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Monday, September 24, 2018**

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Gibson keeps A's at bay as Twins play spoiler

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | September 23, 2018

OAKLAND -- The Twins kept the A's from clinching a spot in the postseason on their watch, as Kyle Gibson threw 7 1/3 strong innings, Joe Mauer reached yet another milestone and Ehire Adrianza had an impressive day both defensively and at the plate.

It helped the Twins to a 5-1 win on Sunday at the Oakland Coliseum to avoid a three-game sweep and keep Oakland's magic number at 1 to clinch a Wild Card spot. In their final road game of the season after back-to-back walk-off defeats, the Twins also managed to avoid making dubious history, as they finish with 14 walk-off losses, which is one short of the Major League record.

"Winning games is always important, but I wasn't too concerned about slowing down their party," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "We were going to go out there and try and compete these last few days, and put our best foot forward. To come back after a couple of late losses and find a way to play as well as we did today, starts with your starting pitcher."

Gibson, who entered with a 4.66 ERA in eight starts since August, turned in a strong outing in his second-to-last start of the year. The right-hander scattered seven hits and three walks with three strikeouts to improve to 9-13 with a 3.68 ERA in 190 2/3 innings.

He came out for the eighth despite having thrown 105 pitches and exited after surrendering a one-out single to Stephen Piscotty on his 114th pitch of the afternoon. But relievers Tyler Duffey and Trevor May combined to get out of the inning unscathed with May striking out Ramon Laureano on a 3-2 fastball with two on. May also threw a scoreless ninth to get his first career save on his 29th birthday.

"I was glad that Mollie let me go back out for the eighth inning," Gibson said. "That's something I want to try to do more and more. I definitely didn't physically feel my best today. I had spotty fastball command early and then found a little something mechanic-wise that kept me on the ball a little bit better."

The lone run Gibson gave up came on a homer to Matt Olson to lead off the second. But he was helped by several strong plays from Adrianza, including a barehanded play on a slow roller from Chad Pinder in the second and robbing Marcus Semien with a sliding stop to his right in the fourth. His best play came on a diving stop and throw to turn a double play to help Gibson escape a jam in the fifth.

"That was as good a play as I've seen all year," Gibson said. "All over the diamond today was some of the best defensive I've seen. You can't start talking about anything I did without talking about the defense. It was an incredible display."

Offensively, the Twins snapped out of their recent funk. Mauer went 2-for-4 to tie Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew for the most times reaching base safely in Twins history. Mauer reached base safely for the 3,072nd time in his career with his single in the fifth.

Jake Cave started the scoring with a two-run homer off right-hander Trevor Cahill in the first. Minnesota scored three more runs in the fourth, keyed by a one-out single from Robbie Grossman and an error from third baseman Matt Chapman on a grounder from Tyler Austin.

Max Kepler made the A's pay with an RBI single to left while Adrianza stayed hot with an RBI double to knock Cahill from the game. It was Adrianza's sixth double over his last four games, and helped set up a sacrifice fly from Chris Gimenez to cap the scoring.

"We had some big hits today," Molitor said. "Adrianza had a nice little one and he made some great plays, one of them was a momentum changer for us."

SOUND SMART

The Twins finished with a road record of 29-52, which is tied for the third-most road losses in club history. The most is 58 in 1982, followed by 53 in '86, while they also lost 52 road games in '87 and 2016.

YOU GOTTA SEE THIS

Adrianza made several great plays on Sunday, but his best came in the fifth on a diving stop and throw to start a double play on a hard-hit grounder from Chapman with two on and one out. It was the hardest-hit ball of the day with an exit velocity of 108.1 mph, per Statcast™, but Adrianza was able to save at least one run from scoring with the double play.

"Great play," Chapman said. "That kind of just describes what happened today. They made the plays they needed to when they needed to, and we didn't."

HE SAID IT

"The last couple years we've seen other teams celebrate while we were in town. So to be able to finish out the season without having to see any celebrations is kind of nice. It's a disappointment for us obviously this year, but I think one thing that has been impressive is guys not quitting and playing every game hard. Even though we have seven games left, that's 30 at-bats for some people. We still have a lot to play for. We're going to do our best, not to give anything away and finish up strong at home." -- Gibson, on keeping the A's from clinching

UP NEXT

After their final off-day of the season on Monday, the Twins host the Tigers for a three-game series that begins on Tuesday at 7:10 p.m. CT at Target Field. Minnesota will use an unannounced opener for the game, while rookie right-hander Kohl Stewart (2-1, 4.40 ERA) is expected to be the primary pitcher. Stewart is coming off the best outing of his career, allowing no earned runs in six innings in Detroit. Second baseman Logan Forsythe could also return from a knee injury. The Tigers will start right-hander Spencer Turnbull (0-1, 10.80 ERA).

