

ASTROD DAILY CLIPS

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Keuchel lowers ERA to 0.62 despite 'spotty' command; Not pleased about two walks, posts 9 scoreless

By Alex Espinoza / Special to MLB.com

Astros southpaw Dallas Keuchel might have started off Friday's wild 5-4 extra-inning win over the A's with nine scoreless innings, but he couldn't get his mind off of the two walks he issued.

Keuchel has developed a reputation of being something of a perfectionist on the mound, and he offered a glimpse of his high standards after the contest.

"It was just real spotty command," Keuchel said. "I'd like to kind of clean that up early in the game. That's not my M.O. That's when I was telling [catcher Hank] Conger, 'Just bear with me and we'll get through this.' Sure enough, we did."

Keuchel allowed a walk in the first inning and then a walk to Mark Canha in the third. After that, Canha was retired on a 4-6-3 double play off the bat of Ben Zobrist, starting a string of 19 straight batters that Keuchel retired to end his evening. For the year, he's sporting a 0.62 ERA.

The 27-year-old finished nine innings for the fifth time in his career, giving up two hits while striking out four. Despite throwing 106 pitches, Keuchel said he didn't want to come out of the game.

"It was extremely hard," Keuchel said. "I don't want to come out of any game, if I'm throwing 140 pitches or what not. But that's just my mentality."

Manager A.J. Hinch said he considered sending Keuchel back out to the mound for the 10th, but he elected to go to his well-rested bullpen, which entered the game with a 1.94 ERA. Even though Houston's relievers were tagged for four runs in two frames, the offense picked them up with two big rallies.

"This Coliseum never really disappoints in late-inning drama," Keuchel said.

Alex Espinoza is a contributor to MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

**Video clips (link below)*

<http://m.astros.mlb.com/news/article/120422680/astros-left-hander-dallas-keuchel-lowers-era-to-062-despite-spotty-command>

Astros hold off A's in 11 for crazy finish

By Jane Lee and Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

Left fielder Robbie Grossman notched a go-ahead, two-run single off of A's southpaw Eric O'Flaherty in a three-run 11th inning, helping the Astros claim a 5-4 series-opening victory at the Coliseum on Friday evening.

It was a wild ending to a game that didn't see its first run until the 10th inning, when Marwin Gonzalez hit a two-run, two-out double off of A's reliever Dan Otero. The A's came right back in the bottom of the frame against a familiar face in right-hander Luke Gregerson, getting a game-tying, two-run double from Josh Reddick, who unsuccessfully tried racing home when the ball got away from the plate.

"Once I see the ball get by, I figure, why not try?" Reddick said. "The ball was soaking wet rolling in outfield grass. You've got to make a perfect throw to get me. I'm trying to win the ballgame. We haven't been scoring many runs the past two games. I don't see a problem with trying."

"For me, I'm relieved," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "We had that game won twice and we didn't finish the game until the end. We never count that team across the way out, good team. I'm personally relieved. I think our guys are tired, obviously, but there's a little boost of adrenaline after you win that game, as opposed to the heartache of losing it."

Astros starter Dallas Keuchel worked nine scoreless innings, with just two hits and two walks allowed. A's starter Scott Kazmir kept pace with seven zeros, holding the Astros to five hits in that span.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED Nineteen straight: Keuchel's masterful night was capped off with a run of 19 straight retired Athletics. Following Mark Canha's third-inning walk, Keuchel kept Oakland off the basepaths for the rest of his evening. The southpaw owns a 0.62 ERA this season and hasn't allowed a run in 15 consecutive innings.

"For the length of the game and quality of stuff, and retiring guys in a row, this was his best start," Hinch said.

Kaz control: Kazmir completed seven innings for the third time in four starts, limiting the Astros to five hits with seven strikeouts and three walks while not allowing a run to lower his season ERA to 0.99. In 27 1/3 innings, the southpaw has surrendered three runs and fanned 30. As a collective group, A's starting pitchers have allowed two runs or fewer in 11 of the first 18 games and have a 2.60 ERA, lowest in the American League.

Marwin's magic: Gonzalez didn't enter the game until the eighth inning as a pinch-runner but played a big role in the game's outcome. He staked the Astros to a short-lived, two-run lead in the 10th when he roped a double into the left-field gap to score Springer and Jed Lowrie. Gonzalez would end up being caught in a rundown between second and third, marking the second time of the evening he was tagged out on the basepaths.

Bullpen blunders: The A's bullpen has allowed two runs or more in five of the last nine games, surrendering a total of 20 runs over 27 1/3 innings in that time. For O'Flaherty, it was his second loss this week. Before that, his last loss came Aug. 14, 2011.

"He's getting pretty good movement, he's just not harnessing it," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "He's not throwing it over the plate. He's a guy we really feel like has a great chance to get us ground balls. He's got a history of getting righties and lefties out. It's just right now, the last few times have been a little bit of a struggle for him."

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS With his third-inning single off of Kazmir, Jose Altuve extended his hitting streak against Oakland to 27 straight games, dating back to Sept. 5, 2013.

WHAT'S NEXT Astros: Scott Feldman will have revenge on his mind when he steps to the Coliseum mound Saturday at 3:05 p.m. CT. The veteran right-hander was roughed up by the A's on April 13, when he gave up eight runs (seven earned) on 10 hits and a walk over five innings of work.

