

Rays show signs of progress with series win over Rockies

By Marc Topkin, Tampa Bay Times

DENVER — There were several moments in the second inning alone Wednesday when it looked like the game would get away from the Rays, as so many others have during their month of misery.

The fly ball to left-center that both Corey Dickerson and Brandon Guyer misplayed. An ensuing walk, followed by the first-and-third bunt play — yep, just like the one the Rays used to favor but have abandoned — producing the tying run. Chris Archer walking opposing starter Jorge De La Rosa to load the bases.

Then the frustration of seeing what looked to be an inning-ending double play on rightfielder Steven Souza Jr.'s strong throw to the plate overturned in an agonizing 61/2-minute replay review with a convoluted explanation that didn't make sense then and may never.

That the Rays weathered all that and went on to roll to an 11-3 victory over the Rockies said something about their resolve, as well as their efforts, however sincere, to start fresh since the All-Star break.

"What are we, 3-3? We've played better baseball, there's no doubt," manager Kevin Cash said. "We've been in ball games like we think we're built to do. We've still got to find a way to work better than .500 at some point, but this was a really nice start to win a series on the road."

Indeed. The Rays winged further west Wednesday night having won their first consecutive games since June 14-15 (after which they lost 25 of 29), first series since June 27-29 against Boston and first road series since June 6-8 at Arizona. They have won three of their past four. However, they are still 37-57 overall.

As much as the offensive numbers — led by Tim Beckham's five hits — stood out Wednesday, Archer righting himself the way he did after the second, in which he allowed two runs and lost the lead — retiring 12 of his final 14, eight on strikeouts — was the most significant individual accomplishment of the steamy day.

The byproduct, not that it mattered in Archer's process-oriented view, was his first win since June 6, snapping his six-game skid and keeping his majors-most loss total at 13. He allowed just four hits and the two walks, striking out 11 to take over the AL lead with 147.

"The second inning, obviously we didn't help him out too much," Cash said. "We put him in a little bit of a jam, and he probably put himself in more of a jam. ..."

"I was really impressed the way he settled down and forgot about that inning and went out there and gave us a really good start."

Archer has now had a pair of solid outings, and three of his past four. Rookie Blake Snell showed Tuesday night the reason for the hype. Jake Odorizzi is showing signs of progress. Matt Moore has been pitching the best of all of them for the past month.

There is some thought around the Rays that — with the exception of Drew Smyly, who may be a lost cause, or at least having another lost season — the starters are finally, maybe, kinda sorta, pitching up to their capabilities, building off each other's success to put together strings of good games.

"I think it's that time," Archer said.

Cash had seen subtle signs of overall improvement over the week or two going into the break, even as they were losing games, and said they've continued to improve, benefiting from some rest and being markedly more efficient.

Okay, so say that — at this late date — they finally are pitching the way they were supposed to, giving the Rays that potentially dominating rotation that would carry them.

Now the question is whether they will get to keep pitching together.

Moore and Odorizzi have been heavily scouted by a number of contending teams looking for help in the 12 days before the Aug. 1 deadline for nonwaiver trades, and market economics make it reasonable and logical to think at least one will be dealt. Archer's name will continue to come up at least in speculation. Even Smyly's, despite his struggles.

"That's our strength, and I think going forward for this organization to have success we should keep this core of pitchers together," Archer said. "There are other thoughts that go into it as far as finances and stuff goes ... I'm hoping that we can stay together."

Tim Beckham leads Rays' onslaught with career-high five hits

By Marc Topkin, Tampa Bay Times

DENVER — The Rays hitters certainly enjoyed their three days at Coors Field, rapping 35 hits and scoring 25 runs.

Perhaps no one enjoyed it more than INF Tim Beckham, who had a career-high five hits Wednesday.

"It's a pretty good day," Beckham said. "I just want to keep building off that momentum and keep trusting my approach at the plate and not trying to do too much."

Beckham is the ninth Rays player to have five hits in a game, the previous being OF Mikie Mahtook in September. Though Beckham has not gotten much playing time — having totaled just five hits total since June 12 — he found ways to stay sharp, and it showed.

He wasn't the only one to enjoy Coors, as 3B Evan Longoria went 6-for-15 in the three games and ex-Rockies OF Corey Dickerson 6-for-10, raising his average there to .360.

REPLAY DAZE: The Rays were on the wrong end of a long and convoluted replay call in the second inning based on a rule manager Kevin Cash said might be headed toward alteration.

The Rays thought they were out of the inning when RF Steven Souza Jr. caught a fly and made a strong throw home, with the Rockies' Mark Reynolds called out by umpire Paul Emmel.

But after waiting out an awkward and agonizing 6:28 review — longest since the 2014 expansion of replay, pending verification — the Rays saw the call overturned.

More maddening was the explanation: The replay officials determined that C Curt Casali never tagged Reynolds and that Reynolds never touched the plate, which, by replay rule, somehow made him safe. Cash was told the onus was on the Rays to either retag Reynolds or appeal the play before it went to review, but there was no reason for them to do either since the call on the field was an out.

"Unique play," Cash said. "Nobody has quite an understanding of how they came up with that. Even the umpires, to their credit, said that's just the rule, it is what it is. ... Obviously when the umpire makes the call out, it's out. Curt Casali is not going to run over and tag the guy just in case. That's not the way you do things."

REHAB REPORT: RHP Alex Cobb (Tommy John surgery), whose rehab assignment was paused due to fatigue and mechanical issues, threw 28 pitches in a bullpen session at the Trop and was said to feel good, with the next step to be determined. ... RHP Brad Boxberger (oblique) is scheduled to make his second rehab appearance for the advanced Class A Stone Crabs in Port Charlotte tonight. ... OF Desmond Jennings (hamstring) has been doing light running with Charlotte.

