

A's News Clips, Sunday, October 4, 2009

Eveland faces uncertain future

By Ben Enos, Oakland Tribune

A's pitcher Dana Eveland had plenty working for him at this time last year. He finished the 2008 season second on the team in innings pitched and was one of the most experienced pitchers on a staff that was getting younger and younger.

After wrapping up his 2009 campaign with a 4-2 loss to the Los Angeles Angels on Saturday at the Oakland Coliseum, Eveland's outlook is decidedly different from what it was one year ago.

The left-hander compiled an 8-6 record in Triple-A Sacramento this season, finishing with a 4.94 ERA in 21 starts. After starting the season in Oakland, Eveland eventually became a casualty of the A's youth movement, unable to regain a consistent spot in the rotation after being optioned in early May.

"Last year I felt I had a pretty decent season, and then I came in this year and got an opportunity to start in the rotation again and just struggled out of the gate and got sent down," Eveland said.

"I didn't really throw the ball great in Triple-A, either. Just all around this season I didn't feel dominant like I did in the past. All-around, it's been kind of a grind."

The future is unclear for Eveland considering the A's have four near-locks to fill the 2010 rotation in Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill, Vin Mazzaro and Dallas Braden. The A's are Eveland's third team, and he's cognizant of the possibility of a change in location.

"I love these guys here and I love the city, but whatever happens, happens," said Eveland, who turns 26 on Oct. 29.

"I've been traded twice before, so I wouldn't be surprised if something like that happened, but I definitely would enjoy being back here."

Saturday's outing didn't necessarily do much to change any minds one way or another. Although Eveland didn't walk anyone, he caught too much of the plate several times, giving up doubles to Gary Matthews Jr., Robb Quinlan and Vladimir Guerrero in surrendering four earned runs in just 42/3 innings.

Eveland exited after throwing just 63 pitches and said he felt good from a stamina standpoint.

"He did all right. He gave up four runs, but he had his cutter going a little bit," A's manager Bob Geren said of Eveland.

"He had a little trouble finishing guys off, but when you give him zero runs, it's tough to be perfect."

Eveland aside, the A's offense continued its recent slumber, scoring only a pair of eighth-inning runs on a RBI triple by Eric Patterson and an RBI double by Rajai Davis.

Angels pitcher Scott Kazmir continued his dominance against the A's, throwing five shutout innings to get the win. Kazmir is now 8-3 with a 2.96 ERA in 14 career starts against Oakland.

The A's bullpen continued to be a bright spot, as John Meloan, Brad Ziegler, Craig Breslow and Andrew Bailey combined to throw 41/3 scoreless innings.

But, while the bullpen has been solid, Eveland's loss dropped A's starting pitchers to 0-6 with a 9.40 ERA over the last seven games.

Notes: Geren said he had yet to decide who would be the starting pitcher in today's season finale but that he planned to use five to eight pitchers. ... Geren also said he planned to give veteran Nomar Garciaparra a start today. ... Longtime A's P.A. announcer Roy Steele, who has missed the 2009 season with a rare throat disease, was scheduled to announce part of Saturday's game but did not attend because of his condition. Sharks in-game host Danny Miller filled in for the final three innings as regular announcer Dick Callahan left to call the Cal-USC football game. ... Bailey made his first

appearance since Sept. 26, working a perfect ninth inning in a nonsave situation. ... Angels reliever Jason Bulger had to leave the game in the eighth inning with right shoulder stiffness.

Lurie: Looks as if Yankees and Cardinals will meet in the World Series

By Marty Lurie, Special to the Oakland Tribune

Playoff baseball is here. The weather has that chill we feel each October, meaning it's time to start Major League Baseball's postseason party.

Teams play 162 games to determine the right to go to the tournament, which covers three rounds and potentially 19 games between the participants.

This year, all the teams have qualified except the winner of the AL Central, where Detroit's bats have gone into early winter hibernation. This could allow the Minnesota Twins a chance to extend their home love affair with the Metrodome.

If a playoff is needed to decide the division race, the Twins current domed ballpark, which will be replaced next season with open-aired Target Field, will be the site of the one-game playoff on Tuesday.

There are many variables to consider when determining a team's chance in the playoffs. Some include strength of the starting staff, a team's ability to score runs without the long ball, home-field advantage in a deciding game, a team's bullpen (always a factor), and how well a team is playing as the regular season winds down.

Let's rank the teams heading into the playoffs, based on those variables, starting in the American League.

1. New York Yankees: Heading down the stretch, the Yankees continued to win at home (57-24). The Yankees will have home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. The Yankees score runs easily, hitting home runs daily in their new park.

Starters CC Sabathia and A.J. Burnett are veterans, although Burnett has never pitched in a playoff game. Sabathia, a 19-game winner, is living up to his free agent contract. The problems begin for the Yanks when Andy Pettitte (shoulder fatigue in September) and Joba Chamberlain take the mound. Chamberlain has been awful since the All-Star break and one wonders if the righty is healthy.

Closer Mariano Rivera and set-up man Philip Hughes lead a very good 'pen.

The Yanks are the team to beat in the AL because of their two starting pitchers and the franchise's long history of not being awed by October baseball.

2. Boston Red Sox: Every team in the playoffs has some potential issue when assessing strengths and weaknesses. The Red Sox are not playing their best baseball right now. This team is much better at home (54-25) than on the road (39-42).

Josh Beckett is one of the top postseason pitchers in history. Beckett has struggled in September before finally needing three cortisone injections in his sore upper back this week. Yesterday, Beckett did not appear to be sharp in a start against the lowly Cleveland Indians at Fenway Park.

Starter Jon Lester has been terrific for the past three months. Daisuke Matsuzka looks playoff-ready. Clay Buchholz will be the club's fourth starter.

Boston has not hit as well against left-handed pitching. The Angels will throw lefties Scott Kazmir and Joe Saunders in Games 3 and 4 in Boston.

Boston's 'pen is one of the best in the playoffs. The relief staff overall throws hard and is well-balanced between left-handed and right-handed pitchers.

Offensively, Kevin Youkilis, Victor Martinez, Dustin Pedroia and Jason Bay are legitimate hitters.

If Boston gets by the Angels and meets the Yankees in the ALCS, New York better be careful, despite dominating the Red Sox since the All-Star break.

The only worry is the health of Beckett, a pitcher who changes the balance of power in any playoff series.

3. Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim: The Angels have played great baseball (67-36) since reaching the .500 mark of 29-29 earlier in the season.

The major question facing the Halos is will they be able to break the hold Boston has held on them during their past three meetings in the ALDS? If the Angels play in the postseason as they have during the regular season, things will be fine. If the big hitters Kendry Morales (he hits sixth in the order for some reason), Torii Hunter, Juan Rivera, Vladimir Guerrero and Bobby Abreu go into slumps, then the Angels are sunk.

The Angels run the bases better than anyone in the majors. If they have chances to steal on Boston catchers Jason Varitek and Victor Martinez, they will as often as possible.

The Angels' worry is their 'pen. Closer Brian Fuentes gets the job done, but it's never easy for the lefty.

Starter Ervin Santana will help rookie set-up man Kevin Jepsen in the 'pen. Boston's 'pen is ideal while the Angels' relief corps leaves much to be desired.

Starters John Lackey, Jered Weaver, Kazmir and Saunders are steady, but not spectacular pitchers.

The Angel- Red Sox series will be something to see.

4. Detroit or Minnesota: Whichever wins the AL Central.

The Tigers' lack of offense has been a problem for manager Jim Leyland all season. Magglio Ordonez has begun to hit, but without power. Miguel Cabrera is a quiet star.

The Tigers have three starters they rely upon. Edwin Jackson has not been the same pitcher as earlier in the season. Rick Porcello, a 20-year-old righty, has been very good in September. Justin Verlander leads the AL in strikeouts.

If Detroit gets into the playoffs, the Yankees will have to take them seriously because of Detroit's potentially dominating starting pitchers.

Minnesota has taken advantage of the Tigers' fall, putting them in a position to win the division or possibly force a playoff.

The Twins have Michael Cuddyer whacking the ball in September. Joe Mauer, everyone's MVP, is a threat to get a hit every time he steps into the box. Delmon Young has come alive at the right time.

Minnesota's pitching staff is ordinary, at best.

Minnesota has karma and the motion of the Metrodome going for them. However, if the Twins do unseat the Tigers for the division crown, their joy will be short-lived in the first round versus the Yankees.

NL:

1. St. Louis Cardinals: Even though the club is not playing good baseball right now, St. Louis has much going for it heading into the playoffs.

The Cards' slide has cost them home-field advantage against all their NL opponents except the wild-card entry.

St. Louis has two key ingredients: Two absolutely dominating starting pitchers in Adam Wainwright and Chris Carpenter. Joel Pineiro has had his best season since his days in Seattle. Either Kyle Lohse or John Smoltz will be the fourth starter.

