



Clips

(September 24, 2014)

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FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Erick Aybar steals a run, Gordon Beckham homers in 2-0 Angels' win

By MIKE DIGIOVANNA

KEY MOMENT: Oakland loaded the bases off setup man Joe Smith in the eighth when Eric Sogard singled and Josh Donaldson and Brandon Moss walked with two outs. But Smith got Stephen Vogt to fly to right to snuff out the rally.

AT THE PLATE: Erick Aybar stole a run in the second when he singled, swiped second on a delayed steal, took third on Geovany Soto's throwing error and scored when Soto threw to second on Efen Navarro's stolen-base attempt. Gordon Beckham, who probably has won a spot on the playoff roster, led off the sixth with a homer off A's starter Sonny Gray.

ON THE MOUND: Jason Grilli replaced starter Wade LeBlanc with one on in the sixth and struck out Donaldson, hit Moss with a pitch and struck out Vogt. Kevin Jepsen threw a scoreless seventh, and Huston Street retired the side in order in the ninth for his 16th save with the Angels and 40th of the season.

IN THE FIELD: With a runner on third and two outs in the fifth, Angels second baseman Howie Kendrick charged Sogard's bunt, made a bare-hand grab and off-balance throw to first for the out to preserve a 1-0 lead.

REHAB REPORT: Josh Hamilton, who has missed 17 of 18 games because of right shoulder, chest and rib-cage injuries, hit off a tee again Tuesday but probably won't return until this weekend. ... Matt Shoemaker (left rib-cage strain) played catch for the second straight day Tuesday and "is definitely making progress," Manager Mike Scioscia said.

OUT SICK: Ace Jered Weaver missed Monday's game because of flu-like symptoms and returned to the team hotel before batting practice Tuesday. Scioscia said the Angels could push Weaver's next start to Saturday. Weaver would still be in line to start Game 1 of the division series Oct. 2.

FREESE FRAME: David Freese, who is batting .339 (21 for 62) with four home runs, five doubles and 14 RBIs in his last 18 games, sat out Tuesday because of upper back stiffness, but he said the injury is not serious.

THE KID ON THE KID: Former star Ken Griffey Jr. and an MLB film crew talked to Angels star Mike Trout for a special that will appear on Fox Sports 1 on Oct. 9.

UP NEXT: Left-hander Hector Santiago (5-9, 3.98 ERA) will oppose Oakland left-hander Jon Lester (16-10, 2.41 ERA) at the Oakland Coliseum on Wednesday at 12:30 p.m. On the air: TV: FS West. Radio: 830 AM.

Angels' Wade LeBlanc makes pitch for playoff spot in 2-0 win over A's

By MIKE DIGIOVANNA

The tangled web of an injury-plagued and struggling Angels rotation grew even more convoluted Tuesday night, but for a good reason. Veteran left-hander Wade LeBlanc has thrust himself into the playoff picture.

LeBlanc, filling in for the injured Matt Shoemaker, allowed five hits over 5 1/3 scoreless innings in a 2-0 victory over Oakland that pushed the Athletics into a tie with the Kansas City Royals for the American League wild-card lead.

Combined with his 5 1/3-inning scoreless effort last Thursday against Seattle, LeBlanc, who was designated for assignment three times this season — twice by the Angels — has thrown 10 2/3 scoreless innings in two starts, allowing eight hits, striking out four and walking one.

With Shoemaker questionable for the division series because of a rib-cage strain and Hector Santiago getting shelled in his last two starts, LeBlanc has positioned himself to be considered for the playoff rotation. At the very least, he should earn a long-relief spot.

"Any time players perform well and put their best foot forward, it makes you a stronger club," Manager Mike Scioscia said. "We haven't made any decisions about what our playoff rotation and roster will be, but those are two really strong starts by Wade. He looked good, and that's all a player can do."

LeBlanc, who spent most of the season at triple-A, is having too good of a time to think about his chances of pitching in the playoffs.

"It's been awesome," LeBlanc, 30, said. "It's been a big-time blessing to end up back here with the opportunity to throw some meaningful pitches and try to give these guys a chance to win. If you do your job, I feel like everything takes care of itself."

Santiago will try to solidify a playoff rotation spot today against the A's. The left-hander looked like a lock when he went 5-0 with a 2.29 earned-run average in 12 games from July 10 to Sept. 9, but two starts in which he was rocked for nine earned runs and 12 hits in three innings of losses to Houston and Texas put him on shaky ground.

"Hopefully it will be a nice clean game, no walks, a lot of strikes, a lot of outs, and I give us a chance to win," Santiago said. "I definitely want to get back on the right path to where I was before the last two outings."

If not, Santiago may head into downtown Oakland and jump into Lake Merritt. After lasting one inning and giving up six earned runs against Texas last Friday, Santiago shaved his head and sat in a hot tub and ice bath in full uniform.

"As soon as I started shaving, my head felt cool, I let some steam out," Santiago said.

"I did a little hot-tub time machine, trying to beam myself to the future and forget about the day. Then I jumped in a cold tub for a little contrast."

This is nothing new for Santiago, who drove to his Arizona home in full uniform after a shoddy spring-training start and jumped in his pool, and who showered with his uniform on after a shaky Sept. 4 start in Minnesota.

"It's part of my cleansing process," Santiago said. "I'm not saying it's going to work or make me a better pitcher, but sometimes I feel like I want to wash all this bad stuff away."

Santiago can help his cause by attacking the strike zone and pitching to his strengths on Wednesday.

"My last start I tried to throw a lot of two-seam fastballs and get early ground-ball outs," Santiago said.

"I'm going back to my old approach, more of a 'here it is, hit it if you can.' "

FROM THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Status quo for Angels' Shoemaker, Hamilton

· posted by JEFF FLETCHER

OAKLAND - The two biggest medical issues facing the Angels in the week before the playoffs gained little clarity Tuesday.

Matt Shoemaker played catch and Josh Hamilton hit off a tee, both repeating the work they did Monday.

Hamilton may play as soon as Friday, but Manager Mike Scioscia said Shoemaker will not pitch before the end of the regular season.

A new, albeit minor, injury cropped up Tuesday. David Freese was not in the lineup with what Scioscia called stiffness in his upper back. Scioscia said he expects Freese to be back in the lineup Wednesday.

Howie Kendrick, who missed Monday's game because of a tight hamstring, is back in the lineup.

The Angels will face the Oakland A's on Tuesday at 7 p.m., with Wade LeBlanc taking the ball against Oakland's Sonny Gray.

Final: Angels 2, A's 0

BY JEFF FLETCHER / STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND – Welcome to the postseason conversation, Wade LeBlanc.

LeBlanc, a journeyman who has been designated for assignment three times this season, suddenly has positioned himself to help an Angels pitching staff full of question marks, perhaps into October.

Inserted into the rotation after Matt Shoemaker got hurt, LeBlanc posted his second consecutive scoreless outing in the Angels' 2-0 victory over the Oakland Athletics on Tuesday night.

The Angels, who cut their magic number to three over the Baltimore Orioles to clinch the best record in the American League, certainly now must consider LeBlanc for the postseason roster, especially if Shoemaker can't go.

The Angels remain publicly optimistic about Shoemaker, but he still hasn't tried to throw off a mound.

If Shoemaker isn't ready for the playoffs, and the Angels need a starter to join Jered Weaver, C.J. Wilson and Hector Santiago, LeBlanc has put himself right alongside Cory Rasmus. Rasmus has more sustained success in the majors this season, but LeBlanc can go deeper into a start.

All of this seemed unlikely for a guy who the Angels designated twice, with the Yankees letting him go once in between. All three times, all 29 other clubs passed on picking him up, so he stuck with the Angels.

LeBlanc got knocked around for six runs when he got the first opportunity to fill in for Garrett Richards in late August. Since he's back in September, and especially since Shoemaker's injury gave him another chance to start, he's been a different pitcher.

The 30-year-old lefty – owner of a career 21-33 record in parts of seven big league seasons – has now strung together 15 $\frac{2}{3}$ consecutive scoreless innings. In his two starts in the past week, he's had matching starts of 5 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings.

The A's did not get a runner into scoring position against LeBlanc until the fifth inning, when Josh Reddick ripped a one-out double. Reddick was at third with two outs when Howie Kendrick saved LeBlanc a run charging and making a barehand pickup of Eric Sogard's attempt to drag bunt for a hit.

The Angels bullpen then did what it has done for most of the second half, with Jason Grilli, Kevin Jepsen, Joe Smith and Huston Street preserving the lead.

They didn't have much room for error because the Angels could manage only two runs against Sonny Gray, who struck out 12 in seven innings.

Erick Aybar created the game's first run with alert baserunning. He took second on a delayed steal against catcher Geovany Soto, who has an unorthodox stutter in his throws back to the mound. Soto's throw went into the outfield and Aybar took third. He scored on an attempted double-steal, when Efen Navarro was caught between first and second.

In the sixth, the Angels scored a more conventional run, on a Gordon Beckham homer.

After shutting down A's, LeBlanc a new piece in playoff puzzle for Angels

BY JEFF FLETCHER / STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND – Welcome to the postseason conversation, Wade LeBlanc.

