

A's News Clips, Wednesday, December 23, 2009

A's showing more offseason energy than Giants

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle, 12/23/09

The A's have developed an annoying habit of generating excitement in the offseason, then unveiling a slipshod product when it matters. Perhaps this winter will prove to be no different, but the A's are building the foundation of a boldly refreshing plan - and they have a definite edge over the Giants in the construction process to date.

There are basically two ways to screw up a team's offensive identity, and thanks to our two-team market, we got both of them last year. The Giants were the reckless free swingers, a weak-hitting team lacking any semblance of discipline, embodied by Aaron Rowand's futile swing at a low-and-outside strike three. The A's, clinging to a tedious obsession with on-base percentage, produced a lineup of reasonably thoughtful hitters doing nothing for weeks on end.

Neither team will get back into playoff contention if such nonsense continues. The Giants, beyond the dismissal of hitting coach Carney Lansford, haven't taken a single stride toward a more potent attack. That's guaranteed to change - Brian Sabean isn't about to let the winter pass without one or two moves - but payroll restrictions could turn them into unsatisfying, back-page news, back there with the bowling scores and toupee ads.

(We'll take it all back if Mark DeRosa signs to play third base and Pablo Sandoval moves to his rightful spot at first. That will take care of two spots quite handsomely, if only scratching the surface of work to be done.)

So far, the big noise out of the Giants' camp has been their abhorrent paranoia over the A's designs on San Jose. Whether it's snobby elitism from Bill Neukom or some preposterous threat of a lawsuit, the Giants don't seem to understand that they own the Bay Area, and always will, and have a gold mine of a ballpark that virtually guarantees a wondrous, season-long atmosphere for baseball until the end of time. Protecting time-honored interests is understandable, but their overbearing stance is standing in the way of progress.

A's fans have grown too skeptical of Billy Beane's desperate maneuverings to place much faith in the future, but there are hints of change. It's possible that sometime next summer, the A's will have power-hitting sensation Chris Carter at first base and Michael Taylor, the heralded 6-foot-6, 250-pound prospect recently acquired from Toronto, at a corner outfield spot. If these guys are for real, they're going to give the A's a distinct local edge in starting-lineup appeal unless Sabean pulls off the unexpected.

So many of the names contributing to last year's malaise - Jason Giambi, Nomar Garciaparra, Daric Barton, Bobby Crosby, Jack Cust, Travis Buck - are either absent or passe. There's hope for a solid young infield, eventually, with Adrian Cardenas at third base, Cliff Pennington at shortstop and Jemile Weeks at second. Scouts like the potential of Landon Powell and Sean Doolittle. The raw but talented pitching staff (116 games started by rookies) speaks for itself.

Division favorites? Hardly, but it's nice to see a bunch of highly regarded A's prospects on the verge of something interesting. Who knows, we might even get a miracle and watch them all play together for four or five years.

The Giants believe that no matter what happens in the offseason, their pitching will keep them in contention - and they're probably right. The A's will need a few breaks, but they have to be pleased with recent developments.

The Angels keep losing big talent (Mark Teixeira, Francisco Rodriguez, John Lackey, Chone Figgins, most likely Vladimir Guerrero) without gaining adequate replacements. This has to catch up to them eventually, and though they have an adequate farm system, there's little proof that it ranks any higher than Oakland's heading into 2010.

The Mariners had it all going for a while this winter. They stole Figgins, made a huge deal for Cliff Lee (4-0, 1.56 for the Phillies in the postseason), cleared some room for No. 1 draft choice Dustin Ackley (a pure hitter out of North Carolina) and cherished another season of clubhouse harmony, fashioned so masterfully last season by Ken Griffey Jr. and a revitalized Ichiro Suzuki.

General manager Jack Zduriencik earned a ton of well-deserved praise for changing the Mariners' identity, but it must have gone to his head. He traded for Milton Bradley. Zduriencik decided that unlike all those other executives and managers over the past decade, he could turn Bradley into a prince. What a foolish, team-wrecking notion.

