

A's News Clips, Tuesday, April 19, 2011

A's fans not getting many opportunities to see Red Sox, Yankees at Coliseum

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

For a team that struggles so much to fill the Oakland Coliseum seats, the A's didn't catch any breaks with their 2011 schedule.

The New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox have attracted the American League's biggest crowds on the road for each of the past 10 years.

The A's get a grand total of five home games this season against those two teams. That's fewer than they'll host against the Arizona Diamondbacks and Florida Marlins, who don't even play in the same league as the A's.

It's one of many head-scratching quirks that appear each season in the Major League Baseball schedule. But such a development makes things particularly tough on the A's, who finished 29th out of 30 major league teams in 2010 in average home attendance (17,511).

The A's begin their two-game series against the Red Sox on Tuesday night.

"It's difficult, but some years are better than others," said Ken Pries, the A's vice president of communications. "Would we like to have the Red Sox in (for more games)? Sure. It would definitely affect us better from an attendance standpoint. But you're doing your best with the cards you're dealt." It bears noting that some of the A's attendance woes are self-inflicted.

Team co-owner Lew Wolff has made no secret of his desire to move the team to San Jose, which has alienated many Oakland fans. And the A's have not embraced their storied history and integrated former players into the game-day experience as well as other teams.

But it's also true that they're playing in a rundown ballpark that does not attract fans the way AT&T Park has for the Giants.

The A's need all the home games they can get against top-draw opponents to sell tickets.

Last season, they hosted two three-game series each against the Red Sox and Yankees. Outside of their three-game set against the cross-bay rival Giants, which drew 103,503, the two Yankees series drew the top crowds of any A's home series, with totals of 79,396 and 72,046.

A Red Sox series in mid-July brought the next-biggest turnout for any three-game series at 70,068.

That begs the question: Would Major League Baseball consider helping attendance-starved teams such as the A's by ensuring a certain number of games against teams such as Boston and New York?

"There are several teams that would argue they need help with attendance, but you can't penalize other teams," said Katy Feeney, MLB's senior vice president in charge of scheduling.

A's put Braden on DL, trade for Jays' Purcey

David White, Chronicle Staff Writer

A's left-hander Dallas Braden went on the 15-day disabled list, effective Sunday, with a stiff left shoulder, but that's not why the club traded for another left-handed pitcher Monday.

Oakland acquired Blue Jays reliever David Purcey to add a 94-mph fastball - and a fifth lefty - to the bullpen, and not to replace Braden, according to assistant general manager David Forst.

The real question is, who will replace Braden in the starting rotation, and how long will he be out? That, the A's cannot tell going off Sunday's initial exam.

"I know Dallas is frustrated and upset about this, but we're still optimistic that it's not something serious and this isn't a long-term thing," Forst said during the team's off day Monday. "We don't have a definite answer yet. We'll find out more from doctors and tests the next couple of days."

Braden, 27, is 1-1 with a 3.00 ERA. He has struck out 15 and walked five in 18 innings. He got the win in Saturday's 6-2 victory over Detroit, giving up one unearned run in five innings before leaving the game with that stiff shoulder.

Relievers Tyson Ross and Bobby Cramer, both starters in the minor leagues, are candidates to sub for Braden, who is eligible to return May 2.

In Purcey, the A's acquired a 2004 first-round pick who has allowed three earned runs in 2 1/3 innings this month. At 6-foot-4 and 242 pounds, Purcey has been clocked at up to 94 mph by A's scouts. Toronto designated him for assignment last week.

"We made the call on Purcey before Dallas got hurt," Forst said. "As a starter, (Purcey) didn't throw enough strikes. That's kind of been his weakness, but we think he can contribute out of the bullpen."

To get Purcey, Oakland sent minor-league right-hander Danny Farquhar back to the Blue Jays, five months after he was traded to the A's in the Rajai Davis deal.

The A's also moved right-hander Rich Harden to the 60-day disabled list with a strained right shoulder. He started the season on the 15-day DL after signing in the offseason as a free agent.

Wuertz update: In his second one-inning rehab assignment for Class A Stockton, Michael Wuertz (hamstring) gave up a run, a hit and a walk to Visalia while striking out the side.

A's leading off

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Keep up the good work: Can Brett Anderson match what his fellow starters did against Detroit? Gio Gonzalez, Brandon McCarthy, Dallas Braden and Trevor Cahill combined to give up one earned run in 25 2/3 innings, an 0.35 ERA.