ABOUT TUESDAY NIGHT: Longoria had the big blast in a 10-1 win over the Rockies that was delayed two-plus hours at the start by rain, a 462-foot home run that bounced on the concourse and out of Coors Field. But rookie LHP Blake Snell was the big story, allowing one hit over six dazzling innings and striking out nine. Cash praised Snell for the way he used his fastball to set up his off-speed pitches. Snell was most pleased with the effectiveness of his slider, which he reintroduced as a main weapon in place of his curveball, which wouldn't break as well in the altitude. But Snell's friends in the stands had a different highlight: "They said it was worth the two-hour wait to see you attempt to bunt. That's all they were talking about."

MISCELLANY: Fox Sports Sun is not televising tonight's game, but MLB Network plans to pick up the A's broadcast in progress, after the end of the Tigers-White Sox game. ... Rays pitchers struck out 15 Wednesday, 31 for the series. ... RHP Chris Archer said he enjoyed getting to run the bases, after drawing a walk, and scoring a run. ... CF Kevin Kiermaier got the day off after playing five straight following his return from an eight-week DL stint. ... OF Brandon Guyer was hit by a pitch for the MLB-most 22nd time.

These days, Dewon Brazelton's happy being a doting dad

By Roger Mooney, Tampa Bay Times

ST. PETERSBURG — It is a magnificent throw, one Evan Longoria makes before every home game right after playing catch with Logan Forsythe. The Rays third baseman walks through the gate behind home plate and tosses the baseball to a young fan.

Before a late-June game against the Red Sox, Longoria's throw arced toward a budding 12-year-old Little League pitcher named D.J. who grabbed it with his glove. Sitting nearby, wearing a smile that could light all of Tropicana Field, was D.J.'s proud dad, Dewon Brazelton.

Yep, that Dewon Brazelton.

Whatever happened to him?

That question has been asked this season around the Trop, where there is a lot of reminiscing about the Devil Rays days as the Rays' season sinks to depths never before reached in the club's history.

What happened to this guy? What happened to that guy?

What happened to the big right-hander taken third overall in the 2001 draft? The one who was supposed to be the cornerstone of pitching staffs to come? The one who was 8-23 with a 5.98 ERA in 54 games over four years in Tampa Bay?

You mean Dewon Brazelton?

Yeah, him.

"I'm doing great, man," said Brazelton, in a "thanks for asking" way.

Brazelton, 36, last pitched in 2010 for an independent league team in Kansas City. He now sells commercial and residential real estate for Bulls Realty, and manages a gas station and tire shop in the bay area. He plays golf as often as he can.

He worked for three years at a bartender at what had been called the X.O. Club at Amalie Arena.

He speaks to students at Sexton Elementary in St. Petersburg.

He shares custody of Devon Jr. with D.J.'s mom, Elizabeth Boyce, in Orlando.

He is a doting father.

"I love being around my son," Brazelton said.

He puts an emphasis on the word "love."

"I still missed a lot of his life," he said. "Now I enjoy being a part of my son's day-to-day life. I loooooove going to parent-teacher conferences. I check his school work. 'Why did you get a frowny face?' I loooooove being a part of that."

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Brazelton is aware of his place in Devil Rays history. He'd have a speaking part if they made a movie about all that went wrong during the franchise's first 10 years. He wouldn't be the only one.

But Brazelton was the high draft pick, taken out of Middle Tennessee State, handed a \$4.2 million signing bonus and immediately placed on the major-league roster in late August, where he rode the bench until the end of the season.

He was armed with a mid-90s fastball and a good changeup. The Devil Rays tried without success to teach him a curveball the following summer at Double-A Orlando. He did learn a slider, but now realizes he was unprepared to face major-league hitters when he finally arrived in 2002 as a September callup.

"I'm not blaming anybody for anything, but they tried to get me here so quick I wasn't ready," he said. "They said to learn on the job. It didn't work. You can't figure things out in the American League East."

Still, by 2005 Brazelton was the opening day starter.

He began that year 1-7 and infamously left the team for three weeks after pitching 4 2/3 innings and allowing five runs May 11 in a loss to the White Sox.

The reason was D.J.

Brazelton and Boyce were fighting for custody. It became ugly.

There were arguments. The police were called.

There were restraining orders placed against Brazelton and charges of domestic violence with children present. There were battles over child support payments and how much Brazelton should pay.

Brazelton's on-field life was just as messy.

"I'm not making any excuses for my pitching," he said. "I love my son so much. That was the constant going on in my life. It hurt so much. It was weighing on my mind heavily during this time. I didn't know how to handle the situation. I felt helpless."

It took years, but the matter was eventually resolved. Brazelton and Boyce now share custody on nearly a 50-50 basis. They are amicable, even posing together with D.J. for a picture recently after one of D.J.'s all-star tournament games.

"That was the first time we ever did that," Brazelton said. "It felt weird."

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Ginger Tolliver works the suites on the 200 level at the Trop. She has known Brazelton since the day he signed back in 2001.

"Love him to pieces," she said.

Tolliver looked after Brazelton once he moved north to play for Tampa Bay. She became his mother figure.

It was Tolliver who arranged the bartender job for Brazelton and who helped find him places to live in St. Petersburg during his career.

Tolliver said Brazelton is doing better now that D.J. is the biggest part of his life.

"He's got his act together," she said.

Keesha Graham teaches third grade at Sexton Elementary. She met Brazelton through mutual friends and invited him in 2014 to speak to her class during the Great American Teach-In.