The other key ingredient is first baseman Albert Pujols, who is the best hitter in the game. The likely NL MVP is capable of changing the game any time he makes contact with the baseball.

The Cards for some reason don't hit left-handed pitching as well, even with right-handers Ryan Ludwick, Matt Holliday and Mark De Rosa leading the way.

The Cards have a deep 'pen. even though closer Ryan Franklin has some physical issues. Manager Tony La Russa will use the whole relief staff, if necessary, in a close game.

Cards have dominated the Dodgers (5-2) in '09, but have trouble beating the Rockies (1-5).

If Carpenter and Wainwright are both on top of their game, then this club is the favorite to win the NL pennant. If either of the two falters, then the race to the World Series is wide open.

2. Philadelphia Phillies: The Phils are the defending World Champions, and for that reason (playoff experience) I rank them ahead of the Rockies.

The Phillies' starting pitching may be spectacular or it may be ordinary, it depends on which Cliff Lee and Cole Hamels show up once the games begin. Both have been shaky down the stretch.

JA Happ, Pedro Martinez and Joe Blanton give the Phils depth, but the lefties (Lee and Hamels) must lead the way.

The Phils' lineup has gone through slumps at various times this season. The club is loaded with left-handed power (Ryan Howard, Raul Ibanez and Chase Utley), making them vulnerable to the Dodgers' lefty starters.

Who will close for the Phillies? Brad Lidge -- perfect in 2008 -- has been the opposite this year. Set-up man Ryan Madson may be needed this month to close. If that's the case, the Phils will be in trouble.

The Phils win at home (44-36), but are better on the road (48-33), a good omen during the playoffs, where many games are played before noisy, hostile crowds.

The Phils are a solid, veteran ballclub and definitely a dangerous team. But the key starting pitchers and the big hitters had better live up to their hype.

3. Colorado Rockies: Clearly the most unknown team of the NL entrants.

The Rockies have been playing great baseball since May. Manager Jim Tracy has been masterful during that time.

Shortstop Troy Tulowitzki is doing a good imitation of Albert Pujols every time he steps into the batter's box. Todd Helton has had a tremendous comeback season.

The strength of the club is in its 25-man roster. Everyone on the team contributes to the cause.

The Rockies got a huge boost when starter Aaron Cook returned this week. Lefty Jorge De LaRosa has been one of the best pitchers in baseball since June. Ubaldo Jimenez has a power arm.

In the 'pen, Huston Street is the closer. Set-up men Franklin Morales and Rafael Betancourt have been very steady for the manager.

The Rockies must be taken very seriously by whomever they meet in the NLDS. This team could make it to the World Series because of its depth (Carlos Gonzalez, Brad Hawpe, Yorvit Torrealba, etc) and excellent starting staff -- with Jason Hammel and Jason Marquis providing help, if needed.

4. Los Angeles Dodgers: The Dodgers are playing their worst baseball of the season right now, mainly because they are not scoring runs.

Andre Ethier, who has struggled versus left-handed pitching, and Manny Ramirez, who is striking out with alarming frequency, are the two biggest bats misfiring right now.

The Dodgers will rely on starters Randy Wolf, Clayton Kershaw and Chad Billingsley, along with Jon Garland and Vicente Padilla. This starting staff is a major concern for manager Joe Torre.

The Dodgers 'pen is solid with the addition of George Sherill as its eighth-inning relief specialist.

The Dodgers need to rediscover the offense right away or their recent postseason misery will continue in the NLDS.

Every team has its issues. Relief pitching will be a key this postseason because of the lack of true "aces" on many of the staffs.

We may see more offense than we usually see in the postseason because of the lack of those so-called aces.

My guess right now is we will see the Cardinals and the Yankees in the World Series, but I wouldn't bet the mortgage that those will be the two teams squaring off when the Fall Classic begins Oct. 28.

My darkhorse picks: Colorado and Boston.

This is one wide-open playoff and that's the way this season should conclude. That's baseball.

See you in the spring!

Crosby takes what may be his final bow

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

In possibly his final game starting for the A's, Bobby Crosby was the only member of the lineup to hit the ball hard through the first seven innings Saturday at the Coliseum, and he scored Oakland's first run.

He came up representing the tying run with two outs and one on in the ninth, but he grounded out to end the game, and the A's fell 4-2 to the Angels, their sixth loss in a row.

"I felt great swinging the bat, and I hadn't been in there in a while," Crosby said. "I wish I could have done something my last at-bat, but I've had plenty of good memories here.

"I don't know if I'm playing (today) so it's definitely possible this was my last game here. This is all I know, and I've always enjoyed playing here. It's weird to think about being with another team, but I'm also looking forward to starting anew."

Six years ago, Crosby was the AL Rookie of the Year and he appeared set for a long, productive career with the A's. But injuries and underperformance pushed him off that track, and for nearly a year, it's been clear that Crosby's tenure in Oakland would end this month, if not before.

First, the A's tried to waive him last winter; there were no takers for Crosby's \$5.25 million contract for 2009. Then the club signed free-agent shortstop Orlando Cabrera, relegating Crosby to backup infield duty. Finally, when Cabrera was traded, the shortstop job was handed to rookie Cliff Pennington.

Crosby was reluctant to play other positions, but he probably has increased his value in learning to play third and first, and even getting some time at second and in right.

"If there's a positive that's come out of this for Bobby, it's that he's showed the ability to play multiple positions, which at some point later in his career could help him," A's general manager Billy Beane said. "And under less-than-ideal circumstances this year, he handled himself well."

Throughout Crosby's recent health travails and then his disgruntlement this season about his role, he has remained popular in the clubhouse. Here's guessing that there might be several players wearing high socks, Crosby's trademark, in the season finale.

While many fans had begun to express frustration with Crosby in recent years, he always had one loyal - and very vocal - follower at the Coliseum. She was in attendance for his possible final A's appearance Saturday, yelling "Bobby, you're hot!" at every possible opportunity.

"I've never experienced anything negative right to my face, and I know the fans want to win and they want players to perform, so I don't get upset," Crosby said. "But all the people that have stuck by me - the fans near the dugout and my fan that yells for me - they've always been great."

Today might be Nomar Garciaparra's last game in a 14-year career. Garciaparra, who will be in the lineup, nearly retired after last season, and he said last week that he won't make any decisions about his future immediately.

The bullpen will split up today's game, with either Brad Kilby or Jerry Blevins getting the start.

Briefly: Travis Buck was out again Saturday with what he described as post-concussion syndrome. Buck incurred a severe concussion last year when he ran headfirst into the wall at Triple-A Sacramento, and he collided with outfielder Chris Denorfia a month ago at Sacramento and banged the back of his head on the warning track. He has had headaches the past two weeks, Buck said, but Friday, he also became dizzy, so was ruled out of action. ... Longtime public-address announcer Roy Steele, whose health has kept him from working games this season, had hoped to fill in in the late innings Saturday but was not well enough to do so.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

GM shuffle: Expect Billy Beane and David Forst to be mentioned as possible replacements for Kevin Towers as Padres GM, but it's unlikely either would be interested. Meanwhile, fired Toronto GM J.P. Ricciardi, Beane's former special assistant, always has a spot with the A's if he wants.

Our award motto: Thanks, but no Yanks

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Is it wrong to choose the non-Yankee in tight races for player awards?

Generally speaking, the non-Yankee must do more because his team is inferior. The Yankee is surrounded by loads of quality and depth, which creates a comfort zone, while the non-Yankee is more alone and not simply a bought player tossed into a mix of elite talent.

Take **CC Sabathia** and **Mark Teixeira**, who were signed by the Yankees last winter for a combined \$341 million. Both had super years, as expected. Sabathia is a finalist for the AL Cy Young Award, Teixeira for MVP.

Sabathia leads the league with 19 wins, and Teixeira leads with 122 RBIs. Sabathia has a 3.37 ERA and 197 strikeouts. Teixeira has a .293 average and 39 homers. The Yankees' two biggest investments are paying off, and the team has gone from missing the playoffs to posting the majors' best record.

With all due respect, we'll go with **Zack Greinke** and **Joe Mauer**.

Greinke was 6-0 with a 0.43 ERA in his first six starts and was 5-0 with a 0.72 ERA in his past seven - before the Twins hit him with a four-run sixth on Saturday. He has 28 quality starts and just five that weren't. His 2.16 ERA is lowest in the majors, and he has more strikeouts (242) than Sabathia, though Sabathia is 11-2 since the All-Star break.

A possible tiebreaker is Greinke pitches for the last-place Royals, so he gets little help. He's doing what **Tim Lincecum** did last year, winning a lot of games for a team with a lot of losses. Other candidates come from winning teams: Detroit's **Justin Verlander** (18-9, 3.45 ERA, league-leading 264 Ks) and Seattle's **Felix Hernandez** (18-5, 2.48 ERA, 211 Ks).

