

A's News Clips, Tuesday, November 3, 2009

Inbox: Did the '09 A's need better pitching?

Beat reporter Mychael Urban answers fans' questions

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

Why didn't the A's go after pitching before last season? Also, are they going to re-sign Adam Kennedy?
-- Danny S., Alta Loma, Calif.

Was pitching Oakland's problem in 2009? I'd argue strongly that it wasn't. Sure, some of the kids took some lumps, but general manager Billy Beane was, in my opinion, very smart to let that happen. Clearly, young pitching is the foundation of Beane's rebuilding project, and had Justin Duchscherer been healthy and had Josh Outman *stayed* healthy, the A's would have had one of the better rotations in the American League.

Even without Duchscherer and Outman, they had a solid rotation. And the bullpen was among the AL's best for most of the year.

The major problem in 2009 was the offense's performance in the first half -- and the failures of Matt Holliday and Jason Giambi to provide the kind of production for which they were brought in. That's the way I saw it, anyway. When the offense perked up in the second half, Oakland was a pretty good team. Not great, but certainly good enough to suggest that the team is heading in the right direction.

As for Kennedy, who is a free agent, I can't give you an answer with any sort of conviction. I'm sure you've heard that there have been talks between the two sides, and both sides say they're open to a new deal. But from my angle, Kennedy doesn't exactly fit into the stated plan, and I have a feeling there's going to be plenty of interest in him on the open market.

Kennedy is a good player and a good teammate, but he's not really a third baseman, and like a lot of A's fans, I'd like to see Brett Wallace get the same kind of sink-or-swim opportunity at the hot corner that Kurt Suzuki got behind the plate a few years ago. I also think Kennedy would prefer moving back to second base, and that's not going to happen with Mark Ellis under contract for next year (with a club option for 2010) and Jemile Weeks waiting in the wings.

Great story on Rickey Henderson working with Weeks in Arizona, Mychael. Any chance our living legend will be in uniform helping out next spring?
-- Orrin P., Pittsburg, Calif.

I'll look into that. I should've asked that of my source for that story, director of player development Keith Lieppman. But it sure seems like a no-brainer to have Rickey in camp, doesn't it?

The A's were among the top running teams in the league in the second half, and they've got plenty of team speed coming back, so Henderson seems like the ideal guy to bring in for some special instruction. Don't forget that Henderson was a heck of an outfielder, too, and while the A's have a solid coaching staff, it wouldn't hurt to have a Hall of Famer helping out for a few weeks. Someone like Chris Carter, a first baseman who might be moved to left field, surely would benefit.

I'm a transplanted A's fan who keeps close tabs on the team by following your work, and I know you've already said you don't think Ryan Sweeney will win a Gold Glove this year. But what about Ellis or someone else?
-- Carl D., Detroit, Mich.

First of all, I want to make it clear that I think Sweeney *deserves* a Gold Glove. The guy was amazing defensively. But the Gold Glove voting is something of a popularity contest, and I just don't think enough managers and coaches -- they are the voters in this case -- are aware of how good he was.

That's why Ellis hasn't won one yet, despite deserving at least two, and I don't see him winning his first after a season in which he missed two months.

If anyone else has a shot, it's Suzuki. He led the league in starts and putouts, had the second-best zone rating in the league (behind Joe Mauer, who played in 109 games to Suzuki's 135), had all of five errors and three passed balls, and

his .995 fielding percentage was among the top five -- Detroit's Gerald Laird (123 starts to Suzuki's 132) and Boston's Jason Varitek (106 starts) tied for the league lead at .997.

Add to all of that the fact that he handled the youngest staff in the league and I say it makes him the best defensive catcher in the AL.

I didn't read much about Michael Wuertz this year that didn't focus strictly on his great season between the lines. What can you tell me about the kind of guy he is? Is he funny? Is he a leader? Do the young guys look up to him?

-- Alex V., Palo Alto, Calif.

Wuertz is pretty quiet when the media is around, but in my one-on-one dealings with him I've discovered that he's very quick-witted with a dry, sly, self-deprecating sense of humor. I imagine that plays well in the bullpen, where he's definitely a leader.

A lot of the young relievers have said they pick his brain all the time, and they say he's always very gracious when it comes to dispensing advice. I did a story on that very topic late in the season while the team was in Seattle, and the 10 minutes I spent with Wuertz for the story really opened my eyes to what a cool guy he is.

