



Clips

(April 6, 2017)

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FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**Garrett Richards looks sharp for four innings in Angels win, but biceps cramp stops him in fifth**

By Pedro Moura

It all seemed swell. In his first time on a major league mound in 11 months, Garrett Richards was dominating Oakland. A groundout to begin the bottom of the fifth inning made it 11 consecutive Athletics the Angels' right-hander had retired Wednesday at the Oakland Coliseum.

And then it went awry, not terribly, but quickly. He lost command of a few breaking balls and his fastball velocity dipped. After Richards' first pitch to Matt Joyce, Angels catcher Martin Maldonado jogged to the mound, asked the pitcher a question, and signaled to the dugout for a trainer to visit. Richards pointed to his arm and walked off the mound.

"It felt like somebody punched me in the arm," he later said.

Postgame, the pain had waned. Per the initial diagnosis, Richards suffered only a biceps cramp, not a recurrence of the torn ulnar collateral ligament that forced him to miss most of 2016. The scare shrouded the Angels' 5-0 victory over the Athletics, but the club said he was removed for precautionary purposes and could make his next scheduled start Tuesday at Angel Stadium.

"Everything's fine," Richards said. "Everything moves on as planned."

No one knew quite what to expect in Richards' return, because he opted to repair the tear with a stem-cell injection rather than Tommy John surgery, the far more common course that requires a longer recovery. Steve Yoon, the doctor who performed the injection, said this week that Richards was healed based on the tests he has examined.

The last time Richards left a major league mound, last May Day in Texas, the Angels announced he was dehydrated. He played catch the next two days before the elbow injury was diagnosed.

Two scouts in attendance at the Oakland Coliseum on Wednesday each said they did not detect a significant deterioration in Richards' pitches before his departure. They only saw him grab his arm above his elbow seconds before he left.

Ninety minutes earlier, Richards took the mound firing 97-mph fastballs to Joyce, who singled. He then induced a groundout, struck out Ryon Healy and walked Khris Davis. Stephen Vogt chopped a ball back up the middle, and Andrelton Simmons ranged over to secure the out.

Richards settled from there, requiring only 14 pitches to strike out the side in the second, five to finish the third, and 18 in the fourth. To begin the fifth, Trevor Plouffe grounded out into the shift. Then Yonder Alonso and Marcus Semien singled on hanging sliders, Rajai Davis grounded out, Joyce approached the plate, and Maldonado approached the mound.

“It’s just something that flared up that inning,” Richards said. “It was a long inning, and I just kind of stiffened up a little bit. But, there’s no red flags to be worried about.”

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Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs poised to face longtime pal in first start

By Pedro Moura

In his first start of the 2017 season, Angels left-hander Tyler Skaggs will face the major league hitter he believes knows him best.

For seven years now, Skaggs has spent his offseasons training with Oakland third baseman Trevor Plouffe at Pepperdine University. Twice, Plouffe has stood in the batter’s box for Skaggs’ first bullpen session of a new year. On Thursday afternoon at the Oakland Coliseum, they’ll face each other on a major league field for the first time.

“I know him, and I know how he thinks,” said Plouffe, a longtime Minnesota Twin and Crespi graduate who signed with Oakland in January to take over third base.

Plouffe said he does not believe he has gained much of an understanding of Skaggs’ pitches.

"I don't know him as a pitcher," he said. "I know his work ethic, I know the drive that he has, the competitiveness. Those are the things that I know of him. Obviously I know what he throws and how he tries to approach the game, but I think I'll know a lot more after Thursday."

Told the gist of what his friend said, Skaggs laughed, intimating that Plouffe was downplaying the depth of what he has picked up. They effectively grew up together in this sport.

"As far as the kind of person he is, he's a worker, and that's something that I don't know you could have said early, early on, when I first met him, when he was 18," Plouffe said. "You can't really say that about too many people at that age. But he has made himself into that guy."

Plouffe said Pepperdine's weight room is too small for all the players who work out there, including Milwaukee's Ryan Braun, to lift together. So, as a prospect, Skaggs went in after the big leaguers, working in solitude for several winters.

"He paid his dues, and eventually he came in and started working out with us," Plouffe said. "As soon as he started working out with us, we realized that he was a special talent and a guy that was going to make us better."

Both men have experienced analogous instances in the past. As he rode the bus to his first start since Tommy John surgery during 2016 spring training, Skaggs texted his friend and former teammate, Matt Davidson, whom he knew he'd face that day. He told Davidson his curveball was feeling particularly good, and then struck him out on three consecutive fastballs.

"I knew I got into his head," Skaggs said then.

In Detroit last season, Plouffe batted against his friend and longtime Twins teammate Mike Pelfrey for the first time. He saw Pelfrey, then pitching for the Tigers, holding back a smile on the mound while he notched two singles in three at-bats.

"You're trying to be very competitive up there, but there are times that it is just a game again, and those are the real moments," Plouffe said. "You're like, 'Dang, I'm facing my buddy. This is fun.' "

Both men expect something similar to begin around Thursday's second inning.

