

A's News Clips, Monday, December 14, 2009

A's Community Fund hosts zoo event

Local children rewarded with pizza, autographs and more

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com 12/12/09

OAKLAND -- When Kate Nicol received notice in September that the Athletics were interested in throwing her kids a "zoo party," the school principal laughed and considered the whole idea a hoax.

Good thing Detra Paige, A's Director of Community Relations, called back.

"That's when I thought," Nicol said, "that maybe it's for real."

After all, the A's Community Fund doesn't mess around when it comes to its annual holiday party, held since 2003. Not when zoo animals, pizza, player autographs and Santa visits are involved.

So when Nicol used said prizes as bait to boost attendance records at Oakland's Civicorps Elementary and Middle School, her kids responded in a big way.

The result: Around 190 children storming the Oakland Zoo's Marian Zimmer Auditorium on Friday as part of the A's holiday event that included lunch courtesy of Round Table Pizza, along with face painters, arts and crafts and a wrapped gift for each student compliments of the Good Tidings Foundation.

"That's out of about 210 kids we have in grades kindergarten through fifth," Nicol said. "So we've made some progress, and it definitely helps when you have something to motivate the kids."

"We're working on really great attendance, so these are kids that followed our attendance policy the entire trimester and were on time every day and didn't have any unexcused absences."

The attending group was plenty large enough to keep special guests Vida Blue and Tyson Ross busy. Blue, a six-time All-Star and World Series championship A's pitcher, autographed photos alongside the A's second-round pick in the 2008 First-Year Player Draft and Oakland native Tyson Ross.

"Any time you get to do these type of events, at least for me, it's great because you're here for the kids," Blue said. "The A's do a great job with their community outreach programs and being active in the community."

"Being on the retired side, I enjoy doing this stuff. I enjoy the young kids, I enjoy the older folks. If I can bring a smile to a young person's face or even an older person's face, that's so rewarding to me."

It was a day of old meets new, as the 60-year-old Blue exchanged words for the first time with Ross, the 22-year-old pitching prospect out of Bishop O'Dowd High School and the University of California who made it to Double-A Midland in his first full year in the A's Minor League system.

"I've heard nothing but good stuff about Tyson," Blue said. "I'm pulling for him to make it to the Major Leagues and be a successful person at this level."

"There's nothing like getting a chance to make it to the Major Leagues and pitch in the town that you were born and raised in. There's a lot of pressure that comes with it too, but it's so rewarding when you make it to that level and get the locals to come see you play."

Said Ross: "Whenever you get to talk to guys that have been there before and hear their experiences and take on things, it just teaches you a lot more about the game and about yourself, really."

The young A's prospect enjoyed every second of watching the always outspoken Blue battle it out with Santa for biggest crowd pleaser. The retired baseball great toasted water bottles with kids and was quite amused with the black and white pitching photos he gave away.

"Am I so old they don't have any color shots of me?" Blue questioned with a large grin.

Not in the eyes of second graders Owen Weingarten and Felix Merrifield, who gave Blue and Ross a thumbs-up sign while collecting their autographs.

"Being able to give back to my community a bit is a great experience," Ross said. "I get to come out here and meet Vida Blue -- you can't complain.

"It's awesome giving back to the kids. I was in their shoes when I was little, seeing guys like Rickey Henderson. That would just make my whole month."

Nicol guarantees Friday's experience will stay with her kids longer than that. The second-year principal was all smiles after checking in on the older kids who were roaming in and out of classrooms meeting hedgehogs, rabbits and lizards.

"I think they were having a hard time figuring out how the zoo and the A's went together," Nicol said, "but I think today it's really obvious."

Oakland lets Cust go, but door is still open

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 12/13/09

By non-tendering Jack Cust on Saturday, the A's are taking a risk that their offense, already lacking much power, will lose its top home run hitter of the past three years.

General manager Billy Beane said that Oakland will continue to talk to Cust about a possible deal, with the threat of arbitration no longer looming.

"It's not out of the question," Beane said.

Cust said by phone Saturday evening that the dialogue will stay open with the A's but he's also looking forward to exploring his options in free agency.

"I told Billy, 'I'm going to be 31 years old, I've got to see what's out there,' " Cust said. "I have to do what's best for my family. I spent a lot of years riding the bus, not making any money. But Oakland was the team that gave me an opportunity, and I'm very grateful for that."

