

A's News Clips, Tuesday, September 28, 2010

Oakland A's lose to Los Angeles Angels 6-5

By Al Balderas, Correspondent, Oakland Tribune

In a managerial game of cat-and-mouse Monday, A's manager Bob Geren summoned James from the bullpen to face pinch hitter Hideki Matsui in the bottom of the seventh inning at Angel Stadium.

James didn't deliver.

Instead he allowed a hit, two walks and hit a batter, allowing the Los Angeles Angels to come from behind and beat the A's 6-5 at Angel Stadium.

The victory enabled the Angels to creep to within a game of the second-place A's in the American League West.

OK, playing for second place doesn't carry nearly as much excitement as playing for a trip to the postseason, but this is all that's left for the two rivals.

"We've talked about it," Geren said. "There are some secondary goals. They know."

It looked as if the A's were taking that secondary goal to heart, jumping on Angels starter Ervin Santana for a run in the first inning and two in the second.

The Angels tied the score in the second in what described by Geren as a "goofy inning."

Maicer Izturis, returning to the lineup since Aug. 22, singled home Juan Rivera from second with the Angels' first run. Erick Aybar, also returning to the lineup, followed with a dribbler in front of the plate. Pitcher Brett Anderson picked up the ball and tossed it to catcher Kurt Suzuki, but Mike Napoli was called safe at home. Replays appeared to have favored the A's.

"I thought he was out," Geren said. "He (umpire C.B. Bucknor) said he (Napoli) got in, and (Suzuki) did not block him. I was looking at the marks. You can't see the plate from my angle whatsoever. You can only see when the ball gets there. It's very difficult for me to see that play."

Anderson also failed to get a good look at the play.

"He said he was out, but I'm sure with the dirt and the timing, it was difficult to see," he said. "It's one of those things you can't dwell too much on. You've got to make pitches and get outs."

Anderson did a good job in pushing himself through unusually hot conditions before leaving in the seventh inning. He left with a one-run lead, courtesy of Jack Cust's RBI single in the fourth.

Pitcher Justin Duchscherer was greeted with hugs and handshakes when he walked into the A's clubhouse at Angel Stadium.

"I thought I'd come out and see everybody before I'm a free agent at the end of the year," Duchscherer said. "I may not be back, so I wanted to tell everyone to have a good offseason and to talk to my coaches and tell them how much I appreciate them."

Duchscherer, 32, missed all of last season and appeared in only five games this season.

A torn labrum in his hip is what benched him this season. He is coming off surgery and feeling better.

"I've taken it a little slower than the rehab (schedule) because I knew I wasn't going to be back for this season," he said. "The doctor said after surgery it would be four months before I would start throwing. It took me about 4½ months."

Once he is ready to pitch, it'll be a matter of his finding a team. It doesn't appear likely that the A's will re-sign him, even though they're the team that knows how good he can pitch when he is healthy.

"I think when I'm healthy I've always proven that I can pitch," he said.

Los Angeles creeps closer

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Once the A's were knocked out of the playoff race, their thoughts turned to nailing down second place. The Angels have the same goal, and the teams staged a Monday night duel reminiscent of their matchups when both were atop the AL West rather than trying to avoid third place.

The Angels came out ahead 6-5 to move a game behind Oakland in the standings.

"It seems like every time we play this team, no matter when and where, it's always a great battle to the end," said A's manager Bob Geren, whose team has lost four in a row.

Oakland left 16 men on base. The Angels scored twice in the second with only one well-hit ball, using some bloop and infield hits, plus a favorable call at the plate on Erick Aybar's tapper back to the mound. It appeared that A's catcher Kurt Suzuki blocked Mike Napoli and tagged him before he got his foot in, but Napoli was called safe.

The key inning was the seventh, with the A's bullpen down several men. Michael Wuertz was out again with a sore thumb, and Henry Rodriguez, Vin Mazzaro and Boof Bonser also were unavailable, according to Geren. When Geren took out Brad Ziegler with two on and one out, the seldom-used Justin James took the mound. Pinch-hitter Hideki Matsui drove in the tying run with a broken-bat single, James hit Aybar to push in the go-ahead run and walked Hank Conger to send in another.

Oakland scored once in the eighth, with Suzuki tripling in Jack Cust, but Jeremy Hermida struck out looking, stranding Suzuki.