"I think it's going to be a challenge for both of us," Plouffe said. "Either way, we're going to have fun with it."

Short hops

The two last cuts from the Angels' opening-day roster, right-handers Austin Adams and Kirby Yates, have both cleared waivers and been assigned to triple-A Salt Lake. ...Catcher Carlos Perez will make his first start of the season Thursday, Angels Manager Mike Scioscia said.

FROM THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER**Garrett Richards not concerned after leaving Angels' victory with biceps cramp**

By Jeff Fletcher

OAKLAND — Garrett Richards could not have been more clear in describing why Angels fans should not panic after watching him walk off the mound with a trainer on Wednesday night.

Following the Angels' 5-0 victory over the Oakland A's, Richards said "everything is fine," or words to that effect, a half-dozen times.

He was able to smile and laugh over what he is certain is a biceps cramp, and nothing more serious.

"My arm feels good," he said. "My elbow feels fine. My shoulder feels fine. It was just a long inning and I kind of stiffened up. Nothing to worry about."

All of that certainly should help Angels fans come down from the anxiety many of them felt in watching their ace — a pitcher who last year tore his ulnar collateral ligament — walk off the mound.

Of course, it bears noting that last season he left a game with what the team initially described as dehydration. Richards expressed little concern after that May 1 game, and only a little more in the days following, before he was eventually diagnosed.

For now, though, the Angels are going to stick with calling it a cramp. Manager Mike Scioscia said Angels doctors will take a look at Richards when the Angels return home after Thursday's series finale, but they currently don't even have plans for an MRI exam.

"With any pitcher when they have to come out of the game there is a certain amount of concern," Scioscia said. "Right now it looks like a cramp in his bicep, not at all related to what he was feeling last year. We're going to take it one step at a time. As of right now, hopefully he'll make his next start."

Richards' next start would be on Tuesday at home against the Texas Rangers. If the Angels do decide to take the conservative route, they could use Monday's off day and delay his next start all the way until a week from Saturday, in Kansas City.

"We're not going to take any chances with any pitcher feeling something like that, let alone a guy that went through what he went through last year," Scioscia said.

What Richards went through last year was a revolutionary stem-cell therapy, an alternative to Tommy John surgery. Although there were skeptics of the process throughout, it seemed to work.

By October, when he was throwing at full velocity in instructional league, he seemed to have been healed. All spring, his outings provided further encouragement.

And when he finally took the mound in a regular-season game on Wednesday night, all still seemed well until the fifth.

After a 24-pitch first inning, Richards slipped into a groove and retired 10 in a row through the fourth. His fastball was consistently at 96-98 mph.

“Garrett was throwing the ball very well,” Scioscia said. “It was coming out hot. He had good movement. The slider and curveball were there. That’s a great first step for Garrett.”

Richards added: “After the first inning I felt like I settled in. I did today what I’ve been trying to do, fill up the zone. Go after guys and make my pitch.”

The Angels sent six hitters to the plate in the top of the fifth, with a pitching change in between, as they pushed the lead to 5-0. After sitting out through that long inning on a cold night, Richards then came out for the bottom of the inning and apparently didn’t feel quite right.

Richards began the fifth and lost a couple pitches high, prompting catcher Martin Maldonado to come out to check on him. Richards got an out, then gave up two straight singles. He got the second out, then threw a 94 mph fastball for a strike to Matt Joyce.

Then Maldonado came back to the mound, and motioned for trainers. Richards said he explained he felt just a cramping, “like someone punched me in the arm.” Moments later, Richards was headed back to the dugout. The expression on his face didn’t reveal any panic that something had happened to the ligament he damaged last year.

And he had the same expression more than 90 minutes later, after undergoing a few tests in the clubhouse.

“I feel pretty good,” he said. “I feel fine now. I felt great when I came out of the game. Everything is fine.”

Angels Notes: Tyler Skaggs ready for season debut

By Jeff Fletcher

OAKLAND — Tyler Skaggs has been insisting for a month that the shoulder issue he had a month ago was not an issue at all, and the time is coming near for him to demonstrate.

Skaggs will make his season debut on Thursday, his first opportunity to prove that he’s fully caught up after being set back early in the spring because of shoulder fatigue.

“Tyler is ready,” Manager Mike Scioscia said. “He’s where he needs to be. Hopefully he’ll be getting pitches in good zones and will be able to pitch to a certain point in the game. It’s going to be critical for us to get a certain amount from our starters every night.”

Skaggs threw 92 pitches in a five-inning minor league outing last week, so it’s unlikely that he would be stretched much beyond that against the Oakland A’s on Thursday.

The Angels figure to also be monitoring Skaggs' innings closely this season, his first full season after Tommy John surgery. He last threw at least 150 innings in 2011. He didn't throw any in 2015 and in 2016 he pitched 89 innings, between the minors and majors.

MORE TROUT GOODNESS

Lost in the craziness of Tuesday night's ninth-inning comeback victory, earlier in the game Mike Trout collected his 500th career RBI. It made Trout the sixth player in history to have 500 RBI and 600 runs before his 26th birthday.