Similarly, Mauer gets the nod over Teixeira for MVP. Mauer is hitting .366 with 28 homers and 96 RBIs, both careers highs, despite missing the first month with a back ailment. Plus, he's a Gold Glove catcher. Helping to keep the **Justin Morneau**-less Twins in contention to the final day gives Mauer bonus points.

The NL MVP is easier to gauge. The only question: Who finishes second behind **Albert Pujols**? We like **Andre Ethier**, a fabulous late-game performer who has picked up **Manny Ramirez**'s slack in L.A., over **Prince Fielder** and **Hanley Ramirez**.

The NL Cy Young remains in doubt. We'll go with **Chris Carpenter**, but Giants fans can dream about Carpenter and fellow St. Louis ace **Adam Wainwright** splitting the votes - Carpenter and Wainwright sharing many of the first- and third-place votes and Lincecum getting enough second-placers to put him over the top.

Lincecum backers who cringe over his lack of run support should know he tops Carpenter and Wainwright in seven of 16 starting-pitching categories listed on a sheet of leaders distributed to the media daily: complete games, shutouts, home ERA, night ERA, Ks, Ks per nine innings and opponents' batting average.

Carpenter leads in six categories: winning percentage, ERA, road ERA, day ERA, fewest walks per nine innings and longest winning streak. Wainwright leads in wins, starts and innings.

As for top rookies, **Rick Porcello** won 14 games and had five quality starts in September for the Tigers, so he edges Oakland's **Andrew Bailey**, Texas' **Elvis Andrus**, the White Sox's **Gordon Beckham** and Tampa Bay's **Jeff Niemann**. In the NL, Florida's **Chris Coghlan** (league's highest average since All-Star break) finished stronger than pitchers **J.A. Happ** of Philadelphia and **Tommy Hanson** of Atlanta, though Milwaukee's **Casey McGehee** made a case for himself.

Colorado's **Jim Tracy** is the NL's top manager. No debate. In the AL, **Ron Washington** gets a narrow nod over **Don Wakamatsu** and **Mike Scioscia** in an all-West showdown.

Shea Hey: Fired GMs have different philosophies

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

When **Kevin Towers** and **J.P. Ricciardi** were fired Saturday, it showed no method as a general manager is foolproof.

Towers made his rise to the majors as a scout, Ricciardi as an assistant to **Billy Beane**. Both are good guys, accommodating and respected among their peers, and both had tall orders - positioned in divisions in which others spent much more.

In San Diego, the Padres will always be the Dodgers' little brother, trying to outdo their northern rivals and sometimes one-upping them. Four of the Padres' five division titles came on Towers' watch, and this year's team, out of it early, did a nice job as spoilers while going 36-24 since late July.

It wasn't Towers' fault that former owner **John Moores** had a messy divorce, prompting a massive payroll slash and pending sale of the team to ex-agent **Jeff Moorad**. Towers was a good soldier, severing ties with popular **Trevor Hoffman** and dumping **Jake Peavy**'s contract.

Ricciardi's task also was tough, trying to build a winner in Canada while competing with the Yankees and Red Sox. Like Towers, Ricciardi was asked to trade a Cy Young winner, but he never got rid of **Roy Halladay**. His highest finish in Toronto was second place in 2006.

Blue Jays CEO **Paul Beeston**'s new GM is Ricciardi's assistant, **Alex Anthopoulos**, 32, who broke into the game as a media relations intern with the Expos, in charge of sorting players' fan mail.

Moorad hasn't said who's replacing Towers, but it's speculated it could be **Paul DePodesta**, another Beane disciple who would rely more on computer analysis than Towers.

If it doesn't work one way, try another.

The Bull Pen

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

-- With **Eric Wedge** fired, the Indians need a new manager. A perfect fit would be ex-Indians shortstop **Omar Vizquel**, whose goal is to manage. Vizquel, who hasn't been listed as a candidate, doesn't want to pay his dues managing in the minors - figuring he paid his dues as a player for 21 years. GM **Mark Shapiro** should take a chance and grant an interview.

-- **Matt Pagnozzi** made his big-league debut Tuesday, catching two innings for St. Louis and wearing No. 19, the same number worn by his uncle, **Tom**, a former Cardinals Gold Glove catcher who said, not so humbly, ""Pretty good-looking kid."

-- **Lou Piniella** on the **Milton Bradley**-less Cubs: "Things have been much quieter, and it allows the players to concentrate on playing baseball."

-- Great idea: Fifty-five years later, to the month, there's a proposal to depict **Willie Mays** making his famous catch in the 1954 World Series at the site of the old Polo Grounds.

-- **Bobby Abreu**, left, became the fifth player to appear in at least 150 games 12 years in a row. The only one on the list whose streak dates to the era of 154-game schedules: Mays.

-- Abreu is the second Angel in the 30-100 club for steals and RBIs. The first: **Bobby Bonds**.

Numbers game

8 - Ejections by Bill Hohn, more than any other umpire.

9 - Blown saves by the Dodgers' bullpen in starts by Randy Wolf, the most for any pitcher.

A's skid hits season-high six games

Another late charge comes up short against Angels

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Just as they'd done the previous night, the A's on Saturday forced Angels closer Brian Fuentes into the game with a late rally and had the tying run at the plate with one out in the bottom of the ninth inning.

Just as they'd done the previous night, the A's saw their next two hitters quickly retired, bringing the American League West champions pouring from the dugout to celebrate a victory.

This time the final score was 4-2, rather than 5-2, but the feeling was essentially the same.

Actually, it was worse, as reflected by the somber mood in the clubhouse.

The A's quietly changed out of their home white uniforms and into their alternate black jerseys before trudging out to face the masses at a special event for season-ticket holders, losers of a season-high six games in a row.

"It's not the best bad timing," outfielder Rajai Davis said of Oakland's recent struggles, which have come on the heels of a 17-7 start to September.

A's manager Bob Geren agreed, and the late push didn't do a thing to make him feel any better. Before the eighth inning, the A's got one runner to second base -- on a fifth-inning double by Bobby Crosby.

The night before, they hadn't gotten anyone to third base until the ninth.

Oakland has scored six runs in its past four losses.

"The last four or five days, we've had a lot of trouble swinging the bat," Geren said. "We had a ton of guys hot [in August and September] and everyone just sort of cooled off at the same time."

Angels left-hander Scott Kazmir cruised through five quick innings in his final tuneup for the postseason, and Robb Quinlan paced the Halos' offense with a two-run single in the second inning and an RBI double in the fourth.

Gary Matthews Jr. added an RBI single, and all four runs were charged to A's lefty starter Dana Eveland, who gave up eight hits without a walk or a strikeout over 4 2/3 innings.

"Dana was OK," Geren said. "He gave up four runs, but it's tough to pitch when you have zero runs."

The A's finally broke through when Crosby walked to open the bottom of the eighth and scored on a triple by Eric Patterson, who scored on a double off the left-center-field wall by Davis.

Kurt Suzuki drew a pinch-hit walk in the ninth, but Fuentes got Landon Powell on a pop up and got Crosby on a groundout for his 48th save.

Geren discounted the fatigue factor as an excuse, pointing out that most of the players he's using these days are in their early 20s.

Davis, again, cited timing.

"It's getting late [in the season], and we're still trying to win as hard as we were before," he said, "but it's tough to remain focused for the last few games when you're not going to the playoffs. That's the challenge, and that's a challenge we have to accept tomorrow."

The longest losing streak of a losing season would be the worst timing of all, and the season ends -- for the A's, anyway - - on Sunday.

"Hopefully we can salvage one tomorrow," Geren said, "but we've got to get some runs early."

Unofficially unanimous: Suzuki is MVP

Oakland (75-86) vs. Los Angeles (96-65), 1:05 p.m. PT

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Few polls have unanimous results, but such was the case this week when more than three-quarters of the current A's roster was asked to name the team's Most Valuable Player.

Every player named catcher Kurt Suzuki, who will lead American League catchers in starts for the second consecutive season and lead the A's in RBIs for the first time.

Suzuki, who didn't start Saturday but will make his 132nd start on Sunday as the A's close out the regular season and their three-game series against the Angels, also has a shot at leading the team in hits for the second consecutive season.

He had 148 last season, and his 2-for-4 night on Friday pushed his team-leading hits total to 155; Adam Kennedy ranked second on the team with 153 entering Saturday's contest, but he also sat.

Oakland's coaches were unanimous in support of Suzuki as the team MVP, too, but it took manager Bob Geren a couple of days to get off the fence and join the party.

Geren, who said his reluctance was based on the fact that his team doesn't officially recognize an MVP, waffled on the topic on Friday. He mentioned All-Star rookie closer Andrew Bailey, rookie left-hander Brett Anderson, star setup man Michael Wuerz, outfielder Rajai Davis and even team home run leader Jack Cust as worthy candidates.

Asked to reconsider on Saturday, Geren relented.

