

Sports

Diaz strikes quickly, leads Rays to wild-card win over Oakland

OAKLAND: Who bats their first baseman lead-off? The Tampa Bay Rays did Wednesday night, and largely because of it, they'll get at least three more chances to do it this postseason. Yandy Diaz hit two home runs, one on Sean Manaea's fifth pitch of the game, as the Rays overpowered the host Oakland Athletics 5-1 in the American League wild-card game.

By hitting four homers to win the single-elimination affair, the Rays advance to a best-of-five AL Division Series against the AL West champion Astros. Game 1 is Friday in Houston. The wild-card loss was the second straight for the A's, who dropped their ninth straight winner-take-all playoff game dating to 1973. Oakland lost 7-2 to the New York Yankees in last year's AL wild-card game.

Diaz, who returned Sunday from a two-month layoff caused by a fractured left foot, worked Manaea to a 3-1 count as the game's first batter before driving a fastball over the wall in right field. After the A's left the bases loaded against Rays starter Charlie Morton (1-0) in the bottom of the first, Avisail Garcia followed a second-inning infield single by Matt Duffy with a two-run homer, increasing the Tampa Bay advantage to 3-0.

Diaz made it 4-0 when he belted a carbon-copy homer to right off Manaea leading off the third, ending the Oakland left-hander's night. "I'm probably the happiest guy on the team right now," Diaz said on the field immediately after the win. "I was just trying to get good pitches to hit,

and luckily they went out." With homers in each of his first two postseason plate appearances, Diaz became just the fourth player to accomplish that feat.

SACRIFICE FLY

The two-homer game was his second of the year. He also went deep twice against the Yankees in May. Manaea (0-1) was charged with four runs on four hits in two-plus innings. He struck out five and did not issue a walk. "It looked to me like same pitch three times," A's manager Bob Melvin told reporters afterward. "To get four hits off him and three of them are homers, you have to give them credit."

The A's used a three-base throwing error by Rays third baseman Michael Brosseau to score their only run in the last of the third. After Marcus Semien reached third on the miscue, Ramon Laureano drove him home with a sacrifice fly. Tommy Pham completed the Tampa Bay scoring with a homer off Yusmeiro Petit in the fifth. Morton worked through a high pitch count to go five innings, allowing just one unearned run on five hits. He walked three and struck out four. The veteran threw 94 pitches.

"They were putting pressure on me all night," Morton told ESPN during an in-game interview. "They never really had that one big moment. A lot of that is luck. Sometimes the ball will find a hole; tonight it didn't." Diego Castillo (two innings), Nick Anderson (1 1/3) and Emilio Pagan (two-thirds) blanked the A's the rest of the way.



OAKLAND: Yandy Diaz #2 of the Tampa Bay Rays hits a solo home run off Sean Manaea #55 of the Oakland Athletics in the third inning of the American League Wild Card Game at RingCentral Coliseum. — AFP

Diaz finished 3-for-4 and Pham 2-for-4 for the Rays, who also won their previous trip to the AL wild-card game, eliminating the Cleveland Indians 4-0 in 2013.

Jurickson Profar and Robbie Grossman had two hits each for the A's, whose eight hits in the

game were all singles. The A's out-hit the Rays 8-7. "They kinda beat us at our game," Melvin said. "We're usually a home-run-hitting team, and we couldn't do much. And they hit the ball out of our ballpark, which at night can be tough to do." — Reuters

NHL champion Blues fall in overtime to Caps

LOS ANGELES: The St. Louis Blues raised their NHL championship banner and raced to a 2-0 lead on Wednesday before the Washington Capitals roared back to capture their season-opener 3-2 in overtime. Jakub Vrana scored the game-winner for the Caps in the duel of the last two Stanley Cup champions. Washington had tied the game with 7:32 remaining in the second period with a power play goal by Dmitry Orlov.

The Blues opened the evening at Enterprise Center in St. Louis celebrating their run to a first Stanley Cup championship last season. Blues players filed past the Stanley Cup during player introductions, and Ryan O'Reilly carried on the Conn Smythe Trophy, which he won voted as Most Valuable Player of the playoffs. He was followed by captain Alex Pietrangolo, who took the Stanley Cup on a procession around the ice to commemorate the Blues' seven-game victory over the Boston Bruins in last season's Stanley Cup finals.

