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"We play for Something"



Former Hokie Saunders takes down M's

Southpaw and former Clark Griffith League Star honors Virginia Tech victims with six strong

ANAHEIM -- With Joe Saunders' inspiration and Vladimir Guerrero's hefty bat, all was right for the Angels on Friday night as they defeated the Seattle Mariners, 8-4, at Angel Stadium.

With his alma mater's tragedy last week not far from his mind, Saunders got special permission in the form of a phone call from MLB Commissioner Bud Selig about two hours before game time to wear a Virginia Tech cap during his start, and he turned the opportunity into one of the better outings of his young career at a time when his team sorely needed a victory.

Saunders held the Mariners scoreless for six innings, surrendering seven hits and two walks along the way, to help snap the Angels' six-game losing streak.

"I was really nervous before the game and right when the game started for the sheer fact of what this game meant to me," said Saunders. "I spent the best three years of my life at Virginia Tech. This was the first time I've ever had to do something like this, and hopefully it will be the last."

"He really battled out there," said Angels manager Mike Scioscia. "It was a tough week for Joe. He has a lot of connections to Virginia Tech, and he showed his sentiment tonight. He is just a classy guy."

Having Guerrero's bat back in the lineup was crucial for the Angels, who struggled on their recent eight-game road trip, during which they lost seven of eight while being outscored 44-16.

Guerrero went 3-for-5 on the night with one RBI that came on his team-leading fourth home run of the season. He also scored two runs.

"He comes to play every day, and sometimes it is easy to take for granted that he is in the lineup," said Scioscia. "I've never seen a guy swing as hard as Vlad does and be able to square it up. He is in a special class." The Angels broke out of their hitting slump in a big way to the delight of the 43,359 in attendance, tying a season-high with 14 hits. They were 5-for-9 with runners in scoring position, another area that needed a boost after the disastrous road trip.

The Halos' offense jumped all over Mariners starter Miguel Batista, rocking him for two runs apiece in the first and third innings en route to 10 hits and six runs in the six innings he pitched.

Guerrero started the first of three consecutive hits for the Angels in the opening inning with a double into the right-center-field gap. Garret Anderson followed with a double of his own, scoring Guerrero. Casey Kotchman then scored Anderson with a single to right and the Angels had a 2-0 lead that they wouldn't give up.

The Mariners tried to rally their way back late, scoring four runs off Hector Carrasco before Angels closer Francisco Rodriguez came on with runners on first and second and one out in the ninth. Rodriguez induced Jose Vidro into a groundout and then struck out Jason Ellison swinging to end the game and earn his fifth save of the year.

In what turned out to be a night of tributes, Angels center fielder Gary Matthews Jr. wore No. 42 in honor of baseball great Jackie Robinson during the game. Matthews originally planned to wear the number last Sunday in Boston to coincide with the rest of the MLB tributes to Robinson, but that game was postponed due to bad weather. Matthews finished 0-for-4 on the evening with a walk, but he made several nice plays in the outfield. Saunders honored his school by etching the letters "VT" on the pitching mound before the game began, in addition to donning the Hokies cap and writing "VT" on his cleats. He plans on signing the cap and giving it to his father.

Saunders pitched at the school until he was drafted by the Angels in the first round in 2002. Both of Saunders' parents preceded him at Virginia Tech, and he met his fiance, Shanel, there.

Friday was a night he'll remember for the rest of his life.

"To get a win for all the Hokies out there and for the lives that were lost, it means a lot to me," said Saunders.