"Yeah, he's been our MVP," conceded the skipper, noting Suzuki's consistency, durability, defensive prowess and his adroit handling of an exceptionally young pitching staff.

"He has been extremely valuable for all those reasons."

Suzuki, who turns 26 on Sunday, is finishing his second full year as the starter behind the plate, and while he expressed considerable appreciation for the recognition of his teammates, he expects to contribute more across the board in 2010.

He was batting .274 -- his .279 average led the 2008 A's -- with 15 home runs and 88 RBIs with a .313 on-base percentage through Friday, and he led AL catchers in doubles (34), RBIs and stolen bases (eight).

"I feel like I can get better in every area," he said. "It's been a good year for me, but I always feel like I can do more, and if I keep working the way I have been, I think I can do more."

Oakland's primary cleanup hitter down the stretch, Suzuki agreed with hitting coach Jim Skaalen's opinion that he could develop into a 25-homer man.

"I do," Suzuki said. "I've hit a lot of doubles [at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum] that probably would have been homers in a lot of other parks, so that's something you have to factor in, but I definitely think I can get stronger and maybe take better advantage of some of the other parks we play in.

"Defense will always be first for me, though. My job is to handle the staff and do a good job behind the plate. Whether you hit or not, that's the most important part of being a catcher."

The most valuable part, you might say.

Pitching matchup

OAK: Edgar Gonzalez (0-4, 5.51 ERA)

Gonzalez was Oakland's scheduled starter for Sunday, but before Saturday's game Geren suggested that he might treat the finale "like a bullpen game." Among those who'd be considered to get the ball first and work the first two innings are lefties Jerry Blevins and Brad Kilby and righty John Meloan.

LAA: LHP Joe Saunders (15-7, 4.62 ERA)

Saunders had a shutout going entering the seventh against the A's on Sunday when it unraveled, with four hits, a walk and a wild pitch producing three runs. He finished with the win, his sixth in seven starts, yielding three earned runs on seven hits and a walk, striking out three men. Saunders has allowed three or fewer earned runs in his past seven outings, since recovering from shoulder issues. Saunders is 7-3 with a 3.97 ERA in 12 career outings against the Athletics and 3-1, 2.73 in four outings in Oakland.

Dribblers ...

Infielder Nomar Garciaparra, who was considering retirement before signing with the A's during Spring Training, might be playing his last game in the Majors on Sunday. Geren said Garciaparra will start but didn't say where he'll play. One of the top shortstops of his generation, Garciaparra, 35, hasn't played there all year while dealing with a chronic condition in both calves. He said he's undecided on his future but doesn't expect to be asked back as a free agent. ... Rookie right-handed reliever Henry Rodriguez hit 101 mph on Friday night. Geren said Rodriguez, 22, has the potential to be "pretty incredible" if he can develop consistent control of his heat. ... The Angels have won the season series against the A's in five of the past six seasons. ... Outfielder Travis Buck said he's been dealing with dizziness, which he suspects is related to post-concussion syndrome. He missed part of last season after running into an outfield wall.

Angels hand A's sixth loss in row

Associated Press

OAKLAND Scott Kazmir pitched five scoreless innings, Robb Quinlan drove in three runs, and the Los Angeles Angels beat the A's 4-2 Saturday.

It was the A's sixth consecutive loss.

Erick Aybar had three hits and scored twice in his return to the Angels' lineup, and Juan Rivera added two hits before being lifted in the fifth inning when Los Angeles manager Mike Scioscia substituted liberally to rest his starters for the postseason.

Brian Fuentes pitched a scoreless ninth for his major league-leading 48th save.

Rajai Davis had two hits and an RBI for the A's.

Los Angeles, which plays Boston in the first round of the playoffs, won for the sixth time in seven games after a mid-September slump slowed the Angels' momentum.

Kazmir (10-9) struck out three in his final playoff tuneup. He didn't allow a runner past first base through the first four innings, faced just two over the minimum overall and gave up only three hits — one an infield single.

Kazmir also got some help from Los Angeles' defense, which turned a double play and caught two Oakland runners trying to steal.

The Angels' bullpen almost let him down.

After Matt Palmer pitched two scoreless innings following Kazmir, Jason Bulger walked Bobby Crosby leading off the eighth and gave up a triple to Eric Patterson. Rafael Rodriguez replaced Bulger and promptly gave up an RBI double to Davis.

Aybar sat out Friday's 5-2 win after bruising his right wrist a night earlier against Texas, but it didn't seem to affect his swing.

He singled and scored in his first two at-bats against Oakland starter Dana Eveland (2-4), then had a broken-bat single off reliever John Meloan in the sixth.

Quinlan, still uncertain if he will be on the Angels' postseason roster, drove in Aybar and Juan Rivera with a two-run single in the second. Quinlan and Gary Matthews Jr. had RBI doubles in the fourth.

Eveland gave up eight hits and threw a wild pitch just before Quinlan's two-run single in the second. The left-hander, making just his third start since rejoining the A's rotation Sept. 20, couldn't make it out of the fifth and is winless in six career starts against the Angels.

MVPs and LVPs, Cy Youngs and Yuks ...

By Jayson Stark, ESPN.com

Our calendar says it's (uh-oh) October. So it must be time once again to hand out another set of end-of-season awards. Since Teri Hatcher and Cameron Diaz were unavailable to come to our little gala, guess we'll have to do these honors ourselves. Well, here goes ...

Most Valuable Players

NL: Albert Pujols, Cardinals

#5 1B

St. Louis Cardinals

2009 STATS

- GM158
- HR47
- RBI135
- R124
- OBP.446
- AVG.331

What do you say we just give this man the Most Valuable Pujols award every darned year and open the regular old MVP competition to the rest of the human race? Might as well. Pujols has been in the big leagues for nine years. When the voting smoke clears next month, he'll have finished in the top four in *eight* of those nine MVP elections. That's more top-four finishes than Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio, by the way -- and exactly as many as Willie Mays. And this guy hasn't even turned 30 yet. Do we even need to make the case for him this year? He's going to lead the league in homers, runs scored, on-base percentage, slugging, OPS, total bases, extra-base hits, runs created and possibly walks. Looks as if he'll finish no worse than third in batting, RBIs and doubles. And he'll do all this even though he's been intentionally walked more times (44) than any player in history who wasn't named Barry Bonds or Willie McCovey. It's easy to forget now how Sir Albert lugged his team into first place before Matt Holliday showed up to shore up the surrounding offensive cast. But let's refresh your memory. In the pre-Holliday portion of the Cardinals' 2009 festivities, they were 20-35 when Albert didn't drive in a run -- and 32-12 when he did. In other words, when he didn't knock in a run, they had a worse record than the Pirates. And when he did, they were better than the '98 Yankees. So, uh, any more questions?

Apologies to: Hanley Ramirez, Ryan Howard, Troy Tulowitzki, Prince Fielder, Chase Utley.

AL: Joe Mauer, Twins

#7 C
Minnesota Twins

2009 STATS

- GM135
- HR28
- RBI95
- R91
- OBP.442
- AVG.366

When you watch the Twins, do you ever feel as if you're watching The Legend of Joe Mauer erupt before our eyes? Well, you should, because this man can't be a real person, can he? Before Mauer came along to do his Ted Williams impersonation, two catchers in the history of the universe had ever won a batting title -- neither of them in the past six decades, incidentally. By next week, Mauer will have won three of them -- which would be more than all 2 billion previous catchers combined -- by age 26. But this year, he decided to branch out and start doing stuff that almost nobody at any position has done in his lifetime. Unless he goes 0-for-the rest of the year, he's going to become the first American Leaguer since George Brett (1980) to lead the league in batting (.366), on-base percentage (.442) and slugging (.591) in the same season. And he's tossed in 28 homers in his spare time -- which happens to be almost as many as Pudge Rodriguez, Matt Wieters and Russell Martin have hit put together (29). But if you've digested all that and still think the MVP of this league is somebody else, jot this down: If Mauer finishes the year with numbers this high in all these categories, he'd be the first AL hitter to do that since Ted Williams. And before Ted, only Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio and Earl Averill were in that club. Any time you're hanging out with a group like that, while playing a position like catcher on a team that had no business being in contention till the last weekend of the season, there's a term for that: M-V-P.

Apologies to: Derek Jeter, Miguel Cabrera, Kevin Youkilis, Mark Teixeira, Ichiro Suzuki.

