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### A small essay in an ugly mess

Mother of God, what's going on around here? More importantly, what the hell just happened in Texas?

After a crappy couple of losses, I was counting on the stopper, Tim Hudson, to get the A's back on the right side of things, which he did, though he was not without his struggles. It took Hudson 123 pitches to get through seven innings since he walked five and gave up seven hits, but at the end of all that, the A's were up 3-2.

It might just be me, but it seems like Jim Mecir could be called "reliable" these days. I'm ready to call any pitcher who can throw a 1-2-3 inning occasionally reliable, however, so maybe you shouldn't mind me. Whatever you think of Mecir's overall ability, though, he threw one of those nice 1-2-3 innings last night, and Bobby Crosby added his 21st homer of the year in the top of the ninth, giving Octavio Dotel a two-run cushion heading to the final half-frame.

Unfortunately, Dotel has been ... well, he's been about as flammable as any other closer the A's have had in the last five years. Which, if you haven't been paying attention, is pretty flammable. He was good before he got to the A's, but it seems like the relatively inexpensive price Oakland paid for him has gotten into his head, and he's pitching down to the level of that price.

His reasons for pitching poorly aside, though, Dotel blew it last night. After he got Eric Young (who hit a key homer the night before) to line out, he showed the necessity for the extra cushion Crosby had delivered, giving up a homer to Hank Blalock to cut the lead to one. He then gave up a double to Michael Young and intentionally walked Mark Teixeira.

These three plays aren't so troubling. Blalock's a fine young hitter, and the homer was his 32nd of the year. He's victimized a lot of pitchers, and when you get Dotel's power matching up against Blalock's, the pitcher is going to lose sometimes. Michael Young, though he's playing over his head, is having a hell of a fine season for the Rangers, particularly with his .315 batting average. The double was his 32nd of the year, so, like Blalock's homers, he's going to hit them sometimes. That Dotel gave up the hit immediately after the homer, rather than shutting the Rangers down right then and there is painful, of course, but let's move on. The intentional walk to Teixeira was obvious and inarguable. The man has monster power that could win the game with one swing, the batters coming after him aren't nearly so ominous, and walking him sets up a game-ending double play.

And lo and behold, the next batter, Brian Jordan, hit a grounder to second! I didn't see the play, so I don't know whether Jordan should have been doubled up or not, but in the end, just one out was made, at second base, while the tying run moved to third. Then came David Dellucci. He was oh for his last nineteen, and all Dotel needed was some kind of out, and the game was won. Instead, Dellucci hit a scorcher to right that dropped in front of Jermaine Dye, allowing the tying run to score, but leaving the winning run at second and putting the game in the hands of Kevin Mench.

But no! It didn't happen that way! Jermaine Dye stupidly dove for the ball, missed it, and saw it roll all the way to the wall, which, especially since, with two outs, the runner on first was going on contact, allowed the winning run to score. Even though Dotel didn't do his job, the A's should have been given a chance in extra innings, but Jermaine Dye, who's been killing this team with ugly offers all season, added to his and the team's miseries with yet another loss.

Did it have to be this way? Did the A's have to not turn the double play on the previous play? Did Dotel have to give up so many hard-hit balls? Did Jermaine Dye even have to be in the game anyway, when Nick Swisher, younger and probably faster and more nimble, with no nasty broken leg bones in his past, was on the bench?

Why do I feel like the A's are going to finish up in third place, four games back of Anaheim and two back of Texas? Maybe it's because they've absolutely sucked for the past who knows how long? Maybe because the pitcher most likely to throw a truly shut-down game right now is Rich Harden?

I don't have the answers. If I did, I'd be in Oakland, waiting to step up when David Forst moves on, further spreading the Beane seed throughout baseball.

On the other hand, I don't think Beane, Forst, or any of the other guys in the front office have any answers, either.

Bobby Crosby and Michael Young

Let's move on to a happier topic. Unless the Angels go crazy again and sign Nomar or something, the only two contenders for best shortstop in the AL West are Michael Young and Bobby Crosby. Actually, even if the Angels sign Garciparra, that statement holds. But we'll talk about the decline of Nomar some other time, when we're ready to delve into some psychoanalysis of the types of writers who like to do baseless psychoanalysis, and the possible effects of that type of behavior on players.

Michael Young has been more valuable than Crosby this year. Using VORP, which just measures offense, the difference is about 26 runs. It would basically take Crosby being a brilliant defensive shortstop combined with Young being a lousy one to make up that difference and while I can't say that those things aren't true, I think they're unlikely. It seems to me, though, that Young's edge is entirely about batting average and playing time. Young is hitting .315 in 695 plate appearances, while Crosby is at a measly .250 in 584. Now, we can't really disparage the playing time difference, because Young deserves credit for remaining in the lineup, but going forward, Crosby's other numbers indicate that, so long as he isn't actually a .250 hitter, he'll be the more valuable of the pair.

For example, let's look at on-base percentage. Despite that gaudy batting average, Young has an OBP of .355, which is nothing to sneeze at, but the ISO there is just .040. Crosby, meanwhile, has a .329 OBP, good for a .079 ISO, and that's while drawing fewer walks than many expected: for example, in about 520 AAA plate appearances, Crosby drew 63, compared to 58 major league walks in about 580 PA's. He's still at that nice 1-in-10 ratio, but you might expect some improvement in that category going forward. On the other hand, Young's major league career also shows fewer walks than his minor league record indicated: he was perhaps a smidge below 1-in-10 during his minor league career, but he's well below that mark in the majors, talking closer to one every seventeen times up in The Show.

To power, then. Crosby carries a slightly smaller edge, I think, with a .194 ISO to .171 for Young. I wonder about the effects of the Coliseum vs. those of the Ballpark, though, in keeping this race as close as it is. Looking a little closer at the pair's extra-base hits, it appears that Young's speed is also keeping him in the race: he's hit eight triples to Crosby's one, while both have 21 homers and Crosby actually has two more doubles than his counterpart. Triples, count, of course, but you won't necessarily find them turning into homers down the road, while Crosby, at 24, might expect to see a couple of his doubles get over the wall.

That brings up what might be the most important point, however: age. Crosby is three years and two months younger than Michael Young. Furthermore, that gap means that Young is in his infamous age 27 season as we speak. While his batting average trends indicate that this .315 season isn't a fluke so much as the culmination of an upward trend, I'd bet on him losing about 15 points off his average starting next year, while Crosby, unlikely to hit .300 like he did in the minors, adds perhaps 20 points to get to a nice round .270. Taking away 35 points of Young's batting average advantage, despite leaving him with a sizeable lead, should be enough to make Crosby the player you'd rather have in the six-hole every night.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 19:05