Twins finish road schedule with a victory in Oakland

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 24, 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. – For a Jake Cave homer, Sunday's two-run blast was puny. For Kyle Gibson and the walkoff-ridden Twins, it was monumental.

Cave, whose 419-foot average home run distance is the longest in the AL, drove a first-inning sinker from Trevor Cahill over the wall in center field, handing Gibson a lead to protect and the Athletics a deficit they never erased. The result was a 5-1 victory for the Twins, a postponement for Oakland's playoff-clinching celebration, and an end to the Twins' weakness for walkoffs, at least for this year.

Gibson recorded an eighth-inning out for only the third time this season and turned in one of his most impressive outings, particularly given the Twins' recent history at Oakland Coliseum. Gibson allowed seven hits, five of them singles, and struck out three en route to his ninth victory of the season, and first ever in Oakland — where the Twins had lost four consecutive games, over two seasons, in walkoff style.

"To come back after a couple of late losses and find a way to play as well as we did, it starts with your starting pitcher," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "Kyle was a little frustrated early with some of the pitches that were at the bottom of the zone, but he kept grinding."

So did Cave, and his homer set the tone for the day. After Joe Mauer led off the game with a single and Jorge Polanco took strike three, Cave worked the count to 2-2 before unloading on a Cahill pitch that hung in the middle of the strike zone. It traveled 417 feet, easily clearing the center field wall, but according to MLB's Statcast data, still ranked as the fourth-shortest of the dozen homers Cave has crushed this season.

"I had no idea [of his hit-ball-far league-leadership]. I'm just looking to be on time and drive the ball hard," Cave said. "When I connect, good things have happened. That's one of the things that's beautiful about baseball, you don't have to be the biggest, strongest guy if you hit it right."

Cave came up through the Yankees system with Aaron Judge, whose average homer — thanks to the short right field at Yankee Stadium turning would-be fly outs into home runs — measures a paltry-by-comparison 397 feet this year. "Yeah, I'm not even close. He's in a different class,"

Cave said. “Coming up, I would hit a few balls that would really travel, but this is the most consistently I’ve ever don’t it, certainly to hit it that far. I’m really putting in the work to drive the baseball, and it’s helping.”

Gibson’s pitching helped the Twins finish this road trip with a 5-5 record, their first .500 multicity trip since early June. He allowed a second-inning home run to Matt Olson on a full count, but then held the A’s scoreless until being removed with one out in the eighth.

He was helped by his defense, too; Polanco and Ehire Adrianza each started impressive double plays to end innings for Gibson, Adrianza’s play coming on a hot smash by Matt Chapman that replays showed was actually past him when he gloved it.

“You can’t start talking about anything I did without talking about the defense,” said Gibson (9-13) after lowering his ERA to 3.68. “It was an incredible display. When I’m putting baserunners on, I’m not nearly as effective unless we can turn those double plays.”

Twins' Trevor May gets his own birthday gift — his first career save **Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 23, 2018**

OAKLAND, Calif. – The champagne was on ice, ready for the Athletics to pour it all over each other after Sunday’s game. But in the end, it was Trevor May who felt like celebrating.

May pumped his fist in satisfaction after striking out Ramon Laureano to extricate the Twins from an eighth-inning jam, then held the A’s scoreless in the ninth to preserve the Twins’ 5-1 victory. In doing so, the hard-throwing righthander also earned his first career save — and on his 29th birthday.

“It was cool. To be honest, it was more meaningful because it feels like playoff baseball here,” May said of playing before large, energized crowds over the weekend. “With the bleacher creatures, and everybody pumped up here, and them wanting to clinch today at home, it was great to be able to put that off. That’s what we were going for [Sunday], and it made it feel like a big game.”

He wouldn’t mind if it was the first of many chances to close out a game, either.

“I’ve thought about it quite a bit. If you throw in the back end of the bullpen, most guys want to close eventually,” said May, a converted starter who returned this season from Tommy John elbow surgery. “I’ve decided that if I’m going to be in the bullpen, the goal is to be throwing toward the end of games. So to be able to do it once, it’s a satisfying feeling. I thrive off it, I really enjoy it. Baseball’s meant to be fun, and this is fun for me.”

