

ASTROS DAILY CLIPS

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Scott Kazmir coughs up four runs as Astros drop second straight to A's

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – Scott Kazmir turned and leaned to the side as he agonizingly tracked Mark Canha's line drive Tuesday night. He then shook his head in disgust after the shot sailed through the air on the fair side of the left field pole for a three-run home run, pushing the Astros closer back to the AL West pack.

Brought in to bolster the Astros' rotation for the pennant stretch, Kazmir could not match his protégé Sonny Gray in his first outing against the A's since Oakland traded him to his hometown team on July 23.

Gray and reliever Ryan Dull combined for a shutout and Canha broke open a one-run game with his three-run home run to propel the A's to a 4-0 victory before a crowd of 11,364.

"It's always frustrating losing games, especially at a time like this when we really need to take care of business," Kazmir said. "You have to stay positive and trust what's gotten us here this entire year, and we'll be just fine.

"We can't let a game like this really bother us and we can't let it carry on for tomorrow's game and the series after that."

The AL West-leading Astros are now off to an 0-2 start on their crucial 10-game trip through Oakland, Anaheim and Arlington.

The Astros have not had a losing record in any of the previous five months this season, but they are off to a 2-5 start to what likely will be a season-defining September.

The loss combined with the Rangers' victory over the Mariners helped the Lone Star State rivals cut the Astros' lead in the AL West to one game.

"We're not going to carry any baggage with us," manager A.J. Hinch said. "I think the drama surrounding multiple losses in a row certainly hurts. Our guys know what's at stake. Our guys are ready to play. We're going to show up the next day like we do after every loss."

Gray, who entered the night with the second best ERA in the AL at 2.36, held the Astros to five hits and two walks with four strikeouts over seven scoreless innings to drop his ERA to an AL-best 2.28.

Kazmir, who is now 2-5 with the Astros, gave up four runs on seven hits with two walks and three strikeouts in six innings. Righthander Collin McHugh will try to avoid the three-game sweep Wednesday night in the series finale against the A's Aaron Brooks.

The A's threatened right away. Canha hit a one-out single to right in the first. Danny Valencia put runners at the corners with a two-out single to center, but Billy Butler grounded out to short to strand the runners.

The Astros countered with their best threat of the night in the second inning. Carlos Gomez led off with a double to left. One out later, Evan Gattis and Luis Valbuena drew consecutive walks to load the bases.

Gray struck out Hank Conger on three pitches. Then he escaped unscathed by inducing Jake Marisnick's foul out to third.

"I got to be better than that and overall we have to be better than that," Conger said. "It's crunch time here in September. Everybody keeps talking that we're a playoff team. We got to keep showing it.

"We got to start bearing down and be able to at least put together better at-bats than what I did today."

Billy Burns gave the A's a 1-0 lead with a solo home run to center in the third inning.

Kazmir issued a one-out walk to Marcus Semien in the fifth. Semien stole second and then reached third on Burns' single to right. Canha followed with his three-run home run to left field.

"The one to Canha, it's something that I look back and kind of just shake my head," Kazmir said. "I feel like I had been beating him with a fastball all game. Then I speed his bat up with a cutter inside.

"It's frustrating. That's a huge hit right there. We're trying to battle our way back and I end up giving up a three-spot in the fifth inning. That's tough to come back from, especially with a guy like Sonny on the mound."

Refined repertoire leads Michael Feliz to new heights

By: Cory McCord / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND, Calif. – Nobody would have blamed Michael Feliz for feeling dejected upon being sent back to Class AA Corpus Christi less than an hour after throwing a scoreless inning for the Astros in his major league debut May 31.

Although the hard-throwing righthander wasn't exactly happy, he exited Minute Maid Park more inspired than heart-broken. He had used his three-day promotion to observe how Luke Gregerson, Pat Neshek, Chad Qualls and the rest of the major league relievers prepared themselves.

This after arriving at his first major league spring training camp in February knowing he needed to improve his off-speed pitches. That brief, in-season opportunity in the majors reiterated the need to refine his slider.

That message was driven home further by veteran Roberto Hernandez, who guided his fellow Dominican through his first three days in the majors.

"What helped me was being able to see the players here and learn from them and learn that I also deserved to be here," Feliz said. "Roberto Hernandez would always tell me that he heard that I had a good repertoire."

The 6-4, 226-pound Feliz entered the season rated by Baseball America as the Astros' fourth-best prospect, behind Carlos Correa, Mark Appel and Vince Velasquez.

ESPN.com rated him the Astros' seventh-best prospect behind Correa, Appel, Velasquez, Colin Moran, Brett Phillips and Lance McCullers.

Rule 5 gamble pays off

Of that group, only McCullers beat Feliz to the majors this year. Correa, Velasquez and McCullers have been steady contributors this season, but Feliz might have taken bigger leaps among the Astros' impressive rookie crop.

Feliz, who turned 22 in June, had never pitched above Class A before this season. He was placed on the 40-man roster at the last minute in November ahead of the Rule 5 draft, with the Astros instead exposing 2010 first-round pick Delino DeShields Jr., who was subsequently selected by the rival Rangers.

Feliz then drew rave reviews from Astros pitching coach Brent Strom for his work ethic and willingness to learn in spring training.

Although Feliz's fastball has averaged at 94.55 mph in this majors this season, according to Brooks Baseball, he has shown an ability to hit 98-99-mph on the radar gun.

He has improved his fastball command, but he has made the biggest gains this year with his slider.

"My slider wasn't bad before, but it wasn't good," he said. "It was mediocre. I didn't have the consistency that I have now. I've fixed my breaking pitches. When you have better breaking pitches, you can improve your fastball, slider and changeup.

"Learning how to throw my slider consistently has been what has helped me the most this year."

Feliz credits roving pitching instructor Doug White with helping him refine his slider in spring training. Class A Lancaster pitching coach Don Alexander continued working with him on the slider, helping him earn a promotion to Class AA after he went 1-1 with a 4.41 ERA and 33 strikeouts in 32²/₃ innings with the JetHawks.

'A work in progress'

The work continued with Class AA Corpus Christi pitching coach Doug Brocail, and Feliz was back in the bigs from June 28-July 1 before returning to the Hooks.

"He committed to developing his breaking ball, and it's much, much better," Strom said. "He always had the arm strength for his fastball, but Doug (Brocail) did a lot of the hard work in getting him to understand spins and things like that. He's still a work in progress, but much, much improved."

The Astros had hoped to give Feliz some playoff experience with the Hooks, but they rushed him back up last Friday to add another arm to the bullpen after Scott Feldman went down with right shoulder irritation.

Feliz, who also throws a decent changeup, showcased his fastball and slider Saturday with a scoreless inning against the Twins. He showcased the slider again Monday while proving to be the Astros' most productive reliever in a 10-9 loss in Oakland with 12²/₃ scoreless innings.

According to Brooks Baseball, Feliz has thrown his four-seam fastball 68.97 percent of the time while mixing in his slider 22.99 percent of the time over his three outings in the majors. Of those 87 pitches, 60 were fastballs, 20 were sliders and seven were changeups.

Best days ahead?

Heading into the second game of the three-game series against the Athletics, Feliz had thrown 32/3 scoreless innings of relief in the majors with four strikeouts, one hit and one walk.

Not bad for a pitcher who had never pitched above Class A until this year. Although he will be used out of the bullpen the rest of this year, Astros manager A.J. Hinch is adamant that Feliz is still considered a future starter.

For now, though, the Astros are glad Feliz knows he can succeed in the majors with his refined repertoire.

“The time in the big leagues has allowed him to settle in and realize that his best can compete here,” Hinch said. “He’s very at ease within himself.”

Astros’ pro scouting strategy hits big on Francis Martes, David Paulino

By: Evan Drellich / Houston Chronicle

Two hard-throwing, buzz-generating Astros prospects, Francis Martes and David Paulino, encapsulate how the Astros have taken a different approach to the game in a way that has nothing to do with the usual meme of analytics.

The Astros did not draft these pitchers, and numbers didn’t matter much, radar-gun readings aside. It’s about the design of a scouting system that got the right people to the right place, people who then made the right evaluations. In this case, one young scout named Alex Jacobs on the backfields of Florida were the Astros’ eyes, under the supervision of the director of pro scouting, Kevin Goldstein.

And it’s about a general manager who, during his highly publicized rebuild, had reason to want players far away from contributing — and subsequently listened to his people on whom to target.

“I never heard of either of them when I was asking for them,” Astros GM Jeff Luhnow said of Martes and Paulino. “But I know ‘em now.”

The Astros traded then-closer Jose Veras to the Tigers in a deadline deal in July 2013, when the team was in full-scale, cut-throat demolish and rebuild mode.

By midseason in each of the next two years, Veras became Astros property again on the cheap, his contributions decent in 2014 in the big leagues, but limited to the minors this season. He was released from Class AAA Fresno right around this year’s deadline, coincidentally.

The Astros may well be regarded as the winners in the ’13 Veras deal, but not because they were able to get Veras back in subsequent seasons.

There was this unknown kid from the Dominican Republic they picked up off the backfields in the deal named Paulino. A righty who is now 21, Paulino had undergone Tommy John surgery very shortly before he was included in the the July 29, 2013, that sent Veras to the Tigers. And the Astros wanted the injured pitcher anyway.

Healthy now, Paulino has struck out 72 and walked 19 with a 2.81 ERA between Low and High Class A this season after beginning the year in extended spring training.

In 2014, the Astros pulled off a higher profile deal most literally at the last minute of the deadline with the Marlins, acquiring outfielder Jake Marisnick, third-base prospect Colin Moran and a future draft pick in a deal for Jarred Cosart and Kiké Hernandez.

There was one other player in the trade — the “throw-in,” if you will — a teenager named Martes. Astros personnel were excited about him at the time, but teams are almost always excited about players they acquire.

This enthusiasm was well founded.

A righty who is now 19, Martes is also from Dominican, and he’s making even greater waves than Paulino. The teenager’s already in Class AA Corpus Christi, with 98 strikeouts and 28 walks in 101 2/3 innings between three levels — not including extended spring, where he also started out.

The Astros have made their share of mistakes, as all clubs do, some notable. They’ve had victories as well, and the acquisition of these two pitchers show a different side of how the Astros’ outside-the-box thinking benefited them.

It was Jacobs' reports that encouraged the Astros to trade for the pitchers, and it was Goldstein's design that had Jacobs, 28, patrolling backfields. The Astros have a similar strategy in Arizona, where Aaron Tassano takes in games at team complexes.

The Astros aren't the only organization watching the youngest, raw players, but it's not a universal practice.

"When I hired Kevin, one of the things I asked him to do was think about what the right strategy should be for us given the fact that we were on a slightly longer time frame than other clubs," Luhnow said. "Normally when you're dealing players, I found this now being on the acquiring side, when you're dealing players, the team wants players that are close to the major leagues back in return. Which is why we trade (Domingo) Santana and (Brett) Phillips and those types of guys.

