

Oakland A's are shut out again by Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's have played the part of considerate house guests during this stay at Safeco Field, not giving their hosts much cause for worry.

That well-mannered approach doesn't translate into many victories.

The A's went down quietly again Friday night in a 4-0 defeat to the Seattle Mariners. They have yet to score in the first two games of this four-game series against the American League West cellar-dwellers.

They've also suffered back-to-back shutouts for the first time since May 13-14, 2008, against the Cleveland Indians. It's the first time Seattle has ever blanked Oakland in consecutive games.

"I think the guys are frustrated about it," A's manager Bob Geren said. "They're going to just have to snap out of it and keep battling. Every one of these guys has a track record, some longer than others. And everyone is just not where their career numbers are."

The A's mustered just seven hits against Mariners rookie Michael Pineda (3-1) and four relievers on another cold night in the Pacific Northwest.

The dismal offensive showings were not supposed to appear as frequently this season after the A's made several offseason additions to their lineup.

Through 20 games, however, the offense looks similar to the punchless units of the past few seasons.

Oakland is hitting .236 as a team. Its eight home runs are tied with the Minnesota Twins for fewest in the majors.

The Mariners opened up their four-run lead by the end of the fifth inning. With the way the A's are swinging the bats, the margin seemed more like 14.

In a finish that added salt to the wound for Oakland, pinch hitter Conor Jackson hit into a game-ending double play with the bases loaded against Brandon League.

Pineda, facing the A's for the first time, draws comparisons to Mariners ace Felix Hernandez with his stuff. The 6-foot-7 right-hander touched 99 mph Friday, overpowering the A's through six innings. He allowed five hits.

"It's not fun," A's second baseman Mark Ellis said of the team's struggles. "But you can't get frustrated, you can't pout. Nobody's going to feel sorry for you."

Seattle took a 1-0 lead in the second against Tyson Ross (1-2).

Ross, making his first start of the season in place of the injured Dallas Braden, walked four and lasted just 4 1/3 innings. His fastball command was off, but Geren indicated Ross would get another start Wednesday against the Los Angeles Angels.

Ross said he needs to get his "hand on top of the ball better" in his delivery, or else he loses the strike zone.

"I've got to get better at recognizing the problem in the game and make better adjustments," Ross said.

Jerry Blevins replaced him with runners on the corners in the fifth. The lefty walked Michael Saunders and Jack Cust to force in a run.

Not wanting to expend his bullpen so early in the game, Geren stayed with Blevins against the left-handed hitting Adam Kennedy. Kennedy smacked a curve into center for a two-run single and a 4-0 Mariners lead.

Kennedy, the former Athletic, accounted for the game's only run Thursday with a homer to beat the A's.

Besides the ninth inning, Oakland's best chance to score came in the fifth, with Kevin Kouzmanoff on third with one out. He broke for home on Coco Crisp's weakly hit grounder to first, but Kennedy fielded the ball and threw home in time to nail Kouzmanoff.

Oakland A's update: Pitchers are limiting opponents' running game

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

SEATTLE -- The A's pitching staff has received plenty of attention for its work against opposing hitters this season.

But the job Oakland has done holding base runners in check has gone somewhat unnoticed.

The A's lead the majors with seven pickoffs and 12 runners caught stealing, a contributing factor to a major league-best 2.52 ERA entering Friday night's game against Seattle.

"It's important," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Every phase of the game is important when you're playing close games, and that's one that we're doing well in."

In recent years, the A's generally have had at least one pitcher adept at nabbing would-be base stealers.

Greg Smith set an Oakland record with 16 pickoffs in 2008. Dallas Braden's eight pickoffs in 2010 tied for second in the American League. He's yielded just one stolen base since the start of the 2009 season.

This year, Brett Anderson leads the majors with four pickoffs.

"It's kind of a read," Anderson said. "If they go on first move, I'm going to pick them off. You kind of take pride in not allowing steals and picking guys off."

Reliever Craig Breslow is tied for second in the majors with two pickoffs. He and Anderson are both left-handed.

But A's starter Trevor Cahill said another lefty on the staff, Gio Gonzalez, takes some grief for not having a great pickoff move.

"I don't think he's too worried about it," Cahill said. "He strikes everybody out anyway."

Triple-A Sacramento outfielder Chris Carter is sidelined by a left thumb injury and likely will go on the disabled list, A's director of player development Keith Lieppman said.

It's the same thumb, and a similar injury, to the one that caused Carter to miss time last season.

Carter, the top power hitter in the A's system, is hitting just .173 but has two homers and 13 RBIs in 14 games.

Because of a conflict with a Sharks playoff broadcast, Saturday's 6:10 p.m. game against Seattle will be shown on Comcast Sports Net Plus rather than CSN California. If the Sharks lose and play Monday, the A's-Angels game that night also would air on CSN Plus.

For Comcast subscribers, CSN Plus is Channel 410 (780 for high definition). Non-Comcast customers should check with their provider for the channel.

Chin Music: Geren searching for right offensive formula

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune 4/22/2011 6:29PM

Here are the lineups for Game 2 of A's-Mariners from Safeco Field:

A's – Crisp CF, Barton 1B, DeJesus RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Suzuki C, Ellis 2B, Kouzmanoff 3B, Pennington SS; Ross RHP.

