

A's News Clips, Monday, November 30, 2009

Possible A's sites a case of fantasy baseball?

Phillip Matier, Andrew Ross, San Francisco Chronicle, 11/30/09

Oakland boosters are ready to present Major League Baseball with four possible sites for a new A's ballpark.

They are:

-- The current Oakland Coliseum site.

-- Oak and Third streets, just south of Jack London Square.

-- The old Howard Street terminal on the waterfront, a bit north of the Coliseum and on the other side of the Nimitz Freeway.

-- Howard Street on the northeast side of the Embarcadero.

Sources close to the search tell us that Mayor **Ron Dellums'** message to Major League Baseball will be, "We have the site, we have the community and business support, and we have the political unity to get the job done."

Most of the sites, however, have already been reviewed by A's co-owner **Lew Wolff**, and he considers them unworkable.

"We think we've exhausted every option in Oakland," Wolff told us the other day.

The team is focusing on possibilities in San Jose, which the San Francisco Giants consider their territory.

Still, Oakland boosters - led by Sen. **Barbara Boxer's** son **Doug Boxer** - have been lobbying Major League Baseball hard to keep the team in the city. As a result, baseball has sent in a three-member commission to take a look at possible sites.

The city's pitch seems to be directed more at the committee than at the A's.

"We'll leave it to the committee to comment on what to do next," Wolff said.

Fans gather at Raley Field to give Art Savage a final cheer

Anna Tong, Sacramento Bee, 11/29/09

Saturday afternoon mourners remembered Art Savage, the River Cats owner who helped propel Sacramento to near major-league status by putting old-school American glamour into summer nights.

The memorial was held over home plate at Raley Field, Savage's very own field of dreams. The winds were violent and the sky bright and cloudless – perfect for a game of unpredictable baseball.

Savage, who died Nov. 21 at age 58, helmed one of the nation's most successful minor-league franchises.

He had been diagnosed with lung cancer in late 2007, but since 2008 had a clean bill of health. On Nov. 21 he suddenly became ill at his east Sacramento home and collapsed.

Saturday's public memorial service drew a thousand people, including Sacramento luminaries Savage had been friends with, such as Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento.

"Art did so much to give back to his own community," she told the crowd. "He moved Sacramento forward."

Savage brought the River Cats to West Sacramento in 2000, ending a prolonged professional baseball drought. He built Raley Field, which along with the team immediately became a local institution.

Over the team's 10 seasons, the River Cats won eight division titles, four Pacific Coast League championships and two Triple A championships.

The team broke minor league attendance records, in its first season drawing more than 800,000 fans and leading in minor-league merchandise sales.

Friends remembered him as a gentle, kind man. But behind the "wry smile" and "familiar wink" was a steely businessman, they said, as the River Cats' success shows.

Chuck Noski, a lifelong friend, recalled when Savage's wife, Susan, planned him a surprise birthday party. Noski's job was to keep Savage away from his home. To do this, he had Savage drive with him to the Oakland airport to pick up his girlfriend, only to "realize" she had actually flown into the San Jose airport. Then he staged a misunderstanding where she arrived two hours later than expected. A good five hours late, the three headed home.

"Any ordinary man would have lost his cool, but he was cool, calm and patient," Noski said.

The service also drew Sacramentans who were not personal friends with Savage but whose lives had been enriched through him.

Betty and Gary Regallo, who have been season-ticket holders since the team's inception, came Saturday decked in their River Cats game outfits. Betty, 69, wore a crimson baseball hat, studded with River Cats pins and an American flag. Gary, 62, wore a flannel shirt.

"I was going to come in my suit and tie, but I decided to wear this because I thought Art Savage would have liked it," he said.

Betty Regallo met Savage once at Raley Field, when she thought she was "jabbering away" to a patient stranger.

The Regallos said they've seen many dreams come true at Raley Field. Rising baseball stars have come through: the team has sent more than 100 players to the Oakland A's major-league team, the River Cats' parent club. Betty Regallo said she caught a fly ball a few months ago and gave it to a 7-year-old boy who "probably still sleeps with it under his pillow."

"When you come to a game, and it's a sold-out house and the whole place goes wild after a home run, there's nothing like it," she said.

"Art Savage put fun back into our lives."

A's future is bright at corner spots

Top pitching prospects graduate to Majors early

By Lisa Winston / MLB.com

When last we wrote about the Oakland Athletics' Minor League system, just before the 2009 season, we highlighted its young starting pitching prospects, noting that several potential members of the big league staff would normally be starting the year at Triple-A Sacramento, but instead looked like they would be pressed into service due to injuries in the big leagues.