"He's very down to earth," Graham said. "The kids gravitate to him."

Brazelton has spoken to Graham's class during the past two years. Last November, after learning about a student from a low-income family who needed clothes, Graham said Brazelton returned to her class room with a bag filled with some of D.J.'s old clothes.

Graham wants to start a mentoring program. She wants Brazelton to be part of it.

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Brazelton is a proud product of the Middle Tennessee State baseball team. He is a member of the school's athletic hall of fame. He remains in touch with the coaching staff and former teammates.

He donated \$250,000 for the renovation of the baseball stadium. The Devon Brazelton Alumni Suite is found inside the ballpark.

Brazelton found a picture on his phone of himself and D.J. standing outside the suite on a rug that bears his name.

"I got my own rug, man," Brazelton said. "Who's got their own rug?"

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On July 26, 2010, Brazelton was at Dave & Buster's in Kansas City as his career was winding down. On TV, Matt Garza, was about to pitch the only no-hitter in Rays' history. Several times throughout the game, Brazelton saw his name flash on the screen. Brazelton's 7 2/3 innings of no-hit ball against the Marlins June 24, 2004, was the deepest a Rays pitcher had pitched without allowing a hit.

Mike Lowell broke up the no-no with a double. Brazelton was removed at that point. He earned the victory and the Rays evened their season record at 35-35, one of the few highlights of the Devil Rays Era.

It was also the highlight of Brazelton's career.

Well, that and the game earlier that month when Brazelton, having been recalled from Triple-A Durham that afternoon, came on in relief and struck out Barry Bonds.

After the game Brazelton sent a Rays clubbie over to the Giants clubhouse with the ball that Bonds swung at for Strike 3. Brazelton wanted Bonds to sign it.

"He threw it in a garbage can," Brazelton said.

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After the 2005 season, Brazelton was traded to the Padres for third baseman Sean Burroughs. It was a swap of former first-round picks who had nowhere to go but up.

Brazelton pitched in nine games for the Padres. He was released after the following season and bounced through the Royals, Pirates and Cardinals organizations before pitching for a pair of independent league teams.

By the summer of 2010 his career was over.

"I spent my first two years of retirement beating myself up over it," he said. "But then I had to come to terms with it. That's just life. Things went the way they went.

"I fell very thankful and very fortunate to be where I was and what I did. Did I want it to have a 15-year major-league career? Sure. But that's not in the cards for everyone."

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Brazelton won't say anything negative about his time with the Devil Rays.

Would things have been better if he had someone like James Shields to show him how to act as a big-leaguer or been able to work with Jim Hickey? Maybe.

Would he have had more success in the majors had he spent more time in the minors? Possibly.

But Brazelton wanted to reach the big leagues as soon as possible and did accept the huge signing bonus. So he said it's hypocritical to complain since he took the money. He does know how fortunate he is to have been a major-leaguer.

D.J.'s favorite player is David Ortiz. It meant the world to Brazelton when his son finally realized that not only did his daddy pitch to David Ortiz, he enjoyed some success against the Red Sox slugger.

"Every dad," Brazelton said, "wants to be his son's hero."

Brazelton said he belongs to a Facebook page for former professional baseball players. As in the real world, only a small percentage of those who joined the page played in the big leagues. Brazelton knows the ones who didn't would love to have enjoyed even 1 percent of what he accomplished with the Devil Rays.

"You spend one day in the big leagues and you will always be known as former major-leaguers," Brazelton said as he scrolled through his phone for pictures of D.J. "The only thing better than being called a former major-leaguer is someone calling you Daddy."

And that is what happened to Dewon Brazelton.

Rays-Athletics Thursday preview

By Marc Topkin, Tampa Bay Times

Tonight: at A's

10:05, Oakland Coliseum

TV/radio: MLB Network (joined in progress about 11); 620-AM

Probable pitchers

RAYS: LH Matt Moore (5-7, 4.33)

A'S: RH Sonny Gray (4-8, 5.12)

On Moore: Coming off solid outing vs. Orioles, working into eighth for first time since 2013. Is 3-3, 2.51 over past seven starts. Is 0-1, 8.44 in three starts vs. A's.

On Gray: Is 1-3, 4.07 in eight starts following DL stint due to shoulder muscle strain. Is 2-1, 3.11 in six starts vs. Rays.

Key matchups

RAYS VS. GRAY

Evan Longoria 5-for-17, HR

Brad Miller 4-for-24

Logan Morrison 4-for-22

A'S VS. MOORE

Billy Butler 3-for-9

Danny Valencia 5-for-11, 2 HRs

Numbers of the day

6:28 Announced time of second-inning review, longest since MLB expanded replay.

41 days,

7 hours,

55 minutes

Lapsed time between Rays road wins on June 6 and Tuesday.

Rays' hits parade keeps Rockies at bay

By Thomas Harding and Ben Weinrib, MLB.com

DENVER -- Jorge De La Rosa had five quality starts in six outings since being reinstated to the Rockies' rotation. The Rays finally spoiled his run in an 11-3 rout at Coors Field on Wednesday to win their first road series in six weeks.

Tampa Bay lit into De La Rosa early with Evan Longoria's RBI double in the first. Longoria, who ended the series with five extra-base hits, was one of three runners to score in the third before the floodgates opened the next inning. Six of the first eight batters reached base, en route to five runs, highlighted by Steve Pearce's RBI double and former Rockie Corey Dickerson's RBI single.

"It was a pretty good day, man," said Rays shortstop Tim Beckham, who went a career-best 5-for-5. "I just wanted to keep building off that and trusting my approach. It's great to get the win today and great to take the series. We're looking forward to going to Oakland and keeping the momentum going."

