

Oakland A's lose to Texas Rangers, who close in on AL West title

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

After managing to keep their faint hopes flickering over the past week, the A's may finally have to face cold reality -- the Texas Rangers are going to win the American League West.

The only pertinent question as far as the A's are concerned may be where it happens. They'd prefer it not occur on their home field, but suddenly that's also looking likely.

Vladimir Guerrero drove in four runs with a homer and a bases-loaded double Friday night as the Rangers pounded out 18 hits and beat Oakland 10-3, boosting their division lead to eight games with nine to go. The victory officially ended the Los Angeles Angels' three-year reign as division champions and reduced the magic number against the A's to two.

In other words, Texas will be staging its title celebration at the Coliseum over the weekend unless the A's can win today and Sunday against the Rangers, who are looking to capture their first division crown since 1999.

The visitors aren't sipping any champagne prematurely, however.

"We just have to come out and not try to get too bigheaded or anxious with our situation," Guerrero said through a translator. "We just need to win a ballgame and we don't need to make it about anything more than that."

Texas manager Ron Washington, who celebrated a few division championships on Coliseum turf when he was the A's third base coach, was playing it just as cautiously.

"We feel good about ourselves and we'll see what happens in the next couple of days," Washington said. "We hope it's (today), but if it's not, we'll continue to come out the next day to try and finish it off."

Texas, which had lost four of five entering Friday night, broke open a tight game with a five-run seventh inning, culminated by Guerrero's three-run double to left-center off A's reliever Boof Bonser.

After scrambling to find a job in the offseason, the 35-year-old DH has had quite a year, with 28 home runs and 111 RBIs to go along with a .303 average. An astounding 53 of Guerrero's 111 RBIs have come with two out, which leads the major leagues.

"That's something he's been doing all year, all you have to do is look at the production numbers," Washington said. "We're just glad he did what he did for us tonight."

The Rangers never trailed. They forged an early 1-0 lead against A's left-hander Bobby Cramer, who was looking to go 3-0, when Guerrero sent his first pitch of the second over the center-field wall.

The A's offense, meanwhile, went nowhere against Texas starter Tommy Hunter (13-4) over the first five innings. Hunter gave up four hits over that span, three of them with two out. The only time Oakland got a runner in scoring position was when Chris Carter doubled down the left field line with two out in the second, but Aki Iwamura struck out.

The A's closed to within 2-1 in the sixth but that one-run deficit was short-lived. Jeff Francoeur opened the seventh with his 12th homer of year and first as a Ranger after being acquired from the New York Mets on Sept. 4. Jorge Cantu followed with a double down the left-field line, and that was it for Cramer.

His successor, Bonser, couldn't keep it close and ultimately surrendered the game-breaker to Guerrero. Now the A's have their backs to the wall, with the prospect of the Rangers closing it out against them.

"I don't think anybody's going to take their foot off the gas," said outfielder Gabe Gross. "I don't think anybody will take their foot off the gas until Oct. 3. That's the way we've played all year long, and I don't expect that to change. We'll give all we have to give."

Oakland A's update: Rickey Henderson is willing to help top prospect Chris Carter learn to play left field

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson has some advice for Chris Carter if the A's decide the top prospect is going to become a permanent left fielder -- do it, and embrace it.

"I was a center fielder when I came up and they moved me to left," Henderson said. "They told me I was going to play left or go back down to the minor leagues, so I said, 'OK, I'll go over the left.' When you're a young guy, you're just trying to stay up here."

Henderson, a roving instructor for the A's who teaches primarily baserunning, believes Carter has excellent potential as a left fielder and wouldn't mind getting a chance to work him at the position. After all, Rickey played 2,423 games in left field over a 25-year career and did a pretty fair job. He won a Gold Glove in 1981.

Since Carter played mostly first base at Triple-A Sacramento, Henderson didn't have an opportunity to talk to him much about outfield play. But if that's Carter's future -- it appears Daric Barton is set at first base after a strong defensive season there -- Henderson believes he has something to offer.

"I can help him," Henderson said. "I can teach him how to read the ball off the bat, how to get a good jump, how to always be prepared setting up. If he can learn how do those things, it'll come to him. He's a natural athlete with good feet, so he just needs to get out there and play and start feeling relaxed."

Henderson is excited about Carter's prospects as a major league hitter as well.

"I'm glad he got that first hit and got it off his back," he said. "He's starting to relax. I think he's going to be good. You don't keep hitting 30-35 home runs everywhere you go and not do it up here. Sooner or later, it's going to happen for him."

Less than two weeks after the season, Carter will travel to Caracas, Venezuela, to play winter ball with the La Guaira Tiburones. The A's can't exert any authority over where Carter plays, but Carter says he has expressed a preference to play in the outfield.

"Hopefully, I can play enough out there where I can get more comfortable," he said.

Outfielder Rajai Davis, a late scratch Thursday night, was held out Friday for what the club termed a non-baseball related issue. Neither manager Bob Geren nor Davis would elaborate, but Davis took batting practice and participated in warm-ups. Greg Gross started in center field and Mark Ellis was the leadoff hitter.

Texas can clinch AL West with 1 win over A's

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

With a mix of bunts and power, the Rangers all but planted a flag in the American League West.

