



# ***Press Clips***

**(August 2, 2018)**

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**FROM THE OC REGISTER****Luis Valbuena's rough season continues in Angels' loss to Rays**

By Jeff Fletcher

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The Angels are still waiting for Luis Valbuena's season to turn around.

Valbuena had yet another forgettable game in the Angels' 7-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Rays on Wednesday night.

There was plenty of blame to go around on a night when the Angels had one hit with a runner in scoring position and their pitchers walked seven and hit two batters.

As for Valbuena, he had nothing go right. He struck out twice and grounded out in three at-bats, each time coming up with at least one runner on base. He also made two errors at third.

Valbuena is now hitting .200 with nine homers, none since June 23. He had briefly lost his regular spot in the lineup when David Fletcher took over at third, but the trade of Ian Kinsler moved Fletcher to second and allowed Valbuena another shot to come out of his slump.

It didn't go well on Wednesday. He struck out with two on and one out in the fourth, scuttling one of the Angels' most promising rallies. He also fanned after an Andrelton Simmons one-out walk in the sixth.

"At times it looks like he's moving forward a little bit," Manager Mike Scioscia said. "At times he's still searching. He's going to keep working hard and we're going to try to get him on the beam. He had some opportunities tonight and didn't get it done."

Hitting coach Eric Hinske said Valbuena is tinkering with his swing, trying to be shorter to the ball and to swing at more strikes.

Valbuena said it's mostly the latter.

"I have to swing at good pitches," he said. "That's the difference. That's it."

His discipline has also shown up in a decrease in walks. Last year he hit .199, but with enough walks to still have a .294 on-base percentage. This season, his on-base percentage is .252.

"I have to keep going," he said. "It was a bad day. Tomorrow is another day. I'll wait for my opportunity. I am doing my best. This is not my first time in this situation. I'll be better."

Valbuena also had a tough night defensively.

In the fourth, he made a poor decision trying to do too much. Tommy Pham was at third on a fly ball to left field. Pham had broken toward the plate but stopped. He wasn't far off the bag when Valbuena cut off the throw from left and tried to flip it to Simmons to get Pham before he could get back to third.

Simmons wasn't close enough to the bag, and the ball dribbled into foul territory, allowing Pham to score.

The run was earned because the next two hitters had hits anyway, giving the Rays a 3-2 lead against Nick Tropeano. In the sixth, Tropeano had to throw extra pitches to escape a bases-loaded jam after Valbuena booted a grounder with two outs.

Tropeano then gave up a homer to Willy Adames leading off the sixth, putting the Angels behind 4-2.

That was too much for the Angels on a night when their offense, which had been performing well for about a week, couldn't manage any runs after the fourth.

Kole Calhoun put the Angels on the board with a first-inning homer that splashed into the Rays' "touch tank" beyond the right-center field fence. The tank of swimming rays was installed in 2006, and Calhoun became just the seventh player to hit a ball into it.

It was Calhoun's 13th homer since he came off the disabled list on June 18, the most in the American League since then.

## **Jo Adell making an impression as he rises quickly in the Angels' system**

By Jeff Fletcher

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — A day after Jo Adell hit a home run in his Double-A debut, Angels manager Mike Scioscia was asked whether the organization's top prospect was "on the radar" of the major league staff yet.

Scioscia indicated it's a little early for that, but that Adell has nonetheless made a strong impression. Adell, 19, has hit .303 with 19 homers at three levels of the Angels' system this season, his first full year as a pro.

"Everyone is excited with Jo and where he is," Scioscia said Wednesday. "Just the growth we've seen from a teenager in a couple years is incredible. His athleticism is off the charts. He doing some great things on the field."

Adell is actually ahead of the pace set by Mike Trout when he began his minor league career. Trout did not play at Double-A until the start of his second full season. He wasn't there for long, though. Trout reached the majors in the middle of that season.

### **TROPEANO'S TROUBLE**

Nick Tropeano had not allowed a run through his first three innings on Wednesday night, but he gave up three runs in the fourth, an inning that started with him hitting a batter.

"I think the issue this season, and especially today, has been the big inning," Tropeano said. "It's been haunting me throughout this year and today especially. That stems from free passes."

Tropeano walked four on Wednesday. For the season, he's walked 30 in 71 innings, with a 4.94 ERA.