This was De La Rosa's first start since being reinstated to the rotation on June 14 in which he allowed more than three runs. The nine runs and 11 hits he gave up were both season highs.

"I felt good, just pitch selection was really, really, really bad," De La Rosa said. "You're in the big leagues and you make mistakes, they're going to hit you hard. That happened today."

Following two straight rough outings, right-hander Chris Archer held the Rockies to two runs -- which scored in the second inning on Tony Wolters' safety squeeze and Charlie Blackmon's sacrifice fly -- on four hits with 11 strikeouts and two walks in six innings. It was his first quality start since June 17.

The Rockies fell to 21-24 at home.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Archer bears down: After giving up two second-inning runs, Archer settled in. He faced two batters over the minimum in his final four innings and struck out eight during that stretch, including the final five he faced. Archer threw first-pitch strikes to just four of the first 11 batters but stepped up after the second inning to throw first-pitch strikes to 10 of his final 14 batters.

"I felt good from the time that I took the ball," Archer said. "There was some crazy stuff that happened there. I did kind of lose my feel, but I'm happy that we had a great offensive day and I was able to get it together and get through six innings." More >

Doing a little with a lot: Daniel Descalso doubled and took third on Brandon Guyer's error with one out in the second, but that was as hard as the Rockies could hit a ball against Archer. The big hit was not to come, as Archer fanned 11 in six innings. The Rockies struck out 15 times total, after whiffing 12 times against Blake Snell and the Rays in Tuesday night's 10-1 loss. It's the first time in club history the team has been fanned 12 or more times in consecutive home games.

"That guy last night had really good stuff, and Archer was really good today, too -- good slider, good fastball, competed well," said Rockies second baseman DJ LeMahieu, a teammate of Archer during their days in the Cubs' system.

Capitalizing on mistakes: The Rays' big fourth inning was helped in large part by the Rockies' mistakes. De La Rosa walked Archer on six pitches to lead off the inning, and he proceeded to put four straight batters on base with two outs. Furthermore, his wild pitch scored Logan Forsythe from third, and Trevor Story's throwing error plated an extra run on Beckham's RBI single.

"There's no doubt you've got to capitalize and take advantage of a team's mistakes. We've had that happen to us throughout the course of the year at times, so when other teams give you extra outs, it's huge to capitalize on."

Could've stopped it right there: With the score tied at 2 and Longoria at third with one down in the top of the third, De La Rosa had a chance to end the threat and possibly get into the roll he had been on the previous six starts. But Steven Souza Jr. knocked a 90.3-mph fastball for a sharp single through the middle, and the Rays were on their way. De La Rosa would give up 11 hits and nine runs, seven earned, in four innings.

QUOTABLE

"I was somewhat inspired by Blake Snell last night. He looked really good. He attacked, he used his off-speed in a smart way, and I told him after the game, 'Thanks for the inspiration.' He said, 'Let's keep inspiring each other.' I think we're definitely capable of the past two nights and even more. We only went six innings, but we're capable of more." --Archer

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Blackmon singled in the bottom of the fifth to run his hit streak to a career-high-tying 12 games. He last accomplished the feat Aug. 14-26, 2014.

EJECTED

The Rockies' disagreement with the strike zone began when leadoff man Blackmon took a called third strike to lead off the bottom of the first and stormed away, waving demonstratively. Home-plate umpire Paul Emmel expressed his conviction by following Blackmon a few steps. In the top of the second, with Beckham at the plate, Emmel ejected hitting coach Blake Doyle for arguing the strike zone policy from the dugout. Weiss had a brief and peaceful talk with Emmel.

REPLAY REVIEW

After one a long replay review, the Rockies were awarded a second-inning run on Mark Reynolds' deft slide after Blackmon's fly ball. Emmel originally ruled that Rays catcher Curt Casali, who took the throw from Souza, made the tag in time. But after examining many angles, it was determined that Casali never made a tag and Reynolds never touched the plate. By rule, if there is no tag and no contact with the plate, the defense has to appeal Reynolds' failure to touch the plate before the crew chief makes contact with the replay official. In other words, had Casali tagged Reynolds after the play to make sure, Reynolds would have been out.

WHAT'S NEXT

Rays: Left-hander Matt Moore (5-7, 4.33 ERA) takes the mound for the Rays to open a four-game set in Oakland on Thursday at 10:05 p.m. ET. Moore has pitched at least six innings and limited opponents to two earned runs or fewer in his last four starts, which has lowered his ERA by 0.71.

Rockies: Righty Chad Bettis (7-6, 5.55 ERA) is 3-1 and the Rockies are 6-1 in his last seven starts. He threw 6 2/3 innings and gave up three runs on six hits Friday at Atlanta, and it didn't figure in the decision in a 4-3 Rockies victory. The Braves will start righty Mike Foltynewicz (3-3, 3.70 ERA), who threw seven innings -- six of them scoreless -- against Bettis and the Rockies.

Archer fans 11, delivers quality start in victory

By Ben Weinrib, MLB.com

DENVER -- Coming into Wednesday's start, Rays right-hander Chris Archer aimed to throw 70 percent strikes, a mark he has yet to eclipse this season. Although he fell just short of his goal, he put together his first quality start in over a month in a 11-3 win over the Rockies.

Archer tossed six brilliant innings, limiting the Rockies to two runs on four hits with two walks and 11 strikeouts. He struck out his last five batters and eight of his last 11.

This was a marked improvement compared to recent starts, in which he had given up at least four runs in four of his last five starts. His last quality start came on June 17.