"We were, we knew we were in a position where we had a lot of already interesting prospects at the upper levels and we could afford to take some fliers on some guys that were further away. And so when Kevin set up the department, he set it up in a way that was pretty balanced where scouting was across all levels and not necessarily focused on the upper levels."

Jacobs, who covers part of the Florida State League as well as team complexes, and Goldstein deferred comment on this story to their superiors.

Working in baseball media for a decade with an emphasis on scouting and prospects before joining the Astros front office, Goldstein thought long about how he might do things differently given the chance to run a scouting department: how many looks to get on players, and on which types of players.

That strategy coincided with the Astros' overall approach.

"And as a result of (Goldstein's system), we had good reports on players that maybe another organization might not have even seen, or might have had only one report on," Luhnow said. "Whenever you're asking for the third player in the trade, and he's a rookie ball player or a Low A ball player, those guys are far away. They're — it's like rolling the dice. But in the case of both Paulino and Martes, Kevin and his scouts did a tremendous job of identifying those guys."

Martes, at 6-1, 225 pounds, is big bodied but that belies a free-and-easy delivery. He sits in the mid-90s — a couple ticks higher than Paulino — with a power breaking ball at 82-84 mph. His quick rise is an example of how the Astros are more comfortable promoting pitching prospects with speed than hitting prospects.

"For his age, 19 years old, he's very ahead, speaking about maturity-wise," Lancaster manager Omar Lopez said. "His stuff is so good. He's got a power fastball, he has a nice and smooth arm action.

"Breaking ball, his out pitch right now — when that pitch is good in an outing, oh my God, he's unhittable."

Paulino, 6-7, has tossed 67 1/3 innings this season, well more than he had in his first three years in pro ball combined, from 2011-13.

Lancaster has been a bit of a struggle after he posted a 1.57 ERA at Quad Cities: he has a 5.22 ERA in the hitter-friendly California League. Fastball command will be key for him, and he's not as polished as Martes, made evident by Martes' arrival at Class AA at a younger age. Like Paulino, he throws a curveball and changeup.

But both pitchers are potentially big arms, and big boons for the Astros on the side of the ball they're not best known for, pro scouting.

Astros C Jason Castro on track to rejoin team in Anaheim

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – Astros catcher Jason Castro, who has been on the 15-day disabled list with a right quad strain since Aug. 29, started light running exercises on a treadmill this week.

Barring a setback, Castro will move behind the plate within the next two days to catch situational lefthander Tony Sipp's bullpen session at Minute Maid Park.

Sipp, who has been out with a back ailment, and Castro remained behind in Houston during the Astros' three-game series against the A's. They're expected to rejoin the club in Anaheim for the three-game series against the Angels, A.J. Hinch said.

As is his custom, Hinch wouldn't divulge which of the next two days Castro will catch Sipp.

Carlos Correa joins George Springer on elite franchise list

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – With his 17th home run and 50th RBI of the season on Monday in his 75th game in the majors, Astros rookie shortstop Carlos Correa joined George Springer as the only players in franchise history to have that many home runs and RBIs in their first 75 games in the majors.

“Obviously for (Correa) he’s a different breed,” said Springer, who had 19 home runs and 50 RBIs in his first 75 games last year as a rookie. “He’s obviously shown a lot in his 80 games that he’s been here. He’s going to continue to grow and he’s going to be special.”

Although Correa, 20, readily acknowledges a goal to win the AL Rookie of the Year Award, he is adamant that he isn’t focusing much on his numbers now.

“You weigh the numbers at the end of the season, and I’ll try to improve each year,” Correa said. “But my goal and the reason they brought me up is to help try to find a way to help my team win.

“Springer’s a great player. I’m very happy he’s back with us in the lineup. He’s an impact player that we need in the lineup. He brings a lot of big things to this team.”

Astros players on death of Andujar: ‘This was a huge loss for the Dominican’

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – Dominican Republic natives Carlos Gomez and Michael Feliz were saddened by the death of former Astros and Cardinals great Joaquin Andujar, who was one of their island’s biggest baseball stars.

“This is very sad news for us,” Gomez said. “For us Joaquin was an icon in the Dominican Republic, a very respected person. He’s somebody we identified with baseball. He was an idol to our parents.

“It’s a big loss for our country and for baseball. He was an example and somebody who was very valuable for us.”

Gomez met Andujar a few times over the years when the former ace would visit clubhouses during the Dominican winter ball league.

“This was a huge loss for the Dominican,” Feliz said. “He always kept the Dominican flag flying high because he was a great person for our country and a baseball legend.”

Astros set rotation for upcoming series vs. Angels

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – Astros manager A.J. Hinch has set his rotation for the upcoming three-game series against the Angels at Angel Stadium, starting ace lefthander Dallas Keuchel on regular rest in the opener Friday night.

Rookie righthander Lance McCullers, who pitched a day ahead of Keuchel in their previous turns in the rotation, will follow the lefthander on Saturday exactly a week after his last start.

Righthander Mike Fiers will start the series finale Sunday against the Angels.

By using Fiers on Sunday the Astros will have their top four starters – Scott Kazmir, Collin McHugh, Keuchel and McCullers – available for the crucial four-game series against the Rangers next week.

Joaquin Andujar, former Astros pitcher, dies at 62

By: Reid Laymance / Houston Chronicle

Joaquin Andujar, who broke into the big leagues with the Astros, and later won Game 7 of the 1982 World Series for the St. Louis Cardinals, has died. He was 62.

Fellow Dominican and former big-league pitcher Mario Soto told ESPN Deportes that Andujar had been suffering from diabetes for years and died Tuesday in his hometown of San Pedro de Macoris.

Astros president of business operations Reid Ryan issued a statement Tuesday afternoon about Andujar's death.

"We are saddened by the passing of former Astros pitcher Joaquin Andujar," Ryan said. "Joaquin began his long Major League career with Houston, spending seven of his 13 Major League seasons in an Astros uniform. The passion and enthusiasm that he brought to the game will always be remembered by the fans and the players that he played with and played against. We send our deepest condolences to his family members, friends and fans."

"Joaquin was a great competitor and very entertaining as a teammate," said Enos Cabell, a former Astros teammate and current special assistant to the general manager. "He went on to become one of the best pitchers in the league. We really enjoyed playing with him because he brought a lot of energy to our club. I'm very sad to hear of his passing."

Andujar, who originally signed with the Reds as a teenager in 1969, made his MLB debut with the Astros in 1976 and pitched for parts of his first six seasons in Houston and was an All-Star in 1977 and 1979. The Astros traded Andujar in June of 1981 for Tony Scott. In 1982 for the Cardinals, Andujar had a 1.35 ERA in two World Series starts against the Brewers but losing out to his batterymate Darrell Porter for series MVP honors.

He led the majors with 20 wins in 1984 and won 21 games in 1985 for the Cardinals.

He was traded to Oakland in 1986 and returned to Houston for one final season in 1988, working mostly out of the bullpen, before retiring at age 35.

Astros 2016 schedule: Open at Yankees; Cubs and Cardinals visit Houston

By: Jose de Jesus Ortiz / Houston Chronicle

OAKLAND – The Astros will open their 2016 schedule on the road against the Yankees on April 4 and then hold the home opener at Minute Maid Park on April 11 against the Kansas City Royals.

The Astros' 2016 interleague slate will feature their old National League Central rivals. The St. Louis Cardinals will visit Minute Maid Park on Aug. 16-17.

The Cubs, who have traditionally been one of the strongest draws in Houston, will visit the Astros from Sept. 9-11. The Reds also will visit Minute Maid Park on June 17-19.

The Astros will play their first six games on the road next season, beginning with the opener at Yankee Stadium. They'll be off on April 5 and then play the next two games of the three-game series in the Bronx. They'll then play an interleague series against the Brewers at Miller Park April 8-10 before returning home for a seven-game homestand that begins with a four-game series against the Royals.

The Yankees will make their only visit to Minute Maid Park on July 25-27. The Red Sox will visit for a three-game series April 22-24. The Lone Star Series rival Rangers will make three visits to Minute Maid Park next season, May 20-22, Aug. 5-7 and Sept. 12-14.

Hinch turns Astros' blend of players into a team

By: Brian T. Smith / Houston Chronicle

We've lived with A.J. Hinch for 139 games during a crazy baseball season.

This is what we're certain we know: He's so calm, cool and even.

When everything around the Astros heats up, their Stanford-educated first-year manager just watches, observes and stares, locked into a Zen-like trance. As the games only become more emotional and chaotic in the near-playoff fire of September, Hinch only gets cooler.

That's the story, right?

Wrong.

"I go off with the best of them," Hinch said, grinning at his personal secret.

The family that loves Hinch and the friends who really know him can't believe he has made it this long without occasionally exploding on camera. All the TV ever shows is a fit 41-year-old kneeling near the top step for nine innings, surveying an unpredictable chess match that plays out daily in ballparks across the country. But when the pieces suddenly fall apart or the plot goes awry, Hinch feels the pain as much anyone in the stadium.

He just never allows himself to show it.

"Oh, I'm going, 'Oh my God,' " said Hinch, whose team played at Oakland late Tuesday night. "I have to go for a walk and get it out of my system. Behind the scenes, I've done a few things that I'm not the most proud of that players have seen. But that's the competitor in me, and it's OK for them to see that."

It's the real Hinch. It's the vow he made to himself when baseball came calling last September with another shot at running a big-league club. It's why the can't-be-killed Astros are still in first place in their division on Sept. 9 and Hinch is the best candidate running for American League Manager of the Year.

One for all at the park

I'll be me and you'll be you, Hinch has told and shown his team since spring training. But when we're all on the field, we're Astros.

"He just exudes confidence. You can feel it coming from him," rookie righthander Lance McCullers said. "He loves his team, he trusts his team and he'll run us out there against anyone, any day. When you can feel that - everyone can talk about it - but when you can feel that from a manager, it means a lot more to the guys and they play with that much more intensity, that much more heart. Because he's backing you up." Hinch's combined 89-123 record during two abbreviated years in Arizona doesn't show it. But he did some good things from 2009-10 with the Diamondbacks. He also made classic rookie mistakes.

"I was very much fixated on what it looked like and what the perception was," Hinch said.

"It" is everything. The team, the players, the clubhouse. The endless big picture of the season; the overwhelming minutiae that defines everyday life at the park.

"It" is what Hinch has got so right in his second run on the top step. He has completely been himself while allowing the Astros to be exactly who they are. Silly, fun and weird. Passionate, powerful and erratic. The full arc of young, international baseball at its brightest. The quieter view of veterans, backups and castoffs, who are caught in the middle of a story that won't end and rarely feels so right.

"We have to understand societally where we are with how these players have grown up," Hinch said. "We have a ton of personality. And then I ride them pretty hard about the baseball. ... I have incredibly high standards for this team."

There's Dallas Keuchel and his huge beard. Carlos Correa as the 20-year-old genius. Evan Gattis with his unorthodox lumberjack attack. Jose Altuve, Marwin Gonzalez, Luis Valbuena, Carlos Gomez and Correa, converging in the clubhouse as they preside over their Latin Corner.

