

RAYS CLIPS



July 31, 2012

While you were sleeping: Rays lose to A's 4-3 in 15 innings

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. — The amazing A's have drawn comparisons with the 2008 Rays for their inspired play and unexpected success, and Rays manager Joe Maddon said before Monday's game a telling sign are the "magical" things that seem to happen frequently during such a season.

The Rays saw it for themselves by the end of the long night, as the A's raucously celebrated their major-league leading 12th walkoff win after a 4-3 15-inning victory.

The end came just after 3:15 a.m. Tampa Bay time when Jemile Weeks hit a sacrifice fly to right-center off Kyle Farnsworth, the eighth Rays pitcher, to score Brandon Inge. The rally started when Inge opened the 15th with a single and went to second on a bunt, and Farnsworth walked two — one intentionally, one not — to load the bases. The Rays went to a five-man infield but Weeks' fly ball ended the marathon after 5 hours and 9 minutes.

Farnsworth said it was obviously frustrating: "It is. It totally is. It (stinks)."

"It's tough," said Rays starter David Price. "When you play for as long as we did, and we played great defense and we pitched very well, and to not be able to win that that game, that kind of stings a little bit."

The Rays didn't exactly challenge, going from the seventh to the 14th without a hit. And when they got two to open the 14th, singles by Ben Zobrist and Jeff Keppinger, they didn't do anything with them. Brooks Conrad, pinch-hitting for Matt Joyce against lefty Jerry Blevins, struck out looking, as manager Joe Maddon eschewed the bunt. Ryan Roberts flied to right, with Zobrist moving up to third, and Carlos Pena flied to right for the final out.

They got two on again in the 15th, but B.J. Upton — 0-for-7 on the night — popped out and Zobrist grounded out.

The A's, who have seven walkoff wins in their last 12 home games. had numerous chances. They had the bases loaded in the ninth, but Wade Davis struck out Weeks. They loaded the bases in the 10th, but Jake McGee struck out Kurt Suzuki. (McGee had a particularly tough inning as he took a grounder off his left foot and then — somehow — airmailed what was supposed to be ball four of an intentional walk to the backstop.) They had two on in 11th, but J.P. Howell struck out Josh Reddick.

"They have all the chances and did not score," Maddon said. "So you think at some point you're going to find a way to get it done. And it just did not want to work."

Tampa Bay pitchers struck out a team-record 21 and walked 10, throwing 279 pitches. It was the longest road game in team history; the overall record is 16.

"The bullpen was fabulous once again," Maddon said. "We were just unable to get any offense together. ... We just have to hit the ball better. We did not make a lot of hard contact tonight."

The Rays didn't want to use Farnsworth, Maddon said, but he offered and they decided to give him one inning. Keppinger was warming up and would have pitched the next two, Maddon said, with Roberts after that.

The loss kept the Rays (53-50) from what would have been their first three-game winning streak since June 7-10, when they won four straight. It gave them a 4-3 record thus far on their nine-game cross-country challenge against other wild-card contenders and left them needing to win the next two to take all three series, having won two of three at Baltimore and Anaheim.

The game, played before a gathering of 12,564, was tied at 3 after seven innings.

After setting the A's down in order in the first, Price gave up two runs in the second, ending the Rays' scoreless streak at a team record-tying 24 innings going back to the third on Friday night in Anaheim.

Price didn't allow anything else until the seventh, but it was costly: a two-out homer to No. 9 hitter Brandon Hicks on a 1-and-1 pitch.

"Just very unfortunate," Maddon said.

"That's part of it," Price said. "I wish I could have that pitch back and throw something different, but that's it."

Price left after seven with a decent line — three runs allowed on five hits, two walks and 11 strikeouts — but without a shot at what would have been his major-league leading 15th victory. "They got me the lead like they have all year and I wasn't able to hold on to it," Price said.

The Rays were held hitless through the first three innings by A's rookie right-hander A.J. Griffin then rallied for two to tie in the fourth, Zobrist getting them started with a single up the middle and Peña delivering the big hit. Zobrist was replaced by Keppinger on first after a fielder's choice grounder, Joyce walked then Peña laced a drive to right-center for a two-run double.

