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Thoughts on a third baseman (and some bullpeners)

What the hell's the matter with Octavio Dotel? This guy was supposed to be the savior of the bullpen, and he's put up a 5.53 ERA since coming over. His strikeout rate is still prodigiously high (38 in 26 innings) but he's giving up home runs like it's 2000 again. That's 5 in 26 innings for the A's, and it was 26 in just 125 innings in 2000. In other words, about every week and a half or so, Dotel's going to give up a homer. When you're a closer, and those homers are tying or winning ballgames for the other team, that's a really bad thing.

On the other hand, I saw the homer he gave up to Justin Morneau this weekend. It looked to me like the ball was in the middle of the plate, but it was down. Morneau really had to golf it to get it out of the park, and when a big strong kid goes down and gets a pitch like that, sometimes there's not a lot you can do about it. On the other hand, the tying homer he gave up to the Yankees the other night was a terrible hanging slider, I think, that Sheffield just smoked, and rightfully so.

With the A's bullpen basically being one big back problem (Bradford joined Rhodes on the DL yesterday), forcing them to bring up Jairo Garcia, who started the year in A-ball, it would be really nice to have a reliable guy sitting out there whose name isn't Duckschr ... whatever. The Duke, by the way, has moved into 22nd in the big leagues in ARP.

On the other hand, as much as A's fans seem to hate Ricardo Rincon, he's been effective this year, posting 3.5 ARP in his one-batter role. Justin Lehr has also made a positive contribution, at 2.0 ARP in his 21 innings. The problem has been Bradford (-2.8), Hammond (-2.8), and Rhodes (-2.1), and, to a certain extent, the mediocre work of Jim Mecir (-0.1). Mecir's excusable: he's not helping the team, but he's not really hurting it, either, and I don't think anyone expected him to be the Mecir of old this year.

Look at those three names with negative contributions, though, and you see a common factor. Rhodes has been on the DL a long time with a back injury, Bradford just went on the List, also with a back, and Chris Hammond was on the DL for a little over a month with a strained shoulder.

Now, perhaps the A's are engaging in some of that infamous Yankee chicanery, sending guys down with owies to work on their mechanics and get right for the playoffs. More likely, though, a small part of each guy's bad pitching may have been due to throwing through a little more pain than they should have been. We'll see what happens with the other two, but since Hammond's been back, he's thrown seven innings in four games (including three big ones in that crazy 18 inning game), giving up three hits, two walks, no runs, while striking out seven. Will he pitch this way the rest of the year? I doubt it. But if he's better than he was before the injury, it'll be a pretty big boost.

Can we talk about Eric Chavez for a second? First, let's discuss his walks. He's got 64 for the year, which is just one off of his previous career high, set in 2002. Since we're only in August, that's pretty impressive. Indeed, his BB/PA mark of 0.177 is significantly higher than any he's posted before, .063 higher than 1999's previous high. For the first time in his career, he's walking more than he's striking out, with 1.14 BB/K. There's no intentional walk effect here, either, with just six of his walks coming from the opposing manager, compared to 13 of his 65 in 2002. And he's doing all this while hitting for the best power of his career. His odd lack of doubles means that while he's posting his highest ISO ever, it's actually tied for the top spot with 2001. But his homerun rate has shot to one ever 14.7 at-bats, two and a half at-bats better than his previous best, 2002. The walks don't appear to be a fluke, either, since he's seeing far more pitches than he ever has, increasing from a prior career high of 3.88 per plate appearance to 4.10 this year.

Chavez's injury earlier in the year are holding down his counting numbers, but let's check out his rates compared to the rest of baseball. He's 13th in OBP (13th! Eric Chavez! 13th despite batting .276!), almost .200 points behind the leader (you know who), but just .053 off the pace of the mortal top man, Lance Berkman. His .527 SLG ranks his 31st, but if he can get some outs to turn into doubles, we could see that number rise.

Chavez has hit six more homers than doubles this year, in 294 at-bats. That's .0204 HMTDPAB (homers more than doubles per at-bat). The only players with a higher HMTDPAB above him on the SLG list are Gary Sheffield (.0224), Paul Konerko (.0346), Adam Dunn (.0339), Adrian Beltre (.0224), Jim Thome (.0214), and Barry Bonds (.0431, who, as usual, blows everyone away, even when it's some made up number like this). All of these guys are big slow sluggers; only Bonds and, to a certain extent, Adam Dunn, have decent speed.

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That 20% of the guys ahead of him on the SLG list are even more homer prone than Chavez indicates that his lack of doubles may not be as odd as it first appeared. On the other hand, Chavez hasn't been a doubles avoider in the past: his previous career-high HMTDPAB was .0059 in 2000. Sheffield has done this before, putting up three crazy years in Los Angeles (.0255, .0379, .0155) as well as three nice ones in Florida (.0342, .0376, .0173). Konerko's like Chavez, having never put up more homers than doubles in a full season before. Dunn has history, smacking .0394 last year.

Beltre is like Konerko, in that he's never done this before, and like Chavez, in that he's enjoying a breakout season at third base, but it's more noticeable with Beltre because he's so far above where he's ever been before, finally living up to everything he was supposed to be all those years ago.

Thome, as you might expect, has a Sheffield-an history here: starting in 1996 and skipping just 1998, when he set a career-high with 34 doubles (and, "incidentally," his worst homer year from 1996 to today), he's put up .0198, .0302, .0121, .0072, .0437, .0688, .0294. That 2002 number is ridiculous. He hit 52 homers with just 19 doubles that year, a gap of 33 in just 480 at-bats.

With a break for 1998, when he smote a career-high 44 doubles, Bonds has been hitting more homers than doubles since 1993, much earlier than I would have expected, because while his stolen-base numbers have declined precipitously in the last few years, he still stole at least 28 bases every year from 1993 to 1998. Bonds's numbers are going to be fun, especially his record-breaking 2001. Here they are, then, from 1993 to 2003, skipping the aforementioned 1998: .0148, .0486, .0059, .0290, .0263, .0394, .0438, .0861, .0372, .0589.

What this looks like for the guys without a history of hitting like this before is career progression. Some guys smack the hell out of the ball but don't get doubles out of it. Chavez could be on his way to being one of those guys. If he ends up hitting like Barry Bonds over the rest of his career, I won't complain too much about it.

Back to the original point, Chavez is 25th in RC/27, 22nd in ISO, 5th in BB/PA, and 13th in BB/K.

Be honest. Did you really think you'd ever see the day when Eric "If It's Within a Foot of my Head, I'm Swinging" Chavez would be fifth in walk rate in the major leagues?

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 10:47