"Team Venezuela," said Hinch, who has relied on multiple players to carry and lead the Astros all season. "They've sort of inherited Puerto Rico into Venezuela. And now we have a Dominican in Gomez."

When third baseman Jed Lowrie (31, born in Salem, Ore., Stanford-educated) was deciding whether he wanted to rejoin the Astros a second time, he met with Hinch before signing anything. Out of all the questions asked and inside baseball discussed, Lowrie had one main point he wanted to press with his potential new manager: Are you going to micromanage everything or give the young guys a chance to actually prove they're pros?

The right touch

Lowrie got the answer he wanted. The Astros haven't looked back since April, after roaring out to an 18-7 start.

"He's done a really good job of knowing when to say something and knowing when to back off," Lowrie said. "And that's the best quality a manager really can have, because you have all these dynamic personalities in the clubhouse."

Club Astros is only part of Hinch's 2015 hit list. Some squads lose on the road and the flight to the next city is a cold library. Not the young Astros, who are allowed to revel in their youth, even after a loss.

"It's not OK when we lose," Hinch said. "It's OK to be a human being after we lose."

The human side of the game has done wonders for the chemistry of the team, clubhouse and front office.

Rocky to smooth

Bo Porter, the first manager of the Astros' new era, was a fierce proponent of new-age speak and even quoted himself above players' lockers. But his shorter-than-expected tenure was riddled with infighting and negativity, with coaches plotting behind his back and executives wondering why the organization hired Porter in the first place.

Hinch established an immediate rapport with general manager Jeff Luhnow, whose relationship with Porter deteriorated while the Astros' rebuild progressed. "(Luhnow has) been terrific this year in terms of support, in terms of creative ideas, in terms of just being a sounding board for me about our team," Hinch said. "Yet he's kept his distance and allowed me to do my job, and I've appreciated that type of freedom."

Luhnow's second managerial hire has been one of his smartest moves in Houston.

"I have no complaints," Luhnow said. "He knows the game very well. ... He asks for feedback. But I don't have a lot of feedback to give him, because he makes good decisions."

Consistency, communication and caring. They were the Astros' biggest flaws as the franchise tore everything down in downtown Houston. They're Hinch's main strengths. The second-time manager hopes to keep the best conversation in a decade rolling through October.

"I want to finish this," Hinch said.

Kazmir topped by A's; Astros' West lead to 1

By Jane Lee and Oliver Macklin / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Sonny Gray baffled the Astros' lineup over seven shutout innings, and Mark Canha hit a three-run homer in the fifth, to guide Oakland to a 4-0 win over Houston on Tuesday night at the Coliseum.

Gray loaded the bases in the second inning and allowed two Astros to reach base in the fifth and seventh, but was able to work out of all three jams. The right-hander allowed five hits and two walks while striking out four.

"You've got to tip your hat to Sonny," Astros catcher Hank Conger said.

Scott Kazmir, who faced his former team for the first time since the Trade Deadline, surrendered all four runs via the homer. The Athletics' Billy Burns went deep in the third inning off Kazmir, who allowed seven hits and two walks. The Astros' lead in the AL West fell to one game over Texas, which topped Seattle.

"It's always frustrating losing a game, especially at a time like this where you really need to take care of business," Kazmir said. "You have to stay positive, trust what's gotten us here this entire year, and we'll be just fine."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

It's always Sonny: With seven scoreless innings in his pocket, Gray jumped ahead of Houston's Dallas Keuchel to regain the American League ERA crown with a 2.28 mark, to Keuchel's 2.29. The right-hander navigated traffic with ease, stranding seven base runners in his time on the mound, and exited the 101-pitch outing with his team-leading 13th victory. It was the 16th time this season Gray has completed at least seven innings. [More >](#)

Leaving 'em loaded: Carlos Gomez doubled to lead off the second inning and Evan Gattis and Luis Valbuena followed with one-out walks. But the Astros squandered their best chance to score against Gray as Conger struck out swinging on three pitches and Jake Marisnick popped out to end the rally.

"We had, I think it was, three innings with runners on base, and coming into the game, we know the opportunities against Gray are going to be few and far between," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "Certainly, the opportunity early that he pitched out of was a big one."

Homer happy: Burns, who tallied just two home runs across five Minor League seasons, drilled his fourth homer of the year to center field to lead off the third inning. Fellow rookie Canha launched his 14th of the season to left field in the fifth, a three-run shot that afforded the A's some breathing room. For Canha, it was his second home run in as many days and sixth in his last 20 games.

"You don't expect Billy to hit a ball that far, especially when he's into the count that far, but it was flying a bit tonight with it being a bit warm out there, but still, he squared it up," manager Bob Melvin said. "He's surprised us a few times this year, and again that time."

QUOTABLE

"These guys are the best in the league for a reason. Pitchers like him, pitchers like we saw -- [Zack Greinke], [Clayton Kershaw], [Madison Bumgarner], we see Keuchel do it every five days. You've got to earn your keep against these guys and find ways to scratch runs across. At the same time, he's going to break out his best stuff when his back is against the wall." --Hinch on facing tough pitchers like Gray.

WHAT'S NEXT

Astros: Houston turns to right-hander Collin McHugh as the Astros look to take the series finale beginning Wednesday at 9:05 p.m. CT. McHugh, going for his 16th win, is 2-1 with a 1.77 ERA in his career against Oakland and 1-1 with a 2.31 ERA against the A's this season.

A's: Right-hander Aaron Brooks, who has a 8.64 ERA in two starts since his return from Triple-A Nashville, gets the ball for Wednesday's 7:05 p.m. PT series finale against the Astros at the Coliseum. Brooks took a no-decision in his only career start against Houston, allowing one run in seven innings on Aug. 6.

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

Astros have Gray on ropes, but can't cash in

By Oliver Macklin / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Athletics' Sonny Gray didn't need any help as Oakland defeated Houston, 4-0, Tuesday night at the Coliseum, but the Astros provided it anyway.

The Astros' offense stranded seven runners and went 0-for-5 with runners in scoring position as they saw their lead over the Rangers in the American League West drop to one game following Texas' win in Seattle.

"Obviously, today wasn't one of the best days," Astros catcher Hank Conger said. "You've got to tip your hat to Sonny."

While Gray was solid throughout his seven scoreless innings, the Astros had their opportunities to put runs on the board.

Carlos Gomez led off the second inning with a double to left field, and after Jed Lowrie lined out to Jake Smolinski in left, Evan Gattis and Luis Valbuena walked to load the bases. But Conger (strikeout, swinging) and Jake Marisnick (popup to third) were unable to drive in a run, seeing a combined five pitches in their two at-bats.

"Right there, with us struggling to score some runs, I've got to do a better job as far as at least trying to work the count or at least trying to put the ball in play, and try to battle off those pitches," Conger said.

It seemed as if momentum was leaning Houston's way, but Gray was able to bear down and record the outs he needed to get it back on his side.

"Coming into the game, we know the opportunities against Gray are going to be few and far between," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "Certainly, the opportunity early that he pitched out of was a big one."

Houston did get another chance in the fifth. Valbuena singled to begin the inning and George Springer followed with a single of his own with two outs, but Jose Altuve lined out to right field to halt the rally.

In Gray's final inning, he allowed consecutive two-out singles to Conger and Preston Tucker, but was able to work out of another jam as he got Springer to ground out to end the frame.

"You look at a guy like that, he's an All-Star, Cy Young candidate," Conger said. "You want to try and do something to break the tension. Especially knowing that if you don't capitalize in a situation, it could be the only situation you have to capitalize on for the rest of the game."

Hinch: Correa, Springer adjusted 'very quickly'

Astros announce rotation for weekend series vs. Angels

By: Oliver Macklin / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Carlos Correa clubbed his 17th home run Monday and knocked in his 50th RBI, joining teammate George Springer as the only players in franchise history to reach those totals in their first 75 big league games.

Springer accomplished the feat last year with 19 homers and 50 RBIs in his first 75 games after being called up midseason.

Correa arrived at the Coliseum on Monday needing a homer and four RBIs to become a member of Springer's elite club.

The rookie shortstop drove in a run in the first inning on a groundout, then made his mark in the seventh, when he crushed a three-run blast into the left-field seats off Athletics reliever Fernando Rodriguez.

Correa did not seem satisfied Tuesday, because the Astros lost Monday's game to the A's, 10-9.

"If I'm getting the team to win because of that, it makes me feel like I've accomplished something," Correa said. "At the end of the day, if you have good numbers and your team is losing, you're not accomplishing anything."

Springer, 25, and Correa, 20, have played a major role in turning around an organization that won just 51 games in 2013.

Springer made a big splash with Houston in 2014, giving the Astros' faithful a glimpse of the franchise's promising future. Correa followed suit this year, propelling Houston to first place in the American League West.

"Certainly, they're two of the more impactful players we have in general, let alone their experience level," manager A.J. Hinch said. "It's rare to have that type of talent arrive so soon after one another."

Hinch credited the young duo's knack to adapt on the fly as to why they have found success early on.

"They both adjusted to the big leagues very quickly," Hinch said. "They've both shown they belong at an early age, and there's a reason why they're hitting in the top third of our order consistently. It's due to their talent and ability to adjust to this level right when they got here."

- Hinch announced the Astros' plan for their pitching rotation for Houston's next series against the Angels. Dallas Keuchel will throw Friday, followed by Lance McCullers on Saturday and Mike Fiers on Sunday.
- Jason Castro has resumed running on the treadmill and "hit a couple days in a row," Hinch said Tuesday. The catcher has been on the disabled list since August 29 with a right quad strain.

"It's progressing nicely," Hinch said of Castro's rehab process. "But he hasn't done the catching stuff."

The Astros' skipper said Castro will meet the team in Anaheim later in the week to engage in more rigorous baseball activities. The plan is for Castro to catch Tony Sipp, who is working his way back from back and oblique issues, in "the next day or so in Houston," Hinch said.

Astros set to open 2016 against Yanks in NY

Houston scheduled to face former NL Central foes in Interleague matchups

By: Brian McTaggart / MLB.com

HOUSTON -- For only the sixth time in 35 years, the Astros will open a season on the road when they face the Yankees on April 4 at Yankee Stadium in the 2016 season opener. Major League Baseball released its tentative 2016 regular-season schedule on Tuesday.

The Astros will begin the season with three games in New York (April 4, 6-7) followed by three against the Brewers in Milwaukee (April 8-10) before returning to Houston for the April 11 home opener against the Royals at Minute Maid Park.

- Tentative 2016 Astros schedule

In addition to the Brewers, the Astros will also see former National League Central foes when the Reds (June 17-19) and Cardinals (Aug. 16-17) return to Minute Maid Park for the first time since 2013. The Cubs (Sept. 9-11) will visit for the first time since '12. The Astros will play the Cardinals in St. Louis (June 14-15) and the Pirates at PNC Park (Aug. 22-24).

The Astros will face their in-state rivals, the Texas Rangers, 19 times, with the first of three home series scheduled for May 20-22. The other two three-game sets at Minute Maid Park will be August 5-7 and Sept. 12-14.

