

Wednesday, July 20, 2005

A's 3, Angels 1

Be honest with me: did you really think Rich Harden would be this good already? He's 23 years old, he's in his second full big league season (third overall) and he's doing the kinds of things that, despite missing time with an injury, have to make awards voters give notice, if not for this year then for next. The only other starter in the American League with a better ERA than his 2.11 mark (so long as you're not counting Al Leiter) is Erik Bedard, who, like Harden, doesn't have enough innings to qualify for the official title. Harden is 18th in all of baseball in pitcher VORP, despite having anywhere from four to seven fewer starts than the other pitchers in the top thirty (again, except for Bedard, who, in just ten starts, is ranked 22nd). He's on his way to surpassing his 75th percentile PECOTA VORP projection and approach his 90th percentile projection, again despite missing a healthy chunk of time with an injury.

All of this love is appropriate because, of course, Harden shut down the Angels last night, throwing eight and two thirds innings of shutout baseball before giving up a run and being removed for Huston Street. If the Yankees bullpen hadn't been so combustible (or better, if the Yankees' powerful offense had managed to scratch out more than just a couple of runs against Chan Ho Park, of all people), the A's would be in second place right now. We'll have to wait another day for that, however, and settle for moving to seven and a half back of Anaheim. The A's are also just two and a half back of the wild card leaders, though there are four teams ahead of them and one just a half game behind.

As one of the Mets announcers pointed out last night (even TV guys say something smart sometimes), the big hurdle is often less how many games you have to make up than how many teams you have to jump over. It's one thing to gain two games on Minnesota, but it's an other thing entirely to do that while all the other teams around you are also losing ground. In fact, it's nearly impossible because many of those other teams are playing each other at the time. For example, the Yankees are tied for the wild card lead and thus the A's should be happy that they lost, but Texas beat them, and the Rangers are ahead of the A's in the chase for the playoffs, so they can't be too happy.

Anyway, tonight's game (on ESPN2!) is a rubber match and pits Barry Zito against Paul Byrd. The Anaheim hurler is having a surprisingly good year (ERA well under four) that looks. I see three factors: a lower than average home-run rate, a lower than average walk rate, and a lower than expected BABIP. Two of those three are in his control, of course, and are of the utmost importance to a guy who doesn't strike out many batters (which he doesn't). But the Angels' defensive efficiency implies that about 30% of his balls in play should drop for hits, while in reality it's happening to about 27% of the balls. Unfortunately for Oakland, that's not really significant on a micro level. In other words three more hits for every hundred balls in play works out to fewer than one per game.

Anyway, with Aaron Small (yes, the same one who once pitched for Oakland; raise your hand if you remember him) going for the Yankees tonight as they continue their open casting call for pitchers, the A's have to look at this game as a chance to move up on the wild card leaders rather than on Texas. I don't have high hopes for Small surviving the Texas heat.

Meanwhile, Erubiel Durazo "will need season-ending surgery and is expected to be sidelined an additional nine to 12 months." (AP) Obviously, the A's would have liked to get him back to add a potentially powerful bat to the lineup. Even without that, though, the opportunity to trade him for a goodie or two this offseason loomed. Just as with Octavio Dotel, however, Durazo's value is now nil to the A's. They can't trade him, they don't want to sign him, and while members of the current team have stepped up admirably to fill the holes left by these two (Huston Street, Dan Johnson), we're talking about something approaching \$10 million worth of payroll that has no value whatsoever to the A's. That's just plain unfortunate.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 14:05