A's: Right-hander Kendall Graveman looks to bounce back from a short Monday outing against the Angels, when he needed 73 pitches to get through just three innings, marking the second time in three starts this season he hasn't been able to complete at least four. Graveman has already faced the Astros once this year, tossing 5 1/3 scoreless innings. First pitch at the Coliseum will be at 1:05 p.m. PT. Watch every out-of-market regular season game live on MLB.TV.

*Video clip (link below)

<http://m.astros.mlb.com/news/article/120237200/astros-hold-off-as-in-11-for-crazy-finish>

Altuve menaces A's while Springer breaks out

By: Evan Drellich Houston Chronicle

If there's one thing about his hometown of Houston that A's pitcher Scott Kazmir should not like, it might be Jose Altuve.

The Astros second baseman continued to be a menace to the Cypress Falls lefty Friday night in the Astros' 5-4 win in 11 innings, improving with a pair of hits to 13-for-25 lifetime against Kazmir. Altuve also drew a walk against Kazmir, one of his two free passes in the game, which he finished 2-for-4. The defending major league batting champion has 21 hits through 16 games, four more hits than he had through the same number of games last season.

It's not just Kazmir that Altuve does well against, it feels like most anyone on the A's roster. He has a 27-game hit streak against the A's dating to Sept. 5, 2013. He's hitting .350 in that run.

Meanwhile, it's been a rough go overall for right fielder George Springer, who's hitting .183 after a 2-for-6 performance. But both hits Saturday were in extra innings and crucial to the Astros win, perhaps a hidden bright spot in a game that was filled with twists.

Springer was 0-for-10 until his 10th inning double led to one of the two runs that scored on Marwin Gonzalez's go-ahead hit, the one that temporarily put the Astros ahead 2-0.

In the 11th inning, Springer singled home the third run of the inning, a run that didn't appear needed at the time but certainly was when a 5-2 Astros lead was cut to 5-4 on Marcus Semien's homer in the bottom of the 11th.

"We know it's in there," manager A.J. Hinch said. "He's so hard on himself and obviously a couple ABs tonight showed some frustration after getting out, but he's pretty fun to watch run the bases when he gets going."

Springer also struck out twice.

The timing for the big-league sophomore's resurgence may be perfect.

Through his 15th big league game in 2014, he hit .180. In the 23 games that followed, he batted .330 with a .739 slugging percentage.

Friday was Springer's 16th game of the season.

Extra-inning runs lead to wild Astros win in Oakland

By: Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

It wasn't until the misty rain arrived at O.co Coliseum and even fewer eyes were left that the Astros' 5-4 win over the A's in 11 innings reached its crazy peak.

The first nine innings were a reminder the baseball world isn't paying enough attention to Dallas Keuchel, the Astros lefty who was perfect for the final six of his nine shutout innings Friday night. He would've gotten the win had the Astros not coughed up a 2-0 lead in the bottom of the 10th with closer Luke Gregerson on the mound and spotty defense behind him.

Even when the Astros scored three to take a 5-2 lead in the top of the 11th, the A's managed to make it interesting on a damp field. Marcus Semien's two-run homer to left field off Pat Neshek with none out cut the lead to one, and the A's weren't done. Five more batters came to the plate.

"This stadium never disappoints," Keuchel said. "Whether you're coming in with 40 consecutive saves or you're coming in with no runs given up in the last four innings, something's going to happen in this stadium and it's just a matter of when."

Chad Qualls, the third Astros pitcher of the bottom of the 11th, came on to face Brett Lawrie with the potential tying run at second base and winning run on first base. Lawrie rocked one to center field, just shy of the warning track, for an out.

"For me, I'm relieved," manager A.J. Hinch said. "We had that game won twice and we didn't finish the game until the very end. ... I think our guys are tired, obviously, but there's a little boost-of-adrenaline factor. You win that game as opposed to the heartache of losing it — especially for us (to have) had the lead twice, for them to come back twice on us would have been tough."

A one-out single from Robbie Grossman to left field off A's reliever Eric O'Flaherty plated two runs with one out in the top of the 11th, breaking a tie at 2. The Astros tacked on one more on a George Springer RBI-single, which proved to be a huge run.

Chris Carter and Colby Rasmus started the 11th inning with walks against O'Flaherty before Hank Conger sacrificed them ahead of Grossman.

Offense was a newfound venture for both sides in the final two innings.

The game was scoreless until the under-appreciated Marwin Gonzalez hit a two-out gapper to left-center field off Dan Otero in the bottom of the 10th for a 2-0 'Stros lead. Gonzalez pointed to the dugout as he made his way to first base, with Keuchel cheering.

"It was in general," Gonzalez said when asked whom he was pointing at. "I was excited. Dallas did a really good job, he deserved to win the game and we were fighting all game long. That was just the emotion."

Springer, who started the rally with a two-out double, scored from second base, while Jed Lowrie came around from first base on the Gonzalez rip.

Everything was working perfectly for the Astros: Gonzalez came through in his first at-bat after entering as a pinch runner two innings earlier, and Keuchel was about to get a win. James Harden may be Houston's man of the moment, but Keuchel has the beard to match — and the tiniest of ERAs after Friday night's two-hit dominance, 0.62.

Gregerson falters for first time

Then came the first blown save of Gregerson's Astros career. His defense was little help as the 2-0 lead disappeared in the bottom of the 10th.

A two-out double crushed by Josh Reddick to center field, the third A's pinch hitter to get a hit in the inning, tied the game at two with two out.