THE 1981 A'S

30 Years Later

Team brought back the spark

By Ron Kroichick , CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Thirty years ago this month, the A's stormed into prominence with all the subtlety of manager Billy Martin sprinting out of the dugout to confront an overmatched umpire.

Those were the A's of Mike Norris and Rick Langford tossing complete games by the truckload, young Rickey Henderson

running wild on the basepaths and Dwayne Murphy swiftly retreating to snag another flyball. They also were the A's of slow-footed Wayne Gross stealing home, frustrated opponents hurling spitball accusations and frequent bench-clearing brawls.

Oakland won 11 consecutive games to start the 1981 season, lost once and then reeled off six more victories to reach 17-1. It was a glorious, record-setting April, launching a memorable season in A's history — partly because of a two-month interruption when major-league players went on strike.

At its core, '81 counts as a rollicking snapshot of "Billy-Ball" at its finest. Two years removed from a 108-loss season — in which the A's drew fewer than 307,000 fans, including 653 for one game — Martin guided the franchise back to the playoffs, in the first year after Charlie Finley sold the team to the Haas family.

Martin, in his second season with the A's, did it in his unique, fiery way — drinking with players at the hotel bar, employing innovative strategy and leaning on good old-fashioned fear. "The players saw that Billy cared and took losses hard," said Mickey Morabito, then as now the A's traveling secretary (and a good friend of Martin's). "You'd come in after a game and Billy would be screaming and throwing things. He almost scared those guys into winning. They were afraid of not doing well."

Relentless pressure

Martin, who died in a Christmas Day car accident in 1989, helped the A's thrive by perpetually putting pressure on their opponents. One of his favorites was the first-and-third play, when an Oakland runner at first (no matter how slow) would take a giant lead off the base and intentionally stumble to the ground.

Pitchers and/or catchers couldn't resist the bait, invariably throwing to first in an attempt to nab the fallen runner. And as soon as the ball began sailing toward the bag, the runner at third took off and scored easily.

These stunts didn't exactly thrill foes around the American League. One Baltimore writer described BillyBall as a "hyped-up thing" and derided the team's "bush-league cockiness and rampant mediocrity."

Martin didn't mind, nor did his swaggering ace, Norris, and stylish leadoff hitter, Henderson. Norris recalled one game in which the A's swiped several bases against Detroit, prompting All-Star catcher Lance Parrish to angrily march off the Coliseum field, overturn the water cooler and flood the dugout.

"I think BillyBall was another word for being aggressive," said Jeff Newman, who shared catching duties with Mike Heath in '81. "Billy knew how to push, how to sneak in a run. It was just aggressive baseball — and it was fun."

Leaning on his starters

Another element of Martin's managing style then: unwavering faith in his starting pitchers. Oakland was one of the first teams to use a five-man rotation all year, and the starters — Norris, Langford, Steve McCatty, Matt Keough and Brian Kingman — were promising and in their 20s.

This was the era before deep, orderly bullpens, and the '81 A's didn't have much relief pitching, anyway. So Martin stuck with his starters to the point of exhaustion. They accumulated a mind-bending 94 complete games in 1980 (led by Langford's 28), then posted another 60 in 109 games the next season.

Keough recalled some 14-inning complete games — Norris, McCatty, Langford and Keough each threw one in 1980 — though he insisted A's starters worked more efficiently than today's pitchers. (Langford needed fewer than 80 pitches for at least one nine-inning complete game.) Even so, the pitchers grew weary late in the '81 season and later dealt with arm injuries.

Norris was 8-3 in the first half and 4-6 in the second half. He and the other starters might have slacked off during the two-month strike, but they know Martin overworked them.

They also don't care, even 30 years later.

"It ended our careers, all of us," Norris said. "I was a shell of myself when I came back (after the strike). ... But if I had a chance to do it again, I'd do it the same way. It was an honor to do that. It wasn't Billy's fault."

The starting pitchers were fabulous athletes — by some accounts, Henderson was the only player on the team faster than Norris and Langford — and they leaned on a similarly dynamic outfield. Henderson played left field, Murphy patrolled center and Tony Armas handled right.

Henderson was only 22 at the time and cat-quick at cutting off balls hit down the line.

Murphy, then 26, played exceedingly shallow in center, routinely taking away base hits that would have fallen in front of other center fielders. Armas, 27, owned the strongest arm.

Unconventional strategies

Martin did his part by concocting uncommon defensive alignments, based on the pitcher, hitter and his own instincts. A's pitchers defied conventional wisdom by trying to induce flyballs — including one game at cozy Tiger Stadium with 17 flyball outs, by Keough's recollection — and letting their outfielders chase them down.

