

Yanks' seventh straight sweeps Padres

Contributed by Administrator
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PETERSBURG -- Youth baseball coaches were smiling throughout the Tampa Bay area after the Rays affirmed the time-tested dictum, "a walk's as good as a hit" during Thursday night's 8-3 rout of the Cubs.

The win was the Rays' 43rd of the season, and moved the team to 14 games over .500, a club-record high-water mark. Along the way, the Rays completed their fifth series sweep of the season and the first sweep in franchise history of a team with the best record in the Major Leagues. The Rays are now 35-18 since April 22, which is the best record in baseball over that span.

Pan to the bottom of the seventh -- directly after the Cubs had taken a 3-1 lead -- when Willy Aybar led off the inning by working a walk against Cubs reliever Carlos Marmol. The Cubs' right-hander then made matters worse by walking the next hitter, Dioner Navarro.

"Willy did a great job by starting the inning and giving us all a great look," Navarro said. "He took the walk, then I came up and I was patient enough to take the walk, too, and I guess it really helped us."

Marmol clearly looked rattled at this point and gave no indication to the contrary by hitting Gabe Gross to load the bases -- and then hit Akinori Iwamura to drive in the Rays' second run.

"Aybar's been working good at-bats," Rays manager Joe Maddon said. "Navy's been working good at-bats. Gross normally works a good at-bat. And then Aki had two strikes, and he hit Aki with two strikes, and that was kind of fortunate there. That part of the order, those guys usually will give you good at-bats, and they will accept their walks."

Cubs manager Lou Piniella had seen enough and called to the bullpen for left-hander Scott Eyre to pitch to left-handed-hitting Carl Crawford.

The Rays speedster took ball one before breaking from the theme of the inning by swinging at the next pitch, an inside fastball.

"It was supposed to be down-and-away, and I missed up and in, and he still hit it," Eyre said.

Seconds later, the ball landed in the right-field stands for a grand slam and a 6-3 Rays lead.

"Those guys [in front of him] did a great job of battling a tough reliever," Crawford said. "We got the bases loaded where I could just try and put the ball in play, because we just needed the one run, so I was just trying to put the ball in play."

"... I didn't know it was gone. I was hoping. I thought it was a lazy fly ball and it kept drifting out. So I'll take it."

And suddenly, the walks gave way to an offensive onslaught.

By the time the Rays finished hitting in the seventh, they had scored seven runs to take a commanding 8-3 lead. The first seven hitters reached base and scored during the 23-minute half-inning.

"Not too good -- it was a horrible inning, wasn't it?" Piniella said. "It started with two walks and two hit batters, a grand slam and I don't know where it went from there."

James Shields started for the Rays and pitched well enough, holding the Cubs scoreless through six and striking out nine. But he ran into trouble in the seventh that festered into a three spot for the Cubs.

Shields could only sit in frustration on the bench and watch while the Cubs took a 3-1 lead. But frustration turned to joy for the right-hander, after watching the Rays come back in the bottom half of the inning.

"Absolutely amazing," said Shields of the comeback. "You're on this team, and you become a fan. Watching what they do out there, it's incredible."

The three-game series drew 97,544 fans to Tropicana Field and brought good-natured fan warfare between those clad in Cubs jerseys and those supporting the Rays. Ultimately, the Rays fans had the last laugh, many holding brooms afterward to salute the home team's sweep.

Crawford smiled when asked how the team felt about sweeping a team managed by Piniella, the former manager of the Rays.

"We like Lou," Crawford said. "We just wanted to win these games, it's nice to get the wins -- I know he's probably not too happy about it. Bragging rights I guess."

Meanwhile, Maddon spoke about the significance of sweeping the best team in baseball.

"It validates what we're doing," Maddon said. "And it does give us more confidence; I don't know how else to say it. ... To beat them here under these circumstances, based on their prestige in the game right now. It is important. And it is something we have to look at in a highly positive way, and hopefully, it's going to catapult us even further." (mlb.mlb.com)