LeBlanc, a journeyman who has been designated for assignment three times this season, suddenly has positioned himself to help an Angels pitching staff full of question marks, perhaps into October.

Inserted into the rotation after Matt Shoemaker got hurt, LeBlanc posted his second consecutive scoreless outing in the Angels' 2-0 victory over the Oakland Athletics on Tuesday night.

Manager Mike Scioscia conceded that LeBlanc has helped himself in the postseason consideration.

"Any time players perform well it's going to help you to be stronger and it will help you to make some decisions," Scioscia said. "We haven't made any decisions yet, but that's two strong starts from Wade."

The Angels, who cut their magic number to three over the Baltimore Orioles to clinch the best record in the American League, have serious issues facing their rotation heading into the postseason.

If Shoemaker isn't ready for the playoffs – and he still hasn't thrown off a mound – the Angels could be looking for someone to join Jered Weaver and inconsistent lefties C.J. Wilson and Hector Santiago.

LeBlanc has put himself into the conversation, alongside Cory Rasmus. Rasmus has more sustained success in the majors this season, but LeBlanc can go deeper into a start.

All of this seemed unlikely for a guy the Angels designated twice, with the Yankees letting him go once in between. All three times, all 29 other clubs passed on picking him up, so he stuck with the Angels. He said he came back because the Angels were honest with him at all times about where he stood.

"It's been a big time blessing to end up back here with the opportunity I've had to throw some meaningful pitches and give these guys a chance to win," LeBlanc said. "It's been awesome."

The 30-year-old lefty – owner of a career 21-33 record in parts of seven big league seasons – has now strung together 152/3 consecutive scoreless innings. In his two starts in the past week, he's had matching starts of 51/3 innings.

On Tuesday night he put on a clinic on how to get outs without eye-popping stuff. Hint: throw strikes.

"That's the way Wade pitches when he's on," Scioscia said. "Just his ability to command both sides of the plate with his fastball. Although it's not overpowering, it has a lot of life when you combine it with his offspeed pitch."

The A's had only one real threat against LeBlanc, and that was defused by the defensive play of the game. With a runner at third and two outs, Eric Sogard tried to reach on a drag bunt. Howie Kendrick charged, barehanded the ball, and threw Sogard out.

"It's a do-or-die play," Scioscia said. "He made it as well as you can."

Change of approach didn't work for Angels' Santiago

BY JEFF FLETCHER / STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND – Hector Santiago provided Exhibit A for why it may not be a good idea for pitchers to change their approach to get deeper into games.

Santiago, who will make his final regular season start Wednesday afternoon against the A's, will be looking to bounce back from a pair of terrible outings.

His last out was the result, he said, of trying to be more efficient with his pitches.

"I had a stretch where I wasn't (allowed to go past) 90 pitches, so I was trying to see if I could get through the sixth with 60 instead of 80," Santiago said. "I was trying to make better pitches early to get earlier outs."

Santiago said he threw more two-seam fastballs instead of four-seamers, which is normally what pitchers do when they are trying to get ground balls.

What he ended up with were a lot more hits.

Facing the Texas Rangers, Santiago got only three outs and gave up seven runs on seven hits. In an effort to get more outs with fewer pitches, he did the opposite.

Santiago was at the other end of the spectrum in his previous start, when he walked five in two innings and threw 82 pitches to get just six outs. That one, he said, was more of an isolated disaster.

Neither game, however, did anything to shake Santiago's confidence.

"I didn't even look back," he said. "I forgot about them."

The Angels, whose rotation is full of questions, desperately need Santiago to get back to the way he was throwing before the two-start hiccup, when he had a 2.61 ERA over a seven-start stretch.

STATUS QUO

Matt Shoemaker and Josh Hamilton repeated the workouts they did Monday, which was encouraging but not indicative of whether either will be ready for the playoffs.

Shoemaker, who has a strained left oblique, will not pitch in a game before the regular season ends, Manager Mike Scioscia said.

"He's moving in the right direction, but we're not going to have any indications until he gets out there, does full long toss, and gets on the mound," Scioscia said.

Hamilton, who has discomfort in his rib cage, hit off a tee. Hamilton might be able to play by Friday.

A SHOT FOR RASMUS?

If Shoemaker isn't able to pitch, the Angels may end up giving Cory Rasmus a start in the postseason. If that happens, the Angels would likely view it as another bullpen day, rather than hoping for Rasmus to get through five or six innings.

Scioscia said "it's not ideal" to have a bullpen day in the postseason, but they may not have a choice.

"We're going to do what we have to do," Scioscia said. "We're going to do what we feel is best to get through a game, an inning. Whatever we need to do. That's the only way you can approach the playoffs. If it takes a bullpen day, so be it. We've done remarkably well when those guys have had to do it."

TROUT-GRIFFEY

Mike Trout spent part of his afternoon Tuesday with Ken Griffey Jr. for a piece by Major League Baseball Productions.

Griffey and Trout talked hitting and discussed some of Trout's performances, including the at-bat in which he hit a grand slam against Chris Sale.

The piece will air on Fox Sports 1, probably some time in October.

NOTES

Jered Weaver has been away from the team two days in a row because of the flu. If Weaver is unable to make his scheduled start Friday in Seattle, the Angels could push him back to Saturday and still have him on regular rest for Game 1 of the division series Oct. 2. ...

David Freese was not in the lineup because of "upper back tightness," Scioscia said. He said Freese is expected to be back in the lineup Wednesday.

On deck: Angels at A's, Wednesday, 12:30 p.m.

BY JEFF FLETCHER / STAFF WRITER

Where: O.co Coliseum

TV: Fox Sports West, 12:30 p.m.

Did you know: Albert Pujols has 33 go-ahead RBI this season, most in the majors and one shy of the Angels record, set by Vladimir Guerrero in 2006.

THE PITCHERS**LHP HECTOR SANTIAGO (5-9, 3.98)**

Santiago had a 2.61 ERA over a seven-start stretch before imploding in his past two outings. He gave up nine earned runs in three innings. Against Oakland, though, Santiago has had three good games this season. He's allowed two earned runs in 18 innings, including his only seven-inning start of the year.

- **Vs. Athletics:** 1-2, 2.39
- **At O.co Coliseum:** 0-2, 6.43
- **Loves to face:** Josh Donaldson, 1 for 11 (.091)
- **Hates to face:** Josh Reddick, 3 for 7 (.429)

LHP JON LESTER (16-10, 2.41)

For all the talk about how the trade of Yoenis Cespedes may have been responsible for the A's slide, no one can say that Lester hasn't delivered on his part of the deal. Lester has a 2.20 ERA in 10 starts with the A's, although he's just 6-3 in those games because of the slumping offense.

- **Vs. Angels:** 4-3, 3.94
- **At O.co Coliseum:** 4-4, 2.61
- **Loves to face:** Gordon Beckham, 2 for 21 (.095)
- **Hates to face:** Erick Aybar, 7 for 20 (.250)

Miller: Angels, Dodgers find fate fickle

Angels starters turn vulnerable, as the Dodgers look healthy with the playoffs fast approaching.

BY JEFF MILLER

LOS ANGELES – He was talking about this time a year ago, as his team was readying for the playoffs and – in an instant – he was readying for the most unwanted of layoffs.

“I thought my ankle was good,” Dodgers outfielder Matt Kemp recalled Tuesday. “I woke up one day and couldn't walk.”

And that got me thinking about today's Angels, who are prepping for the postseason only to keep waking up too often to find they can't pitch.

For a sport with sing-alongs, snow-cone catches and – in the case of the Dodgers – dugout bubbles, baseball can be oddly cruel, a kid's game with consequences too adult.

The Angels are finishing up what could be the best season in either league, a season in which they've appeared at times invincible, yet they've never looked more, well, vincible.

That's what can happen when it's the end of September and suddenly you have only one healthy, reliable starting pitcher. Unless Jered Weaver figures out how to sprout two more arms in the next week, the Angels could be in trouble.

The Dodgers, by comparison, are as healthy as the dislike between Yasiel Puig and San Francisco's Madison Bumgarner, and those two guys just looked like they were ready to set fire to each other's lips.

That's the one thing you can always assume when these teams meet: There's a chance of something MMA breaking out.

The Dodgers understand. Why else would they have invited Bruce Buffer, of all people, to throw out one of the ceremonial first pitches Tuesday? He's the official Octagon announcer for the UFC.

Sure, the Dodgers do have concerns about the state of Hyun-Jin Ryu's shoulder and the general condition of every reliever who comes before closer Kenley Jansen.

But the Dodgers, unlike the Angels, can be fairly confident they'll enter October with the minimum number of roster pieces required.

Their magic number slipped to one Tuesday with a 4-2 victory that proved they can muster the adrenaline necessary to play deep into the postseason.

Puig took growling exception to a Bumgarner pitch that – were it not for the history here – would have seemed innocent enough. I mean, the slider hit him near his ankle. Who ever heard of a pitcher being a foot hunter?

But Puig and Bumgarner had a similar testosterone dance at Dodger Stadium in May when the pitcher evidently didn't appreciate Puig's posing and subsequent pace around the bases after hitting a solo home run.