Additional highlights from the 2016 schedule include home matchups against the Red Sox (April 22-24), Yankees (July 25-27) and Blue Jays (Aug. 1-4).

Season tickets, group tickets, and individual-game suite rentals are on-sale now for the 2016 season. The purchase of 2016 full-season tickets also guarantees access to 2015 postseason ticket options. Fans can purchase tickets by calling the Astros ticket sales office at 1-800-Astros2 or by visiting www.astros.com.

Former big league pitcher Andujar dies at 62

Right-hander was four-time All-Star, two-time 20-game winner

By: Joey Nowak / MLB.com

Former Major League pitcher Joaquin Andujar, a four-time All-Star who helped lead the Cardinals to the World Series title in 1982, has died at the age of 62.

The right-handed native of the Dominican Republic had a 13-year Major League career that featured stops with Houston (1976-81, 1988), St. Louis (1981-85) and Oakland (1986-87).

"It's someone that served, to people like me, as a role model," Hall of Famer and fellow Dominican native Pedro Martinez said Tuesday on MLB Network. "This is a big hit for the Dominican Republic, because before I thought about baseball as a career, it was only a dream. And Andujar was in the middle of every dream I had because he was one of the best pitchers we ever had in the Dominican Republic."

Andujar was instrumental in helping the Cardinals to the World Series title in '82, throwing a team-high 13 1/3 innings -- including seven in the decisive Game 7 -- over two World Series starts, allowing just two earned runs for an ERA of 1.35, the lowest in the seven-game Series by any pitcher who worked at least three innings.

"I loved him," said Whitey Herzog, Andujar's manager in St. Louis. "He made managing fun. He'd take the ball and he'd pitch. He was a good competitor. Even in the [1982] World Series, when [Ted] Simmons hit that line drive back at him in the third game, I thought he was killed. It hit him on the shin, and I had to take him out, and it didn't look good. He said, 'I'm one tough Dominican. I'll pitch the seventh game.' And he did a good job and, of course, we won in the seventh game."

Andujar went on to win a Major League-leading 20 games with the Cardinals in 1984 (also taking home a Gold Glove that year), then won another 21 games the following season as the Cardinals won the National League pennant.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of one of the best pitchers in Cardinals history," Cardinals chairman Bill DeWitt Jr. said. "Joaquin Andujar was 'One Tough Dominican' who endeared himself to Cardinals fans not only with his great talent, but also with his unrivaled passion for the game. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, his friends and his teammates today."

Said former Cardinals teammate Rick Horton: "He was an outstanding pitcher and a terrific pitcher. We probably don't talk about how good he was as a pitcher often enough. We always talk about [John] Tudor and Bob Forsch and Bob Gibson and [Adam] Wainwright and [Chris] Carpenter, but Andujar was a 20-game winner twice.

He was incredibly good during those early 80's years, and a guy you could count on to pitch a lot of innings. So many despite his flair and his notoriety at the time, he has been more forgotten than he should have been for his accomplishments."

According to an ESPN Deportes report citing former Reds pitcher Mario Soto, who is the president of the Dominican Federation of Professional Baseball Players, Andujar died after a long battle with diabetes.

ESPN's Enrique Rojas reported that Andujar will be honored Tuesday in his hometown of San Pedro de Macoris and will be buried on Wednesday.

"Someone that came over from San Pedro de Macoris, like pretty much every one of us -- hungry and from very poor backgrounds," Martinez said. "To have him serve as a role model for so many of us is great."

Andujar, well known for his aggressive pitching style and fiery personality on the mound -- not to mention his colorful commentary, including his endearing use of the expression "you never know" -- finished his career with 127 wins in 405 games, with the majority of his appearances coming for the Astros, with whom he won 44 games as both a starter and reliever. He was signed by the Reds as an amateur free agent in 1969 but was traded to Houston in October 1975, and he debuted with the Astros in 1976. He won nine games that rookie season.

"He was a real hard thrower and wild," former Astros teammate Larry Dierker said of Andujar. "He was very emotional, almost an explosive-type personality. He started a couple of fights -- started them or finished them, whatever -- and funny, too. He had that one quote, 'You can sum it up in one word: You never know.' A lot of people have a lot of memories when they hear that name.

"He developed into a good pitcher with us and a great pitcher with the Cardinals."

Andujar returned to the Astros in 1988 for a final season, going 2-5 in 23 appearances (10 starts).

Enos Cabell, currently a special assistant to Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow, played with Andujar in Houston for five seasons.

"Joaquin was a great competitor and very entertaining as a teammate," Cabell said. "He went on to become one of the best pitchers in the league. We really enjoyed playing with him because he brought a lot of energy to our club. I'm very sad to hear of his passing.

"He became a really good pitcher. He was really excitable when he pitched. He had chicken legs, but he was very competitive. For his talent, he really pitched a long time and was very successful."

The Astros released the following statement:

"We are saddened by the passing of former Astros pitcher Joaquin Andujar. Joaquin began his long Major League career with Houston, spending seven of his 13 Major League seasons in an Astros uniform. The passion and enthusiasm that he brought to the game will always be remembered by the fans and the players that he played with and played against. We send our deepest condolences to his family members, friends and fans."

Former Astros GM Tal Smith said Andujar was one of the most unforgettable characters he came across in baseball.

"He was an interesting guy," Smith said. "He was a very accomplished athlete, but he was very controversial. ... You never knew what you were going to get. I really think some of it may have been intentional."

Smith said that Andujar was a switch-hitter who would bat left-handed against lefty pitchers, exposing his pitching arm to being hit by a pitch.

"That was just Joaquin," Smith said. "If it was 90 degrees out and humid, he wanted a jacket when he reached base. If was 50 degrees, he'd be sleeveless. Just a real eccentric, but he was very accomplished, very competitive. He pitched some great games for the Astros, and obviously with the Astros, he was a leader and won back-to-back 20 games."

Tucker helps power Greeneville to Appy League title

Astros' No. 4 prospect homers in second consecutive Appalachian League Championship game

By: Mike Rosenbaum / MLB.com

Kyle Tucker picked a perfect time to discover his power stroke.

The Astros' No. 4 prospect helped Greeneville secure its first Appalachian League title since 2004 on Tuesday night, going 2-for-4 with his second home run in as many days and three RBIs in an 8-7 win over Princeton.

Tucker's home run -- a three-run shot in the third inning -- was his third in six playoffs games for Greeneville, matching his total from 63 games during the regular season. He also scored two runs and stole a base in the contest.

After going 3-for-12 with a home run against Kingsport in the Appy League semifinals, the 18-year-old outfielder collected multiple hits in all three games against Princeton in the finals, finishing 6-for-12 with two home runs as well as five runs scored and four RBIs.

Overall, Tucker, who served as Greeneville's three-hole hitter in postseason, batted .375 with seven runs scored, six RBIs and the aforementioned three home runs in six games.

Tucker scuffled in the Gulf Coast League after the Astros made him the No. 5 overall pick in the 2015 Draft, batting just .208/.267/.317 with a pair of homers in 33 games. However, the 6-foot-4, left-handed hitter's production picked up with a promotion to the Appalachian League, where he posted a .286/.322/.393 batting line along with one homer, nine doubles, 20 RBIs and 14 steals in 30 contests.

Between both stops, MLB Pipeline's No. 60 overall prospect batted .246/.294/.353 with 30 runs scored, 17 extra-base hits, 33 RBIs and 18 stolen bases in 63 regular-season games.

McHugh seeks 16th win as Astros-A's wrap in Oakland

By Oliver Macklin / MLB.com

Astros right-hander Collin McHugh, who has a 1.54 ERA across his last six starts, will be on the mound for Wednesday's series finale against the A's at the Coliseum as the Astros seek to protect their division lead over the Rangers.

Houston is one game ahead of Texas in the American League West.

Oakland will counter with right-hander Aaron Brooks, who has struggled to the tune of an 8.64 ERA in two starts since his return from Triple-A Nashville on Aug. 29.

McHugh, vying for his 16th win of the season for the first-place Astros, has limited opposition to seven runs in his last 41 innings, posting a 1.10 WHIP in that span.

Things to know about this game

- Brooks took a no-decision in his only career appearance against the Astros, a start in the A's 5-4, 10-inning loss on Aug. 6 in which he yielded just one run on four hits in seven innings.
- McHugh is 2-1 with a 1.77 ERA in three career starts against the A's, including 1-1 with a 2.31 ERA and 19 strikeouts over 11 2/3 innings in two outings this season.
- A's third baseman Danny Valencia has hit safely in each of his 13 career games against Houston.

Elias Says...

By: Elias Sports Bureau

Mets rally from six down to extend division lead

The Mets scored six runs in the seventh inning and once in the eighth to overcome a six-run deficit and register an 8-7 win over the Nationals on Tuesday night. It marked only the second time in the era of divisional play in which a first place team came back from a deficit of six or more runs to defeat a team that trailed them by five or fewer games in the standings in September or October. The only other team to do that since 1969 is the Mariners, who defeated the A's by a score of 10-7 after trailing by six runs on September 22, 1995. Oakland entered the contest trailing Seattle by five games in the American League West.

Hudson

40-year old Hudson wins and goes deep

Tim Hudson allowed one run over six innings and earned the win and he also chipped in at the plate with two hits including a home run in the Giants' 6-2 victory over the Diamondbacks. Hudson is only the third Giants pitcher at least 40 years old to hit a home run, joining Clarence Mitchell (40 years old in 1931) and Steve Carlton (41 in 1986).

Prior to Hudson, the last 40+ year old pitcher to hit a home run and earn a victory in the same game was Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan on May 1, 1987 against the Braves.

Rookies turn up aces in Padres-Rockies duel

Padres' rookie Colin Rea allowed two hits and no runs over seven innings and Rockies' rookie Jon Gray allowed two hits and no runs in five innings of work in a game won by San Diego by a score of 2-1 on Tuesday night. It marked only the second time since 1900 that opposing rookie starters each allowed no runs and two or fewer hits. The only other time that happened in the modern era was on June 24, 2011 when Oakland's Guillermo Moscoso allowed two hits and no runs and Philadelphia's Vance Worley allowed one hit and no runs.

Rookies lead Phillies to victory

Aaron Nola hurled seven shutout innings and earned the win and he was backed by three RBI by fellow rookie Odubel Herrera in the Phillies' 5-0 victory over the Braves on Tuesday night. That marked the first time in nearly 23 years that a Phillies' rookie starting pitcher did not allow a run in a winning effort and a rookie teammate drove in at least three runs in the same game. The last time that happened for Philadelphia was on September 26, 1992 when Ben Rivera pitched a shutout and Ruben Amaro Jr. knocked in four runs in a 10-0 Phillies' win over the Cardinals in the second game of a double-header.

A-Rod hits his 30th homer of the season

Alex Rodriguez hit his 30th home run of the season accounting for the Yankees only run in the team's 2-1 loss to the Orioles on Tuesday night. Rodriguez became the third player to hit his 30th homer of a season at the age of 40 or older in major league history. The only other players to do that are Darrell Evans (1987) and Barry Bonds (2004).

