

A's News Clips, Friday, December 25, 2009

Still can't believe he didn't slide

Scott Ostler, Chronicle Staff Writer 12/27/09

Don't take it too hard, Bay Area sports fans. Anyone can have a bad-hair decade.

Major team championships were scarce (as in zero) in the '00s. The struggles were mighty, the frustrations profound. But we've still got 90 years to get this century on track.

There's no point wallowing in self-pity and negativism as we blast into a new decade. But on reflection, what grade would you give Bay Area sports for the 2000s?

On this judge's report card: C-minus.

Why sugar-coat or over-complicate a decade that can be summed up in three words: "Slide, Jeremy, slide!"

After showing promise, our two storied pro football franchises went downhill like tobogganers. The Giants and A's floundered in the second half of the decade. The Warriors missed the playoff bus nine times.

Many heroes wound up departing the scene with all the dignity of drunks on the end of a bouncer's toe. Where have you gone, Barry Bonds, Baron Davis, Jason Giambi, Miguel Tejada, Jon Gruden, Rich Gannon, Terrell Owens, Dusty Baker, Gilbert Arenas, Jeff Garcia?

The colleges have an excuse. Their main goal is to educate students, not provide sporting thrills for couch potatoes. Still - thank you to Toby Gerhart, Aaron Rodgers, Natalie Coughlin, Candice Wiggins, Leon Powe ...

The amateurs raised the grading curve, but the crummy GPA-by-the-Bay was weighed down by an F in chemistry, as our professional jocks blew up the lab.

Speaking of the lab

Steroids dominated the global sports decade, and many of the juice-related crimes and misdemeanors that tainted everything from the Olympics to high school sports can be traced to our back door. Folks will come to look upon this decade of drug-cheating as Bay Area happy hour run amok.

Six years ago, federal agents swarmed the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative in Burlingame, digging up evidence that would raise a stinky mushroom cloud over all sports. The investigation may have begun with one G-man's determination to topple Bonds, by means legal or otherwise, but it wound up crushing the world's sports innocence - or naivety.

Our own Victor Conte was Mr. BALCO, taking stealth performance-enhancing drugs cooked up by a rogue Illinois chemist and distributing them to elite athletes. Among the Bay Area sports heroes tarnished by drug scandal: Kelli White, Jason Giambi, Tejada, Bill Romanowski and Mr. Bonds.

Jose Canseco jumped into the muck with his '05 book "Juiced," which helped inspire Congressional hearings, leading to shame for Mark McGwire and others.

For the Bay Area, the long, juicy story was good and bad.

The bad: Some great heroics were forever tainted. Bonds hits 73 homers in '01 and the Giants went to the World Series in '02. The A's opened the decade with four straight playoff appearances. Those and other achievements are forever stamped with the dreaded asterisk of steroids.

The good: Pushed by the BALCO scandals and "Juiced," sports began to face reality. MLB crawled in from the Stone Age and copped to its problem with performance-enhancing drugs. Testing was beefed up in every major sport, college and pro. Even the PGA was forced to join the pee party.

So we polluted sports, then we helped clean up the mess, sort of. Even Conte claims to have switched sides in the drug wars. Did we balance the cosmic scales? Quien sabe?

It all ended in ...

We did seem to incur some bad karma, because every team had a defining moment of heartbreak. Briefly:

-- A's: Jeremy Giambi trying to score standing up in Game 3 of the '01 ALDS, tagged out by Yankee Jorge Posada after a miracle relay from Derek Jeter. A's lose game, then series.

The A's and general manager Billy Beane gave us "Moneyball," the brilliantly innovative approach to baseball. They gave us five trips to the playoffs, two MVPs and a Cy Young. But in the end they were playing no-money-ball.

-- Giants: Bonds, wearing an expensive suit, ducking in and out of federal court.

Bonds put on a fireworks show for the ages, he even built a ballpark while carrying a team on his back. But what price was paid? Bonds became America's villain.

-- 49ers: A large photo of Bill Walsh, framed in flowers.

When Walsh died in '07, the team momentum he had built was already fading fast. To paraphrase the Eagles, "We haven't had that spirit here since 2002 (most recent playoff appearance)." Whoever imagined 49ers' fans would pine for .500?