There is no getting around the fact that Oakland needs a bigger threat in the middle of the order to be able to contend next year, and many believe that if general manager Billy Beane adds a bat or two this winter, the A's will be the team to beat in 2011.

Co-owner Lew Wolff, who was on hand for Monday's game, doesn't disagree with that, but said that even with at least \$22 million coming off the books (Ben Sheets' \$10 million and Eric Chavez's \$12 million), the team doesn't necessarily have that amount to spend beyond next year, and he is disenchanted with one-year additions.

"The fans feel we have all this money, but it's for one year," he said. "We've tried that before.

"We do need some hitting. But we have some hitters maturing just like the pitchers have matured the past year. I don't see a lot of moves. I don't see the necessity of going out and getting someone for one year."

What about longer than that? A four- or five-year deal for the right free agent?

"We want to be careful with that," Wolff said. "I like the fact we've tied up Suzuki and Brett Anderson, but you have to be careful you don't risk the team on one person."

The A's are first in the league in ERA but second to last in the majors in home runs, with 99 after Hermida's solo shot in the second.

"I'm sure Billy will come up with something," Wolff said.

Briefly: Mark Ellis had three hits, including a double, and he is batting a league-best .407 in September. ... Anderson went 6 1/3 innings and allowed seven hits, two walks and four runs. ... With temperatures over 110 degrees during the day in Orange County, the A's hit indoors before the game. ... Josh Outman threw two innings in instructional league, and his pitches were "outstanding," according to reports Geren received.

Drumbeat: Hodgepodge from broiling Anaheim

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Angel Stadium 9/27/2010 5:41PM

It was 111 degrees here earlier in the day, and it's still 106, so the A's are hitting indoors; the Angels hit outside, but only briefly. They'll continue in the batting cage.

As for news, the theme for this series will be second place. Not quite what most Drumbeat readers had hoped, but for the A's, it's a step up, especially when it means finishing ahead of the Angels. Oakland has a two-game lead right now. And of course the A's would like to finish with a winning record. They're one game below .500 going into tonight.

Josh Outman threw 2 innings at instructional league today and the report manager Bob Geren got was 33 pitches, averaged 91 mph with the fastball, all his pitches "outstanding."

Justin Duchscherer is here, which is nice to see - he'll be in an A's uniform at least one more time. He went and stretched with the team, and he said he's throwing long toss out to 90 feet. Had the A's made the playoffs, he was going to try to rush to come back from left hip surgery, but as it is, he's going the prescribed route. He knows the recovery process well, having done exactly the same thing with the right hip. So it's easier this time, more stream-lined, because Duchscherer knows what to expect.

He isn't likely to be back next year; I don't see the A's taking a flier on the same pitcher two years in a row. But I'm not sure what's left to break - the team has known since the right hip surgery that the left likely would go at some point. Maybe an invite to major-league camp? With Eric Chavez? A longshot, probably. Not the Chavez part, necessarily, but I think that Duchscherer will be in a different uniform next spring.

I do think Duchscherer had some impact on the A's young starters this season. Not to the extent that Ben Sheets did - Sheets gave them more grit, and a little attitude. Duchscherer provided a role model for what can happen when you throw strikes: You can get away with mediocre velocity if you have pinpoint accuracy. The A's emphasized throwing strikes with the youngsters, and Duchscherer was the best possible example. He might not have been around for a long time this season, but I remember Andrew Bailey saying after one of his starts that while he'd heard about Duchscherer's accuracy, seeing it was another thing altogether. He was blown away. If Bailey was noticing, so were Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez.

I spoke to Lew Wolff before the game about the A's need for a big bat for next season; details will be in tomorrow's Chronicle (and in the online story this evening) but it's safe to say he's not guaranteeing anything. The A's approach to spending money will remain cautious, it seems.

Here's the lineup: Davis cf, Barton 1b, Ellis 2b, Cust dh, Suzuki c, Kouzmanoff 3b, Hermida rf, Carter lf, Pennington ss

A's fall short in tight game against Angels

Oakland belts 15 hits in back-and-forth loss on the road

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

ANAHEIM -- The A's have essentially found themselves engaged in something of a new season, a week-long road stint that has them in a full-fledged arms race with the Angels for second place in the American League West.