"We get to see Arch quite a bit, and the stuff looked the same," Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "You see him in the zone, and he's a really special pitcher."

Archer threw 63.8 percent of his pitches for strikes (67 of 105), but he was still happy with his results.

"You set your standard really high," Archer said. "You shoot for the moon, and if you come up a little short, you're still amongst the stars."

In the first two innings, Archer ran into trouble when he threw 27 of 49 pitches for strikes. He fell behind early in counts, throwing first-pitch strikes to only four of the 11 batters, which allowed the Rockies to put runners on and make hard contact.

However, from the third inning on, Archer faced two batters over the minimum and threw first-pitch strikes to 10 of his final 14 hitters. He allowed two singles in the fifth but quashed the rally by punching out Nolan Arenado and Carlos Gonzalez.

Archer said he found success by not focusing too much on exactly how many strikes and first-pitch strikes he had already thrown, instead staying present and pounding the zone.

“Honestly, I’m trying to throw a strike on probably 90 percent of my pitches,” Archer said. “There are times when I’m trying to deliberately throw a slider under the zone or a fastball in, out, up, down, whatever. Strike one with nobody on base, you’re usually trying to be over the plate, and it’s a goal, but I’m not conscious of that too much.”

Despite shaky showings lately, Archer feels good. As illustrated by his Wednesday’s start, his strikeouts are up, his walks are down, and he’s been much better since he carried a 7.32 ERA after his first four starts.

“I don’t judge myself off the end result,” Archer said. “There’s times where you can go out and give up four or five runs and win, and there’s times where you can give up one or two and get a loss. Those things, I don’t even think about. That’s for other people to think about. I just think about it one pitch at a time, and it worked out for us today.”

Longoria’s hot-streak mantra: ‘Drive guys in’

By Ben Weinrib, MLB.com

DENVER -- Right as trade rumors heat up around much of the Rays’ roster, Evan Longoria carries the hottest bat for Tampa Bay.

Longoria is hitting a red-hot .308/.357/.885 since the All-Star break with three home runs. At 22 homers, he has already matched his home run total for the past two seasons.

Longoria’s power has been especially present in Denver, where he had two doubles in the Rays’ 11-3 series-finale win, and two triples and a home run in the first two games. That helped raise his slugging percentage to .552, which is a career high.

“I’m just trying to go out and have a career year,” Longoria said. “It’s been going well. I never really think about my power totals, whether it’s early or late in the season. I usually try to drive guys in. That’s really all I think about.

“Hitting home runs is cool, and everybody takes notice of it, but for me personally, it’s not something I look at and say ‘I’ve got to get to this number.’”

Longoria’s 19 first-half home runs are a career high, and his .289 first-half average is the second best of his career. One of the bigger reasons for his success has been sustained health, especially after being dinged up last season with a left wrist injury.

“When you’re a player of that caliber, those things can affect you,” Rays manager Kevin Cash said. “But we’ve seen a very healthy player who has kind of led us through some difficult times here. He’s been the one constant in our lineup, and we’re just thankful for what he’s provided for us.

Longoria’s hot streak goes back to May 8, and he’s hitting .319/.371/.606 during that stretch. He says he feels more comfortable at the plate than ever, and the early-season success gives him more confidence going forward.

“He’s established himself,” Cash said. “You can say he’s growing as a hitter, and with the amount of at-bats, you get smarter as you go, and he’s already a smart hitter to begin with. He has a very good idea of what pitchers are trying to do to him and what he’s wanting to do. This year, he’s been very successful with those approaches.”

Moore, Gray called on to open 4-game set

By Mark Chiarelli, MLB.com

The A’s and Rays open a four-game series Thursday at the Coliseum with a pair of pitchers who, to varying degrees, have seen their names involved in trade rumors in advance of the Aug. 1 non-waiver Trade Deadline.

Oakland starts Sonny Gray, who continues to be mentioned as a possible trade candidate despite being a long shot to be dealt. Gray has struggled this season, going 4-8 with a 5.12 ERA, but he is beginning to show signs of a turnaround. He gave up three runs in six innings in a 5-4 A’s win over the Blue Jays on Saturday, registering his first win since April 22.

Gray has also pitched well against Tampa Bay in his career, going 2-1 with a 3.11 ERA in six starts. He gave up six runs (three earned) in 5 2/3 innings against the Rays on May 15.

The Rays counter with Matt Moore, whose name also continues to be mentioned in trade talks, along with several other Tampa Bay starters. Like Gray, Moore has struggled this year, going 5-7 with a 4.33 ERA, and he has yet to regain the form he displayed prior to undergoing Tommy John surgery in 2014.

Moore is coming off his longest start in nearly three years, giving up two runs over 7 1/3 innings vs. the Orioles on Saturday. He faced Gray in that same May 15 start, giving up four runs on seven hits in five innings.

Things to know about this game

- Moore has never faced the A’s at the Coliseum, but he has struggled in three career starts against Oakland, going 0-1 with an 8.44 ERA while giving up 15 runs in 16 innings.
- Gray hasn’t fared well against the American League East this year, going 2-2 with a 7.01 ERA in five starts, allowing three runs or more in each of them.
- Oakland’s Danny Valencia hit two homers off Moore in May, and he has enjoyed facing the lefty in his career, hitting .455 (5-for-11) against him.

Rumor Roundup: Bucs eyeing closer Gomez

By Chad Thornburg, MLB.com

Phillies closer Jeanmar Gomez has been the subject of frequent rumors heading into the Aug. 1 non-waiver Trade Deadline, and the Pirates are among the teams eyeing the right-hander as a possible upgrade to their bullpen, according to ESPN's Buster Olney.

