

FEEL THE BUZZ!!

Monday July 20, 2009

The week that was... ('nt quite)

The Saskatoon Yellow Jackets have struggled away from home all year long but, despite facing a road-heavy end of season schedule, there was a growing sense of confidence in YJ's Nation as the week began. The team had failed to put together the long winning streak they needed so badly but, from the outside, they looked to be (at long last) forming an identity as they focused on grabbing the Central division's last playoff spot. It's an old cliché but sometimes a road trip really is exactly what a team needs to come together.

Once again, despite some fine individual efforts the week didn't play out quite as well as the Yellow Jackets had hoped. They began the week .5 games back of a playoff spot and, after splitting their 4 road games and losing their only home tilt, the playoffs are anything but locked up.



Things started off well for the Jackets as Zach Wentz took the mound on Wednesday night in Medicine Hat. The YJs third baseman and mid-line up slugger pitched 7 innings giving up 3 runs and striking out 5 before giving way to Mike Frisina who went the rest of the way for the save. Wentz helped out his own cause at the plate going 2/3 with 2 runs and 2 RBIs managing to squeeze an entire week's worth of "impressive" into a single game.

Winners of 2 straight and three of their last 4, the Jackets returned home Thursday night to face the hated Regina Red Sox. It was a beautiful evening which brought out a nice crowd that seemed poised to work itself into full-throated playoff intensity. Sadly, they weren't really allowed to become a factor in the game as a suddenly red hot Regina squad took a lead early and hung on for a 9-6 victory.

The boys could have been forgiven if they were looking ahead to Saturday's double header against Moose Jaw--the team currently sitting in the playoff spot they're after. Things looked awfully good for the YJs in game 1 as Nate Coronado (who has, I think, likely solidified his place in the YJs playoff rotation) was cruising with a 5-1 lead after 6 innings in game one. Coronado, who had thrown a lot of pitches, tired in the 7th and the wheels fell off all too abruptly. The Express scored 5 runs in the bottom of the 7th to grab a 6-5 lead and then shut down the Jacket's attack the rest of the way to secure a 6-5 victory. That loss made game two an absolute must-win for Saskatoon. Thankfully for the YJs it was ace Dan Morari's turn in the rotation. He did—once again—exactly what the squad needed him to do, going the distance, pacing the Jackets to a vital 6-4 victory. On offense the top end of the line up did their job at the dish: Loard, Klassen, Cardinal and Wentz combined for 8 of the team's 11 hits and adding 4 runs and 4 RBIs. Big time performances under pressure.

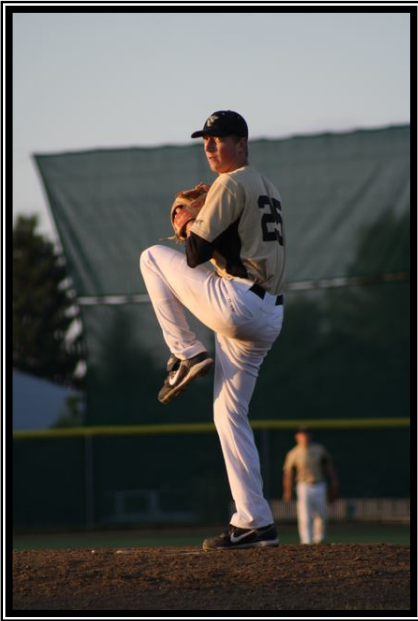
The Jackets continued their up-and-down pattern last night. Any momentum they gained from the previous day's victory was erased when the impressive Melville Millionaires touched up Andrew Buckham for 6 runs in the first 2 innings before cruising to a 9-3 victory. There's no shame in going .500 on the road but the Jackets are going to have to do better....

MOLSON
CANADIAN 

FEEL THE BUZZ!!



The week that will be...



