch into the seventh inning once all season, despite the fact that he's routinely blowing away opposing lineups. Second, only seven times in 22 starts has he been pushed over 90 pitches.

Twins Daily member jokin was in attendance during Meyer's latest start in Louisville, and described the performance in a post here on our forums. His writeup noted that Meyer was pulled rather abruptly with two outs in the fifth despite "looking completely in command of the game," as the righty had surpassed the 90-pitch threshold.

This observation coincides with what we're seeing in Meyer's pitch count trends. There's a clear effort being made to monitor him

very closely and pull him out of games where he's laboring or approaching that triple-digit pitch mark.

It's a lot easier to do that in Triple-A, where the games don't really matter, than in the majors. Big-league starters are expected to throw more than 90 pitches. And Meyer, whose command remains spotty despite all his notable strengths, could have some games where he hits that 90-pitch mark pretty quickly as he transitions to the highest level. That taxes a bullpen.

As a fan, I am dying to see Meyer pitch in a Twins uniform. But at the same time, I'm not going to fault the organization for taking every precaution with such a highly valuable arm, especially in a lost season. If they just want to get him through a full, healthy campaign, with the idea of having him try and win a spot next spring, I can live with that.

At this point, it might not make much of a difference. He has already thrown 112 innings this year, which is eight more than he threw total last year, between the regular season and Arizona Fall League. As careful as they've been with him, it's hard to imagine the Twins letting Meyer top 150 innings this season.

That means he might only have five or six starts left. While it would be nice for the fans if a few of those come in the majors, that also requires adding him to the 40-man and starting his service clock. Those aren't huge hurdles, necessarily, but they're factors.

Ultimately, it wouldn't shock me if the Twins let Meyer finish out in Triple-A, and it wouldn't really upset me.

International League hitters might feel differently.

Twins fans taking note of Kennys Vargas

Seth Boster / Pioneer Press – 8/6/14

In five career major league starts, Twins slugger Kennys Vargas has apparently set some expectations among fans, who on Wednesday at Target Field seemed to bubble with anticipation each time the 6-foot-5, 280-pounder stepped to the plate as designated hitter during a 5-4 loss to the San Diego Padres.

Vargas didn't replicate the heroics of his home field debut from a night prior, where his three-run homer provided the 3-1 win. But with a single on the day, he still has a hit in each of his outings in a Twins uniform since being called up from Double-A New Britain for last weekend's series against the Chicago White Sox. He has also scored a run in each game.

The 24-year-old switch-hitter from Puerto Rico is batting .318 with seven RBIs.

"The battle's not over," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "He's got a long ways to go and a lot to learn. He's going to have some good (at-bats) and some bad ones, but he's sure fun to see walking up there."

Even when Joe Mauer returns to the big league club to reclaim first base, where Vargas has started when he's not the designated hitter, Gardenhire said he doesn't expect his new slugger to leave Minnesota any time soon.

"If he goes I'm going on the plane with him," the skipper quipped. "I like watching him play."

Still, Gardenhire remained adamant about seeing development from Vargas, who will get a good test from the American League-leading A's and their strong staff during a four-game set on the road beginning Thursday night.

When asked about Vargas' likelihood of staying around with the big league club, general manager Terry Ryan said, "It's up to Vargas."

"In today's game, it's difficult to find power," Ryan added, "and when you do find it, you better hang on."

Twins, Kernels extend

Though an official announcement had yet to be made Wednesday afternoon, Ryan confirmed reports that the club would be extending its player development contract with Class A Cedar Rapids. Ryan was sporting a Kernels polo during his usual pregame meeting with reporters.

In their first season of partnership in 2013, the sides agreed upon an initial contract that extended through 2016. The new four-year extension, approved Tuesday afternoon by the Kernels Board of Directors and formally signed before the team's home game Wednesday night, will run through 2020.

