

Friday, July 9, 2004

### Something decent? Not really

I was waiting for something good to happen before I wrote about this series.

So much for that.

I think in the course of this ugly three-game sweep at the hands of the Red Sox, the A's displayed every weakness they have that they're, frankly, not supposed to have: incredibly weak offense (they're supposed to be decent), terrible bullpen (pitching is the strength, remember?), and remarkably little rotation depth (outside of Hudson [injured] and Mulder, who would you want on the mound in an important game?).

That last item is the most troubling of all, and while it's not fair to judge solely on the basis of a series against the Red Sox, purveyors of one of the top offenses in the league, now and in perpetuity, I'm sure, Zito's seven runs in four innings, Redman's seven in just two and two thirds, and Harden's seven in five innings (the best start of the bunch!) are surely signs of trouble. Even supposing the A's make the playoffs, as is their wont these days, at least one of these guys has to start a playoff game. Unless we want to call Octavio Dotel in to reprise his prospect days, that is.

It's certainly possible that Zito will have straightened out by that point, or that Harden or Redman will go on a Lilly-like tear in the second half, making all of this handwringing look foolish and shortsighted. It's also possible that these three will continue to be the "just ok" starters they've been for the entire first half, and that Oakland will be in a position of essentially throwing away one game of a five-game series. Given the likelihood that the team they'd face in the first round is Boston again (Boston's shot is the wild card, while the A's hope to get in through the division; the wild card would play the top team in the first round, except that the top team [Yankees] will likely be in their division, so they bump down a notch), throwing away one game, especially if that one game happened to be at home, is not a sharpest-knife idea.

What's to be done? None of these guys can be realistically bumped for a new starter, though Redman has the weakest case: lots of money being paid to be a starter. You'd have to hope that, if the A's had a shot to acquire a Randy Johnson or something (not saying it will, or even should, happen) on the cheap, that they could pull the trigger, bump Redman to the bullpen, probably squeezing Justin Lehr back to Sacramento until September.

Let's be real, though. Zito needs to get straightened out. That's all. He's a good pitcher, though perhaps not at the levels people thought he was (a Hudson, or even a Mulder), and he's not as bad as he's been this year. Redman might be showing the effects of being run into the ground last year. If that's true, there's probably no hope for him, and the contract he signed looks terrible. If it's not, then he also needs to get straightened out. He's not a Zito, but he's also better than he's shown.

I don't have a lot of hope for either of those scenarios. What I do have hope for is that Rich Harden takes the second half to really break out. He puts his control problems behind him (five unintentional walks in five innings last night, more than a walk every other inning for the year) and really harnesses that Roy Oswalt-type stuff.

Either that or he turns into Victor Zambrano.

That's a whole lot of griping. Can we find any positives from the series?

Justin Duchscherer's still pretty awesome, only running into trouble in the sixth on Wednesday, after throwing four and a third good innings over two games. Duchscherer is the only guy on the team with a positive ARP. Chad Harville also did mildly positive work while he was here, but he's not on the team anymore. The A's bullpen has allowed eight more runs than expected to score. Duchscherer by himself has prevented eight. The A's, already a bottom-ten bullpen team with him, are a bottom-five team without him, and that's without counting the effect that his innings go to bad pitchers if he doesn't pitch them.

Ricardon Rincon threw 2.3 scoreless innings, the last 1.3 of them coming while the A's were mounting a comeback last night.

Jim Mecir threw 1.7 scoreless innings, the 0.7 coming in relief of Rincon last night (i.e. it mattered).

Oakland's offense finally came alive a little last night, getting eleven hits off of Curt Schilling in 5.3 innings, and making

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him throw 119 pitches. Four of those hits even went for extra bases.

The A's actually had a chance to win last night, and they have to be happy that they got to Keith Foulke: that doesn't happen all that often. That said, they still lost in extras, the Red Sox made up the three game lead Oakland had on them, the A's fell two behind Texas, and Kirk Saarloos is pitching tonight. Cleveland isn't that good, but purely by runs scored terms, their offense matches up with Boston's. Luckily for the A's hitters, they leave Boston feeling ok about themselves and go in to face a staff that's given up the most runs in the league, all while Texas has to run the Fenway gauntlet.

It should also be noted that the A's got supremely unlucky in scheduling: they faced the Red Sox three best starters, in Wakefield, Martinez, and Schilling. Texas, coming in immediately after them, obviously will only face the first of those three, with Martinez and Schilling's spots in the series being taken by Bronson Arroyo (who's pretty good, but obviously no Pedro) and Derek Lowe (who's been downright awful, and whom Texas will probably destroy).

For a team that was on top of the division only a short time ago, the A's could have themselves a tidy little deficit going into the all-star break.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 12:05