Liriano posts his first win at Great American Ball Park

Francisco Liriano did not allow a run and struck out 10 in six innings of work in the Pirates' 7-3 win over the Reds in Cincinnati on Tuesday night. Liriano entered the contest with an 0-4 record at Great American Ball Park. Entering Tuesday's action Liriano's six career starts at Great American Ball Park were second most among major-league pitchers that had never earned a win in Cincinnati's current home park behind Barry Zito's seven.

Liriano also contributed at the plate with two hits, including a double. He now has three extra-base hits in his last 17 at bats after not producing a double, triple or homer in any of his first 149 career at bats.

Ramirez moves across the diamond

After making all of his 2,078 career starts in the field at third base, Aramis Ramirez took the field as the Pirates' starting first baseman on Tuesday night. Ramirez is the seventh player to start each of his first 2,000 games in the field at one position and then start at another position, a list that includes Hall of Famer Bill Mazeroski, who started his first 2,044 games in the field at second base before starting at third base while playing his whole 17-year career for the Pirates.

Jays post extra-inning win at Fenway

The Blue Jays scored four runs in the 10th inning and defeated the Red Sox by a score of 5-1 at Fenway Park on Tuesday night. It marked the second time the Jays won an extra-inning game in Boston this season, having also done that on June 13. Toronto won only one extra-inning affair at Fenway Park in the 22 seasons previous to 2015 (1993-2014), with that victory coming on July 25, 2001 (Toronto had eight extra-inning losses in Boston over that span).

Marlins' rookie catcher goes deep twice

T.J. Realmuto hit two solo home runs to lead the Marlins to a 6-4 win over the Brewers on Tuesday night. Realmuto is the first Marlins rookie catcher to hit multiple homers in a game. Prior to Realmuto, the last Marlins catcher to homer twice in a game was Ronny Paulino on June 14, 2009 against the Blue Jays.

Castro delivers with two outs

Starlin Castro drove in four runs - three of which came on a home run with two outs in the second inning - in the Cubs' 8-5 win over the Cardinals on Tuesday night. Only 16.7 percent of Castro's 48 total RBI came with two outs prior to Tuesday. That was the lowest such percentage among major-league players with at least 40 RBI.

Hosmer and Morales come through in the first

Eric Hosmer stroked a three-run double in the first inning and Kendrys Morales followed with an RBI double giving the Royals all the runs they would score in the team's 4-2 win over the Twins on Tuesday night. Morales now has 29 RBI in the first inning this season, which is tied with the Yankees' Brian McCann for the highest total in the American League; and Hosmer's 26 first-inning RBI ranks third in the A.L.

Tigers use 10 pitchers in win over the Rays

The Tigers used 10 pitchers in their 8-7 win over the Rays in a 13-inning affair on Tuesday night. That ties the most pitchers the Tigers have ever used in a single game in their franchise history. The only other time Detroit had 10 pitchers take the mound was on September 14, 1998 in a 12-inning loss to the White Sox.

Leadoff hitters go deep in the first for Angels and Dodgers

Justin Ruggiano led off the top of the first with a home run and Kole Calhouncountered with a leadoff homer of his own in the bottom of the first in the Dodgers' 6-4 win over the Angels on Tuesday night. It marked only the sixth time since inter-league play began in 1997 that each team's leadoff hitter homered in the first inning in a game involving an American League and National League team. The other instances: Boston's Jose Offerman and Philadelphia's Doug Glanville (1999), the White Sox Ray Durham and Cincinnati's Brady Clark (2001), Montreal's Brad Wilkerson and Toronto's Shannon Stewart (2002), Florida's Hanley Ramirez and Boston's Kevin Youkilis (2006) and Milwaukee's Gerardo Parra and Minnesota's Brian Dozier (2015).

Gray outpitches buddy Kazmir; A's beat Astros 4-0

By: Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. -- The Houston Astros realize they can hardly afford many more September slip-ups as they try to hold a slim division lead.

Their advantage in the AL West is down to one game after Texas won at Seattle.

Sonny Gray outpitched close friend Scott Kazmir, and the Athletics spoiled the former Oakland lefty's return to the Coliseum mound with a 4-0 win over the Astros on Tuesday night.

"It's always frustrating losing a game, especially at a time like this where we really need to take care of business," Kazmir said. "You have to stay positive, trust what's gotten us here this entire year and we'll be just fine. We can't let a game like this really bother us and we can't let it carry on for tomorrow's game and the series ahead of that."

Mark Canha hit a three-run homer in the fifth inning after Billy Burns' earlier solo shot to back Gray (13-7). The All-Star right-hander ended a four-start winless stretch and got the best of mentor Kazmir, traded by the A's to his hometown Astros on July 23.

Kazmir had been back to the Bay Area with Houston but didn't pitch against his old team during that trip in early August. He faced A's for the first time since Aug. 18, 2013, with the Indians.

Gray allowed five hits, struck out four and walked two in seven innings. He ended a three-game losing streak with his first victory since beating Houston on Aug. 7.

"The one to Canha is something I look back and kind of just shake my head," Kazmir said. "That's a huge hit right there. We're trying to battle our way back and end up giving up a 3-spot in the fifth inning that's tough to come back from, especially with a guy like Sonny on the mound."

Ryan Dull pitched the final two innings.

Kazmir (7-10) lost his second consecutive decision. He was tagged for four runs and seven hits in six innings.

"You tell them this is an opportunity to play tomorrow," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said. "We're not going to carry any baggage with us. The drama surrounding multiple losses in a row, it certainly hurts. Our guys know what's at stake. Our guys are ready to play."

Gray got through a 1-2-3 first on 11 pitches. Kazmir allowed two singles in the bottom half but escaped unscathed on a night when the game-time temperature of 87 degrees was the warmest at the Coliseum all season.

Houston left the bases loaded in the second after Carlos Gomez's leadoff double and a pair of one-out walks. Hank Conger struck out and Jake Marisnick fouled out.

The A's are doing their part to affect the playoff race after holding off the Astros 10-9 on Monday afternoon.

"I had a rough outing my last time so it was important to get back on the mound and put zeros up, give us a chance to win," Gray said.

Jed Lowrie was back in Houston's starting lineup after resting for most of Monday's game, but went 0 for 4 with his first hitless game in the last eight. He batted .478 (11 for 23) with three home runs, four doubles and seven RBI during that stretch.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Astros: The plan is to have lefty reliever Tony Sipp, who hasn't pitched since Aug. 26 because of a troublesome back and oblique, throw off a mound in the next day or so in Houston to rehabbing C Jason Castro. He has been on the disabled list since Aug. 29 with a strained right quadriceps muscle. Both are scheduled to join the team in Anaheim this weekend to continue their recoveries. Sipp played catch two days in a row. Castro has been running on a treadmill and hitting. "He's going to join us in Anaheim to do a little more aggressive baseball activity," Hinch said. "We're going to try to get him behind the plate in Houston to catch Tony."

Athletics: C Stephen Vogt had a second ultrasound on his injured groin area after taking a hard foul tip Sunday, and the latest test showed he won't need any procedure. He was home resting for the second straight day, expected to return to the ballpark Wednesday night. It's unclear when or if he will play again this year. ... OF Sam Fuld, who last played on Aug. 30 but hasn't batted since Aug. 25 as he deals with back spasms, could get into the game Wednesday in a defensive role or to pinch run but perhaps isn't quite ready to hit until the weekend.

UP NEXT

Astros: RHP Collin McHugh (15-7) looks to win his third straight start when he pitches the series finale.

Athletics: RHP Aaron Brooks (1-2) tries for his first victory in three starts since being recalled Aug. 29.

Four-time All-Star Joaquin Andujar, 62, dies after battle with diabetes

By: Enrique Rojas / ESPN.com

Former major league pitcher Joaquin Andujar, who helped lead the St. Louis Cardinals to the 1982 World Series title, died Tuesday in the Dominican Republic after a long battle with diabetes. He was 62.

Andujar will be honored Tuesday in his hometown of San Pedro de Macoris, in the eastern region of the Dominican Republic, and will be buried Wednesday.

Former major league pitcher Mario Soto, who works as a special assistant to the general manager in the Cincinnati Reds organization and is president of the Dominican Federation of Professional Baseball Players, confirmed the death to ESPNDeportes.com.

Joaquin Andujar, known for his feistiness on the mound, was a four-time All-Star over 13 seasons. He finished his career with a 127-118 record and a 3.58 ERA. Ronald C. Modra/Getty Images

"Joaquin struggled for years with diabetes and in recent days had deteriorated a lot," Soto said from Santo Domingo. "He was hospitalized several times but always came out unscathed. However, he surrendered to the disease that consumed him completely."

Andujar was one of the best Dominican players of the 1980s. A right-hander, he was 127-118 with a 3.58 ERA and was a four-time All Star in 13 seasons with the Houston Astros, the Cardinals and the Oakland Athletics.

Andujar was 2-0 with 1.35 ERA in the 1982 World Series, which the Cardinals won in seven games against the Milwaukee Brewers. In Game 7, he pitched seven innings and allowed two runs to push his record to 3-0 that postseason.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of one of the best pitchers in Cardinals history," St. Louis chairman Bill DeWitt Jr. said in a statement. "Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, his friends and his teammates today."

The Cardinals honored Andujar with a moment of silence before Tuesday night's game.

The Cards and Astros also paid tribute to Andujar on Twitter.

Andujar won 20 games in 1984 and 21 in 1985, and both times was fourth in the race for the Cy Young Award in the National League. He also won a Gold Glove in 1984.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the relatives of Mr. Andujar, a fierce pitcher who always gave the maximum on the mound," said Leonardo Matos Berrido, president of the Dominican winter baseball league.

Andujar played for 14 years with four clubs in the Dominican winter league.

"Everyone called him crazy because of his way on the mound," Soto said. "He was a great competitor and above all, very courageous. No one wanted to have problems with Andujar."

A Texas ranch is leading a pitching revolution -- just ask the Astros

By: Jason Fagone / ESPN.com

HE DOESN'T HAVE time for this. On a patch of dirt 50 miles north of Houston, Ron Wolforth's baseball students are taking turns hurling a blue medicine ball at a green wall as hard as they can, which isn't hard enough, and Wolforth doesn't have time to keep pushing them, to "ride you like a pony until you get better," he tells them.

The ball weighs 4 pounds. He has calculated that if these guys can throw it 40 mph, holding it with both hands and releasing it over their heads like a soccer throw-in, they can throw a baseball 90 mph from the mound. And if they can't throw a baseball 90 mph, they are never going to be great at pitching. And if they are never going to be great at pitching, well, that's fine -- most people are not great; most by definition are mediocre -- but then why did they come here?