The Rays, after hitting a couple balls to the wall off Griffin, took the lead in the sixth when Joyce hit one out to right, his first homer since June 10 and 12th overall.

They had a chance for more in the seventh but doomed themselves in a perplexing sequence after Peña led off with a single. It seemed like an obvious bunt situation for Jose Molina, but the Rays let him swing, and he made that work out with a single. But Peña tried what Maddon said was a "a good job" that turned out to be a bad decision trying to get to third and was thrown out by rightfielder Josh Reddick. Worse, two pitches later Molina took off for second and, well after Sean Rodriguez swung and missed on what was supposed to be a hit and run, was easily thrown out. Rodriguez then flied out.

As frustrating as the loss was, Maddon said it can be forgotten on Tuesday: "You have James Shields go out and pitch well - that would be our best medicine."

Tampa Bay Rays unlikely to make major trade before Tuesday deadline

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. — What started as a roar of rumors about numerous Rays players was down to barely a whisper by Monday night. And unless something unexpected happens in the final hours — which it can with one phone call — it looks like the Rays will get to today's 4 p.m. deadline for nonwaiver trades without making a deal.

"Extremely quiet," manager Joe Maddon said after exchanging text messages with executive vice president Andrew Friedman before Monday's game. "There's nothing to think about for me right now. It's just play today and not worry about anything because it's probably going to look like this right after trade deadline also."

As a further sign, Maddon said he had "not even thought about" a contingency plan if the Rays did deal James Shields, who is scheduled to start tonight.

Most of the speculation has involved Shields who, with Zack Greinke traded to the Angels and Cole Hamels signed to an extension with the Phillies, was considered one of the top available starters.

Shields, while acknowledging the situation could change, said he doesn't expect anything to happen, either. "It's looking like more and more I'm going to stay here," he said. "I plan on pitching (tonight)."

Outfielder B.J. Upton, whose name has also been mentioned in some reports, said he and Shields have had a bit of a running joke over the past few weeks: "We see each other and it's kind of like, 'You're still here? I'm still here.' "

Shields and Upton both said they take it as a sign of confidence the front office has in the current squad, which began play Monday two games out of the second wild-card spot.

"I don't see them breaking any of this up," Upton said. "We're playing well and we're playing well against teams we need to play well against."

The other possibility would be to supplement what they have. But the prime areas for improvement are shortstop and catcher, where significant (and affordable, which can be a different issue) upgrades are hard to find and seem unlikely.

Tampa Bay Rays encouraged by Evan Longoria's progress in rehab

By Marc Topkin, Times Staff Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. — **Evan Longoria** isn't quite ready to end his rehab assignment and rejoin the Rays, but manager **Joe Maddon** spoke as optimistically as he has in months about the slugger's return to the lineup.

"It's moving along pretty nicely," Maddon said. "It's very exciting. I am encouraged."

Longoria on Monday played his fourth game, in a five-day span, as the DH for Triple-A Durham, going 1-for-3 with a walk. Overall, Longoria is 2-for-12 with four walks.

When Longoria headed to Durham last week, Maddon said his rehab assignment would last only three to four games, but he has since revised that. The soonest Longoria would join the Rays would seem to be when they return home Friday.

"When exactly I'm not sure," Maddon said, "but I know he's making progress and he's feeling good."

The plan to limit Longoria to DH duties has apparently worked, as Maddon said the reports on his left hamstring, which was partially torn April 30, have been positive.

"He's getting better," Maddon said. "We've been very cautious on his rehab assignment. The reports daily are that he's feeling good. He felt really good (Monday). There's been no setbacks, and that's been a good thing."

The reports on Longoria aren't the only good ones.

- DH **Luke Scott** on Monday took swings — about 30, albeit with the ball on a tee — for the first time since going back on the DL July 21 with a mild oblique strain. He remains confident he will return "around" his Sunday eligible date. Given the progression of drills he has to get through, and another short rehab assignment, a target of the end of next week is probably more realistic.