Being a setup man, he doesn't get a lot of attention, and he seems to like it that way. But after that interview, I vowed to spend a lot more time talking to him next year.

How do you choose which questions to respond to in your column?

-- Russell S., Livermore, Calif.

If I get multiple versions of the same question, it gets moved to the top of the list because it's obviously of great interest to the fan base. Anything topical gets high priority, too -- for example, I'm sure I'll be answering a question about Andrew Bailey after the AL Rookie of the Year Award is handed out, win or lose.

Beyond that, I don't have much in the way of a system. A lot of questions I get have been answered in stories I've already written, so those all get the boot right away. And I try to focus on the big league level as much as I can; that's one of the reasons I started the weekly series on top prospects. I want the "Inbox" to be about the Oakland A's as much as possible.

And finally, I try to pick a fun question or two every week. In my opinion, the best sportswriting puts fans where they can't go: in the clubhouse, around the batting cage, etc. So I'm drawn to questions about personalities and such, as you can see from the previous question and answer.

AFL's Rising Stars set to shine Saturday

League's top prospects will face off on MLB Network

By Jonathan Mayo / MLB.com

On any given day in the Arizona Fall League, you can see what amounts to a Minor League All-Star Game.

The Rising Stars Showcase takes it to another level, truly representing the best of the best. The showcase game, which will take place this Saturday at 6:15 p.m. MT, features current AFL participants selected by scouting and Minor League directors from every organization, along with input from AFL executive director Steve Cobb. The 50 players chosen to represent their organizations and AFL clubs will come together Saturday night at Surprise Stadium.

For the first time, the Showcase will also be available to a national television audience. MLB Network will carry a live broadcast of the Rising Stars Game with Diamondbacks announcer Daron Sutton and MLB Network's Tony Clark in the broadcast booth. A live video feed will also be available right here on MLB.com.

The Rising Stars Showcase matches prospects from each Major League Baseball organization in an East Division against West Division format. Teams from the AFL's East Division feature prospects from the Angels, Athletics, Blue Jays, Cubs, Diamondbacks, Giants, Marlins, Nationals, Orioles, Phillies, Pirates, Rays, Red Sox, Rockies and Twins. Players on the West squad will come from the Astros, Braves, Cardinals, Dodgers, Indians, Mariners, Mets, Padres, Rangers, Reds, Royals, Tigers, White Sox and Yankees. All 30 organizations will be represented in the game.

"It's a great opportunity and should be a lot of fun," said A's prospect and Phoenix Desert Dogs outfielder Grant Desme, who leads the AFL in home runs and RBIs. "I'll get a chance to play with a bunch of talented guys."

The biggest name on the roster is that of Stephen Strasburg, the No. 1 overall pick in last June's Draft, and he's in line to start Saturday's showcase after having his pitching schedule shifted this week. The top pick, who's making his unofficial pro debut in the AFL, is one of six 2009 first-round picks scheduled to be at the game, with Dustin Ackley, Mike Minor, Mike Leake, fellow Washington National Drew Storen and Rangers supplemental first-round pick Tanner Scheppers participating as well.

"I think it's great. I've heard it's an exciting game to be a part of. I'm looking forward to going out to pitch and have a fun time," Strasburg said. "It's also exciting to know my entire family will be able to watch me pitch, since the game will be on MLB Network."

The Cincinnati Reds lead all organizations with four players on the West Division roster: Leake, Yonder Alonso, Zack Cozart and Chris Heisey. Several other organizations boast three players in the game.

"It should be a fun day ... a chance to play with some of the younger talent in this league," said Ike Davis, the lone Met on the roster. "I'm honored, it means just a little more that I'm getting there."

What it means beyond that is open to debate. The alumni list from the game, now in its fourth rendition, is impressive, including big leaguers such as Gordon Beckham, Ryan Braun, Jacoby Ellsbury, Tommy Hanson and Phil Hughes. In last year's Rising Stars game, Hanson continued his jaw-dropping AFL performance by going three hitless innings while striking out seven.

"I don't know if one game can make a big difference for you [attention-wise]," Davis said. "This whole league is filled with great young talent. It's been a real eye-opener."