Sam Fuld singled with one out and Stephen Vogt with two out — balls that arguably were both playable on the right side of the infield — bringing up Reddick.

"It's pretty cold, it's wet, it's raining," Hinch said. "I mean every ball that went to the outfield was drenched."

Reddick was unsuccessful trying to come all the way home as the ball briefly got away from catcher Hank Conger.

Hinch acknowledged he considered leaving Keuchel in for the 10th inning. He was at 106 pitches, the same number Kazmir finished with.

"I thought about it," Hinch said. "We had such a rested 'pen after an offday, our 'pen has been fantastic. So I don't really want him to go out for the 10th."

On the radar gun, Keuchel's best pitch was 92.7 mph. The mid-90s barrier can keep eyes away — no heat, no buzz. But in a season where many wondered if King Keuchel and rotation mate Collin McHugh could do it again, the answer couldn't be any louder thus far: yes.

Double play turned game for Keuchel

Keuchel finished with four strikeouts and two walks. This was Keuchel's 11th straight quality start dating to Aug. 15, 2014, and he has a 1.81 ERA in that time (16 runs in 79 2/3 innings).

Kazmir too put up zeroes, but the starting pitchers' nights worked to different beats. Kazmir retired the side in order just twice in seven innings.

Keuchel's turning point came in the bottom of the third inning, when No. 8 hitter Craig Gentry snapped an 0-for-22 streak to begin the season with a single.

A sacrifice, single and walk later, Keuchel had third-place hitter Ben Zobrist up with the bases loaded. He hit into a 4-6-3 double play and from there, Keuchel was perfect.

"I was just commanding the two-seam a little bit better. I was just all over the place: it was diving, cutting, sinking, nothing that I was hoping it would do.

"That's what I was telling Conger, just bear with me, see if we can get through this, and sure enough, we did. That was a great game by Kazmir over there. Really didn't disappoint at all either, and it ended up being a great game. Just a little bit more runs than what we're used to giving up."

Kazmir finished with five hits allowed in seven innings. He struck out seven and walked three, with base runners on in all but two of his seven innings.

Fields back in the bullpen mix for Astros; Right-hander joins dominant relief corps

By Alex Espinoza / Special to MLB.com

Reliever Josh Fields joined the Astros on Friday after recovering from a strained groin he sustained near the end of Spring Training. In a corresponding move, which was announced by the team Wednesday night, Houston optioned infielder Jonathan Villar to Triple-A Fresno.

Fields, who posted a 4.45 ERA in 54 2/3 innings for the Astros last season, allowed two runs in six innings of rehab work with Fresno. The right-hander threw 36 pitches while recording two scoreless innings on Monday in his final outing with the Grizzlies. It was a lengthy rehab assignment that lasted 10 days, but Fields said he's happy to be back with the big league club.

"It was part of the process," Fields said. "I didn't want to come back and not be totally ready. I felt like I got in what I needed to get done and trying to give myself the best chance to be able to come up here and stay healthy and stay up here. Felt like that's what I needed to do that, and we got it done."

He's back with an Astros bullpen that entered play Friday with a 1.94 ERA, which was second-best in the American League and third-best in the Majors.

"Josh Fields is a real weapon in the 'pen anytime during the game," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "I told him, he'll be used primarily as a bridge in the middle part of the game. Get a couple outings under his belt, we can move him into a number of roles."

Hinch added that Villar will be used at five different positions -- second base, third base, shortstop, left field and center field -- with Fresno, as the organization envisions a utility role for the 23-year-old, who went 1-for-13 with the Astros to start the season.

Marisnick to get a couple of days to deal with leg soreness; Scratched from lineup Friday ahead of planned day off Saturday

By Alex Espinoza / Special to MLB.com

Astros center fielder Jake Marisnick was scratched from Friday night's lineup against the A's and is expected to sit out Saturday's contest as he deals with leg soreness.

"It's a bummer when you can't write his name in the lineup for his offense and for his defense," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "Unfortunately, he had a little soreness. He went first-to-third in the ninth inning in Seattle [on Wednesday] and came out of it a little bit sore. He kicked and screamed a little bit, wanting to play, but we're going to err on the side of caution just to make sure."

The 24-year-old has been Houston's hottest hitter to begin the season, entering Friday's matchup with a team-high .350 batting average and .400 on-base percentage while showing off his range in center field.

Marisnick appeared in the first lineup shared by the Astros on Friday, batting ninth and playing center field. But he was replaced by Robbie Grossman, who took his spot in the order as the left fielder, while Colby Rasmus moved to center.

"I like George [Springer] in right field," Hinch said. "Rather than move multiple people all around, you can get some consistency out there. George has really adapted well to right field. Colby's obviously played six years in center field, so there's more experience there."

Hinch said he had already planned on giving Marisnick a day off Saturday, but that the outfielder could be used as a pinch-hitter Friday if needed.

"I think in his eyes, he's very available," Hinch said. "For us, the level of risk we're willing to take is low with him. We have another capable person in Robbie Grossman."

Worth noting

- Hinch is always happy to return to the Coliseum, where he made his debut with the A's on Opening Day in 1998. He recorded his first big league hit three days later against Yankees starter David Cone at the stadium.

"There's a fraternity of sorts of those of us who have worn the white shoes," Hinch said. "It's always fun to come back."

