

Blue Jays swept by Mariners, display boom or bust nature again in up-and-down season

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By Israel Fehr

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SEATTLE – The boom or bust Blue Jays are at it again. The last three nights in Seattle certainly fall under the bust category.

The Mariners beat R.A. Dickey and the Jays 2-0 behind Kendrys Morales' two-run home run in the first inning on Wednesday night, completing a three-game series sweep and putting some distance between themselves and Toronto in the race for the second AL wild-card spot. They're now three games back of Seattle and Detroit and only half a game ahead of the Yankees.

The Blue Jays' high-powered offence could only muster four runs in the three losses to the Mariners. Seattle's starters, Felix Hernandez, Chris Young, and Hisashi Iwakuma, held Toronto to two runs and five extra-base hits over 19 2/3 innings.

On the weekend, Toronto took advantage of the Tigers' biggest weakness – a shaky bullpen – and pulled off two comeback wins. They faced a much stiffer test against the Mariners and their AL-best rotation and bullpen and they came up flat.

"They shut down our offence, stone-cold," said Blue Jays manager John Gibbons. "We scored a few [runs Tuesday night] but it was pretty much a mismatch. They get to the 'pen and there's no letup down there either."

There's perhaps no team in the league that relies more on power hitting than Toronto. Only Baltimore (152) has hit more total home runs than Toronto's 139. When the balls are flying out of the park, it widens the margin of error for the starting staff, which is much improved from last year but is still putting up a 3.98 ERA, which lines up with the AL average.

"We've got to score for our pitching staff," said Gibbons.

The 2014 season has been one of dramatic highs and lows for the Jays. There was the 14-9 comeback win in Cincinnati that was followed by an 11-1 beatdown. A 14-1 loss to the Red Sox at home in Toronto was supposed to be a stinger, except the Blue Jays went on to win the next three games of the series. A week later, they even returned the favour, beating Boston by the same symbolic 14-1 scoreline at Fenway Park.

In May, the Jays went 21-9 and scored an average of 5.5 runs per game. They followed that up with a 12-15 June and a substandard 3.9 runs per game. They can look disproportionately good or bad depending on how the bats are producing. It's the only area of Toronto's game that's significantly above average.

"We have been streaky [this season], both good and bad, and we're due for a good run," said Dickey. "We've got to stay positive, remain optimistic, and keep our poise."

Even with much-needed off days coming Thursday and Monday, the rotation order (Stroman, Buehrle, Hutchison, Happ, Dickey) will remain the same. The offence slumped in Seattle, but help is on the way. Adam Lind returned Tuesday and Edwin Encarnacion is slated to be back in the lineup Friday against the White Sox.

"We're hoping to get on a roll where we can score a bunch of runs [and] take a little pressure off the rotation," said Gibbons.

That's exactly what they'll need to do if they're going to stay in the playoff hunt.

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