The Giants hit Puig on Monday, too, before Bumgarner dinged him in the first inning this time, leading to one of those classic baseball brawls during which everyone puffs up and blows hot air but no actual brawling takes place.

At one point, Bumgarner ripped off his mitt and tossed it away in the style of a hockey player, and let's not forget that even Teemu Selanne once dropped his gloves in this town and fought.

There certainly was a theme winding around here Tuesday, and it started three hours before the game. That's when Dodgers manager Don Mattingly talked about gut punches, but he was making reference to losing in September.

"It's like a playoff loss," Mattingly explained. "It hurts you. You go home thinking about it."

The same could be said, presumably, of a broken jaw.

Alas, there were no punches thrown this time ... unless you count the blow Kemp then immediately landed.

Just one batter later, he ripped a Bumgarner fastball over the center-field wall, giving the Dodgers a 3-0 lead and continuing a second-half surge that has Kemp feeling markedly better about himself and his status, this time around.

For one thing, Tuesday he didn't have to limp around the bases. For another, it was his birthday, and it would have been hard for 30 years old to feel much younger.

"The last two years have been pretty freaky," Kemp said, talking mostly about the injuries that have slowed him. "You know, everything happens for a reason. Just gotta stay healthy (now) and stay on the field. That's all I can pray for."

This victory put the Dodgers in position to celebrate their National League West title Wednesday night and do so at the expense of their biggest rivals. Maybe Buffer should be invited back.

Even better, the Dodgers will be sending out the ace of a generation, Clayton Kershaw, and who wouldn't have scheduled this delightful convergence of circumstances 158 games ago?

"Nothing's ever perfect," Kemp said, still talking about his struggles the past few seasons. "Nothing happens the way you want it to happen. If things could be different, I'd have had a better first half and a good second half. But that's just not the way it is."

Wednesday night, though, things could be pretty close to perfect for the Dodgers, who'll never have a more ideal chance of reminding the Giants just how cruel this sport can be.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Clock is ticking for Shoemaker, Hamilton

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Matt Shoemaker and Josh Hamilton continued to make progress on Tuesday, but their status for the American League Division Series didn't get any clearer.

Shoemaker, out since suffering a mild left oblique strain on Sept. 15, played light catch for the second straight day, "and again he's moving in the right direction," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said, adding that Shoemaker is now "symptom-free." The 27-year-old rookie is already guaranteed to not pitch again in the regular season and will have to progress to long toss before he can pitch off a mound, perhaps during one of the workout days early next week.

"We're not going to have any indications until he gets out there, does full long toss and gets on the mound," Scioscia said. "That's the challenge right now, to see how that progresses. It's still going to take a little bit of time, but he's still making progress."

Hamilton -- limited to one game in the last 19 days because of pain in his right AC joint, shoulder, chest and rib cage -- took some swings for the second straight day and is still hopeful of returning to the lineup by Friday's series opener in Seattle. But the 33-year-old hasn't been able to throw yet, and may only be available to the Angels in the ALDS as a designated hitter, if at all.

"If he can just swing, so be it," Scioscia said. "Obviously we're better with him playing left field."

Below are some additional injury updates ...

Jered Weaver: The Angels' ace stayed at the team hotel on Monday and left about three hours before game time on Tuesday, after playing catch, because he continued to feel under the weather. Weaver is slated to make his last regular-season start on Friday, but he can be pushed back to Saturday and still be in line to start Game 1 of the ALDS.

David Freese: The veteran third baseman was out of the starting lineup Tuesday because of "a little upper-back tightness," Scioscia said. Freese is expected to return to the lineup for Wednesday's series finale at O.co Coliseum.

Howie Kendrick: Kendrick was held out of Monday's lineup for precautionary reasons, one day after exiting early with some soreness in his left hamstring, but the Angels' second baseman was back in on Tuesday.

LeBlanc's gem sends Angels closer to AL's top seed

Lefty silences A's; magic number to lock up best record shrinks to 3

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Wade LeBlanc was designated for assignment three times this season. The Angels designated him on May 31 and the Yankees claimed him three days later, designated him two weeks after that and watched him reject his outright assignment and return to the Angels, who designated him once again on Aug. 26 and ultimately took him off their 40-man roster.

LeBlanc thought about that late Tuesday night after shutting down the A's, twirling 5 1/3 scoreless innings for the second time in six days in a 2-0 victory at O.co Coliseum.

"You know what, it's been awesome," the journeyman left-hander said. "It's been a big-time blessing to end up back here, with the opportunity that I've had to throw some meaningful pitches and try to give these guys a chance to win."

LeBlanc's win kept the Angels 2 1/2 games up on the Orioles for the best record in baseball and trimmed their magic number to lock up home-field advantage throughout the postseason to three. Seeding isn't manager Mike Scioscia's primary concern, though. His focus is on maintaining some semblance of momentum heading into the American League Division Series and trying to figure out what to do with his pitching.

LeBlanc has made his case for cracking the Angels' postseason roster.

"We're looking at a lot of things this week," Scioscia said, "and anytime players perform well, obviously it's going to help you to be stronger and help you to make some decisions. We obviously haven't made any decisions yet, but that's two strong starts from Wade right there."

Last Thursday, the day after the Angels clinched the AL West title, LeBlanc found out around noon that he'd be replacing Jered Weaver and starting against Felix Hernandez, then he gave up three hits, no walks and no runs in 5 1/3 innings. On Tuesday, the 30-year-old gave up five hits and one walk in 5 1/3 innings and outpitched a lights-out Sonny Gray, who struck out a career-high 12 batters in seven innings.

LeBlanc doesn't want to concern himself with his chances of cracking the postseason roster, "Especially with a team like this behind you," he said. "You just want to go out there and enjoy every pitch."

His outing -- plus a combined 3 2/3 scoreless innings by Jason Grilli, Kevin Jepsen, Joe Smith and Huston Street -- handed the A's their seventh shutout loss since the start of August, sending them into a tie with the Royals for the AL Wild Card lead while keeping them three games up on the Mariners for the second spot.

"He didn't really miss over the plate tonight," A's first baseman Stephen Vogt said of LeBlanc after stranding six baserunners. "He's a really good pitcher, and the key [to get to him] is when he misses over the plate, and he didn't do that tonight."

The Angels, who must win three of their final four games to finish with 100 wins, won the kind of game they won many times over at the start of the second half, before their offense started to click. Their starter kept them in the game, their bullpen threw up zeros and their position players did the little things.

Like Erick Aybar, who toyed with A's catcher Geovany Soto in the second inning, breaking to second as he casually lobbed the ball back to the pitcher, advancing to third when Soto's errant throw trickled away and later scoring when Soto threw to second on Efren Navarro's attempted steal.

Or Howie Kendrick, who got the Angels out of the fifth by barehanded Eric Sogard's bunt and making a perfect, off-balance throw to first baseman Albert Pujols with a runner on third. The next half-inning, the Angels got a critical insurance run on Gordon Beckham's leadoff homer.

"Me and Albert were both like, 'Man, he may try to bunt,' and sure enough, he laid it down," Kendrick said of Sogard. "It was a great bunt by him, and I was just able to make a play. The only play I had was to barehand it and throw it, and it was still close."

Angels put 'it factor' on display in win over A's

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Angels, it should be established, own the best record in Major League Baseball for a reason. They have acquired the confidence and ability to steal games they appear to have no business winning, out of force of habit if nothing else.

On Tuesday night in the East Bay, all the tangible incentives, plus a dominant pitching effort, were with the Athletics. They needed this game and hurled themselves into it. All that did, at the end of the day, was magnify their frustration.

The Angels, with Mike Trout, Albert Pujols and Howie Kendrick a combined 0-for-11, snatched a 2-0 decision to send the A's and the partisans in a lively crowd of 27,588 home unhappy. Oakland and Kansas City are tied for the American League Wild Card lead, with Seattle three games off the pace.

The Halos have 97 wins -- three more than the AL East champion Orioles, five more than the National League leader, the East champion Nationals.

"Good teams find ways to win," Angels leadoff catalyst Kole Calhoun said. "We're a good team. I'm not in their clubhouse, so I don't know how they feel, but we're extremely happy."

The Athletics were deflated. How else could they feel? They had everything going for them in this one.

Young Sonny Gray was in prime-time form. The kid with the golden arm struck out 12 across seven innings, putting away Trout three times, Pujols twice. Gray looked unbeatable matched against Wade LeBlanc, a left-handed journeyman trying to carve out a niche in the big time.

The Angels prevailed, leaning on opportunism, a deep bullpen and the belief that this is what they're supposed to do. It's what happens when a team goes 52-26, as the Halos have since July 1.

One of the runs against Gray was manufactured entirely by Erick Aybar's daring and speed on the bases after a leadoff single in the second inning. The other came with one Gordon Beckham swing, lifting into the seats a delivery Gray didn't seem to think was so bad in the sixth.

"It was a fastball away," Gray said. "I got a ton of outs with that pitch tonight. That one, he got."

Calhoun opened the game with a double to right, but he stayed there, watching Gray strike out Trout, Pujols and Kendrick in succession.