Since falling out of playoff contention, A's manager Bob Geren has insisted his club is set on attaining that next-best goal. The thing is, the Angels are trying to do the same thing.

And neither team is giving in.

That was all the more evident Monday in Anaheim, where the AL West runner-up battle was on display for more than three hours. In a rather strange affair, the A's were ultimately left on the losing end of a 6-5 contest and two games below the .500 mark.

Furthermore, the defeat allowed Los Angeles to move within one game of the highly sought second-place prize. But, as veteran Mark Ellis noted, one look at the box score indicates that, despite each team's push for a win, neither really succeeded in capitalizing on several chances to run away with the victory.

A combined 26 runners were left on base -- 16 by the A's, who went 3-for-14 with runners in scoring position.

"For as long as the game was," Ellis said, "there weren't as many runs as there should have been."

The A's second baseman attempted to do his part, tallying three hits, including a double and an RBI. But he also left runners on first and third with two outs in the ninth, essentially turning his rather stellar night into a side note.

"You have to take advantage of every opportunity," he said. "There's no reason we should be leaving that many guys on base. I wasn't able to do my part there, either."

All wasn't lost from the start, though. In fact, the A's jumped out to an early 3-0 lead off right-hander Ervin Santana thanks to a first-inning sacrifice fly from Kurt Suzuki, along with a solo homer from Jeremy Hermida -- his first wearing green and gold -- and Ellis' RBI base hit in the second.

A's starter Brett Anderson breezed through a clean first frame before witnessing a second-inning mess. A Juan Rivera double with one out was followed by a walk to Mike Napoli to put runners on first and third for Maicer Izturis, who brought home Rivera with an RBI single to make it 3-1.

With Napoli on third and Izturis at first, Erick Aybar hit a soft grounder that was fielded by Anderson, who flipped the ball to home only to have Suzuki barely miss Napoli with the tag, thus narrowing Oakland's lead to one with just one out. Then, what appeared to be ruled a double steal for Izturis and Aybar was ultimately deemed a batter interference out by Bobby Wilson.

Anderson, armed with two outs, proceeded to load the bases on a bunt single off the bat of Peter Bourjos. Another infield ground ball, this time to Ellis deep in the hole, resulted in a run-scoring single for Howard Kendrick to knot the game before Bobby Abreu flied out to left to end the disastrous inning.

"That wasn't much fun," the southpaw said. "It was a grind, and a lot of strange things happened. But I was just trying to battle to get us deep in the game and give us a chance. That's two games in a row where I've felt just subpar."

Monday's game, though, may have to include an asterisk for all involved. After all, record-high temperatures well surpassing the 100-degree mark consumed the steamy Southern California air. Anderson didn't use it as an excuse, however, and he was able to toss four-plus more innings despite leaving the second frame with 50 pitches attached to his name.

"That second was just a goofy inning," Geren said. "Just strange. A lot of bizarre things happened. It was a crazy inning for Anderson, and he had a very high pitch count after that. With the heat, it took a lot out of him, so if you consider all that, what he did after was remarkable. He actually had a heck of an outing."

Meanwhile, the A's broke open the game in the fourth when Ellis collected his third hit of the day in the form of a double and eventually scored on an RBI hit from Jack Cust.

But with the Rally Monkey and its adherents out in full force, the Angels posted three in the seventh, which brought about three A's relievers following Anderson's exit with one out and a runner on first. Brad Ziegler garnered the second out but walked Juan Rivera, leading Geren to bring in Justin James.

The rookie righty -- summoned in a high-pressure situation as a result of a very thin bullpen missing the likes of Michael Wuertz, Henry Rodriguez and Boof Bonser -- immediately offered up an RBI single to Hideki Matsui and proceeded to walk Izturis to load the bases. He then hit Aybar with a pitch and walked Bobby Wilson to bring in two more runs.

"I thought they all did a good job there, being patient and getting good counts," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said of his ballclub. "We played hard, battled back."

Oakland attempted to do the same in the eighth, trimming Anaheim's 6-4 lead on an RBI triple from Suzuki, but Fernando Rodney closed things out in the ninth to end the A's threat, one they'll be ready to reintroduce on Tuesday.

"There's no reason not to be fighting for second place," Ellis said. "If not out of pride, you just want to try to keep winning every game."