The others were Ty Cobb, Joe DiMaggio, Jimmie Foxx, Mickey Mantle and Alex Rodriguez.

ALSO

Right-hander Kirby Yates, who had been designated for assignment when he failed to make the opening day roster, cleared waivers and was outrighted to Triple-A. The Angels claimed Yates on waivers over the winter. He had good numbers early in the spring, but struggled at the end. The Angels are hoping that his 50 strikeouts in 41 1/3 innings last season with the Yankees are indicative of what he can do...

Yates addition to the Triple-A bullpen pushed Alex Blackford off the roster. Blackford had been set to be one of the starters at Triple-A, so the Angels will now use a combo of relievers Deolis Guerra and Brooks Pounders for that spot...

The new 30-second limit on managers to use a replay challenge is being measured by a clock that begins counting down the moment a play ends. Scioscia said it's going to cause some issues this season: "It's going to be tough because we don't get to look at the super slow-mo until 40 seconds, so we are going to have to make some calls on the fly."...

Scioscia said he's been following the condition of Pedro Guerrero, his former Dodgers teammate. Guerrero had been in a coma after having a stroke. "We're all praying for him and hopefully he'll get through this and get his health back," Scioscia said.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Richards leaves start with biceps cramping

By Maria Guardado / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Through four innings on Wednesday, Garrett Richards showed why he's one of the Angels greatest sources of optimism for 2017.

In his first Major League start since May 1, 2016, Richards had held the A's to just one hit and had retired 10 batters in a row, reaffirming the effectiveness of the stem-cell treatment that regenerated his partially torn ulnar collateral ligament that allowed him to avoid Tommy John surgery.

But in the fifth, Richards hit a speed bump.

After coaxing a groundball to start the inning, Richards surrendered consecutive singles to Yonder Alonso and Marcus Semien. He retired the next batter but then threw a 94-mph fastball to Matt Joyce that triggered the concern of catcher Martin Maldonado, who signaled for the team trainer to come out to the mound. Richards subsequently departed the game with a right biceps cramp, dampening the Halos' 5-0 win over the A's at the Coliseum.

The club announced that Richards' removal was precautionary, and he said afterward that he wasn't concerned about the issue, which was called a cramping of his right biceps.

"My bicep was just kind of cramping a little bit," Richards said. "Nothing serious. My arm feels good. I felt good tonight. Elbow feels fine. Shoulder feels fine. It was kind of a long inning and I kind of stiffened up a bit, but nothing to be worried about."

Manager Mike Scioscia said Richards will be evaluated by team doctors when the Angels return to Southern California following their series finale against the A's Thursday, but as of now, there are no plans for the 28-year-old right-hander to undergo an MRI.

"We're going to take it one step at a time," Scioscia said. "As of right now, hopefully he'll make his next start. We're not going to take any chances with any pitcher that's feeling something like that, let alone a guy that went through what he went through last year."

While Richards' premature exit was a little disconcerting, the Angels were encouraged by what they saw before he left the game. Richards allowed just three hits, walking one and striking out four, in the 76-pitch effort.

"After the first inning, I felt like I settled in a little bit," Richards said. "But I did today what I've been trying to do, which is fill up the zone, kind of go right after guys and make them hit my pitch."

Much of the Angels' success in 2017 figures to hinge on the health of their starting rotation, which is anchored by Richards.

Richards made only six starts in 2016 before he was diagnosed with a torn UCL. The loss of Richards and left-hander Andrew Heaney, who also suffered a season-ending elbow ligament tear, crippled the Halos' rotation and derailed their season. Richards avoided Tommy John surgery by receiving an injection of stem cells in his damaged elbow, and his return was a boon to the Angels, who need his presence at the top of their rotation.

For now, the Angels will continue to tread carefully with their ace, though Richards said he's confident he'll be able to move forward without any further setbacks.

"Everything kind of moves on as planned," Richards said.

Espinosa stays hot as Angels blank A's

By Jane Lee and Maria Guardado / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The Angels used timely hitting to nail down their second straight victory at the Coliseum on Wednesday evening, but their 5-0 win over the A's was tempered by starter Garrett Richards' premature exit.

The right-handed Richards, who was making his first start since May 1 after opting for stem-cell therapy over Tommy John surgery to treat elbow ligament damage, accompanied a trainer out of the game with two outs in the fifth. The Angels announced biceps cramping as the reason for his removal, which they deemed precautionary.

Nevertheless, the scene cast a shadow over an otherwise encouraging performance: Richards held the A's to just three hits, retiring 11 in a row at one point. He had early run support to boot, as the Angels jumped on A's starter Jharel Cotton for three runs in the second inning, later tacking on two more against the right-hander in the fifth to hand him his first career loss.

"Maybe not his best stuff," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "After the first, they made him work a little harder even though it was a couple bloop hits they got him for the first few runs in the second inning."

Andrelton Simmons' RBI double got the Angels on the board in the second, and Danny Espinosa, whose three-run homer lifted his club to victory the night before, followed with a two-run single. Mike Trout and Albert Pujols collected back-to-back run-scoring singles in the fifth.