"You'd think you gave up a hit, then you'd turn around and there would be an outfielder standing there in a completely bizarre position," Keough said. "Murph played right behind second base and you still couldn't hit it over his head."

The A's cooled off after their sizzling start, but they still stood 37-23 and led the AL West when the players went on strike. Oakland didn't play a game between June 10 and August 10, a strange and unwelcome break for players with postseason visions.

Many players convened for informal workouts during the strike. One Chronicle story described several A's players gathering at Monte Vista High in Danville, wearing shorts and using aluminum bats — alongside Darrell Evans of the Giants, who lived in Pleasanton and showed up to get some swings.

Then, after the labor dispute was settled and before the games resumed, the A's learned they already had clinched a playoff berth. Major-league officials split the season into two halves, creating an odd sprint down the stretch.

"It was like starting up all over again," infielder Shooty Babitt recalled. "Some guys prepared themselves during the strike and some guys didn't. We knew we'd be in the playoffs, so that probably killed our sense of urgency a little bit."

Kansas City won the West in the second half, but the A's rolled over the Royals in the Division Series, then a strikenecessitated novelty. Oakland allowed only two runs in sweeping the Royals in three games.

The ALCS was not as enjoyable, as the mighty Yankees — led by Graig Nettles, Dave Righetti and Goose Gossage — squashed the A's in another three-game sweep. Thus ended one of the most eventful years in the team's colorful history.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Sacramento pulls off stunning sweep

By Mike Morris / Sacramento River Cats

Sacramento capped a rare road sweep with its fourth come-from-behind victory in a wild series at Cheney Stadium.

The River Cats were relentless Monday night in Tacoma, coming back from an early 3-1 deficit to win 7-6 on a line-drive single by Adrian Cardenas in the seventh inning. The hit scored Matt Carson, and Tacoma Manager Daren Brown was ejected after voicing his displeasure with the call at home.

The win was Sacramento's fifth in a row, heading into a four-game series at Reno this week.

Despite an early home run by Eric Sogard, Sacramento found itself down 4-1 after the first inning. Right-hander Josh Outman had a start similar to that of a week ago where he had an extended first inning. On April 13, Outman threw 41 pitches in the first inning, going only 2.0 innings while allowing four earned runs. Outman threw 35 pitches in the first inning Monday night, allowing four runs in the first but pitching better as the night wore on, retiring eight of nine batters at one point.

Outfielder Matt Carson chipped away at the lead with a one-run double in the second inning and hit a two-run home run in the fourth inning to give the River Cats their second lead of the ballgame at 5-4.

That run lasted a short until Tacoma third baseman Alex Liddi doubled to right, bringing in two runs for a 6-5 lead in the fifth.

Catcher Josh Donaldson, batting .094 on the season, picked a good time to hit his first home run of the year, tying the game in the sixth.

In the seventh, Carson found himself in another position to put his team up after stealing second with one out. The red-hot Cardenas was able to bring him in, although Brown and catcher Josh Bard didn't see eye-to-eye with home plate umpire Brian Sinclair. Cardenas' hit was his second on the night and gave him his team-leading seventh multi-hit game.

RockHounds Fall At Hammons Field

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

Hammons Field, Springfield, MO - - -

After the RockHounds and Cardinals exchanged 2-run home runs in the second inning, Springfield turned to the "two-bagger" to take a lead they would not relinquish.

Jeremy Barfield gave the 'Hounds a 2-0 lead in the top of the second, but Chris Swauger answered with a 2-run shot in the home half of the inning. Jose Garcia then singled, followed by back-to-back doubles from Tommy Pham and Ryan Jackson, the latter driving in two runs, giving the Cardinals a lead they would not relinquish.

Doubles in the third by Niko Vasquez and Alex Castellanos then built the lead to 5-2, and the 'Hounds would not come closer than 5-3 after Yusuf Carter doubled leading off the seventh and scored on two groundouts.

Schneider allowed one run on four hits, with no walks and four strikeouts, to earn his first Double-A win.

- The North swept the South Monday, so the standings don't change ... the RockHounds lead San Antonio by one game ... Frisco by three ... and Corpus Christi by four in the early stages of the (70-game) first half race.

- The RockHounds have just 10 hits in the first two games of the series at Springfield, but half of them have been home runs.

- In their last six games (including with the wind-blown conclusion to the season-opening home stand and the first five games of the road trip), the RockHounds are hitting .180 as a team.