Braden, Haren tabbed in AL West battle

By Alex DiFilippo / MLB.com

While the Angels and Athletics may not be duking it out for postseason spots, they certainly are playing for something -- second place in the American League West.

The Rangers ran away with the division this season, but the two California rivals are still in a battle to finish out the year as runner-up in the AL West. With the Angels' 6-5 win on Monday, Los Angeles pulled within one game of the A's for second place in the division. The win snapped a four-game losing streak for the Angels, and extended the A's losing streak to four.

"We're battling for second, without a doubt," A's manager Bob Geren said. "We talked about it before the Texas series, about secondary goals. I don't have to tell them that's what we're trying to do here. They know exactly."

If the Angels are going to pass the Athletics for second in the division, manager Mike Scioscia said his team is going to do much better with runners in scoring position. Only four teams have fewer runs scored than the Angles in the Majors this season.

"It's been a function of a lot of things," Scioscia said. "We've had more guys struggle overall. We've had a lot of opportunities get away. It's a trend that has to reverse itself. We need guys to rebound. The second thing is awareness of what we're doing in certain counts. Guys have gotten too passive at times. Last year we were sitting at .297. We've got to get productive again in those situations."

The Angels' offensive hopes may come to a halt against A's starter Dallas Braden. If not for his perfect game on May 9, Braden's start on Thursday would certainly be considered his best of the year. He allowed only one hit through eight innings with seven strikeouts against the Rangers' high-powered offense.

"It was kind of a classic Dallas game when he's on," Geren said. "He was throwing the ball in and out and just attacking the strike zone. He also had a great changeup working that he was using in all counts."

Angels starter Dan Haren will be making his first start against the Athletics this season. He's been on fire in his past five starts. In all five outings, Haren has recorded a quality start and has only allowed five combined earned runs in that span. Haren also has already exceeded 215 innings for the sixth straight season (223).

"Dan pitched a terrific game," Scioscia said after Haren's last start. "I don't think he was quite as crisp tonight [with only two strikeouts]. I thought he battled. I didn't see his best stuff, but that's indicative of the terrific pitcher he is."

Sure, the season will be over in less than a week for both teams. But neither club is ready to throw in the towel yet.

"We're having fun," Braden said. "We know what position we're in. We know what we're dealing with, but that's not going to deter us from coming in and getting our work in and getting to where we want to be. There's no obese lady in sight, and she ain't singing. I can't hear nothing."

Angels: Driver convicted in Adenhardt's death

The driver implicated in the deaths of Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt and two others was convicted of murder on Monday. Andrew Gallo, 23, was convicted on three counts of second-degree murder and single counts of drunken driving, hit-and-run driving and driving under the influence and causing great bodily harm. The counts could carry a sentence of 50 years to life in prison. The sentencing hearing is scheduled for Dec. 10.

Athletics: Rehabbing pitchers making progress

Lefty Josh Outman and righty Joey Devine are making progress and all signs point to a healthy a return for both hurlers when Spring Training comes around. Outman threw 33 pitches and averaged 91 mph on his fastball in two innings during an Instructional League game on Monday. Geren said all his pitches looked "outstanding." Reports said that Devine "felt great" playing catch from a distance of 160 feet on Monday. Both suffered elbow injuries earlier this year.

Worth noting

Athletics left fielder Chris Carter returned to the starting lineup on Monday after missing Sunday's game with a sore left thumb. He went 0-for-2 with two walks in the loss. ... The Angels (76-80) need to win five of their final six to finish the season at .500.

Duchscherer rejoins team, still rehabbing

Right-hander glad to finally be back in A's uniform

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

ANAHEIM -- More than four months ago, Justin Duchscherer prepared to rid himself of a disabled list status and take to the mound in Anaheim for his first start in two weeks.

However, Duchscherer never made that start. In fact, he was scratched before he ever reached the mound after experiencing hip pain during his warmup session. He's yet to step on one since, having undergone season-ending hip surgery on June 7.

But on Monday, the A's righty returned to the scene of the crime, joining his teammates in Anaheim for the first time since mid-May. He suited up, and couldn't have been more happy doing so.

"I missed this," Duchscherer said, looking around the clubhouse, before Oakland's contest against the Angels. "It feels like years, it really does."