- RHP **Jeff Niemann** looked sharp in another bullpen session and is set to throw a simulated game Friday, with the plan, if all goes well, to head out on a rehab assignment of three or four starts that would have him back in the rotation before the end of August. "He threw the ball really well and he came out smiling broadly, feeling very good about it," Maddon said.

SICK BAY: RHP **Jeremy Hellickson**, who threw up several times while pitching Sunday, said he felt "a little better" and was able to eat, as well as run around a bit on the field playing Frisbee before batting practice.

A GAME: RHP **James Shields** feels he is pitching better than his results have shown and expects a payoff soon. "Last start (in Baltimore on Thursday) I thought I pitched pretty well considering it was pretty hot," he said. "I gave up two hits

and they cost five runs, unfortunately that was the case and I walked a couple guys. Other than that I feel really good. We've been trying to stay consistent with the routine and I think I'm pitching okay right now. Hopefully I can get on a nice little roll these last two months here."

MISCELLANY: The 23 scoreless innings streak the Rays took into Monday's game was one shy of the team record, set May 8-11, 2008. ... Montgomery RHP **Alex Colome** was named the Double-A Southern League's pitcher of the week after going 2-0, 1.15.

Rays lose 15-inning marathon at Oakland, 4-3

By Roger Mooney, Tampa Tribune

OAKLAND, Calif. -- The Tampa Bay Rays and Oakland A's played on and on Monday night.

On and on and on until Monday night became Tuesday morning on both coasts.

"That's not easy to do," Rays manager Joe Maddon said.

It is when strong pitching meets weak offenses, which was clearly the case during the opening game of a three-game series at the Oakland-Alameda County Stadium.

The A's pulled it out in 15 innings, winning 4-3 when Jamile Weeks scored Brandon Inge with a bases-loaded sacrifice fly to right field. The ball was caught by center fielder B.J. Upton because right fielder Ben Zobrist was stationed behind second base as the Rays employed five infielders with the hopes of sending the game into the 16th inning.

"I can't say that it was a well-played game," Maddon said. "It was well-pitched. Their pitching was good, and so was ours."

The A's won for the 19th time in 23 games this month, making this the best July in franchise history.

The Rays saw their modest two-game winning streak end and fell 3½ games behind the American League wild card-leading A's and three games behind the Angels, who occupy the second wild card spot.

Led by starter David Price and all seven members of the bullpen, the Rays struck out a franchise-record 21 batters. They also walked 10, though three were intentional.

In all, 13 pitchers were used. They combined to throw 494 pitches.

There were 104 official at-bats – 52 on both sides.

Upton, Weeks and Oakland's Josh Reddick each were 0-for-7. Reddick struck out four straight times between the sixth and 11th innings.

Rays designated hitter Jeff Keppinger was warming in the bullpen when the A's finally ended the night against reliever Kyle Farnsworth, who was pitching on back-to-back days for the first time this season.

The game took 5 hours, 9 minutes and ended at 3:15 a.m. on the East Coast.

"It was difficult," Maddon said. "We pitched so well."

Price was looking for his major league-leading 15th win and appeared headed that way when Matt Joyce homered in the sixth inning to give the Rays a 3-2 lead.

The Rays could have added to that lead in the seventh when Carlos Peña, whose two-run double in the fourth erased an early 2-0 deficit, opened the inning with an infield single. But Peña tried to go to third on Jose Molina's single to right and was easily thrown out by Reddick.

Molina then was caught stealing when Sean Rodriguez swung through a pitch on a hit-and-run.

Those would be the last hits for the Rays until Ben Zobrist singled to start the 14th inning.

The reason the game continued into the early morning was because Price allowed a home run to Brandon Hicks, the A's No. 9 hitter, with two outs in the bottom of the seventh.

"They got me the lead like they have all year, and I wasn't able to hang on to it for us," Price said.

The A's, who entered the night with a major league-best 11 walk-off wins, were close to getting No. 12 when they loaded the bases in the ninth off Wade Davis and again in the 10th when they loaded the bases off Jake McGee and again in the 11th when they had runners at first and second with two outs against J.P. Howell.

They would eventually get that 12th walk-off victory, but it would come much later in the game because Davis, McGee and Howell were able to end each threat with a strikeout for the final out.