M's – Ichiro RF, Figgins 3B, Bradley LF, Cust DH, Kennedy 1B, Olivo C, Langerhans CF, Ryan SS, Wilson 2B; Pineda RHP.

It's the sixth time the A's have gone with their opening day lineup, and it's the only one that Bob Geren has used more than once. Overall, the A's have used 14 different lineups over the first 19 games. Right now, Geren would go with any combo that offered the promise of scoring more runs. He says the A's are trying anything to jumpstart things offensively, including giving the green light on 3-0 counts more often. "We're trying to build on what we do well and exploit every different way to score runs," Geren said.

-The stat that says all you need to know: David DeJesus has the highest batting average of any A's regular. ... and he's hitting just .250.

-First baseman Daric Barton said he still has some flu-like symptoms but feels good enough to play.

That's all for now ...

Mariners top A's; consecutive shutout 1st since '08

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

So far, in the battle of two of the league's worst offenses, Oakland is outdoing the punchless Mariners when it comes to utter futility.

The A's ran their string of innings without a run to 18 on Friday at Safeco Field in a 4-0 loss to the Mariners. Making his fourth big-league start, Michael Pineda worked six scoreless innings for Seattle, which had shut out the A's 1-0 the night before behind Felix Hernandez.

The last time the A's were blanked in consecutive games was May 13-14, 2008, at Cleveland. The A's have lost three in a row, a season high.

Kevin Kouzmanoff missed home plate on the A's only real scoring opportunity, in the fifth, and was tagged out by catcher Miguel Olivo. Then the A's had the bases loaded in the ninth - something of an accomplishment in itself of late - but Brandon League got pinch hitter Conor Jackson to ground into a game-ending double play.

The A's are batting .236, the last-place Mariners .224. The A's 66 runs are second-fewest in the league, after the Twins, who are tied with the A's for the fewest homers, eight.

"You can't pout," Oakland second baseman Mark Ellis said. "No one feels sorry for you. But you know we're going to come out of it. Everyone in here can hit a little bit, and sooner or later we will. But it's not fun wasting a lot of good starts, games you could be winning. You hope that doesn't hurt you down the road."

Tyson Ross, who turned 24 Friday, made his first start of the season, pitching in place of Dallas Braden, who is on the disabled list with left shoulder stiffness. Despite some control issues, Ross allowed only one run through the first four innings, but things started to unravel in the fifth when he gave up a leadoff single to Jack Wilson, then a one-out walk.

Jerry Blevins took over and walked two more, including ex-A's designated hitter Jack Cust with the bases loaded, and Adam Kennedy slapped a two-run single to center. The total damage charged to Ross: four hits, four walks and three runs in 4 1/3 innings.

"The fastball command wasn't close to where it was in the spring or really close to where it needs to be," A's manager Bob Geren said.

Ross said he'll work between starts on staying on top of the ball, but, he said, he needs to get better at adjusting during the game when he starts getting on the side of the ball too much, the reason he felt he wasn't in the zone enough.

Pineda, 22, held Oakland down for the most part, even though at this point, it's hard to tell if it's the opposing pitching or the A's anemic attack that is more responsible for the string of zeros. Oakland had been shut out the previous night by reigning Cy Young winner Hernandez, and sometimes there's a carryover effect.

"That's a tough 1-2 combo," Ellis said. "And any time you face a guy for the first time, it's more difficult. He's really got a great arm."

Brad Ziegler got two strikeouts to end the fifth; he worked 1 1/3 scoreless innings and is unscored upon in all seven of his appearances this year.

A's Anderson, McCarthy do clubhouse talk on Twitter

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Two of the A's starting pitchers have an entertaining rivalry going on - on the Internet.

Brett Anderson and **Brandon McCarthy** are engaged in a spirited back-and-forth on Twitter, occasionally spending up to an hour at a time trading insults, or, more likely, taking shots at another starter, **Trevor Cahill**.

"They're really bored and I'm really cool, so they talk about me," Cahill said with a smile. He hasn't actually seen any of the comments by his friends, saying he's not into social media and has no Twitter or Facebook account.

Though Cahill is the most frequent target of abuse for his love of Star Wars and Legos, McCarthy said he feels as if it is backfiring.

"We spent an hour bashing Trevor - and someone from Star Wars sent Cahill an invitation to Skywalker Ranch," McCarthy said. "So it benefits Trevor, and we get squat."

The other day, Anderson, or @BrettAnderson49, tweeted that if sarcasm were an Olympic sport, he and McCarthy would be gold medalists. McCarthy, who is @B_McCarthy, referred to their exchanges as "sarcasmlympics."

At one point, McCarthy tweeted, "I think my relationship with my wife would be better if Brett wasn't on Twitter. #cometobedcaninternetarguing."

Anderson said that one thing he likes about the Twitter banter is that it gives fans a glimpse into what the players' actual interactions are like.

"Everyone gets to see what we'd say in the clubhouse," Anderson said. "It's like translating what happens in the clubhouse for people. We don't take ourselves too seriously."

McCarthy, a quick wit, is widely recognized as the A's best tweeter, and he's got to be among the best in professional sports, if for nothing else than his apt use of arcane TV knowledge.

Briefly: Daric Barton, who missed Thursday's game because of illness, said he still had body aches but was well enough to play. ... Going into Friday, the A's were 4-6 in games decided by two runs or fewer.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Wonder of wonders: For the first time this season - and going back well into last season and perhaps beyond - there was no pregame medical update. None of the five A's on the DL did anything of note.