Jockeying for position

While parents and children stood in line for a postgame run-the-bases promotion, 20 Twins rookies and new staff members walked past in horse costumes. Yes, Sunday was the third and final leg of the Twins Triple Crown, this year’s edition of the baseball tradition of hazing rookies.

After two controversy-filled races in Kansas City and Detroit, with disputes over whether the winners — Jake Cave in the “Derby,” Kohl Stewart in the “Preakness” — had galloped or sprinted, the rules were changed to race-walking.

“When they changed the rules, I knew I had a chance,” Zack Littell said. “I know how to walk.”

Sure enough, Littell came from behind near the end of the race and narrowly beat fellow pitcher Andrew Vasquez at the wire. “I dug deep,” Littell joked.

After the race, the Twins clubhouse was littered with discarded costumes, as the veterans ruled that the rookies no longer had to wear them on the team’s flight home. Littell jokingly bid farewell to his horse, which he named Jim. “We found a good home for him here,” he said. “I just can’t afford to take care of a horse anymore.”

Belisle to keep playing

While Joe Mauer will wait until the season ends to decide whether he will play in 2019, the oldest player on the roster has no such timetable. Does 38-year-old Matt Belisle intend to play a 16th MLB season?

“Oh hell yes. One hundred percent,” Belisle said. “I’ve got a lot left in me.”

Belisle is coming off the worst season of his career, having been released by the Indians after posting a 5.06 ERA, then watching that mark balloon to 8.35 after the Twins picked him up in mid-June. He also spent a month on the disabled list with sore cartilage in his right knee, and tinkered with his mechanics.

Has it been a frustrating season? “I haven’t even thought about it. I’m excited about what I’m doing right now, today,” Belisle said. “I know what I’m doing and where I’m going with it.”

The “where” might be problematic, however, after such a difficult season. Belisle didn’t sign a minor league contract with the Indians until two weeks after spring training opened last February. Does he worry about finding another job?

“I haven’t even thought about it,” Belisle said. “All I know is I’m feeling good, and focusing on this team and this season.”

Long, long gone: Jake Cave and the AL's other long home run hitters
Staff Report | Star Tribune | September 23, 2018

Jake Cave — at 6-0 and 200 pounds — has the longest average home run distance in the AL (minimum 10 home runs):

419 Jake Cave, Twins

417 Nomar Mazara, Rangers

417 Mitch Moreland, Red Sox

415 Gary Sanchez, Yankees

415 Shohei Ohtani, Angels

Sunday's Twins-Oakland game recap
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 23, 2018

GAME RECAP

IMPACT PLAYER

Kyle Gibson, Twins

The A’s were averaging 7.8 runs in September home games, but managed only one off the Twins righthander.

BY THE NUMBERS

3,072 Career times on base by Joe Mauer, tying Harmon Killebrew for most ever by a Minnesota Twin

100 Hits by Robbie Grossman, a career first.

6 Doubles by Ehire Adrianza in his past four games.

ON DECK

Their road season finished, the Twins return to Target Field on Tuesday for the final week, starting with the Tigers.

Twins trying to break walkoff streak in season's final road game
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 23, 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Twins have lost four straight games in walkoff fashion at Oakland Coliseum, Paul Molitor pointed out Sunday morning.

“Sometimes it’s really beyond explanation,” Molitor said, but the Twins can still salvage a break-even road trip with a win today. That may not sound like much, but Minnesota hasn’t had a .500 road trip of two cities or more since early June.

In doing so, the Twins could avoid watching the A’s celebrate on the field. Oakland’s magic number for clinching a playoff spot is down to one over Tampa Bay. That doesn’t really hold much appeal for the Twins’ manager, though. “I don’t get a lot of satisfaction from spoiling. It’s kind of hollow for me,” Molitor said. “To try to gain any kind of satisfaction by delaying Oakland’s postseason confirmation by a day is not overly rewarding for me. To win is rewarding.”

The Twins haven't done much of that away from home. Their road record is 28-52, just one season after going 44-37 on the road. If they lose to the A's today, they will tie the 1986 Twins for second-most road losses in a season; only the 1982 Twins, who lost 58, were worse.