An energized St. Louis scored just 53 seconds into the contest against the 2018 Stanley Cup champion Capitals as Sammy Blais finished off a pass from David Perron. Alex Pietrangolo made it 2-0 on a power-play goal, firing in a one-timer off a defensive pass from Justin Faulk. Alex Ovechkin scored with 4:23 remaining in the period to put the Capitals on the board. Washington knotted the score with 7:32 left in the second on a power-play goal by Dmitry Orlov. The contest was one of four opening night games. Ottawa's Brady Tkachuk scored the first goal of the season 24 seconds into the Senators' game against the Toronto Maple Leafs. But Auston Matthews' opening night magic continued, the Maple Leafs center scoring twice in a 5-3 victory over the Sens. — AFP

Salazar makes brutal 40-year run from legend to disgrace

LOS ANGELES: Alberto Salazar pushed himself to the brink and beyond as an athlete, and preached the same philosophy as a coach to distance running stars. But the 61-year-old Cuban-born American's will to win finally went too far, according to the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), which has banned him for four years for multiple doping violations. Salazar has been a major figure in American athletics for four decades.

He won the 1980, 1981 and 1982 New York Marathons and the 1982 Boston Marathon, and later coached such stars as Britain's Mo Farah, the 2012 and 2016 Olympic champion at 5,000 and 10,000 meters. Salazar arrived in the United States as a toddler. His father was a friend of Fidel Castro who fought alongside him in the revolution but later opposed the Communist government.

The family moved to suburban Boston, where Salazar won a state cross country crown in 1975. He helped the University of Oregon capture the US collegiate cross country title in 1977, taking national college individual honors the following year. In 1980, Salazar qualified for the US Olympic team at 10,000m, but the Americans boycotted the Moscow Games and Salazar tackled a new challenge: the marathon. He quickly conquered the 26.2-mile (42.195km) event.

At 22, Salazar won his marathon debut in New York, then set a career-best of 2hrs 8mins 13secs to defend his title. In 1982, he took New York and claimed his only Boston Marathon title in what was dubbed the "Duel in the Sun" with Dick Beardsley. After besting Beardsley in a sprint finish, a dehydrated Salazar collapsed and had to be treated in hospital with intravenous fluids.

Salazar finished 15th in the marathon at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, then trained and competed until retiring in the mid-

1990s, when he began moving into coaching, joining with Nike to form the Oregon Project in 2001 to train distance runners. The program includes Donovan Brazier — who won the 800m world title Monday as news of Salazar's ban exploded into the athletics scene — and Sifan Hassan, who won the women's 10,000m world crown two days earlier.

Stripped of his credentials at the World Championships in Doha, Salazar has vowed to fight the ban, which was handed down for violations including trafficking testosterone, tampering with the athlete doping control process and using banned infusion techniques. A four-year ban was also issued to Dr Jeffrey Brown, who was a physician for numerous Nike Oregon athletes, and a paid consultant on performance enhancement for the Project, part of a scheme to manipulate testosterone levels without testing positive. "While acting in connection with the Nike Oregon Project, Mr Salazar and Dr Brown demonstrated that winning was more important than the health and wellbeing of the athletes they were sworn to protect," USADA chief executive Travis T. Tygart said.

Salazar said he was "shocked by the outcome" of USADA's years-long investigation. Farah won the first Olympic gold for the Nike Oregon Project in 2012 in London in the 10,000m event. Longtime Salazar pupil Galen Rupp took the silver just behind him, and Farah went on to claim the 5,000m gold. But Steve Magness, who spent 18 months as Salazar's assistant coach in the project before leaving shortly before the London Olympics, spoke out as a whistleblower when BBC's Panorama and ProPublica investigated doping allegations around Salazar in 2015.

Testimonies from various figures alleged microdosing of testosterone, among other suspicious actions. Salazar denied wrongdoing. Farah stuck with him and won another golden double at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016. Rupp took marathon bronze and Nike Oregon's Matt Centrowitz won the 1,500m. But doping allegations nagged. Farah left Salazar in October 2017.

The USADA case against Salazar and Brown went to the American Arbitration Association, with hearings conducted in May and June 2018 setting the stage for the arbitration rulings handed down Monday. — AFP