"I thought when they did not take advantage of their opportunities we would get our chance," Maddon said.

But this is a Rays team that managed 11 hits and five runs while winning the final two games against the Angels over the weekend. Opportunities are hard to find.

Still, the Rays had chances in the 14th and 15th innings, leaving two runners in each inning.

The Rays, whose major league-low team batting average dipped to .230 after mustering eight hits during the game, were 1-for-9 with runners in scoring position and stranded nine runners.

The A's, who are a notch above the Rays in batting with a .231 team average, were also 1-for-9 with runners in scoring position but left 16 runners on base.

Maddon said he didn't want to use Farnsworth, but Farnsworth, who struck out two in a perfect inning of relief during Sunday's game at Anaheim, told Maddon he was fine.

Farnsworth allowed a leadoff single to Inge. After a sacrifice bunt, Farnsworth walked Seth Smith intentionally and Eric Sogard unintentionally.

Maddon brought Zobrist in from right field to help guard against a ground ball getting through the infield for the winning hit.

Weeks, though, thwarted that plan with a fly ball to right, and Inge easily beat Upton's throw to the plate.

When asked if it was a frustrating way to lose, Farnsworth said, "It is. It totally is."

The Rays beat the Marlins this season in 15 innings and beat the Mariners on their recent homestand in 14. After both wins, Maddon and his players talked about how important it was to win those games after playing so many innings and how devastating it would have been to lose.

Now that they lost a game that went 15 innings, how do they react?

"We have James Shields go out there (tonight) and pitch well," Maddon said. "That would be our best medicine."

All quiet for Rays (so far) as trade deadline arrives

By Roger Mooney, Tampa Tribune

OAKLAND -- James Shields expects to make his scheduled start this evening for the Tampa Bay Rays. B.J. Upton expects to be behind Shields in center field.

And Rays manager Joe Maddon expects the crew that was in his clubhouse Monday to be the same crew that flies back to Tampa Bay after Wednesday's game with the A's.

In other words, Maddon, Shields and Upton expect today's 4 p.m. non-waiver trade deadline to pass without the Rays making a move.

"It's looking like more and more I'm going to stay here," Shields said Monday. "I'm not really too worried about it."

While executive vice president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman and his staff continued to talk with teams Monday, they were not close to any deals that would either add or subtract from the team as it continues its pursuit of another trip to the postseason.

"They are extremely quiet," Maddon said. "There's nothing to think about for me right now. It's play and not think about anything, because it's probably going to look like this after the trade deadline."

Maddon said he doesn't even have a Plan B should Shields suddenly not be available to pitch tonight.

"I have not even thought about that, because I don't think (a trade is) going to happen," Maddon said.

Neither does Shields, who jokes with Upton every time they pass each other these days.

"You still here?"

"You still here?"

You just kind of laugh at it, kind of go with it," Shields said. "This is part of the business. This is the kind of stuff I signed up for, so it's not like I can complain about it. This is just the way it is in baseball. You kind of have to deal with it. I have the type of personality doesn't like to do things until it happens or say things until things happens. I'm an in the moment guy."

The Rays are usually not active at this time of the year, making only two July trades since 2008. They traded for pitcher Chad Qualls in 2010, and that move was made because Grant Balfour was injured the night before the deadline. The Rays traded for third baseman Ryan Roberts at the beginning of this road trip.

The Rays began play Monday night 2 ½ games behind the A's, who lead the American League Wild Card standings. They were two games behind the Angels, who entered the night as the second Wild Card team.

Given the fact the Rays were 10 ½ games behind the Red Sox at this point last season gives them hope that they are very much in the playoff race. In fact, Upton thinks the Rays can still win the American League East.

"There's still a lot of baseball left," he said.

Former Ray Jonny Gomes, now the A's DH, said he hopes Shields finishes his career in Tampa Bay. Gomes thinks Shields would be on the short list of Rays players honored some day – 10, 20 years from now – with a statue outside whatever ballpark they call home.

"I don't know about a statue," Shields said. "I don't know how good I would look in a statue."