Twins spoil A's clinching party, win 5-1 behind Kyle Gibson
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | September 23, 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. — The champagne was on ice in the home clubhouse. The bin of goggles was in place.

Even the special instruction sheet had been distributed to the media regarding postgame access.

Everything was in place Sunday afternoon for the Oakland Athletics to celebrate the clinching of their ninth postseason berth in the past 19 seasons, but their first since 2014. Then the Twins, so miserable on the road this season, refused to play their part.

Jake Cave set the tone with a two-run homer in the first inning, and right-hander Kyle Gibson made the most of some rare run support in a 5-1 win at Rickey Henderson Field. Combined with the Tampa Bay Rays' win in Toronto, that kept the A's from celebrating at home as they headed out for a season-ending road trip.

"We didn't talk about it at all really," Gibson said. "Somebody mentioned the last couple years we've seen other teams celebrate while we were in town. So to be able to finish out the season without having to see any celebration is kind of nice."

Gibson, shaky early, made a mechanical adjustment on the fly and rebounded to work 7 1/3 innings on 114 pitches. He gave up a long solo homer to Matt Olson in the second inning but still managed to improve to 9-13.

Through 31 starts, Gibson has now lasted seven or more innings 11 times. He has gone six or more innings 20 times, and he has allowed two earned runs or fewer 16 times.

He appreciated Twins manager Paul Molitor letting him go back out for the eighth despite an initially confusing exchange between innings.

"That's something I want to try to do more and more," Gibson said. "(Molitor) asked me how I was doing. I said, 'I'm good.' He said, 'Well, you nodded first and didn't say, 'I'm doing great,' so what does that mean?' I was definitely getting tired."

Snapping a string of four straight walk-off losses at the Coliseum, the Twins managed to avoid tying the big-league mark with a 16th walk-off loss in 2018. They do, however, remain tied with the 1964 Twins for the Minnesota franchise mark.

They had gone 4-18 at this East Bay dinosaur since the start of 2012.

"Winning games is always important," Molitor said. "I wasn't too concerned about slowing down their party."

While the Twins (43-31) still have a chance for their first 50-win season at home since 2010, they finish their road slate at 29-52 after splitting their final 10-game road trip. That's the same road mark posted by the 103-loss edition in 2016 as well as the World Series champions from 1987.

Just two teams in Twins history have suffered more losses away from home: 1986 (28-53) and 1982 (23-58).

A's starter Trevor Cahill was chased in the fourth, when Matt Chapman threw away a potential inning-ending double-play ball. Max Kepler and Ehire Adrianza followed with run-scoring hits, and Chris Gimenez added a sacrifice fly.

Adrianza, playing through a left shoulder strain, has seven doubles in his past six games and a career-best 23 on the year. He also made one of the best plays by a Twins infielder all season, diving to his right to stab Chapman's fifth-inning smash at 108.1 mph, then leaping to his feet to start an around-the-horn double play.

"All over the diamond today was some of the best defense I've seen," Gibson said. "You can't start talking about anything I did without talking about the defense. It was an incredible display."

Trevor May, pitching on his 29th birthday, secured the final four outs for his first career save. He has now stranded seven of 13 inherited runners after striking out Ramon Laureano with two runners on to end the eighth.

It was May's third straight scoreless outing at this same house of horrors where he debuted with seven walks in a two-inning start on Aug. 9, 2014. May had a 19.62 ERA through his first three outings here and before this weekend hadn't pitched here since June 1, 2016.

Joe Mauer as Twins Manager-for-a-Day? Paul Molitor might consider it
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | September 23, 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. — Joe Mauer insisted on playing all three games of the Twins' final road series in Oakland this weekend.

His playing time for the final seven-game homestand, however, remains part of an ongoing conversation with the 35-year-old first baseman. With his eight-year contract expiring after the season, Mauer has said retirement is among the options he will consider.

“We haven't finalized how many games he'll play throughout the course of the week and which game in this particular campaign will be his last one to start this year,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said Sunday. “It's just Joe deserving of conversation almost daily of how we're using him and how he's doing physically.”

Mauer reached base twice on Sunday to tie Harmon Killebrew for the top spot on the Twins' list (3,072). Mauer's career batting average rested at .3059, sixth among active players and just a tick behind Buster Posey of the San Francisco Giants.

With a pair of singles, Mauer reached 2,112 career hits, passing former two-time National League Most Valuable Player Dale Murphy for 224th on the all-time list. Mauer needed four more hits to tie hall of famer Duke Snider.