The mad dash to the playoffs is on. YJ's nation is flat-out desperate to see this team take a deep breath enjoy the new start the playoffs afford and get after some victories. Every player will tell you that the team has underachieved but what's encouraging and frustrating is that it hasn't been from a lack of effort. That horrible start did what horrible starts do...it had guys gripping their bats a little tighter than their opposition night in and night out. That's surely been a factor in far too many of the YJs 11 one run losses. Yes they attached that piano to their backs with their poor start but there's a sneaking suspicion around Saskatoon that no team will benefit more from the fact that everybody starts 0-0 in the post-season.

The boys are, no doubt, more than a little frustrated--its time to see if they have the mental strength to translate frustration into some seriously determined play.

The YJs will have plenty of opportunities to get the victories they need this week as they play Sunday, Monday and Tuesday in Melville before returning home for the last two home games of the season Wednesday July 22 and Thursday July 23. After 5 straight road games the YJs will certainly be looking forward to the energy of a home crowd brings to a play-off race and they should get that Wednesday night as they go to war with the team they're chasing for that final playoff spot, the Moose Jaw Express in the game of the season at Cairns field. This is going to be a special night, mark it down on your calendar's right now—don't miss it.

The next "game of the season" will be Thursday night as the boys will work to protect whatever gains they made the night before when they take on Swift Current in another 7:05 start. Including Saturday's double header that will be the 7th game in 6 days—a tough schedule to be sure perhaps, a great opportunity to be sure, and just as surely the kind of game where this team could really be helped by loud and proud Saskatoon crowd.

The Jackets then head out to Yorkton for what will, no doubt, be 3 crucial games to end the season.

Player of the week...Joel Cardinal/John Jones

To begin with, if you're wondering why Zach Wentz doesn't also get some love, I decided to sneak him in as a pitcher (see below).

As the intensity rises in this late season playoff push, Joel Cardinal has—a little quietly I think--put together an impressive 9 game hitting streak. He chipped in seven of this team leading 45 hits this week and leads the team in runs, doubles and total bases. His continued stellar play in the field is fun to watch. This home town kid and Yellow Jacket vet is talented enough to make things look easy but no one—and I mean no one—looks more frustrated after a poor at bat.

Everyone knows the benefits of keeping an even keel but you need your best players to hate to lose. Cardinal is a good barometer of how things are going for the YJs. When he's having fun and looking focused on the task at hand this team has every right to be thinking about doing some serious damage in the playoffs.



John Jones hit .333 and knocked in a run in 6 of his last 7 games while bouncing around between the top of the order (where the Jackets are able to capitalize on his speed) and the middle of the order (where the Jackets like his power and RBI potential). He's tied for the league lead in triples with three and continues to play solid D.

FEEL THE BUZZ!!



Pitcher of the week...Zach Wentz/Dan Morari

I've been giving pitchers their props for offense all season long so it only seemed appropriate to give third baseman Zach Wentz mention here a pitcher of the week. As previously discussed Wentz—who, I think would still rather be in the batter's box than on the mound—went 7 strong to earn a huge victory for the YJs on Wednesday night. If you haven't seen the slugger out of North Dakota swing a bat yet this season, get yourself down to Cairns field you won't be disappointed—you might even see him toss another gem along the way.

Dan Morari got his third W of the season in the second game of Saturday's double header. It was a gutsy season-saving complete game effort from the YJ's ace. Nobody was surprised. 'Nuff said.

Honourable Mention: The bullpen has had some rough patches of late but Mike Frisina seems to be increasingly comfortable out of the bullpen.

Pitching mostly in the late innings of close games Frisina goes right after hitters mixing his pitches and throwing strikes. That's all a manager can



ask for. Frisina didn't give up a run this week picking up a big save along the way. He'll have to be real good this week for the Jackets to get where they're going.

Player Profiles...

They boys were away from home all week...so I'll do double profile duty next week.

Instead I'll use this space for my own ranty amusements. Judging by some reactions from last week I have some clarifications to make.

First:

Dustin Pedroia is really, really good. On a team that's hard to like, I love the way he plays. I'm not attempting to discount his play, it's just that Aaron Hill (who, I know, is like 0 for his last 20) is simply better—a bit faster, a bit more range, a lot more power, a better RBI guy. Watch their swings side by side and you can see their respective futures.