*Video clip (link below)

<http://m.astros.mlb.com/news/article/120315520/astros-jake-marisnick-to-get-a-couple-of-days-to-deal-with-leg-soreness>

Fields' violent throwing motion brings heat and tweaks

By Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Josh Fields strains enough when he throws off a mound that you'd think he's in the shot put.

Outside of Pat Neshek, who probably shouldn't even count because he's a sidearm thrower, no Astros pitcher's motion makes you wonder just how he does it on every toss quite like Fields. The 29-year-old righty throws from a conventional arm angle, but with his head cocked and an explosive but long, low-to-the-ground stride. He embodies full exertion.

"That's just how I've always thrown," Fields said Friday, his first day back with the Astros off the disabled list. "It used to be worse. I loved how Kevin Brown threw. He had that real big turn (away from the batter in his delivery). He didn't come so much over the top as I used to, but that just kind of happened. But I always had that turn (when I was younger), always watched him, always liked it." Fields is back from a right groin strain after throwing six innings in five appearances for Class AAA Fresno, essentially finishing his spring training in the minors after he was hurt late in camp in Florida. He's had minor leg issues before, and the reality is that with a motion so violent — and results so effective — a few days missed here and there might go hand-in-hand with his pitching, like an occasional hurt knee for an outfielder who crashes into a lot of walls.

"It's been annoying, frustrating when it happens," Fields said. "And my delivery is max effort and pretty violent. I just try to stretch and stay on top of it as much as I can. But I feel like just kind of my style of pitching, I feel like it's maybe a hair bit prone to that. Because we've seen it the last couple years, just little strains. But praise God that it's been soft tissue and nothing structural."

On Friday afternoon, Fields said he was good to go.

"The last outing I threw (Monday), I felt as normal with my motion and everything as it has been yet," Fields said. "I think it was just kind of like a progression. I built up in the rehab and I stayed back in Kissimmee. Felt good there. Once I got to Fresno, just a different intensity, a different work. I realized I needed to make sure I was ready before I came back here and then I felt like I got there."

It didn't hurt that Will Harris was dealing either. The righty reliever's success in place of Fields essentially forced the Astros to add Fields as an additional pitcher, taking away bench player Jonathan Villar instead.

Manager A.J. Hinch indicated he wanted to see Fields get a couple outings under his belt before moving him into the most crucial of situations — a common decision with a reliever who has been away for a bit. Unlike last year's Astros team though, Hinch doesn't have to rely too heavily on just Fields, or Tony Sipp or Chad Qualls.

"As the season progresses we'll continue to ride the hot hand and the match-ups that we like down in the 'pen," Hinch said. "I would see him bridging the gap in between starters and the backend of the bullpen. And then as guys are not available, and guys start slotting into more roles, he's somebody that I can really use. He's a guy that replaces any of our guys who aren't available."

This is Fields' third year with the Astros. The hard thrower was taken with the first overall pick in the 2012 Rule 5 draft from the Red Sox, and last year led the Astros relievers with 70 strikeouts in 54 2/3 innings.

But things didn't pick up until he visited Class AAA Oklahoma City in the second month. His last outing before the demotion was May 6, and he had a 12 ERA in 14 games. He came back to post a 2.32 ERA in his final 40 games, finishing third on the club in appearances at 54.

How can he avoid a rough start again this year?

"I think I was just pressing a little too hard," Fields said. "And once I went down, I just kind of made a decision: 'You know what, I just want to have fun, wherever I'm at.' And when I came back up I kind of kept that mindset, and just said, 'You know what, no matter what happens if I stay here I get sent down again, I just want to enjoy it.'"

O.co Coliseum brings back fond memories for Astros manager A.J. Hinch

By Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Astros manager A.J. Hinch played his first game in this ballpark, now known as O.co Coliseum, on April 1, 1998. His retelling of the day usually turns into something of a joke surrounding the two key facts: the pitcher he was facing was Pedro Martinez and the pitcher he was catching was a knuckleballer, Tom Candiotti.

Hinch went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts, plus a passed ball, as the Red Sox won 2-0 over Hinch's A's. Welcome to the big leagues, indeed.

"I remember the stadium being very similar to how it is now without the big fancy jumbotron," said Hinch, a Stanford product who went to the A's in the third round of the 1996 draft. "It takes you back a while. I remember how massive — you know, this stadium can feel really massive. Especially in center. "I was pretty brash back then. I knew I was going to write Pedro Martinez's name on the ball (I expected to keep after collecting) my first hit — which I did not get off of Pedro Martinez. But great memories, the Bay Area in general. I've spent a lot of my life here. I always love coming back here. You wear the white shoes (when you're on the A's). It's a fraternity of sorts, for those of us that have worn the white shoes." Hinch's first hit came in game No. 3, a 7-3 win over the Yankees on April 4, 1998, also at home. He singled to center off David Cone in the bottom of the sixth inning. Hinch, who turns 41 next month, was 23 when he debuted.

"Half my life ago almost," Hinch said. "I just had come out of college. I was pretty young, my family was out here for my debut, it was opening day 1998. So that feels like a whole career ago, which it was. "Had my first hit in this ballpark which is always special to a major league player. So that was right before that stretch where the A's made the playoffs a number of years in a row. We were laying the groundwork of a good team."

Jonathan Villar to work on versatility while down with Class AAA Fresno

By Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Jonathan Villar is to play multiple positions at Class AAA Fresno — second base, shortstop, third, left field and center — so that he can continue his growth as a super utility player.

