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Ascending A's: Donaldson waits his turn

Backstop prospect building reputation with bat and glove

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

"Ascending A's" is a regular offseason feature in which Oakland director of player development Keith Lieppman and director of player personnel Billy Owens will provide analysis on various top prospects in the organization. Today, Owens offers insight on catcher Josh Donaldson, who is coming off a strong season at Double-A Midland.

OAKLAND -- Acquired from the Cubs in a six-player deal that sent A's right-hander Rich Harden and Chad Gaudin to Chicago in July of 2008, catcher Josh Donaldson showed enough promise in 47 games at Class A Stockton after the trade to earn an invitation to big league Spring Training this year.

He played in only eight games in the Cactus League, mostly as a late-game substitution, but in collecting four hits -- including a double, a triple and a home run -- in 11 at-bats he drew the attention of the man he might someday replace.

"He could swing it a little bit," said Kurt Suzuki, who has been Oakland's starting catcher since Jason Kendall was traded to the Cubs in July 2007. "I didn't see a lot of him as a catcher, but [I could see that] he's athletic and he works hard."

Suzuki, who turned 26 in early October and led the A's with 88 RBIs while playing Gold Glove-caliber defense this season, won't likely be looking over his shoulder at Donaldson any time soon.

Donaldson, who turns 24 in early December, hasn't yet reached Triple-A ball, and ahead of him on the organizational depth chart behind the plate is Landon Powell, who served as Suzuki's backup in 2009 and played well in limited duty.

Asked if there might be a time when the club has to make some tough decisions regarding its trio of talented catchers, Owens said, "That's what the Hot Stove [league] is for."

"We have a very good catcher in the Major Leagues right now," he continued, "and Powell is a bona-fide backup with a chance, if he stays healthy, to be an everyday guy. ... But the sky's the limit for Josh. He's got a very good all-around package."

A "sandwich pick" of the Cubs following the first round of the 2007 First-Year Player Draft, Donaldson didn't start catching until his sophomore season at Auburn University. In fact, he was named the third baseman on the NCAA's All-Region Tournament Team as a freshman in 2005.

Four years later, he's what Owens called "an outstanding defensive catcher."

After making the transition to catcher in 2006, Donaldson started to turn heads in earnest in the prestigious Cape Cod League before his junior year, and he was certainly on Oakland's radar heading into the 2007 Draft.

Owens said A's director of scouting Eric Kubota "loved" Donaldson, who led Auburn with a .349 batting average and 54 RBIs as a junior.

The Cubs snapped Donaldson up before Oakland got a chance, so the A's jumped at the chance to have him included in the package they got in exchange for Harden and Gaudin.

Having batted .217 with Class A Peoria of the pitcher-friendly Midwest League over 63 games in the Chicago organization before the trade, Donaldson made some adjustments to his approach under the guidance of A's Minor League roving hitting instructor Greg Sparks and Lieppman upon being assigned to Class A Advanced Stockton of the California League.

He batted .330 with nine home runs, 39 RBIs, a .391 on-base percentage and a .955 OPS in 47 games.

"He was outstanding in the Cal League," Owens said. "Torrid, really."

Donaldson, a right-handed hitter listed at 6-foot-1 and 215 pounds, made a seamless transition to Double-A Midland of the tough Texas League. He made the All-Star team on the way to batting .270 with nine homers, 37 doubles, 91 RBIs, a .379 OBP and .795 OPS in 124 games, and he batted .340 with runners in scoring position.

But it wasn't just what Donaldson did with the bat that so impressed the A's. He handled pitchers well, controlled opponents' running games and displayed the type of intangibles for which Suzuki is lauded at the big league level.

"He's a high-everyday guy, a vocal guy, a leader, and a hard worker," Owens said. "He has a well-rounded game."

Owens suggested that Donaldson is a virtual lock to be back in big league camp this spring, and with Suzuki and Powell entrenched in Oakland, a season at Triple-A Sacramento is likely the next developmental step.

"That's probably the plan, but in this game, you never know," Owens said. "What we do know is that Josh has done a nice job climbing the ladder so far, and he has a chance to be an outstanding player."