It is just one game, and an exhibition at that, but many scouts will be in attendance to see how the best perform against the best. The Fall League is expecting a good crowd, adding a little more energy to the proceedings than a typical low-key AFL game.

"It's just a great opportunity," Desme said. "But it isn't a ticket to anywhere. I know I have to get better, that I'm not there yet."

RISING STARS SHOWCASE 2009

2009 AFL Rising Stars rosters

East Division

West Division

Position players

POS.	PLAYER	TEAM	ORG	POS.	PLAYER NAME	TEAM	ORG
C	Hank Conger	Mesa	LAA	C	Jason Castro	Saguaros	HOU
C	Buster Posey	Scottsdale	SF	C	Lucas May	Javelinas	LAD
IF	Brandon Allen	Scottsdale	ARI	IF	Yonder Alonso	Saguaros	CIN
IF	Starlin Castro	Mesa	CHC	IF	Zack Cozart	Saguaros	CIN
IF	Chase d'Arnaud	Scottsdale	PIT	IF	Ike Davis	Surprise	NYM
IF	Matt Dominguez	Mesa	FLA	IF	Daniel Descalso	Surprise	STL
IF	Brandon Snyder	Phoenix	BAL	IF	Carlos Rivero	Saguaros	CLE
IF	Josh Vitters	Mesa	CHC	IF	Mike Moustakas	Surprise	KC
IF	Jemile Weeks	Phoenix	OAK	IF	Lance Zawadzki	Saguaros	SD
OF	Domonic Brown	Scottsdale	PHI	OF	Dustin Ackley	Javelinas	SEA
OF	Grant Desme	Phoenix	OAK	OF	Jordan Danks	Javelinas	CWS
OF	Bryan Petersen	Mesa	FLA	OF	Chris Heisey	Saguaros	CIN
OF	Jose Tabata	Scottsdale	PIT	OF	Daryl Jones	Javelinas	STL
OF	Rene Tosoni	Mesa	MIN	OF	Casper Wells	Javelinas	DET

Pitchers

POS.	PLAYER	TEAM	ORG	POS.	PLAYER NAME	TEAM	ORG
RHP	Andrew Cashner*	Mesa	CHC	RHP	Phillippe Aumont	Javelinas	SEA
RHP	Brandon Erbe	Phoenix	BAL	LHP	Michael Dunn	Surprise	NYN
RHP	Reidier Gonzalez	Phoenix	TOR	RHP	Josh Fields	Javelinas	SEA
RHP	Matt Gorgen	Phoenix	TB	RHP	Javy Guerra	Javelinas	LAD
RHP	Andrew Johnston	Scottsdale	COL	RHP	Danny Gutierrez	Surprise	TEX
LHP	Danny Moskos	Scottsdale	PIT	RHP	Craig Kimbrel	Saguaros	ATL
RHP	Toru Murata	Scottsdale	N/A	RHP	Mike Leake	Saguaros	CIN
LHP	Blake Parker	Mesa	CHC	LHP	Mike Minor	Saguaros	ATL
LHP	Matt Reynolds	Scottsdale	COL	LHP	Andrew Oliver	Javelinas	DET
LHP	Dustin Richardson	Mesa	BOS	RHP	Mark Rogers	Javelinas	MIL
RHP	Drew Storen	Phoenix	WAS	RHP	Tanner Scheppers	Surprise	TEX
RHP	Stephen Strasburg	Phoenix	WAS				

Coaches

COACH NAME	ORG	COACH NAME	ORG
Gary Cathcart	Manager TOR	Kevin Bradshaw	Manager DET
R.C. Lichtenstein	Pitching coach TB	Fred Dabney	Pitching coach MIL
Brian McArn	Hitting coach OAK	Gary Ward	Hitting coach CWS
Moe Hill	Hitting coach BAL		

Weeks, Veal win weekly AFL honor

A's, Bucs prospects named Players of the Week

By Adam McCalvy / MLB.com

Infielder Jemile Weeks of the A's organization and left-hander Donnie Veal of the Pirates were named Arizona Fall League hitter and pitcher of the week on Monday.

Weeks, playing for the Phoenix Desert Dogs, went 8-for-15 (.533) for the week with three doubles, two triples, three RBIs and four runs scored to continue a strong start to the prospect-laden league. He entered week four of AFL play riding a seven-game hitting streak during which he has batted .379 and scored eight times.