But Shields, who was drafted in 2000 and reached the big leagues in 2006, said he would like to remain with the organization for his entire career.

"It seems like I've been here forever. That would be nice," Shields said. "I wouldn't mind being here for 20 years. That means I've been pitching pretty decent."

Rays notes: Low average offset by patience at plate

By Roger Mooney, Tampa Tribune

OAKLAND, Calif. --

The Rays began play Monday with the lowest batting average in the major leagues, a .231 mark that was one point behind the Mariners and A's.

They also began play with a major league-high 374 walks.

Only one team in major league history finished first in both categories and that was the 1914 Yankees, who batted .229 and drew 577 walks.

Rays manager **Joe Maddon** is not a fan of batting average as the main indicator of how well one of his players is contributing offensively. He's big on walks, on-base percentage and the theory that enough good at-bats will lead to enough productive at-bats.

He used 1B **Carlos Peña** as an example. Peña was 1-for-4 Sunday with a strikeout, but hit the ball hard into the over-shift twice before doubling down the right-field line and scoring the second run in the Rays' 2-0 win against the Angels.

"I'm all in for making harder contact more consistently, and I think that does come with better pitch selection," Maddon said. "I think it's also true if you make hard contact more consistently, you will hit for a higher batting average."

Maddon said he would like to see the Rays cut down on strikeouts and draw more walks.

"I do believe in a nice finish offensively speaking, but I am more interested in the runs scored, cutting down on the strikeouts, accepting our walks when they're there and playing more of a complete offensive game," he said. "I think that's within our capabilities."

Injury updates

RHP **Jeff Niemann** (fractured right fibula) threw 60 pitches in his fourth bullpen session and is scheduled to pitch a simulated game Friday when the Rays return to Tropicana Field.

If that goes well, Niemann could begin a minor league rehab assignment. He is on target to return in late August.

"The thing about Jeffery is he can get really hot, too," Maddon said. "When he gets on a roll he beats really good teams and, of course, he's not going to be tired. He's going to be well-rested. He can be a real shot in the arm for us."

DH **Luke Scott** (oblique) took 30 swings off a tee Monday.

"Everything went well," Scott said. "Nice and easy, nothing too crazy."

Scott said he won't set a timetable for his return, adding that he will need four to eight at-bats at Triple-A Durham before he's ready to face major league pitching.

3B **Evan Longoria** (left hamstring) continued his rehab Monday with the Bulls. He is expected to return sometime during the upcoming homestand.

Johnson's Twitter contest

Beginning today, SS **Elliot Johnson** will begin a contest every Tuesday on his Twitter account — @elliotjohnson9 — where a fan will win a prize (tickets, autographed baseball) if he or she predicts that night's lineup.

"I like it. I'll throw something in there, too, for the winner. Maybe the lineup card itself, a signed lineup card. Maybe the scratch paper it was written on just like when (the Beatles) wrote, 'Let it Be.' I'll sign it right down there in the corner," Maddon said.

Rodney surprises

That **Fernando Rodney** became the fastest Rays closer to 30 saves (103 games) is somewhat surprising given the fact he was signed in the offseason to add bullpen depth to the late innings.

Rodney was mentioned as a candidate when RHP **Kyle Farnsworth** was injured before the start of the season.

"If Kyle had been well, he definitely would have been given that first opportunity, but when he was not I still wasn't sure," Maddon said. "Think about it, we didn't know at that point. He just kind of seized it and ran with it. I had no idea it was going to turn out like this at that time."

Noteworthy

Sunday, the Rays handed Angels RHP **Zack Greinke** his first loss at home since July 26, 2010, breaking a streak of 19 straight wins in his starts. ... The Rays' bullpen had allowed one run and struck 44 in its last 292/3 innings heading into Monday's game. ... In the previous eight games prior to Monday, the Rays' pitching staff had held opponents to a .200 average.

Rays fall despite club record 21 strikeouts

By Bill Chastain, MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Finally, the Rays appeared headed to a third straight win.

Not since their fourth consecutive victory on June 9 had the Rays experienced a winning streak surpassing two games.

But it wasn't to be.