Drumbeat: Ways Bob Geren might get the A's offense going, and Daric Barton back in lineup

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Safeco Field 4/22/2011 6:00PM

Manager Bob Geren said last night that the A's need to find somehow, some way, to start scoring more runs, so I asked today what that might entail and what he's telling the team about ways to pick up the pace offensively.

He mentioned that some A's hitters might be looking to swing earlier in the count and be more aggressive in general. So keep an eye on that tonight - first-pitch swinging might not be the norm, but we could be seeing some of the extra-patient hitters swinging once they get ahead in the count. Geren also discussed the possibility of using the hit-and-run more often, maybe some 3-0 green lights, bunting for base hits, more steals - it sounds like nothing is off the table.

Geren didn't go for a lineup shakeup to try to get things going; tonight's bunch behind Tyson Ross is the standard A's lineup against right-handed starters, the one he's used most often this season.

Daric Barton still has body aches from the flu-like thing he picked up yesterday or the night before, but he said he's feeling well enough to start and he's in the lineup, which is: Crisp cf, Barton 1b, DeJesus rf, Willingham lf, Matsui dh, Suzuki c, Ellis 2b, Kouzmanoff 3b, Pennington ss

Tyson Ross, who turned 24 today, is on the mound for his first start of the season. Geren says he'll definitely be held under 100 pitches, but whether that means 70-80 or 80-90 will be decided likely as the game is going on. If he's zipping through innings, expect the latter. If he's laboring, the former.

Geren said that if Hideki Matsui, who was on deck as last night's game ended, had made it to the plate to bat for third baseman Andy LaRoche, Geren's plan for extra innings was to have Landon Powell play first base and Conor Jackson third. Geren said he had Matsui go out to the on-deck circle as early as possible, just to put in Brandon League's mind that he was there, figuring maybe Mark Ellis might get a better pitch to hit. Didn't work, but worth a try.

3-Dot Lounge

What playoff changes could mean

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle

Giants fans are certain to have mixed emotions about the postseason setup being planned for next season. If it had been in place over the past two years, it might have diminished one postseason while creating another.

Commissioner **Bud Selig** has made it clear that an additional wild-card team will be added in each league, meaning the 2012 playoffs will begin with wild-card showdowns. While the three division winners await the outcome, the only question will be whether the wild-card teams contest a one-game, winner-take-all playoff or a best-of-three series.

Before weighing those options, consider what this would have meant in 2009.

The Giants of **Tim Lincecum** (Cy Young award) and **Pablo Sandoval** (.330) would have joined Colorado as National League wild-card entries.

Then again, last year's frantic three-team race (Giants, Braves, Padres) would have been rendered meaningless, because all three would have been guaranteed playoff spots. In retrospect, that's a difficult trade-off. For many Giants, **Aubrey Huff** included, nothing surpassed the thrill of clinching the postseason at home on that final day, complete with rousing victory-lap exchanges and a memorable on-field celebration. It gave them a feeling of invincibility, and for a lot of fans — given that all three postseason series were clinched on the road — it provided one of the greatest baseball experiences of their lives.

Reports indicate that the general managers and managers both favor a best-of-three series — thank goodness. It's patently

unfair for a fan base to savor a 162-game grind, then watch it all disappear in a single day on the road.

Some fear the notion of postseason overkill with the division winners forced to sit around for four days, but with a set of smart maneuvers — reduce the number of postseason off days, shorten spring training, start the regular season around March 24 — baseball will have shut down by Halloween, perhaps with a few days to spare. That should be the overriding goal.

The worst guy in the world

Reports indicate that the sickeningly fraudulent owner of the Dodgers, **Frank McCourt**, is preparing to sue Major League Baseball in the wake of Selig's decision to put the club's operations in the hands of a trustee. First of all, that's perfect. McCourt knows how to do two things: borrow money and sue. But it's also fabulous news, because legal experts suggest he'd have no chance of winning — not with Selig exercising his wideranging powers of "baseball's best interests." McCourt will fare nicely when he's eventually forced to sell the club, but let's hope he needlessly blows millions in litigation ... As a Bay Area resident since 1966, and a sportswriter bound by objectivity, I cast aside my youthful loyalty (growing up in Southern California) long ago. Couldn't care less how the Dodgers fare on the field. But I fondly recall the days when Dodger Stadium was a veritable Disneyland, when the franchise stood for stability and historical significance. You don't mess with that. I'd love to see McCourt and his pathetic wife reduced to outright destitution, borrowing nickels from backstreet hobos ... What's it like to grow up in Cleveland in the late 1970s with **Duane Kuiper** as your favorite ballplayer? Don't miss a splendid yarn by Sports Illustrated's **Joe Posnanski** on his blog site (joeposnanski.blogspot.com), filed Monday ... Something to remember with the Atlanta Braves and illfated **Brooks Conrad** in town: The Giants were very lucky he was in position to make a difference last October. The Braves had to play that series without injured infielders **Martin Prado** (.307) and **Chipper Jones** ... Subtle change at AT&T Park this year: The tartan warning track, running along both foul lines and behind the plate, has been replaced by real dirt. Safer, and easier on the eyes ... Troubling sequence in **Jon Gruden's** "Quarterback Camp," the ESPN feature in which the former NFL coach grills quarterbacks coming into the draft: When Gruden asked **Cam Newton** to call out a typical play from last season — any play at all — he couldn't come up with one.