Wolforth stands under a tree with a radar gun and calls out the velocity of each throw as the blue thing smacks off the wall. "Forty-one point seven! ... Thirty-nine point eight. ... Huh, thirty-five three." The players are in their late teens and early 20s, and half are shirtless in the damp Texas heat. There's no baseball diamond, just acres of watered grass, some chain-link fences, a smattering of nets and tarps and incongruous green walls, a John Deere tractor, a burn pile of old wood and, plunked down in the middle of it all, a steel barn with an arched ceiling, open to the air on both ends. A white sign near the road says baseball ranch in large letters, and underneath, where you can dream as big as your work ethic will allow. Wolforth boasts of having taught more than 200 pitchers at all levels of the game to throw 90 mph, and major leaguers such as Trevor Bauer and C.J. Wilson have praised him for helping boost their velocity to lucrative heights. So when visitors first arrive here, at the Texas Baseball Ranch, they're usually expecting something grander. Drones? No, this is it.

Wolforth lowers the radar gun and steps out from the tree. "Some of you guys didn't impress me on the wall," he says, wearing khaki shorts, camouflage sneakers and a yellow polo that bulges at the waist. He is 56 years old and not too tall. He raises the gun and nods for the drill to resume. The next kid tries so hard that he forgets to stop running and nearly smacks into the wall after his ball does. "Thirty-one six," Wolforth mutters. "Too close to the wall." His voice grows loud. "Don't waste your time with 31-six! If you're not 35, you're nothing. We got a bunch of 31s we gotta make 35s or else you have no shot at playing at the next level, gentlemen."

Thump ...

"Thirty-two," Wolforth says. "Moving on, Geno. Good luck with the rest of your life."

Thump ...

"Thirty-nine two," he says to Gardner Nutter, a sophomore at Eckerd College, a Division II school in Florida. "Take that governor off your wiener." Nutter grins. "You're like a 39-four guy."

Thump ...

Wolforth parts his lips in bafflement and gazes at a skinny, black-haired kid who's jogging back into line after an off-kilter throw. "You are a ... unique situation," Wolforth says. "You threw that like a watercolor in the rain."

THUMP ...

To warm up, Ranch campers perform one-legged squats designed to replicate what a pitcher feels at the lowest point of his delivery. Fredrik Broden

FOR A LONG time, few in major league baseball paid any attention to Ron Wolforth. Ten years ago, he says, the disdain was "very overt. It was, 'He's crazy, it's a marketing ploy, he's making money and he's trying to be provocative.' "

After all, anyone can hang a shingle and call himself a pitching coach. God bless America. Wolforth isn't a former pro. He doesn't come from a prominent sports family. Yes, he had some luck with Trevor Bauer, his poster-boy student, drafted No. 3 by the Diamondbacks in 2011. But Bauer is a strange bird, the son of a chemical engineer who invents wacky new pitches ("reverse slider," "the bird") and films himself on an ultra-high-speed video camera so he can step through his motion and his ball spin a thousandth of a second at a time. You can't extrapolate any pattern from a guy like that.

But then there was Scott Kazmir, a former All-Star released by the Angels in June 2011 after a groin injury and a long, steady deterioration of velocity. He considered retiring but instead called Wolforth, who came to his house in Cypress, Texas, with a bag of equipment. They worked for most of a year before Wolforth brought out the radar gun. That day, Kazmir threw as hard as he could. He looked at Wolforth. How fast? Wolforth looked at him. Eighty. "Motherf---er," Kazmir said, throwing his glove to the ground. "Well, that was 85," Wolforth said.

"I worked for eight months straight," Kazmir recalls, laughing. "And I go out there, like all right, I'm going to light this gun up, and it's like 80. But we went through the process."

Within two months, Kazmir was back above 90. In 2013, the Indians snapped him up, then lost him to the A's in free agency. In July of this year, he was traded to the Astros, where he pitched seven scoreless innings in his first start on July 24. Four days later, before an evening home game, 15 or so reporters clustered around Kazmir's locker and shined lights on him, eager to know how he had pulled off his comeback. He spoke with fondness about Wolforth and the Ranch: "To be able to go somewhere and work on the mechanics and do certain things, certain drills, to really get kind of in tune with your body and just relearn the mechanics of pitching a baseball -- that's what he provides out there, and it really helped."

MLB, like large institutions everywhere, has an insular culture that resists change. It is also a \$36 billion business. At some point, for a GM, the pain of not taking advantage of an innovation that works and saves money becomes greater than the pain of change. "Now the criticism is more whispering than overt," Wolforth says, "because now it's like the results are too many and too wide and too deep, and they'll just go, 'Oh, that doesn't work for everybody.' That tells me they don't truly understand what we're doing."

Wolforth says 85 pro draft picks have trained here, including 2015 draftees Drew Smith, Cory Taylor and Beau Burrows, the Tigers' first-round pick. Veteran outfielder Raul Ibanez first went to Wolforth for hitting advice ("I figured if he knew so much about pitching, he must know something about hitting too") and was so impressed he invited Wolforth to give a clinic to his 13-year-old son's Little League team. "He gets results for 10-year-olds, and he gets results for major leaguers," Ibanez says. "And when you can do that, I think everyone has to take notice."

The Astros, Indians, Rockies, Mets, Cubs and Cardinals have invited Wolforth to speak to members of their staffs at spring training. In addition to dozens of college coaches, big names from pro clubs have visited the Ranch too: Terry Francona, manager of the Indians; Jerry Dipoto, ex-GM of the Angels; A.J. Hinch, first-year manager of the Astros. Hinch watched his former teammate Barry Zito work out at the Ranch last winter; Zito had been released by the Giants at age 35, and most figured he was finished, but after four months with Wolforth, he got a minor league deal with the A's. "It's a great facility for training," Hinch says. "It has everything you could ask for as a baseball player."

What's more, devoted "Ranch guys" have landed coaching and front office jobs. Brent Strom, who has taught more than 150 boot camps, is the pitching coach for the Astros, a young squad in transition that as of Aug. 24 was leading the AL West with a staff ranked No. 1 in the American League in ERA, WHIP and OBP allowed. Another Ranch guy, Eric Binder, who trained there and played at Northwestern, works in player development for the Indians. And the peak performance coordinator of the Rockies, Andy McKay, speaks at Ranch clinics on the mental side of the game.

Each player and coach who makes it to the next level takes some Ranch ideas with him, and "they talk to each other," Wolforth says. "It's almost -- it's not a good word, but it's almost cultish. It's a culture." And like other small but growing cults, or cultures, it can make sparks when it scrapes up against the majority that does not believe.

A BIT BEFORE 2 p.m. on a Friday in late July, cars begin to pull into the Ranch's parking lot, expelling boys with coolers and parents with lawn chairs. They're arriving for an "elite boot camp," a three-day, \$1,299 burst of instruction and practice to initiate players into the Ranch method. The campers and their parents walk across 50 yards of lawn to the barn and take seats in folding chairs, cooking in their clothes. The silver walls focus the heat like aluminum foil around a baked potato.

Wolforth stands in front of a projection screen with a microphone clipped to his T-shirt and welcomes the pilgrims. The next three days will be a transformational experience, he says. He shows them slides of the Ranch's success stories: Bauer, Kazmir, 203 players breaking the 90 mph barrier. "That actually needs to be updated," he says. "We have 207 now." He tells them that youth baseball is a fallen world, a world of mediocrity and failure, and he tells them why: It's a one-size-fits-all system designed to create decent results for a broad bulk of halfway serious players, not exceptional results for the few who are willing to work. The Ranch,

on the other hand, considers the player as an individual. "Welcome to the sanctuary," he says. And not to worry: They never have to leave, even when they go home, because Wolforth has developed Durathro System, a website with videos, worksheets and audits to keep campers on the straight and narrow after camp. Access starts at \$79 a month. Talk to Jill about Durathro.

From there, Wolforth splits the campers into groups that circulate around the property. From the beginning, throwing instruction is integrated with questions about movement and pain; a physical therapist goes through a 15-page "functional movement screen," measuring ranges of movement and prescribing corrective exercises, and Wolforth analyzes a video of each camper's throwing motion. He's convinced that the epidemic of pitching injuries can be blamed, in part, on the artificial separation of pitching coaches and physical trainers; a coach shapes the motion, a trainer treats the pain, but it's really all the same thing. "The pitching people just think that [the physical therapists] are a bunch of lab coats," he says, "and the physical therapists think the baseball guys are just tobacco-chewing, ass-scratching guys. So we're the bridge."

A few of the Ranch drills require unusual tools, like a pitching sock, which is a weighted glove that replicates the feel of a pitch when you make a throwing motion, and a shoulder tube, which is a flexible staff that kids wave back and forth like Gandalf doing aerobics. But the general vibe here is that you've been dropped back into 1950, albeit a 1950 in which everyone is obsessed with data. The campers fill out worksheets -- a "mindset audit," a "velocity audit," a "warm-up audit" -- and record their performance on drills. "The core concept of what Ron is doing is measuring," the Rockies' McKay says. In general, "people don't like doing that. It takes time. It takes energy. And it also creates reality, and it creates accountability."

To log this data and begin to learn from it requires a self-selecting level of drive. The players who make their way here are an intense bunch. A 12-year-old from Abilene, Texas, says his goal is to throw 100 mph and get into the Hall of Fame. Nutter, the college pitcher in Florida, says he wants to get his velo up, but what really hooked him and his father was the science. "We fell in love with the information" is the way he puts it. "I think the process in and of itself is going to make me a better person." Many campers describe feeling out of place on their teams back home, either because they want to work harder than their teammates or because their coaches have said they'll never make it. "My high school coach told me I'd never throw over 82 mph," says Rob Maislin, 21, a senior at Whitman College, a Division III school in Washington state. Another coach? "He told me I was fat." Maislin is not fat, just short, at 5-foot-7. He says the coaches at the Ranch are the first ones who've taken his desire to be a pro pitcher seriously. At the Ranch, "it seems like greatness isn't unattainable, it's just a hell of a lot of work." He throws above 90 now.

As for the guy who's showing all these kids how to break 90? He was never able to do it himself. The son of a Union Pacific Railroad agent from a small town in Nebraska, Wolforth played college ball at five schools, throwing in the high 80s, not fast enough for love from scouts. "You know how people talk about the 'player to be named later'?" he says. "I was the player never to be named." He graduated with a kinesiology degree from Sam Houston State in Texas and took a job coaching softball at Nebraska, where he met his wife, Jill -- she was a star player on his team. He eventually got sick of "the shackles," the athletic director and others looking over his shoulder. So in 1993, he and Jill started their first private baseball school, the CAN-AM Sports Academy in Canada.

He was bad. He admits that now. He taught pitching the same way it had been taught for a hundred years. You make this position on the windup, this position on the move to the plate, this position on the follow-through. You make your body look like this. The problem, he'd figure out later, is that if you look at 10 Hall of Fame pitchers, they all look different. It wasn't until 2003 that Wolforth realized the error of his ways, after meeting a guy named Paul Nyman, an engineer and former track athlete. To Nyman, the key thing wasn't the position of the body but its movement, the interlocking and connected motions that create explosiveness. And to build it, you had to measure obsessively -- to set a baseline of performance and then test and retest and re-retest to make sure you were making progress.

