

A's News Clips, Thursday, October 22, 2009

Making the grade: Offense

Beat writer Mychael Urban assesses A's hitters

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

"Making the Grade" is a four-part series analyzing the performances of various units of the 2009 Oakland A's. It kicked off last Wednesday with starting pitching, followed by a look at the bullpen last Friday. Today: offense, followed by a look at the defense on Friday.

OAKLAND -- Coming off two seasons in which their offense ranked near the bottom of the American League in virtually every significant category, the A's entered 2009 with high hopes and one of the best on-paper lineups in the league.

Outfielder Matt Holliday, a legitimate superstar over the previous three seasons in Colorado, had been acquired in a blockbuster trade. First baseman/designated hitter Jason Giambi, who'd hit 36 home runs with 96 RBIs and a .373 on-base percentage with the Yankees in 2008, had been brought back for a hugely hyped homecoming.

Shortstop Orlando Cabrera, a proven winner, represented an offensive upgrade over his star-crossed predecessor, Bobby Crosby. And Nomar Garciaparra, who was introduced as a free-agent signee on the same spring day as Cabrera, was penciled in to spell Giambi at first, Eric Chavez at third and serve as the top right-handed option at DH.

A's fans know all too well how far short the aforementioned expectations fell. Holliday and Giambi were abject failures in Oakland and were gone by August, as was Cabrera, who wasn't nearly as bad but wasn't an impact player, either. Chavez missed most of the year -- again -- with injuries, and Garciaparra was never healthy enough to make much of an impact.

By the 2009 All-Star break, the A's were every bit as poor offensively as they'd been in '07 and '08.

Strange and unpredictable game, baseball.

To wit: Oakland, which recommitted to its prospects after the break (and particularly after the departures of Holliday, Giambi and Cabrera), was a totally different -- and far better -- offensive team in the season's second half.

The A's started to hit after the break, posting the fifth-best team batting average in the Major Leagues. They started to run, leading to their highest stolen-base total since 1992. And most important, they started to score, giving their core of young pitchers the margin for error that Holliday and Co. were expected to provide.

The long ball never did become a big part of the proceedings, though. Oakland's 135 homers ranked last in the AL, and it's an area in which the team will need to improve dramatically to be competitive next season.

But the A's played .500 ball (44-44) after June 29, and given the performances of several young players in the second half, there's reason for optimism that the first half of 2010 won't be the washout it was this past season.

(Note: Only players who appeared in at least 40 games are graded, ruling out, among others, Eric Patterson, who had a huge year at Triple-A Sacramento before batting .287 in 39 games with the A's. Players who didn't finish the year in the organization are excluded, too, but their performances factored into the overall grade.)

Overall: C

Despite a solid spring, **Rajai Davis** was Oakland's fourth or fifth outfielder for much of the first half, but he was given a shot at winning the starting job in center and literally ran with it, stealing a career-high 41 bases to go with a team-high .305 batting average while becoming the sparkplug behind the club's offensive resurgence. A solid "A."

Catcher **Kurt Suzuki** was consistent and clutch, hitting 15 home runs and leading the team with 88 RBIs. He gets an "A-," grading out slightly lower than Davis in part because of his .313 on-base percentage.

Outfielder **Ryan Sweeney** gets a "B+" for showing considerably more pop while posting a .319 batting average after the All-Star break. He, too, was quite consistent, but he'll need to improve upon his RBI total of 53 to hang on to the No. 3 spot in the order that he held down late in the year.

Infielder **Adam Kennedy** was one of the biggest surprises of the season, providing steady production after being picked up in a Minor League trade in May. He got off to a ridiculously hot start and finished third on the team with 63 RBIs, earning a solid "B."

Rookie shortstop **Cliff Pennington** was handed the starting job after Cabrera was dealt, and he did extremely well under the circumstances, batting .279 while providing aggressive baserunning and doing many of the little things that make for good offensive baseball. Another strong "B."

First baseman **Daric Barton** didn't make his season debut with the A's until June, and he batted .118 in 17 games for the month before batting .188 in 17 games in July. He was much better after Giambi was cut loose and had a very good September (.310, 16 RBIs), finishing with a respectable .269 batting average and a .372 OBP -- enough to merit a "C+."

Outfielder/DH **Jack Cust** reached the 25-homer mark for the third consecutive year and finished second on the team with 70 RBIs, but he regressed overall. He finished the year strong, bumping his grade to a "C."

Second baseman **Mark Ellis** had a torrid August, batting .340 with 22 RBIs, but he was otherwise average at best. A calf injury cost him much of the first half, limiting him to 105 at-bats before the All-Star break. Another "C."