Texas used three bunts, including a suicide squeeze, and three solo homers en route to flattening Oakland 10-3 on Friday night at the Coliseum. The Rangers held a one-run lead going into the seventh, then scored five times off starter Bobby Cramer and reliever Boof Bonser to put the game, and essentially the division, out of reach.

"Before it was like we could smell it - and now we can taste it," Rangers second baseman Ian Kinsler said.

The A's are eight games out with nine games to play, putting the Rangers' magic number at two. With a win either today or Sunday, Texas would claim the division crown.

"It's obviously a tough hill to overcome," A's manager Bob Geren said. "All we can do is try to win every single game at this point. That's been our approach for a long time."

Cramer, a 30-year-old rookie who'd won his first two big-league starts, allowed a homer by Vladimir Guerrero leading off the second, and a double by Ian Kinsler in the fourth that was followed by Jeff Francoeur's RBI single; shortstop Cliff Pennington dived for the ball but it kicked off his glove.

Francoeur hit a solo homer to lead off the seventh, and five of the seven runs Cramer has allowed in his three starts have come on solo homers. Jorge Cantu doubled, Chris Davis ran for him, and Bonser replaced Cramer.

"We needed a shutdown inning in the seventh," Cramer said. "If I go 1-2-3, we're right back in the game. And I give up a run right back. ... I take responsibility for the big inning. I didn't hand over an easy situation to Boof, and it snowballed."

After one bunt put Davis at third, he charged home as Julio Borbon put down another. Borbon made it safely to first, beating the throw from Bonser. After still another sacrifice, a walk, and an infield single, Guerrero cleared the bases with a double.

The A's didn't back Cramer with much against Tommy Hunter, with only one runner getting past first in the first five innings.

In the sixth, Mark Ellis singled and stole second, and with one out, Kurt Suzuki sent him to third with a base hit. Jack Cust struck out looking, his 39th strikeout in 93 at-bats with men in scoring position.

Pinch-hitter Matt Carson then drove in Ellis with a soft single to left-center.

Cust grounded out with the bases loaded to end the seventh.

Jeremy Hermida, who has played sparingly of late, had four hits, tying his career high. He doubled in a run in the eighth. Ellis had three hits, his 10th multi-hit game of the month, and he's batting .405 over the past 22 games.

Rajai Davis remained out with "a non-baseball-related issue." He took batting practice and said he felt fine; he again declined to give specifics about why he was scratched Thursday night and out Friday.

Michael Wuertz, who has been bothered by a swollen right thumb, threw off the bullpen mound before the game and said he was ready to go.

Briefly: Chris Carter has a five-game hitting streak at home, where he is 6-for-14. He's 0-for-32 on the road. ... Catcher Josh Donaldson said he's considering playing some winter ball, but probably not in Mexico again.

OAKLAND A'S LEADING OFF

[Susan Slusser](#), San Francisco Chronicle

Taking flight: Following an A's bullpen tradition going back to Jason Isringhausen, Craig Breslow led several relievers onto the field Friday to fly a remote-controlled plane. He promptly crashed it a few times and took it to the training room for repairs.

Drumbeat: Davis remains out, Wuertz said he's good to go

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 9/24/2010 5:41PM

Rajai Davis is still out with that "non-baseball related issue." He was on the field, he took batting practice, and he was surprised to hear that manager Bob Geren told us he was unavailable tonight. He said he feels OK, but another day off wouldn't be a bad thing. He again declined to provide specifics.

That means that Gabe Gross is in center. He made a terrific catch diving into foul territory last night; Dallas Braden compared it to Gross' days as Auburn's quarterback, leaping across the goal line. "Dallas must not have seen me play at Auburn," Gross said with a laugh.

Michael Wuertz's right thumb is a little less swollen and he played catch and then threw off the bullpen mound, and he just told me that he's good to go tonight. That was accompanied with a little shrug, sort of non-committal, but when I pressed him, he said, yes, he is really available tonight.

The lineup: Ellis 2b, Barton 1b, Suzuki c, Cust dh, Gross cf, Carter lf, Iwamura 3b, Hermida rf, Pennington ss.

It's Bobby Cramer's first start at home tonight; he's up against Tommy Hunter.

The Coliseum certainly has been a friend to Chris Carter: He's 5-for-10 here, 0-for-32 on the road.

If you saw Sunday's feature about Trevor Cahill in The Chronicle, you didn't see [the whole thing: Cahill's mom, JoAnne, was nice enough to have some great family photos scanned in for us](#) to use, but the story didn't run the day originally planned and I think the photos sort of fell between the cracks by the time the story got into the paper. Great stuff, and I'm hoping there's a chance to sneak them into The Chronicle some day. Thanks, JoAnne!

A's face elimination after falling to Rangers

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's found themselves tasting a small helping of Texas' recent hitting woes on Friday.

The Rangers, meanwhile, decided they were done with their slumping ways. Done in a five-run-inning kind of way. And two-home-runs kind of way. A big way, basically.

Together, it made for something of a predictable night at the Oakland Coliseum, where the A's watched Texas' magic number shrink to two with a 10-3 loss to the Rangers, who now have a chance to clinch the American League West title as soon as Saturday.