- Several of the key "bats" have struggled of late: Grant Green is 3-for-his-last-34 ... Stephen Parker is 1-for-18 ... Matt Sulentic is 2-for-20 ... Michael Spina is 2-for-16 ... and lead-off man Jermaine Mitchell is 0-for-13..

- The 'Hounds are 2-3 on the road trip, which concludes with a noon (12:07) game Tuesday at Hammons Field in Springfield.

- The league has Wednesday off for travel, with the RockHounds beginning South Division play, hosting San Antonio and Corpus Christi in an 8-home home stand opening Thursday.

Straily-ng No More!

Stockton Ports

The night may have started out poorly for the Ports, but the Boys of Banner Island were able to band together to earn the 6-3 victory on Monday night against the Rawhide. Oakland Athletics reliever Michael Wuertz, who was making his second rehab appearance of the season with the Ports, gave Ports fans a scare in the first when he gave up a run in the first. Wuertz quickly recovered and struck out the next two batters faced to end the inning.

Ports planned starter for the contest, RHP Dan Straily came in to start the second and immediately started sitting Rawhide hitters down. Straily got the best of Bobby Borchering to start off the inning, getting the Rawhide hitter to ground out and quickly put one away for Visalia. Borchering, who had gone 4-for-5 with a double, home run and three RBIs on Sunday, only managed to record one hit and an RBI on Monday.

The Ports got on the board in the fourth on a three-run blast by Rashun Dixon. Designated hitter, Max Stassi, started off the inning with a single up the middle. Anthony Aliotti, who has scored a run in both games against Visalia, walked to put runners on first and second. Dixon stepped up to the plate and crushed a 3-1 pitch over the right field wall by the Jackson Rancheria Back Porch. The three-run bomb gave the Ports their first lead since the second inning of Saturday's game against Modesto, some 20 innings earlier.

The Ports would add an insurance run, which they would end up needing, in the fifth. Dusty Coleman, who had been struggling of late, hit a single to start the inning off. After a walk put Coleman on second, the shortstop advanced to third on a Stassi fly ball and came home on a Kent Walton sacrifice double play.

Straily would continue to pitch lights out for the Ports through the sixth, ultimately retiring nine batters by way of the strikeout. Straily's strong performance earned him his first win of the season, lowering his ERA to an impressive 1.29. Straily would be replaced in the seventh by Ports newcomer Jeffrey Lyman. Lyman, who filled the injured Josh Lansford's spot, pitched 2.0 innings and gave up one earned run on two runs and a walk.

The Ports would tack on two more runs in the seventh. Michael Gilmartin gave Ports fans a thrill, jacking the second Ports home run out of the park to bring Stockton's final run total to six. Gilmartin has been on a tear since returning home to Banner Island Ballpark on Thursday, going 8-for-14 (.571) with six runs, a home run and two RBIs.

The Rawhide could never recover, despite adding a run in both the eighth and the ninth, and dropped a game that held early promise for the visitors. The Ports and the Rawhide face off again tomorrow night as righty Robert Gilliam (2-0, 3.46) takes on LHP Kevin Belfiore (0-0, 0.00) for the Rawhide.

Cougars Edge Bees in Series Opener

GENEVA, III. - Travis Jones and Ryan Stovall each came up with clutch two-out RBI singles on Monday night as the Kane County Cougars held off the Burlington Bees, 4-3, on a 40-degree night at Elfstrom Stadium. The victory was the Cougars' first of the year in a series opener and second straight overall.

The Bees scored two quick runs in the first inning against Sugar Ray Marimon, but the Cougars fought back. Brian Fletcher singled home Alex Llanos in the first against Seth Frankoff, and Lane Adams reached on an error with two outs in the third, which allowed Yowill Espinal to scamper home and tie it, 2-2. Marimon left after four innings and gave up two runs on five hits, walked two and struck out four in a no-decision, and Jon Keck followed with a pair of hitless, scoreless innings.

The Cougars pulled ahead, 3-2, in the sixth inning when Jones singled to score Murray Watts, but the Bees tied it in the seventh versus Dusty Odenbach, forcing the Cougars to respond. Adams led off the bottom of the eighth and reached on an error. He took third on a sacrifice bunt by Geulin Beltre, went to third on a wild pitch and scored on a single to center by Stovall off Drew Tyson (1-2) that gave the Cougars a 4-3 lead. Chase Boruff (2-0) logged the eighth and ninth innings to earn the win, stranding two in the top of the ninth after a pair of Cougars errors to confirm the 4-3 final.