

Blue Jays' offence a no-show in critical loss to Orioles

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – The powerful Baltimore Orioles' first two runs came courtesy of a sacrifice fly and an RBI fielder's choice. The third run was driven home on a ground ball through the right side. So was the fourth.

Not how you would expect the team that leads the major leagues in home runs to generate its offence, but as long as they scored more runs than the Blue Jays on Thursday night it was good enough. One run would have been enough in this game.

Orioles starter Ubaldo Jimenez – he of the 5.71 ERA on the season, but 3.17 ERA in the second half – shut out Toronto over 6 2/3 innings and Baltimore's lockdown bullpen did the rest in a 4-0 win at Rogers Centre where the home team managed just one extra-base hit.

The boos from the sellout crowd hoping to see the Blue Jays grab a stranglehold on the wild card began well before the bottom of the ninth when Josh Donaldson and Jose Bautista struck out against reliever Brad Brach. It was Bautista's third strikeout of the game and Donaldson was retired on strikes twice. The offensive woes that have plagued the team this month has put them in a less-than-ideal spot.

"We need to get back to hitting the baseball, getting on base and knocking them in," said Bautista. "We had seven chances today with runners in scoring position. We didn't do that. That falls on guys like me do drive the runs in and we've got to do a better job."



Marcus Stroman pitched into the eighth, a welcome sight for manager John Gibbons as he entered the game

knowing his bullpen wasn't at full strength. Stroman gave up nine hits, but kept Baltimore's sluggers from hitting a ball over the fence, which is an accomplishment worthy of kudos.

"I thought Stroman pitched a nice ballgame, but we couldn't get anything going for him," said Gibbons. "You have to stay positive in this game — sometimes you just get beat. Sometimes they outplay you, sometimes they outpitch you."

Outplayed and outpitched, though the emphasis strongly on outplayed (or outhit), in consecutive games, the Blue Jays and Orioles enter the final weekend of the regular season tied in the American League wild-card race. Toronto does hold the tiebreaker, meaning they'll host the wild-card game if they can at least match Baltimore's record over the weekend. There are certain factors, however, that are out of their hands.

The Red Sox, the Blue Jays' opponent, are playing for playoff positioning as champions of the AL East. The Yankees, the Orioles' foe, are playing for pride. Both situations bring up interesting questions about what kind of lineups both teams will field, especially when it comes to who might pitch.

The Tigers' rainout against Cleveland earlier Thursday further complicates matters. Detroit is 1 1/2 games behind the Jays and Orioles, and depending on how the weekend plays out with their series against the Braves, may have to play a makeup game against the Indians on Monday if they can still claim a wild-card spot or force a Game 163 with a win.

Losing two out of three at home against Baltimore with a scuffling offence is not the best way to roll into Boston. A month ago there was a feeling this series would decide the division. Now it's wild card or bust for the Blue Jays, and despite their up-and-down September, they know what they have to do.

"We're still tied for the wild-card lead so I would say the other teams are in a more pressure situation than us right now," said Bautista. "We're a confident group, no matter what short-term results we've had. We just have to go out there and execute better and get those wins."

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