The 22-year-old Orlando native is the younger brother of Brewers second baseman Rickie Weeks. Jemile was Oakland's first-round Draft pick in 2008 out of the University of Miami and he topped out in 2009 at Double-A Midland.

Veal, playing for the Scottsdale Scorpions, didn't allow a run in two starts last week, allowing only five hits with two walks and seven strikeouts in 7 2/3 innings. He leads Fall League starters with a 0.71 ERA and is tied for the league lead with two wins. He ranks second in opponent batting average (.159) and third in walks plus hits per inning pitched (0.71).

The 25-year-old former Cubs prospect made his Major League debut with the Pirates in 2009 with 19 relief appearances. He also pitched for Double-A Altoona (0-0, 1.35 ERA in seven games) and Triple-A Indianapolis (0-1, 6.43 ERA in nine games) last season.

Other hitters receiving Player of the Week consideration were Weeks' fellow A's prospects Grant Desme and Corey Brown and Peoria Saguaros outfielder Jonathan Gaston, an Astros farmhand.

In the pitching category, Peoria Javelinas right-handers Justin Cassel (White Sox) and Robbie Weinhardt (Tigers) also received consideration for the weekly honor.

Desme Does The Desert

A's farmhand threatening AFL homers mark

By Bill Mitchell, Baseball America 11/2/09

PHOENIX—It would be impossible to determine which player leads the Arizona Fall League in home runs just by watching the Phoenix Desert Dogs take pregame batting practice.

Athletics outfielder Grant Desme tops the league with 10 homers, accumulated in only 15 games, at the midpoint of the season. His overall numbers—.393/.464/.934—rank in the top four in each of the three slash stats. He also leads the league in RBIs with 23.

The righthanded slugger is content to work on his other hitting skills during batting practice.

"The thing that impresses me is that he does not waver from his work in batting practice every day," Desert Dog manager Gary Cathcart said. "As a matter of fact, I don't think he's hit a home run in batting practice here. He stays within his routine—line drives in the middle of the field and opposite field, getting his hands working, and just feeling a good tempo. He pretty much saves the rest of it for the game."

Desert Dog hitting coach Brian McArn chimed in on the effectiveness of Desme's pregame approach, even bestowing on him the degree of "professional hitter."

"He takes his at-bats with a professional attitude," said McArn, the A's Triple-A Sacramento hitting coach. "His batting practices are amazing. He tries to use the whole field. He rarely hits a home run in batting practice . . . just a pleasure to watch."

Desme's AFL performance comes after a breakout 2009 season, in what was in essence his first full professional season. The 23-year-old product of Cal Poly hit a combined .288/.365/.568, including eye-popping totals of 31 homers and 40 stolen bases, with low Class A Kane County and high Class A Stockton.

His career got off to a slow start after the A's grabbed him in the second round of the 2007 draft. Desme totaled only 49 at-bats in his first two seasons due to a succession of injuries (wrist surgery and a shoulder separation), with only three trips to the plate in a lost 2008 campaign.

Desme doesn't feel that last year was a total loss. He believes that the time away from the game helped him grow as a person.

"I'm very thankful it happened to me," said Desme, in reference to the separated shoulder that sidelined him for most of 2008. "I think it needed to be. As a person, baseball was really the one and only thing in my life. With the injuries, it kind of put everything in perspective. There are much bigger things in life. Baseball could be taken from you at any moment . . . You step on the field and that could be your last game. There are a lot of other things that matter more . . . baseball's just a game."

Desme's biggest area for improvement at the plate is cutting down on strikeouts. He fanned 148 times in 486 at-bats this year and has been punched out 17 times in 61 AFL at-bats. His strikeout totals could be viewed in two different ways. A pessimist might say that Desme's numbers are too high for a 23-year-old college product in A ball, while an optimist

would point out that it's not bad for a power hitter in his first full pro season.

Regardless, it's a facet of his game that Desme knows he needs to improve and he's using the AFL to make the necessary adjustments.

"That's something I'm working on and trying to improve," said Desme, ". . . just try to find a two-strike approach I'm comfortable with and try to make more contact."