Villar was optioned to the minors ahead of Friday's game to make room for reliever Josh Fields' return from the disabled list, pushing the Astros to 13 pitchers, one more than they opened the year with.

The new roster dynamic means manager A.J. Hinch has only one back-up middle infielder, Marwin Gonzalez, limiting some of Hinch's opportunities to pinch hit Gonzalez. At the same time, eight relievers should help keep the bullpen fresh.

"Got to be a little careful with it," Hinch said of Gonzalez's usage. "It's more of the two-players-for-one move that makes it hard with three bench players in an American league game, four bench players in a National League game. To pitch hit somebody and then utilize somebody else on defense, that really does thin out your bench.

"Colby (Rasmus is) swinging the bat very well against lefties his last game, he's in there again tonight. You know, Marwin as a pinch hitter, we haven't had to pinch hit a ton. But it depends where the game is. With the game on the line in the seventh, eighth or ninth inning, I'm not too consumed with emptying the bench when we're trying to win the game."

The Astros could fluctuate between 12 and 13 pitchers going forward.

"I think it could go back and forth really by need," Hinch said. "We have 17 games in a row from this day forward, so it's one way or another, right? You're going to tax your bullpen or you're going to tax your everyday players. Our bench players are versatile enough.

"So any given time, we can go back to the 12 pitchers. But the stretch that we're heading in, for the foreseeable future, we like the 13. And we like our bullpen as a strength, we like to keep it that way and we play so many close games we've had to use all those guys a lot."

The only pitcher who hasn't been turned to much is the long man, righty Sam Deduno.

Jake Marisnick out of lineup with right leg discomfort

By Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Astros manager A.J. Hinch took his hottest hitter out of the nine-hole on Friday for the series opener with the A's, but the destination wasn't a higher spot in the order.

Jake Marisnick and his team-high .350 average were held out of the lineup for precautionary reasons because of soreness in Marisnick's upper right leg, Hinch said. Marisnick felt the injury running from first to third base in the ninth inning against the Mariners on Wednesday night in Seattle.

"It's a bummer when you can't write his name in the lineup for his offense and for his defense," Hinch said. "He went first to third in the ninth inning in Seattle and came out of it a little bit sore and he kicked and screamed a little bit, wanted to play, but we're going to err on the side of caution."

Robbie Grossman started in left field batting ninth with Colby Rasmus in center batting seventh.

"I think in his eyes he's very available," Hinch said. "The level of risk we're willing to take is low with him, and we have another capable person in Robbie Grossman. ... In a pinch tonight I think he's available. I would hope sometime in this series we'd see him."

Hinch said Marisnick was able to go through a full range of pre-game activities.

Owner Jim Crane was on hand Friday and stood at first base during batting practice, on the field behind the protective screen, chatting with Hinch. When Marisnick was walking by, Crane made sure the 24-year-old upstart outfielder came over for a handshake and a quick chat. A hot start will get an owner's attention.

Marisnick's made 13 of 16 starts in center field, with the other three falling to Rasmus. Although George Springer is a very capable center fielder as well, Hinch wants to leave him in right field.

"I like George in right field," Hinch said. "Rather than move multiple people all around... you get some consistency out there. George is really adapted well to right field. Colby's obviously played six years in center field, so there's more experience there, but it really is easy to put either one of them there."

Top Astros prospect Mark Appel starts strong at Corpus Christi

By Ultimate Astros / Houston Chronicle

Righthander Mark Appel, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2013 draft and the top pitching prospect in the Astros' system, has gotten off to a strong start at Class AA Corpus Christi.

Appel is 2-0 with a 1.93 ERA in three starts for the Hooks, with 11 strikeouts to two walks in 14 innings this season. Opponents are batting .196 against him.

Appel lasted four innings in Thursday's 8-2 victory at Frisco, giving up runs, both earned, on two hits while striking out three. He appeared to be removed for pitch-count reasons, as he threw 71 pitches (51 strikes) in those four innings.

Meanwhile, shortstop Carlos Correa, the top position player prospect in the Houston system who was drafted first overall in 2012, is batting a team-high .360 and is tied for the Texas League lead with 14 RBIs and 11 runs scored.

*Image gallery (link below)

<http://blog.chron.com/ultimateastros/2015/04/24/top-astros-prospect-mark-appel-starts-strong-at-corpus-christi/#31998101=0>

Astros report: Leg soreness forces Marisnick out of lineup

By Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Astros manager *A.J. Hinch* took his hottest hitter out of the nine hole Friday for the series opener with the Athletics, but the destination wasn't a higher spot in the order.

Jake Marisnick and his team-high .350 average were held out of the lineup for precautionary reasons because of soreness in Marisnick's upper right leg, according to Hinch. Marisnick felt the injury running from first to third base in the ninth inning against the Mariners on Wednesday in Seattle.

"It's a bummer when you can't write his name in the lineup for his offense and for his defense," Hinch said. "He went first to third in the ninth inning in Seattle and came out of it a little bit sore. He kicked and screamed a little bit, wanted to play, but we're going to err on the side of caution."

Robbie Grossman started in left field batting ninth Friday with *Colby Rasmus* in center and hitting seventh.

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A hot start will get an owner's attention.

Marisnick has made 13 of 16 starts in center field, with the other three falling to Rasmus.