Bradley's latest firestorm won't be ignited right away. Griffey, Bradley's longtime idol, will make sure of that. But in signing Bradley to a two-year deal, the Mariners dropped a mine field into their master plan. The Cubs, with Bradley out of their clubhouse, will have one sensational Christmas.

Crisp's physical delayed; Travis Buck update

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser 12/23/09

I'm hearing that Coco Crisp was having a tough time getting from his home near Palm Springs to Phoenix for his physical because of a flight delay, so any announcement is on hold for the time being.

There's no problem with the physical itself, just getting the free-agent outfielder to it. Crisp, 30, has had surgery on both shoulders this year but he is expected to be completely ready for spring training. He has a pending one-year deal that is believed to be worth around \$4.5 million (with an option for 2011) but he will have to pass that physical first.

I spoke to onetime A's right fielder Travis Buck yesterday about the most recent influx of outfielders, which presumably pushes him down the depth chart again, but Buck has a good attitude about the whole thing: He said that if he goes out and does what he's supposed to during the spring, either the A's will want him or someone else might.

To that end, Buck has been working with ex-A's outfielder Nick Swisher and Yankees hitting coach Kevin Long. Buck has all but eliminated his famous "waggle" and he said that for the first time, he's really incorporating his lower body into his swing. That gives him more power, Buck said. (And that's certainly something the A's could use.) He's very happy with the results.

Buck said his agent heard some rumblings during the winter meetings that some other teams might have interest in him but A's GM Billy Beane didn't express interest in parting with him.

A's, 49ers Banjo Man missing his banjo

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MARIN COUNTY — The Banjo Man is missing his banjo.

Stacy Samuels, the beanie-wearing Banjo Man who fires up crowds at San Francisco 49ers and Oakland A's home games by picking a lively "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," has been searching for his favorite banjo since he absent-mindedly left it on a sidewalk in Fairfax. So far, no luck.

"I miss it like an old friend," he said of the Gibson Mastertone banjo he's played at Candlestick Park and the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum for 25 years.

"It has a lot of sentimental value," he said. "It's witnessed some exciting times in sports, including a couple of Super Bowls."

The bearded, ponytail-sporting Samuels, aka "Super Niner," said he left his banjo behind after a Sunday afternoon Irish music session at the Sleeping Lady Cafe in Fairfax last month. The banjo was in its case when he put it down on the sidewalk while he adjusted some boxes of his signature beanie caps to make room for it in the back seat of his car.

He was parked across the street from the Barefoot Cafe, 1900 Sir Francis Drake Blvd.

"I slammed the car door and drove away not knowing I'd left it on the sidewalk," he explained.

Because he often leaves his banjo in his car overnight, he didn't realize it was missing until the next day. He went back on the off chance it would be where he left it. He wasn't surprised it wasn't.

"I learned my lesson about not getting distracted," he said, sighing. "But how can you remember that?"

Samuels put some "Lost Banjo" fliers up around Fairfax, where he lives, but hasn't had any response. A week later, he filed a missing banjo report at the Fairfax Police Department.

Not wanting to appear foolish, he was reticent about going public with this but ultimately decided the beloved instrument was worth any embarrassment.

He said the banjo can be identified by some missing inlay on the headstock. And there may be a photo or two of the Banjo Man in the case.

Anyone with information on its whereabouts may contact Samuels' Interstellar Beanie Company at 800-232-6963. No questions will be asked on its return. There is a reward.

Samuels has been using a backup banjo, but it would be a nice Christmas present for him to get his trusty old friend back in time for the San Francisco 49ers-Detroit Lions game Sunday.

"Each instrument has its own character, and this one had a special character to it," he said. "It was a particularly good-sounding banjo. I played it at many significant football and baseball games, and it's held up to a lot of mistreatment."