Gomez, 28, owns a 2.76 ERA and has converted 26 of his 29 save opportunities as he assumed the Phillies' primary closing duties this season. He's pitched his way into numerous trade rumors as next month's Deadline approaches.

The Pirates are very familiar with the Venezuelan right-hander. Gomez played two seasons with Pittsburgh in 2013-14, making 78 appearances (eight starts) with a 3.28 ERA for the Bucs.

Here's a look at some of the other rumors circulating around the big leagues:

Dodgers could make a splash

The Dodgers could be big players at the Deadline as they look to make a push to catch the Giants in the National League West. ESPN's Jerry Crasnick reported Wednesday that a rival executive told him the Dodgers are "big-game hunting" for impact players.

Los Angeles is facing uncertainty with its ace Clayton Kershaw, who's out indefinitely and possibly facing surgery due to lower back pain, and could try to acquire a starting pitcher, such as Tampa Bay's Chris Archer.

Morosi previously reported that the Dodgers and Rays have engaged in trade talks, but it's not known which players were discussed. Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman hails from the Rays front office, where he was general manager for nearly a decade.

MLB Rumor Central: Steve Pearce 'available and drawing interest'

By Sam Henken, ESPN.com

Tampa Bay Rays utility man Steve Pearce made a loud return from the DL last night, going 2-for-5 with a home run in the Rays' 10-1 win over the Colorado Rockies. Now that Pearce is back in the lineup, he could be a trade option.

Yahoo Sports columnist Jeff Passan tweeted that not only is there interest in Pearce but that the Rays have made him available.

The Rays inked Pearce, 33, to a one-year deal during the offseason after he struggled with the Baltimore Orioles last year. Pearce has shown versatility to play multiple positions, both in the outfield and infield, throughout his career.

With Pearce putting up solid numbers this season, including the best batting average of his career, and his contract expiring at the end of this year, he represents a solid option to upgrade a team's depth at several positions. Meanwhile, the Rays will look to get some value in return for the veteran.

Ranking MLB trade options at each position

By Jim Bowden, ESPN.com

From what I'm hearing, history could repeat itself.

The present trade market has a strong supply of available relievers and outfielders, but it's thin on quality starting pitchers, catchers and infielders. And dialogue has already been fast and furious with all 30 general managers and their assistant GMs. Trades can happen at any time, a change from the past when most clubs tended to make most of their deals closer to the actual trade deadline, which this year is 4 p.m. ET on Aug. 1.

So who's on the block? Here's my annual ranking of players who could be traded or change teams either at this trade deadline or in the offseason. Last year, a staggering 54 of the 65 players I listed ended up changing teams. For more trade coverage or to share your own trade ideas, follow me on Twitter: @JimBowden_ESPN.

Starting pitchers (15 options)

1. Sonny Gray, RHP, Oakland Athletics

Gray has had the worst year of his career because of injury and mechanics. His trade value is at a career low, and it's doubtful the A's deal him unless someone wants to pay a prospect package based on his career performances coming into this season. I doubt that happens.

2. Julio Teheran, RHP, Atlanta Braves

The Braves were spoiled when they hit a grand slam with the Shelby Miller trade, and because of that, they're asking for an even bigger return. As such, Teheran is probably staying put too.

3. Rich Hill, LHP, Athletics

Hill has had to deal with both a groin injury and blister issues on his throwing hand. However, he also has found his arm slot and command of his pitches, and he could be the best pitcher traded at this deadline. He's just a rental, as he's a free agent at season's end.

4. Jake Odorizzi, RHP, Tampa Bay Rays

The Rays are committed to trading one of their starting pitchers for offensive help; the trade return will have more to do with their decision of

which one to trade than salary will.

5. Matt Moore, LHP, Rays

Moore has pitched so well over his past seven starts that he has risen past both Odorizzi and Drew Smyly on many teams' trade target boards.

6. Jimmy Nelson, RHP, Milwaukee Brewers

The Brewers are not interested in trading their best starter, but with the year Nelson has had, they could get back a significant prospect package. That could be good enough to get them to change their minds.

7. Hector Santiago, LHP, Los Angeles Angels

The Angels have to listen on everybody not named Mike Trout, and Santiago could be a good get for a contending team.

8. Matt Shoemaker, RHP, Angels

What a great bounce-back season he has had after getting optioned out earlier in the year for underperformance. Several teams have inquired about him as a back-of-the-rotation answer to add depth.

9. Ervin Santana, RHP, Minnesota Twins

The Twins have a new interim GM in place in Rob Antony, and he'll get his chance to keep the job permanently if he can have a strong trade deadline.

10. Drew Smyly, LHP, Rays

Smyly has a 7.13 ERA over his past 13 starts, which is scaring teams off of him.

11. Nathan Eovaldi, RHP, New York Yankees

The Pirates have inquired about Eovaldi, which led to several other GMs dialing the Yankees to express their own interest. To move him, the Yankees will need a young controllable starter back.

12. Michael Pineda, RHP, Yankees

His inconsistency drives the Yankees crazy and his trade value down.

13. Jeremy Hellickson, RHP, Philadelphia Phillies

He's effective when his sinker is working, and would fit nicely in the back end of a contender's rotation.

14. Andrew Cashner, RHP, San Diego Padres

His best trade value will probably be as a reliever, as the breaking ball and command just aren't there for him to be a starter on a contending team.

15. Jon Niese, LHP, Pittsburgh Pirates

Pirates GM Neal Huntington recently admitted he made a mistake in trading for him and that he should have taken two fringe prospects from the Mets instead for Neil Walker. That kills his trade value -- if he had any -- but still, eight wins in the first half can't be ignored for good offensive teams looking for a back-of-the-rotation starter.