Cust made \$2.8 million last year and after 25 homers, 70 RBIs and a team-high 88 runs, he might have made upward of \$4 million in arbitration. His agent, Bobby Barad, expects that there will be interest elsewhere, given the fact that Cust has averaged more than 100 walks per year - and he has hit 25 or more homers in each of the past three seasons in a ballpark that is not hitter-friendly.

"I'm hoping someone with a small ballpark calls," Cust said with a laugh. "Playing three years in Oakland isn't the best for your numbers."

Cust led the league in strikeouts three years in a row, including an AL-record 197 in 2008. He also provided a big plus: Cust remained healthy through a stretch in which Oakland set records for using the disabled list.

"One thing about Jack is that he hits home runs, he draws walks and he plays," Beane said. "He's never hurt."

Cust's reputation as a poor defensive outfielder probably will give many National League teams pause, along with some in the AL.

"That's all part of the equation and the risk you take, but it only takes one team" to sign Cust away, Beane said. "And we have to consider that there are other options out there for us."

The White Sox, who are looking for a left-handed hitter, might be a possibility for Cust.

If Cust departs, catcher Kurt Suzuki will be the top remaining home run hitter on Oakland's roster, with 15. Mark Ellis is next, with 10. The A's hit an AL-low 135 homers last season.

Should Oakland pursue a free-agent bat to replace Cust, it is likely the team will wait to find a bargain as the season approaches. Beane stressed again that the A's have no interest in moving young talent for offensive help.

The top designated hitter candidate on the current roster is recently acquired Jake Fox, but Eric Chavez would fill the role if his twice-repaired back prevents him from playing third but still allows him to swing the bat.

Oakland tendered contracts to the team's other arbitration-eligible players: set-up man Michael Wuertz and outfielders Rajai Davis and Scott Hairston.

Cust released by Oakland

Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune 12/13/09

The A's parted ways with outfielder/DH Jack Cust on Saturday, opting not to tender a contract to their home run leader for each of the past three seasons.

It wasn't an unexpected move. Saturday was the deadline for major league teams to offer contracts to all unsigned players on their 40-man roster, including arbitration-eligible players.

Cust made \$2.8 million last season and was due another raise through arbitration that was expected to boost him into the \$4-5 million range. That was more than the A's were willing to spend on a player who led the American League in strikeouts for the past three years.

Cust now becomes a free agent.

Oakland tendered contracts Saturday to its other arbitration-eligible players — outfielders Rajai Davis and Scott Hairston and reliever Michael Wuertz. None will command nearly as much in salary.

Cust knew there was a strong chance he'd be non-tendered. Still, he said he was disappointed.

"We had a feeling it was probably going to happen, but deep down you have a little hope," Cust said in a phone interview. "I've been a big part of that lineup the last three years, and I don't really know where they're gonna go to replace that."

A's general manager Billy Beane pointed out that nothing prohibits the A's from re-signing Cust as a free agent even after non-tendering him.

"Given the potential options that could be available (in free agency), we wanted at least more time to explore that," Beane said. "And it gives Jack, obviously, the ability to explore his opportunities also."

The A's actions suggested Cust might be shown the door. They swung a trade Dec. 3 for third baseman Jake Fox, who may also see time in the outfield and at designated hitter.

If Eric Chavez can remain healthy, he could be used at DH in order to limit the stress on his surgically repaired back.

Free agent outfielder Marlon Byrd was on the A's radar during last week's winter meetings. And there's thought that outfielder/DH Hideki Matsui also could be a potential fit for them.

Cust, who turns 31 on Jan. 7, said he looks forward to exploring free agency. It's also easy to understand why he'd be open to returning to Oakland.

He appeared in just 70 big league games with four organizations from 2001-06 before the A's obtained him in May 2007 and gave him a home in their lineup.

He responded by averaging 28 homers and 76 RBI from 2007-09, the only legitimate slugger in a power-starved lineup over that time.

"It was nice to finally make it," Cust said. "Billy and the A's gave me the opportunity, and I'm grateful for it."

Slugger Cust non-tendered by A's

DH enters free agency; Davis, Hairston, Wuertz get offers

By Tom Singer / MLB.com

Jack Cust became a free agent Saturday, when the Oakland A's, as anticipated, did not offer him a 2010 contract.