The A's attempted not to think of such a thing heading into Friday's contest, but the Rangers made it hard not to by having their way with an Oakland pitching staff that just 24 hours prior had limited Texas to one hit. The A's will again try not to think of the standings entering Saturday afternoon's contest, all the while knowing they stand eight games back with nine remaining.

"It's obviously a tough hill to overcome, and all you can do is try to win every game we can at this point," manager Bob Geren offered. "That's been our attitude for a long time. Guys are giving it all they've got. I'm proud of their effort, and we'll continue to do that the rest of the way."

"I don't know," Kurt Suzuki said, shaking his head. "We just want to keep playing. The standings, it is what it is. You can't really think about it. You just have to go out and try to keep win games."

Friday's affair didn't get ugly until late. In fact, both teams combined for six innings of good baseball. The only Rangers runs attached to the scoreboard through six came courtesy of a second-inning homer from Vladimir Guerrero and an RBI single from Jeff Francoeur in the fourth.

Guerrero's homer -- his 28th of the season -- put an end to Texas' string of 32 innings without posting an earned run.

Even then, the A's were still in it against starter Tommy Hunter and Co. They even narrowed Texas' lead to one in the bottom half of the sixth, thanks to a run-scoring single from pinch-hitter Matt Carson.

But the flood gates opened wide in a seventh inning that saw nine Rangers batters step to the plate and five runs cross it.

First up was Francoeur, who decided to do a little more damage off Cramer by belting a homer to left field to make it 3-1. Jorge Cantu followed with a double, putting an end to the Oakland lefty's night following a season-high six-plus innings in just his third career start.

Cramer, who entered the big leagues riding an 11-start, 70 2/3-innings homerless streak, has now offered up five in his three starts with Oakland. Cramer had given up just six in 169 2/3 Minor League innings overall before his callup.

"You fall behind and throw a fastball here, they're going to get it," Cramer said. "That's what they're doing. I'm not helping my cause. I need to pitch better behind the count. I think I'm underestimating what these guys can do up here. I need to do a better job of making quality pitches and knowing your hitter. I haven't done that. It's a problem I'm going to have to try to correct."

But the homers proved to be the least of worries on a night when Texas seemingly found every which way to score. Chris Davis, pinch-running for Cantu, ultimately moved to third on a sacrifice bunt from Bengie Molina off reliever Boof Bonser before racing down the third-base line on a squeeze bunt single off the bat of Julio Borbon.

Texas' 4-1 lead eventually turned into a 7-1 lead by way of a three-run double from Guerrero, who tabbed four RBIs on the night. All three of those runs were attached to Bonser, who has now yielded 13 runs in his last seven outings after not allowing any in his first two appearances with the A's.

"They're a good team," Texas' Michael Young said. "They've got good pitching. But we always knew the offensive talent we have and that we're always one big inning away. We always want to scratch and claw, but we know we're capable of one big inning."

"[Cramer] was missing some locations, and they were starting to get on him pretty good," Geren said. "Then we had a guy like Bonser who had been throwing the ball pretty well, and they got to him good. Whoever we used tonight at that point didn't work."

The "whoever" included Ross Wolf, who surrendered three more Rangers runs in the eighth inning.

The A's, meanwhile, managed very little against Hunter, who tossed 5 1/3 innings of one-run ball. The Rangers' righty gave up six hits and struck out four while improving to 4-0 in five career starts against Oakland.

Cliff Pennington cut his club's deficit to five runs in the seventh with an RBI double that scored Jeremy Hermida, who enjoyed a career high-tying four-hit night. But, despite loading the bases with one out in the frame, the A's managed to end the threat without any further damage. Overall, they left 10 on base, a number not so pretty standing next to Texas' 18 hits.

"We had some chances, but obviously they had a lot more chances and did a lot more damage," Geren said. "They swung the bats extremely well tonight."

Texas' efforts officially have the A's on the brink of elimination, but that doesn't mean anyone is about ready to help the Rangers prepare the champagne.

"It is frustrating because we were in it tonight," Suzuki said. "And then they started hitting everything. Once you get rolling -- any team -- you see that hitting is contagious. It's hard to stop something like that. It's just one of those nights you have to put it behind you and move forward."

Rangers can clinch AL West with win over A's

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

It's very simple for the Texas Rangers on Saturday. If they beat Oakland, they clinch the American League West. If they lose, the A's stay alive in the race for at least one more day.

The task in front of young Texas left-hander Derek Holland figures to be a great challenge.

Holland must break out of the inconsistency that's hindered his progress in an injury-plagued year and try to win on the road so he can join his teammates in popping champagne corks in the visiting clubhouse at Oakland Alameda Coliseum.

He'll have to do better than he did last time out.

In that outing, on Monday in Anaheim, Holland took a 7-4 loss to the Angels after giving up four runs on six hits and three walks in 3 2/3 innings. He looked sharp for two innings, was saved by a home run-saving catch by center fielder Julio Borbon in the third and gave up three runs before exiting with two outs in the fourth.

"The first two innings, I felt really good," Holland said. "Everything worked perfectly. Then, my offspeed stuff kind of shut down and it really hurt me. It was easy for them to sit back and go after my fastball."

Holland, going back to last season, was 5-6 with a 4.52 ERA in his first 14 starts in the Major Leagues. Since then, he is 4-10 with a 7.25 ERA in his last 16 starts. He won his first two starts in May before ending up on the disabled list with shoulder inflammation.

