

Oakland Athletics look for free agent hitters at winter meetings

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group, 12/8/09

Two-time All-Star pitcher Justin Duchscherer declined the A's offer of arbitration, which wasn't a shock. A free agent, Duchscherer can continue negotiating with the A's, with whom he's spent the past seven seasons, as well as other teams.

Because he's a Type B free agent, the A's will receive a compensatory "sandwich" pick in next year's draft if Duchscherer signs with another club.

The potentially bigger story line is whether the A's will make a splash in free agency before the winter meetings conclude Thursday.

After swinging a trade last week with the Chicago Cubs for third baseman Jake Fox and infielder Aaron Miles, the A's are focusing their energies this week on available free-agent hitters. Earlier this winter, general manager Billy Beane indicated the A's would go the trade route with any significant additions to the roster. But the A's aren't willing to part with the young players other teams covet in potential deals.

"We've got to understand that if we're going to talk trade with a team, we're gonna get a lot of names from teams that we're just not willing to talk about," Beane said Monday. "I would expect we'd have conversation with agents (about) some short-term free agents and midlevel free agents as much as anything."

The A's are expected to meet with the camp for outfielder Marlon Byrd. Byrd, 32, hit .283 with 20 homers and 89 RBI last season for the Texas Rangers.

There is speculation about whether free agent Hideki Matsui might be a match for the A's. Knee problems limited him to DH duty for the New York Yankees in 2009. Matsui, 35, is said to want the chance to play outfield, though it's unknown if his health will allow it.

The A's would lose their primary DH if they don't tender Jack Cust a contract by Saturday's deadline.

A recent foxsports.com story reported Oakland offered shortstop Marco Scutaro, a former Athletic, a three-year contract worth more money than he received from Boston. Beane wouldn't comment on that report, citing his policy of not discussing specific free agents. But he added that "what we could use is another infielder who can play (shortstop)." Cliff Pennington is the projected starter.

It appears highly unlikely that free-agent infielder Adam Kennedy will re-sign with Oakland. His agent, Paul Cohen, said Kennedy is looking for the chance to play second base. He would serve the A's needs best at third base. Cohen, who also represents Oakland free-agent infielder Bobby Crosby, said he expects Crosby to sign with another team by next week.

Duchscherer opts to become free agent

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer 12/8/09

Justin Duchscherer declined salary arbitration Monday, but that doesn't rule out the two-time All-Star opening next season in the A's rotation.

General manager **Billy Beane** said the club still has interest, and Duchscherer's agent, **Damon Lapa**, confirmed there's "mutual interest."

Monday was the deadline for free agents offered arbitration to accept or reject. If Duchscherer accepted, he definitely would have returned to Oakland. Now, he can negotiate with other teams. If he signs elsewhere, the A's would receive a compensatory draft pick.

"Other clubs have a very high degree of interest. With the number of clubs interested in Justin, we didn't want to close the door on the Oakland A's or anyone else," Lapa said.

Duchscherer missed the 2009 season with physical and personal issues. He was recovering from hip and elbow surgeries and developed a back problem. He made three rehab starts through mid-August but was diagnosed with clinical depression and was shelved.

Damon said Duchscherer has made great strides both mentally and physically and will enter next season in solid condition on both fronts.

Lowry update: The Rockies and Reds reportedly have interest in signing **Noah Lowry**, who hasn't pitched since winning 14 games for the 2007 Giants. Lapa also represents Lowry and said the lefty is prepared to hold workouts for teams.

"Clubs realize what he's capable of doing when he's healthy," Lapa said. "He's throwing five times a week, and we expect him to enter spring training without restrictions."

Garko's status: Saturday is the tender deadline for clubs to offer arbitration to their arb-eligible players. The Giants list five, and they'll offer arbitration to **Tim Lincecum**, **Jonathan Sanchez**, **Brian Wilson** and **Brandon Medders**, but GM **Brian Sabean** said **Ryan Garko** is "on the bubble." If he's non-tendered, he becomes a free agent.

Oakland's arbitration-eligible players include **Jack Cust**, **Rajai Davis**, **Scott Hairston** and **Michael Wuertz**.

Beane explores A's short-term options

Oakland GM scours free-agent market for veteran infielders

By Tom Singer / MLB.com 12/8/09

INDIANAPOLIS -- If you're a team looking to make a major upgrade this offseason, the current free-agent market may not be for you.

But if you're the Oakland A's, a market dominated by midlevel veterans could be perfect for Billy Beane.

The Oakland general manager could find himself in position to be very selective for the type of interim reinforcements atop his "get" list.

Beane identified the left side of the A's infield as his primary target, and also made it plain that he regards free agents as more likely to hit the bull's-eye than trades.

At third base, where Eric Chavez's ongoing health concerns mandate insurance, and at shortstop, where young Cliff Pennington is the incumbent, a long-term answer is intriguing.

But Beane would be comfortable with veteran, temporary bridges to more permanent solutions.

"A younger third baseman would be our first choice," Beane said as the sun fell on the first day of baseball's Winter Meetings, "but if that's something we aren't able to do, we'd consider short-term options."

Ditto at shortstop. Beane last week swung a deal with the Cubs that included versatile infielder Aaron Miles, but he is regarded as more qualified to play on the other side of the bag.

"We could use another infielder who could play [shortstop]," Beane said. "That's an area we may have to fill with a veteran guy."

Thus, Oakland has two spots available to "veteran" and "short-term" guys. And the free-agent rolls teem with guys who fill that description: shortstops Ramon Martinez, Juan Uribe and Jamey Carroll, plus third basemen Troy Glaus, Mark Loretta and Fernando Tatis.

No wonder then that Beane came here with an agenda focused on talking to agents, rather than other general managers.

"We did not come with the idea of being aggressive in the trade market," Beane said. "I still anticipate having more conversations with agents, inquiring about short-term or midlevel free agents.

"That seems to be a preferable way to go," he said, "so we can preserve our young players," who would otherwise be subjects in any trades.

"So we have some [free-agent] guys reaching out to us, and we'll schedule [talks with] those afterward. Here, we'll see agents of players we have interest in."

Since he is already scheduling post-Meetings talks with free agents, Beane clearly does not anticipate departing here with any needs crossed out on his checklist.

However, biding his time until Saturday's deadline for clubs to tender contracts to unsigned veterans under their control is not part of his tactic.

Beane isn't a subscriber to the popular expectation that a large number of veterans will not receive contract offers and become free agents, swelling those ranks.

"I've never held out a huge amount of hope that there is a potentially larger pool out there," he said. "It never turns into the market that we anticipate. People expect more than what is usually delivered in terms of available players."

Part posturing? Certainly: If the grapevine detects and spreads your interest in a potentially non-tendered player, his club has incentive to sign him then try to deal him to you -- for a price.

Part lowered expectations? That, too: You would much rather be surprised by who becomes available, then become frustrated by who does not.

As he settles in for more exploratory conversations, Beane has the luxury of reality on his side. A strong American League West Division with one ruler (Angels) and two oncoming throne-aspirants (Rangers, Mariners) may not seem like much of an ally, yet ...

"There is no sense of anxiety about acquiring what we don't have, because there is plenty we don't have," Beane said. "We are realistic about where we are, hence the desire to hold onto our young players.

"We aren't looking for that one final piece to put us over the top, but want to develop new pieces internally to put us within that one player. And, certainly, there are guys who short-term could help in our development."

Randy Newman sang about "Short People." Beane strolls the hotel lobbies here humming about "short-term people."

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