The three other arbitration-eligible A's players did receive offers for 2010 contracts: outfielders Rajai Davis and Scott Hairston, and right-handed reliever Michael Wuertz.

These contract decisions came several hours prior to an 8:59 p.m. PT deadline for making them.

Non-tendering Cust removes Oakland's leading home run hitter in each of the past three seasons. But along with the 84 long balls from 2007-09, Cust struck out 546 times, leading the American League in each of those seasons.

Having made \$2.8 million last year, when he drove in 70 runs with 25 homers, Cust would have been in line for a considerable raise through binding salary arbitration.

Oakland general manager Billy Beane clearly preferred to channel those funds in different directions. The A's will seek reinforcements at third, short and in the outfield the balance of this offseason.

The 30-year-old Cust had been the A's primary designated hitter, making 96 of his 147 starts last season in that role. But Oakland may already have a replacement: Jake Fox, acquired as part of a recent trade with the Chicago Cubs, is a similar defensively challenged guy with a heavy bat.

"He's got great power, and is having a good Winter League season in the Dominican now," A's manager Bob Geren said of Fox, who had 11 homers in 216 at-bats for the Cubs last season. "He's average defensively, but is known for his offense, a middle-of-the-lineup kind of guy."

Cust cut loose by A's

Associated Press 12/12/09

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Jack Cust became a free agent Saturday when the Oakland Athletics failed to offer him a 2010 contract.

Cust hit .240 with 25 homers and 70 RBIs last season but struck out 195 times, becoming the first player to lead in the AL in three straight seasons since Minnesota's Bobby Darwin from 1972-74. Cust whiffed 164 times in 2007 and 197 times in 2008.

He had 26 homers in 2007 and 33 the following year, and has topped Oakland for three consecutive seasons in homers, strikeouts and walks (93 last season).

Cust made \$2.8 million last season and had been eligible for salary arbitration.

Oakland has three players remaining eligible for salary arbitration: right-hander Michael Wuertz and outfielders Rajai Davis and Scott Hairston.

General manager Billy Beane has been determined to add more power to the lineup. The A's last week acquired third baseman Jake Fox from the Chicago Cubs largely because they like Fox's bat.

For the first time in year's, there's drama in the A.L. West

Stan McNeal, The Sporting News, 12/14/09

Suspense in the A.L. West has been as limited as the Oakland A's payroll for the past three seasons. Everyone knew the Angels would win. All that remained was determining their final lead in the standings. With the margin coming in at 10, 21 and six games, meaningful games in September had become as rare as hitless days by Ichiro.

Kendry Morales was one of many young players to break out in the A.L. West last year.

But pennant-race drama is returning to baseball's only four-team division. If the season started today, the Angels would remain the favorites. They no longer would be locks, though. The Mariners and the Rangers have closed the gap in a hurry and the A's are growing up.

A division that fielded only one winning team in 2008 boasted three in '09. The Mariners went from 103 losses to 85 wins, resulting in a majors-best 24-game turnaround. The Rangers scared the Angels early, won the season series and finished with a winning season for only the second time in 10 years. Even the A's, at 75-87, could claim that they were the majors' best last-place team.

In 2010, the A.L. West should have a race as entertaining as any. The outcome likely hinges on two key factors:

The progression of the division's young talent. There's plenty. At 23, Mariners' right-hander Felix Hernandez made the jump from potential ace to Cy Young probable. The Rangers used a pair of 21-year-olds, SS Elvis Andrus and right-hander Neftali Feliz, to help transform a homer-happy club into one with a focus on defense and pitching. The Angels' Kendry Morales made the loss of Mark Teixeira bearable by hitting .306 with 34 homers and 108 RBIs. The A's broke in 12 rookie pitchers and one of them, Andrew Bailey, won Rookie of the Year.

Who wins the off-season? The Mariners took the lead after signing Chone Figgins away from the Angels but two months remain before spring training and a couple of hundred free agents still are looking for jobs.

What remains to be done:

Angels. If alarm bells didn't ring when the Mariners signed Figgins with a four-year, \$36 million contract, they should have. The Angels had made keeping Figgins top priority and his departure was a double whammy: It not only left a large hole at the top of the lineup but gave the Mariners the game's most dynamic 1-2 punch with Ichiro and Figgins.

"He'll impact that team much as he did ours," Angels manager Mike Scioscia admitted. "Chone is going to bring an incredible amount of depth to their lineup."