Over his last seven Major League starts, he is 1-4 with a 5.64 ERA as he continues to try to find command and confidence in his three-pitch repertoire.

"He just didn't have the command he's capable of having," Rangers manager Ron Washington said after his last outing. "The thing that got him in trouble is he couldn't get that third out. If he gets that third out, he could have gone much deeper in the game."

The A's will do their best to continue Holland's struggles on Saturday in what could be a last-ditch effort to keep contention alive.

They'll turn to their own talented young left-hander, Gio Gonzalez, who has quietly put together a breakout season. A victory on Saturday would be Gonzalez's 15th of the season, extending his career-high total.

The southpaw has allowed one run or fewer in 10 of his last 17 starts and is 8-4 with a 2.67 ERA and .221 opponents batting average over that span.

Rangers: Feliz one save from history

Closer Neftali Feliz needs one more save to reach 38 for the season and set a Major League record for saves by a rookie. He can eclipse the mark of 37 that he shares with Kazuhiro Sasaki, who accomplished the feat for the Seattle Mariners in 2000. Feliz has pitched 12 scoreless innings in his last 12 games. ... Holland is 1-1 with a 2.84 ERA in five career games against Oakland, including a 1-1 record and 2.61 ERA in two starts.

A's: Success has been day and night

One thing in the A's favor for Saturday might be the fact that they've been a lot better during the day than they've been at night this year. The A's have a 34-18 record during the day, compared to a 43-58 mark at night. The day record is tied with Colorado for the best in the Majors and the night record is fourth-worst in the AL. ... Gonzalez is 3-1 with a 1.93 ERA in seven career appearances (five starts) against Texas and is 2-1 with a 2.74 ERA in four starts against the Rangers this year.

Worth noting

Texas designated hitter Vladimir Guerrero was hitless in his previous 10 at-bats entering Friday night's win over the A's, in which he went 3-for-5 with a homer, a double and four RBIs. He is batting .371 (26-for-70) over his last 17 games and has hit safely in 15 of his last 18 games overall with eight multihit games. ... The A's have used the disabled list 23 times, which is second-most in Oakland history behind 23 in 2008. They've used the DL 87 times since the start of the 2007 season. The only team that has used the DL more over that span is Texas (98).

Breslow filling workhorse role in A's 'pen

By Alex Espinoza and Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Much of Craig Breslow's year has been highlighted by off-the-field accomplishments, most recently as cover boy of this week's Sporting News for his nod as the smartest athlete in sports.

But inside the A's clubhouse, Breslow's Yale-educated mind isn't valued so much as his overall worth to a team that views him as "the one constant in the bullpen," according to hurler Brett Anderson.

"He's been phenomenal," Anderson said. "He's filled all kinds of roles it seems like, whether it is as a closer or to get a lefty out. Anything he's been asked to do, he's done it and done it well."

Breslow's workload has spanned 71 appearances, third-most among American League relievers. He's tallied 69 1/3 innings and is just one out away from matching his 2009 total. All the while, he's compiled a 3.12 ERA and has allowed just six of 32 (18.8 percent) of his inherited runners to score, which ranks second in the AL.

High-ranking numbers are great and all, but none would be tallied without health, something Breslow has been able to maintain throughout the season, give or take a couple of days due to a bruised forearm as a result of a line drive that came back at him.

"Breslow has been remarkably consistent all year," manager Bob Geren said. "If you look at the body of work he and guys like [Michael] Wuertz and [Andrew] Bailey did, they've all been outstanding. The difference is Breslow has been consistently healthy all year. He's been so valuable in that bullpen. All those guys have done a great job, but if you look at a combination of performance and availability, he's been the guy."

Breslow has never found himself on the disabled list, an even bigger accomplishment in Oakland, where the A's have sent 23 to the DL this year.

"There's something to be said for that, especially the way he's been used this year," Anderson said. "He's been one of the few that's maintained health throughout the year. It seems like every time we look down there, asking ourselves who is up, the answer's Breslow. He works hard, and it shows in his consistency and resiliency out on the mound."

"He's got a very resilient arm, a resilient body, and he's mentally tough," fellow reliever Brad Ziegler said. "He knows that he can go out and be successful at any time. That's something we've come to depend on him for. The players are counting on him to give us innings night after night because he can do it. You hope long-term it's not doing any damage to him, but I think for right now he's throwing the ball well."

"There's a couple of nights where he's been down there and unavailable, and he's thinking how much he wants to get out there and pitch. He just has that drive."

Home sweet home for Carter

OAKLAND -- Home has certainly been sweet to Chris Carter.

The 23-year-old Oakland slugger, who went 0-for-32 on the road to start his career, has since hit in all four home games on the current stand, going 5-for-10 with a home run, two RBIs and three runs scored.

"The games are a lot more fun now that I'm actually contributing and helping the team out, instead of just going 0-for every game," Carter said. "Now I'm not thinking about this 0-for streak I had. Now it's gone. It's all past. I can just keep going after this."

But Carter's biggest adjustment hasn't come in the batter's box, as he is trying to make the move from his natural position of first base to left field. In 13 of his initial 15 big league games, Carter has played in left, while he's played designated hitter in the other two contests. First-base coach Todd Steverson has been working with Carter before games to improve his defense.