Briefly

In Baseball America's annual best tools survey, International League managers voted Twins prospect Alex Meyer as having the best fastball and best breaking ball (spike curve). In 22 starts, the Triple-A Rochester right-hander is 6-4 with a 3.05 earned-run average and has 128 strikeouts over 112 innings.

Twins: Jake Mauer, Joe's brother, says he's 'on the right path' to big leagues, too

Tim Leighton / Pioneer Press – 8/6/14

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa -- Jake Mauer is camped out four hours south of his ultimate career destination, honing his craft for minimal pay and even less notoriety.

The St. Paul native makes it clear he wants to return home, almost in his back yard, for the dream job of managing the team he has adored -- the Minnesota Twins -- since the first time he heard the pop of a baseball in his new glove growing up a couple of blocks from Central High School.

"The ultimate goal for me is the big leagues," said Mauer, who at age 35 is in his second season as manager of the Cedar Rapids Kernels, the Twins' Class A Midwest League affiliate.

"There are only 30 of those (major league) jobs out there. Actually, any part of a big-league staff is something I'm trying to keep striving for, trying to attain. You've just got to keep smiling and plugging away. This is a good place for me right now. Hopefully, that light at the end of the tunnel is Minnesota."

As he continues to build a managerial resume that he hopes will someday draw the attention of the Twins' front office, Mauer doggedly works in the summer heat, scurrying like a jitterbug from station to station, educating prospects on hitting, fielding and base running techniques.

It is not unusual to see him helping out the grounds crew, picking up trash in the dugout and giving fatherly advice to a young prospect.

He does a little bit of everything for the Kernels.

"You wear so many different hats with this job," he said. "This is a level of baseball where guys are starting to figure things out and discover what it takes to compete at those higher levels. To see them figure it out is a truly rewarding thing. We take a lot of pride when one of our guys gets called up. That means we've done our job providing the tools for that player to succeed at higher levels."

Mauer has a 342-300 managerial record in seven seasons in the Twins organization.

He managed the Class A Fort Myers Miracle from 2010-12 and the Gulf Coast League Twins in 2008 and '09. The Kernels are 26-18 in the second half of the season and a half-game out of first place. He led the Kernels to an 88-50 record and championships in both halves of last season before the team made a quick exit in the Midwest League playoffs.

The Twins won't have to look far for one major vote of support in Mauer's climb to the big leagues.

His little brother, Joe, has seen it for years, and is seeing it again firsthand this week during his rehab stint with the Kernels.

"I don't see why he wouldn't be a big-league manager," said Joe, the Twins' first baseman who is recovering from an oblique muscle strain. "Ever since we were little kids, he was always thinking one or two pitches ahead, one or two plays ahead, in whatever sport we were playing. He understands the game so well. He understands the game from all aspects. It's nice to see it firsthand."

The Twins picked up Jake Mauer, a Division III All-America infielder while playing for the University of St. Thomas, in the 23rd round of the 2001 amateur baseball draft by Minnesota -- the same draft the Twins made his little brother the No. 1 overall pick. Jake played five seasons in the Twins' minor-league system before an elbow injury forced him to retire after the 2005 season. He had a .256 batting average and 82 runs batted in during his minor league career, climbing as high as Class AA New Britain.

"He was phenomenal as a hit-and-run guy for us," said Jim O'Neill, his former high school coach at Cretin-Derham Hall. "A lot of guys can't comprehend that part of the game at that age. If he saw a shortstop creeping in, he would immediately adjust and belt the ball over his head. He would see those things in the game that others didn't, the things others would overlook. He is so bright. I knew the minute his playing career started to slow down that the Twins would get him to the coaching side."

O'Neill said one of his favorite things is attending Twins spring training in Fort Myers. He especially likes going onto the back fields at the complex where he often finds Mauer teaching prospects or conversing with former Twins manager Tom Kelly.

"He sees the big picture and has the tools to succeed at the top level," O'Neill said.

A year ago, managers in the 16-team Midwest League voted Mauer as the managerial prospect most likely to make it to the major leagues.