"We played good baseball," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "We had some clutch hits, had a lot of opportunities tonight and got five runs. Our bullpen did a terrific job. We have to get more length from our starters eventually, but our bullpen picked us up. JC Ramirez did a tremendous job tonight."

Pujols' knock prompted Cotton's departure with one out in the inning. Cotton, making just the sixth start of his big league career, offered up eight hits and two walks with four strikeouts on the night.

The A's mustered just six hits, to the Angels' 13, stranding multiple base runners in three innings. Right-hander Frankie Montas was the lone bright spot for them, stranding Cotton's final two base runners and tossing 2 2/3 innings in his Oakland debut. Montas and Cotton arrived in the same trade from the Dodgers last summer, when the A's shipped Josh Reddick and Rich Hill to Los Angeles.

"Last night he gave me a ride home, and I was like, 'I got your back just in case, man,'" Montas said. "Turns out I was able to save those runs for him."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Alvarez works out of a jam: After Richards departed and left a pair of runners on base in the fifth, Scioscia brought in left-hander Jose Alvarez to face the left-handed hitting Matt Joyce with two outs.

Melvin countered by sending up righty bat Mark Canha as a pinch-hitter for Joyce, but Alvarez induced an inning-ending pop out to first base, preserving the Angels' 5-0 lead.

A's fail to cash in: The A's also threatened in the sixth after Khris Davis hit a two-out single and advanced to third on Stephen Vogt's double, but Ramirez defused the threat by striking out Trevor Plouffe swinging on a 96-mph fastball.

WHAT'S NEXT

Angels: Left-hander Tyler Skaggs will make his season debut Thursday afternoon as the Angels wrap up their four-game series with the A's at the Coliseum. Skaggs is entering his first full season since returning from Tommy John surgery and posted a 1.35 ERA over three Cactus League starts this spring.

A's: The A's will cap off this four-game series with right-hander Andrew Triggs on the mound in Thursday's 12:35 p.m. PT finale. Triggs, who will be making his season debut, begins his second big league season. He posted a 4.31 ERA in 24 games -- six of them starts -- over eight stints with the A's last year.

Fast start by Maldonado impressing Angels

New backstop playing like he wants the full-time job

By Maria Guardado / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The 2017 season remains in its nascent stages for the Angels, but the first few games of the campaign have already offered a glimpse at how the Halos might handle the division of playing time between catchers Martin Maldonado and Carlos Perez this season.

Maldonado, who was acquired from the Brewers in exchange for Jett Bandy in December, has started the Angels first three games, signaling that he will likely get his first opportunity to be a primary catcher in the big leagues. Maldonado, 30, spent much of his career backing up All-Star Jonathan Lucroy in Milwaukee, but he's impressed the Angels with his defense and currently appears to be ahead of Perez on the depth chart.

Maldonado made his presence behind the plate felt Tuesday night in the Angels' 7-6 win over the A's, unleashing two outstanding throws to pick off Marcus Semien at first base and nab Rajai Davis at second base on a stolen base attempt.

"He's a game-changer behind the plate with his arm," manager Mike Scioscia said. "There's no doubt that when he throws, that ball comes out hot."

Still, Perez also figures to draw plenty of starts and is expected to make his season debut Thursday in the Angels' series finale in Oakland, which will be a day game after a night game.

Perez, 26, entered last spring as the Halos' No. 1 catcher, but he lost his starting job after struggling at the plate and was briefly demoted to Triple-A to work on his offense. Perez tried revamping his swing

this year by adding a leg kick, but he still batted just .182 (8-for-44) in Spring Training and appears poised to serve as Maldonado's backup.

Scioscia has remained relatively mum on how he sees the catching situation shaking out, but he's acknowledged that the two catchers' playing time is malleable and "it could change during the year."

Worth noting

- Scioscia said he's been following the news about his former Dodgers teammate Pedro Guerrero, who awoke from a coma Wednesday after suffering a stroke.

"It's tough," Scioscia said. "We got a little bit better news today, from what I understand. We're all praying for him, and hopefully he'll get through this and get his health back."

- The Angels announced that right-hander Kirby Yates, who was designated for assignment last week, has cleared waivers and has been outrighted to Triple-A Salt Lake.

Skaggs gets first start vs. A's since 2014

By Maria Guardado

The Angels and A's will close out their four-game series Thursday in a matinee that will feature a matchup between left-hander Tyler Skaggs and right-hander Andrew Triggs at the Oakland Coliseum.

Triggs, 28, earned the No. 4 spot in the A's rotation despite recording an 8.10 ERA in seven spring games, including five starts. He was claimed off waivers from the Orioles last year and logged a 4.31 ERA across 24 games (six starts) in 2016. Triggs has a 1.69 ERA in two career appearances against the Angels, allowing one run over 5 1/3 innings.

Skaggs dealt with shoulder fatigue during Spring Training, but the Angels are confident that he's now past the issue.

"Tyler is ready," manager Mike Scioscia said Wednesday. "He's where he needs to be. Hopefully he'll get pitches in good zones and be able to pitch deep to a certain point in the game. It's going to be critical for us to get a certain amount of outs from our starters every night, and hopefully he'll reach that point."