Relief pitchers (14 options)

1. Andrew Miller, LHP, Yankees

Miller is the most sought-after reliever on the market because he is controllable for two more years and can be utilized as a closer or setup reliever or lefty specialist. He should get the best trade return of any player dealt at the deadline.

2. Aroldis Chapman, LHP, Yankees

Since he becomes a free agent this winter, he's a rental, but also a postseason game-changer with the potential to shut down the game's best left-handed hitters in October playoff games.

3. Jeanmar Gomez, RHP, Phillies

Gomez and Hellickson are the two most valuable trade pieces the Phillies have to continue their rebuilding program by adding talent through trades at this year's deadline.

4. Alex Colome, RHP, Rays

Colome quickly developed into one of the league's best closers after Brad Boxberger went on the disabled list. The Rays are looking for bats if they trade him.

5. Jeremy Jeffress, RHP, Brewers

If the Yankees don't end up selling, the Brewers could benefit by reaping a significant return for Jeffress.

6. Will Smith, LHP, Brewers

Teams that lose out on Chapman and Miller will be calling the Brewers on Smith as well as Jeffress.

7. Sean Doolittle, LHP, Athletics

Doolittle's injury history and contract will make it difficult for the A's to move him.

8. Fernando Abad, LHP, Twins

Abad is probably the best bet to be the first player traded by interim GM Rob Antony.

9. Ryan Madson, RHP, Athletics

He's better suited for a setup role for a contending team than pitching as a closer at this point in his career.

10. Tyler Clippard, RHP, Arizona Diamondbacks

He has experience closing and setting up, and he can get out both right-handed and left-handed hitters.

11. Boone Logan, LHP, Colorado Rockies

The Rockies should be able to pick up a quality prospect for him.

12. Jake McGee, LHP, Rockies

He needs to get out of Coors Field.

13. Joe Smith, RHP, Angels

Teams looking for a different arm angle and bullpen look should take on a chance on him.

14. Huston Street, RHP, Angels

An injury and poor performance are the story here, as his value has plummeted.

Catchers (2 options)

1. Jonathan Lucroy, C, Brewers

Lucroy is an elite defensive catcher who knows how to call a game, frame pitches and handle a pitching staff. He also hits for average and power, and he's under contract with an affordable \$5.25 million club option for 2017.

2. Derek Norris, C, Padres

He has great power and continues to improve defensively. He would be a great fit for the Rangers or Indians.

Infielders (7 options)

1. Yunel Escobar, 3B, Angels

He can play second or third and has developed into a solid defense and on-base percentage player.

2. Yangervis Solarte, IF, Padres

As a switch-hitter who can play multiple positions, he'll help the bottom of a contender's lineup.

3. Chris Carter, 1B, Brewers

Carter's home run power can help lengthen a contender's lineup despite his high strikeout tendency.

4. Howie Kendrick, 2B/LF, Dodgers

Kendrick has never complained about playing time or position, but he needs to be traded somewhere he can play second base every day.

5. Danny Valencia, 1B/3B, Athletics

There hasn't been much trade interest in him, but that could change with so few infielders on the trade market.

6. Erick Aybar, SS, Braves

He has started to play better over the past month and could help a contender if there is an injury to their shortstop or playing in a backup role.

7. Alexei Ramirez, SS, Padres

Ramirez has to start playing better if the Padres hope to dump him at the deadline.

Outfielders (11 options)

1. Carlos Gonzalez, RF, Rockies

The Rockies will have to be overwhelmed to move him, but his trade value will never be higher.

2. Ryan Braun, LF/RF, Brewers

The Brewers view him as part of long-term answer because of his contract but he sure would make a difference in the middle of a contender's lineup.

3. Carlos Beltran, RF/DH, Yankees

Beltran has always been a clutch postseason difference-maker. He's also a free agent at season's end.

4. Kole Calhoun, RF, Angels

One of the most underrated right fielders in baseball.

5. Charlie Blackmon, OF, Rockies

The Rockies are always looking to trade for pitching and if they hold onto Gonzalez they could trade Blackmon for a top of rotation-type starter with top outfield prospect David Dahl ready to take his place.

6. Jay Bruce, RF, Cincinnati Reds

The Reds almost traded him to the Blue Jays in the offseason, and all signs point to Bruce getting moved this time at the deadline as the Reds continue their rebuilding. He's also controllable in '17.

7. Josh Reddick, RF, Athletics

He is a shutdown right fielder with both a plus arm and glove. He's at his peak offensively too. A free agent at season's end.

8. Matt Kemp RF/DH, Padres

He would fit best in the American League where he could DH. Bad contract.

9. Melvin Upton Jr., CF, Padres

He's a candidate for comeback player of the year and playing once again like he did for Tampa Bay.

10. Nick Markakis, RF, Braves

Markakis has lost his bat speed and power but he's still an average major league player -- just one without home run power.

11. Jon Jay, CF/LF, Padres

Jay is expected to be back in action in the next two weeks, just in time to be traded at the deadline as a solid fourth outfielder.

Picking best Hall of Fame position player/pitcher pair for each AL team

By Jay Jaffe, Sports Illustrated

On Sunday, Ken Griffey Jr will be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, a well-deserved honor for a player who bashed 630 career home runs (sixth all-time), won 10 Gold Gloves, made 13 All-Star teams and set a record by receiving 99.3% of the writers' vote on the 2016 ballot. Not only will Griffey become the first No. 1 draft pick to be inducted, but he'll also be the first honoree with a Mariners cap on his plaque, as Class of 2015 member Randy Johnson went in as a Diamondback.