"He attacks, comes after you," Calhoun said. "He's not scared out there. Sliders, curves, cutter ... he mixes them all and knows what he's doing. Gray competes against us like that every single time."

A's manager Bob Melvin anticipated a strong effort by Gray and marveled at the way he went after the Angels' loaded lineup.

"He was up for it," Melvin said. "When he came in the dugout, there was a look in his eye that he was going to get after it. He had everything working."

Gray had eight strikeouts through three innings.

The Athletics took their best shots at LeBlanc, but they fired blanks. In the third, they had two hits around a double-play grounder. In the fourth, they had a walk, a single and two line-drive outs. In the fifth, Josh Reddick doubled -- his second of three hits -- with one out but LeBlanc left him at third.

"LeBlanc is the story of the game," Calhoun said. "That was an awesome game he pitched. He mixed his pitches well, kept them off balance. Just a great performance by Wade."

LeBlanc, who was set free by both the Yankees and Angels this season, made it through 5 1/3 innings, lowering his ERA from 5.24 to 4.23. He yielded five hits and struck out 11 fewer men than Gray, but he minimized damage and showed a veteran's poise and resolve.

In the sixth, Halos manager Mike Scioscia began rolling in his big guns: Jason Grilli, Kevin Jepsen, Joe Smith, Huston Street. The A's loaded the bases in the eighth against Smith, but Stephen Vogt lifted a fly ball to right to quiet fans hoping to go a little crazy.

"It's tough at times," Gray said. "We did hit the ball hard tonight. We just didn't find any holes. Hopefully tomorrow those balls will find some gaps. It's just the way it goes. We lost. All that really matters is winning."

LeBlanc wants to pitch in the postseason for the AL West champions, and he is making a pretty decent case for himself given the unsettled nature of the staff.

Gray made a name for himself last October in the postseason, pitching brilliantly -- just not quite as brilliantly as the Tigers' Justin Verlander, who vanquished the A's in the AL Division Series.

Gray's performance against the Angels came on the heels of a pedestrian outing against the Rangers. It has been seven starts since his most recent victory, but it's not easy to claim wins when your offense is in a deep funk.

Melvin went away from the club's customary platooning against LeBlanc, injecting left-handed bats Reddick, Vogt and Eric Sogard into the lineup. Sam Fuld made it four lefty swingers against LeBlanc, and Brandon Moss entered mid-game. They fared well as a group, reaching base eight times, but the bottom line was empty.

The Angels, winning by force of habit, took care of that.

Trout meets Griffey to tape FOX Sports 1 show

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Mike Trout finally met one of the men he most closely resembles on Tuesday -- Ken Griffey Jr.

Griffey is one of few center fielders throughout history who can match Trout's combination of power, speed, on-base ability, defense and, well, popularity. And prior to Tuesday's game, the two sat down for about a half hour at one of the family rooms at O.co Coliseum, reviewing Trout's game film for an episode of "Big Sticks with Ken Griffey Jr." on FOX Sports 1, which will air at some point during the American League Division Series.

"It's cool," said Trout, who earlier this year became the first Major League player since Griffey to get his own shoe from Nike. "Growing up watching him on TV, playing all his video games, it's pretty cool, just sitting down and talking to him.

"We just went over some swings, went over some at-bats. I thought it was pretty cool just sitting down and talking to him."

Angels may give Rasmus a shot at 2015 rotation

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In 2007, there was damage to his rotator cuff, his shoulder capsule was tightened and doctors may have even shaved off some of his labrum, so Cory Rasmus missed his entire second pro season. To start 2011, he unknowingly chipped the end of his collar bone, near his AC joint, and made seven painful starts before he underwent another surgery. It was then that the Braves decided to move him out of the rotation for good, placing Rasmus in the reliever's role he's now flourishing in with the Angels.

Next year, Rasmus may get another crack at starting.

The 26-year-old right-hander has started each of the last five times Garrett Richards' spot has come up, but he hasn't been stretched out further than 59 pitches because he's worked mostly as a short-inning reliever the last three years. Turning Rasmus back into a starter "is no doubt going to be a conversation over the winter," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said on Tuesday.

Scioscia even left open the possibility of Rasmus starting in the American League Division Series, which would basically turn into a bullpen game because he can't really go much longer than four innings at this point.

"We're going to do what we have to do," Scioscia said. "We're going to do what we feel is the best for us to get through a game, an inning, whatever we need to do. That's the only way you can approach the playoffs. If it takes a bullpen game, so be it. We've done remarkably well when those guys have had to do it."

For a team without much pitching depth in the upper levels of its system, and few available funds to acquire it in the offseason, it makes all the sense in the world to give Rasmus a shot at starting next year.

"That's completely on them," Rasmus said. "If they offer that up, I wouldn't be against it. But at the same time, I'm not banking on it."

Rasmus has a solid four-pitch mix, which features a four-seam fastball, changeup, slider and curveball. And his stuff has translated to the Major League level this year, while posting a 2.38 ERA, a 1.04 WHIP and a 3.38 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 53 innings.

"It gives me a little confidence that my stuff plays a little bit," Rasmus said. "I can go out there and trust it and not have to worry about being perfect every pitch. Go out there and throw it in the zone, let them hit it."

Santiago seeks redemption as Angels face A's

Lester gets the call for Oakland as AL Wild Card race starts to boil

By Aaron Leibowitz / MLB.com

Hector Santiago, who will toe the rubber for the Angels on Wednesday afternoon in the rubber match against the A's at O.co Coliseum, has recorded a total of nine outs in his last two starts. Immediately after his latest outing, he showered with his uniform on, shaved his head completely and shaved off his beard, leaving only a goatee. It was a cleansing method, if you will.

"I'm a new guy, bro. I am a different breed. I am a hybrid," Santiago said. "I came out of that shower, and that haircut, changed, happy. Feliz, man. Like no other. Not many times I'm going to give up six runs and give myself a haircut and feel as good as I do."

The cleansing was no joke, but Santiago wanted to keep the mood light after his brutal performance against the Rangers.

"Honestly, it helped," he said. "Instead of people not wanting to talk to me to, 'Whoa, what did you do?' I don't want to be the guy in the clubhouse that nobody wants to talk to. I want to be approachable, even if I had a perfect game or if I didn't record an out. I want to be the guy who's, 'Man, he doesn't change his attitude.' Because that's who I am. I'm not going to be in a bad mood."

Santiago's confidence in himself is a reflection of the confidence he feels his teammates have in him. That confidence is especially important now, given the doubts surrounding the Angels' rotation in the wake of his struggles, Matt Shoemaker's oblique strain and C.J. Wilson two-out outing on Monday.

That's concerning for a team that has basically worked with a four-man rotation since Garrett Richards was lost for the season on Aug. 20.

"I don't think one game should dictate anybody," Santiago said, "because if we're going to go by that, how many times can I look at our offense and be like, 'Oh my god, he's going to hit four balls in the infield, or he's going to strike out four times,' and then the next day they go 3-for-4, hit some home runs, whatever it is."

"I'm worried coming out of the last one, just because about all the comments from the outside about, 'Oh, we have a one-man rotation.' No, we don't. We have a four-man rotation."

Jon Lester will start Wednesday afternoon for the A's, whose magic number to clinch an American League Wild Card spot is three after Tuesday night's 2-0 loss to the Angels and the Mariners' 10-2 loss to the Blue Jays. Lester has been nothing shy of fantastic since being dealt to Oakland at the Trade Deadline. In 10 starts in green and gold, he is 6-3 with a 2.20 ERA, 64 strikeouts and 16 walks.

The lefty has won each of his last three starts and has held opponents to two earned runs or fewer in six straight -- even when he hasn't had his best stuff.

"He's been terrific every time out there," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "You feel like you don't have to score many runs for him because he's going to do a good job, and you'd like to make it easy on him every once in a while, but every time out there, he's deep in the games, 110-plus pitches and comes out with the lead. That's all you can ask for."

Wednesday marks the A's final home game of the season and their last of a nine-game homestand. They are tied with the Royals for the top AL Wild Card spot, with the Mariners three games back.

Angels: Freese sits with back tightness

Third baseman David Freese did not play Tuesday night because of upper-back tightness, but he is expected to return to the lineup for the series finale.

The Angels certainly need Freese, who only gets better as the games become more important. In 65 at-bats this September, he has four home runs, 14 RBIs and a slash line of .323/.371/.585.

For his career, Freese's OPS in the final month of the regular season is .883, higher than in any other month.

A's: Norris likely to catch Wednesday

Geovany Soto has done a nice job behind the plate with the A's catching corps banged up, but Melvin said Tuesday that Derek Norris is likely to work with Lester on Wednesday.

Norris received a shot Sunday in his right arm, which was hurting from a play at the plate on Saturday. He was the designated hitter on Tuesday, and Melvin would certainly like to let Soto rest for Wednesday's day game after a night game.

With John Jaso out with a concussion and Stephen Vogt unable to catch, Norris started 27 of 28 games behind the plate between Aug. 22 and Sept. 20.

Worth noting

- The A's are 3-5 on their final homestand. They have lost nine of their last 13 home games and will finish the year with only two losing homestands -- their last two.
- Oakland is 31-38 this season in games decided by two runs or fewer.