Second:

I don't think it is an absolute certainty but I do appreciate that the Jays may have to let Doc go. My point last week was that you'll get better value in the off-season—and much better value if you have a competent GM making the deal. J.P.'s 17 deals that involved swapping major league position players or pitchers are cumulatively more embarrassing than the 80s retro women's jeans Obama wore to throw out the first pitch last week (he made up for it with the ballsy decision to go with the White Sox jacket—every real sports fan nodded appreciatively).

I know the chattering classes get a lot of love mocking the Leafs and some puzzling satisfaction in their unified effort to make Roberto Luongo the reigning “most over-rated athlete in professional sports”, but it might be time to start frisking J.P.'s operation with some degree of seriousness.

He's done well pilfering under-appreciated middling-but-major-league arms from other organizations and recent drafts have been competent but Ricciardi's most impressive achievement is keeping his job during a 9 year rebuilding plan in a market that gave (equally incompetent) John Ferguson a 9 week window to get things turned around before pouncing. His second most impressive achievement has been to--with truly remarkable efficacy--manage to get media and fans alike to accept his re-branding of Toronto as a “small market” team. This comes in handy when explaining his poor performance as a GM but, by any reasonable metric; the GTA is the 6th largest market in North America. Yeah, J.P. can't spend like NY and Boston but sorry dude; you're in a massive market.

3rd—In unison with the “small market” thing he, like any good bully, recognized and exploited a sort of subtle but fundamental insecurity. When he got the job he stated that part of his job was going to be to “teach” the game to Canadian fans and journalists alike. This one still rankles. Canada has a long, storied baseball history and Toronto had spent the previous decade setting numerous attendance records while capturing two World Series rings. He should have been run out of town for that statement...instead; the free pass he got might have convinced him that he really was in a small market. It's an attitude that has yet to mellow (perhaps if he actually had moved to the city where he is the Vice-President and GM it would have made a difference) when he threw Halladay under the bus recently he stated that it wasn't a big deal because the rumours would only “matter” in markets like Philly, Boston and New York.

FEEL THE BUZZ!!



I'm pretty sure I could name another market that might notice. The fact that Ricciardi can't should be his epitaph in Toronto.

Ok...now that I'm rolling and unable to sleep...here's what a more blatant attempt to court controversy might look like (incidentally I believe every word of this):

This probably isn't the venue and its really the wrong time of year but they recently gave out the invites, we're all sports fans here and I've been dying to declare publically that there is absolutely no way that the 'afore mentioned Roberto Luongo even comes close to warranting an invitation to Team Canada's Olympic camp. He's 30 years old and he's managed to win a grand total of two playoff series in his career. Two series in ten years toiling in a league that is dominated by goaltending is downright awful. He's been on some bad teams but he's also been terrible in every pressure situation he's ever faced. Cam Ward is 24 and he's already won more playoff series that Luongo will in his entire career on a team that is anything by a powerhouse. There are at least 6 Canadian goaltenders I'd rather have start a game #7 for me right now. (B.T.W. his talent is unparalleled and, for gambling and fantasy purposes in meaningless games in November, he's absolutely the goalie you want—I'm not joking--it doesn't matter who the 'Nuks are playing as long as nothing is on the line). You'd think one of TSN's 45 hockey analysts might have made this argument by now thereby breaking their record of loudly agreeing on absolutely everything. Instead Marc-Andre Fleury remains a "huge question mark" in Pittsburg while he sips champagne out of Lord Stanley's mug and Luongo—who doesn't exactly ooze leadership qualities and is already on his 4th team before the age of 30--is the first goalie to become a captain in the NHL over 50 years. I really don't really care that his greatness has become accepted wisdom among those serious minds of "insiders" but if Bobby Lou parlays it into anything more than a meaningless exhibition game against Belarus in a Team Canada uniform I'm absolutely going ballistic.

If you have any questions, suggestions or topics you'd like to see in up-coming editions of the buzz drop us a line at cmsincer@yahoo.ca or michael@in-play.ca