Asked if he might give Mauer a chance to manage one of the Twins' remaining games, both against non-contenders, Molitor chuckled.

“I haven't really thought much about that as an option,” he said. “Maybe it will be included, now that you brought it up. I don't know if he'd want any part of that or not.”

RALEY IMPRESSES

Tommy Watkins had a chance to manage the two Double-A prospects the Twins received from the Los Angeles Dodgers for Brian Dozier on July 31.

Soon Watkins, headed to the Arizona Fall League to manager the Salt River Rafters, will get another six-week look at slugging outfielder/first baseman Luke Raley and lefty reliever Devin Smeltzer on that club.

“I think they were two good adds,” Watkins said during his brief coaching call-up. “Raley kind of reminds you of a left-handed (Brent) Rooker. The guy had some pop. He's really put together. Nice body. He can run. He's athletic. Good teammate, played hard. He was real good to have.”

An Ohioan who plays first and both corner outfield spots, Raley has an average arm. But he posted a .350 on-base percentage in 551 combined plate appearances this season.

Smeltzer, a 23-year-old lefty from New Jersey, had four saves and a 12.0 nine-inning strikeout rate in 10 outings for the Lookouts despite pitching at 88-90 mph with his fastball.

“He's a little funky lefty who throws everything at you,” Watkins said. “He's a competitor. He gets after it pretty good.”

INSTRUCTS BEGIN

The Twins' last three first-round draft picks — Alex Kirilloff (2016), Royce Lewis (2017) and Trevor Larnach (2018) — highlight the group of 50 position players that will take the field Monday in Fort Myers for the start of a 13-day prospect mini-camp.

No pitchers will participate as the Twins aren't holding traditional instructional league games, but 17 catchers will get a chance to work with catching coordinator Tanner Swanson. Ryan Jeffers, a second-round pick in June, joins Ben Rortvedt and trade acquisitions David Banuelos and Janigson Villalobos among those invitees.

Michael Davis, a 24th-round pick this year out of Texas Tech, will work with the catchers after being drafted as a third baseman.

MAKING HISTORY

Twins relievers led the majors with 89 homers allowed through Saturday.

According to baseball researcher Bill Arnold, that ties them for the fourth-most homers allowed by any bullpen, although the figure is skewed by the Twins' recent use of the opener. The top three totals belong to the 2016 Cincinnati Reds (102), the 2017 San Diego Padres (101) and the 1994 Oakland Athletics (92).

The Twins obliterated the franchise mark of 82, set by their 1996 edition.

Fill-in closer Trevor Hildenberger led the way with 12 homers allowed, followed by Addison Reed and Matt Magill with 11 apiece. Los Angeles Angels right-hander Noe Ramirez led all true relievers with 14 homers allowed.

BRIEFLY

Mitch Garver (concussion) has played catch at Target Field, but the Twins were still weighing the value of giving him at-bats during the final homestand. Garver will not catch again this season.

Second baseman Logan Forsythe (left knee) was available in an emergency Sunday, but the plan was to hold him out until a potential return on Tuesday.

Right-hander Zack Littell won the final leg of the Twins Triple Crown, power-walking his way to a postgame victory in the Twins-mont Stakes. He joined fellow pitcher Kohl Stewart and fellow ex-Yankees prospect Jake Cave in reaching the winner's circle while wearing the red-and-black checkered horse-and-jockey suit.

Joe Mauer ties Harmon Killebrew for most times on base in a Twins uniform

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500| September 23, 2018

Joe Mauer can add another baseball to his mantle.

The legendary ballplayer from St. Paul tied Harmon Killebrew on Sunday for the most times on base in Minnesota Twins history.

Mauer laced a single into center field in the 5th inning of Sunday's game in Oakland against the A's. Mauer also got on base in the 1st inning to put him in a position to tie the record in the 5th.

Player				
Hits				
Walks				
HBP				
Times On Base				
Harmon Killebrew	1,713	1,321	38	3,072
Joe Mauer	2,112	935	25	3,072
Kirby Puckett	2,304	450	56	2,810
Rod Carew	2,085	613	20	2,718
Tony Oliva	1,917	448	59	2,424

Source: Baseball-Reference.com

These stats don't count Killebrew's days in Washington with the Senators, nor do they tally his times on base as a member of the Royals. Mauer has spent his entire career with the Twins.