That's how easy the Auburn coaching staff made it for him ... Something to remember as **Jim Harbaugh** talks up **Alex Smith** as the 49ers' quarterback: In his interactions with the press, Harbaugh takes great delight in saying things he doesn't mean ... Watching the Bulls' **Derrick Rose** weave through impossibly heavy traffic, you're thinking **Nate Archibald**, **Isiah Thomas**, perhaps the vintage **Micheal Ray Richardson**.

Has any ordinary-sized NBA guard (say, 6-3 or smaller) ever done it better?

A's bats remain quiet in second straight shutout

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 4/23/2011 3:15 AM ET

SEATTLE -- A's manager Bob Geren spent much of his Friday pregame media session explaining ways in which he's encouraged better production at the plate from an Oakland team that ranks near the bottom of nearly every offensive category in the Majors.

Saturday's session with reporters may very well be a rehash of that same message, after the skipper watched his team extend its scoreless streak to 18 innings in a 4-0 loss to the Mariners on Friday night.

"I think the guys are frustrated about it," Geren said. "They're just going to have to snap out of it, keep battling. Every one of these guys has a track record of some sort, some longer than others, and everyone is just not where their career numbers are. They'll get there. They just have to keep grinding through it."

The sputtering A's, who sit last in the league with just 66 runs on the year, failed to record an extra-base hit for the second night in a row and managed just seven hits while going 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position and stranding eight total -- including three in the ninth.

As a result, they were dealt their second straight shutout at the hands of a Seattle club that owns one of the American League's worst records (8-13) and offenses (.224 average), marking the first time they have suffered back-to-back shutouts since May 13-14, 2008 in Cleveland.

"It's not fun," Mark Ellis said. "You can't get frustrated. You have to keep going and get your work in every day. We know we're going to come out of it sooner or later. Everybody, at one point, has hit a little bit at some point or another. It's just not fun, feeling like you're wasting a lot of good starts in games you could be winning that hopefully aren't going to hurt you down the road in September."

Oakland's starting pitching, which has combined for a Major League-best 2.28 ERA, has been the one constant positive in an up-and-down April for the A's. But on Friday, even that wasn't all too great.

Righty Tyson Ross celebrated his 24th birthday by garnering his first start of the season, filling in for the injured Dallas Braden. It was a short-lived party, though, as the youngster struggled with his command in just 4 1/3 innings of work, surrendering three runs on four hits with four walks.

"I fell behind a bunch of hitters and put them in good hitters' counts," Ross said. "It was just one of those off days. I couldn't find a rhythm. I had good movement, but it was movement out of the zone. That's why I really need to find the right adjustment to keep it in there."

The hard-throwing hurler, who said he struggled to keep his hand on top of the ball, had not allowed a run in two of his three relief appearances after going 1-0 with a 0.59 ERA and 10 strikeouts through 15 1/3 innings spanning five Spring Training outings. On Friday, he didn't tally a strikeout and threw just 31 of his 76 pitches for strikes.

"His fastball command wasn't close to where it was in the spring -- or anywhere remotely close to where it needs to be," Geren said. "He was good this spring and he was good in his other outings, so we look toward his next outing, and I'm sure he'll be better."

A Jack Wilson RBI single in the second put the Mariners up 1-0. Ross managed to throw two scoreless innings thereafter, but quickly ran into trouble in the fifth by putting runners on first and third via Wilson's second hit of the game and a one-out walk to Chone Figgins.

That marked the end for Ross, whose runners both scored when reliever Jerry Blevins came in and offered up back-to-back free passes to Michael Saunders and Jack Cust, scoring Wilson, along with a two-run single to Adam Kennedy that plated Figgins and Saunders to make it 4-0.

Seattle starter Michael Pineda went six innings, allowing just five hits with two walks and five strikeouts. The Mariners' rookie, making just his fourth Major League start, picked up his third straight win while sending Oakland to a 9-11 mark.

"Good arm," Geren said. "One pitch, knee-high on the black at 99 [mph], that's something you don't see very often."

The A's nearly scored in the fifth, when Kevin Kouzmanoff led off with an infield single, advanced to second on a wild pitch, moved to third on a groundout by Cliff Pennington and bolted toward the plate on Coco Crisp's ground ball to Kennedy at first base. Kouzmanoff arrived just as the ball did, sliding in without even touching home plate.

"You're expecting them to go on contact," Kennedy said. "It was a little high throw that left [catcher Miguel Olivo] a little out to dry there, but he put a good tag on him. It worked out well."

Not much did all night for the A's, though, as they stranded two with one out in the sixth and left the bases loaded in the ninth, when pinch hitter Conor Jackson grounded into the club's second double play of the night to seal its third consecutive loss.

"It's unusual to get to this stage of the season like this," Geren said. "You always have a couple guys with a slow start and a couple guys with a hot start. We just haven't had anybody with a real hot start. Everybody is below where they normally will be. Everybody is below where they're going to finish. I know that, because everybody on this team is going to finish better than they're at right now. I'm obviously looking forward to that day."

"When we do start swinging the bats, we're going to be winning a lot of games," Ellis said. "We just want that to be sooner, rather than later."

