

Thursday, July 29, 2004

### Eats, Shoots, and Calls a Loose Game

With a sweep of Seattle and Texas's two losses (out of three) to Anaheim, the A's have moved to just half a game back of the division leaders with a big series in Texas coming up. The A's could finish up as much as 3.5 games ahead or 4.5 games behind in the best and worst case scenarios. That worst case scenario would put the A's in the position of having to erase the magical four game lead after the trading deadline, while the best-case scenario is only marginally better for the Rangers.

The fact that the games will be played in Texas doesn't really bode well for Oakland, who've been awful as of late on the road. Also on the pessimism tip is that Mark Mulder won't pitch against the Rangers, having won his 14th game last night over Seattle.

Kirk Saarloos goes against RA Dickey tonight, and while Saarloos's last outing wasn't terribly special, the A's still won the game. On the other hand, after two sparkling starts (11.2 innings, 1 RA), he's regressed some in his last two (8.2 innings, 6 RA). It's hard to say what the A's will be getting. RA Dickey, on the other hand, should be pretty predictable: a 5.78 ERA and four runs in 5.1 innings in his last start (in Oakland) make the hope for a 5-7 run game for the A's a reasonable one.

Rich Harden goes Friday, supposedly against John Wasdin, but I'm pretty sure Wasdin was designated for assignment after his last start, so I don't know who we'll see there. Whoever it is, it won't be Kenny Rogers (because he also pitched last night, and lost), so it's pretty safe to say they won't be very good. This is, first place and all, still the Rangers. Harden's been pretty good in July, having just a 5-inning, 7-run blowup against Boston diminishing his record. On the other hand, he threw 125 pitches over 8.2 innings against Toronto two starts ago, and took 119 just to get through five innings against Texas last time. Combine those starts with Harden's record as the most heavily used A's starter (by Baseball Prospectus's Pitcher Abuse Points), his age, his general inconsistency, a usually high-powered Texas offense, and the incredible hitting environment that the Ballpark at Arlington is and what you sum up to is worry.

Zito and Redman throw the last two games of the series, and it almost doesn't matter who they're pitching against. You have no idea what you're going to get out of them, and an A's win is almost entirely dependent on whether Good Lefty or Bad Lefty shows up. Pray for Good Lefty so that the season doesn't come down to the A's playing three games against the Angels while the Rangers get three against Seattle.

Ah, and what about Seattle? Oakland won a couple of close games on Tuesday and Wednesday, 5-3 and 3-2 and overcame Bad Zito on Monday (a four-run second inning) by scoring 14 runs, including at least one tagged to each pitcher who showed up for the Mariners. The bullpen held up against a late Seattle charge on Tuesday as Jim Mecir and Octavio Dotel struck out four of the five batters they faced (Dotel hit Miguel Olivo) to end the game. Yesterday saw Mark Mulder hanging and hanging and hanging, waiting for the A's to piece together enough runs to overcome a pair of singletons scored in the second and third by Seattle. An Eric Byrnes home run tied the game in the eighth to bail Mulder out and a Mark Kotsay pinch-hit single won the game in the ninth. Despite barely-adequate Jermaine Dye having shown up this year, Eric Byrnes and Mark Kotsay have lifted the outfield to heights a lot of A's fans couldn't imagine after last year's debacle.

Let's go back to that 14-run first game, though. The A's pounded out thirteen hits, but with just two doubles and an Erubiel Durazo solo (i.e. patented) homer, how on earth did they turn that in fourteen runs? Why, by walking fourteen times, of course, including drawing nine from starter Travis Blackley in just four innings. The A's themselves walked five, which is more than you might normally see out of them also (despite it being a Barry Zito start), so you might start wondering about the umpires in this game, especially since Seattle's pitching coach, Bryan Price, got thrown out of the game for getting all fired up and running out to yell at the home plate umpire, Charlie Reliford, about balls and strikes.

Luckily for us, Baseball Prospectus tracks umpires. How does Reliford usually call games? Reliford's called 331 innings in 19 games behind the plate this year, so we're dealing with a decent sample. Surprisingly, he looks like one of the better pitcher's umpires around. His games have resulted in a 4.1 RA with a composite batter's line of just .251/.331/.379. Compared to league averages, those batting averages and slugging percentages are very low. The thing is, his strike-ball ratio is right in line with the middle of the pack, as nearly as I can eyeball it (the umpire stats are alphabetical, so it's hard to tell), while his BB/9 ratio is notably toward the upper end (he's one of just six umpires with a ratio over four). Conclusion? Reliford's umpiring falls right in line with those of his colleagues, but he's managed to be

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behind the plate for some of the more powerless teams in the league this year, purely by chance. In fact, there are just two umpires with lower HR/9 rates (as rounded to one decimal place, anyway) this year, though there are about ten who are tied with him at 0.8.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 12:03