Wednesday's AFL roundup

Yanks' Laird slugs one of Rafters' four home runs

By / MLB.com

Rafters 10, Scorpions 5

Yankees prospect Brandon Laird hit one of Surprise's four homers and drove in three runs to power the Rafters to their second straight win. Tyler Henley (Cardinals) slugged a solo shot and Nick Evans (Mets) and Marcus Lemon (Rangers) both went deep in the eighth. Giants Minor Leaguer Thomas Neal collected three hits, including a two-run homer, and Pirates prospect Jose Tabata went 3-for-5 with an RBI for Scottsdale, which has dropped three in a row.

Solar Sox 8, Javelinas 5

Steve Singleton went 3-for-5 and notched his ninth RBI in as many games as the Solar Sox snapped the Javelinas' five-game winning streak. The Twins prospect singled and scored in the first inning, lined an RBI double in the second and got another base hit in the third, when Mesa scored five times to build an 8-0 cushion. Tigers Minor League Casper Wells hit a three-run homer in Peoria's five-run outburst, extending his AFL on-base streak to 33 games, dating to last season.

Saguaros 3, Desert Dogs 2

Chris Heisey continues his solid fall with a solo homer as the Saguaros climbed back to the .500 mark. The Reds prospect is hitting .365 and ranks among the AFL leaders in total bases (46), extra-base hits (12), runs scored (15) and slugging percentage (.730). Indians Minor Leaguer Matt McBride contributed three hits, including a double, to raise his average to .405 for Peoria. Rays farmhand Shawn O'Malley reached base three times and drove in a run for the first-place Desert Dogs.

Weeks Putting Together A Fast Finish To '09

Melissa Lockard
OaklandClubhouse.com

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Baseball is fun again for Jemile Weeks, who battled through injuries and inconsistencies this season to put together a strong finish to his first full professional season. Recently named to the Arizona Fall League's Rising Stars Showcase, Weeks is playing well against elite competition. We caught-up with Weeks to get his thoughts on the league, his 2009 season, working with a legend & more...

[Jemile Weeks](#) knows a little something about playing with and against some of the most talented baseball players in the world. He grew up playing baseball with his older brother Rickie, who was also selected in the first round of the MLB draft and is currently the starting second baseman for the Milwaukee Brewers. As a freshman at the University of [Miami](#), Weeks was named to the Team USA national collegiate squad, where he played alongside current top minor league prospects [Pedro Alvarez](#), [Julio Borbon](#) and Brandon Crawford, among others. With the Hurricanes, Weeks was part of a stacked Miami squad that featured fellow 2008 first-round picks [Yonder Alonso](#) and [Carlos Gutierrez](#), among others.

Despite all of that experience, Weeks didn't hesitate when asked whether the competition he is facing currently at the

Arizona Fall League is the best he has ever encountered.

"Definitely," Weeks said on Tuesday after the Phoenix Desert Dogs' extra-innings loss.

"You are playing with guys who are at the top of their game that you know are going to be on a big league roster. It's still baseball, but, at the same time, it is still an exciting time just because the fact, like I said, you know one day they are going to be on a big league roster. To be able to compete against them, it just makes it that much more fun to be a part of because you know what can happen in the future with some of these guys that you are around."

One of the players with a seemingly bright future ahead of him is Weeks himself, who was the Oakland A's highest draft pick in a decade when he was taken 12th overall last season. Weeks' talent has not gone unnoticed around baseball. He was named to the MLB All-Star Futures Game during the regular season and this week was one of two A's prospects to be named to the roster of the AFL's Rising Stars game, which is intended to bring together the top prospects from the AFL in a one-game prospect showcase.

"I'm gratefully honored for the selection to be a part of that team. I'm just looking forward to going out there and having fun. That's just pretty much what this is all about, people with great talent going out there and showing what they can do," Weeks said.

"It's been the situation [at the AFL] where you are having your jaw drop at times because you are playing with some elite players. The Rising Stars game is going to be the same thing and it is going to be an exciting time."