"We have to realize we are capable, and sometimes that's half the battle, just knowing that you can go up there and do it."

Kouzmanoff trying to find his groove

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- There was one word that Kevin Kouzmanoff used to describe his 2010 season -- and it's the same one that came to his mind on Friday when asked about his overall performance in the early going of the 2011 campaign.

Unsatisfactory.

"I'm a slow starter, and I've always had to dig myself out of a hole every season," Kouzmanoff said. "I think, in the long run, it all evens out. Some guys start out slow and then have a hot month. Right now, I'm just trying to find a groove and be consistent, try to get good pitches to hit."

Through 17 games -- 15 of them starts -- Kouzmanoff has just 10 hits. That total spans 52 at-bats, leaving him with a .192 average. Add just one home run and five RBIs to the mix, and it equals another sluggish beginning for the third baseman, whose career totals in April -- .222 average, six home runs, 38 RBIs -- are his lowest for any month.

Kouzmanoff has also tallied four errors already, which is tied for eighth most in the Majors. The miscues follow a 2010 season in which he made 12 in 142 games. In 2009, he made just three all year.

"I think the game maybe sped up on me a bit," he said. "When one thing happened, then another did -- and everything started spiraling. I've been trying to slow it down."

As a result of both the offensive and defensive woes, the 27-year-old Kouzmanoff has found himself in a situation he hasn't been in since the first month of the 2007 season, when he hit .113 in April but ended the year with a .275 mark for the Padres.

"Walking in, I'm wondering, 'Am I playing today, am I not playing today?'" he said. "It's kinda weird, because usually I walk in every day and not even look at the lineup because I know I'm in there."

"But I want to constantly be out there. In the past when I've started off slow, I've realized it's just something you have to grind through. You have to find it."

That process doesn't happen overnight, though. And Kouzmanoff is the first to admit that, although he believes he's close to breaking through, he may need a little more time.

"I think when you're going slow, your first reaction is you want to come back out of it with one swing," he said. "You can't do that. You have to take it from pitch to pitch -- and I think I've shown with results [that] I should just look at the quality of the at-bat. It's important to try to ignore the results and focus on the positives."

Geren looking at ways to get A's bats going

SEATTLE -- Oakland's offensive woes can be spelled out in numbers.

The team entered Friday's contest batting .237 -- sixth lowest in the American League -- with just eight home runs (tied for fewest in the Majors) and a .211 mark with runners in scoring position, the third lowest average in the league.

Manager Bob Geren is well aware of his club's trying battle at the plate, and insists anything and everything is being done in an attempt to turn things around and help a pitching staff that leads the Majors with a 2.52 ERA.

"We look at some early-in-the-count things, notice some adjustments that can be made, some guys who can maybe be a little more aggressive at times," Geren said. "We're looking at anything we can to help get them going. Nothing is untouchable. We can try anything."

On Friday, Geren ran out his Opening Day lineup in Game 2 of the four-game set against the Mariners -- which had been used five times prior, while producing a 2-3 record.

The A's, who were averaging 3.58 runs per game, have contributed to a Major League scoring rate of just 4.31 runs per team per game this season entering Friday, according to STATS. When told of the unusually low number, Geren noted exceptionally talented pitching as a likely factor.

"I think it's just we've seen some really good pitching," he said. "Not just us, but all around baseball. I know last year was considered the year of the pitcher, but this year there's some newcomers coming on. Some of the younger guys keep improving. Our staff is a good example of young guys getting better."

Cahill, Vargas to duel in AL West clash

By Tom Singer / MLB.com | 4/23/2011 2:45 AM ET

Left-hander Jason Vargas sat on the bench on Friday night, charting pitches and perhaps thinking, "Great. Looks like I get the short straw again." Vargas might have been excused for wanting the Mariners to score a little less -- and even for wanting the A's to at least score.

As he watched, his Seattle teammates didn't exactly run amok over Oakland. But they scored enough to suggest a quieter Saturday.

Quiet has tended to surround Vargas on the mound this young season, which is how one manages to pair three no-decision starts with a 1.93 ERA.

Saturday's quest for his first victory since Aug. 14 -- a stretch of 13 starts -- didn't get simpler with Seattle's 4-0 win in the second game of the four-game set.

Seattle's halting offense scored four or more runs for the seventh time in 21 games. The day after five of the last six such "outbursts," the Mariners have averaged a run and a half.

And after consecutive shutouts, the A's figure to put some numbers on the board for Trevor Cahill. Oakland hasn't suffered a trifecta of shutouts since Sept. 9-12, 1979, when it was blanked by the White Sox in the nightcap of a doubleheader, then twice more in Milwaukee.

"Runs aren't my concern," Vargas said. "To keep asking questions about that is irrelevant. My job is to just keep us in the ballgame, so that's all I'm focused on."

Mariners manager Eric Wedge couldn't agree more.

"That's what we're looking for, our starting pitchers to give us an opportunity to win ballgames," Wedge said. "And that's what he's doing."

So is Cahill, like the rest of Oakland's young, vaunted rotation. The 23-year-old right-hander had a hiccup on Apr. 12 -- two days after being given a five-year contract extension -- by failing to survive the fifth inning in a 6-5 loss to the White Sox.

"I was a little off then. There might have been a little more adrenaline, just cause I was trying to prove myself," Cahill said. "Now, I'm just trying to throw strikes."