Despite striking out a club-record 21 batters and stranding 16 A's baserunners, the Rays were denied their third consecutive W in a 4-3 loss in 15 innings Monday night at the Oakland Coliseum with 12,564 watching.

"I can't say it was a really exciting baseball game. It was well pitched by both sides," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "Their pitching's good and so is ours. That's probably what happened tonight."

In defeat, the Rays moved to 53-50 on the season while remaining 7 1/2 games behind the American League-leading Yankees, but dropped to 3 1/2 games behind the Wild Card-leading Athletics and three behind the Angels, who are the leaders for the second Wild Card spot.

Brandon Inge singled off Kyle Farnsworth to start the Athletics' 15th. Kurt Suzuki sacrificed Inge to second. Seth Smith was intentionally walked and Eric Sogard walked to load the bases for Jemile Weeks.

That prompted Rays manager Joe Maddon to bring in Ben Zobrist from right field to become the Rays' fifth infielder. Weeks then hit a sacrifice fly to right-center that scored Inge to give the Athletics their 12th walk-off win of the season in a game that actually ended early Tuesday morning.

"I was confident," Weeks said. "You've got to be confident. I went up there looking for a pitch up, and I said if I got it, I was going to put it in the air. Thankfully he gave me that pitch and I did that."

Maddon said he had not planned on using Farnsworth at all, but had to given the circumstances of the game. If the game had moved into the 16th inning, he said he planned on using Jeff Keppinger, the Rays' designated hitter, for two innings and after that he would have had Keppinger flip-flop with third baseman Ryan Roberts.

"We were prepared for 20 innings," said Maddon, still managing a smile after the tough loss.

If ever a win seemed like a highly probable outcome, Monday night's game did. David Price looked overpowering while hunting his 15th win of the season.

Price surrendered two runs in the second, which snapped the Rays' 24-inning scoreless streak. The Rays had tied a club record after Price held the Athletics scoreless in the first. The Rays answered in the fourth when Carlos Pena doubled home two to tie the score.

Matt Joyce gave the Rays the lead with a solo home run in the sixth.

Protecting the one-run lead in the seventh, Price struck out the first two hitters he faced before Brandon Hicks stepped into the batter's box. Given the way Price was pitching, coupled with the fact that the Athletics' No. 9 hitter is not having the grandest offensive season, few in the ballpark would have bet against Price chalking up his 12th strikeout of the game.

Instead, Hicks hit a 1-1 pitch the opposite way. When the ball cleared the wall in right, Hicks had his third home run of the season and the game was tied at 3.

"[I] felt like I made an all-right pitch and he put a good swing on it," Price said. "That's part of it. I wish I could have that pitch back and throw something different.

"I felt good tonight. I gave up two runs early and we bounced back with two of our own. ... They got me the lead like they have all year and I wasn't able to hang onto it for us."

Joel Peralta took over for Price and pitched a scoreless eighth. Wade Davis and Jake McGee each managed to come away unscathed in the ninth and 10th innings despite having the Athletics load the bases in both innings.

J.P. Howell pitched a scoreless 11th when he struck out Josh Reddick with runners at first and second for the third out. Burke Badenhop then pitched two scoreless innings before Fernando Rodney pitched a scoreless 14th. The run that Farnsworth gave up in the 15th was only the second run the Rays' bullpen had allowed in 37 1/3 innings.

"We pitched great, pitched well," Maddon said. "A lot of our guys pitched well under duress. A lot of baserunners and they came through with big strikeouts. Our pitching staff has been doing that all year. But our bullpen has been outstanding and they were once again tonight."

Maddon expects Rays to stand pat at deadline

By Bill Chastain, MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Major League Baseball's Trade Deadline is Tuesday at 4 p.m. ET, and heading into the final 24 hours before the deadline passes, the Rays are looking more and more like they will stand pat.

Rays manager Joe Maddon said he texted a couple of times on Monday with Andrew Friedman, Rays executive vice president of baseball operations, "but nothing, zero" according to Maddon.

When a reporter noted that it sounded as though things were "fairly quiet" on the trade front, Maddon replied: "They are. Extremely quiet."