"Only time is going to tell how good he'll end up being out there," Steverson said. "For a relative newbie in the outfield, he's doing all right. He goes after ball OK. It takes a while to really understand your feet in the outfield, in terms of your breaks and your moves. ... He's a good enough athlete to catch the ball, it's just a matter of getting to the right spots."

Carter said he will be going to Venezuela this winter, marking the second straight season he's headed south for winter ball. Last season, Carter played in Mexico, but he missed about two weeks of action due to illness.

This time around, Carter's main focus will be on defense. Carter will be playing for the Tiburones de La Guaira in Caracas, while fellow A's Jeff Larish and Henry Rodriguez will be playing for the Leones de Caracas, another Venezuelan team based out the same stadium. In all, Carter has only played about a month of left field between his time in Triple-A Sacramento and Oakland.

"It takes a while to make the adjustment with your eyes from the infield to the outfield and learning how read balls off the bat," Steverson said. "If the season ended and he was never to show up again for Spring Training, he would probably still be behind as an outfielder. But him going to winter ball, that's going to help him quite a bit."

Gross making most of limited time

OAKLAND -- Gabe Gross paused and smiled when asked on Friday about his performance this season, knowing it's rather difficult to judge when playing time with the A's has been sparse and erratic.

"I think up and down probably would be a good description," Gross said. "I think I've played really well at times, and there have been other times where I've felt I could have done a lot more, which is probably the attitude of almost every guy in this clubhouse."

But Gross isn't like every guy in the clubhouse. He'll be 31 in October and has already played for four teams in seven Major League seasons. Nevertheless, he's been around the block and realizes his recent lack of playing time -- his Thursday start marked his third straight after going 24 games without one -- is partly the result of the A's wanting a look at the younger crowd.

"You've definitely seen that toward the end of the year, but at the same time I guess my job responsibility has been to remain ready, and I feel like I've done that," he said. "I feel like when there were long stretches where I wasn't playing and the opportunity popped up for me to play, I was prepared. The couple times I've been put in following those stretches, I think I've done my job well."

Gross, signed by the A's as a free agent to a one-year contract in February, admits he didn't have many expectations heading into the year. He hit .278 with 12 RBIs in 24 Spring Training games and entered the season on the bench following a 2009 season with the Rays that saw him start 71 games while platooning with Gabe Kapler in right field much of the time. He came into Thursday's contest batting .167 (10-for-60) since the All-Star break after hitting .309 over his first 37 games.

"I didn't really have any idea what this was going to hold," he said. "I didn't really know exactly the role I was going to play. I knew I wasn't coming into a situation where I was going to really get that chance to play every single day. I didn't know all they had going on. Looking back on it, it's been kind of a wild ride, so to speak. There's been stretches where I've played for a week straight or five days in a row, and then there have been stretches where I haven't played for three weeks at a time."

Through it all, Gross admits he thought about the possibility of being moved or designated, but is thankful the club has "obviously kept me here for some reason." Thus, despite his looming free-agent status, he wouldn't mind returning to Oakland again next year.

"Definitely," Gross said. "I don't know what's going to happen these last 10 games, but these guys, I think there's a good foundation here to win and contend for the playoffs next year. On top of that, I've enjoyed being around these guys."

I kind of have my nose to the ground, trying to keep my head in these last games. But whatever happens in the offseason, I'll just deal with it when it gets here."

To land a spot on the 2011 roster, Gross will have to compete with guys like Chris Carter, Rajai Davis, Ryan Sweeney, Conor Jackson and possibly Coco Crisp, whose option for next season is likely to be picked up.

Davis remains unavailable

OAKLAND -- Rajai Davis was unavailable for a second straight night Friday, when both he and A's manager Bob Geren again declined to give a reason other than to say it involved a "non-baseball-related issue."

Davis, however, took part in batting practice before the club's contest against the Rangers, thus continuing speculation about his lineup absence. He was a late scratch before Wednesday's game and insisted the matter is "personal."

With Davis out of the mix, Geren again placed Mark Ellis in the leadoff spot and played an outfield boasting Chris Carter in left, Gabe Gross in center and Jeremy Hermida in right.

Worth noting

A's lefty Jerry Blevins, battling a shoulder strain, has yet to resume throwing, and there is still no timetable for his return. ... Right-handed reliever Brad Ziegler, who entered Friday's contest having either appeared in or warmed up in the club's last seven games, was unavailable Friday. ... Thursday's one-hitter against the Rangers marked the fourth time in Oakland history the A's had a no-hitter and one-hitter in the same season and the first time since 1975.

Rangers Close to Clinching Division

Malaika Bobino, Oakland Post

Oakland, CA – The hitting woes for the Texas Rangers ended tonight. Two out and one day away from clinching the division, the A's fate falls in the hands of two of their best pitchers.

Both Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill will be on hand for the last two games of the series. To avoid elimination and the thought of popping champagne bottles on their turf Oakland must win the next two games.

The Rangers struggles at bat are now over, a team effort led them to defeat the A's 10-3 and move closer to capturing their first division title since 1999. Vladimir Guerrero opened up the hitting spree in the second inning with a solo home run. He then drove in a total of four runs including a double in the seventh frame.