- Shoemaker and outfielder Josh Hamilton (rib inflammation) have made progress, but their status for the AL Division Series remains unclear.

FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Angels shut out A's as Sonny Gray's 12 strikeouts go for naught

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Three times this season Wade LeBlanc got designated for assignment and bounced back, two of those cases with his current club.

His latest performance might have earned him a spot on the Angels' playoff roster, or at least made manager Mike Scioscia think hard about the decision.

LeBlanc (1-1) ran his scoreless stretch to 15 2/3 innings over his last six outings in a 2-0 victory over Oakland on Tuesday night, dropping the Athletics into a tie with Kansas City for the AL's top wild card spot.

"Any time players perform well, it's going to help you to be stronger and help you make decisions," Scioscia said. "We haven't made any decisions yet but these are two strong starts from Wade."

LeBlanc allowed five hits in 5 1/3 innings for the AL West champions. LeBlanc is the second of three straight left-handers the Angels are throwing in this series.

He was first designated by the Angels on May 31, then by the New York Yankees in June, and Los Angeles again in late August.

"It's been awesome. It's been a big-time blessing to end up back here with the opportunity I've had to throw some meaningful pitches and try to give these guys a chance to win," LeBlanc said. "They've been awesome about everything."

Gordon Beckham homered for the Angels, who struck out 12 times against A's starter Sonny Gray. Mike Trout was fanned three times in Gray's biggest strikeout game yet, one month to the day after Jon Lester struck out the Angels slugger three times at the Coliseum.

But Gray had nothing to show for it as Oakland was shut out for the seventh time since Aug. 1.

Gray (13-10) is 0-3 in his last six starts. The right-hander has one victory in 11 starts since a 5-0 July that earned him AL pitcher of the month honors.

Of Trout's 13 games with three or more strikeouts, three are against the A's. Gray struck out eight of the first 11 batters he faced.

"He was tough against us," Scioscia said. "We didn't get many hits but we did some things on the bases to generate some runs. We made it hold up."

The A's had a chance to tie the game in the fifth after Josh Reddick's one-out double. Eric Sogard grounded out two batters later on an off-balance throw by second baseman Howie Kendrick that just beat Sogard, who slid headfirst.

Los Angeles went ahead in the second on an unearned run when Erick Aybar scored from third during a rundown. Efen Navarro was caught stealing at second on a 2-6-3-4 double play after Hank Conger struck out swinging.

Beckham hit his ninth homer leading off the sixth.

The A's loaded the bases in the eighth against Joe Smith, who retired Stephen Vogt on a shallow fly to right to escape unscathed. Huston Street finished the three-hit shutout for his 16th save with the Angels and 40th overall.

"I left a small village of runners in scoring position," Vogt said.

Oakland was shut down after scoring 16 runs over its previous two games. That outburst came after the A's totaled only 19 runs in their previous 10 contests.

LeBlanc did his part.

"Whatever happens after this is hopefully with this team," he said. "I love the guys here, I love the staff. Everything's been incredible so far."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Angels: Jered Weaver (18-8) had the flu for a second straight day and left the ballpark. Scioscia said there is flexibility to push Weaver's next start from Friday to Saturday if the right-hander needs an extra day. ... 3B David Freese was held out of the lineup after he experienced tightness in his upper back earlier in the day. ... OF Josh Hamilton hit off a tee for the second straight day. He missed his 18th game in 19 because of pain in his upper body. ... Scioscia said RHP Matt Shoemaker is "symptom-free" from a strained left oblique but won't pitch again in the regular season. He still needs to throw off a mound. "You don't want to jump over a step and risk setting yourself back," Scioscia said.

Athletics: C Derek Norris was the DH for a second straight day after requiring an injection in his troublesome shoulder. He is slated to start Wednesday's series finale.

UP NEXT

Angels: LHP Hector Santiago (5-9, 3.98 ERA) has pitched two or fewer innings in each of his past two starts -- both losses -- after winning his previous three. He had no-decisions with a 1.00 ERA in his first three outings against Oakland this season.

Athletics: Lester (16-10, 2.41) looks to improve on his 3-1 September record and beat the Angels for the first time in three starts this year.

FROM USA TODAY SPORTS

Angels found harmony when Moreno said 'go figure it out'

Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY Sports

ANAHEIM, Calif. - The rumors spread rapidly that someone had to go.

If it wasn't the general manager, surely the manager was going to have to be fired, if they were ever going to win again.

Well, that press conference that was widely speculated finally happened Monday, but in Atlanta, where GM Frank Wren was fired.

Oh, and that firing that was supposed to happen in Anaheim?

Sorry, Los Angeles Angels owner Arte Moreno was too busy wiping the champagne from his eyes after the Angels clinched the AL West Division, singing the praises of GM Jerry Dipoto and manager Mike Scioscia, instead of firing anyone.

Funny what a little patience can do in baseball.

One year after showing signs of organizational disconnect, the Angels are headed to the playoffs for the first time in five years, boasting baseball's finest record.

Moreno, 67, California's version of late Yankees owner George Steinbrenner with his fiery competitiveness, made his greatest move this season by simply making no move.

"Arte is so competitive (like Steinbrenner)," Dipoto says. "He's so invested in this club, and he's all about winning. The standard he holds, me and everyone else in the organization, is doing the right thing.

"And winning. He's not in it for any financial reward. He's in it for the jewelry."

Oh sure, Moreno was infuriated by the Angels' results a year ago, when they staggered to a 78-84 record, their worst performance in a decade.

He was miffed that his GM and manager weren't getting along. And, oh, boy, was he ever frustrated.

Yet, just when everyone was trying to figure out which man was going to be fired, Moreno kept both of them, with the duo leading the Angels back to the postseason in search of Moreno's first World Series title as owner.

"Arte pretty much told both of us," Dipoto told USA TODAY Sports, "I believe in you.

"And I believe in you.

"Now go figure it out."

Scioscia, who told USA TODAY Sports that he met with Moreno and Angels president John Carpino after the season, trying to establish some guidelines, came away convinced he and Dipoto could have a solid working relationship.

Sure, maybe you're never going to convince Scioscia that advanced metrics will replace what he sees with his own eyes. And maybe Dipoto believes that analytics are more invaluable than the simple batting average and ERA stats.

Yet, after meeting during the winter, with a full-scale summit of the entire front office and coaching staff in January, they truly believed they could co-exist, and yes, even win a championship.

"All of us had some very candid meetings after the season," Scioscia says. "Talking with Arte, and John Carpino, I think there was some real clarity that was outlined, as to where we he felt we could go, and what we needed to do.

"That got the off-season more focused, and he had the confidence in Jerry and I to be able to accomplish that." And I've always loved the passion Arte has. He has high expectations, but he backs up those expectations for our club by giving us the tools to reach those expectations."

It was spending \$240 million on Albert Pujols and \$77.5 million on starter C.J. Wilson one year. Spending \$125 million on Josh Hamilton the next. And expending a franchise-record \$161.9 million on payroll this year.

Every penny was spent on trying to win, and to win right now.

But since they weren't winning, well, it seemed like someone would have to pay a price.

Moreno, who says he has watched every single pitch of every Angels game this season, whether in person, via TV or iPad, knew that everyone anticipated him to make an impetuous decision last year. Yet, Moreno still believed he had one of the finest managers in the game. He believed he made the right choice in hiring Dipoto, and it would be grossly unfair to fire him after two years.

Sure, Scioscia and Dipoto certainly butted heads, and had different philosophies, but he told them that whether they like it or not, they better get along, or they'd both be looking for work after the season.

Now, go win a championship.

"We sat down with both of those guys," Moreno told USA TODAY Sports. "The best thing is to surround yourself with the best people available, and I thought we had those guys. We weren't in a situation we were trying to be negative. We just asked what we can do to improve to get to the Promised Land."

"His numbers are unbelievable"

Moreno could have fired Scioscia, who's under contract through 2018, but couldn't in his heart blame him for their second losing season in four years. It wasn't his fault that Albert Pujols got hurt, Hamilton's bat went AWOL and he had no reliable reliever in his bullpen.

"If you look at his numbers, his numbers are unbelievable," Moreno says of Scioscia. "It's really hard to make a quick decision on what I consider is a long-term commitment. It was really a hard thing to do. I have a good relationship with Mike, and know his family. He's good with players and fans. We just had some players that were hurt and others that didn't perform like we expected."

Dipoto, meanwhile, hardly had time to put his stamp on the organization.

"One of the reasons we hired Jerry is that I really liked the way he viewed baseball analytics," Moreno says. "I really thought he would do a good job drafting and building our system. I didn't think he had enough time to rebuild a minor-league system, and make those adjustments, not just with our 25-man roster, but our entire system.

"I believed he deserved to come back."

It was left up to Dipoto and Scioscia to make it work.

Dipoto, who never met Scioscia until his introductory press conference two years ago, finally really started to get to know his manager this winter. They shared philosophies. They talked about ideas. And finally, they came to an understanding.

"If we were at A and Z before," Dipoto said, "I think we found a way to get to L and M. It just took time for us to all adjust. And along the way, we've gotten to know each other better. I like Mike personally, so we never had any issues getting along in that regard, we just had different ideas. We just made sure we communicated more frequently than we did in the past.