But those names represent, of course, legendary Twins players. And when you look at Mauer's greatest attribute as a ballplayer, he's right up there with the best of the Twins.

Gibson deals, Twins delay A's playoff berth with 5-1 win

Associated Press | Fox Sports North| September 23, 2018

OAKLAND, Calif. — Oakland will have to take its bubbly on the road.

Kyle Gibson allowed one run over 7 1/3 innings, Jake Cave hit a two-run homer and the Minnesota Twins beat the Athletics 5-1 Sunday, preventing Oakland from clinching an AL wild-card berth in its last regular-season home game.

"I think it was a little disappointing," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "A lot of times we put on our best shows late in games, unfortunately it didn't happen today."

Oakland leads Tampa Bay by 7½ games and needs one win or a Rays loss to clinch its first playoff berth in four years. The A's remained 1½ games behind the New York Yankees, who have clinched a wild-card berth, and fell 4½ games back of AL West-leading Houston.

After going 50-31 for its best home record since 2013, the A's finish with three-game series at Seattle and the Los Angeles Angels. Oakland is 60-26 since mid-June.

"It would have been nice to clinch, but we weren't changing anything up or anything like that," A's first baseman Matt Olson said.

Gibson (9-13) gave up seven hits and three walks. Trevor May struck out Ramon Laureano with two on in the eighth and pitched around a one-out walk in the ninth for his first big league save.

Minnesota finished 29-52 on the road.

Oakland won two of three despite going 0 for 21 with runners in scoring position in the series, including seven at-bats Sunday.

Trevor Cahill (6-4) allowed five runs — three earned — and five hits in 3 1/3 innings.

Cave hit a two-run homer in the first, but Olson cut the lead in half in the second with his 28th homer.

Minnesota added three runs in the fourth after Robbie Grossman singled with one out and Tyler Austin hit a potential double-play grounder to third baseman Matt Chapman, who threw the ball to the left of second baseman Chad Pinder and into right field for his 19th error.

"I was worried about the catch and I didn't pick up my target," Chapman said. "I think I had a little more time, I might have rushed my throw because I wanted to turn the double play. It was my fault that three runs scored so it doesn't really feel good."

Max Kepler hit an RBI single, Ehire Adrianza chased Cahill with a run-scoring double and Chris Gimenez greeted Shawn Kelley with a sacrifice fly.

"For the last couple of years we've seen people celebrate when we're in town," Gibson said. "To be able to finish off the season and not have to watch anybody celebrate, kind of nice."

FAN BASE

A crowd of 35,754 raised Oakland's season total at home to 1,527,588.

FRANCHISE MARK

Joe Mauer was 2 for 4. His fifth-inning single was his 3,072nd time reaching base, tying Harmon Killebrew's franchise record. Twins manager Paul Molitor said he's been communicating regularly with Mauer about his role in this week's six-game homestand. Mauer is contemplating retirement.

"We haven't finalized how many games he will play throughout the course of the week, and which game of this particular campaign will be his last one," Molitor said.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Twins: C Mitch Garver (concussion) played catch on the field, but Molitor said it has not been determined whether he will play again this year. Garver has been out since he took a foul tip to his mask on Sept. 12. ... Molitor expects to make decisions on the playing status of 3B Miguel Sano (lower left leg bruise) and 2B Logan Forsythe (left knee inflammation) on Tuesday.

UP NEXT

Twins: Minnesota has not announced a starting pitcher for Monday's series opener against Detroit.

Athletics: RHP Daniel Mengden (7-6, 4.00 ERA) will make his first start since June 23 in Monday's series opener in Seattle. Mengden is 1-0 with 1.83 ERA in five relief appearances since being called up from Triple-A Nashville on Aug. 27.

How a lucky break and a sidearm style revived Trevor Hildenberger's career **Dan Hayes | The Athletic | September 23, 2018**

BERKELEY, Calif. — Trevor Hildenberger plans to buy John Riley an adult beverage if the two ever run into one another in San Jose. If it hadn't been for Riley, a catcher in the San Francisco Giants farm system, Hildenberger's baseball career as we know it never would have happened.

The Twins reliever's collegiate career was finished after the 2013 season. Hildenberger still had a year of eligibility remaining at the University of California, but he was close to graduating and no longer had a scholarship.

Then Riley surprised everyone.