Least Valuable Players

NL: Milton Bradley, Cubs

#21 RF
Chicago Cubs

2009 STATS

- GM124
- HR12
- RBI40
- R61
- OBP.378
- AVG.257

Is "disaster" too strong a word to describe the calamitous marriage of Bradley and a team that had won more games than any club in the National League in the two years before he showed up? All right, how 'bout "catastrophe"? Or "fiasco"? Whatever, the ever-combustible Bradley had himself about as cataclysmic a Cubs mini-career as anyone since, well, who? George Bell? Mel Rojas? Benito Santiago? Bradley waged regrettable wars with his favorite umpires, bleacher creatures and media pals. He yanked himself out of games, lost track of the outs and -- maybe most amazing of all -- didn't do the one thing he'd done all his life: hit. He made it to home plate 553 times -- and still thumped fewer homers (12) than Kurt Suzuki, hit fewer doubles (17) than Everth Cabrera, drove in fewer runs (40) than Mike Fontenot and slugged under .400 (.397) for the first time since he was an Expo (2000 and 2001). We'll never know what might have been if Bradley had just hit .318 in April instead of .118. But it's too late now. The saddest part of this story is that this man doesn't just need a new team. He needs help.

Sighs of relief for: Brian Giles, Bill Hall, Austin Kearns.

AL: Alex Rios, Blue Jays-White Sox

#51 CF
Chicago White Sox

2009 STATS

- GM147
- HR17
- RBI68
- R62
- OBP.292
- AVG.243

The qualifications to win one of these LVP awards has never been real tightly defined. But in Rios' case, it almost seemed as if the Blue Jays were slapping his LVP credentials on a giant billboard this summer when they essentially announced: "We'd rather *give* this guy away for zilch than have to pay him his actual salary." And so, faced with the prospect of being able to save \$59.6 million on their car insurance, they told the White Sox: "You want him enough to claim him? He's all yours." And off Alex Rios went to the South Side, where he's made his baffling underachievement in Toronto look almost like stardom. For his 137-at-bat White Sox career, he's now hitting .175, with a .208 on-base percentage. That would rank, if you're curious, as the worst OBP in White Sox history by any position player who got that many at-bats. Rios also has done something we're pretty sure only one other White Sox position player (the unforgettable Ed Stroud, in 1971) has ever done in this much playing time -- hit into as many double plays (six) as he's driven in runs. Which isn't easy, especially for a player this talented. The White Sox do get five more years to straighten this fellow out, seeing as how he's under contract through 2014. What we don't know yet is: Is that the good news or the bad news?

Sighs of relief for: Jose Guillen, Delmon Young, Pat Burrell.

Cy Youngs

NL: Chris Carpenter, Cardinals

#29 SP
St. Louis Cardinals

2009 STATS

- GM28
- W17
- L4
- BB38
- K144
- ERA2.24

We want you to know we woke up at 5:40 a.m. today. Not because the alarm went off. Because the Cy Young debate in our brain went off, and wouldn't stop. We don't ever remember a Cy Young vote that was this tough, this complicated, this likely to wake us up in the middle of the night. But we've been informed by high-ranking ESPN.com authorities that if we don't finish this column, we'll be banished to our own personal moon of Jupiter. So we had to decide. And we find ourselves casting a vote for a man who didn't even lead his own team in wins. The pitcher who did -- Adam Wainwright - is an excellent choice. Just not as excellent as Carpenter or the incredible Tim Lincecum. We ranked those three in 30 different categories. Wainwright's big selling points are wins (19), innings pitched (a league-leading 233) and second-half ERA (1.96). But he also has had significantly bigger run support. And Lincecum and/or Carpenter trump him in every other department on our sheet. But separating those two is 99.9999999998 percent impossible. Lincecum leads the league in strikeouts and quality starts. He's had the most "dominating" starts (game scores of 75 or better). And the Elias Sports Bureau reports that no pitcher has ever had as many strikeouts (261) and as low an ERA (2.48) as Lincecum and *not* won the Cy Young. So how could we not vote for him? Uh, it might be the insomnia taking over. But actually, here's how: We don't believe in using "wins" as the ultimate Cy Young barometer anymore, the way folks did in, say, 1956. But they're not exactly irrelevant, either. Lincecum and Carpenter have had just about identical run support (5.83 and 5.84, respectively) and bullpen support (three blown saves apiece). They've also averaged about the same number of innings per start (7.0 and 6.9, respectively). So theoretically, their win totals -- in this particular case -- should tell us something, right? And what they tell us is that one guy (Carpenter) went 17-4, even though he spent a month on the disabled list, while the other guy (Lincecum) was just 15-7. Carpenter finished the year on a 12-1 run of brilliance that

would have been a 15-1 finish if his bullpen hadn't mugged him for three blown saves. Lincecum, on the other hand, needed to win Thursday just to get to 5-5 since the All-Star break. And friends, we've looked at every Cy Young election since the modern voting system was instituted in 1970. There's no historical precedent for a 15-game winner taking home a Cy over another starting pitcher with more wins, a better ERA and a better park-adjusted ERA-Plus. None. So we're going with Chris Carpenter. But one thing we'll never call anyone who votes for Lincecum or Wainwright is this: wrong.

Apologies to: Lincecum, Wainwright, Dan Haren.

AL: Zack Greinke, Royals

#23 SP

Kansas City Royals

2009 STATS

- GM32
- W16
- L8
- BB49
- K237
- ERA2.06

It isn't Zack Greinke's fault he pitches for the Royals. Let's get that straight right now. And it isn't his fault that he isn't employed by a team that plays in the AL East, either. He can only pitch against whoever shows up 60 feet, six inches away. So as best as we can tell, all 32 starts he made this year were against real major league teams. And yeah, that includes the Pirates. So we're not here to judge what might have happened if Greinke had faced the Yankees and Red Sox eight times like Roy Halladay. Or what his numbers could have looked like if he'd pitched, like CC Sabathia, in a pitcher's monstrosity like Yankee Stadium. Or how much different his workload might have been if his team had been forced to ride him as hard as the Tigers pushed Justin Verlander. We understand all seasons aren't created equal. But we also understand that, however it worked out, we don't think anybody in the American League has outpitched Zack Greinke this year. We salute the brilliance of Halladay, Sabathia and Verlander. We're aware that Felix Hernandez has had four unbelievable months (14-2, 1.95 since May 24). But the season started in April. And it's been Zack Greinke's year. He had the best ERA in the AL before the All-Star break (2.12). He's had the best ERA in the AL *since* the All-Star break (1.97). He started the season by giving up two earned runs in his first 45 innings. He goes into his final start of the season with two earned runs allowed in his past 42 innings. The Kansas City Star's Sam Mellinger tells us Greinke has a 1.24 ERA against teams with winning records -- and a better ERA in his non-wins (3.23) than Sabathia's overall ERA (3.31). And baseball-reference.com tells us Greinke has a league-adjusted, park-adjusted ERA-plus of 213 (meaning he's been 113 percent better than your average pitcher) -- a figure matched by only three AL pitchers (Lefty Grove, Roger Clemens, Pedro Martinez) in the live-ball era. We could go on like this for a month. But you get the idea. Lots of deserving candidates here. But Zack Greinke has been the man.

Apologies to: Hernandez, Halladay, Sabathia, Verlander.

Cy Yuks

NL: Brad Lidge, Phillies

#54 RP

Philadelphia Phillies

2009 STATS

- GM66
- SV31
- W-L0-8
- BB34
- K60
- ERA7.34

In a sport that defies explanation anyway, Lidge has had a year that makes explanation officially impossible. Not that that has stopped him from continuing to be what he's always been -- the all-time stand-up pro's pro. He's been there at his locker after all 11 of his excruciating blown saves, trying to explain the unexplainable. But as hard as he may have tried, explaining this mess just couldn't be done. Could it? Think about this: Is there any other line of work in which a person could spend a year doing his job better than anyone else in history has ever done it -- and then, the very next

season, spend a year doing that same job worse than anyone else has ever done it? That doesn't even make sense. But it happened to Brad Lidge. From no blown saves last year to 11 this year (the most by any NL closer since 1998). From a 1.95 ERA last year to 7.34 this year (not just the highest of anyone in history with 13 or more saves, but the highest by any reliever who pitched this much, period). From a year in which he went 19-for-19 saving one-run games (counting the postseason) to a year in which he has blown nine of 15 in one-run games (by far the most in baseball). Somehow or other, the Phillies still won their division by a mile. So they played over their closer's lack of closing. But the one thing they couldn't do was save Lidge from collecting this Cy Yuk Award.

Cys of relief for: [Oliver Perez](#), [Daniel Cabrera](#), [David Bush](#).

AL: [Fausto Carmona](#), Indians

#55 SP

Cleveland Indians

2009 STATS

- GM24
- W5
- L12
- BB70
- K79
- ERA6.32

Speaking of pitchers who hurtled over the old cliff, how about this fellow? A mere two years ago, Carmona won 19 games, had a winning percentage over .700 (19-8, .704) and was practically viewed as CC Sabathia's trusty assistant ace. This season, only two late-season starts against the comatose Orioles and White Sox saved Carmona from having the worst ERA in Indians history. He finished the year 5-12, with a 6.32 ERA. And according to the Elias Sports Bureau, he's only the third pitcher in the division-play era (joining Steve Blass and David Cone) to plummet, within two years, from a 19-win season with a .700 winning percentage to a season with a sub-.300 winning percentage, an ERA that high and this many innings pitched. But that isn't the only reason Carmona scarfed up this Cy Yuk. He was the league leader in most starts failing to get past the second inning (three). He only won *once* in 14 starts between mid-May and mid-September. And he racked up (A) the highest WHIP (1.76) in baseball, and (B) the highest in franchise history by any pitcher who made this many starts (24). That wouldn't be very good in any scenario. But it's a nightmare for a team that just had to trade away the last two AL Cy Young award-winners -- and wouldn't have complained if it had a one-time 19-game winner who showed any sign of being ready to help replace them.