"We talked baseball, and we walked baseball. We got on the same page, and never varied from it all year. Mike and his staff did an unbelievable job of keeping everyone together, and getting guys to seemingly rise up out of nowhere."

Indeed, the team's success has been as much about the emergence of starter Matt Shoemaker, reliever Mike Morin, DH C.J. Cron and outfielder Collin Cowgill as it is the sustained brilliance of Mike Trout or Pujols' revival.

Scioscia has accepted some of the analytics thrown his way, and the Angels have employed more defensive shifts this season than any time in the past. Dipoto listened to Scioscia, and re-modeled the bullpen, making shrewd trades and signing Joe Smith to become their invaluable setup man.

Voila, a divisional title, with the chance to become only the second team in franchise history to win 100 games.

"Arte gave us some time," Dipoto says, "and hopefully now, we're repaying him with a little joy."

Yes, it's a start, Moreno says. One celebration down. Three to go.

"What we've done is a really nice accomplishment," Moreno says, "but the reality is that we're looking for that gold ring. George was George, but you always used to hear and read that George (Steinbrenner) always wanted to win it for their fans.

"Well, I feel the same way.

"I want this generation of fans to experience a World Series championship.

"The way I figure it, it's time."

FROM FOX SPORTS WEST

Can't get everything right: Five errors I made during the season

Ken Rosenthal/FOX Sports

The first lesson of baseball writing — and the first lesson of baseball decision-making, too — is that you're going to be wrong once in a while.

I know, I know — not every writer gives off that vibe. And certain sabermetric absolutists — YOU, BRIAN KENNY — rarely, if ever, admit flaws in their thinking.

Well, the game humbles everyone. Which is why, once again, I am offering my end-of-the-season mea culpa column, an acknowledgement that some of my grand proclamations this season amounted to, well, rubbish.

I do not expect this heartfelt confession to satisfy all of those 140-character experts on Twitter, most of whom are convinced that I hate their team and their team only.

I also do not expect my admission of past sins to translate into fewer sins in the future. Sorry, I likely will author the same number of dumb columns in 2015, if not an even greater number.

Let my critics keep score.

It is now time for me to cleanse my soul.

MEA CULPA NO. 1: ROBINSON CANO

The offending passage, written the day after Cano signed his 10-year, \$240 million contract with the Mariners:

This is the strangest move by a free agent since Alex Rodriguez signed with the Rangers after the 2000 season.

It also is strange for the Mariners, who — for all their payroll flexibility and new local TV money — are not anywhere close to contention.

I obviously sold the Mariners short — they've contended all season. I sold Cano short, too. Yes, this was only Year One of 10. But rarely has a big-money free agent performed at such a high level for his new team.

Cano is in the top 10 in the American League in both widely accepted versions of Wins Above Replacement (WAR). His OPS adjusted to park and league — is nearly the same as it was in his last two seasons with the Yankees.

The Mariners, in general, have demonstrated the value of star power — Cano, third baseman Kyle Seager and pitchers Felix Hernandez and Hisashi Iwakuma all are among the league's top performers.

Mariners fans, I know what you're thinking: Isn't Rosenthal going to apologize for all his "Trade Felix" columns, too?

Been there, done that.

And besides, I only wrote two.

MEA CULPA NO. 2: JACOB DEGROM

The offending passage, written two weeks ago:

Yes, Billy Hamilton ranks 60th out of 68 in OPS among NL hitters with enough plate appearances to qualify for the batting title. But his defense and baserunning more than compensate for his hitting deficiencies, and he has been with the Reds all season, appearing in 139 of 145 games.

DeGrom's case lacks the same bulk — he did not join the Mets until May 13 and was on the disabled list from Aug. 12 to 23 due to right rotator cuff tendinitis.

Mets fans can stop tweeting at me now.

I take it back. I TAKE IT ALL BACK!

Those who dwell on Hamilton's offensive shortcomings tend to overlook his other attributes. But in the end, I also can't get past Hamilton's .293 on-base percentage — .256 since the All-Star Break through Monday.

deGrom, on the other hand, kept improving, pitching to a 1.33 ERA, holding opponents to a .457 OPS and producing a 38-to-6 strikeout-to-walk ratio in September.

He's fun to watch. And yes, he's Rookie of the Year.

MEA CULPA NO. 3: DENARD SPAN

The offending passage, written in June when the Nationals were talking about moving Ryan Zimmerman back to third base once left fielder Bryce Harper returned from left thumb surgery:

In this case, there is a way out:

Trade or bench Span.

Several Nationals veterans scoffed when I broached the idea to them last weekend, saying that Span was one of the best defensive center fielders in the game. The advanced metrics, while not always reliable in rating defense, do not support their contention.

As it turned out, I read Harper's mind — he, too, later suggested a lineup that did not include Span. But the mistake I made — which I later acknowledged in print and on television, and am acknowledging again — was placing too much value on defensive metrics in a small sample.

Span continues to rate below-average in both defensive fWAR and defensive runs saved, but even full-season samples are not always accurate. The previous three seasons, he rated above average. And beyond all that, he has batted .343 with an .855 OPS since the break.

I actually am a huge fan.

MEA CULPA NO. 4: DEE GORDON AND THE DODGERS' BENCH

The offending passage, written in spring training as the Dodgers planned to start Gordon and his career .614 OPS at second base while proceeding with a questionable bench:

The Dodgers' payroll is projected to exceed \$225 million, and this is how they plan to round out their roster?

The consensus among evaluators in Arizona is that the Dodgers' bench is the weakest in the NL West.

I wasn't completely wrong — the Dodgers ended up demoting outfielder Mike Baxter, releasing infielder Chone Figgins and going with Drew Butera over Tim Federowicz as their backup catcher.

On the other hand, I failed to anticipate that infielder Justin Turner and outfielder Scott Van Slyke would prove invaluable — and that Gordon would develop into an All-Star, albeit one who has a .639 OPS since the break.

Oh, and one other thing:

I will not apologize for writing in May, "Several veteran players believe something is missing in the Dodgers' culture, and club officials wonder about the team's makeup, too."

Manager Don Mattingly, alluding to the team's internal friction, recently compared the Dodgers to the '72 A's.

MEA CULPA NO. 5: THE ANGELS

The offending passage, written on Aug. 21, the day after Garrett Richards suffered a season-ending torn patellar tendon in his left knee.

"Woke up this morning, and the Angels stood a 98.6 chance of making the postseason and 55.1 percent chance of winning the AL West, according to Fangraphs.

"But without right-hander Garrett Richards, who is almost certain to miss significant time due to a left-knee injury, does anyone seriously think the Angels are as strong a possibility to win the division?"

Ahem.

At the time, the Angels held a 1½-game lead in the West. The Athletics already had begun their free fall. But Richards' ERA was 2.61, and the rest of the Angels' starters were at 4.04.

It sure didn't seem likely that the Angels would win 18 of their next 23 games and run away with the division. But that is exactly what they did, and for my next trick I will underestimate them in the playoffs, too.

Oh, you've never seen my postseason predictions?

Haha. They're coming soon.

*FROM SPORTS XCHANGE***Team Report – LOS ANGELES ANGELS**

OAKLAND, Calif. Los Angeles Angels left-hander Hector Santiago could be pitching for a spot in the postseason rotation when he starts Wednesday against the Oakland A's.

After winning three consecutive decisions, Santiago has lost two straight, lasting a combined three innings against the Houston Astros and Texas Rangers. He gave up three runs on five hits over two innings in a 6-1 loss to the Astros on Sept. 14, then was knocked out after one inning Friday in a 12-3 loss to Texas. He gave up seven hits and a season-high seven runs to the Rangers.

Santiago isn't the only pitching question mark for Angels manager Mike Scioscia.

Right-hander Matt Shoemaker is 16-4 with a 3.04 ERA, but he hasn't pitched since sustaining a mild left oblique strain Sept. 15. Shoemaker played soft catch for the second day in a row Tuesday but has been ruled out for the rest of the regular season. He has yet to play long toss or throw off a mound.

Left-hander C.J. Wilson had arguably his worst start in an inconsistent season Monday night in an 8-4 loss against Oakland. He allowed six runs, four of them earned, on two hits and four walks in a season-low two-thirds of an inning. Wilson threw 35 pitches, but only 12 for strikes.

"We'll see exactly where our pitching staff is," Scioscia said Tuesday before his team's 2-0 victory against Oakland. "It's something we're paying a lot of time to. I know (pitching coach Mike Butcher) is putting every ounce he can into just seeing exactly where guys are and projecting what they can do for us. We'll see.

"There's some variables that aren't very well defined right now. Definitely the way C.J.'s throwing the ball, definitely the way Hector's throwing the ball. Matt Shoemaker's health. There's a lot of things I think we'll have to weigh this year."

Left-hander Wade LeBlanc (1-1) pitched his second consecutive gem Tuesday night against Oakland. He lasted 5 1/3 shutout innings, allowing five hits while striking out one and walking one to earn the victory.

"Staying aggressive, throwing strikes, commanding the fastball," LeBlanc said of his keys to success. "I didn't have much in the way of swing-and-miss stuff tonight, but (catcher) Hank (Conger) did an unbelievable job of changing speeds and controlling counts."