"I have to get my mechanics more clean and let my stuff eat over the plate," Tropeano said. "Just trust my stuff."

#### **ALSO**

Albert Pujols hit another hard shot down the left field line for a single in four trips to the plate. Pujols has hits in nine of his last 10 games, and he's hitting .303 since July 1. "If you look at where he was the 30-40 at-bats before the All-Star break, you could start to see some things coming and he's continued that," Scioscia said. ...

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**FROM LOS ANGELES TIMES**

## **Angels drop below .500, again, in 7-2 loss to Rays**

By Mike Digiovanna

If the Angels are to make a late-summer run, if not to make the playoffs to at least make things interesting in the American League wild-card race, they might want to start soon.

They remained stuck in neutral in a 7-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Rays in Tropicana Field on Wednesday night, falling to 54-55 on the season. They're 9 ½ games behind Seattle and now Oakland for the last playoff spot.

Since June 25, the Angels have not strayed more than two games above or below the .500 mark, the very definition of a team spinning its wheels. They've been neither good enough to cut into the wild-card deficit nor bad enough to fall so far back they have no chance.

It appeared the Angels turned a corner last week with four straight wins, scoring 38 runs in those games against the Chicago White Sox and Mariners. They have now lost three in a row, along with catcher Martin Maldonado and second baseman Ian Kinsler, who were traded for prospects in the last week.

They still have enough offense to make a push. Mike Trout could win his third MVP award, Kole Calhoun has been one of the hottest hitters in baseball for a month, Andrelton Simmons is having a solid season, Albert Pujols and Justin Upton have hit well since mid-July, and Shohei Ohtani is back.

The Angels tend to run hot and cold though. They mustered only six hits, none after the sixth inning, struck out 11 times and went one for six with runners in scoring position Wednesday night.

Their starting pitchers, while ranking sixth in the AL with a 4.07 ERA, have produced only 42 quality starts, 11<sup>th</sup> in the league, and they rank 13<sup>th</sup> with 566 2/3 innings pitched. That has put a heavy burden on an overworked bullpen that has thrown 407 innings, second to Tampa Bay.

"There are some things that have to fall into place to have that run, but yes, I think we're capable of it," manager Mike Scioscia said. "I feel it. These guys are playing hard, they're working hard, we're just not attacking the ball on a consistent basis, and it comes back to our starting pitching.

"It's tough to absorb the one-out start, the starters coming out in the third or fourth inning. We need those guys to get us to a certain point."

Angels right-hander Nick Tropeano got to the sixth inning Wednesday night, and he escaped bases-loaded jams twice, getting Jake Bauers to line into an inning-ending double play in the third inning and striking out Ji-Man Choi with a full-count changeup to end the fifth.

But he couldn't hold a 2-0 lead, giving up three runs and three hits in the fourth, an inning that started with Tommy Pham getting hit by a pitch. Tropeano gave up four earned runs and seven hits in 5 2/3 innings, walking four and striking out four.

"I think the issue this season and especially today has been the big inning," said Tropeano, who fell to 4-6 with a 4.94 ERA. "It's been haunting me throughout this year and today especially. I think it stems from free passes. I have to clean up my mechanics, be more aggressive and trust my stuff."

The Angels made an early splash when Calhoun became the seventh player in Tropicana Field history to homer into the Rays Touch Tank beyond the right-center field wall, driving a hanging curve from Rays starter Tyler Glasnow 427 feet for a 1-0 lead.

It was the right fielder's 13<sup>th</sup> homer since his June 12 return from the disabled list, a torrid 36-game stretch in which Calhoun has hit .302 with nine doubles, 30 RBIs and 27 runs to raise his average from .145 to .211.

The Angels made it 2-0 in the fourth when Upton singled, took third on Pujols' double and scored on Simmons' 105-mph line-drive single to center.

After Tropeano hit Pham in the fourth, Joey Wendle doubled to right to advance Pham to third. Choi lined out to left, Upton charging in for the catch and making a strong throw to cutoff man Luis Valbuena to keep Pham at third.

Or so the Angels thought. Valbuena made an ill-advised, awkward flip to third in an attempt to pick off Pham, even though he had no play. Simmons was not close enough to the bag to catch the toss, which rolled into foul territory, allowing Pham to score.