We were right -- to a degree. Where we were off target was suggesting that pitchers such as left-hander Brett Anderson, right-hander Trevor Cahill and, though we somehow neglected to single him out, sleeper closer Andrew Bailey, needed more time in the Minors.

Our bad.

No other organization in baseball had more than one player receiving any votes in the 2009 Rookie of the Year voting in either league than Oakland, which not only had the American League winner in Bailey, who posted a 1.84 ERA and collected 26 saves (24 of them after he moved into the role full-time around Memorial Day), but also saw 21-year-old Anderson finishing fifth in the voting (11-11, 4.06).

Bailey had split his 2008 season between starting and relief at Double-A Midland, with a 4.32 ERA between the two, but that split came down to a 6.18 ERA to open the season in the rotation and an 0.92 ERA after he moved to the 'pen in mid-June, so maybe that should have been a sign. So, too, could have been a 1.29 ERA in the Arizona Fall League as he continued his relief conversion.

But not even Athletics farm director Keith Lieppman, the 2009 winner of the Sheldon "Chief" Bender Award for distinguished service in player development, could have predicted the degree of Bailey's rookie success.

The impressive work in the big leagues from Bailey, Anderson, Cahill and another starter who made his big league debut with Oakland, Vin Mazzaro, does, however, tip the balance when it comes to where the current depth is in the Athletics system.

"Obviously our strength is young pitching, but it's in the big leagues, where we had that infusion of kids last year," Lieppman said. "But projecting ahead, our depth would be potential offensive production at the corners."

That would come in the form of two of the Minor League's best young hitters, first baseman Chris Carter and third baseman Brett Wallace. Both came to the Athletics via trades, with Carter coming over as one of six prospects acquired from Arizona in the 2008 deal for pitcher Dan Haren, and 2007 first-rounder Wallace arriving this summer from St. Louis in the Matt Holliday deal.

While some had thought that Wallace would eventually move across the diamond to first, the A's got him in hopes that he would stay at third base, and they're optimistic about that remaining the case.

"A lot of people like the way he's continued to play there," Lieppman said of Wallace, who combined to hit .293 with 20 homers and 63 RBIs at three Minor League stops between his two organizations. "So we haven't given up on it. The combination of him at third and Carter at first, you'd get some offensive production."

In his two seasons with the Athletics, all Carter has done is hit 67 homers, drive in 219 runs and rank among the Minor League leaders in nearly every offensive category both years. This year at Double-A Midland, he earned Texas League MVP honors at age 22 while raising his average 60 points.

In fact, when asked where the organization had taken its biggest step forward in 2009, he pointed to all the talent the club had brought in via trades -- Wallace, Carter and infielder Adrian Cardenas being three of the most prominent upper-level prospects acquired for big-name Major Leaguers in the last two years (well, at least those still in the Minors, since Anderson came over in the Haren deal with Carter).

"Every one of our Minor League clubs, everywhere you look, there are guys that [general manager] Billy [Beane] traded for that made a mark on our system," Lieppman said.

But that's not to say that the scouting department only had its eye on players in other organizations. Lieppman has been especially impressed by the influx of talent from the 2009 Draft, which he called "well above average."

Along with the top picks, he also singled out fourth-round pick Max Stassi, who was considered one of the top high school catchers in the country, but whose commitment to UCLA scared off a lot of clubs. The Athletics pursued him, signed him and he made a great impression this past fall with his bat, defense and leadership skills.

"A lot of people didn't think we could get him signed," Lieppman said, "but we did and he was everything he was touted to be."

But when it comes to looking ahead to prospects who could be up there with Bailey and Anderson on the 2010 Rookie of the Year ballots, the talk returns to Carter and Wallace.

"Given our current situation with the youth movement, if the opportunity is there, it might be time to give one of the prospects a shot," Lieppman said. "And they're the two most obvious guys for it, I think."

ORGANIZATIONAL PLAYERS OF THE YEAR MLB.com's Preseason Picks

Chris Carter, 1B: Coming off a 2008 campaign where he ranked among the Minor League leaders in nearly every category, it wasn't a stretch to expect the big young slugger to continue his success up the ladder. Originally drafted out of high school by the White Sox in the 15th round of 2005 and traded twice in the 2007-2008 offseason, first to Arizona and then to Oakland, the 6-foot-4, 225-pounder batted just .259, but collected 39 homers and 104 RBIs at Class A Stockton in '08.