Skaggs returned to the Halos' rotation in July following a nearly two-year absence due to Tommy John surgery, but he was inconsistent after coming back, posting a 4.17 ERA in 10 starts in 2016. The 25-year-old southpaw has a 6.00 ERA in two career starts against Oakland.

Three things to know about this game

- After returning from ligament-replacement surgery last season, Skaggs flashed an impressive curveball that averaged 2,905 rpm, the second-highest spin rate among pitchers who threw at least 200 tracked curves or knuckle-curves, according to Statcast. In at-bats ending with that pitch, opponents hit only .170 and slugged .264 off Skaggs.

- Only four current A's -- Jed Lowie, Yonder Alonso, Rajai Davis and Adam Rosales -- have ever faced Skaggs before. Alonso has had the most success out of the group, going 3-for-7 with a double and three RBIs.
- Expect Carlos Perez to start behind the plate for the Halos in his season debut. Martin Maldonado has handled the catching duties for the first three games of the series, but Scioscia said Perez will receive the starting nod for Thursday's day game.

FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Richards exits with biceps cramping, Angels blank A's 5-0

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Garrett Richards felt some cramping in his biceps, as if someone had punched him in his pitching arm.

The Los Angeles Angels are taking no chances after going without him most of last season, yet manager Mike Scioscia still hopes the right-hander can make his next start.

Richards pitched beautifully while making his first appearance in 11 months after an elbow injury cut short his 2016 season, but left abruptly in the fifth inning with biceps cramping before the Angels beat the Oakland Athletics 5-0 on Wednesday night.

"Nothing serious. My arm feels good. I felt good tonight, elbow feels fine, shoulder feels fine," he said. "It was just kind of a long inning and it just kind of stiffened up a little bit. There's no red flags or anything, just something that flared up. ... Everything kind of moves on as planned."

Scioscia and the training staff rushed to the mound after Richards threw a 94 mph called strike to Matt Joyce with two outs in the fifth. Richards was removed from the game, one out shy of being eligible for the win, and slugger Albert Pujols put an arm around the pitcher in the dugout.

The team announced he came out for precautionary reasons. Afterward, Richards went through strength tests with no issues. He will be examined by team doctors back in Southern California.

Richards struck out four and walked one, allowing three hits in 4 2/3 innings. JC Ramirez (1-0) worked 2 2/3 innings for the victory.

"That's a great first step for Garrett," Scioscia said.

Mike Trout hit an RBI single to back Richards, the Angels' opening day starter a year ago. He pitched for the first time since last May 1.

Danny Espinosa hit a two-run single one night after delivering a deciding three-run homer, and Andrelton Simmons doubled home a run in the second against Jharel Cotton (0-1).

The 25-year-old Cotton, who came to the A's in a trade-deadline deal last year that sent Rich Hill and Josh Reddick to the Dodgers, can feel good about striking out Trout twice on seven pitches.

"He's got such a wide gap between his fastball and his breaking stuff," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "At times you almost have to guess with him a little bit, especially when he's spotting his fastball and he's got decent velocity with it."

Cotton allowed eight hits and five runs, struck out four and walked two in 4 1/3 innings. This marked his first major league loss after going 2-0 over five starts in 2016.

Frankie Montas -- who arrived in the same trade as Cotton -- pitched 2 2/3 scoreless innings in his A's debut.

The AL West rivals had split the first two games of the season.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Angels: RHP Matt Shoemaker came out fine from Tuesday's outing, his first in exactly seven months since being struck in the head by a line drive and needing surgery. "I think it's good he can exhale. He got the first one out of the way," Scioscia said. "I think like any starter, your first start is like opening day. It's probably, obviously, more focus on it to what happened to Matt last year. He was fine." ... Scioscia plans to start Carlos Perez behind the plate in the series finale Thursday afternoon to spell starting catcher Martin Maldonado.

Athletics: RHP John Axford was placed on the 10-day DL, retroactive to Sunday, with a strained right shoulder. He experienced tightness after throwing a curveball warming up Tuesday night. Axford had no issues leading up to the injury. "None, zero," Melvin said. "It was a complete surprise not only to us but to him." RHP Jesse Hahn was recalled from Triple-A Nashville and will be used "for a little bit more length to have a starter back there," Melvin said. ... A's starter Chris Bassitt threw to hitters for the first time since Tommy John surgery last May. He threw 25 pitches, all fastballs, after his warmup. "The first time you had nerves and the first time you had adrenaline in nine months. Good feeling to have," said Bassitt, who threw about 10 bullpens before Wednesday's session. Bassitt is scheduled to pitch to hitters again Sunday at Class A Stockton and expects to be pitching in rehab games next month.

UP NEXT

LHP Tyler Skaggs makes his third career start against the A's and first since 2014, opposing Andrew Triggs as the Oakland right-hander begins his second major league season after making his first opening day roster.

Angels, Athletics close out opening series

OAKLAND, Calif. -- It's been three years since left-hander Tyler Skaggs opened a season as part of the Los Angeles Angels' rotation.