Cys of relief for: [Chien-Ming Wang](#), [Luke Hochevar](#), [Daisuke Matsuzaka](#).

Rookies

NL: [Chris Coghlan](#), Marlins

#8 LF

Florida Marlins

2009 STATS

- GM126
- HR9
- RBI45
- R81
- OBP.387
- AVG.317

It isn't every year that two rookie starters as sensational as [J.A. Happ](#) and [Tommy Hanson](#) swoop in and go 12-4 and 11-4, respectively, with sub-3.00 ERAs for teams that needed every pitch they threw. But who is the last rookie hit machine remotely like Chris Coghlan? Ichiro? Derek Jeter? [Nomar Garciaparra](#)? Well, if those are the names we're comparing this guy to, that pretty much ends the debate about this trophy, wouldn't you say? Coghlan has cranked out more hits (157) than all but three men in the entire National League since his May 8 debut, has more hits (108) than anyone in the sport since the All-Star break and has the highest average (.332), on-base percentage (.394) and OPS (.861) of any NL leadoff hitter for the season. His 48 hits in September were the most by any rookie in 81 years (Chuck Klein, 1928). His 95 hits in August and September combined are the third-most in back-to-back months by any NL player in the expansion era, behind only Pete Rose and Dave Parker -- and the most by any rookie in 62 years (Dale Long, 1947). Five months ago, a

lot of people thought the Marlins were crazy to drop this guy into their leadoff hole *and* a position (left field) he'd played for one day in his pro career. Needless to say, they don't look so nuts anymore. Do they?

Apologies to: Happ, Hanson, Garrett Jones, Andrew McCutchen, Casey McGehee.

AL: Andrew Bailey, A's

#40 RP

Oakland Athletics

2009 STATS

- GM66
- W6
- L3
- BB24
- K89
- ERA1.88

This is one of those years in which we sometimes get the feeling it would be easier to explain how the Internet works than it is to fill out a mere postseason awards ballot. So at least this AL rookie free-for-all just fits right in. We want to express sincere admiration for how Detroit's Rick Porcello and Tampa Bay's Jeff Niemann have pitched for teams that would have had a major rotation mess on their hands without them. But this isn't the Most Valuable Rookie award. It's supposed to go to the player who had the best season, period. And no matter which scenic overlook we take it all in from, that player looks to us like Bailey, the greatest top-secret closer in baseball. The pride of Voorhees, N.J., leads all AL closers in strikeouts (89, in 81 1/3 innings). Only some nobody named Mariano Rivera (1.79) has a lower ERA (1.88). No reliever in the league has had more outings with multiple strikeouts (31). And when a pitcher has had himself a year in which his punchouts (89) are almost double his hits-allowed total (49), it seems to us there's a word for that -- a word we call "domination." And that's a word that will sway our award votes every time.

Apologies to: Porcello, Niemann, Elvis Andrus, Gordon Beckham, Nolan Reimold.

Managers

NL: Jim Tracy, Rockies, and AL: Mike Scioscia, Angels

Back on that fateful day in May when the Rockies handed Tracy the steering wheel, the only team in baseball with fewer wins than the team he inherited was the Nationals. So how amazing is it that they're 74-40 since -- the best record of any team in baseball not known as "the Yankees?" Well, it's not an accident. Tracy stabilized his clubhouse, restored order to his disheveled bullpen, gave opportunities to the youth of America (Ian Stewart, Clint Barmes, Dexter Fowler, Seth Smith) and got the Rockies on a historic roll that drove them all the way to the great Octoberfest. Meanwhile, Scioscia could win this award every year, but this season ranks as his ultimate managerial masterpiece. His team played on through tragedy (Nick Adenhart), injury (the entire rotation except Jered Weaver, not to mention Vlad Guerrero and Torii Hunter) and the free-agent exits of a \$180 million first baseman (Mark Teixeira) and a closer who made history (K-Rod). Yet these Angels have piled up the second-most wins in baseball (95). That doesn't happen -- can't happen -- if there isn't a strong, purposeful leader of men hanging around the manager's office to pull it all together. And Mike Scioscia can run a team and lead human beings as well as anyone who's ever held that job. Ever.

Apologies to: Tony La Russa, Bobby Cox, Charlie Manuel, Joe Girardi, Ron Gardenhire, Don Wakamatsu.

Those Other Awards

Any time a pitcher records a win while he's taking a nap, an infielder gives up 11 runs and it isn't even safe to celebrate a walkoff, it's Year in Review's kind of season. So let's look back on some of our favorite escapades in zaniness:

Injuries of the Half-Year

- First prize: You'd think that the only major injury a guy could suffer while reading was a strained eyeball. But then along came Mariners closer David Aardsma to make his own legendary contribution to nonfiction. Aardsma was unavailable to pitch in a two-game series against the Rays last month because of a sore back. And where did that soreness come from? From curling up and reading a book on the 2,524-mile flight from Seattle to Tampa. Now normally, David, you wouldn't hear this advice from those of us who write for a living. But next time ... just play cards!
- Second prize (tie): It was another one of Those Years for the Cubs. And two mishaps that summed it up eloquently were: First, Ryan Dempster tried to hop over the dugout fence to go muck it up after a July win, didn't quite pull it off like Shawn Johnson and landed on the disabled list with a broken toe. Then, just last week, Derrek Lee crossed home plate on the front end of Jeff Baker's game-winning two-run ninth-inning homer and got slapped so hard on the side of the helmet by teammate Angel Guzman, he didn't get back in the lineup for another *five* days. So what's worse than a Cubs season with almost nothing to celebrate? The celebrations themselves, apparently.

- Third prize: Reds outfielder Chris Dickerson knocked himself out of the lineup -- literally -- when he failed to pass the all-important enter-through-the-revolving-door exam at the team hotel in Pittsburgh and conked himself in the coconut. "My *real* story," Dickerson deadpanned, "is, I hit my head on the rim during a celebrity slam-dunk contest."
- Fourth prize: Rockies outfielder Carlos Gonzalez was just trying to do what any polite young man would do -- clear his dishes after dinner -- one day in August. But then the silverware on his plate tried to escape. Gonzalez made a grab for it with those way-too-quick hands of his, squeezed the blade of the knife a little too hard and wound up in the emergency room. He was out of the lineup for four days. "Next time," he told The Denver Post's Troy Renck, "I am going to use plastic."

- Fifth prize: The surgeon general has issued no warnings about listening to Jay-Z. Just don't sneeze while you're doing it. Blue Jays pitcher Ricky Romero learned that lesson in April, when he strained his oblique -- by sneezing while listening to rap music. Ummm, gesundheit?

Honorable mention: Mariners catcher Rob Johnson sprained his ankle while jumping up and down waiting for Ichiro to arrive at home plate after a walkoff homer. ... White Sox reliever Bobby Jenks popped a calf muscle during pregame stretching. ... Royals reliever Kyle Farnsworth needed stitches in his hand after getting cut trying to break up a fight between his two bulldogs. ... Mets second baseman Luis Castillo sprained his ankle when he fell down the dugout steps. ... Pirates second baseman Freddy Sanchez strained his back getting out of a cab -- and missed six games. ... Jose Guillen blew out his knee bending down to put on his shin guard. ... And Phillies reliever Scott Eyre raised the age-old question, "Whatever happened to bullpen carts?" He strained a calf muscle running in from the bullpen -- and wound up on the disabled list. Call that man a taxi.

Box Score Lines of the Year

Ugliest Win of the Year: Manny Parra, Brewers

Reason No. 5,847 not to take the old win column too seriously: Zack Greinke made six starts this year in which he gave up one earned run or none and didn't get a win. But Parra somehow got a W out of this action-packed Aug. 13 start against the Padres:

5 2/3 IP, 13 H, 6 R, 6 ER, 2 BB, 7 K, 2 HR.

Hey, it was worth it -- because Parra became the first pitcher in 20 years to win a 13-hitter that included at least two walks and two gopherballs.

Special Manny Parra Bonus Box Score

But that wasn't our man Manny's only epic box-score adventure. On June 2, he did something no pitcher had done since Rick Reed on April 21, 2003 -- strike out the first three hitters he faced and then stick around to give up at least 10 runs: 4 IP, 11 H, 10 R, 10 ER, 2 BB, 5 K, 2 HR, 2 WP.