Selected by the Giants in the 31st round of the 2013 amateur draft, Riley made a last-minute decision to bypass on a scholarship to Cal in mid-August and signed a pro contract. Then the school's pitching coach, current Cal head coach Mike Neu used the opportunity to try and lure back Hildenberger, who finally had some success in his fourth year with the program after dropping down and becoming a sidearm pitcher.

The offer caught Hildenberger by surprise. While he ultimately said yes, a decision that has dramatically changed his life, it didn't come without serious contemplation following several difficult seasons of failure in the Pac-12. Five years and 107 major-league appearances later, Hildenberger, who pitched just 12 2/3 innings in 11 games from 2010 to 2012 at Cal, realizes how different things could have been if not for Riley's decision.

"I owe him a beer," Hildenberger said. "He's from Willow Glen, which is pretty close to where I'm from. He signed, which freed up a scholarship and Mike Neu ended up offering it to me. It allowed me to keep playing. All I needed was units. My requirements were done and I was just taking summer classes and I was lifting in the student center. I was benching, which is like the worst thing ever for your shoulder. Doing absurd lifts.

"Mike called and (asked), 'Do you want to keep playing?' I was like, 'Uhh, I guess.'"

Neu still remembers the phone call very well. Sitting in the Cal baseball offices late last week, Neu recalled feeling certain that Hildenberger, who posted a 5.31 ERA in 57 2/3 innings at Cal in 2013, would leap at the chance. After they got off the phone, Neu didn't feel quite as confident.

"I don't know he was totally on board with it right away," said Neu, who pitched in the majors for the Oakland A's and then-Florida Marlins. "When you look back at the different roads he could have taken and now he's in the big leagues ..."

If you'd asked him for a five-year plan in 2013, Hildenberger couldn't have had any idea this is how his life would have ended up.

Even the Twins' Northern California area scout who signed him, Elliott Strankman, who is now the team's West Coast supervisor, looked at Hildenberger as minor-league filler, a player with great makeup and character who could improve everyone around him. Strankman thought there was reason to be intrigued after Hildenberger dropped down, that it was a unique look.

But nobody saw Hildenberger achieving success in the majors on this scale. He had very little track record. He'd pitched in Cal's 2010 season opener as a freshman and the fourth game, then redshirted in 2011 and didn't appear in another contest until 2012. In between was a lot of failure. In fact, Strankman initially remembered Hildenberger because he had an unusual last name.

"He had an odd name that kind of stood out," Strankman said. "But he didn't have the kind of stuff that stuck out to a scout where they'd go, 'Wow, he's going to be a major-league closer one day.'"

Hildenberger was at sushi with his now-fiancee the day Neu called. He remembers being surprised because he mentally had "checked out" on baseball. He'd had more success in his fourth season than ever but still hadn't excelled. A film and media major at Berkeley, Hildenberger instead was thinking about a career as a film critic.

Hildenberger wasn't sure he could take any more struggling on the baseball field. When he threw over the top, Hildenberger struggled mightily. In one intrasquad game during Fall ball, Hildenberger took over in the ninth inning with an eight-run lead. The end result was Hildenberger being struck with two hard-hit balls and allowing nine runs, including a walk-off, three-run homer.

"I gave up nine runs with an eight-run lead in the bottom of the ninth and recorded one out culminating with a three-run walk-off home run by a guy who has no pop," Hildenberger said.

So yeah, he needed a little time to mull it over.

He'd started to change his arm slot at Neu's suggestion in a bullpen session near the end of the 2012 season and tried it out that summer when he played for the Bend Elks in the West Coast League. Even though he struggled in Oregon (he had a 6.45 ERA in 22 1/3 innings), Hildenberger had flashes of success.

He wasn't sure if it was sustainable, but it got him on the mound.

"At that point in my career I had 12 innings and all I wanted to do was pitch," Hildenberger said. "I'd do anything.

“I broke people’s bats, which I hadn’t done in a long time. Breaking people’s bats felt really good and I’d get swings and misses, silly looking swings on fastballs down and in to righties ... this could be something to work with and by the end of the summer I felt pretty competitive, at least. I felt good going back to school.”

Hildenberger liked what he’d been able to accomplish in 2013 by throwing sidearm. But it wasn’t enough to get him drafted after his fourth year. Still, he felt comfortable enough with the adjusted throwing style to accept Neu’s offer.

From there, Hildenberger took off.

“That senior year he was a different guy,” Neu said. “There were times he was unhittable.”