Skaggs spent the entire 2015 season on the disabled list, recovering from Tommy John surgery. Then last year he spent nearly the first four months of the season in the minor leagues as his comeback continued before being recalled by the Angels.

This year, Skaggs opened the season in the Angels' rotation, and he'll make his first start Thursday afternoon in the finale of a four-game series against the Oakland Athletics at Oakland Coliseum.

"The first start of the season's always exciting," Skaggs said before the Angels' 5-0 victory Wednesday night. "You work hard in spring training. Especially for me, the past two years have kind of been up and down with injuries. So of course I'm excited. Just go out there and have fun with it."

Skaggs didn't officially earn a spot in the rotation until March 31, when he threw 92 pitches in a Triple-A spring-training game against the Giants in Tempe, Ariz. Earlier in spring training, Skaggs missed a start because of a weak throwing shoulder.

"Tyler's ready," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "He's where he needs to be. Hopefully he'll be getting pitches into good zones and be able to pitch deep to a certain point of the game. It's going to be critical for us to get a certain amount of outs from our starters every night, and hopefully he'll reach that point tomorrow."

Skaggs went 10-10 with a 4.17 ERA last season. In his Angels debut on April 5, 2014, he allowed one run over eight innings in a 5-1 victory against the Astros. He went 2-0 with a 3.34 ERA in his first five starts that season. Skaggs finished 5-5 in 18 starts in 2014 but missed the final 53 games and had Tommy John surgery on Aug. 13.

A's right-hander Andrew Triggs will make his first start of the season. Triggs made 24 appearances for Oakland last year but only six starts. He has made 167 relief appearances in the minor leagues and just one start.

Triggs, as well as No. 5 starter Raul Alcantara, grabbed spots in the rotation in part because Sonny Gray landed on the disabled list with a right lat injury and some other candidates either underperformed or were injured.

"I'd say there may be some uncertainty," A's manager Bob Melvin said of Triggs and Alcantara. "Andrew has been a reliever most of his career. Raul's just a little bit untested to this point. ... There's still some talent, just maybe some untested talent at this point toward the back end."

The A's had to shuffle their bullpen Wednesday when right-hander John Axford was placed on the 10-day disabled list, retroactive to Sunday, with a strained right shoulder. The A's recalled right-hander Jesse Hahn from Triple-A Nashville to take his place.

According to Melvin, Axford felt tightness in his shoulder Wednesday night after throwing a curveball while warming up in the bullpen.

"Threw another pitch and just wasn't getting any better," Melvin said. "It was a complete surprise not only to us but to him."

FROM ESPN.COM

Garrett Richards removed from start for precautionary reasons?

By ESPN.com news services

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Garrett Richards felt some cramping in his biceps, as if someone had punched him in his pitching arm.

The Los Angeles Angels are taking no chances after going without him most of last season, yet manager Mike Scioscia still hopes the right-hander can make his next start.

Richards pitched beautifully while making his first appearance in 11 months after an elbow injury cut short his 2016 season, but he left abruptly in the fifth inning with right biceps cramping before the Angels beat the Athletics 5-0 on Wednesday night.

"Nothing serious. My arm feels good. I felt good tonight, elbow feels fine, shoulder feels fine," he said. "It was just kind of a long inning and it just kind of stiffened up a little bit. There's no red flags or anything, just something that flared up.

"Everything kind of moves on as planned."

Scioscia and the training staff rushed to the mound after Richards threw a 94 mph called strike to Matt Joyce with two outs in the fifth. Richards was removed from the game, one out shy of being eligible for the win, and slugger Albert Pujols put an arm around the pitcher in the dugout.

The team announced that Richards came out for precautionary reasons. Afterward, Richards went through strength tests with no issues. He will be examined by team doctors back in Southern California, but there are no plans for him to undergo an MRI, according to Scioscia.

Richards struck out four and walked one, allowing three hits in 4⅓ innings.

"That's a great first step for Garrett," Scioscia said.

Mike Trout hit an RBI single to back Richards, the Angels' opening day starter a year ago. He pitched for the first time since last May 1.

Richards, 28, is coming back from a torn ulnar collateral ligament, but he elected to forego Tommy John surgery last season and instead opted for a stem-cell injection and rehabbed the injury.

FROM CBS SPORTS**Garrett Richards looks like old self in 2017 debut before leaving with an injury**

Richards was forced out of Wednesday's start, but it appears he's avoided serious injury for now

By Mike Axisa

One of the many reasons the Angels went 74-88 in 2016 was an injury to staff ace Garrett Richards. Richards was limited to only six starts by an elbow injury, specifically a tear in his ulnar collateral ligament. That usually requires Tommy John surgery.

Richards, however, opted to rehab the injury with help from a new stem cell procedure. The procedure does not work for all UCL tears -- a full tear requires Tommy John surgery, though partial tears like Richards' can be rehabbed -- but Richards was a candidate, so he went for it. No one wants to have their arm cut open.

