

Wednesday, August 25, 2004

Mulder struggles, yet gets Magical 17

Mark Mulder had a pretty usual Mulder game last night against the Orioles, and, while that's not a good thing for the pitcher, it is a good thing for the A's. Even as he's struggling, he's pitching just well enough (and the offense is scoring just enough runs) to win games.

Mulder again had more walks than strikeouts, by a 3-2 margin. He's had more strikeouts than walks just once in his last six starts. If there's any statistic of concern for Mulder, that one is it. He also hit two batters, bringing his season total to ten, which is one fewer than his career high and which, the way he's going, he's likely to easily surpass. While he didn't throw a wild pitch in this game, Mulder has also thrown ten of those this year, three more than in any other season.

Of course, with all of that, Mulder still allowed just four hits (though three were doubles) in six innings, leading to two runs, and that was after being staked to a four-run first-inning lead.

After the game, Mulder said, "My mechanics are a little off right now and I don't feel great out there. I'm battling. Things are going to click soon." (AP) What worries me is that it doesn't seem like A's pitchers had lengthy struggles with their mechanics when Rick Peterson was the pitching coach. Perhaps it's too much to expect Curt Young to be Peterson in all ways, but you've at least got to be able to correct your pitchers' mechanical flaws. With Zito struggling all year and now Mulder falling into a pretty enormous funk, I might start being a Peterson true believer, despite my early-season claims that things would be fine under Young.

The Competition

The Rangers pulled one out against the Twins's closer, Joe Nathan, after Minnesota broke a tie in the top of the ninth with a double by Justin Morneau. Nathan has been mortal of late after not allowing a run from June 9th to August 18th. In his last three games, he's given up seven runs, just one of them meaningless, and cost the Twins two games (and, in effect, cost the A's one game as well).

Chris Young was making his major league debut last night for the Rangers and had a mediocre outing: 5.2 innings, three runs, two homers, three walks, four strikeouts, and twice as many fly-ball outs and ground-ball outs.

Anaheim beat Kansas City, 7-5, as Cal Pickering finally had a hit that didn't leave the yard. Unfortunately for the Angels, it went for a three-run triple in the top of the first. I'm hereby starting a Pickering Watch to see whether Cal can end his season with no singles and still hit .360.

Anyway, too bad for the A's, Jimmy Serrano, the other rookie pitcher mentioned in yesterday's column, couldn't hold up even as well as Chris Young did for the Rangers. Serrano gave up eight hits and four runs in just three innings, and while he didn't take the loss (big ol' Dennys Reyes did for allowing three runs in his three innings), he certainly didn't take advantage of the run support he was given (four runs in the first two innings).

Finally, Boston beat Toronto 5-4 as Tim Wakefield overcame ten hits, two walks, two hit batters, and a wild pitch to allow just three runs to score. That's a pitiful offensive output by the Blue Jays, who now have both Alexis Rios and Gabe Gross in their lineup.

More and more I wish the A's had kept Frank Menechino. He looked done in his few games with the A's, but he's really turned it on north of the border. He was the DH last night and went 3-3 with a triple, improving his line to .317/.423/.539. The A's don't have a single player hitting that well, though the difference between Menechino and Eric Chavez is basically batting average (Chavez's isolated-patience and -power are both better than Frankie's, but he's hitting just .278).

It's true that Menechino's doing most of his damage against lefties, but when the two Oakland options at second against those guys are Mark McLemore (we won't even mention his splits) and Marco Scutaro (.330 OBP vs. left-handers), it'd be nice to have a guy around who can both hold his own against right-handers and crush lefties.

Today

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The standings remain exactly where they were yesterday, so let's look to today. Boston sends Curt Schilling against Josh Towers, and if Toronto had trouble with Tim Wakefield, you can bet they'll go down hard under the buzz-saw of the second-best pitcher in the AL. Not that Towers has been bad, mind you, as he's got a 4.30 ERA and seven of his last ten starts have been Quality, but he's skating a thin line with very few strikeouts (3.99 per nine innings). If he were Mark Mulder, this might be less of an issue, but his GB/FB ratio is 1.33, which is fine (and a significant improvement over his 0.77 from 2002), but not overwhelming enough to be a solid bet for a continued ERA below 4.75.

Minnesota sends Kyle Lohse against Ryan Drese for Texas. As surprisingly bad as Lohse has been, Drese has been that good. He's third in the AL in ERA (ahead of Mulder now by about 0.4 runs) and he's keeping the ball in the park (just 11 homers allowed in 166.2 innings). His peripherals are uninspiring, but, like Mulder, he's keeping the ball down: a 2.40 GB/FB ratio will win you a lot of games when your dominating stuff isn't with you. Look for more bad news for the A's in this one.

Ex-Athletic Mike Wood starts for the Royals against ex-bullpenner Ramon Ortiz of the Angels. Wood's been mediocre in ten starts and is giving up too many bombs, while Ortiz has been up and down as a starter. Oakland's best hope is for Ortiz to have a bit of a down day and for Cal Pickering to rock a couple of homers.

Finally, in ESPN2's second game, Bruce "Ramblin' Man" Chen goes against Rich Harden. Chen's on his 43rd team or so and hasn't pitched this year, so, as always, it's impossible to really get a read on him from the outside. He's obviously talent, but his bouncing around results from a frustrating inability to get him to harness it, so the A's could run into an 8-inning, one-run game, or they could find themselves with a 7-0 lead after two frames. On the flip side, that describes Rich Harden as well. Harden had a nice seven game run of four-runs or fewer from 7/15 to 8/14, but had that snapped with an ugly performance against the Devil Rays of all teams, though he got the win anyway. His ERA now stands just a hair over four, so he should be personally motivated to make himself just one of eleven starters in the American League with an ERA under four.

I'm guessing the A's pick up a game on the Angels and remain steady with regard to the Red Sox and Rangers.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 11:09