-- Warriors: Stephen Jackson on Media Day 2009, grimly explaining why he was resigning his captain's duties and demanding to be traded.

There was a Camelot moment in Golden State, but you missed it if you blinked. The Warriors should keep an empty locker to symbolize the disappearances of Jackson, Davis, Arenas, Antawn Jamison, Jason Richardson, Chris Mullin ...

Still around, however: Chris Cohan, the poster dude for Owners Who Simply Don't Get It Done.

-- Raiders: Tom Brady, tucking The Tuck.

Even Raider-haters admit the team got screwed in Foxboro. Still, the Raiders opened the decade with three solid playoff runs, including a Super Bowl appearance, then fell off the face of the earth, into a black hole.

-- Sharks: The gloom in the dressing room after elimination from last season's playoffs.

The Sharks' high and low points came when they won their first Presidents' Trophy for best regular-season record, then were immediately trampled by the eighth-seeded Ducks.

Credit where it's due

In the end, though, it's not only about wins and losses. So in lieu of the big trophies that go to the champions, we hereby present some assorted awards:

-- Best Idea, Beautifully Conceived and Executed: The little ballyard at Third and King, opened April 2000. The A's and 49ers might top it with their new stadiums, under construction on Pluto and Uranus. Until then, Giants' ballpark - (finger-kissing gesture of perfection)!

-- Grab Your Popcorn Moment: Al Davis, cuing the overhead projector to roast Lane Kiffin.

-- Missing-man Moment: Raiders taking the field for the 2003 Super Bowl without AWOL center Barret Robbins.

-- Most Awkward Moment: Bonds passing Hank Aaron in '07, with Aaron somewhere else and Bumblin' Bud Selig sulking in a Giants' luxury box, looking like someone yanked his underwear 90 degrees clockwise.

-- Most Consistently Brilliant: Coach Tara VanDerveer's Stanford women's basketball team. A handy guideline for any Bay Area coach or manager: "What would Tara do?"

-- Best Example of How Hard Work, Brains, Integrity and Great Coaching Sometimes Pay Off Like Crazy: Coughlin, 11 swimming medals in two Olympics.

-- Same Category, One More Name: Andre Ward. Good guy, bad dude. Champion.

-- Moment That Still Causes Fans to Wake Up Screaming, "Noooo! Don't Give Him the Ball!": Baker, removing Russ Ortiz from the sixth game of the '02 World Series, then calling him back to present him with the baseball.

-- Most Unwarranted Apology: "I'm sorry, America!" That was the incandescent Wiggins, apologizing for her tears during a TV interview just after leading Stanford to the win that sent the Cardinal to the '08 Final Four.

-- Most Improved: Cal major sports. Jeff Tedford brought life to a dead football program, while Joanne Boyle and Mike Montgomery made Bear hoops legit. Late entry (and maybe early exit): Jim Harbaugh and Stanford football.

-- Best Superstar High-Noon Drama: Tiger Woods vs. John Daly, sudden-death playoff at Harding Park, 2005 Amex Championship.

-- Best Poster Photo: Baron Davis dunking a lightning bolt while simultaneously busting the mug of Utah forward Andrei Kirilenko in the '07 playoffs. Captured by Chronicle lenswoman Kat Wade.

- Best Imitation of a Normal Rockwell Painting: J.T. Snow snatching three-year-old Giants' batboy Darren Baker from the jaws of home-plate disaster in the '02 World Series.
- Diva of the Decade, Runners-Up: Al Davis, Nelson, Owens.
- Diva of the Decade: Bonds. He made the Phantom of the Opera look like the stage janitor.
- Best Model for a Hood Ornament: Kerri Walsh, two-time Olympic beach volleyball gold medalist, spiking.
- Keystone Kops Award: To the feds, who did the impossible - making Bonds a sympathetic figure. Tax dollars spent? Dude, the meter is still running.
- Symbol of an Era: Bonds relaxing his mass of muscles in his clubhouse recliner, attended by his four-man pit crew.
- Best Tattoo: Jackson - praying hands holding a pistol. "I'm praying I never use that gun again."
- Most Winning Non-Winner: Touchdown Toby.
- Best Newcomer: Timmy.
- Greatest Allen Iverson-esque Moment: Warriors' guard Mookie Blaylock in '01, skipping a team practice to play golf.
- Best Summation of a Decade: Bonds - "Whatever, dude."