The error, the first of two in the game for Valbuena, was unsightly, but Pham would have scored on Willy Adames' ensuing RBI single that tied the score 2-2. Mallex Smith followed with an RBI triple to left-center for a 3-2 Rays lead.

Adames' homer made it 4-2 in the sixth, and the Rays tacked on three runs off Hansel Robles in the eighth on Matt Duffy's RBI single and Bauers' two-run homer to right-center.

## Shohei Ohtani has been thrown a curve during rookie season

By Mike Digiovanna

**Shohei Ohtani's** kryptonite is no different than that of **Cody Bellinger** or **Joey Gallo** or any young left-handed slugger in the big leagues: the sweeping breaking ball from a left-handed pitcher.

It's the primary reason Ohtani, despite all of his tape-measure home runs and vicious line drives, has struggled against left-handers, batting .170 (nine for 53) with a .499 on-base-plus-slugging percentage, no homers, two RBIs and 22 strikeouts against them.

The rookie entered Wednesday night's game against the Rays with a .296 average, .967 OPS, nine homers, 23 RBIs and 34 strikeouts against right-handers.

"A lot of lefties struggle with that pitch," Angels hitting coach **Eric Hinske** said. "It looks like he's going to hit it sometimes, and he's a little bit early or a little bit late."

Or not even close. Ohtani struck out swinging on a **Ryan Yarbrough** slider that was at least a foot outside and near the dirt with two on to end the sixth inning of Tuesday night's game, his body corkscrewing out of the batter's box and toward the first base dugout.

"We're just trying to keep him in there, you know?" Hinske said. "He has a tendency to want to fall out of it and have that sort of Ichiro-like swing leaning toward first base. We're trying to keep him over the plate so he can go opposite field with that pitch."

Ohtani is taking extra swings off the team's left-handed batting-practice pitcher and the left-handed breaking ball machine. The key, Hinske said, is recognizing the pitch and location.

The slider that starts inside can be hit. The one that starts middle or middle-away is a chase pitch that usually breaks about a foot outside.

“You definitely have to make it a strike — get a pitch you can handle and whack it,” Hinske said. “The mechanics of his swing are great. He has to determine if it’s a strike as early as possible. I think the more he faces them, and he’s starting to get regular at-bats against them now, it’s gonna help out.”

Velocity doesn’t bother Ohtani. He turned around a 95-mph fastball from Rays left-hander **Jose Alvarado** in his last at-bat Tuesday, sending a line drive into center field for a single.

Hinske saw Ohtani make adjustments to transform himself from a player who looked overmatched for much of spring training to one of the game’s most dynamic young hitters, so he is confident Ohtani will figure out how to hit sweeping breaking balls from left-handers.

“I definitely think he will continue to improve,” Hinske said. “The ceiling with Shohei is endless. Just keep giving him little nuggets every day and get him consistent at-bats. He’s still a rookie, he’s new to the league, seeing these guys for the first time, and hitting in the big leagues is pretty tough.”

### **On the rise**

**Jo Adell** is not on the major league depth chart just yet, but the organization’s most highly touted prospect since **Mike Trout** just pulled into the neighborhood.

Adell, 19, the 10<sup>th</sup> overall pick in the 2017 draft, was promoted to double-A Mobile this week after hitting .326 with a 1.009 OPS, six homers and 29 RBIs in 25 games at Class-A Burlington (Iowa) and .290 with an .891 OPS, 12 homers and 42 RBIs in 57 games at advanced Class-A Inland Empire.

The 6-foot-3, 210-pound center fielder hit a 428-foot home run with an exit velocity of 113 mph in his double-A debut Tuesday night.

“I think everyone is excited about Jo and where he is,” manager **Mike Scioscia** said. “The growth we’ve seen from him in a couple of years is incredible. His athleticism is off the charts, and he’s doing some great things on the field.

“There are a lot of things a young player has to learn before he’s ready for that [big league] opportunity, and there’s no doubt Jo has made great strides. He’s been real dynamic with everything he’s doing on the baseball field right now.”



**FROM ANGELS.COM****Calhoun's bat hot, but Angels cooled by Rays**

By Maria Guardado

ST. PETERSBURG -- A Wednesday night that began with a splash ended with a thud, as the Angels fell to the Rays, 7-2, at Tropicana Field to extend their losing streak to three games and dip back below .500.

