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Advice for Zito and from Menander

An atrocious bullpen and defensive performance in the seventh inning last night cost the A's a win, though their inability to get men home (nine men left on base, just three runs scored) didn't help things.

All of that aside, though, I could argue for a different culprit. Barry Zito is finally getting into something of a groove, and he threw six good innings last night, allowing four hits and a walk leading to just one run while striking out five.

Unfortunately, due to his propensity for long at-bats and deep counts, he'd thrown 106 pitches after his six innings and Ken Macha, not wanting to see Zito get to the ~125 mark, pulled him for Chad Bradford in the seventh.

Zito remarked after the game that he would have liked to stay in, but Macha made the right call for a variety of reasons. First, Zito's arm still does need to be preserved. We're not in the playoffs yet (and if we were, Zito certainly would have started the seventh). Second, as I've said before, Zito has had the propensity for big innings, especially as the later innings come and he gets worn down a bit, and Macha didn't want to turn a good start into a bad one, so he brought in a usually reliable (though not this year) pitcher in Chad Bradford to protect a two-run lead. Third, and finally, it teaches Zito a lesson. If he wants to pitch seven, eight, or nine innings, he's got to get through the first six with a much more reasonable pitch count. Zito could learn a lot from Mark Mulder on that count, despite Mulder's recent struggles. I think too many teams are laying off Zito's two-strike way-high fastball, and he needs to find a strategy that doesn't require him getting from 0-2 to 2-2 or 3-2 before striking a guy out.

By my count, Zito threw twelve balls after getting two strikes on batters. If he cut out about eight of those, he'd have been in a position (98 pitches) where Macha might have let him pitch the seventh. Now, it should be noted that his approach worked in the sense of getting guys out: Zito didn't allow a single two-strike count to turn into a hit or walk. He just threw too many pitches to get those outs.

The Angels

The Angels blasted four homers to hold up Bartolo Colon's adequate start (105 pitches in seven innings despite three runs and two walks), so Anaheim finds themselves just a game back of Oakland. It's getting frustrating watching the A's inability to pull away, because this is really out of character for this club. As I've said before, Oakland's never had these kinds of struggles in August and September, and it could end up costing them a playoff spot.

Even if they get to the playoffs, though, they'll almost certainly have the worst record of the four AL teams there, and they have a shot at getting there despite a sub-.500 record on the road. Neither of these items bodes well for their ability to get out of the first round. The only hope would be a matchup against the Twins (that isn't going to happen) and even then, two games thrown by Johan Santana isn't something any team, much less one whose four best hitters (Kotsay, Chavez, Durazo, Hatteberg) are all left-handed.

I'm perilously close to despair. Menander tries to reassure me, though: "He who labors diligently need never despair; for all things are accomplished by diligence and labor."

So labor on diligently, Oakland!

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 12:15