"After yesterday's lost, I refocused and came out ready tonight," said Guerrero. "I got the opportunity to make some things happen, I got good swings and hit the ball hard." "We're all aware of where we stand in the division, we just want to win ball games and put runs on the board."

It just seemed effortless the way Texas scored throughout the game. They pounded out eighteen hits on Bobby Cramer and Oakland's bullpen. Cramer gave up eight hits in six innings. He allowed four runs (four earned), no walks, three strikes and two home runs.

"You fall behind and throw a fastball here, they're going to get it," Cramer said. "I need to pitch behind the count, I think I under estimated what these guys can do out here."

Jeff Francoeur opened the seventh inning with his 12th homer of the year and Jorge Cantu followed with a doubled to left field. The offense continued to dominate, both Bengie Molina and Michael Young doubled in the eighth inning.

The A's couldn't get anything going against Tommy Hunter's 5 1/3 innings when he gave up six hits while striking out four. Despite Jeremy Hermida's career-high tying four hits, Oakland had little offense against the Rangers defense.

The only opportunity the A's had to put a runner in scoring position was when Chris Carter doubled in the second frame but Aki Iwamura struck out. By the sixth inning Oakland tried closing the gap but Texas shut that down as they took over in the seventh inning scoring five runs.

"I don't think anybody's going to take their foot off the gas," Gabe Gross said. "We'll give all we have to give until Oct 3rd." "We played all year long with the intent to win every series and I don't expect that to change."

Rangers edge closer to AL West crown

Hunter gets 13th win, Guerrero leads attack as Texas lowers magic number to 2

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Tommy Hunter pitched effectively into the sixth inning to earn his career-high 13th victory and the Texas Rangers moved a step closer toward winning their first division title in more than a decade by beating the Oakland Athletics 10-3 on Friday night.

Vladimir Guerrero was a triple shy of the cycle and drove in four runs for the Rangers (85-68) who reduced their magic number to two. Texas can clinch the AL West by beating Oakland in either of the final two games of this four-game series.

One night after getting shut out for the second time in three games, the Rangers snapped out of their offensive slump in a big way with 18 hits while Hunter and five relievers combined to handcuff the A's.

The Rangers held a 10-game lead over Oakland a week ago before dropping four of five. The A's won four of five, including a 5-0 blanking of Texas on Thursday, to keep things interesting.

Now up by eight games with nine left, the Rangers are within reach of securing their first division title since 1999 after a tough offseason that included manager Ron Washington admitting during spring training to using cocaine once. The franchise also underwent an ownership change in August when Bill Hicks sold the club to an 18-member investment group led by team president Nolan Ryan.

Hunter is a key reason why Texas turned things around.

He scattered six hits over 5 1-3 innings and didn't allow a runner past second base until the sixth when the A's scored their first run. Hunter (13-4) struck out four and didn't walk a batter for the fifth time this season.

Hunter's 13 wins lead the Rangers.

Guerrero homered to right-center leading off the second against Oakland starter Bobby Cramer (2-1). It's only Guerrero's third home run in September but his 28th this season, his most since hitting 33 in 2006 while with the Los Angeles Angels.

Texas went up 2-0 after Ian Kinsler doubled and scored on Jeff Francoeur's sharp grounder that glanced off Oakland shortstop Cliff Pennington's glove and rolled into left field. Francoeur, who went 3 for 4, later homered in the seventh and Guerrero added a bases-loaded double to drive in three more to make it 7-1.

Oakland scored on Pennington's RBI double in the seventh and loaded the bases with one out against reliever Darren Oliver before Kurt Suzuki fouled out and Jack Cust grounded out to end the threat.

Bengie Molina and Michael Young each had RBI doubles in the eighth for Texas.

Cramer had won both of his starts since being called up from Triple-A Sacramento on Sept. 10 but was in trouble early and often against Texas. The left-handed rookie allowed eight hits and four runs.

Jeremy Hermida matched his career high with four hits for Oakland.

NOTES: Guerrero needed only a triple to become the second Texas player to hit for the cycle this season. Catcher Bengie Molina did it against Boston on July 16. ... Cramer was attempting to become the first A's pitcher to win his first three starts since Dave Hamilton won four straight in 1972. ... Texas is 8-9 against the A's this season. ... The Rangers played their 19th straight game without OF Josh Hamilton, who is still nursing two broken ribs. Hamilton will be re-evaluated in the next 2-3 days. ... Oakland extended its player development contract with Triple-A Sacramento through 2014. ... The 18 hits by Texas are two shy of its season-high.

For Oakland Athletics pitcher Bobby Cramer, life begins at 30

Tom Keegan, USA Today

Struggling to find the right career path, left-hander Bobby Cramer was just another forgotten former minor leaguer, except that one man couldn't stop remembering him.

In the spring of 2007, after two years out of baseball, Cramer lost his job with Shell Oil as part of a work-force reduction and became a substitute teacher in his hometown school district in Anaheim, Calif.

"They were having a hard time finding subs at the continuation high school where you're dealing with students who flunked out of the regular school, kind of attitude cases," Cramer says. "And I was like 'Heck, I'll do it.' It was a long-term sub position, and it paid \$120 a day. Normal sub only paid \$100."

The only pitching Cramer did was for the SoCal Riptide against opponents such as the Tinseltown Terror in a now-defunct adult league.