**Kole Calhoun** dunked a solo home run into the rays tank in right-center field to put the Angels on the board in the first inning, and **Andrelton Simmons** extended the lead to 2-0 with an RBI single in the fourth. But the Rays erased the deficit with a three-run fourth and then added an insurance run on **Willy Adames'** solo homer off right-hander **Nick Tropeano** in the sixth.

Tampa Bay capped its offensive output by scoring three more runs in the eighth, highlighted by **Jake Bauers'** two-run shot off reliever **Hansel Robles**, to secure the series victory.

Tropeano was charged with the loss after yielding four runs on seven hits while walking four and striking out four over 5 2/3 innings. Since returning from the disabled list on July 21, Tropeano is 1-2 with a 5.29 ERA in three starts.

"I think Nick battled," manager Mike Scioscia said. "I don't know if he had his best stuff tonight. He missed with some spots, but he battled. He got us into the sixth. We had a chance to win the game. We just couldn't put enough pressure on those guys."

The Angels (54-55) entered Wednesday batting .309 and averaging 7.6 runs per game over their previous nine contests, but their bats were kept relatively quiet by newly acquired Rays right-hander **Tyler Glasnow** and reliever **Jake Faria**, who combined to pitch the first 6 2/3 innings and allowed only two runs. The Angels were limited to six hits -- none after the fifth inning -- and went 1-for-6 with runners in scoring position.

Calhoun continued to swing a hot bat for the Angels, going 1-for-2 with two walks to put the memory of his early-season slump even further behind him. He is slashing .302/.368/.683 with 13 home runs and 30 RBIs in 36 games since returning from the disabled list on June 18, raising his batting average from .145 to .211 over that span.

"Kole Calhoun might be the hottest guy in our league right now," Scioscia said.

Calhoun's first-inning home run off Glasnow was his 14th of the season and the seventh to land in the rays tank since it opened in 2006, according to the Rays.

The Angels tacked on another run in the fourth after Faria entered the game to replace Glasnow. **Justin Upton** and **Albert Pujols** produced back-to-back singles to put runners on the corners with one out, and Simmons shot a 105-mph liner that deflected off Adames' glove and trickled into center field for an RBI single. The Angels had a chance to add more, but Faria struck out **Luis Valbuena** and **Eric Young Jr.** swinging to end the inning.

Tropeano fell into trouble in the third after **Mallex Smith** doubled, **Kevin Kiermaier** walked and **Matt Duffy** singled to load the bases with one out, but he escaped the jam after Simmons turned an unassisted double play on Bauers' grounder up the middle.

Still, Tropeano couldn't escape damage in the fourth. After hitting **Tommy Pham** to open the inning, Tropeano surrendered a double to **Joey Wendle** that put runners on second and third with one out. That brought up **Ji-Man Choi**, who lined out to left fielder Upton for the second out. Upton then threw to cutoff man Valbuena, who attempted to flip the ball to Simmons to nab Pham at third, but his errant throw missed Simmons completely, allowing Pham to score and cut the Angels' lead to 2-1.

"Errors are part of the game," Tropeano said. "It's our job to pick up our teammates, just like they pick us up with the bats, and I was unable to do that today."

Adames tied it with an RBI single to left field, and Smith subsequently drove in the go-ahead run with a triple to center field.

"I think the issue this season, and especially today, has been the big inning," Tropeano said. "It's been haunting me this year. I think that just stems from free passes. I've just got to get my mechanics more clean, let my stuff eat over the plate and just trust my stuff."

#### UP NEXT

Left-hander **Andrew Heaney** starts for the Angels as they close out their three-game series with the Rays on Thursday at 10:10 a.m. PT at Tropicana Field. **Hunter Wood** will take the hill for the Rays. Heaney faced Tampa Bay on May 19 at Angel Stadium and took the loss after giving up four runs (all unearned) over six innings. He is seeking his first road win since Sept. 2, 2015, at Oakland.

## Adell's stock continues to climb

*Angels' top prospect turning heads in the Minor Leagues*

By Maria Guardado

ST. PETERSBURG -- Less than 14 months after being selected by the Angels with the 10th overall pick in the 2017 Draft, outfielder Jo Adell made his debut with Double-A Mobile on Tuesday and continued to turn heads, going 2-for-4 with a two-run homer in the BayBears' 9-6 victory.