Cathcart, who managed Double-A New Hampshire in the Blue Jays system, sees a hitter who should be able to make the necessary adjustments as he progresses through the minors.

"I don't think he has a poor strike zone and he's not a free swinger," said Cathcart, "but he does miss a little bit . . . It's a natural maturation for him. It's really his first full season."

McArn concurred, adding, "It's just a process. He'll realize what pitchers are trying to do to him."

Perhaps even more surprising than the home run totals is the number of stolen bases he accumulated this year. He stole a total of 20 bases during his three years in college (one season at San Diego State and two years at Cal Poly), but was a perfect 24-for-24 during his time with Kane County and was caught stealing just five times in his 21 attempts with Stockton.

"That was a pretty big surprise for me," he said. "It was the first time I had been able to steal. I really had no idea I could put up numbers like that."

Desme is rated as just an average runner, but according to McArn he had more opportunities to steal this season by getting good jumps and knowing on which pitches he could go.

His performance this fall has not gone unnoticed by the Oakland organization.

"The amazing thing is that he's playing really good defense," said Billy Owens, Oakland's director of player personnel, "he's running the bases hard, and every last home run has been to every crevice of the ballpark—left, right and center—and none of them has been a wall-scraper."

In addition to having McArn on the Desert Dog coaching staff, the A's minor league hitting coordinator Greg Sparks and farm director Keith Lieppman have been keeping close tabs on Desme.

Desme is four home runs away from tying the Arizona Fall League record of 14, set in 2005 by Angels infielder Brandon Wood, but it's not something that he is worried about right now.

"Records are nice, but I'm here to prepare to go on to the next level," said Desme.

His AFL teammates from the Athletics don't let him forget about both the home run record and the numbers he's putting up this fall.

"Grant Desme is a great person, very humble and a quiet guy," said fellow Desert Dog outfielder Corey Brown. "He knows it's there, in the back of his head; he's a guy that really doesn't like to look at his numbers and really know exactly what he's doing."

That doesn't stop Desme's friends from continually reminding him of his accomplishments this fall.

"It's just one of those things that we joke around about," added Brown.

FALL GUYS

- The Dodgers shut down lefthander **Aaron Miller** as planned after three appearances in which the 2009 supplemental first-round pick yielded only one run in 4 1/3 innings. In his brief stint, the Baylor product drew raves from many in the scout section at his games. One scout in particular wondered aloud how Miller had gotten past the first round before being selected with the 36th overall pick. Righthander **Kenley Jansen**, a converted catcher, replaced him on the Javelinas roster. Jansen, a native of Curacao, made his pitching debut this season with high Class A Inland Empire and struck out 19 batters in 11 2/3 innings. The 22-year-old, who caught for the Dutch in the World Baseball Classic this spring, has a big, strong physique and possesses a fastball that reaches 96-97 mph.

- Other newcomers to the league last week included outfielder **Nick Evans** (Mets), pitcher **Kyle Bellamy** (White Sox) and outfielder **Darin Mastroianni** (Blue Jays). Bellamy, a submarining righthander, was a 2009 fifth-round pick out of Miami.

- The annual Rising Stars Game, scheduled for Saturday, November 7th at 6:15 pm, will be telecast live on MLB Network. To be held at Surprise Stadium, the game showcases the AFL's top prospects. Rosters will be announced later this week.

Monday's Arizona Fall League roundup

Petersen extends hitting streak in big game for Solar Sox

By / MLB.com

Solar Sox 7, Saguaros 2

Marlins outfield prospect Bryan Petersen went 3-for-4 with two RBIs in Mesa's victory over Peoria. Petersen has a 12-game hitting streak, which stretches over his entire AFL season. Teammate Starlin Castro (Cubs) had a pair of hits and two RBIs in the win and has hit safely in five of his last six games. Richard Lentz (Red Sox) allowed one hit over two scoreless relief innings to pick up his first win. Lentz struck out two batters and lowered his ERA to 0.84 in six AFL outings.

Desert Dogs 10, Rafters 2

In the longest outing of his fledgling professional career, Stephen Strasburg allowed a run and four hits over five innings in Phoenix's victory over Surprise. Strasburg was consistent and methodical with flashes of awe-provoking stuff in raising his record to 3-1 and lowering his ERA to 5.28. Strasburg was consistent and methodical with flashes of awe-provoking stuff in raising his record to 3-1 and lowering his ERA to 5.28.