NOTES, QUOTES

RECORD: 97-61

STREAK: Won one

NEXT: Angels (LHP Hector Santiago, 5-9, 3.98 ERA) at Athletics (LHP Jon Lester, 16-10, 2.41 ERA)

PLAYER NOTES:

LHP Wade LeBlanc (1-1) gave up just five hits over 5 1/3 shutout innings Tuesday night in a 2-0 victory over the A's. LeBlanc, who spent most of the season pitching for Triple-A Salt Lake, made just his third major league start of the season and 10th appearance. In his previous start Thursday, LeBlanc blanked Seattle on three hits over 5 1/3 innings, striking out three and walking none in a no-decision. He threw a second consecutive gem Tuesday in his second career start against the A's.

SS Erick Aybar went 1-for-3, scored a run and stole a base Tuesday night in a 2-0 victory against Oakland. Over his past 32 games, he is batting .342 (38for-111).

3B Gordon Beckham hit his ninth home run of the season Tuesday night against Oakland and his second since being traded by the Chicago White Sox to the Angels on Aug. 21. Beckham, the No. 9 hitter, drilled a solo shot leading off the sixth inning against RHP Sonny Gray in the Angels' 2-0 victory against the A's. Beckham has 13 hits in his past 41 at-bats (.317).

RHP Matt Shoemaker (mild left oblique strain) played soft catch for the second consecutive day and continued making progress, but Angels manager Mike Scioscia said Shoemaker will not pitch again during the regular season. "Shoe feels better," Scioscia said Tuesday. "He's moving in the right direction, but we're not going to have any indication until he gets out there and does full long toss and gets on a mound. So that's the challenge right now to see how that progresses. That's going to take a little bit of time, but he's definitely making progress."

LF Josh Hamilton (sore right ribcage) hit off a tee Tuesday for the second consecutive day but has yet to throw since being hurt Sept. 16. Angels manager Mike Scioscia ruled out Hamilton for Wednesday's series finale against Oakland but still hopes the veteran can play again in the regular season. "Making progress but not ready for a game yet," Scioscia said before Tuesday's game. "There's going to probably be a little something he has to work out as far as throwing the baseball. We're going to see where he is. If he could just swing, then so be it, but obviously we're better with him playing left field. When that comes, it comes."

2B Howie Kendrick, who strained his left hamstring Sunday, returned to the starting lineup Tuesday night against Oakland after missing one game. "He feels good," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said before the game. "He probably could have played yesterday, but we held him out an extra day. He feels really good today. He's good to go." Kendrick, batting fourth, went 0-for-3.

3B David Freese did not play Tuesday against Oakland due to minor upper back tightness. "We're going to give him a day. Should be out there tomorrow," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. According to Scioscia, the back tightness began Tuesday.

RHP Jered Weaver continued battling an illness and was sent back to the team hotel before Tuesday night's game against Oakland. Weaver also did not attend Monday's game. Weaver is scheduled to start Friday at Seattle. "We have a little flexibility, and if he needs one more day we can push him back to Saturday," said Angels manager Mike Scioscia, whose team has an off day Thursday. "But right now we're just going to take it one game at a time, one day at a time. He's feeling a lot better today. We'll see how he feels tomorrow and then where he is on Friday."

QUOTE TO NOTE:

"That's the way Wade pitches when he's on. Just his ability to command both sides of the plate with his fastball. Although he's not overpowering, it has a lot of life to it when you combine it with his off-speed pitches." Manager Mike Scioscia, on LHP Wade LeBlanc, who threw 5 1/3 scoreless innings Tuesday in a 2-0 victory against the Oakland A's.

ROSTER REPORT**MEDICAL WATCH:**

3B David Freese (minor upper back tightness) did not play Sept. 23. He is day-to-day.

RHP Jered Weaver (illness) was sent back to the team hotel Sept. 23. He is scheduled to start Sept. 26, but his turn could be pushed back to Sept. 27.

2B Howie Kendrick (strained left hamstring) left the Sept. 21 game, and he didn't play Sept. 22. He returned to the lineup Sept. 23.

LF Josh Hamilton (sore right side) last played Sept. 16. He took swings off a batting tee Sept. 22-23. He won't play Sept. 24, but the Angels hope he will be able to return before the end of the regular season.

RHP Matt Shoemaker (mild oblique strain) left the Sept. 15 game, and he missed his scheduled start Sept. 20. He played soft catch for the first time Sept. 22. He will not pitch in another regular-season game, but the Angels are optimistic he will be ready to pitch in the postseason.

RHP Garrett Richards (torn left patellar tendon) went on the 60-day disabled list Aug. 21. He underwent season-ending surgery Aug. 22. He might not be ready for the start of the 2015 season.

LHP Tyler Skaggs (strained flexor tendon in left forearm) went on the 15-day disabled list Aug. 1, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on Aug. 10. He underwent season-ending Tommy John surgery Aug. 13. He will miss the rest of the 2014 season and all of the 2015 season.

LHP Sean Burnett (torn left ulnar collateral ligament) went on the 15-day disabled list May 29, and he was transferred to the 60-day disabled list June 3. He underwent season-ending Tommy John surgery June 5.

RHP Ryan Brasier (right elbow strain) went on the 15-day disabled list retroactive to March 21, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on April 16.

LHP Brian Moran (left elbow inflammation) went on the 15-day disabled list retroactive to March 21, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on April 13. He underwent season-ending Tommy John surgery in mid-April.

ROTATION:

RHP Jered Weaver
RHP Matt Shoemaker
LHP C.J. Wilson
LHP Hector Santiago
RHP Cory Rasmus

BULLPEN:

RHP Huston Street (closer)
RHP Joe Smith
RHP Jason Grilli
RHP Kevin Jepsen

RHP Michael Morin
LHP Joe Thatcher
RHP Fernando Salas
RHP Yoslan Herrera
LHP Michael Roth
RHP Cam Bedrosian
LHP Wade LeBlanc
RHP Vinnie Pestano
RHP Jairo Diaz
RHP Drew Rucinski

CATCHERS:

Chris Iannetta
Hank Conger
John Buck

INFIELDERS:

1B Albert Pujols
2B Howie Kendrick
SS Erick Aybar
3B David Freese
INF John McDonald
INF Gordon Beckham
INF Grant Green
INF C.J. Cron
INF Luis Jimenez
INF Efrén Navarro
INF/OF Shawn O'Malley

OUTFIELDERS:

LF Josh Hamilton
CF Mike Trout
RF Kole Calhoun
OF Collin Cowgill
OF Brennan Boesch
OF Tony Campana
OF Roger Bernadina

Team Report – OAKLAND ATHLETICS

OAKLAND, Calif. The Oakland A's wasted right-hander Sonny Gray's career-high, 12-strikeout gem Tuesday night as well as a chance to bolster their position in the American League wild-card playoff race.

Oakland's bats went silent in a 2-0 loss to the Los Angeles Angels. The A's fell into a tie with the Kansas City Royals for the top spot in the wild-card race. The A's (86-71) and Royals (86-71) are three games ahead of the slumping Seattle Mariners (83-74) with five games remaining.

Gray (13-10) allowed two runs, just one of them earned, over seven innings but fell to 1-6 over his past 10 starts. He gave up three hits and three walks. For the 16th time in his 32 starts, Gray received two or fewer runs of support.

"Anytime you get a great pitching performance like that, it's frustrating to not reward him," A's outfielder Sam Fuld said.

Gray fanned eight of the first 11 batters he faced, striking out the side in the first and third innings. He became the first A's pitcher to strike out 12 in a game since Dan Haren fanned 12 on Aug. 27, 2006, at Texas.

"I just felt good from the beginning," said Gray, who gave up five runs and eight hits against the Rangers in his previous outing. "I felt good going out there in the first. I had a good mindset. Unfortunately, it just wasn't enough today."

Gray, as usual, threw mid-90s heat, but he mixed in plenty of curveballs and sliders, the latter a pitch he hasn't used much in the past.

"That was terrific," A's manager Bob Melvin said of Gray's performance. "He was up for it today. You could see when he came in the dugout there was a look in his eye he was going to get after it."

NOTES, QUOTES

RECORD: 86-71

STREAK: Lost one

NEXT: Angels (LHP Hector Santiago, 5-9, 3.98 ERA) at Athletics (LHP Jon Lester, 16-10, 2.41 ERA)

PLAYER NOTES:

RHP Sonny Gray (13-10) struck out a career-high 12 batters Tuesday night but took the loss as the A's fell 2-0 to the Los Angeles Angels. Gray became the first A's pitcher to strike out 12 in a game since Dan Haren fanned 12 on Aug. 27, 2006, at Texas. He allowed two runs, just one of them earned, on three hits and three walks over seven innings.

RF Josh Reddick went 3-for-4 with a double, matching his season high for hits Tuesday night in a 2-0 loss to the Angels. Reddick is batting .583 (7-for-12) on the homestand after going 2-for-21 (.095) on the Athletics' most recent road trip. He is batting .310 in Oakland and .202 on the road.