"I think I'm on the right path," he said. "You learn so much each year, and I'm eager to put that knowledge to great use. It's nice that people see we're doing well, but the ultimate goal is to get these guys ready to play in Minnesota. Winning 100 games certainly makes it a fun summer, but if we get four or five guys off this roster that make it to the big leagues, then I'd say we're pretty successful.

"Nothing in this (career journey) has ever gotten to the point where I'd throw my hands up and say this isn't worth it. You go through phases where you get frustrated, but nothing has ever been enough to get me to walk away from this. Never."

5 thoughts on would-be game winners, bunting and Correia

Derek Wetmore / 1500 ESPN – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS - Glen Perkins blew just his fourth save of the season in 32 chances and the Twins stranded 14 runners Wednesday. That added up to an extra innings loss to the Padres, 5-4.

This column presents 5 thoughts from Wednesday's game.

As always, feel free to ask questions or make observations in the comments. If you have a unique baseball observation during a game, feel free to share it with me on Twitter (@DerekWetmore).

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1. Kevin Correia started the game for the Twins. He pitched six innings and allowed five hits and three earned runs. More to the point: why was Correia starting a game for the Twins in August when they're out of contention?

The Twins have 50 starts remaining to hand out to starters, and there's a strong case to be made that each should be given to a pitcher with a chance to make the starting rotation next season.

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2. Backup catcher Eric Fryer picked off a runner at second base in the seventh inning to preserve what was then a one-run lead. Yonder Alonso led off the seventh with a single and moved to second base when the next batter walked. With first and second and no outs, Alonso got a little bit too big of a lead and Fryer threw behind him to second base, where Eduardo Escobar was in place to make the catch and apply the tag.

I spoke with a former Major League catcher recently who said that often times a catcher will need to have a throw predetermined before a pitch. That allows the catcher to get set up not only to receive a pitch, but to catch it in a place where he can then make the quickest throw to a base.

In this case, however, Fryer said it was more reactionary, when he saw enough 'daylight' to catch the runner.

"Mentally I just said 'be ready' in case he bunts through it or takes one high. Once I saw the clearance, there was a lot of space there, I'm throwing every time," Fryer said.

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3. Speaking of failed bunt attempts, the Twins had a safety squeeze attempt foiled with Jordan Schafer at the plate. He sacrifice bunted successfully Tuesday, but this bunt -- with runners at first and third -- went straight to the ground and bounced up to catch Schafer as he was leaving the batter's box, so he was ruled out.

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4. Later, there was another interesting situation involving a bunt. Kurt Suzuki led off the bottom of the 10th inning with a pinch-hit single up the middle. Josh Willingham had been getting loose to hit for Schafer, but once the catcher reached base, Schafer walked to the plate and bunted Suzuki to second base.

Studies have shown that bunting in that exact base-out situation reduces the total run expectancy. (If you're curious about the specifics, bunting there drops a team's expectation from 0.941 runs per inning to 0.721 runs.) But the Twins were playing for the tie, and it's also important to consider that getting the runner to second increases the percentage chance that single run scores.

Ron Gardenhire said after the game that Willingham would have hit for Schafer if Suzuki didn't reach base. If the decision is to bunt in that situation, it makes sense to stay with Schafer instead of Willingham.

Generally speaking, I'm against sacrifice bunting because the most important object to score runs in baseball is to avoid outs. But there are certain high-leverage spots in which it can make sense to trade an out for advancing a runner, depending on the score, the skill of the batter and how many outs remain in the game.

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5. Eduardo Escobar slammed his helmet in frustration on the base paths after hitting what looked to be a walkoff winner in the bottom of the ninth inning. With runners on first and second with two outs and center fielder Alexi Amarista playing shallow, Escobar lined a pitch over his head that would have easily scored Eduardo Nunez from second base. Amarista was playing shallow to prevent Nunez from scoring on a ground ball to center or to take away any bloop hits, it seemed.