Catcher **Landon Powell** drove in 30 runs in 46 games, but he batted .226 with a sub-.300 on-base percentage. It might not be fair to downgrade him for playing behind an ironman in Suzuki, but nobody said baseball is fair. "C-."

Infielder **Bobby Crosby** lost his job to Cabrera, didn't get it back when Cabrera was traded and had to learn three new positions at the game's highest level. His .223 batting average is difficult to defend, though, and his sub-.300 OBP leaves him with a "D+" in what surely was his last year in Oakland.

Outfielder **Scott Hairston** was acquired in early July and, before shutting himself down for the year in September, said he played hurt for most of his time with the A's. It looked like it: .236 batting average, .262 OBP. "D."

Walcoff: Put your Bay Area sports knowledge to the test

By: Rich Walcoff, Special to The Examiner

SAN FRANCISCO — So you think you know Bay Area sports? Take the 10-question challenge ...

1. If as Mike Singletary says: "Every work day is critical to building a championship team," how can longtime holdout Michael Crabtree be ready to play, let alone start in Sunday's 49ers game in Houston after all of two weeks of practice? Singletary is: A. Delusional, B. Desperate, C. Convinced Crabtree is the next Jerry Rice.
2. True or false: When the 49ers opened the season just one Brett Favre miracle pass away from a 4-0 record, you thought the Atlanta Falcons would come to Candlestick Park and get pounded by Singletary's vaunted "smash-mouth" defense.
3. True or false: After rejecting San Francisco at every turn, John York will publicly consider a move to Los Angeles if Santa Clara fails to approve a new stadium for the 49ers.
4. After the Raiders lost their third straight game in extra ugly fashion to the New York Giants 44-7, you thought the Silver and Black was: A. In a total free fall, B. You gave up a long time ago and didn't think the Raiders would ever win again, C. Just waiting for defensive coordinator John Marshall to break with team tradition and serve up a blitz-happy game plan that would rock Donovan McNabb and shock the Eagles.
5. True or false: When Cal started the season with three blowout wins and Jahvid Best was leading the nation with nine touchdowns, you thought all the Rose Bowl and Heisman Trophy hype was legit.
6. True or false: After Cal failed to score a single touchdown in back-to-back losses to Oregon and USC, you expected the Bears to bounce back and rout UCLA 45-26, giving Jeff Tedford his first ever win in L.A.

7. At the end of August when the Giants had a share of the NL wild-card lead did you: A. Clear your October calendar for playoff baseball at AT&T Park, B. Realize San Francisco wasn't good enough to be truly "In This Thing," C. Blame Carney Lansford for the September collapse.

8. True or false: The Giants will continue to insist San Jose is off limits to the A's until Lew Wolff writes them a check for about \$50 million to buy back the territorial rights.

9. True or false: After the A's said goodbye to veterans Matt Holliday, Orlando Cabrera and Jason Giambi midseason you thought the rookie laden pitching staff would carry Oakland to a .500 record after the All-Star break.

10. After the Sharks won the President's Trophy as the NHL's winningest team last spring you: A. Remembered the team averaged only two goals a game during the last two months of the season, thus their first round playoff loss to Anaheim wasn't a big surprise, B. Thought the Sharks would bring the Stanley Cup to San Jose, C. Grew a playoff beard, but kept the razor handy because you knew the Sharks wouldn't win more than a series or two.

Answers: 1. B, 2. False, 3. True, 4. C, 5. False, 6. True, 7, B, 8. True, 9. True, 10. A

0-3 correct: Pack your bags, you're being traded for an out-of-town fan.

4-6 correct: Congratulations, you have considerable knowledge and wisdom.

7-10 correct: Get a real job, you're obviously spending too much time at the ballpark or with your bookie.

Oakland A's MLN: Power Ball

Melissa Lockard
OaklandClubhouse.com

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The Oakland A's system hasn't exactly been known for producing power hitters in recent years, but that has been changing over the past couple of seasons. A few of those power-hitting prospects are putting their strength on display in fall and winter league action...

Grant Desme, Chris Carter and Corey Brown are the only three Oakland A's prospects to pass the 30 homer total in one season over the past two years. All three players are showing their homerun power while playing fall and winter baseball.

Desme has been one of the hottest hitters in the Arizona Fall League since the start of league play. The A's outfield prospect has hit three homeruns in only six games. He also has two doubles, seven RBIs and is batting .423. Desme put together a fine regular season in 2009, as he hit an organization-best 31 homers and stole 40 bases. It was Desme's first full professional season. The A's 2007 second round pick missed virtually all of the 2008 season with wrist and shoulder injuries.

Carter has mashed 67 regular season homeruns over the past two minor league seasons and has added another 10 in the post-season. He is currently adding to his impressive homer totals with Guasave of the Mexican Winter League. In seven games with Guasave, Carter is batting only .214, but he has four homeruns and one double and sports a .679 SLG. In 28 at-bats, Carter has struck-out 14 times. He has also walked twice and is seven-for-14 when he makes contact.