Given that the Mariners are an expansion team that began play in 1977, it's not surprising that they have a limited number of connections to Cooperstown; the only other enshrined position player even to suit up for Seattle is Rickey Henderson, who played 92 games there in 2000 at age 41. Many of the Junior Circuit's teams aside from the original eight that comprised the league from 1901 to '60 have failed to produce even one home-grown Hall of Famer.

What follows here is a consideration of each team's greatest enshrined position player and pitcher—not necessarily drafted and developed by the team, and not necessarily wearing its cap on a bronze plaque, but ideally having spent crucial parts of their careers with that franchise. For this exercise, I'm guided by WAR and JAWS (which you can read about here) but not limited to them; milestones, postseason play and historical importance are also factors here. The teams are listed alphabetically; I'll tackle the National League in a separate column later this week.

Tampa Bay Rays

Position Player: Wade Boggs (1998–99)

Pitcher: None

The 1998 expansion team has had just one Hall of Famer pass through the organization: the transplanted Boggs, who collected his 3,000th hit with the team in '99. In signing with the team at the tail end of his 18-year career, he allegedly agreed to go into the Hall as a Devil Ray, but he's wearing the Boston B on his plaque.

Meanwhile, no Hall pitcher has played for the Rays—and no, Boggs's stint as an emergency knuckleballer with the Yankees doesn't count. Someday, maybe David Price will represent them. On that note, third baseman Evan Longoria (45.5 career WAR/40.1 peak WAR/42.8 JAWS) deserved a mention in Tuesday's piece on mid-career players progressing towards Cooperstown: His peak score is 2.6 wins shy of the Hall standard and should draw closer in the midst of this year's resurgence.

Five Rays most likely to be sold at the trade deadline

By Roy Cummings, Today's Knuckleball

ST. PETERSBURG — The Tampa Bay Rays have experienced a slight uptick in attendance of late. The increase, though, is not the result of more fans coming to their games, but rather the result of more scouts from rival clubs.

For weeks now, rival scouts have been circling the dying Rays like vultures prepping to feast on a decaying carcass. At least half a dozen showed up for each of the three games the Rays hosted against the Orioles following the All-Star break.

The scouts ever-presence further suggests the Rays will have a chance to be sellers at the trade deadline. With that in mind, here's a look at the five Rays players who are most likely to be moved, why the Rays might have to move them, and what makes them so attractive to other teams.

IF STEVE PEARCE

Despite some time lost to injury, Pearce has had a great year for the Rays. He went into Wednesday's action hitting a career-best .324 and on pace to possibly reach a new career-high in home runs. The Rays love that he can play anywhere on the field and don't want to lose him, but they may not be able to afford to keep him.

Signed in January to a one-year, \$4.8 million contract, Pearce is slated to hit free agency again this winter. The Rays have probably approached Pearce already about sticking around at a wage they can afford, but if Pearce is adamant about testing the market, the Rays may have no choice but to move him now and get something for him because his bat and versatility are valuable commodities.

1B LOGAN MORRISON

Morrison has heated up nicely at the plate following a freezing cold first month-and-a-half, but from a contractual standpoint he's just like Pearce. As a result of signing a one-year, \$4.2 million contract a week before Pearce, Morrison is slated to become a free agent this winter. The thinking here is the Rays probably can't afford to keep both Pearce and Morrison.

If that proves true, the decision on who to move may come down to who brings the most in return. Pearce's versatility may make him the more attractive buy, but if the Rays decide to invest long-term in Pearce they may wind up taking whatever they can get in a deal for Morrison just to avoid getting nothing.

LHP MATT MOORE

Moore is one of the big reasons rival scouts have been targeting the Rays of late. Now more than two years removed from Tommy John surgery, he has become the Rays' most effective starter.

He's a modest 3-3 in his last seven starts, but he's got his fastball up to 92.8 mph, according to FanGraphs, he's commanding it as well as he has since the surgery and he's posted a 2.51 ERA and 1.22 WHIP in those seven starts. Those factors alone make Moore attractive, but so does his contract.

Moore has three years left on a deal that pays an average of \$8.6 million per year but contains three team options and buyout clauses that start at \$2.5 million in 2017 and drop to \$800,000 in 2019. At those prices, the Rays may opt to keep Moore for themselves.

RHP ERASMO RAMIREZ

Ramirez was one of the Rays' best starters last year. Early on this year — before he became worn out from overuse — he was one of their best relievers. The ability to effectively fill any role on the staff, though, is only part of what make Ramirez so attractive.

First off, he never gripes about how he's used, seemingly happy to be get the ball no matter the situation. Second, he's cheap. The Rays avoided arbitration with Ramirez last January by signing him to a one-year, \$2.4 million contract. Just as they've no doubt done with Pearce and Morrison, the Rays have almost certainly engaged in talks aimed at re-signing Ramirez, but if those talks are going nowhere the Rays may want to make sure they get something back before they lose him for nothing.

RHP JAKE ODIRIZZI

The Rays have already had trade talks with the Rangers about Odorizzi, according to ESPN's Jim Bowden, and despite "Odo's" struggles of late, it's easy to see why.

In 86 his games (83 starts) with Tampa Bay, Odorizzi has pitched to a 3.90 ERA, a 1.22 WHIP and has averaged 8.5 strikeouts and 2.8 walks per nine innings. And then, of course, there's the contract.

Though he will become eligible for arbitration this offseason, Odorizzi is only making \$500,000 this year and the team that gets him will have control of him contractually through 2019. The Marlins are believed to be interested in this right-handed power pitcher as well, leaving some to believe he's the most likely of all to be moved.