Hildenberger struck out 48 batters in 47 2/3 innings and posted a 2.83 ERA in 2014. He tied a school-record with 10 saves. And more important, the pitcher who used to surrender 2-to-3 homers a weekend in intrasquad games only yielded one. Part of it was the odd angle and part was the improved velocity. Hildenberger went from throwing low-to-mid 80s to touching 92 from the side.

Strankman said Cal assistant coach Tony Arnerich began providing velocity updates and hounding him to come see the fifth-year senior pitch.

“Hey, you’ve got to check out this Hildenberger guy,” Strankman said. “He’s making quite the showing. I remember seeing him. I just never thought he had the command or velocity to be effective. Everything kind of came together. He started throwing harder.”

Strankman and several higher-ups in the Twins scouting department happened to be at the Cal-Oregon State game late in the Pac-12 season to take a look at the Beavers’ Michael Conforto, who was possibly in play for Minnesota. The Twins picked fifth that season and instead selected Nick Gordon. But Strankman asked for a detailed report from the others if Hildenberger pitched.

He did and the Twins liked what they saw as a potential late-round pick.

“I liked the guy,” Strankman said. “I thought there was something unique about him. I thought he was a mature kid and he was all business and he just needed a chance.”

The Twins eventually gave him one. They selected Hildenberger with the 650th overall pick of the draft, taking him in the 22nd round. He received a \$1,000 signing bonus, which came out to \$571 after taxes.

Hildenberger continued to pitch well in the minors. He combined on a 2.48 ERA in 29 innings with 32 strikeouts his first season and backed it up with a 1.55 ERA and 80 whiffs in 64 innings the following year. The success continued all the way through 2017 until Hildenberger was promoted last June.

Former Cal teammate Marcus Semien couldn’t believe the difference he saw in Hildenberger. The two played together when Hildenberger was a freshman and only threw over the top. Semien had later heard Hildenberger’s story about the nine-run inning and the aftermath when the pitcher sat on a bench in the shower for 45 minutes to an hour.

“They called it the Hildenberger seat,” said Semien, who’s now with the Oakland A’s. “It’s a totally different at-bat now facing him. I’m really happy for him. We go to the Cal golf tournament every year. He told his story to everybody. It’s a great story.

“That’s what you’ve got to do if something is not working the way you want it to. His was an extreme adjustment. But you have to make adjustments to get where you want to be in this game, or at least try. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. But at least you went after something.”

Hildenberger didn’t know his teammates’ name for the shower bench until his fifth year. By then he’d had some success.

Now, it’s a punchline for him. But that particular outing was a low point for Hildenberger, a moment to think about his career and failures. Ironically, it’s also become a benchmark to provide perspective for any current struggles.

“Nobody told me that to my face until I was a fifth-year senior,” Hildenberger said. “It’s where you contemplate life when you’re depressed.

“Once I had some success they were like, ‘OK, it’s cool to tease him about this.’”

Hildenberger thinks those previous failures have him better prepared for major-league struggles. His first full season in the majors has had its share of high points and low points. He had a 2.06 ERA through June 28 when he had a rough showing at Wrigley Field. Hildenberger surrendered a homer in four straight games in early August and yielded a walk-off grand slam last week in Kansas City. Saturday night, he threw the wild pitch that gave the A’s a walk-off win over the Twins.

He's also been trustworthy enough to move up the ladder in Paul Molitor's bullpen. He has converted seven of 11 saves and is responsible for myriad swings and misses from opponents.

"That (intrasquad) outing helps me deal with walk-off grand slams in Kansas City and allowing homers in four consecutive games," Hildenberger said.

Hildenberger knows he has come a long way from that final bullpen session in the 2012 season when it felt like he was "scraping the ground" with his knuckles. He's developed a changeup he didn't have in college and his slider is improved. He also has worked with bullpen coach Eddie Guardado how to handle the rollercoaster of a major-league season.

"I know I've come a long way and it feels like that," Hildenberger said. "But while you're in it, you don't see the scope of it and don't understand all the steps I've taken. When my career is over in the future, hopefully a long ways away, I can look back and say, 'I made some serious adjustments and put in the work to be somebody who grew from a hungry baseball player who just wanted to play to a legitimate option in the big leagues.' That's something I'm pretty proud of."

And yet, it might never have happened had Riley decided to stay at Cal.

"(Riley) has no idea how profoundly he impacted my life," Hildenberger said. "I definitely owe him a beer."