After opening the season at Class A Burlington, Adell has already earned two promotions, batting .303 with a .936 OPS, 19 home runs and 73 RBIs in 83 games across three Minor League levels. The 19-year-old is the second-youngest player to reach the Double-A level this season, behind top Padres prospect **Fernando Tatis Jr.**, who is three months younger.

Adell's impressive raw power was on display on Tuesday, as his home run -- his first Double-A hit -- traveled an estimated 428 feet with an exit velocity of 112.9 mph, according to BayBears director of broadcasting and media relations Steve Goldberg.

Ranked the **No. 16 overall prospect** in baseball and the Angels' **top prospect**, Adell is easily the club's most exciting prospect since another high school outfielder -- **Mike Trout**.

"I think everyone is excited about Jo and where he is," manager Mike Scioscia said on Wednesday. "Just the growth you've seen from a teenager in a couple years, it's incredible. His athleticism is off the charts, and he's doing some great things on the field."

Although Adell has made a rapid ascent through the Angels' farm system, Scioscia thinks it's still too early to consider him part of the club's depth chart at the Major League level.

"There's a lot of things a young player has to learn before he's ready for that opportunity," Scioscia said. "But there's no doubt that Jo, he's made great strides. He's been really dynamic in everything he's doing on the baseball field."

#### **Worth noting**

- Trout started at designated hitter on Wednesday to get a day off from playing on the artificial outfield turf at Tropicana Field, leaving **Shohei Ohtani** out of the starting lineup against the Rays. **Eric Young Jr.** started at center field in place of Trout.

"There's certainly going to be days when you're not going to be able to get everybody in the lineup," Scioscia said. "It's just where we are."

Ohtani, who is limited to hitting as he works his way back from a sprained elbow ligament, has progressed to throwing from 100 feet.

- Shortstop **Andrelton Simmons** returned to the lineup on Wednesday after receiving a scheduled day off on Tuesday.

### **FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

## **Adames, Bauers homer for Rays in 7-2 win over Angels**

By Dick Scanlon

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Willy Adames made the most of his first day as Tampa Bay's regular shortstop.

The rookie homered and drove in two runs to lead the Rays to a 7-2 win over the Los Angeles Angels on Wednesday night.

Tampa Bay designated slick fielding veteran shortstop Adeiny Hechavarria for assignment, clearing the way for Adames to start on a full-time basis.

"I would say it helped me a little bit," said Adames, who went into the game on an 8-for-53 slump. "You never want one of your teammates to get DFA'd but it's part of the business. I hope he knows that he's going to get a job. He's one of the best shortstops in the game."

Adames drove in a run with a two-out single off Angels starter Nick Tropeano in the fourth inning, then scored on Mallex Smith's triple. Adames led off the Rays sixth with his fourth home run to make it 4-2.

"It had to have been somewhat awkward knowing that we've got this defender who we consider as very elite," Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said. "We feel like that situation now has opened up for Willy to go play and have some peace of mind while doing so."

Jake Bauers added a two-run homer in the ninth for the Rays, his ninth of the season and third in three games.

Starting pitcher Tyler Glasnow and left fielder Tommy Pham played in their first game for the Rays a day after being acquired on the interleague trade deadline.

Glasnow, making his first start of the season after 34 relief appearances for Pittsburgh, gave up one run in three innings while striking out five.

"I'm comfortable as a starter. I've done it my entire career so I'm glad I'm getting put back as a starter," said Glasnow, who will stretch out his innings as a starter. "I think it will help just getting back in that routine."

Pham, who showed up at Tropicana Field just two hours before the game, went 0-for-3 with a hit, a walk, a strikeout, and a balk. He scored the Rays' first run after falling down on the basepath, explaining that his regular shoes have yet to join him.

Jake Faria, pitching for the first time since going on the disabled list with a left oblique strain June 22, got the win in the third relief appearance of his career. Faria (4-3) gave up one run on four hits in 3 2/3 innings.

Kole Calhoun hit the eighth pitch of the game into the fish tank behind the center field wall for the only run off Glasnow. Calhoun's 14th homer of the season was his 13th since coming off the disabled list on June 18.

"Kole Calhoun might be the hottest guy in our league right now," said Angels manager Mike Scioscia.