Although *George Springer* is a capable center fielder as well, Hinch wants to leave him in right field. "I like George in right field," Hinch said. "Rather than move multiple people all around ... you get some consistency out there. George has really adapted well to right field. Colby has obviously played six years in center field, so there's more experience there. But it really is easy to put either one of them there."

With 13 pitchers, bench gets thin

Jonathan Villar is to play multiple positions at Class AAA Fresno - second base, shortstop, third, left field and center - so he can continue his growth as a utility player.

Villar was optioned to the minors before Friday's game to make room for reliever *Josh Fields'* return from the disabled list, pushing the Astros to 13 pitchers, one more than they had when the season started. The new roster dynamic means manager *A.J. Hinch* has only one backup middle infielder, *Marwin Gonzalez*, limiting some of Hinch's opportunities to pinch-hit Gonzalez.

At the same time, eight relievers should help keep the bullpen fresh.

"Got to be a little careful with it," Hinch said of Gonzalez's usage. "It's more of the two-players-for-one move that makes it hard with three bench players in an American League game, four bench players in a National League game. To pitch-hit somebody and then utilize somebody else on defense, that really does thin out your bench.

"*Colby (Rasmus)* is swinging the bat very well against lefties his last game. You know, Marwin as a pinch hitter, we haven't had to pinch-hit a ton. But it depends where the game is. With the game on the line in the seventh, eighth or ninth inning, I'm not too consumed with emptying the bench when we're trying to win the game."

The Astros could fluctuate between 12 and 13 pitchers going forward.

"I think it could go back and forth really by need," Hinch said. "We have 17 games in a row from this day forward, so it's one way or another, right? You're going to tax your bullpen or you're going to tax your everyday players. Our bench players are versatile enough.

"So any given time, we can go back to the 12 pitchers. But the stretch that we're heading in, for the foreseeable future, we like the 13. And we like our bullpen as a strength. We like to keep it that way, and we play so many close games we've had to use all those guys a lot."

The only pitcher who hasn't been turned to much is the long man, righthander *Sam Deduno*.

Hinch fondly recalls debut here

Astros manager *A.J. Hinch* played his first game in this ballpark, now known as O.co Coliseum, on April 1, 1998.

His retelling of the day usually turns into something of a joke surrounding the two key facts: the pitcher he was facing was *Pedro Martinez* and the pitcher he was catching was knuckleballer *Tom Candiotti*. Hinch went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts, plus a passed ball, as the Boston Red Sox won 2-0 over Hinch's Oakland Athletics.

Welcome to the big leagues, indeed.

"I remember the stadium being very similar to how it is now without the big fancy jumbotrons," said Hinch, a Stanford product who went to the A's in the third round of the 1996 draft. "It takes you back a while. I remember how massive, you know, this stadium can feel really massive. Especially in center. "I was pretty brash back then. I knew I was going to write Pedro Martinez's name on the ball (I expected to keep after collecting) my first hit - which I did not get off of Pedro Martinez. But great memories, the Bay Area in general. I've spent a lot of my life here. I always love coming back here. You wear the white shoes (when you're on the A's). It's a fraternity of sorts, for those of us that have worn the white shoes." Hinch's first hit came in game No. 3, a 7-3 win over the New York Yankees. He singled to center off *David Cone* in the sixth inning. Hinch, who turns 41 next month, was 23 when he debuted.

"Half my life ago almost," Hinch said. "I just had come out of college. I was pretty young, my family was out here for my debut, it was opening day 1998. So that feels like a whole career ago, which it was. "Had my first hit in this ballpark which is always special to a major league player. So that was right before that stretch where the A's made the playoffs a number of years in a row. We were laying the groundwork of a good team."

Elias says

By: ESPN.com

Keuchel throwing blanks

Dallas Keuchel earned a no decision despite throwing nine shutout innings for the Astros on Friday night. Keuchel lowered his season ERA to 0.62 in four starts. Only one Astros pitcher had a lower ERA through his first four starts of a season than Keuchel has this season: Roger Clemens in 2005 (0.32)

OPPONENT VS. OAKLAND ATHLETICS 4.25.15

Kazmir has little to show for superb start to season; Works seven shutout innings, lowers ERA to 0.99

By: Jane Lee / MLB.com

A's lefty Scott Kazmir has just two wins to show for four dominant outings, the last resulting in a no-decision against the Astros on Friday evening despite seven scoreless innings.

That the southpaw was opposed by Houston's Dallas Keuchel -- he of a 0.62 ERA after nine shutout frames Friday -- didn't help his cause. But Kazmir's performance in the 5-4, 11-inning loss didn't go unnoticed. Kazmir held the Astros to five hits and three walks and struck out seven, including his final batter, Luis Valbuena, who swung through a 93-mph fastball on Kazmir's 106th pitch.

"I was hoping to match [Keuchel], but I tell you what, the way we fought in those later innings, it shows you something about our team," said Kazmir. "We didn't pull out the win, which is tough, but we'll get 'em tomorrow."

"It's a shame that [Kazmir] doesn't have a couple more wins," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "You know against Keuchel you're going to have to pitch like that, and he did, every bit of it."

"Every time he goes out there, we feel like we have a good chance to win, even if we're not squaring the bats well. Didn't give him enough when he was out there."

Kazmir has surrendered just three runs and struck out 30 in 27 1/3 innings over four starts for a 0.99 ERA this season, completing at least seven innings in three of those outings.