Three-and-a-half years later, Cramer is drawing a major league paycheck, working as the fifth starter for the Oakland Athletics. He was 45 days shy of his 31st birthday on Sept. 13, when he pitched one out into the sixth inning and allowed one run to the Kansas City Royals to win his major league debut. On Sunday, he won again, allowing the Minnesota Twins two runs in 5⅔innings.

If not for the persistence of scout Craig Weissmann, Cramer says he never would have returned to baseball.

Then working for the Tampa Bay Rays, Weissmann signed Cramer a year removed from the Tommy John elbow surgery he had late in his senior season at Long Beach State. After two solid Class A seasons (2003 and 2004), he was released.

Weissmann went to work for the A's and never stopped calling. Thanks but no thanks, Cramer told Weissmann when he inquired in 2006. The job at Shell was going well. Weissmann rang again in mid-May 2007.

"I remember it was a Wednesday, about 9 a.m. I was home sick in bed," Cramer says. "He asked if I wanted to go pitch and when he said Stockton, man, I was 27 going to A ball? But I was like, 'Why not? What else am I going to do?' I punched out six of the first seven batters I faced, which kind of reassured me I made the right decision."

He tore it up at high-A and Class AA and was called to Class AAA for the playoffs.

"I went from pitching in a beer league one Sunday, A-ball the next and two-and-a-half months later I'm in Triple A," Cramer says.

Surely, a big-league call wasn't far behind, right? Not so fast.

"In my career, as fast as things have gotten good, they've gotten ugly," Cramer says. "My shoulder was bugging me."

It broke down on him in winter ball and he was released out of extended spring training in 2008.

Next stop: the Orange County Flyers of the independent Golden Baseball League. He made the All-Star team and drew no affiliated suitors.

"I thought that might be it," Cramer says.

Weissmann got him a job in the Puerto Rican winter league, which led to a job in the Dominican Republic winter ball playoffs. The A's invited him to spring training in 2009 and he spent the year at Class AAA Sacramento (West Sacramento, Calif.) before suffering an elbow injury. He pitched so well in 2010 in the Mexican League and for Sacramento that he got the call to Oakland.

A control pitcher, Cramer doesn't have loud enough stuff to get long chances.

"I've never been the outcast, but I've never been the prospect either," Cramer says. "I can't do so-so. I have to perform extremely well to make anything happen."

Why did Weissmann persist?

"He always had a tenacity, an inner drive to succeed that I thought would allow him to reach the major leagues," Weissmann says.

Against all odds, the scout was right.

Cramer takes long road to the majors

By [MARCIA C. SMITH](#), Orange County Register

Five years ago, Bobby Cramer was "Mr. Cramer," a substitute teacher and a ringer throwing sliders for his beer-league team at Gahr High in Cerritos. He already had quit baseball once.

The left-handed pitcher out of Loara High and Long Beach State went back to the game in 2007 and then wanted to quit again in 2008 while rattling in a tin-can school bus, riding three-to-a-seat for Orange County Flyers independent-league game at a Canadian ballpark.

He wrestled with retiring another time in 2009, the pain in his shoulder striking him in the hollow of a Class-A Stockton dugout.

He thought about giving up once more, less than a year ago, while throwing mid-70-mph cutters in Mexican Summer League shanty towns that were so 115-degrees hot and dry they smelled as if they were on fire. He felt banished, forgotten, "never farther from my dream," he said on those days he knew his big league window was closing.

Ultimately, Cramer, feeling haggard and every exhausting second of being a 30-year-old farmhand, swore this 2010 season in the professional purgatory of the minor leagues would be his absolute last stand.

"If I didn't make it to the major league in my 30th year — it doesn't matter how well I've done in the minors — nobody's going to sign a guy that's 31 on opening day with no major league experience," he told himself. "I needed to move on."

After going everywhere — both coasts, the belly of America, Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic — and getting nowhere, Cramer was losing faith.

After throwing away much of the past decade as a farmhand for the Tampa Bay Rays and Oakland A's and anyone with a vacant mound and a potential scout in the stands, Cramer didn't see The Show coming.

Just the end.

That is, until Sept. 9, when Cramer got called up from Oakland's Triple-A affiliate Sacramento River Cats to take the fifth spot in the starting rotation. Cramer made his major league debut Sept. 13 at Kansas City, giving up his first four hits, his first run and his first walk; recording his first four strikeouts and his first victory after his first 51/3 innings.

Cramer (2-0, 2.45 ERA) made his third career start, his first at his new home field of the Oakland Coliseum, on Friday night when the A's played the AL-West leading Texas Rangers.

"This could be it for me," he said by phone from his Oakland hotel room earlier this week. "I'm not going to take one second for granted. If you only knew what I've been through to get here."

Since first playing baseball for the Loara Little League, Cramer believed he lived for the game, felt like he would die trying make it to the bigs.

In his 2001 senior season at Long Beach State, he worked 12 innings in relief and had a 1.46 ERA before he blew out his arm. A 38th round selection by Seattle in the 2001 draft, Cramer needed Tommy John surgery in 2002.

He recovered and signed as a free agent with scout Craig Weissmann and the 2003 Devil Rays. His signing bonus: \$1,000.