"There's nothing for me to think about right now, it's just play today and not worry about anything because it's probably going to look like this after the Trade Deadline," Maddon said.

Maddon said that he expected to have the same 25-man roster for Tuesday night's game that he had Monday night.

Of note, James Shields is scheduled to start for the Rays Tuesday night. When Maddon was asked if he had a contingency plan for who might start in the event that Shields got traded, he replied: "Have not even thought about that. Because I don't believe it's going to happen."

Inside the Rays' clubhouse, the atmosphere appeared loose Monday afternoon.

B.J. Upton, who has not been the focus of as many rumors this year as in years past, said he believes the team will be in good shape if it doesn't make a deal.

"We believe we can win, we believe we can win, man," Upton said. "And we believe we can do it with what we have. Now if they do happen to make a move, I mean that's kind of out of our hands. We don't really know what's going on with the front office. That's kind of their department, and let them handle that."

Based on what's happened in the past, Upton can empathize with Shields, who easily has been the Rays player most mentioned in trade rumors.

"Yeah, it's kind of a running joke between me and him," Upton said. "We see each other every day and it's like, 'You're still here? I'm still here.' It hasn't really bothered us, we know [trade talk is] part of it."

Like Maddon, Upton expects the team to remain in place after the deadline passes.

Shields didn't care to speculate on the hypothetical question about being traded.

"I don't like to say anything until something happens," Shields said. "I'm an in-the-moment guy. ... We still have 24 hours left. Hopefully I'm still here. It is what it is. It's part of the game."

Rays making up for low average with walks

OAKLAND -- Entering Monday night's game against the Athletics, the Rays ranked last in the Major Leagues (.231 average) in hitting for the first time this season after hitting .208 in their past eight games.

Offsetting that negative stat is the fact the Rays continue to lead the Major Leagues in walks.

Only once in Major League history has a team led the Major Leagues in walks while finishing last in batting. That team was the 1914 Yankees when they hit .229 and drew 577 walks. That team went 70-84 and finished sixth in the American League.

The Rays rank just below Oakland and Seattle (both are hitting .232). In the DH era (since 1973), there has never been a season when the American League had the three lowest-hitting teams in the Major Leagues.

Rays hitters are hitting just .188 with runners in scoring position since the All-Star break.

Rodney quickest in Rays history to 30 saves

OAKLAND -- Rays closer Fernando Rodney earned his 30th save Sunday against the Angels in the Rays' 103rd game. In doing so, he became the quickest player in club history to reach 30 saves. Rafael Soriano reached the mark in the Rays' 104th game in 2010.

Rodney is just the fourth pitcher since saves became an official statistic in 1969 to earn 30 saves and have a sub-1.00 ERA prior to the 104th game of the season.

Others who have done so are Oakland's Dennis Eckersley (1990, 32 saves and 0.81 ERA), Atlanta's John Smoltz (2003, 39, 0.83) and Seattle's J.J. Putz (2007, 31, 0.89). Entering Monday night's game, Rodney had a 0.77 ERA.]

"He's been a great surprise," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "Just think about where he came from and where he got to this year. Then to do the two [saves] down there [over the weekend in Anaheim, where Rodney pitched the past two seasons], I know that was special for him based on what had happened the last couple of years. I was real happy for him."

Extra bases

- Rays manager Joe Maddon said right-hander Jeff Niemann [right fibula fracture] and third baseman Evan Longoria [partially torn left hamstring] are both making nice progress toward returning to the team. Maddon said Niemann will throw a simulated game Friday afternoon at Tropicana Field. Meanwhile, Longoria is being used as a designated hitter at Triple-A Durham and it's reasonable to expect that he will be back with the team at some point during the team's next homestand.

- Elliot Johnson is into Twitter (@elliottjohnson9) and he plans to run a contest every Tuesday for the remainder of the season where he will give away a prize for anyone who can correctly submit that night's lineup. When told of Johnson's plan, Maddon said he would probably contribute the lineup card from that night's game to the winner to "support Elliot." He noted he would not trick up the lineup to prevent entrants from guessing correctly.