But Amarista raced back and made a highlight reel-worthy grab to send the game to extra innings.

Escobar threw down his helmet after rounding first base and jumped several times in apparent disbelief.

"Yeah I hit it good with Amarista playing in so I thought it was a hit. Then I saw him run and run and run and run, it was a nice play," Escobar said.

The two were double play partners in Venezuela, Escobar said, when Amarista played second base.

In the Twins dugout, the feeling when Escobar connected was that the game would be over.

"When he hit it I thought it was down for sure," Fryer said, "just because [Amarista] was playing so shallow, trying to take away a little bleeder. Guy made a great play, going back, over his shoulder. ... Dang it."

Twins leave 14 runners on base in extra-innings loss to Padres

Associated Press – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS -- Center fielder Alexi Amarista made a game-saving catch in the bottom of the ninth inning and Seth Smith followed with a solo homer in the 10th to lift the San Diego Padres to a 5-4 victory over the Minnesota Twins on Wednesday.

Amarista ran backward on a dead sprint and laid out for a brilliant diving catch of a drive off the bat of Eduardo Escobar with two on and two outs to keep the game tied.

Smith had two hits and two RBIs. Joaquin Benoit picked up his fourth save in five tries and the Padres earned a split in the two-game series.

Trevor Plouffe had a homer and three RBIs for the Twins. But All-Star closer Glen Perkins blew his fourth save in 32 chances this year.

San Diego trailed 4-3 going into the ninth against Perkins. Everth Cabrera tied the game with a sacrifice fly and Yonder Alonso added two doubles and a single for San Diego.

The Padres earlier in the day hired Texas Rangers assistant GM A.J. Preller as the team's new general manager, two people with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press. The people spoke on condition of anonymity because an official announcement had not been made.

The speedy Amarista was a late-game defensive replacement, and what a move it was for manager Bud Black. He raced a good 30 yards or more to track down Escobar's hit and the Padres bench erupted when he hauled it in.

Smith responded with a drive more than 400 feet off Anthony Swarzak(2-1) into the right-field stands for his 12th homer. Benoit was able to strand the potential tying run at second base in the 10th.

Kevin Quackenbush (2-2) got the win after starter Odrisamer Despaigne gave up four runs on eight hits with three walks and five strikeouts in 5 2/3 innings for the Padres.

Kevin Correia gave up three runs on five hits with three strikeouts in 5 2/3 innings.

Escobar had two hits and an RBI for the Twins, who jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the first inning on Plouffe's eighth homer of the year.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said first baseman Joe Mauer and right-hander Ricky Nolasco both had successful debuts on their rehab stints with Class A Cedar Rapids on Tuesday night. Mauer (strained right oblique) was scheduled to play first base on Wednesday. If all goes well, Mauer will join the team in Houston next week.

Gardenhire said Nolasco (elbow) "felt great" after throwing 51 pitches. He will make at least one more start before being activated.

UP NEXT

Twins: Minnesota starts a four-game series in Oakland on Thursday night. RHP Yohan Pino (1-3, 4.57) pitches for the Twins against newly acquired A's LHP Jon Lester (11-7, 2.59).

Allowing hit in ninth finally burns Perkins

Tyler Mason / FOX Sports North – 8/6/14

MINNEAPOLIS -- Twins closer Glen Perkins had been playing with fire lately, but it wasn't until Wednesday that he finally got burned.

In each of his last six outings, the left-hander allowed at least one baserunner in the ninth inning. While he got the save in five of those games -- the other was a lopsided Minnesota loss -- he made things interesting, if at least for a brief moment.

That finally caught up to the All-Star closer Wednesday as he blew his fourth save of the season. It wound up turning what would have been a one-run Twins win into a 5-4 loss in 10 innings.

"Today, Perk didn't get it done," said Twins manager Ron Gardenhire.