"It was a Reformation," Wolforth says. "Truly a Reformation for me, and I truly think a Reformation for baseball itself. Does your theory hold water, or is it just a bunch of s---?" Even after he began preaching the new gospel, Wolforth struggled to find a flock. But he had a couple of secret advantages. Like a lot of entrepreneurs, Wolforth was a magpie, willing to collect advice or wisdom from anywhere (a history book, a Zig Ziglar speech, Aristotle, The Matrix) and build a nest with it. "One skill I do have is my skill of application," he says. He's also a gifted marketer, and so is Jill. (The daughter of a Nebraska rancher, she came up with the "Ranch" theme.) As one Ranch dad puts it, "You listen to Wolforth and he could be a preacher or a used-car salesman." The dad says this admiringly: Fifty percent of success in pitching "is just thinking you can do it."

By the middle of the last decade, the Wolforths had made important friends, coaches who'd come to see them teach and left thinking they'd seen something special. In 2006, Ron and Jill bought the current Ranch site, 20 acres in the old pine forest north of Houston. They spent their life savings on the down payment and mortgaged the rest. They almost missed their first payroll. "There's nobody to save ya," Wolforth says. "The cavalry ain't comin'. So you better figure it out."

Luckily for Wolforth, even as he struggled to move closer to the professional game, baseball was moving toward him. Sabermetrics, Moneyball -- a new reliance on data was becoming part of the air, and by now, kids who'd grown up breathing it were arriving at the Ranch. Bauer was one. "I remember him as an eighth-grader," Wolforth says. "He looked like a librarian. There was no athleticism to him. He tells me -- I still remember this -- he says, 'Coach, I'm going to be your first 100-mile thrower.' He weighs a buck thirty-five. Big ears." But the engineer's kid with the big ears turned out to be electric. Bauer still holds the velocity record at the Ranch: 105 mph. In 2011, after the Diamondbacks drafted him, Sports Illustrated ran a long piece about

Bauer and his origin story in Texas. When it appeared online, Wolforth's cell started blowing up. "That was the moment when I knew there was no looking back."

But for all the credibility he's gained since, Wolforth remains an outsider, a guy who still defines himself by his opposition to MLB's institutional wisdom and culture, and even the clubs that like him don't want to talk about him. The Indians wouldn't allow interviews with their Ranch-friendly staff -- "Our relationship with Ron's Baseball Ranch is something we value greatly and also something we really care not to advertise," their PR guy emailed -- and the Astros declined an interview request with pitching coach Strom. MLB advises young pitchers to avoid radar guns, which are central to Wolforth's approach, and weighted balls and long-toss training are also controversial. There's no robust scientific literature showing that they help or hurt the arm. "I can guarantee you that there are 30 clubs out there that are basically willing to spend a lot of money to try to be the top dog," says Cubs minor league pitching coordinator Derek Johnson. "Is there a fear factor in some of it? Yes. Because you're dealing with millions and millions of dollars." Wolforth puts it plainly: "If somebody goes down on [a coach's] watch on a weighted ball and they OK'd it, that could be a career ender."

On the second day of July's boot camp, he tells the campers a story that explains how he sees his place in baseball. Eight years ago, he says, a Milwaukee Brewers scout visited the Ranch. "He said, 'Hey Ron, that's really neat what you're doing. But not all your guys are going to make it.'" It was the law of averages. Wolforth was selling the kids false hope. "You're in the selection business. I get it," Wolforth replied. "My business is teaching. I'm not here choosing the winners and the losers of life's lottery or baseball's lottery." He turns to the campers with peak passion: "Don't let someone throw that junk on you."

Wolforth says the scout became irritated and insisted that "the Brewers way" of teaching pitching was best. That was interesting, Wolforth said: "When's the last time you guys were relevant? The Truman administration?" Laughter in the barn. "We haven't talked since," Wolforth says. "I don't know why."

DURING THE LAST hour of boot camp, at 1:10 p.m., the coaches bring out the radar gun, lead the campers into the barn and line them up in front of two nets covered with green tarps. Unlike some of the other tarps, there are no markings on these two, no particular place to aim. By this point, the campers have completed three days' worth of lectures and videotape sessions and alien drills. At long last, it is time to pick up a good old leather baseball and throw it as hard as they can.

They form two rough lines, chattering and bouncing. Their parents notice the shift in noise and energy and rise from their lawn chairs outdoors, crowding inside to watch. One by one, the campers throw. They sprint toward the tarps for a few yards, getting a good running start, then release. "Eighty-nine!" cries out a coach. "Eighty-seven point nine! Seventy-eight! Sixty-eight! Eighty-four zero, thattaboy! Ninety-three zero!" The campers clap and yell for anyone breaking 90, and flocks of high-fives greet those kids when they return to the line. One guy looks dazed: 17-year-old Seth Fraley, from Sedalia, Missouri. Fraley just got clocked at 86.9. Before this camp, "I barely threw 78 to 80, maybe," he says, and glances back at the tarp. "That was crazy." His father, Rusty Rice, holds out a twitching hand. "I'm shaking!" he says. "Eighty-six nine! Best baseball experience we've ever had."

It goes on like this for 15 minutes before the campers switch to the turn and burn drill: Stand with your back to the tarp and backpedal for 10 yards, then turn 180 degrees and release the ball. More high-fives, more personal records broken. Some kids don't do as well as they'd hoped and slouch back into line with blank looks. Wolforth stands in the middle of the barn, saying little.

Near 2 p.m., he calls an end to the drills and asks the campers to grab folding chairs and sit in the barn for a few minutes before they head back to their cars with their parents. He turns down the lights and clicks his clicker. A sentence appears on the screen: "What if the world does not believe in me?"

Wolforth paces for a few moments, letting that sink in. What if the world does not believe in me?

Silence except for the box fan.

"The world has already decided," he says. "And you are not it."

He clicks again, and a video begins playing. More than 139 million YouTube views. An overweight guy with bad teeth sells mobile phones in England but tells the camera he dreams of being an opera star. He walks onto the stage of Britain's Got Talent to skeptical looks from the judges. Then he starts to sing. In the video, the judges smile, and here in Texas, the barn fills with the contestant's precise and lovely voice, the Italian lyrics of "Nessun Dorma" pinging off the walls. Watching the faces of all these people from Louisiana and Georgia and Pennsylvania and California as they listen to a British opera singer in Texas, Wolforth seems like a grim sort of prophet. For all the froth and uplift of the Ranch's marketing pitch, he is communicating an existential vision of the universe, a vision informed by his own struggles trying to get the universe to pay attention to Ron Wolforth. Instead of selling his students false hope, he's telling them something no adult has ever told them quite this candidly: The world they want to live in, the world of professional baseball, is a brutal place, and no one is going to save them. Not even if they make it to the majors, where they'll only be a highly paid gasket in some GM's beautiful engine, easily swapped out if the worst happens.

"The cavalry is not coming," he says. They have to be their own cavalry.

Throwing 90 or 95 with no pain will help.

Also, signing up for Durathro can't hurt. "OK," Wolforth says in the barn, releasing the campers and their parents back into the abyss. "Can I get the lights, please?"

Fresno Grizzlies conclude historic regular season, get ready for playoffs

By: Bryant-Jon Anteola

Before the Fresno Grizzlies played their regular-season finale Monday against Salt Lake and turned their attention to the playoffs, they presented team awards.

Third baseman Matt Duffy, the MVP of the Pacific Coast League, was a no-brainer as the Grizzlies' MVP.

First baseman Jon Singleton was named the team's Offensive Player of the Year, and reliever Jordan Jankowski was selected as Pitcher of the Year among the honors.

But a strong case could be made that the entire team should have been presented an award after setting the franchise mark for wins during what has been quite a memorable season.

"What a great accomplishment," Grizzlies manager Tony DeFrancesco said. "We came in, had some team goals, reached those goals.

"We still have playoffs. But what we've done so far, it's been great."

With Monday's 8-5 loss to the Bees, the Grizzlies (84-59) finished with the second-best record throughout Triple A, trailing the Oklahoma City Dodgers (86-58). The Grizzlies also posted the most wins by a Houston Astros Triple-A affiliate since 2006.

WHAT A GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT. WE CAME IN, HAD SOME TEAM GOALS, REACHED THOSE GOALS. WE STILL HAVE PLAYOFFS. BUT WHAT WE'VE DONE SO FAR, IT'S BEEN GREAT.

Grizzlies manager Tony DeFrancesco

The Grizzlies will face the El Paso Chihuahuas (78-66) in the opening round of the Pacific Coast League playoffs – a best-of-five series – beginning at 7:05 p.m. Wednesday at Chukchansi Park.

This will be the Grizzlies' first playoff appearance since their inaugural campaign in 1998. They spent the previous 16 seasons as the San Francisco Giants' Triple-A team before changing to the Astros.

Entering this season, the Grizzlies had finished with a winning record only five times.

"I think it's cool, just from the standpoint that we knew the history of it, that there haven't been any playoff teams come through here (since 1998)," said right-hander Dan Straily, who will start Game 1 Wednesday. "To be a part of that first one is always going to be cool."

The Grizzlies will host the first two playoff games, which includes another 7:05 p.m. start Thursday, before playing the next three on the road. Should the Grizzlies advance, they would start the next series on the road for two games before playing the final three in Fresno. Oklahoma City faces the Round Rock Express (78-66) in the PCL's other opening-round matchup.

These Grizzlies also recorded the most home wins (48) in franchise history, which also topped all Triple-A clubs this season.

"This is why you play the games – to perform and win and get to the playoffs and win," Grizzlies outfielder Robbie Grossman said. "We'll be ready to go. Hopefully, the fans will come help us out and show their support.

"It's just been awesome to have this much success in the minor leagues, been a great atmosphere. Would like to keep it going in the playoffs."

The Grizzlies finished as the Triple-A leader in four offensive categories, amassing 804 runs (5.58 average), 756 RBIs (5.25), 606 walks (4.21) and a .357 on-base percentage. Fresno also led the PCL with 157 steals, passing the Tacoma Rainiers on the final day after generating three steals in the finale (two by Tony Kemp, one by Grossman).

IT'S JUST BEEN AWESOME TO HAVE THIS MUCH SUCCESS IN THE MINOR LEAGUES, BEEN A GREAT ATMOSPHERE.

Grizzlies outfielder Robbie Grossman

"I think we just kind of want to go and compete, try to keep up with our offense," said Grizzlies right-hander Mike Hauschild, who would start Game 5 if necessary. "It's easier to pitch on a team when we're winning and scoring runs. It's fun, having a good time in the dugout.

"I think we're feeling pretty good. We think we have the best team in the league, so hopefully, we'll go out there and play like it."

Fresno all set for playoff series vs. El Paso

The Grizzlies host Games 1 and 2 at Chukchansi Park in Downtown Fresno

By: Fresno Grizzlies

FRESNO, Calif. - The PCL Pacific Northern Division Champion Fresno Grizzlies take on the Pacific Southern Division Champion El Paso Chihuahuas in the best-of-five Pacific Conference Finals starting on Wednesday night at Chukchansi Park. The Grizzlies are scheduled to host Games 1 and 2 before heading east to El Paso for Game 3, and 4 and 5 if necessary. Games 1 and 2 on Wednesday and Thursday night at Chukchansi Park will both start at 7:05 PM, with gates to the park opening to the general public at 5:35 PM.