The procedure allowed Richards to resume pitching in an instructional league in the fall, so it was a fairly quick rehab. He did miss most of the 2016 regular season, but that's better than missing 14-plus months with Tommy John surgery. Richards was a full go in spring training, and he opened the season as the Angels' third starter.

On Wednesday night Richards made his first start of the new season, and he looked very much like the pre-elbow injury version of himself. That's great news for the Angels. Richards held the Athletics scoreless over 4 2/3 innings, throwing 76 pitches and striking out four. At one point he threw a 91 mph slider.

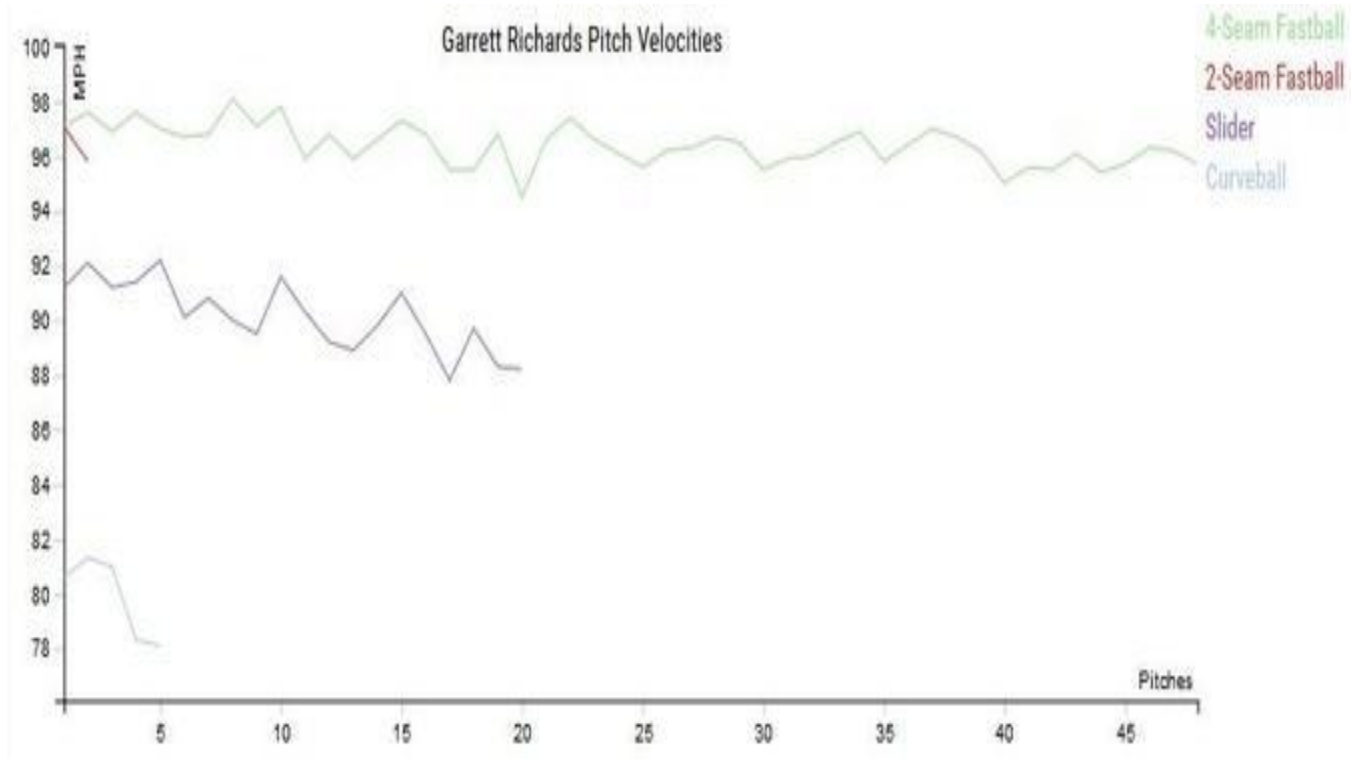
Everything was going well until the fifth inning, when Richards called catcher Martin Maldonado out to the mound and pointed to his arm. Manager Mike Scioscia and the trainer came out to talk, and Richards was removed from the game with an injury.

Bummer, but a few important details:

1. Richards pointed more towards his biceps than his elbow, so maybe it was just a cramp. In fact, Pedro Moura of the *Los Angeles Times* hears it is exactly that.
2. Richards was not in any pain. He appeared to lobby to remain the game and the broadcast showed him joking around with teammates in the dugout after being removed.
3. The Angels were going to be cautious with Richards no matter what given last year's elbow issue. Scioscia was going to take him out of the game even if he had nothing more than a hangnail.

It is also worth noting Richards did not have a sudden drop in velocity or command. There was no obvious indication he got hurt. No wild pitch, no shaking of the arm, nothing. Richards called Maldonado out to the mound and that was it.

Here is his pitch-by-pitch velocity chart, via Baseball Savant:



Garrett Richards had good velocity in his season debut Wednesday night. Baseball Savant

Richards did lose a little velocity on all his pitches as the game went on, but that isn't at all uncommon, especially early in the season. I wouldn't consider that a red flag. I'd consider it normal in-start fatigue.