The hurler's June surgery, performed by Nashville-based physician Thomas Byrd, involved the correction of a femoral acetabular impingement in his left hip. Duchscherer has a congenital issue in his hips where the femur meets the joint, a problem that was resolved in the right hip by the same surgery, which typically requires six months of recovery time.

He is now throwing at a distance of 90 feet as part of his rehab program in Arizona and hoping to begin throwing off a mound in about a month. Where he goes from there, though, is in question. But Duchscherer is sure it better involve a baseball uniform.

"When I'm healthy, I've always proven that I can pitch," he said. "The thing I have to prove is that I can stay healthy. I haven't shown that yet. That's the worst part about that, being a baseball player and knowing I can do it but not physically being able to. So that's my goal, whether it's here or somewhere else. I'm a baseball player, and I'd like to pitch at least a few more years. I'm too young to try to move on to something else."

Duchscherer was 2-1 with a 2.89 ERA in five starts -- three of which didn't include any earned runs -- for the A's before his season ended prematurely. He was sidelined during all of the 2009 season due to elbow surgery and a subsequent bout with clinical depression, and he has missed parts of each of the last four seasons.

"I don't feel anything's wrong with me anymore," he insisted. "Going into the season, I had that back problem, which we found out was stemming from my hip. My hip's been fixed -- both have been fixed -- and my elbow's fixed. I can't imagine what else could go wrong."

Thus, Duchscherer is hoping a team takes a chance on him next year, much like the A's -- who acquired him from the Rangers in 2002 -- did this season with a one-year contract that was highly incentive-laden. Whether they go for the free agent again is out of his control.

"We haven't talked," he said. "It's between my agent and them. If they're interested, that's great. I'd be certainly up to coming back here, but they've got some great pitching, and that's a tribute to them. I don't know if I'll fit. You never know, but we'll see what happens. I'm open to it."

Duchscherer is open to a lot of things these days thanks to a rehab schedule that has allowed him to spend a good dose of time with his 7-year-old son, Evan -- a blessing he wasn't afforded very often while battling elbow issues last year.

"It's different than last year because I was dealing with a lot of other stuff then," he said. "This year it's just baseball. I get to see my son regularly. That wouldn't have been able to happen if I was pitching, so that's one positive out of all this. That helps, because that was the No. 1 thing I was going through last time -- separation from my kid, and not knowing how to deal with that."

And while Duchscherer has very much enjoyed his moments with Evan, including a trip to Sea World in San Diego, he's also ready to begin work again -- as a pitcher, and as a teammate.

"It's difficult when you're on a team but not able to do your part," he said. "It's hard to watch. It's hard not to beat yourself up about it. I want to contribute and I want to help, but I can't. That's why I've been keeping up with the team and the guys, but I don't get too close to it."

"But I can throw again, so I want to at least feel like a baseball player, and that's what's great about being here. One of the main reasons I wanted to come here was to see everybody. I've been with this team for so long. I just want to be able to tell the organization thanks. When I move on, if I go somewhere else, this will always hold a special place in my heart."

Worth noting

Chris Carter returned to the starting lineup on Monday after missing Sunday's game with a sore left thumb, the same one that sidelined him for a couple weeks at Triple-A Sacramento earlier this month. Carter said before Monday's contest that the pain is still there, but is "tolerable." ... Rehabbing lefty Josh Outman tossed two innings in an Instructional League game on Monday, and manager Bob Geren said all his pitches looked "outstanding." According to Geren, Outman threw 33 pitches and averaged 91 mph on his fastball. ... Fellow rehabbing hurler Joey Devine is also throwing in games. On Monday, he played catch from a distance of 160 feet, and reports were that he "felt great." Both Outman and Devine are expected to be ready by Spring Training. ... Steve Tolleson never received the ball he blasted for his first Major League home run on Sunday at the Coliseum. The A's infielder said he was informed that the fan who caught it, despite receiving a signed bat from Tolleson, was sitting next to a lawyer who advised him to keep it, as it may be worth a lot of money some day. ... Blazing temperatures reached 111 degrees in Anaheim on Monday, forcing the A's to take batting practice inside. However, they did all other work outside, where it dropped to 96 degrees by the time of the first pitch.