The series opener on Wednesday, September 9th at Chukchansi Park marks the first playoff game in the city of Fresno since 1998 (6,208 days). The Grizzlies are offering all fans FREE PARKING in the Tulare Parking Structure and the Spiral Structure off of Inyo/Van Ness, courtesy of Van Beurden Insurance Services. The first 5,000 fans through the gates will receive a Playoff Rally Towel thanks to Gar Tootelian, Inc., while Stamoules Produce Company sponsors the fireworks scheduled for pregame, any Grizzlies home runs and after the Rich O'Toole performance of God Bless America in the seventh inning. Tickets for the game are as low as \$10 and can be purchased at the Chukchansi Park Box Office, over the phone at 559.320.TIXS or online through FresnoGrizzlies.com. Those fans interested in group discounts or luxury suites can contact Andrew Milios directly at 559.320.2533.

The best-of-five series continues on Thursday, September 10th at Chukchansi Park with Game 2 between the Chihuahuas and Grizzlies. The normal Tecate Thursday promotion will be in full swing, with \$2 24-ounce Tecate and Tecate Light (through the end of the fifth inning) and \$1 12-ounce sodas (all game). An additional promotion includes a Rib Throwdown between Famous Daves and Dukes Downtown along the third base concourse, with Robert "Rib Man" Wright attending to serve as a guest judge and take pictures with fans. Wright was captured on video last week by KMPH Fox26 Photojournalist Ryan Hudgens holding a rack of ribs after an apartment complex fire and has amassed nearly one million views on YouTube for his interview. The first 5,000 fans through the gates will also receive Playoff Rally Towels, courtesy of Gar Tootelian, Inc.

The Fresno Grizzlies would like to thank playoff partners Gar Tootelian, Inc., California Highway Patrol, Stamoules Produce Company, Holiday Inn Fresno Airport, Solar City, Sun-Maid Raisins, and Van Beurden Insurance Services for their contributions to the 2015 Postseason, which is the first appearance for the franchise since the inaugural 1998 season.

BROADCAST INFORMATION

The entire best-of-five playoff series can be heard locally in Fresno on 1430 AM-KYNO, with broadcaster Doug Greenwald providing the commentary and calling his first-ever PCL Playoff action in what is his 13th season for the club behind the microphone.

STARTING PITCHING MATCHUPS All game times are Pacific

Game 1 - 7:05 PM at Chukchansi Park on September 9th

El Paso RHP Daniel McCutchen (9-8, 3.60 ERA - 32G/22GS) vs. Fresno RHP Dan Straily (10-9, 4.77 ERA - 22GS)

Game 2 - 7:05 PM at Chukchansi Park on September 10th

El Paso RHP Chris Smith (5-7, 3.60 - 22GS) vs. Fresno RHP Asher Wojciechowski (8-4, 4.92 ERA - 20GS)

Game 3 - 6:05 PM at Southwest University Ballpark on September 11th

Fresno RHP Mark Appel (5-2, 4.48 - 12GS) vs. El Paso LHP Robbie Erlin (7-6, 5.60 ERA - 24GS)

Game 4* - 6:05 PM at Southwest University Ballpark on September 12th

Fresno LHP Brett Oberholtzer (7-4, 3.86 ERA - 12 GS) vs. El Paso RHP Casey Kelly (1-2, 6.32 - 4G/3GS)

Game 5* - 12:05 PM at Southwest University Ballpark on September 13th

Fresno TBA vs. El Paso LHP Jason Lane (10-10, 5.71 - 28GS)

*If Necessary

WINNER

The winner of the best-of-five Pacific Conference Finals will move to the Pacific Coast League Championship, which is a best-of-five series against the winner of the American Conference Finals between Oklahoma City (LAD) and Round Rock (TEX).

Deetz named Midwest League Pitcher of the Week

River Bandits rightly wins award for second straight week - first player in MWL to do so in five years

By: Jess Knaster / Quad Cities River Bandits

Quad Cities River Bandits right-hander Dean Deetz has been named the Midwest League Pitcher of the Week for his performance during the week of Aug. 31- Sept.7, the Midwest League announced on Tuesday.

The second straight award for Deetz, 21, marks the fourth time a River Bandit has won Midwest League Pitcher of the Week honors this season, following right-handers Angel Heredia and David Paulino, who won the award back-to-back for June 29-July 5 and July 6-12, respectively. Quad Cities last had four awards for Pitcher of the Week in the same season in 2007 when Elvis Hernandez (April 5-12), P.J. Walters (May 7-14), Tyler Herron (June 5-July 2), and Michael Schellinger (July 16-23) took home the award.

Following infielder Mott Hyde, who was the Midwest League Player of the Week for April 27-May 3, Heredia, Paulino and Deetz (twice) give the River Bandits five Midwest League weekly award winners this season. Quad Cities last won five weekly awards in 2007, when on top of Hernandez, Walters, Herron, and Schellinger winning Pitcher of the Week, Steve Hill was the Player of the Week for July 23-30.

Deetz won the award for his starts on Aug.31 at Burlington and Sept. 5 at Beloit, combining for 11 innings of shutout, four-hit baseball. The right-hander struck out three batters and walked two in his two starts in the week, and extended his scoreless-inning streak to 22 1/3 innings, dating back to Aug. 19 against Wisconsin. Deetz was Pitcher of the Month in August for Quad Cities, which posted a 2.65 team ERA in the regular season - best in the Midwest League and in the 56-year franchise history for the Quad Cities Midwest League franchise.

In seven games since joining the River Bandits from Short Season Class-A Tri-City July 29, Deetz has started six games and is 5-1 with a 0.76 ERA, 29 strikeouts, and 13 walks while allowing 17 hits in 35 1/3 innings. In his second season pitching in the Houston Astros organization, Deetz is 9-3 with a 1.70 ERA in 63 2/3 innings with 50 strikeouts and 23 walks, a .169 opponents' average and 0.97 WHIP.

A native of Nixa, Mo., Deetz was drafted by the Astros in the 11th round of the 2014 First-Year Player Draft out of Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College.

Deetz is the first River Bandit to win a weekly award twice in one season since the late Oscar Taveras was Player of the Week July 11-18 and Aug. 22-29 in 2011. Deetz is also the first player in the Midwest League to win consecutive awards since 2010, when Tom Wilhelmson of Clinton won Pitcher of the Week Aug. 2-9 and Aug. 10-16.

UP NEXT: Tickets are on sale at riverbandits.com and the Modern Woodmen Park box office for the River Bandits' first home playoff game Thursday, Sept. 10, at 7 p.m. against the Cedar Rapids Kernels. For all playoff home games, box seat tickets are \$9 each, and general admission tickets are \$5 each. Current ticket plan holders (12 games or more) receive free playoff tickets by making a \$100-per-seat renewal deposit toward a 2016 ticket package. Group area picnic pricing for 2015 playoff games is the same as regular season pricing, with full details at riverbandits.com/groups. Suite rentals, including 16 tickets per suite, are \$350 per game. Tickets for playoff home games beyond Sept. 10 will be made available once the game becomes necessary. A full playoff schedule is available at riverbandits.com.

ABOUT THE BANDITS: With the installation of the Ferris Wheel, the River Bandits ownership in 2014 made one of the biggest improvements to Modern Woodmen Park since the ballpark was first built back in 1931, and this year the club is matching that effort by opening three new areas. A two-tiered special group deck immediately behind and overlooking the corn field opened in June. A new 11,000-square-foot concourse expansion down the third-base line will open late August. Finally, the club has expanded the children's play area by an additional 5,500 square feet down the right-field line, with additional bounce houses and the newest ride - Spin Zone Bumper Cars - as the latest attraction.

Astros clinch Appalachian League title

By Nick Carey / Greeneville Astros

Princeton, WV - The Greeneville Astros, after an eleven-year wait, emerged as the Appalachian League champions on Tuesday after defeating the Princeton Rays, 8-7, at Hunnicutt Field.

The two clubs' offenses battled throughout as pitching clinched the title with the game on the line. With the victory, the Astros won their fourth playoff game as the visitor and solidified a 9-0 mark by all visiting teams in the Appalachian League post-season.

The Astros took a 1-0 lead after the first inning off of Princeton starter Eduar Lopez beginning with a Kyle Tucker single to centerfield. After stealing second base, Tucker came in to score on a groundball single by Connor Goedert.

Right-hander Erasmo Pinales started on the mound for Greeneville and pitched three innings, allowing four runs on two hits with a strikeout. Lopez tossed four innings for the Rays allowing five runs on eight hits with five strikeouts.

Princeton answered in the bottom of the second inning with a three-run home run by Landon Cray, which scored Brett Sullivan and David Rodriguez.

Down 3-1 in the top of the third, the Astros stole back the lead spurred by leadoff single by Myles Straw then another by Daz Cameron. Kyle Tucker then launched a three-run homer to deep left and give Greenville the 4-3 lead.

In the fourth, Diogenes Almengo took the mound for the Astros and finished the night earning the win over two innings pitched while allowing two runs on three hits.

The Rays tied the game, 4-4, on a solo home run to right field by Peter Maris in the bottom of the third inning. But in the top of the fourth, Rodrigo Ayarza doubled on a deep fly to centerfield to score Arturo Michelena, who reached on a one-out single to make the score 5-4.

In the bottom of the fourth, the Rays countered with two runs to reclaim the lead, 5-6, first as David Rodriguez scored during a fielder's choice then David Olmedo-Berrera scored after a Jonathon Popadics single.

In the top of the sixth inning, the Astros rallied with three runs beginning with Brauly Mejia scoring on a Michelena single after Mejia led off the inning with a single himself. Christian Correa doubled after Mejia to advance him to third. Correa then came around to score on an Ayarza line single to right.

The pair of runs retired Rays' reliever Albert Casanas after one inning with three runs on four hits allowed and two strikeouts. Astros right-hander Edgardo Sandoval earned the save after four innings with just one run allowed on one hit and seven strikeouts.

The eighth and final run for the Astros came in the top of the sixth when an intentional ball four became a wild pitch by Princeton reliever Ruben Paredes allowing Michelena to cross the plate and make the score 8-6.

In the bottom of the sixth, Cray homered to right for the second time to bring the Rays within one and make the score 8-7. Sandoval held out after allowing Cray's homer to close the game with a swinging strikeout of Zacrey Law three innings later.

After the strikeout, 35 orange-clad Astros stormed the field in jubilation to accept the Appalachian League Championship trophy and pennant from League President Lee Landers.

Several Astros will move upward in the Houston farm system to contribute to additional affiliates that have clinched post-season berths but do so with the knowledge of participating in a league championship effort already.

The Astros are the Appalachian League affiliate of the Houston Astros. For more information, call (423) 638-0411.