Tropeano (4-6) gave up four runs on seven hits and four walks in 5 2/3 innings. Three of the runs came in the decisive fourth inning, which opened with his plunking of Pham.

"The issue this season, especially today, has been the big inning," Tropeano said. "It's been haunting me throughout the year. I think that just stems from free passes."

OHTANI BENCHED

Mired in a 3-for-25 slump, Shohei Ohtani was out of the lineup Wednesday night. Manager Mike Scioscia said the RHP/DH was benched to get Mike Trout in the DH slot for one game on the artificial turf. Trout has been the DH for 14 of the Angels' 109 games.

#### TRAINER'S ROOM

Rays: LHP Blake Snell, out since appearing in the All-Star Game on July 17 due to left shoulder fatigue, is hopeful of returning this weekend after having a second bullpen session. A decision won't be made until the team sees how Snell responds Thursday.

#### UP NEXT

LHP Andrew Heaney (6-6, 0-4 on the road) will start Thursday's series finale for the Angels against Hunter Wood (0-0 in 11 appearances including three starts).

### FROM CBS SPORTS

#### **Rays look to continue home surge vs. Angels**

*ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- The new-look Tampa Bay Rays continue to find ways to win baseball games and can close out a sweep of the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday.*

By STATS

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- The new-look Tampa Bay Rays continue to find ways to win baseball games and can close out a sweep of the Los Angeles Angelson Thursday.

Tampa Bay (55-53) has won two straight since making three trades Tuesday, including a 7-2 win on Wednesday night with two new faces in the lineup.

The Rays are now 19-4 at home since June 11, the best home record in the majors in that span, winning seven of their last eight home series. The Angels are another story. After opening the season a major-league-best 18-8 on the road, they're just 7-19 away from home since May 30.

As much as there were newcomers, some of the same young talents continue to spark the Rays offensively, like rookies Willy Adames and Jake Bauers, who both hit home runs Wednesday.

"A lot of the same guys turning it over and getting big, timely hits when we need them," Rays manager Kevin Cash said.

Outfielder Tommy Pham, acquired from the Cardinals, went 0-for-3 with a walk and a run scored in his Rays debut, and pitcher Tyler Glasnow, acquired from the Pirates, pitched three solid innings, allowing just one run in his first Tampa Bay outing.

Another relatively new pitcher will get work in relief on Thursday -- lefty Jalen Beeks, acquired from the Red Sox last week, will almost certainly fare better in his second Rays outing. Last week in his Rays debut, he gave up eight earned runs on 10 hits in 3 1/3 innings for a 21.60 ERA.

The Rays will start 24-year-old right-hander Hunter Wood (0-0, 3.38 ERA), and Tampa Bay is 3-0 in the games where he's served as an "opener." On a staff where relievers are often starters, Wood's last outing -- with a season-high 45 pitches -- actually came in relief. He pitched 1 2/3 innings but gave up two earned runs on four hits in a loss to Baltimore. It was the first time in 11 outings that he gave up more than one earned run.

Los Angeles, hoping to avoid a sweep, will start 27-year-old lefty Andrew Heaney (6-6, 3.64 ERA), who has no losses in his last four starts. That ERA is down considerably from a 7.06 last season. He's faced the Rays once this season, throwing six innings on May 19, allowing three hits and four runs (all unearned) while walking a season-high five batters.

The Angels (54-55) went 1-for-6 with runners in scoring position Wednesday, staying within two runs until the Rays tagged on three in the eighth to break open a close game.

"We had guys on base early for sure, but with our guys in scoring position, they made some pitches and got out of it," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said.

Kole Calhoun homered for the Angels and is batting .294 with 13 home runs and 30 RBIs in 36 games since returning from the disabled list.

After Thursday, the Rays stay home for their next six games, with series against the White Sox and Orioles.

The Angels go to Cleveland for their next three games, with the next six games back home in Los Angeles.

**FROM TAMPA BAY TIMES**

## **Isn't it enough that Mike Trout is baseball's best player today?**

By Martin Fennelly

ST. PETERSBURG — The best baseball player in the universe (provided Mars is not holding out on us), has entered our atmosphere to play the Rays. Angels superstar centerfielder Mike Trout is in our midst, and our midst is better for it. The man should be seen.