Overall, Richards averaged 96.4 mph and topped out at 98.1 mph with his fastball on Wednesday. In his six starts last season, his heater averaged 96.3 mph and topped out at 100.0 mph. The year before he averaged 96.1 mph and maxed out at 99.3 mph. All things considered, Richards had good stuff and good velocity in his season debut Wednesday, before the injury.

The Angels have not yet provided an update on Richards since he exited Wednesday night's game. His next scheduled start is Tuesday, April 11, at home against the Rangers. The Halos have an off-day on Monday, April 10, which they could use to push Richards back a few days to give him extra rest.

FROM SPORTING NEWS**Angels pitcher Garrett Richards exits first start with injury scare**

By Ron Clements

Garrett Richards started just six games last year before a torn ligament in his pitching elbow ended his season. He opted not to have Tommy John surgery, instead choosing a less invasive biometrics procedure.

The 28-year-old Angels pitcher was throwing without pain this spring and was cruising in his first start of the 2017 season Wednesday night against the A's.

But after getting Rajai Davis to ground out for the second out in the bottom of the fifth inning, Angels catcher Martin Maldonado noticed Richards grimace. Maldonado motioned toward the dugout and Richards pointed to his right elbow. He then exited the game after 4 2/3 scoreless innings and was holding his right arm. He was replaced on the mound by Jose Alvarez.

Richards appeared to be in good spirits and the initial diagnosis was not serious.

The Angels said Richards just had a cramp in his biceps and was removed for precautionary reasons.

The Angels held a 5-0 lead at the time of Richards' exit.

Richards, a first-round draft pick of the Angels in 2009, made his MLB debut in 2011. He began the season with a career record of 40-32 with a 3.58 ERA and 531 strikeouts in 640 2/3 innings.

FROM USA TODAY SPORTS**Scary moment in Garrett Richard's encouraging return for Angels**

By Jorge L. Ortiz

OAKLAND – The encouraging comeback, the pioneering treatment, even the direction of the Los Angeles Angels' season seemed threatened as Garrett Richards walked off the mound in the fifth inning Wednesday night alongside the team's trainer.

Richards had looked sharp in his first start since May 1, hitting 98 mph on the stadium radar gun and holding the Oakland Athletics to three hits over 4 2/3 innings in the Angels' eventual 5-0 victory.

But as he headed to the dugout, having rubbed the area around his elbow, it was impossible not to think of the ligament tear that had ended Richards' 2016 season after one month and jeopardized his career.

The elbow apparently is fine. The Angels announced later that Richards had left the game for precautionary reasons after experiencing cramping in his right biceps. No need to panic, at least for now.

"It's nothing serious," said Richards, who felt tightness over his last 5-6 pitches. "My arm feels good. I felt good tonight. The elbow feels fine, the shoulder feels fine. It was just kind of a long inning and it stiffed up a little bit, but nothing to be worried about."

Richards' arm passed a strength test after he left the game, and manager Mike Scioscia said there are no plans for him to have an MRI exam, although he'll get checked after the club returns home following Thursday's matinee.

Still, there figures to be some concern about the status of Richards' elbow for several weeks if not months, because he didn't follow the standard approach to fixing ligament tears, which is undergoing Tommy John surgery.

Instead, he went with a novel treatment in which stem cells from bone marrow in his pelvis were injected into the affected area to promote natural healing, with a shot of platelet-rich plasma as a follow-up a few months later. Teammate Andrew Heaney also tried stem-cell treatment and it didn't work for him, so he eventually had the elbow-reconstruction operation and is out for this season.

Richards did not return to the active roster last year, but pitched in an instructional league in October and made it through spring training healthy. He was dominant at times against the A's on Wednesday, striking out the side in the second inning — one batter on a slider, the next one on a fastball and the third on a curveball — and walking just one.

"Garrett was throwing the ball very well," Scioscia said. "It was coming out hot, had good movement, the slider, the curveball were there. That's a great first step for Garrett and hopefully he'll be back out there his next start to keep moving forward."

The Angels, looking to bounce back from a 74-88 record in an injury-wracked season, desperately need Richards to return to his form of 2014-15, when he went a combined 28-16 with a 3.18 ERA. While it might be unfair to expect the 28-year-old right-hander to carry the burden of a staff ace after throwing just 34 2/3 innings last season, he's clearly the club's most talented starter.

Richards has the highest average fastball velocity in the American League (96.1 mph) since the start of the 2014 season. Not coincidentally, he has allowed the AL's lowest batting average (.222) in that period.

With Heaney and fellow starter Nick Tropeano sidelined while recovering from Tommy John procedures, the Angels' rotation has plenty of question marks. Richards provides an emphatic answer if he can continue to unleash his repertoire anywhere as effectively as he did in that impressive second inning.

"It's something I've been working on, finding a better feel for all three of those pitches," Richards said. "It all comes back to me trying to be more efficient this year. If I can throw four pitches for strikes, it's going to be tough. That's my main focus, to throw everything for strikes."

As long as he stays healthy, he can simply focus on his performance.