Brown hit 30 homeruns in 2008, but managed only nine in 2009. That wasn't because he slumped at the plate. Rather, it was because he was limited to only 66 games thanks to a balky knee. Brown posted a solid .488 SLG for the Double-A Midland Rockhounds and he hit a ninth-inning, game-tying two-run homerun in Game Four of the Texas League Championship Series to help the Rockhounds win the title. Brown is off to a good start with Phoenix. He has already homered once and has a .286 average in 21 at-bats.

Catcher Raul Padron hasn't been known as a big power hitter during his six seasons in the A's chain, but the Venezuelan native has homered in consecutive games for Caracas of the Venezuelan Winter League. In 24 at-bats, Padron is batting .292 with two doubles, two homers and five RBIs.

Other News and Notes

* A's 2008 first-round pick Jemile Weeks got off to a good start at the AFL, but he is 0-for-his-last-10 and is batting .158 in four games.

* Relief prospect Justin Friend became the first pitcher in the AFL to record two wins when he notched a win on Monday for Phoenix. Friend has allowed one earned run in 3.1 innings and he has four strike-outs. The right-hander had a 3.71 ERA in 70.1 innings in the A's system this season.

* Fellow A's relief prospect [Mickey Storey](#) is cruising through the AFL through his first three appearances. In four innings, he has allowed only a hit and a walk and he has struck-out six. Storey had a 1.22 ERA and 71 strike-outs in 51.2 innings for four A's affiliates this season.

* A's 2007 third-round pick [Sam Demel](#) is still looking to get on track at the AFL. After working a scoreless inning in his debut, he has been touched for three runs on six hits in 1.1 innings over his last two outings. Demel had 14 saves and a 2.19 ERA this season for Midland and Triple-A Sacramento.

* A's 2007 first-round pick [James Simmons](#) had a strong first start with Phoenix. A repeat performer at the AFL (he previously participated in 2007), Simmons tossed three scoreless innings in his 2009 debut. He allowed two hits and two walks and he struck-out two.

* A's pitching prospect [Arnold Leon](#) is struggling for Culiacan in Mexico. He has allowed five runs over his last two outings, stretching over 1.2 innings. In five innings this winter, Leon has given up 11 hits and six earned runs. He had a 3.51 ERA for Midland in 2009.

* The Vancouver Canadians, Oakland's short-season A affiliate, announced a new General Manager for the 2010 season. Jason Takefman will replace Andrew Seymour in the position. Takefman has been working in the Vancouver organization since 2006. J.C. Fraser has been promoted to Assistant GM.

* Former A's pitching coach Rick Peterson has joined former A's manager [Ken Macha](#) in Milwaukee for the 2010 season.

A's exec Owens on Padres' GM list?

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group blog,

Heard an interesting tidbit that I thought I'd pass along, as we watch the Phillies and Yankees march toward the World Series ...

You might have seen today's stories that the San Diego Padres are close to naming Red Sox assistant GM Jed Hoyer as their next general manager. David Forst, the A's assistant GM, was mentioned as a potential candidate for the Padres' job two weeks ago, and the A's quickly released a statement shooting down that possibility. But it appears another member of Oakland's front office is (or at least was) under some degree of consideration.

It's my understanding that Billy Owens, the A's director of player personnel, was on San Diego's radar. Realize that this hasn't been confirmed by anybody from the A's or Padres. But I talked to both Owens and A's GM Billy Beane today, and neither one came out and denied it either.

"It's one of those things, (the Padres) are handling everything privately down there, so I'll just stay out of it," Owens said, declining to say whether he had been interviewed.

Beane also was mum on the issue, but said Owens has the potential to continue advancing up the front-office ranks. A Padres spokesperson said the team wasn't discussing GM candidates publicly.

It's probably a moot point anyway, as Hoyer appears to be the Padres' guy. [MLB.com](#), [ESPN.com](#), [the San Diego Union-Tribune](#) and [North County Times](#) all ran stories on the topic Wednesday. But it's something to keep an eye on for future front office openings around the majors. Forst is considered one of the top young executives in the game, and his name gets mentioned whenever there's a GM position available (Forst enjoys living in the Bay Area and has always expressed his happiness with the A's).

Perhaps Owens, 38, is beginning to attract interest as well. He just completed his 11th season with the A's and sixth as director of player personnel. He scouts everywhere – majors, minors, amateur and internationally – and his input has been key as the A's have decided which prospects to target in their many trades of recent years.

I expect to hear Hoyer announced as the Padres' GM in the near future, but keep Owens' name filed away ...