"What he's done for us his first four starts has been something special," said outfielder Josh Reddick.

*Video clip (link below)

<http://m.athletics.mlb.com/news/article/120422820/as-pitcher-scott-kazmir-has-little-to-show-for-superb-start-to-season>

A's rally twice in extras but fall in 11

By Jane Lee and Alex Espinoza / MLB.com

Left fielder Robbie Grossman notched a go-ahead, two-run single off of A's southpaw Eric O'Flaherty in a three-run 11th inning, helping the Astros claim a 5-4 series-opening victory at the Coliseum on Friday evening.

It was a wild ending to a game that didn't see its first run until the 10th inning, when Marwin Gonzalez hit a two-run, two-out double off of A's reliever Dan Otero. The A's came right back in the bottom of the frame against a familiar face in right-hander Luke Gregerson, getting a game-tying, two-run double from Josh Reddick, who unsuccessfully tried racing home when the ball got away from the plate.

"Once I see the ball get by, I figure, why not try?" Reddick said. "The ball was soaking wet rolling in outfield grass. You've got to make a perfect throw to get me. I'm trying to win the ballgame. We haven't been scoring many runs the past two games. I don't see a problem with trying."

After the Astros climbed back on top, with George Springer notching the insurance run on an RBI single in the 11th, the A's nearly rallied again. Marcus Semien provided a two-run homer against right-hander Pat Neshek with no outs, and Ike Davis followed with a pinch-hit single and advanced to second on a wild pitch, but he was stranded there.

"For me, I'm relieved," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "We had that game won twice and we didn't finish the game until the end. We never count that team across the way out, good team. I'm personally relieved. I think our guys are tired, obviously, but there's a little boost of adrenaline after you win that game, as opposed to the heartache of losing it."

Astros starter Dallas Keuchel worked nine scoreless innings, with just two hits and two walks allowed. A's starter Scott Kazmir kept pace with seven zeros, holding the Astros to five hits in that span.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED Nineteen straight: Keuchel's masterful night was capped off with a run of 19 straight retired Athletics. Following Mark Canha's third-inning walk, Keuchel kept Oakland off the basepaths for the rest of his evening. The southpaw owns a 0.62 ERA this season and hasn't allowed a run in 15 consecutive innings.

"For the length of the game and quality of stuff, and retiring guys in a row, this was his best start," Hinch said.

Kaz control: Kazmir completed seven innings for the third time in four starts, limiting the Astros to five hits with seven strikeouts and three walks while not allowing a run to lower his season ERA to 0.99. In 27 1/3 innings, the southpaw has surrendered three runs and fanned 30. As a collective group, A's starting pitchers have allowed two runs or fewer in 11 of the first 18 games and have a 2.60 ERA, lowest in the American League.

Marwin's magic: Gonzalez didn't enter the game until the eighth inning as a pinch-runner but played a big role in the game's outcome. He staked the Astros to a short-lived, two-run lead in the 10th when he roped a double into the left-field gap to score Springer and Jed Lowrie. Gonzalez would end up being caught in a rundown between second and third, marking the second time of the evening he was tagged out on the basepaths.

Bullpen blunders: The A's bullpen has allowed two runs or more in five of the last nine games, surrendering a total of 20 runs over 27 1/3 innings in that time. For O'Flaherty, it was his second loss this week. Before that, his last loss came Aug. 14, 2011.

"He's getting pretty good movement, he's just not harnessing it," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "He's not throwing it over the plate. He's a guy we really feel like has a great chance to get us ground balls. He's got a history of getting righties and lefties out. It's just right now, the last few times have been a little bit of a struggle for him."

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS With his third-inning single off of Kazmir, Jose Altuve extended his hitting streak against Oakland to 27 straight games, dating back to Sept. 5, 2013.

WHAT'S NEXT Astros: Scott Feldman will have revenge on his mind when he steps to the Coliseum mound Saturday at 3:05 p.m. CT. The veteran right-hander was roughed up by the A's on April 13, when he gave up eight runs (seven earned) on 10 hits and a walk over five innings of work.

A's: Right-hander Kendall Graveman looks to bounce back from a short Monday outing against the Angels, when he needed 73 pitches to get through just three innings, marking the second time in three starts this season he hasn't been able to complete at least four. Graveman has already faced the Astros once this year, tossing 5 1/3 scoreless innings. First pitch at the Coliseum will be at 1:05 p.m. PT.

Watch every out-of-market regular season game live on MLB.TV.

*Video clips (link below)

<http://m.athletics.mlb.com/news/article/120237200/astros-hold-off-as-in-11-for-crazy-finish>

O'Flaherty working through a bad stretch; Reliever already has pair of losses this season

By: Jane Lee / MLB.com

The A's bullpen has only sporadically looked like the group assumed to be one of the club's greatest strengths at season's start. On Friday night, in a 5-4, 11-inning loss to the Astros, it picked up its American League-leading fifth loss in 19 games.

In the A's eight wins, their relievers have allowed just one earned run in 23 1/3 innings. In their 10 losses, they've surrendered 26 earned runs in 31 1/3 innings.

"Just one of those stretches," said A's starter Scott Kazmir, who tossed seven scoreless innings. "We know what we're capable of. We know what kind of bullpen we have. It's just a matter of getting everyone going, that's all it is. I think we'll be just fine."