He has allowed one run in each of his other three starts -- logging 20 2/3 innings with 24 strikeouts.

Adam Kennedy, who drove in a pair of runs on Friday night and had homered in the previous two games, will likely remain at first base during the continuing bereavement absence of Justin Smoak. Kennedy has never faced Cahill.

A's: Barton's absence becomes brief

- First baseman Daric Barton, a late scratch on Thursday due to illness, was back in the lineup but wore an 0-for-4 collar.

Mariners: Smoak due back early next week

- Services will be held over the weekend for Smoak's father, Keith, who passed away on Tuesday in South Carolina. The young first baseman is expected to return from bereavement leave on Tuesday, when the Mariners open a series in Detroit.
- Milton Bradley, removed with stomach pains from Thursday's lineup, was back -- but very briefly. After drawing a first-inning walk, Bradley was erased on a double play, and departed two innings later with lower-back pains.

Worth noting

- The A's hadn't suffered back-to-back shutouts in nearly three years, since the Indians blanked them on May 13-14, 2008, in Cleveland.

Mariners rookie lives up to the hype

Seattle starter Michael Pineda throws six shutout innings against A's

By TIM BOOTH, ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — Rookie Michael Pineda dazzled again, throwing six shutout innings for his third straight victory, and Adam Kennedy's two-run single was enough offense in the Seattle Mariners' 4-0 win over the Oakland Athletics on Friday night.

Pineda's night was shortened only because of a rising pitch count. The burly right-hander gave up just three hits in his first five innings and when Pineda (3-1) faced trouble in the sixth, got Kurt Suzuki to line out to left field and a ground ball from Mark Ellis to end the threat.

Oakland has now gone 18 innings since last scoring and was shut out in consecutive games for the first time since May 2008.

Seattle got just seven hits themselves, but took advantage of seven walks allowed by the A's. Kennedy scored on Jack Wilson's two-out single in the second off Oakland starter Tyson Ross (1-2), then drove home a pair in the fifth.

Kennedy has become Seattle's hottest hitter the past few days, quite a jump from being a non-roster invitee who only got to spring training by signing a minor-league deal. He provided all the offense behind ace Felix Hernandez on Thursday night with a solo homer — his second in two games — then came up with two more hits on Friday.

Kennedy waited on Jerry Blevins' slow breaking ball and lined it back up the middle to score Chone Figgins and Michael Saunders in the fifth. Jack Cust walked with the bases loaded to force home Wilson with Seattle's second run.

But the story of this night was Pineda, who became the first Seattle pitcher to begin his career with four quality starts. Pineda has gone at least six innings every time out, and gave up five hits, struck out five and walked only two.

Pineda was done after the sixth due to a high pitch count. Most of those were racked up in the second inning where he threw 31 pitches and allowed consecutive walks to lead off before getting strikeouts of Ellis and Kevin Kouzmanoff and a groundout by Cliff Pennington.

He also got great defense at times. Kouzmanoff led off the fifth with a single and stood at third with one out. Pineda came inside on Coco Crisp, forcing a grounder to first. Kennedy threw home to Miguel Olivo and got the tag on Kouzmanoff, who might have scored with a better slide.

Wilson also started a key double play in the seventh with a sliding stop that was turned nicely by shortstop Brendan Ryan.

David Pauley and Aaron Laffey worked two innings of relief. Jamey Wright entered in the ninth and loaded the bases with one out before Brandon League got Conor Jackson to ground into a game-ending double play for his fifth save in five chances.

Ross made his first start of the season after a trio of appearances out of the bullpen, but could not get command and throw strikes. Already limited to under 100 pitches, Ross was done after 4 1-3 innings thanks to throwing 45 balls compared to just 31 strikes. He was charged with three runs, walked four and struck out none.

Gutierrez: Ross own worst enemy in A's listless loss in Seattle

Paul Gutierrez, CSNCalifornia.com

As far as birthdays go, Tyson Ross might want to skip right over No. 24.

It's not that Ross was awful tonight in his first start in the injured Dallas Braden's spot in the A's rotation. It's just that Ross was far from sharp on his 24th birthday and, as a result, was his own worst enemy in the A's eventual 4-0 loss at Seattle.

A troublesome 45 of of Ross' 76 pitches were balls and he walked four batters. So he was actually quite fortunate to exit the game trailing only 1-0 in the fifth inning. And yes, Jerry Blevins was even less effective in letting two more of Ross' runners score.

But it all sprouted from the young Ross and his awkward, all-arm delivery playing with fire early and often and finally getting burned.

Perhaps the A's should have left him at triple-A Sacramento to marinate a little longer as a starter rather than calling him up during the first road trip of the season as a reliever?

Of course, the A's invisible offense put more pressure on Ross and the rest of the A's staff by failing to show up - again - and getting shut out for the second consecutive game by the Mariners.

In fact, Oakland has scored only two runs in its last 26 innings, or since Coco Crisp's lead-off home run Wednesday against Boston at the Coliseum.

The A's were 0 for 8 with runners in scoring position on the night and entered the night batting just .202 in such situations on the season.

And for those keeping track at home, the A's are now averaging 1.7 earned runs against starting pitchers.

Speaking of Crisp, as brilliant a defensive center fielder and spark plug of a leadoff man he is, his throwing arm leaves a lot to be desired.

