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Sonny delivers a rapid classic

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ST. PETERSBURG — To say Andy Sonnanstine made quick work of the White Sox on Saturday night would be the understatement of the year.

The heady right-hander, coming off a rocky last outing, delivered a gem, his first big-league complete game in a 5-0 Rays win that happened to be the shortest game (2 hours, 2 minutes) in Tropicana Field history.

Fittingly, the typically quick-paced Sonnanstine sprinted to the mound before the ninth, and the 17,613 in attendance stood on their feet as he recorded the final out, throwing his 77th strike of his 106 pitches.

"Incredible," manager Joe Maddon said. "That's even beyond expectations tonight. That was a really clean game that he pitched."

The 25-year-old said he was motivated by his last start, when he gave up seven runs and three homers in just more than three innings against New York, an off outing he attributed to straying from his game plan.

On Saturday, however, Sonnanstine was in complete control, working off his fastball and attacking the inside corner while throwing all four pitches for strikes.

Said catcher Shawn Riggins: "You couldn't have written it better than that."

What impressed Maddon more than just the win, the second for the Rays (8-10) in their past six games, was how they did it, a "clean game" with many bright spots.

There was the return of Carlos Pena, who served as DH after missing a game with hamstring tightness. Pena, who went 2-for-3, took it easy on the basepaths but showed no ill effects.

There was the hot bat of B.J. Upton, who tied a season high with three hits and is batting .457 in the past nine games.

There was the defense, which has struggled with mental mistakes of late, playing crisply behind Sonnanstine, ending two innings with double plays.

But the game's second star — other than Sonnanstine — was Jonny Gomes. The rightfielder used his hustle and his muscle to spark the scoring and deliver the "turning point," as Riggins called it.

That key play came with two outs in the second, a rally sparked in a weird way. Gomes, who was hit by a pitch, nearly became the second runner picked off by White Sox left-hander Mark Buehrle. Caught in a rundown, Gomes didn't give up, sneaking back to second for a stolen base. Eric Hinske then started a string of four singles, including an RBI single by shortstop Jason Bartlett.

"That's incredibly large," Maddon said of Gomes' play. "A lot of guys would have given up under those circumstances, get tagged out and come back to the dugout."

Gomes then jump-started the fourth, ripping a triple to deep centerfield. Two batters later, Riggins picked up his second RBI of the game with a sacrifice fly, making it 4-0.

Sonnanstine joked that Gomes sparked his strong start by giving him a "good-luck charm," (a limited edition Gomes figurine) before the game. It came as no surprise, then, that Gomes capped the outing by smothering a towel with shaving cream all over Sonnanstine's face during a postgame interview.

"I had no idea; everything was kind of a whirlwind, and I was just so happy about the way things turned out, (he) caught me off guard," Sonnanstine said. "It was very fitting that he was the one that got me."

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