Business as usual for Shields against A's

By Anthony Odoardi, MLB.com

There's a possibility Rays right-hander James Shields will be traded Tuesday. And that would certainly make for an interesting day, as Shields is the club's scheduled starter in Oakland. However, Shields is doing what he can to put it out of his mind.

"That's the only thing I can really do," Shields said Monday. "I plan on pitching [Tuesday]."

With both teams fighting for a playoff spot -- the A's currently own a Wild Card spot and the Rays are within striking distance -- the three-game series is a big one, and the Rays will need Shields at his best.

The 30-year-old right-hander has been a hot topic in trade talks as Tuesday's 4 p.m. ET deadline approaches. One could argue it has affected his performance as he's 1-2 with a 6.06 ERA in July.

He is coming off a three-start stretch in which he allowed 14 earned runs and 21 hits, despite recording 10 strikeouts in two of the three outings. Shields is 8-7 on the season with a 4.52 ERA and remains set to face the A's for the first time in 2012.

"They swing it. There's no doubt," Shields said. "They've got a lot of young guys. A lot of guys who want to win. They've got some good guys on the bench. They've got the best bullpen in the league, next to us. They're a good team over there."

Shields is 4-3 with a 4.58 ERA in 11 career starts against the A's. He is 1-2 with a 6.46 ERA in five starts at The Coliseum.

With already a sub-par track record, he now faces an Oakland team that's one of the hottest in the Majors in July.

"Oakland's a good team. They've done really well since the All-Star break," Shields said. "They're making a push just as much as we are."

Rays: Injured Rays making progress

- Rays manager Joe Maddon said right-hander Jeff Niemann (right fibula fracture) and third baseman Evan Longoria (partially torn left hamstring) are both making nice progress toward returning to the team. Maddon said Niemann will throw a simulated game Friday afternoon at Tropicana Field. Meanwhile, Longoria is being used as a designated hitter at Triple-A Durham and it's reasonable to expect that he will be back with the team at some point during the team's next homestand.

- With a scoreless first inning Monday night, the Rays tied the club record with 24 consecutive scoreless innings. David Price had a chance to beat it by recording an out in the second, but the A's plated a run before he could do so. The Rays blanked the Angels on back-to-back nights and held them scoreless in 25 of 26 innings.

Athletics: Milone hopes to rebound

Opposing Shields will be left-hander Tommy Milone, who is 9-7 with a 3.51 ERA this year. Milone is 1-1 in July with a 2.67 ERA and hopes to conclude what has been his best month of the season on a high note.

Following three starts in which he allowed three runs in 20 innings, he gave up five earned runs to Toronto in his last outing. It was only the A's second loss of the month at the time.

"You just push this one aside," Milone said after the game, "and keep playing the way we've been playing."

Tuesday will mark Milone's second start of the year vs. Tampa Bay. In his first start, on May 6, he allowed five runs on five hits in five innings. But that was at Tampa, and Milone is much better at home (0.91 ERA) than on the road (5.77 ERA).

Can you guess Joe Maddon's lineup?

By J.B. Long, MLB.com / Cut4

It's every Rays fan's favorite pastime: Guess Joe Maddon's lineup.

Evan Longoria batting leadoff? Seen it.

Desmond Jennings down in the seven-hole? It happened.

Even Rays players have been known to get in on the guessing game. And now, Elliot Johnson is formalizing it in Twitter contest form.

Elliot Johnson tweet: *New weekly competition starting this Tuesday for the rest of the season: Guess the starting lineup exactly, order & positions. Win a prize!*

His official rules:

- 1) Picks must be tweeted to him at least four hours prior to first pitch to "prevent insider trading."
- 2) Entries must predict all the players in correct order, with defensive positions to win the grand prize.
- 3) Winner(s) receive(s) two tickets to a home game, field passes for batting practice and a Johnson-autographed baseball.

Meanwhile, the manager who will pencil in that starting lineup every Tuesday totally digs the idea.

"I'll throw something in there, too, for the winner," Maddon said. "Maybe the lineup card itself ... I'll sign it down in the corner there, scribble marks, maybe some tea stains, possibly some dribble from sushi. Something like that."

--J.B. Long