Trout went 2-for-5 Tuesday against the Rays, including his 30th home run of the season, a massive blast off the Tropicana Field C-ring catwalk. Typical of Trout, the umpires had to slow him down as he rounded second.

"I just thought, 'Keep running,'" Trout said with a grin.

That is the best ballplayer in the game for you, whether he is breaking seats with smashed homers, roaring like a locomotive on the base paths or dashing across outfields to turn base hits into outs.

The best player in baseball, the game's five-tool wonder, signed autographs before Tuesday's game. Michael Nelson Trout remains a Jersey Boy (Millville), possessed of unflagging sincerity and unfailing humility, even though he is baseball's highest-paid player, earning, \$33.25 million this season. No matter. No big head. Trout, a two-time MVP, has the same exact hat size that he did when he hit the majors in 2011.

The problem — baseball's problem, really — is the game can't figure out a way to better market Trout and his wondrous talents in the name of baseball's brand.

There are a few things preventing that.

First, Trout plays more than half his games on the West Coast, including all his home games. Even the hardest East Coast baseball geek's eyes are drooping by the time the Angels play.

"It's even tough for my family," Trout said.

Second, Trout hasn't held baseball's center stage very much in his career, which isn't his fault. The Angels have been to the postseason just once with Trout, in 2014, when they were swept by Kansas City. With only the All-Star Game as a platform, Trout has torn the Midsummer Classic to pieces, winning two MVP awards.

But the biggest obstacle to marketing Mike Trout as the face of baseball might be ... Trout.

At least commissioner Rob Manfred thinks so, which is why at this year's All-Star Game (Trout hit a home run), Manfred gently suggested that Trout could help grow his brand and that he "has to make a decision to engage. It takes time and effort."

This is lost on Trout, who steadfastly steers clear of attention. He routinely skips the All-Star Home Run Derby, though he did allow himself to be wired for sound during the game. "That was a lot of fun," he said.

You know, baseball has a lot of nerve. Twenty years ago, it was so desperate to be football that it turned a blind eye as the anabolic twins, McGwire and Sosa, hunted down the honorable Roger Maris. My eyes were blind, too.

Baseball, why don't you work on starting World Series games before 8:30? Leave Mike Trout to Mike Trout.

He just wants to be himself, and what's so bad about himself?

He doesn't care about attention or branding. He likes to go back to Millville, hunt, fish and hang with friends, and root for his football team like the goofy Philadelphia Eagles fan he is (QB Carson Wentz is among Trout's best buds). Trout lives on the beach in Los Angeles, but that's for him, his wife, Jessica,

who naturally was his high school sweetheart, and their dog. A man, a woman and a dog, That's the high life for Trout. No scandals, no TMZ, just ESPN.

"I don't know," Trout said. "That's the kind of person I am. I've been doing that since I was a kid. I'm not changing anything. I like my free time. Obviously, baseball is great and all. But once the game is over, you want to be yourself. You want to be a regular guy."

His teammates, who never tire of watching Trout, don't get any of this.

"He doesn't have to be more than who he is," outfielder Kole Calhoun said. "That's an opinion of other people, for him to do more. He's the best player in the game. Everybody knows that. How he wants to handle his business is his business. He's a humble person."

"I hate watching him do what he does against our team or any of the other 30 teams," Rays centerfielder Kevin Kiermaier said. "He kills everyone. But you can't do anything but respect everything he does out there on the field. He plays the game the right way. He's humble, easy to root for. He's going to go down as one of the best ever. It's an honor taking the field with him."

"He's just like every other player, but he's not," Rays manager Kevin Cash said. "Just interacting with other players, with umpires, he's just very respectful. He acknowledges the other dugout when a series starts and he comes up to bat. I've only seen one other player that has done that consistently, and that's Derek Jeter."

"There are a lot of attention-seeking people in our world," Kiermaier said. "With all the Internet and social media, people love attention. Mike Trout doesn't."

He's too busy being the best player in baseball. Job enough. Brand enough.

Calhoun said, "Why are people stunned that he's a normal person? Do we want him to not be normal? Let him live his life. He keeps a low profile. Then he goes out and puts up crazy numbers. Where's the problem?"

The best player in baseball is in town.

"I'm just a simple guy," Trout said. "I just try to keep it as simple as I can. At the plate and just in general."

We're lucky to have him. Baseball is, too.