Vin Mazzaro, RHP: The 2008 season was a huge breakthrough campaign for the New Jersey native, as the 2005 third-rounder went 12-3 with a 1.90 ERA at Double-A Midland before struggling just a bit in his Triple-A debut at Sacramento. Our prediction that he'd have a big year came true, as he made the Majors and went 4-9 with a 5.32 ERA, no longer qualifying for our prospect list as a full-fledged big league pitcher.

MLB.com's Postseason Selections

Chris Carter, 1B: Our predictions on Carter came through and then some. With his promotion to Double-A, he kept the power numbers coming, but also raised his average significantly, winning Texas League MVP honors and adding on a brief Triple-A taste of Sacramento as he batted .329 with 28 home runs, 115 RBIs and 43 doubles for a .422 on-base average and .570 slugging percentage. The 22-year-old Carter led the Minors with 179 hits and 310 total bases, was second in RBIs and third with 115 runs scored. It would be tough to find anyone who had a better season across the board.

Anthony Capra, LHP: A fourth-round pick out of Wichita State in 2008, Capra's first full season was one to remember, as he combined between Class A Kane County and Stockton for a 3.20 ERA and finished second in the Minors with 170 strikeouts in 152 innings, allowing just 112 hits while walking 61. His 10.07 strikeouts per nine innings ranked 10th among all full-season starters. He limited Midwest League hitters to a .197 average and was almost as effective in the California League at .223. He's not overpowering, with his plus changeup his best pitch, but he gets the job done.

Braden giving back this Thanksgiving

A's southpaw donates ton of food to hometown of Stockton

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- When someone asks A's left-hander Dallas Braden what he did to give back to his community this Thanksgiving, he can say "I donated a ton of food."

Some might hear that and take it figuratively.

The reality: He'll mean it literally.

Not satisfied with the roughly 850 pounds of food he solicited and matched in donations to St. Mary's Interfaith Community Services in his beloved, but downtrodden hometown of Stockton, Calif., last November, Braden this year launched "Operation Ton of Food for The 209."

As usual, when it comes to his altruistic works, Braden succeeded. More than 2,000 pounds were provided for Stockton's less-fortunate Wednesday, with Oakland's Opening Night starter as the star server.

For weeks leading up to the event, Braden visited Stockton restaurants, asking -- then matching -- food donations such as ribs, steak, turkey, ham, salad, pizza, tacos and beverages for the holiday meal.

Local merchants such as Bottley's BBQ, Richard Eales Home of Stockton, El Super Mercado Mexican Meat Market, Fat's Sports Bar and Grill, Gaines Liquor, Gians Deli, Graduate of Stockton, John's Incredible Pizza, Octavio Cruces Casa Flores, Michaels Pizza & Ginas Café, Pepsi and Whirlow's were happy to help.

"I'm in a little bit better [financial] situation than I was a year ago, so naturally I want to do more," Braden told MLB.com this week. "We've got 800 pounds in ribs alone this year. We've got 100 large pizzas, 50 big trays of lasagnas. People are going to be able to eat and eat and eat some more. It's like 'Field of Dreams.' If you build it, they will come. Last year, we built it and they came, and this year it's going to be more than double.

"It's pretty big-time. All of the places that I've had a relationship with since I was young, from patronizing their establishments, everyone stepped up again."

Walking the talk

Stepping up for Stockton is nothing new for Braden, whose body is adorned with various tattooed tributes to the city in which he was raised.

When an athlete hits the big time after surviving an upbringing under dire circumstances, in an area known for crime, gangs, poverty and desperation, the first thing he or she usually does is bail that area as quickly as possible.

For good. Usually with family and a few friends in tow.

By now, though, A's fans know that pretty much everything about Braden is *unusual*, including the fierce loyalty and devotion he shows to "The 209."

That's the area code for Stockton, which *Forbes Magazine* in February placed atop its annual list of America's Most Miserable Cities.

Braden, who cemented his status with the A's pitching staff by claiming the No. 1 spot in the starting rotation last spring, long ago cemented his status as Stockton's favorite son.

He still lives there, in the same hardscrabble neighborhood that served as his stomping grounds while being raised by a single mother, Jodie Atwood, who died of cancer when he was a high school senior.

And he doesn't just live there in the offseason. Braden, a 25-year-old left-hander, lives there year-round, making the 90-minute drive -- when he doesn't hit traffic -- to and from the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum whenever the A's are at home.