Ugliest Save of the Year: Frank Francisco, Rangers

If you subtracted the goofy night of Aug. 14 from Francisco's permanent record, there wouldn't have been a single month all season in which he gave up seven hits. So how do we explain what happened to him in one insane inning against the Red Sox?

2/3 IP, 7 H, 6 R, 6 ER, 0 BB, 1 K, 1 HR.

However it happened, Francisco was just the third closer in the history of the modern save rule to serve up at least seven hits and six runs while blowing a save in the ninth inning.

Ugliest "No-Hitter" of the Year: Dontrelle Willis, Tigers

Next time you hear one of us ESPN baseball geniuses say something like "You've got to hit to win," feel free to bring up this June 4 Dontrelle Willis start against the Red Sox:

2 1/3 IP, 0 H, 5 R, 5 ER, 5 BB, 3 K, 1 HBP.

Dontrelle was only the fifth pitcher in the past 55 years to pull off that unique daily double -- at least five runs allowed, but not a hit in sight.

What's Glove Got To Do With It Classic: Rich Harden, Cubs

The Cubs' entire infield and outfield could have gone out for some deep-dish the way Rich Harden pitched in this April 15 all-timer against the Rockies:

3 IP, 5 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 4 BB, 8 K.

Yep, the fielders in this stint were clearly optional -- because none of them (except the catcher) got mixed up in a single out. Harden faced 17 hitters, and all 17 either struck out, walked or got a hit -- an achievement in defensive indifference that no other pitcher in the past 80 seasons has duplicated in a start that long.

Don't Do This Match Classic: David Robertson, Yankees

We're just glad we don't have to explain to any tourists from Moldavia how it's possible for a pitcher to have more strikeouts than outs. But Robertson should be required to do it after this Aug. 6 outing against the Red Sox:

2/3 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 3 K.

Thanks to the miracle of the old strikeout-wild-pitch trick, he's just the sixth pitcher in the past 55 years to have a three-strikeout appearance in which he did *not* get credit for three outs. Last Yankee to do it: Ron Davis, on Sept. 17, 1980.

Minor Miracle: The High Desert Mavericks

There wasn't a crazier game all year -- minor league or major league -- than this June 28 extravaganza in the California League that ended: Lake Elsinore Storm 33, High Desert Mavericks 18. There were so many insane pitching lines from that madness, we have to offer them tag-team style:

- The first three pitchers to take the mound for High Desert -- Nathan Adcock, Juan Zapata and Natividad Dilone -- combined for this goofy line: 4 IP, 19 H, 22 R, 21 ER, 8 BB, 6 K, 1 HR, 6 doubles, 2 triples, 2 WP.

- But the highlight of the day was this performance by High Desert's Jose Yopez -- who was reminded vividly why he's normally a *catcher* for a living: 1/3 IP, 5 H, 5 R, 5 ER, 0 BB, 0 K and 4 HR. Yep, he faced six hitters -- and *four* of them made home run trots.

Magical Mystery Man Tour: Paul Janish, Reds

Finally, in a season so bizarre that *nine* games featured position players trudging to the old pitcher's mound, nobody kept our box-score researchers cranking more than Reds infielder Paul Janish. Check out his two visits to that big pile of dirt:

- May 6 versus Milwaukee: 1 IP, 5 H, 5 R, 5 ER, 0 BB, 2 K, 1 HR (to Prince Fielder).
- July 6 versus Philadelphia: 1 IP, 4 H, 6 R, 6 ER, 2 BB, 1 K, 1 grand slam (to Jayson Werth).

You'd better digest all that for a second. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Janish was the first position player to give up 11 runs in the same season since Willie Smith in 1964 -- except it took Smith 11 appearances.

Even better, Janish was the first mystery player to allow five runs or more *twice* in the same season since Johnny Lindell did it in 1953 -- but Lindell did it over 32 appearances, not *two*.

"You know, records are made to be broken," Janish told Year in Review. "And I'm definitely breaking records. They're just the wrong damn records."

The Five Craziest Games of the Year

- **Suspended animation:** May 5 (with part two July 9): Nationals 11, Astros 10 in 11 innings (spread over nine weeks). Things were zipping along swell in this game until these two creative bullpens conspired to blow leads in the seventh, eighth and ninth innings. And by the 11th, the D.C. weather gods clearly decided they'd seen about enough. So this game got weathered out, and didn't resume until two months later -- in Houston. But as far as the baseball historians were concerned, even the stuff in July actually happened in May -- in Washington. So officially, the Nationals used eight players in this game who weren't even on their team by the time they finished it. The winning run was scored by a guy wearing a Nationals uniform (Nyjer Morgan), even though history will tell us he got a hit for the Pirates the day he scored that run. Because the Nationals were still the "home" team when the festivities picked back up in Houston, the Astros became the first team to lose a game on a walkoff hit in their home park since the Yankees sprung that trick on the 1975 Twins. And not only had Washington's winning pitcher, Joel Hanrahan, been traded to the Pirates by the time this game ended, he was actually taking a nap in Philadelphia when he was awarded the win. "You know," Pirates coach/wit Rich Donnelly told Year in Review, "if he'd have gotten a good eight hours in, he might have had a chance to win 20."

- **Hang 10:** May 25: Indians 11, Rays 10. Nothing too unusual happened in this game -- except for the Indians falling behind 10-0 and *winning*. A week after blowing a seven-run lead to these same Rays, the Indians found themselves trailing 10-2 in the eighth inning and 10-5 with two outs in the ninth. Hey, no problem. They then erupted for their first seven-run bottom of the ninth since (ready?) May 23, 1901. Even crazier, they became the first home team to come from 10 runs back to win a game with a bottom of the ninth of seven runs or more since (ready again?) the first day in the entire life of the American League. That was April 25, 1901, when Kid Eberfield's Tigers chugged from behind against Milwaukee with a 10-run ninth. Then it took more than a quarter-million games for that to happen again. Of course!

- **Gio whiz:** July 20: A's 14, Twins 13. As whacked-out as that Indians-Rays game was, this would be our choice for the most totally berserk game of the year. First off, the A's won a game in which their starting pitcher (Gio Gonzalez) gave up 11 runs -- something no team had pulled off since the 1941 Red Sox (behind Dick "Don't Call Me Bobo" Newsome). The A's were down 12-2 in the third inning, then roared from 10 back to win -- for the first time since 1925. And fittingly, the game ended when the Twins' Michael Cuddyer got thrown out trying to score on a wild pitch -- from second base. "I don't think you'll see many games crazier than that one," A's reliever Michael Wuertz told the Contra Costa Times' Joe Stiglich. "After that out was made, I was thinking, 'I don't know what just happened.'"

- **18-wheeler:** Aug. 31: Blue Jays 18, Rangers 10. What madness. First, the Blue Jays scored 11 straight runs. Then they gave up 10 consecutive runs. Then they scored the final seven runs. Well, you sure don't see *that* every day. According to Elias, this was the first game since the legendary Phillies-Cubs 23-22 game on May 17, 1979, in which one team scored at least 10 consecutive runs at one point, allowed at least 10 in a row at another point and ran off at least seven more in a row in yet another stretch. Even more amazing, the Blue Jays became the first team to give up 10 consecutive runs in a game and still win it by *eight* runs since Chicken Wolf's Louisville Colonels did it against Baltimore on May 12, 1887. Well, we always said it might be another century before you see a team like those Louisville Colonels.

- **Just Joshin':** June 7: Diamondbacks 9, Padres 6 in 18 mesmerizing innings. The Padres really aren't required by their lease at Petco Park to play one 18-inning game every year. It just seems like it. You had 18 different pitchers combine to throw 593 pitches in this game. David Eckstein, a man with zero homers at the time, tied it with a three-run pinch homer with two outs in the ninth. But after that, 31 Padres hitters came to the plate -- and *none* of them got a hit. And it still took the Diamondbacks nine innings to win it, on a three-run 18th-inning homer by Mark Reynolds -- off an *infielder*. That was Josh Wilson, who became the fourth position player in the last 40 years to figure out a way to become a losing pitcher. Incredibly, Wilson had just pitched in a game *for* the Diamondbacks 27 days earlier. So he also became the first position player to pitch for two teams in one year since Willie Smith did it in 1968. Was Josh Wilson the most historic figure of 2009? Maybe Ichiro, Derek Jeter and Pudge Rodriguez will fight us on that. But he sure kept Year in Review entertained.

Five Memorable Freeze-Frames of the Year

- **Three for the price of one:** Aug: 23, Citi Field: Phillies second baseman Eric Bruntlett was minding his own business in the ninth inning of this game -- when the second game-ending unassisted triple play in history came flying directly at him. Toss in a not-so-well-timed double-steal attempt by the Mets and a line drive toward the bag by Jeff Francoeur -- and even Bruntlett admits he didn't actually turn that triple play. *It turned him*. "I didn't really have much choice but to

tag second after I caught it. The ball kind of took me right there," Bruntlett told Year in Review. "Then I turned around to try to find [baserunner Daniel Murphy]. And I didn't have any choice there, either. He pretty much came right to me." So if a double play is a pitcher's best friend, what's a game-ending unassisted triple play? "Boy, how do you get better than a best friend?" Bruntlett chuckled. "I don't know. But whatever's better than that, that's what it was."