Javelinas 6, Scorpions 4

Lucas May (Dodgers) went 3-for-4 with a go-ahead two-run homer and an RBI double as Peoria overcame Scottsdale. The Dodgers' eighth-round pick in 2003 smacked his second homer of the fall with one out in the seventh off Craig Baker, a two-run drive to right-center field that gave Peoria the lead and sparked the decisive four-run rally. May put the Javelinas on the board in the fifth by smacking an RBI double off Edgar Garcia with two outs.

Strasburg sharp in longest pro outing

Top '09 pick stifles Rafters ahead of Rising Stars start

By Tom Singer / MLB.com

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- In the longest outing of his fledgling professional career, Stephen Strasburg allowed a run and four hits over five innings in Phoenix's 10-2 victory over Surprise in Monday afternoon's Arizona Fall League game.

The 21-year-old sensation out of San Diego State made his delayed fourth AFL outing on five days' rest to set him up to start Saturday's Rising Stars Game, and he again looked the part.

Strasburg was consistent and methodical with flashes of awe-provoking stuff in raising his record to 3-1 and lowering his ERA to 5.28.

"It's a long progression," he said. "I just want to fine-tune everything. You can't settle for what you've done in the past. They might figure you out, so you always have to be ready.

"It was a pretty decent day."

Strasburg was given an instant 3-0 lead in the top of the first inning at Surprise Stadium, on a two-RBI single by Chris Marrero followed by fellow Rising Star Grant Desme's single for another run, and he never looked back.

For a second consecutive start, the notable right-hander took the Rafters to school. The subject: Strasburg 101. A fastball clocked at 101 mph was one of four to hit triple digits in the first.

Even a pickoff throw to first base, on Dan Descalso after he had singled with one out in the first, tripped the radar at 92 mph. So both Phoenix first baseman Brandon Snyder and catcher Nevin Ashley could attest to Strasburg's good stuff.

His appearance in the road game -- about 25 miles west of the Desert Dogs' Municipal Stadium digs -- provoked a relative rush on the box office, with many in the eventual gathering of 456 walking up to line up for tickets as first pitch approached.

Strasburg didn't disappoint. His next appearance will be quite higher profile as he starts Saturday night for the Eastern Division in the AFL's all-star game on the MLB Network.

The Nationals' and the nation's No. 1 choice in June's First-Year Player Draft walked one and struck out six, all swinging, most of them at biting sliders into the dirt.

Strasburg stretched out to 68 pitches, 43 of them strikes, in the five innings, two outs beyond his previous longest outing, the 4 1/3-inning turn last Tuesday against Surprise.

As was the case then, Surprise broke through against him in his last inning. Brandon Laird led off the fifth with a double off diving left fielder Corey Brown's glove, and he worked his way home on a pair on infield grounders.

"I wanted to go out and build off the previous start," said Strasburg, whose timetable calls for him to reach to 75 pitches before the AFL schedule runs out in a couple of weeks.

It's all about building back up an arm that had essentially been holstered for four months. At San Diego State, it wasn't unusual for Strasburg to approach 130 pitches in a close game, although coach Tony Gwynn normally took him out of blowouts after he crossed 100. But that last collegiate outing was on May 29.

"Coach Gwynn was really protective of me," Strasburg said. "It's a gradual progression, and I just have to stay on my program."

Strasburg's effort reinforced the notion that, regardless the stature of the man in the middle, baseball is a nine-man game. The Rafters hit numerous hard shots, but right at fielders.

The best defensive play behind Strasburg was turned by third baseman Josh Bell, who charged a third-inning bunt by Jarrod Dyson and nailed him with a strong, sidearm throw.

Paul Menhart, a pitching coach in the Nationals' organization, is chaperoning Strasburg here in the same capacity with the Desert Dogs. Skull sessions with Menhart are all part of the education.

"I talk to him a lot," Strasburg said, "particularly about the mental game. He's been around the game for a long time, and I listen to everything he has to say.

"One of the biggest things has been learning to call your own game. In college, the coach pretty much calls the game, so you don't have any input. Here, you have to think about what pitch to make."

At least, Strasburg has to be concerned only with making his pitch, not hitting it. He seems to have the easier task.