

Monday, August 16, 2004

The Royals and the Future

What's to be said about this series with the Royals? The offense got shut down (ten runs in three games), the pitching got blown up (seven runs against Mark Mulder, a bad bullpen outing last night), and the lead in the West is narrowing (just a half game over the Angels and Rangers, with the A's having one more win than Texas and one fewer loss than Anaheim).

Over the last month or so, Mark Mulder really hasn't been the kind of pitcher the A's need, especially since Tim Hudson is still recovering from his injury and Barry Zito only now appears to be getting himself straightened out (though we've said that before). Mulder's ERA has risen over a run since a June 24th complete game victory over Anaheim, dropping his ranking to 7th in the American League.

While he's still getting ground balls (13 ground ball outs to 5 fly balls in this latest game, for example), Mulder is giving up home runs at an alarming rate: of the eighteen homers he's allowed on the year, exactly half of them have come in the last month (from July 18th through last night). Worse, he's walking batters frequently: since 6/24, he's had just one game where he's walked fewer than two batters (a one-walk performance in which he gave up seven runs in six innings to Texas), and, overall, he's walked 28 batters in his last 75 innings, or 3.36 per nine innings.

The walks are nothing new, though, at least not for this year. He's already given out more free passes in 2004 than he did in this last three years, and he's only eleven behind his career-high, set in his rookie 2000 season. With around ten more starts to make this year, he'll break that number easily.

Rich Harden's turned up his game of late, but with the effectiveness of Barry Zito and Mark Redman always in question, and the health of Tim Hudson on the top of everyone's worry list, the A's need Mark Mulder to get back to his ~2.7 RA form if they're going to hold off the Anaheim and Texas squads.

What's next?

With 45 games remaining, we're to the point in the season where remaining strength of schedule can really make a difference. How do the A's match up with the Angels and Rangers?

One nice thing about the imbalanced schedule is that it makes these kinds of comparisons late in the season easier, because all four West teams play each other frequently and evenly down the stretch, so that the difference in schedules comes down to a fairly small number of games.

Out of the division, the A's play Tampa Bay home and away (six games), Baltimore home (four) and away (three), the White Sox in Chicago (three), the Blue Jays in Toronto (three), the Red Sox in Oakland (three), and Cleveland in Oakland (three). A quick breakdown: that's 16 games against bad teams (seven at home, nine away), six against average teams (three home, three away), and three against a good team, all at home.

That's a pretty favorable schedule, though it could be even better: unfortunately, the Tampa Bay and Baltimore series are coming up next, and the later in the season you play against bad teams, the more they're going to be playing young kids who are not necessarily ready (especially in the case of those two farm systems) to be facing off against Mark Mulder and Tim Hudson.

Texas has the Indians in town for three contests, three at Kansas City, home (four) and away (three) against the Twins, three at home against the Orioles, three in Boston, four at home against the White Sox, and finish up with three at home against the Blue Jays.

That's nine games against bad teams (six home, three away), seven against average teams (all at home), and ten against good teams (four home, six away). That Twins series, if Minnesota brings its A-stuff and the Rangers get a heavy dose of Johan Santana, could really help the A's out. That the Rangers have to play in Boston (where the Red Sox are 37-21) while the A's get them in Oakland (the Sox are under .500 on the road) is also a boon.

The Angels, meanwhile, go to Tampa, then to the Bronx before coming home to face KC and Minnesota, followed by a jaunt to Boston and Cleveland before finishing up at home against Toronto and the White Sox. Unlike the Rangers and

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A's, these are all three-game series.

That's nine games against bad teams (six home, three away), six against average teams (all at home), and nine against good teams (six away, and in Yankee Stadium and Fenway, to boot, three at home).

Again, that's a tougher-looking schedule than the A's have to face, largely due to the trips to New York and Boston, plus a home series against the Twins.

For what it's worth ...

It should also be noted that, by BP's Adjusted Standings, while the A's are remarkably close to their predicted record (they're less than half a win lower than they should be based on the third-order calculation), while the Rangers and Angels are both about three games over their "true" records.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 14:13