The biggest regret Perkins had in the ninth inning, he said, was a leadoff double to Yonder Alonso. The Padres first baseman didn't waste any time swinging against Perkins, lining the first pitch he saw to center field before scampering easily into second base.

Batters have had success -- especially recently -- when swinging early in the count against Perkins. For the season, opposing hitters are batting .464 on the first pitch. He's given up more hits on the first pitch (13) than on any other count.

Alonso must have read the scouting report, because he wasn't fooled by Perkins' 93 mph offering.

"I thought he was going to take a pitch. He didn't take a pitch," Perkins said. "It starts with the leadoff double. Mistaking the situation and thinking they were going to take a pitch, he jumped on a fastball and he didn't miss it. . . . I think recently here, guys have been swinging a little earlier on me, and I need to make adjustments on that."

After the double to Alonso, Perkins then walked former Twins catcher Rene Rivera, who entered the game in the seventh inning as a pinch hitter. That six-pitch walk put two Padres on base with nobody out as Perkins dug himself an even deeper hole.

A sacrifice fly by Alexi Amarista helped advance Alonso to third base, moving the tying run 90 feet from home plate. One more sacrifice fly, this time off the bat of Everth Cabrera on a 1-2 pitch, was hit deep enough to right fielder Oswaldo Arcia to bring Alonso home to make it a 4-all game. Arcia fired home to catcher Eric Fryer, but the throw was high and not in time to prevent the tying run.

"I had him 0-2 and made him some good pitches and then left a slider up," Perkins said. "Arcia did everything he could with it to try to catch it and make a play at home. He made a hell of an effort at it, and he scored there. But it starts with the leadoff double."

The tying run mean Perkins had blown his chance for his 29th save of the season. The Twins failed to score a run in the ninth, and San Diego capitalized in the 10th on a solo homer by Seth Smith off reliever Anthony Swarzak to win the second game of the brief two-game series. It snapped the Twins' nine-game winning streak over the Padres, which dated back to 2008.

Wednesday's game also extended Perkins' recent stretch of less-than-perfect outings. In his last 11 games, Perkins has allowed hits in 10 of them -- although Wednesday was just the second time he gave up a run during that stretch, and his first blown save since July 20.

"Closers make it interesting. They always do," Gardenhire said. "People come in there hacking against closers, and Perk's as good as there is. He's a good one. Today, he got a couple pitches up and they jumped him early."

After seeing once again that opposing hitters are looking to swing early in the count, Perkins knows his game plan needs to change.

"They're probably not wanting to get to two strikes and having to deal with the slider or guessing what I'm going to throw," Perkins said. "I think they're making a little adjustment on me. That's on me to adjust back and kind of figure out a better process of getting ahead and then putting guys away."

Verot grad Hudson Boyd reinstated by Minnesota Twins

David Dorsey / News-Press – 8/6/14

Hudson Boyd, a Bishop Verot High School graduate and minor league pitcher for the Minnesota Twins, has been reinstated by the team.

Boyd, 22, was suspended indefinitely by the Twins following his July 24 performance for violating undisclosed team rules.

Boyd is a relief pitcher for the low Class A Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Kernels, one level below the Class A Fort Myers Miracle.

Minnesota Twins director of minor leagues Brad Steil met with Boyd last week and decided Sunday to lift the suspension after six days.

"We just talked about expectations and making good decisions," Steil said. "He's taking the steps to get back on the field and understands he made a mistake. He knows going forward he needs to make better decisions."

Steil declined to divulge Boyd's rules violation, and Boyd could not be reached for comment.

Boyd, the No. 55 pick in the 2011 draft, pitched Sunday and again Tuesday night. He did not give up a run in either one-inning appearance. He had a combined one walk and no strikeouts.

"He did OK," Steil said. "He was rusty after being out."

Boyd has a 4-2 record and 4.34 ERA in 36 relief appearances this season. He has compiled 35 strikeouts and given up 26 walks in 45 and two-thirds innings.