A's give away game in Anaheim

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANAHEIM — Pinch-hitter Hideki Matsui tied the game with an RBI single off Justin James, and the Oakland rookie forced in two more runs by hitting one batter with the bases loaded and walking another, helping the Los Angeles Angels beat the Athletics 6-5 on Monday night.

Matsui greeted James with a tying RBI single to center, after Bobby Abreu chased A's starter Brett Anderson with a one-out single and Brad Ziegler (3-6) walked pinch-hitter Alberto Callaspo.

James loaded the bases by walking Maicer Izturis, then grazed Erick Aybar with a pitch to force in the go-ahead run and walked pinch-hitter Hank Conger to bring in another and give the Angels a 6-4 lead.

The A's got one back in the eighth when Jack Cust singled with two outs against Jordan Walden and nine-time Gold Glove outfielder Torii Hunter lost Kurt Suzuki's liner in the lights for a triple. But Fernando Rodney got three outs for his 13th save in 19 chances.

The Athletics loaded the bases for the third time in the game after Michael Kohn (2-0) took over for starter Ervin Santana in the seventh. But the rookie retired No.9 hitter Cliff Pennington on a fly ball to right that was too shallow for Suzuki to score on, and Rajai Davis struck out. Pennington is 2 for 16 in bases-loaded situations this season.

The Angels erased a 3-0 deficit with three runs in the second, including RBI singles by Izturis and Howie Kendrick. Izturis' hit came in his first plate appearance since Aug. 19, after he missed 33 games because of inflammation in his right shoulder.

Cust regained the lead for Oakland with a run-scoring single in the fourth against Santana, who was charged with four runs and 10 hits over six innings with six strikeouts and three walks. The right-hander was 9-2 in his previous 12 starts and came in 12-3 lifetime against Oakland.

Suzuki gave Oakland the lead in the first with a bases-loaded sacrifice fly. Jeremy Hermida led off the second with his first home run in an Oakland uniform, a drive that cleared the 18-foot wall in right field. The A's loaded the bases again later that inning before Mark Ellis drove in Oakland's third run with an RBI single.

Anderson was charged with four runs and seven hits over 6 1-3 innings.

Any combination of Oakland victories and Angels losses will clinch second place for the Athletics in the AL West. They need to win four of their final six games to give manager Bob Geren his first winning record in four seasons as their manager.

The A's haven't had four straight losing seasons since a six-year stretch from 1993 through 1998. The Angels, who won division titles in each of the previous three seasons before their reign was ended by the Texas Rangers, need to go 5-1 the rest of the way just to finish at .500.

Different Route

Cramer's long road to the major leagues has been nothing like that of his Dirtbags brethren

By Bob Keisser, Long Beach Press Telegram 9/28/2010

There's Dirtbag pride, the kind a fan feels about Troy Tulowitzki, Jered Weaver and Evan Longoria dominating their fields, and then there's the somewhat giddy sense of accomplishment when someone like Bobby Cramer becomes a major league member of Dirtbag Nation.

Bobby Cramer wasn't a high draft pick fast-tracked to the major leagues. If Weaver and friends flew over the Grand Canyon to reach the majors, Cramer metaphorically reached the bigs on a burro from the bottom of the national landmark.

Cramer made his big league debut this month at the age of 30, finally getting the call from the Oakland A's after a career that included Tommy John surgery, two years out of the game, a season in that last bastion of fading hope known as independent league baseball, and even a year in Mexico.

He's had success in his three starts, earning a 3-1 win over Kansas City (5<MD+,%30,%55,%70>1/<MD-,%0,%55,%70>3 innings, four hits, one run), a 6-2 decision over Minnesota (5<MD+,%30,%55,%70>2/<MD-,%0,%55,%70>3, five hits, two runs), and then leaving an eventual loss to Texas (six innings, eight hits) trailing just, 3-1.

He makes his fourth start Wednesday in Anaheim against the Angels, where a large group of friends from his home in Orange County and several colleagues from his three years at Long Beach State will be on hand.

The day of his first start was also the day of a Dirtbag golf tournament, and Mike Weathers, Troy Buckley and friends of the program spent most of the afternoon smiling about Cramer's long road to becoming the 38th alum to reach the majors.

Cramer spent some time that afternoon thinking about the Dirtbags, too.