The Arizona Fall League experience has been a positive finish to what has been an up-and-down first full season for Weeks. He began the year at extended spring training, where he was rehabbing various leg injuries that were a result of a torn hip flexor he sustained in a game with the Low-A Kane County Cougars in July 2008. The A's were cautious with Weeks, having him rehab for nearly the first two months of the season before allowing him to report to the High-A Stockton Ports. Once with Stockton, Weeks was kept on a short leash for the first few weeks with the team, often being given a day off after playing three or four games in a row.

"I felt pretty good once I got [to Stockton]. I'd say that things were ready to get on a roll about two weeks into the season, I was ready to get it going," Weeks said.

"The organization has been looking out for me and looking out for my well being coming off of such a serious injury. I think that helped out just to make myself sure that I was ready."

If Weeks wasn't ready when he reported to Stockton, it would have been hard to tell by his numbers. He hit safely in his first 22 games with the Ports and batted an even .400 with seven homers and 23 RBIs over that stretch. Weeks hit a bump in the road after that initial hot start, however, batting only .216 over his last 27 games with the Ports. Despite those struggles, Weeks was promoted to Double-A Midland, where he once again got off to a good start – hitting safely in five of his first six games – before going through stretches of struggling. Weeks finished the regular season with a .278/.357/.425 line in 80 games between Stockton and Midland.

Weeks says that he learned a lot from his struggles in 2009 and he believes that the experience will make him a better player down-the-road.

"It was just one of those situations where baseball has that effect. You are going to go good sometimes and you are going to go bad other times. You are just trying to even out those good and bad days as much as possible, is what it is," Weeks said.

"It's a long season. I learned coming into next year to be prepared to deal with those bad days better than I did this year. That is the whole thing about being successful in baseball is learning how to deal with those days when you are not going the best."

Since the end of the regular season, Weeks hasn't had too many days where he hasn't been at his best. He was instrumental in the Midland Rockhounds' Texas League title run, batting .290 with a 905 OPS and two crucial homeruns in eight playoff games, as the Rockhounds clinched the title. Weeks has been finding similar success at the Arizona Fall League, where, through Tuesday, he was batting .308 with nine extra-base hits, seven RBIs and a 918 OPS in 12 games.

Between winning the Texas League crown and participating in the AFL, Weeks has thoroughly enjoyed his first full professional season, even with the ups-and-downs.

"Just to be able to accomplish making it to Double-A and winning a championship all in that one full season, I'm not sure what more anyone else could ask for from the first year of jumping into the professional world," Weeks said.

When the A's selected Weeks last season, they believed that they were bringing a player into the organization with the abilities to be a top-of-the-order offensive force and someone who could steal bases regularly at the major league level.

Since he injured his hip last season, Weeks has been limited on the bases. He attempted only 10 stolen bases in 2009 and was successful nine times.

Weeks is expected to be given the green light more frequently in 2010 and has been working hard on improving that aspect of his game this fall. Before the start of the AFL season, Weeks spent time with the major league's all-time leading base-stealer, A's Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson, going over the finer points of stealing bases. The advice seems to already be paying dividends as Weeks has swiped four bags in four opportunities over 12 games at the AFL.

"There were a few tactics that he wanted me to work on as far as base-stealing. That was the biggest thing that he was trying to touch up for me. He showed me quite a few things at our minor league park [Papago Park] while I was training to get ready for [the AFL]. I have been trying to incorporate those things and have been trying to get to the point where I can perfect it," Weeks said.

Henderson joined the A's as a consultant and "roving coordinator" of sorts this season and Oakland hopes that he will be able to do for Weeks what he did for New York Mets' shortstop [Jose Reyes](#), whom Henderson tutored in 2006. Since that time, Reyes has been one of the National League's top lead-off hitters and base-stealers.

Weeks was thrilled with the opportunity to work with Henderson.

"The guy is a Hall of Famer, so right off the bat you are pretty much in awe just to be in the presence of that person and to have conversations with him about the game. Obviously, just being around him, you know that he has a lot of knowledge and information that he can spread that you know is going to help in every way possible," Weeks said.

"That was the first thing. After that, it was really just him being such a down-to-earth person and so easy to talk to which made the experience go a lot smoother."