"I get to sleep in my own bed more than any baseball player I know," he says proudly. "Why *wouldn't* I live there?"

Um, the crime? The gangs? The poverty? The desperation?

"I'm staying because I want to try to help change all that," he explains.

He already is. Last Thanksgiving, Braden rallied and matched local merchants who donated food and supplies that allowed him -- wearing an A's cap and a yellow football jersey with large green 209s on the front, back and each sleeve -- to help dish out some culinary kindness to about 450 Stockton residents who, like Braden not long ago, were down on their luck and needed a helping hand.

"Ideally, the number [of people in need of help] would be zero," Braden says. "But realistically, times are tough, and I just want anyone who's in need of a hot meal to come on down and do their thing."

'It takes a village'

Known for his colorful quotes, clubhouse pranks and heavily tatted skin (he has a huge 209 inked across his midsection), Braden is serious, earnest and intense when explaining that his motivation to succeed in baseball is tied with heartstrings to his motivation to make a difference in Stockton.

"It's all about giving back for me," he says. "They say it takes a village to raise a child, right? Stockton is my village. It's a rough village, but it helped raise me."

In turn, Braden wants to help Stockton rise up, even if he has to do it one child at a time. That's the message he sent in June, when he hosted nearly 600 Stockton residents for the finale of a three-game Interleague series against the Rockies.

As part of Little League Day at the Coliseum, Braden invited all 271 players from his former youth league -- Hoover Tyler Little League (HTLL) -- and one guest of each player, for the formal announcement of his latest altruistic effort.

Beginning this year and "every year for as long as I live," Braden says, he'll sponsor at least one child each season from the HTLL who is being raised by a single parent.

As a sponsor of this child or children, Braden picks up the costs associated with the Little League season, including cap, jersey, pants, equipment costs, league fees and photo package. He's also convinced Mizuno, the equipment maker with which Braden is under contract, to provide new gloves for the program.

"[Having been] raised by a single parent," Braden says, "I realize and appreciate all of the sacrifices that are made and hardships endured just to keep a family afloat, let alone accommodating a child's wants and needs. By creating a way to provide some sort of relief for a family, my goal is to alleviate some stress, bring a family closer together and to allow a dream to be realized, all the while trying to bring our community together."

"The little things in life can go unappreciated at times, but can also go a long way. Giving a new ball glove to a child not only can keep a dream alive, but also bring a smile to a face and a tear to an eye."

There were plenty of moist pupils in the house in June, when Braden introduced the first recipients of his "baseball scholarship." Camron and Mitchell Alexander, brothers who are being raised by their mother, Tami, are ages 9 and 8, respectively.

"The mom is doing an amazing job," says Braden, who asked the HTLL board of directors to select the recipient(s) each season because it has a better handle on each child's needs. "Both of the boys are on the honor roll at their school, and the mom is going to Sacramento State to get her Master's degree.

"That's some serious juggling and dedication. Just like my Mom did for me."

Baseball second

Braden this year posted a 3.89 ERA in 22 starts before being placed on the disabled list with a rash that became an infection and eventually forced him to concede that his season was over. But it's what he has done *off* the field that makes him most proud.

In recognition of his community work, Braden was named by his teammates as Oakland's nominee for the MLB Players' Association's 2009 Marvin Miller Man of the Year Award.

"Nobody does stuff like this to get recognized," Braden says. "That's not what it's about, obviously. And I'm certainly not alone on this team in helping people. But if someone hears about what I'm doing [through the recognition I get for it] and decides, 'Hey, I want to help out, too,' then awesome.

"The ultimate goal is to keep love and hope alive in 'The 209' through baseball and community appreciation."

To ensure that love and hope *stay* alive in Stockton, Braden says he'll never leave -- even should he land a hefty seven- or eight-figure contract down the road.

"Then I could live in my house during Spring Training, too!" he says enthusiastically, laughing at the notion of commuting to Arizona via private jet.

With similar zeal, Braden explained his ideal life once his playing career comes to an end: pitching coach of the Minor League Stockton Ports *and* mayor of Stockton.

"City Council meetings are on Thursday," he says. "Trust me, I know."

This is why Braden's friend recently called him "Robin Hood."

"Then," Braden says, "he said, 'Only you ain't robbin' the 'hood.'"

Quite the opposite. And getting a ton of satisfaction in return.

"I know it's cliché," he says, "but it's true: If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."