• **The Picture of Perfection:** July 23, U.S. Cellular Field: As loyal reader Ed Burmila made sure to report, more men have orbited the moon (21) than thrown a perfect game (18). And of all the pitchers who have ever thrown one, you'd have a tough time finding a less likely candidate than the White Sox's lovable Mark Buehrle, a fellow whose opponent batting average (.270) is higher than the average of any perfect-game artist in history. But on this day, the Rays cooperatively went 27-up, 27-down. And Buehrle joined Don Larsen as the only men in history to throw an el perfecto at an incumbent league champ -- thanks to an unforgettable wall-splattering, no-no-saving kamikaze ninth-inning catch by center fielder Dewayne Wise. "He might wake up tomorrow," the Rays' Pat Burrell quipped about Wise, "with a new car in his driveway."

• **The Hidden Ball Trick:** July 28, Wrigley Field: We've all seen ground balls that found holes. But usually they're not buttonholes. But on this beautiful shirt-sleeve evening, Astros reliever Jeff Fulchino had more than a trick up his sleeve. He induced a one-hopper back to the mound by Kosuke Fukudome, only to have the ball disappear -- right down his shirt. At first, no one on the field was real certain what had just transpired. "I thought he just absorbed it, maybe swallowed it or something," third baseman Geoff Blum told Year in Review. But after doing a full pirouette on the mound, Fulchino detected a lump in his abdomen that didn't appear to have anything to do with his trip through the pregame food spread. So Fukudome had himself the weirdest infield single of the year. Asked if Fulchino should have just fired the shirt to first base, Blum replied: "Hell, no. That's the last thing we wanted to do. The wind was blowing out. It could have been ugly."

• **Ya Gotta Bee-lieve:** July 2, Petco Park: In what had to rank as the favorite game of the year for Samantha Bee, B.J. Surhoff and all the contestants in the National Spelling Bee, the Astros and Padres spent this day buzzing about the longest bee delay in modern baseball history. They wasted 52 minutes of their valuable lives watching thousands of bees apparently confuse the left-field ball girl's Padres jacket for a lilac bush, or something. Fortunately, the Padres knew just where to find their very own friendly neighborhood beekeeper. And he eventually stalked out of the left-field corner, sprayed every insect between the foul line and Del Mar, and allowed these two teams to get on with their important baseball-playing lives. "You know, it's so ironic to have this happen in San Diego," Astros broadcast-humorist Jim Deshaies told Year in Review, "because they're never going to have a rain delay. I don't even know if they have a tarp. But they have a beekeeper on speed dial."

• **Don't Feed the Birds:** June 11, Progressive Field: Man wasn't meant to fly. And birds weren't meant to play center field. But tell that to the deranged seagulls of Cleveland. For some reason, in mid-May, these birdbrains mistook the Progressive outfield for the sands of Kapalua or something. And dozens of them began roaming the field *during* games. "One time, there was a ball hit, and I was playing in center field," since-traded Indians outfielder Ben Francisco told Year in Review. "The ball was hit to my left. So I took off, and the birds all took off, too. Flew right over my head. It was crazy." Asked if they distracted him from catching that fly ball, Francisco retorted: "I was just trying not to get pooped on." The Indians eventually chased the birds back toward peaceful waters by shooting off fireworks between innings. But for a few weeks there, they just waddled around, doing their best to wander into as many "SportsCenter" highlights as possible. Their crowning moment came in this June 11 game against the Royals, when Shin-Soo Choo ingeniously deflected a game-winning hit off a seagull. Till then, those birds had given no indication they were rooting for the Indians. "But maybe they were," Francisco theorized. "They got in the way of that ball. And we won, right? So maybe they were."

Davis Emerging as an Athletic Team Leader

Charley Thompson, Alameda Sun

Rajai Davis is a spark plug. Or he's a blasting cap. Maybe both. Either way Davis has been a catalyst for the Athletics as he's helped lead the team to its recent ascent in the win column.

On September Fourth the A's were 59-76. Since then Oakland has won 12 of 14 (after Sunday's game) to improve their record to 71-78. Last week they swept the Rangers and Indians. The A's need to win at least nine of their last 13 games to avoid a losing record for the third year in a row.

Utilizing great pitching, which the A's have had recently, is one thing. A team also needs to score runs to convert those fine pitching performances into wins (ask the Giant starters about that). Lately the A's have scored a ton partly because Rajai Davis has been a league leading hitter and base stealer since the All Star Break.

While hitting .395 in the month of September, Davis has led the American League in hits and stolen bases for the month. His .347 batting average since the All Star Break is sixth best in the AL.

A's bench coach Tye Waller has been one of many to note that the A's recent successes have coincided with Davis'.

"I think it's played a big part," Waller said by the dugout before last Saturday's 8-4 win over Cleveland. Waller believes Davis and Adam Kennedy's ability to get on base at the top of the lineup is key to Oakland's winning ways.

"More times than not you've got somebody on base every turn around on the lineup," Waller said. "That has created pressure on the defense because of their speed and their ability to recognize situations. And their clutch hitting. They're two of the better hitters with runners in scoring position. And they're also scoring a ton of runs for us."

Does Waller believe Davis is a team leader right now?

"He's one of them," Waller said. "Rajai is still in the learning process in regards that he's done it a couple of years. You become that leader. He's more of a leader by example, a leader by his play. As a team leader it encompasses the experience factor that he's getting right now. He's put himself in a good position for a promising next year. He could become a star in the league."

Ask Davis why the A's are winning and he'll tell you it's because of the team's attitude.

"We have a positive outlook everyday," Davis said while sitting in front of his locker. "Every guy thinks he's going to produce and help us win. With our attitude nothing is impossible for the whole group of guys who believe the same thing."

Davis pointed out that the team's attitude is the same as when they were losing in April, only now the club is having more fun.

"There may have been more pressure on some of the guys who were here and they felt like they had to do more than what they were capable of doing," Davis said. "Now everyone is chipping in and the weight is not

all on one person's shoulder. We have great pitching. We're playing great defense. And we're scoring more runs than the other team."

From his spot in centerfield, Davis has had a prime location to watch three of the A's touted rookie pitchers, Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill and Vin Mazzaro, improve.

"Just seeing them throughout the whole year," Davis said, "and seeing them in the beginning when they were just a little bit timid just because they were unsure of what types of hitters they were facing or how they were going to get hit. Seeing them develop, gain confidence as the year has gone on, seeing them mature on the mound and have some poise when they're in a difficult situation and to come through those difficult situations with flying colors it's really amazing. Considering the fact that they are 21 years old in the big leagues that's big."

Davis' first big league team was the Pirates. The Giants acquired him in a July 2007 trade. The Athletics claimed Davis off waivers in April of 2008 after he began last year by getting one hit in 18 at bats.

Davis said the difference between that Rajai Davis and the one who is terrorizing American League pitchers is confidence.

"Getting the opportunity and believing in my abilities with what God has blessed me with already," Davis said. "And keeping a positive mindset through ups and downs and throughout the whole experience."

Former players are known to visit their old teams. Whether it was Willie Mays with the Giants or now Rickey Henderson with the A's, Davis often uses the opportunity to learn from the masters.

"I was able to talk to Rickey and get some ideas from him," Davis said. "It would be nice if Rickey could be here even more. Just his attitude and his presence is deeply appreciated. Ricky has a wealth of knowledge obviously."

Davis said that while he was with the Giants, "Willie Mays was always in the clubhouse. I got to talk to Willie and I even cut his hair. It was an honor just to have Willie in the locker room.

"One of the things Willie liked, he liked to use a heavier bat. That's something to consider."

As for cutting tresses in the clubhouse, the self taught Davis said he has been the barber for more than half of the A's players.

With Davis in center field, Kurt Suzuki behind the dish, and the way the rest of the A's have been doing including the young pitching staff, are the A's a couple of pieces away from the pennant hunt next year?

"You never know," coach Waller said. "At the end of the season we're finishing strong. The question is do we have enough so that we can do this throughout the season. When you're out of the race it's a different game.

When you're not in a meaningful game as far as winning the pennant, you're a spoiler. It's a different role.

We want to have games that mean something in September and getting these guys to understand if they can execute day in and day out this can be a continued way of A's baseball. The goal is to have a couple more veteran guys that are run producers and continue to have solid pitching, base running and the solid defense."

"Right now we're playing to have fun," Davis said. "We're playing to win every game. We're going to continue to play like we're playing and we'll continue to stay positive and we'll see what happens."