Lefty Eric O'Flaherty has been responsible for the bullpen's last two losses. This is the same reliever who, before Sunday's loss in Kansas City, had not lost since Aug. 14, 2011, a stretch spanning 120 1/3 innings. O'Flaherty was brought in to pitch the 11th inning of a 2-2 ballgame, after the A's rallied following right-hander Dan Otero's two-run 10th frame. O'Flaherty walked his first two batters and ultimately offered up a go-ahead, two-run single to Robbie Grossman. He was also charged with one more run in the inning, raising his season ERA to 11.37.

"He's getting pretty good movement, he's just not harnessing it," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "He's not throwing it over the plate. He's a guy we really feel like has a great chance to get us ground balls. He's got a history of getting righties and lefties out. It's just right now, the last few times have been a little bit of a struggle for him."

Zobrist eases back into A's lineup at DH; Versatile player managing soreness in left knee

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Ben Zobrist made his return to the A's lineup for Friday's series opener against the visiting Astros with a start at designated hitter, as he looks to ease his way back into game action.

With Zobrist holding down DH duties, after being held out of each of the club's previous four games because of soreness in his left knee, Billy Butler made his first start of the season at first base.

"It's much less of a risk, certainly, DH'ing him," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "It's going to be a progression with him. If he feels comfortable DH'ing, maybe we move him into the outfield, which is a little less taxing than maybe the infield. We just want to see how he does with the at-bats."

Before the game, Zobrist put his knee through numerous tests. He ran, slid and took balls in the outfield, acknowledging that he's still putting much of his weight on the right leg. It's his way of compensating for the slight discomfort he's still experiencing in the other leg, "but hopefully I can get close to 100 percent out there speed-wise," he said.

"The goal is to hit a home run and you don't have to run hard," continued Zobrist. "If I hit a ball to the infield, you know, I'm going to run hard. If I think I'm sniffing a hit, it doesn't mean I'm going to be diving into first base. I've got to make sure I take care of the progression here and make sure that I'm going as hard as I can go tonight without making it worse. That's the goal."

"I just don't know how it's going to react. After today, we're just trying to take the natural progression to getting back into the full game."

Worth noting

- Outfielder Coco Crisp took more dry swings Friday and will throw out to 75 feet again Saturday, as he continues to progress from right-elbow surgery.
- The A's will wait to announce their rotation plans past Monday's off-day until they have a better understanding of when Jesse Hahn (blister) will be able to start.
- Shortstop Marcus Semien made his first start of the season in the leadoff spot Friday, a decision made by Melvin that was just as much about batting typical leadoff man Craig Gentry in the bottom of the order.

Gentry entered the day 0-for-22.

"Against left-handed pitching, Gentry's been our guy. So just take a little pressure off him," said Melvin.

"He's been struggling some, and Marcus is pretty versatile in where he can hit in the lineup."

*Video clip (link below)

<http://m.athletics.mlb.com/news/article/120316428/ben-zobrist-eases-back-into-as-lineup-at-dh>

Parker, Doolittle take big steps forward in rehabs; Righty feels good in first start; lefty throws from flat ground

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Jarrold Parker made his first start in a professional game since Tommy John surgery on Thursday evening, and Sean Doolittle tossed 15 pitches from flat ground on Friday, marking big steps for these rehabbing A's pitchers.

Parker got up to 56 pitches in his rehab start for Class A Advanced Stockton, completing 3 2/3 innings. The right-hander allowed three runs on four hits, including a solo home run, and struck out one while walking none.

"I had a blast," said Parker. "Gave up a homer, hit a guy, I was still smiling, it didn't matter. I could've given up seven. I would've had fun.

"I might not have been very sharp. My delivery was probably quick. But I was healthy enough to catch up and be where I wanted to be. That was one of the big things I got out of it. Have fun. Come out of it feeling good. And compete. All three of those things I did. It's continuing the work after to continue to feel that way."

Parker, who underwent his second Tommy John surgery last spring, hopes to get up to five innings and around 75 pitches in his next start, tentatively scheduled for Tuesday with Stockton in Bakersfield. He's already a clubhouse favorite, having treated the Ports to a postgame spread from Tahoe Joe's.

"They were excited," said Parker, expected back with the A's in late May or early June. "I think that might've been the best loss of the year so far."

For Doolittle, who threw all of his pitches during his session Friday, "it's the best I've felt, which has been true every time out," he said.

"It's cool and encouraging. I can feel it getting stronger every time I throw, and I've been able to stay in my mechanics all the way out to 120 feet and backspin the ball. It's got good carry and everything right now. So very encouraging day for sure."

Doolittle, who has been rehabbing a shoulder injury since January, has been using this time in a controlled environment to experiment with different grips on his changeup and slider.

"We're trying to use this time to not only get my shoulder better," said Doolittle, "but improve as a pitcher as well."

"That's the kind of guy he is," said A's manager Bob Melvin. "He's always looking to try to get better and try to make his time that he's off useful and think about some things and implement them as we go along, whether it's certain grips on certain pitches he's been fooling around with. For me, it's just more about him feeling good about where he is right now."

Doolittle will throw from flat ground again Sunday, increasing to 20 to 25 pitches. From there, he could potentially advance to the mound, and the A's hope to have their closer back sometime in June.

*Video clip (link below)

<http://m.athletics.mlb.com/news/article/120317350/as-pitchers-jarrodparker-sean-doolittle-take-steps-forward-in-rehabs>