"I still have a Long Beach State sticker in my car window," Cramer said. "I feel like I'm representing the city and the program, because I took a lot of pride playing there. The list of former players in the majors is huge, and I want to do them a service and represent the school."

Cramer starred as a senior at Loara High - his only year of varsity - and went to Fullerton College out of high school. After two years, he had scholarship and aid offers from other schools but was hoping to hear from Long Beach State.

"I wanted to go to Long Beach since I was in junior high school," Cramer said. "My mother (Barbara) went back to college at Long Beach State when I was a kid, and she'd take me and my older brother (Chris) with her. I loved the campus and loved the Dirtbags.

"I'd go to Long Beach State games at Fullerton and root against the Titans. I liked the Dirtbags so much I'd go to Titan games against other teams and root against."

His coach at Fullerton knew Weathers and made a call. Assistant Jim Yogi came over to visit and within a week Cramer was in Snow's office, blown away when the head coach offered him tuition, books and a stipend.

"It was a dream come true," he said. "I never thought I would have that opportunity and it was the best thing possible for me career-wise. They whipped me into shape and taught me to respect the game. The tradition and professionalism that is part of that program makes you a better person as much as a better athlete."

Cramer made 22 appearances in 2000 with two starts, a 3-4 record and a 4.81 ERA, his season ending in mid-May when he took a line drive off his right hand. He was off to a fast start in 2001, with a 1.46 ERA and 15 strikeouts in 12-plus innings when he suffered an arm injury.

"I was pitching at Wichita State. It was about 40 degrees and we had a rain delay, but I went back out to pitch," he said. "My arm started to hurt and I thought it was forearm cramps."

It was a strained ligament. Cramer rehabilitated the injury in the offseason and was planning to come back for 2002, but doctors re-examined his arm and decided he needed Tommy John surgery.

"At least when you're in a slump, you feel like you're a day away from getting out of it," he said. "When you're injured, all you can do is watch from the sidelines. It was so frustrating."

Cramer recovered and was signed as a free agent by Tampa Bay in 2003, when he had a 2.70 ERA in 10 games. He moved up to single-A ball in 2004, going 6-4 with a 3.32, and earned a trip to spring training spot in 2005, but was cut the last day of spring training.

He spent the next two years out of organized baseball playing in Sunday recreation leagues, teaching algebra as a sub in Anaheim, and serving as a pipeline inspector for Shell Oil. Cramer went to a lot of Angels games, watching former Dirtbag Jered Weaver and wondering if he could resurrect his career.

Cramer began his comeback in 2007 when the A's signed him in 2007, and he went 9-2 with a 2.77 ERA for two Oakland farm teams. Released again, he signed with the Orange County Flyers in the Golden League for 2008, and was 7-4 with a 3.88 ERA. The A's signed him again in 2009 and he was 5-5 with a sub-4.00 ERA in 20 games, reaching triple-A.

Cramer went to spring training with the A's this season, but management loaned him to Quintana Roos of the Mexican League. "I basically looked at it as an audition for the Mexican League," he said. "I was still under contract with Oakland and at least I had a job, but I figured this was my last opportunity to create something for myself."

After going 13-3 with a 2.95 ERA, the A's sent him to Sacramento, where had a 1.94 ERA in seven games, leading at last to his call up.

"Every year I'd come back, I always felt like `this is it, my last year, if I don't make it, I'm done,'" he said. "I felt that way in 2007. I felt that way in 2008 when I was grinding it out in Independent ball. I felt that way when I went to Mexico.

"But one of the things I learned at Long Beach was the ability to control my mental game and stay within myself. That was about pitching, but I used it throughout all these comebacks, because what I always knew is that when I was healthy, I pitched well." Indeed.

His career minor league numbers are a 42-21 record and 3.15 ERA.

A's manager Bob Geren made it clear this wasn't an act of kindness.

"It's always a pleasure to see someone work that hard and get a chance," Geren told Oakland writers. "But we're in the business of winning games, and we feel he's our best option to throw and win us a game."

When he got the call, he had the usual feelings of exhilaration and success, but there was also an emotion that came from too many years of lateral steps. "I remember thinking `It's about damn time,'" he said. "Now that I'm here, let's go, let's get this started."

Like most former Dirtbags, Cramer may have suffered some setbacks, but he never took a step back, making that step up to the majors all the sweeter.