C Geovany Soto went 0-for-3 and grounded into two double plays Tuesday night in a 2-0 loss to the Angels. Soto, who had a total of five RBIs in his previous two games, saw his 10-game hitting streak against the Angels end.

C Derek Norris (sore right shoulder) started at designated hitter Tuesday night against the Angels for the second straight game but was available to catch if needed. He went 1-for-2. "I could use him today (behind the plate)," manager Bob Melvin said before Oakland's 2-0 loss. "Last night, not the case." Barring a setback, Norris will start at catcher Wednesday against the Angels. He was injured Saturday against Philadelphia and had a cortisone injection Sunday.

QUOTE TO NOTE:

"He went out there and threw the ball well and gave us an opportunity to win. ... It was just really frustrating to not get him the win and not get us the win." 1B Stephen Vogt, on RHP Sonny Gray, who struck out 12 Tuesday in the Athletics' 2-0 loss to the Los Angeles Angels.

ROSTER REPORT**MEDICAL WATCH:**

C Derek Norris (bruised chin, sore right shoulder) was hurt Sept 20 but remained in the game. He did not play Sept. 21, and he received a cortisone shot in his shoulder. He returned as the designated hitter Sept. 22-23. He is scheduled to start at catcher Sept. 24.

OF Craig Gentry (concussion) left the Sept. 9 game and did not play Sept. 10-23. As of Sept. 21, he was still feeling concussion symptoms and hadn't resumed baseball activities. There was no timetable for his return.

C John Jaso (concussion symptoms) went on the seven-day disabled list retroactive to Aug. 24. He battled concussion symptoms since Aug. 8, when he took a hard foul ball off his mask. Jaso ran, shagged balls, played catch and hit in the cage Sept. 1. Jaso took batting practice on the field Sept. 2, ran the bases Sept. 5 and began catching bullpen sessions Sept. 6. He visited a concussion specialist Sept. 10 in Pittsburgh and was not cleared to return. He is out indefinitely.

1B Kyle Blanks (torn left calf, left Achilles tendinitis) went on the 15-day disabled list retroactive to June 23, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on Aug. 24. Initially out due to the calf ailment, Blanks began a rehab assignment with Triple-A Sacramento on Aug. 9. He experienced a setback Aug. 20 when he developed left Achilles tendinitis, and he was shut down. There is no timetable for his return.

RHP A.J. Griffin (right flexor tendinitis) went on the 15-day disabled list retroactive to March 21, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on May 4. He underwent season-ending Tommy John surgery April 30.

RHP Jarrod Parker (torn right ulnar collateral ligament) went on the 60-day disabled list March 20. He had a second Tommy John surgery March 24, and he will miss the entire season. He resumed playing catch Aug. 4.

ROTATION:

LHP Jon Lester
RHP Sonny Gray
LHP Scott Kazmir
RHP Jeff Samardzija
RHP Jason Hammel

BULLPEN:

LHP Sean Doolittle (closer)
LHP Eric O'Flaherty
RHP Ryan Cook
RHP Luke Gregerson
RHP Dan Otero
LHP Fernando Abad
RHP Jesse Chavez

RHP Evan Scribner
LHP Drew Pomeranz
RHP Fernando Rodriguez

CATCHERS:

Derek Norris
Geovany Soto
Bryan Anderson

INFIELDERS:

1B Stephen Vogt
2B Alberto Callaspo
SS Jed Lowrie
3B Josh Donaldson
DH Adam Dunn
INF Nick Punto
INF Eric Sogard
INF Nate Freiman
INF Andy Parrino

OUTFIELDERS:

LF Brandon Moss
CF Coco Crisp
RF Josh Reddick
OF Jonny Gomes
OF Sam Fuld
OF Craig Gentry
OF Billy Burns

Team Report – SEATTLE MARINERS

TORONTO Over in the Toronto Blue Jays clubhouse, the winning pitcher, R.A. Dickey, marveled at what he had just seen.

The Blue Jays scored eight runs in 4 2/3 innings against Seattle Mariners ace Felix Hernandez for a 10-2 victory after scoring nine runs (eight earned) against left-hander James Paxton in a 14-4 win on Monday.

"If you had told me we would score 24 runs against those two guys coming into this series, I would have been happy with three a game," Dickey said.

It could not have come at a worse time for the Mariners, who can see a playoff spot slipping away after losing eight of their past 11 games.

They needed Hernandez to come up big on Tuesday and he did not. King Felix allowed seven earned runs in the fifth inning, the most runs he has allowed in one inning in his career. The eight earned runs he allowed in 4 2/3 innings equal his career high. He allowed nine runs (eight earned) against Texas on Aug. 28, 2013.

"As an ace, I take responsibility," Hernandez said. "I let my team down. That's my fault."

"He just seemed to lose his command in the fifth inning for some reason," manager Lloyd McClendon said.

"My fastball was not there, my changeup was just okay and I made a couple of mistakes," Hernandez said. "I didn't make that play in that big inning (on a bunt by Blue Jays catcher Josh Thole). I should have made that play. After that, it was downhill."

"It's frustrating," center fielder Austin Jackson said. "We know the situation we are in. This is a tough one. We just have to try and put it behind us and come out win tomorrow."

"We're not playing well right now," McClendon said. "A lot of things are going wrong, but we're still alive."

Perhaps, but barely. The Mariners have five games left and the Kansas City Royals and Oakland A's are three games ahead of them.

NOTES, QUOTES

RECORD: 83-74

STREAK: Lost four

NEXT: Mariners (RHP Taijuan Walker, 2-2, 3.00 ERA) at Blue Jays (LHP Mark Buehrle, 12-10, 3.53 ERA)

PLAYER NOTES:

RHP Taijuan Walker will make his eighth appearance and fifth start for the Mariners on Wednesday in the third game of the four-game series against the Blue Jays at Rogers Centre. The 22-year-old picked up his second win of the season for the Mariners last Friday, when he allowed eight hits and two runs in 5 2/3 innings and had seven strikeouts in a 10-5 win over Houston. It was his first start since July 23. He was 7-4 with a 4.37 ERA in 16 starts among Triple-A Tacoma, Double-A Jackson and Class A High Desert. He is 3-2 with a 3.20 ERA in 10 games (five starts) in his major league career and is 2-1 (3.00 ERA) in seven games (five starts) on the road. He has never faced Toronto.

RHP Felix Hernandez tied his career high by allowing eight earned runs over 4 2/3 innings in the Mariners' 10-2 loss to the Blue Jays on Tuesday. He allowed nine runs (eight earned) against the Texas Rangers on Aug. 28, 2013. He allowed seven earned runs in the fifth inning on Tuesday, a career high for one inning. "The fastball wasn't there," Hernandez said. "I made a couple of mistakes. As an ace, I take responsibility. I let my team down. That's my fault."

2B Robinson Cano hit a two-run single in the third inning of Tuesday's 10-2 loss at Toronto to extend his hit streak to six games. He is batting .349 (8-for-23) on the streak and is 10-for-33 (.303) on the road trip.

1B Logan Morrison doubled in the seventh inning of Tuesday's 10-2 loss to the Blue Jays to extend his hit streak to nine games. He is 12-for-29 (.414) in that span. He is batting 19-for-57 (.333) with three homers in September.

OF Michael Saunders doubled in the third inning of Tuesday's 10-2 loss at Toronto. He was 1-for-2 against Blue Jays RHP R.A. Dickey in the game and is 3-for-7 with a double and two homers in his career against the Blue Jays knuckleball pitcher.

QUOTE TO NOTE:

"We're not playing well right now. A lot of things are going wrong, but we're still alive." Mariners manager Lloyd McClendon. Seattle is three games behind both Oakland and Kansas City, who are tied for the top wild-card spot in the American League.

ROSTER REPORT

MEDICAL WATCH:

LHP Roenis Elias (left elbow stiffness) left his Sept. 16 start due to the ailment. There is a chance he could pitch out of the bullpen in the season's final week, but he won't get another start.

INF Willie Bloomquist (right knee contusion) went on the 15-day disabled list July 24, and he was transferred to the 60-day DL on Sept. 1. He underwent season-ending arthroscopic surgery Aug. 8.

ROTATION:

RHP Felix Hernandez
RHP Chris Young
RHP Hisashi Iwakuma
LHP James Paxton
RHP Taijuan Walker
LHP Roenis Elias

BULLPEN:

RHP Fernando Rodney (closer)
RHP Danny Farquhar
LHP Charlie Furbush
RHP Tom Wilhelmsen
RHP Brandon Maurer
RHP Yoervis Medina
LHP Joe Beimel
RHP Dominic Leone
LHP Lucas Luetge
RHP Carson Smith
RHP Erasmo Ramirez

CATCHERS:

Mike Zunino
Jesus Sucre
Humberto Quintero

INFIELDERS:

1B Logan Morrison
2B Robinson Cano
SS Brad Miller
3B Kyle Seager

DH Kendrys Morales
INF Corey Hart
INF Justin Smoak
INF Chris Taylor

OUTFIELDERS:

LF Dustin Ackley
CF Austin Jackson
RF Michael Saunders
OF Chris Denorfia
OF Endy Chavez
OF James Jones
OF Stefen Romero