Or did you not see Jack Cust - JACK CUST! - go from first to third on an Adam Kennedy grounder up the middle, challenging a charging Crisp and beating him.

Now, I'm not going to say it was Sid Bream beating Barry Bonds to win the 1992 NLCS. But it was very Johnny Damon-esque.

As noted by CSN's stat guru @dfeldy, the A's set a little misery history as this is the first time they have ever been shut out in consecutive games by the Mariners. The last time Oakland was blanked in back-to-back games? In 2008 by Cleveland.

Teams step to plate with faith-based promotions

MICHAEL MCCARTHY, USA TODAY

Pro teams are promoting more fan days involving religious groups because they help drive group ticket sales in a recession. With more seats to fill during the course of a 162-game season than other sports, Major League Baseball teams are at the forefront.

The Oakland Athletics, for example, will hold their first Jewish Heritage Night, in which attendees will receive an A's yarmulke, on May 17. The San Francisco Giants are planning Fellowship (Christian), Jewish Heritage and LDS Family (Mormon) nights.

"We welcome everyone to the ballpark," Giants spokeswoman Staci Slaughter said.

Other MLB teams, including the Florida Marlins, Kansas City Royals and Philadelphia Phillies, are planning similar fan days. The Colorado Rockies will have their seventh annual Faith Day for all faiths.

It's not just baseball. The NBA's Golden State Warriors held their first Jewish Heritage Night recently, including a Q&A with Israeli player Omri Casspi of the Sacramento Kings.

But some question whether these are appropriate in the public arena of sports.

Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations objects because there are no plans for a Muslim Family Day.

"That would be the ultimate test of this kind of policy — and gauge the public reaction to it," he said. "Given the heightened state of anti-Muslim sentiment in our society, I have a feeling there would be some objections to that."

Six Flags held Muslim Family Day at some of their amusement parks last year, and three of them were criticized for holding it on Sept. 12.

Blair Scott, spokesman for American Atheists, said religion and sports is problematic — not because it's illegal but, he said, unethical.

"They're taking advantage of people's religiosity to make that buck," he said.

But groups approach the teams, which have final say on promotions. Spokesman Matt Bourne said MLB has "confidence in our clubs to conduct ballpark promotions that are appropriate in tone and content."

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Walk-off double in ninth leads Reno over Cats

By Mark Ling, Sacramento Rivercats

Postgame fireworks capped off a thrilling 6-5 walk-off victory on Friday night.

Unfortunately for Sacramento, the Reno Aces were the ones celebrating.

Despite leading 5-2 entering the bottom of the ninth inning, River Cats closer Joe Bateman allowed four runs to cross the plate including a walk-off, two-run double from Aces catcher John Hester.

Before the ninth-inning rally, Sacramento looked to be on its way to an easy series win.

Starting pitcher Travis Banwart pitched seven strong innings, allowing just one run on three hits and one walk with five strikeouts. Banwart's ERA for the season is now 3.12.

The Cats gave their starter an early lead as they drove in three runs in the second inning. Jai Miller, who would eventually hit his fourth home run in as many games, led off the inning with a double. RBI-singles from Adrian Cardenas and Adam Heether along with a run-scoring sacrifice fly from Jemile Weeks gave Sacramento a seemingly comfortable lead.

Miller and Aces third baseman Cody Ransom traded home runs in the fifth, bringing the score to 4-1. Sacramento tacked on one more in the seventh on an Anthony Recker double, putting the Cats on top 5-1.

The normally strong River Cat bullpen was unable to maintain the lead as Gabe DeHoyos, entering the game in relief of Banwart, allowed one Ace to cross the plate before Reno's big ninth inning come-back.

In the end, Sacramento logged 14 hits to Reno's eight. Miller continued his torrid play going 4-for-5 with two runs, an RBI and his fifth home run of the year. Miller finished the series having gone 10-for-17 (.588) with eight RBI and seven runs scored.

Entering the game, the Cats were tied with the Las Vegas 51s for first in the Pacific Coast League's South Division.

The loss gives the Cats their second series split of the season and a 6-2 record on the road.

Sacramento will have to put this loss behind them as they turn around and play the Tucson Padres at home on Saturday. First pitch is set for 7:05 p.m.

Wild Pitch Walk Off

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

Citibank Ballpark - - -

It wasn't "that" kind of streaking, but Jermaine Mitchell came flying home from third on a wild pitch in the last of the ninth, capping a comeback that saw the RockHounds come from a 6-0 deficit to defeat the San Antonio Missions, 7-6.

James Darnell led the Missions with two solo home runs, continuing a season in which he is, virtually without argument, the top hitter in all of Minor League Baseball. The University of South Carolina product entered the game hitting .500 ... and raised that average with a 3-for-4 night, plus a walk. Darnell is now hitting .521, with 13 walks and one strikeout for a remarkable on-base percentage of .613.

The Missions built a 6-0 lead after three innings. From there, relievers Neil Wagner, Jared Lansford and Jonathan Ortiz combined to pitch 6.0 scoreless innings, allowing five hits and one walk with six strikeouts.

Yusuf Carter's 2-run triple got the 'Hounds on the board in the fourth, and Michael Spina hit his second solo home run in as many nights, slicing the deficit to 6-3 in the sixth.