Losing Figgins makes retaining No. 1 starter John Lackey a higher priority but there's another way the Angels could restore faith in their fans. They have been mentioned as a destination for Roy Halladay although one of the Angels' main attractions -- its Southern California location -- could prove a stumbling block because Halladay would prefer a job closer to his home in Florida.

The Angels also need a DH and are considering a one-year return of Vladimir Guerrero, 2009 World Series MVP Hideki Matsui and 2005 World Series hero Jermaine Dye.

Mariners. Their off-season began with a pleasant surprise when catcher Kenji Johjima told them he'd rather return to Japan than play the final two years on his contract. His opt-out saved the Mariners \$15.8 million to go with \$12 million already coming off the books with the end of Adrian Beltre's five-year deal.

They aggressively pursued Figgins, and GM Jack Zduriencik said at the Winter Meetings that he's not done. Zduriencik would be no more specific than to say he could add an impact bat -- Jason Bay lives in the area -- or front-line starter. Swiping Lackey remains a possibility.

Rangers. They haven't allowed an unsettled ownership situation silence their off-season, not that you would expect anything less from a club run by Nolan Ryan. No matter who ends up the majority owner, look for Ryan to make the majority of the big decisions. The Rangers signed Rich Harden, who has the stuff to dominate but an arm that he can't keep healthy. He could prove an interesting case for Ryan's mission to toughen up his starting pitchers.

The Rangers also have made a move for veteran Mike Lowell, a trade pending because of Lowell's bad thumb.

A's. The most eye-catching development out of Oakland emerged from reports that they made a larger offer to Marco Scutaro than the Red Sox. The A's lost out on Scutaro but such an offer proved the A's recognize the new and enhanced challenge of keeping up in the West.

City of Oakland offers 3 possible ballpark sites

By Janie McCauley, AP, 12/11/09

The City of Oakland unveiled three waterfront sites Thursday as potential spots to build a new ballpark for the Oakland Athletics and ultimately keep the team from leaving town.

As the small-budget A's have seen before, there are still plenty of hurdles ahead. In the past they haven't been able to find a suitable spot to build and were set to leave Oakland and move to nearby Fremont until that plan fell through.

More recently, owner Lew Wolff has been determined to move the team to San Jose — though the San Francisco Giants hold the rights to that territory. Wolff felt the A's had exhausted their options in Oakland after several years of trying.

Oakland mayor Ron Dellums said Thursday the project also would be about bolstering the blue-collar city's economic future by creating jobs and helping turn Oakland into a destination spot. The three sites would be within easy access of public transit, parking and would offer other options for entertainment and food.

"This city's leadership has a clear, concise and unified message for Major League Baseball: Keep the A's in Oakland," Dellums said. "This project is not solely about a baseball stadium. This is about continuing our efforts to bolster Oakland's economic future."

Two of the spots hadn't been previously studied, including one in the popular Jack London Square area that would be easy to get to off the heavily traveled 880 interstate.

In March, Dellums and the city council wrote to commissioner Bud Selig to tell him the city would do everything in its power to keep the A's in town. Selig — who has repeatedly said the A's can't survive playing in the run-down Oakland Coliseum they share with the NFL's Raiders — then formed a task force to analyze the situation.

The nonprofit group "Let's Go Oakland!" has generated tens of thousands of supporters and petitioned to Major League Baseball to keep the team in Oakland.

"The stadium situation is in the hands of the commissioner and the committee and we won't be commenting on the stadium situation until they make a decision," said Ken Pries, A's vice president of broadcasting and communications.

Wolff, a Los Angeles real estate developer, has worked hard to find a better venue for his team.

The A's had planned to build a state-of-the-art stadium in nearby Fremont that they thought would eventually transform the small-market club into a big spender.

But that plan, which would have been in partnership with Cisco Systems, Inc., fell through because of a variety of complications — including public transportation issues.

The team had agreed to purchase 143 acres of land from Cisco in suburban Fremont, about 20 miles south of the Coliseum. The plan had called for the ballpark to open in time for the 2011 season.

That stadium — with a price tag of around \$500 million that was to primarily come from private funds — was to seat between 30,000 and 34,000 fans, an intimate venue with an impressive range of technological capabilities and surrounding features outside the fences.

Wolff certainly would be interested in a similar type of ballpark, especially considering Oakland has struggled mightily to fill the stands in recent seasons.