Cramer logged relief innings with the Rays' Class-A clubs in New York's Hudson Valley, Bakersfield, Calif., and Charleston, S.C., before he needed his elbow scoped in 2004. He worked his way back only to be cut on the final day of 2005 spring training.

So he left baseball. Came home to Anaheim. Got a "job job," actually several of them, during his 21/2-year retirement. He was a pipeliner for Shell Oil and a substitute teacher for the Anaheim Unified School District, which included Loara. He offered private pitching lessons for extra cash and later taught algebra and even worked surveillance for private investigator.

He was thinking about going back to school to get a master's degree in 2007 when his scout called, pulled him out of his Sunday rotation in the beer league and signed him to a minor league contract with Oakland. In one year,

Cramer, now a starting pitcher, went 9-2, with a 2.77 ERA, in 15 starts with A's Class-A affiliate Stockton Ports and Double-A Midland (Texas) RockHounds before getting promoted to the Triple-A River Cats.

"But what started well with Bobby didn't last," said his father Bob Sr., 63, of Anaheim, who, with wife, Barbara, faithfully backed his son's dream.

The parents have sat in near-empty stands around the country, covered his cell phone bill just before disconnection, made payments on his 2004 Dodge Ram pickup before the repo man came, and bought him a tank of gas so he could drive from Stockton to Midland. And, sadly, back.

"What could we say to our son other than 'We're here for you,'" said Bob Sr., a retired telephone company poleman who climbed his way to management. "We've had so many sleepless nights worried that we should tell him to stop trying. But we couldn't. He loved the game."

Cramer's left shoulder failed him near the end of 2007. Doctors instructed him to rest the arm if he ever wanted to return to form, which wasn't sizzling speed as much as it was a marksman's control. The A's cut him when injury kept him from reporting to spring training.

"Then everything just got tougher, harder," said Cramer, who signed with the Flyers of the Golden Baseball League in 2008.

Hall of Fame catcher Gary Carter managed the team, which was a mismatched collection of players falling through baseball's cracks, guys on their ways up and down and, like Cramer, going in circles and collecting the 50 caps from every team on which he has thrown an inning.

"I don't even like hats but I keep them and give a signed ball to my dad from every first game I have so I remember all the stops and sweat in this journey," he said.

Cramer hit bottom when a mid-sized school bus shuttled players, crammed thigh-to-thigh in bench seats, from the Edmonton airport to the ballpark.

He remembered thinking: "If I ever have to play independent ball and be a grown man riding on a school bus, let me know so I can retire."

But Cramer, who went from the Flyers to play in Puerto Rico and then in the Dominican Republic, didn't quit. Not then. Not after all the whipsawed emotions of promotions and demotions through Class-A five times, Double-A Midland twice and Triple A Sacramento twice.

Not after three surgeries. Not after getting released by the Rays, first, and then the A's, who eventually re-signed him 2009 and sent him up to Sacramento and directly down to Stockton and out to 2010 Tigres de Quintana Roo in the Mexican League.

"I felt banished for six months, had my best season as pitcher of the year and didn't even get a phone call from Oakland," said Cramer, who went 13-3 (2.95 ERA) in 22 games. "I thought, 'This is all there is.'"

He kept believing what his mother once said about God testing him. He clung to this idea gnawing at his core. "I'm good enough for the majors. I can do this," he would whisper, falling asleep, convincing himself of just one more season, one more surgery, one more rehab and one more strike that might catch the right guy looking.

"Some players are fortunate enough to have the paved road and can get here quickly, and this is all they know," said Cramer, who joined the River Cats on Aug. 5. "I definitely know the other side of baseball."

When Oakland optioned right-handed pitcher Vin Mazzaro to the River Cats, Cramer figured other pitchers, younger guys with propeller arms such as Boof Bonser or Clay Mortensen, would probably move up into the fifth spot in the rotation.

Cramer was so certain that he would not be promoted he insisted his father take his scheduled trip to Alaska to see Bobby's brother, Chris, 33, a new father and an Army captain scheduled to be deployed in early 2011.

"Go, Dad," Bobby said. "Nobody's talking about me."

Then came Sept. 9, the night the River Cats lost the second game in a best-of-5 Pacific Coast League playoff series with Tacoma. River Cats manager Tony DeFrancesco wanted everyone in clubhouse immediately.

Players dripped wet from the showers. Others set down the car keys. Cramer stopped eating his post-game meal to listen to the fiery skipper try to motivate the team.

"You know we want to win but ultimately, the main reason we're here is to get you guys to the big leagues," DeFrancesco said. "Bobby Cramer, you're going to the big leagues."

Cramer, stunned, felt his heart bungee-jump into his sneakers. His vision went dim around the edges. He felt nothing but numb when teammates shook his hand, heard nothing but silence when they clapped and cheered.

He took a deep breath and exhaled a decade of frustration. One word came to mind. Finally. He deserved this.

Then Cramer grabbed his cell phone, raced outside the clubhouse and called his father, who had arrived in Alaska the day before.

"Are you sitting down?" Bobby began.

"Yeah."

"Dad, Oakland called me up."

A white A's jersey, No. 64 with "Cramer" stitched between the shoulder blades, was hanging in his locker when he arrived at the clubhouse on Sept. 10. Forty-seven days short of his 31st birthday, his big-league career began.

This was why Bobby Cramer never could quit.