The RockHounds tied the game, batting around in the seventh, fueled by Jeremy Barfield's lead-off triple and RBI singles from Matt Sulentic, Shane Peterson and Stephen Parker.

Mitchell led off the ninth with a walk and advanced to third on a throwing error by pitcher Colt Hynes. With two on and an 0-2 count on Parker, Hynes' pitch in the dirt got away just far enough for Mitchell to "streak" home with the winning run.

- Carter has played in just five games, but is 5-for-12, with four runs, a triple, two home runs and four RBI in his last three.
- Barfield has hit in four straight, going 6-for-16 with triple, home runs and five RBI.
- In the San Antonio series, Parker is 4-for-7 with a run, walk and RBI. He was robbed of an extra-base hit Thursday on a sensational catch by Missions centerfielder Blake Tekotte.

Late Runs Help Ports To 5-4 Win

04/22/2011 11:00 PM ET

LANCASTER, Calif. - The only error made in Friday night's game between the Stockton Ports and Lancaster JetHawks changed the fortunes of both teams. With two outs and the bases empty in the top of the eighth, JetHawks shortstop Jonathan Villar committed a throwing error that would give the Ports a window of opportunity. Stockton took advantage by scoring a pair of unearned runs en route to a 5-4 win at Clear Channel Stadium.

It was Lancaster that started the scoring in the game in the second. In fact, the JetHawks held the lead the entire night until Stockton pulled ahead in the eighth. Kody Hinze led off the second inning with a solo home run to left; his second big fly in the series and his league-leading seventh of the year to give the JetHawks a 1-0 lead.

The JetHawks extended their lead in the third. With runners at second and third and one out, Ports starter Fabian Williamson uncorked his second wild pitch of the inning, allowing Jay Austin to score and putting the JetHawks ahead 2-0. Later in the frame, Hinze drove in his second run of the game with a single to left to make it 3-0. Two batters later, Jonathan Meyer singled to left, giving Lancaster a 4-0 advantage.

After Meyer's single, Williamson would retire seven of the next eight batters to finish his outing. He received a no-decision after going five innings and allowing four runs on five hits while striking out six and walking three.

Stockton got on the board in the fourth. With the wind blowing ferociously out to right field from imminent rain showers, Leonardo Gil led off and hit a fly ball to right that got up into the wind and over the fence to make it 4-1.

Gil's homer was the only run allowed by JetHawks starter Jose Cisnero, who received a no-decision after going five innings, allowing six hits while striking out four and walking two.

After the top of the fifth, a rain shower moved through the area prompting a 32-minute rain delay. Following the delay, Williamson came out and tossed a scoreless fifth to finish his outing.

In the top of the sixth, the Ports cut their deficit to a run. With Wander Alvino (0-1) on the mound in relief, Rashun Dixon singled with one out and scored on a triple from Anthony Aliotti to make it 4-2. Kent Walton, who hit for the cycle on Thursday night, followed with a single to left to score Aliotti and cut the JetHawks lead to 4-3. Walton went 2-for-4 on Friday with an RBI and a run scored.

After Walton's single, Alvino retired seven in a row, taking him to the point where there were two outs in the eighth. After two superb defensive plays started the inning, Villar fielded a routine ground ball at short off the bat of Aliotti. Villar's throw to first, however, sailed high and over the head of Hinze, extending the inning. Walton followed with a single to left, and Ryan Lipkin, who joined the team on Thursday night, drove in both baserunners with a double to left-center-his first Ports hit-giving Stockton a 5-4 lead.

Alvino would suffer the loss, going three innings and allowing four runs (two earned) on five hits while striking out four and not allowing a walk.

Scott Deal (1-0) pitched a scoreless sixth and seventh for Stockton in relief of Williamson. After the Ports failed to take advantage of a bases-loaded, one-out situation in the top of the ninth, Connor Hoehn (SV, 3) came on to pitch the ninth and try for the save. Hoehn set the side down in order, finishing the game by getting Hinze, who had been 2-for-2, to strike out looking.

Deal earned the win after his two scoreless innings of relief.

Having won three straight, the Ports will try for their first series sweep of the season on Saturday night at Clear Channel Stadium. Dan Straily (1-1, 1.29 ERA) will head to the bump for Stockton, opposed by JetHawks right-hander Andrew Robinson (1-1, 6.06 ERA). First pitch is set for 7 p.m. PDT.

Bees and Timber Rattlers Postponed Again

By Jon Versteeg, burlingtonbees.com

BURLINGTON, IA- The Burlington Bees and Wisconsin Timber Rattlers game was rained out on Friday at Community Field. The game will be made up as part of a doubleheader at Community Field on Saturday afternoon at 4:00. Fans that have tickets for the rainouts on Thursday and Friday may exchange them at the Community Field Box Office for tickets of equal or lesser value to any remaining home game during the 2011 season. Gates will open at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday afternoon.

The Bees and Timber Rattlers twin-bill will have the following pitching match-up. In game one RHP Matt Miller (0-1, 8.68) gets the start for Wisconsin against LHP Jacob Brown (2-0, 1.64) for Burlington. In game two it will be RHP Del Howell (0-0, 5.40) for the Timber Rattlers against RHP Blake Hassebrock (1-0, 0.00) for the Bees. Pre-game coverage begins at 3:40 p.m. on Newsradio 1490 KBUR and online at gobees.com.