A's season one to forget and to build on

Losing '09 campaign not without its promising moments

By Tom Singer / MLB.com 12/26/09

For the Oakland A's, it wasn't a memorable year, but one worth remembering. How is that contradiction possible?

Very simple. The 2009 edition was the first Oakland team since 1998 to finish in the American League West cellar, and lingered longer (160 days) in last place than any team in the *franchise's* 109-year history. The A's were also last in the AL in home runs, and they hadn't done that since they were in Kansas City.

Forget it.

This same Oakland team underwent a notable in-season rebirth, the Going Green project highlighted by a starting rotation of rookies backed up by a bullpen of even more rookies. The kids did the bulk of the work for a staff that compiled the AL's fourth-lowest ERA and set a franchise record for strikeouts.

Remember *that*, as the corner, when the A's turn into division forces again.

Besides youth, history is also on the A's side. They have now gone under .500 for three straight seasons, and after the last time that happened (1996-1998), the ensuing eight years brought four division championships and four other second-place finishes.

Coincidentally or otherwise, that launching-pad 1998 season was the first as general manager of architect Billy Beane, the Frank Lloyd Wright of rosters.

"Our organization has two waves of players," Beane says now. "We have a strong group of young pitchers up in the Majors, and we have a group of young hitters coming up behind them who will be ready soon. It's a process we went through in the 1990s, so we know how it works."

So as the Athletics clear their throats to sing Auld Lang Syne, the young signs are they will turn the calendar with a bang.

Here is a rundown of the breadcrumbs they dropped on the way to the future.

January

Ahead to the past. The new year begins with a double-track of Golden Oldies. The retro trip leads off with the Hall of Fame election of Rickey Henderson, well-traveled but synonymous with the A's for having played more games with them (1,704) than his other eight teams combined (1,377). A couple of days later, Jason Giambi returns to the scene of his rock & roll years, older and wiser but with a little less hair and power than when he departed following the 2001 season.

February

Pitchers and catchers and Michael Wuertz report. The acquisition of the reliever from the Cubs for a pair of Minor Leaguers didn't stop the presses, or fire up Twitter. But it grew in significance as the season progressed toward the right-hander's 2.63 ERA in 74 appearances -- only 18 other Major League relievers worked as many games, and only four with lower ERAs.

Farewell Fremont. Putting an end to two years of hopes and of hard planning, the club rolls up the blueprints and pulls the plug on owner Lou Wolff's project to relocate the franchise in Fremont. In the end, the A's relent to resident concerns about the effect of a newly-erected ballpark on traffic and surrounding property values. In response, Commissioner Bud Selig will, in March, form a task force to analyze prospects for the team remaining in Oakland.

March

Three weeks into Spring Training, the A's pick up a shortstop, spending \$4 million on free agent Orlando Cabrera. Concurrently, Oakland also inks Nomar Garciaparra. The two follow a veterans influx begun by Matt Holliday, Jason Giambi and Russ Springer -- a tipoff that Beane evaluates the team as a potential contender which could benefit from the vets' influence.

Manager Bob Geren, whose patient leadership has navigated the A's through a transitional period, has a more solid footing for seeing the job through after signing a contract extension through the 2010 season, with an option for 2011. "He's the perfect man for the job," Beane says.

In what will soon turn out to be a prophetic wish, Mark McGwire, who tutored several Oakland hitters during the offseason, looks forward to doing more of the same. "I believe I have so much knowledge to give and help people improve as baseball players," McGwire says in a rare interview with the New York Times -- eight months before being appointed the St. Louis Cardinals' new batting coach.

April

J.D.? Stands for Just Disabled. Joey Devine, the 2008 rookie relief sensation, undergoes Tommy John elbow ligament replacement surgery -- a few days after Justin Duchscherer's own elbow surgery. It is merely the start of a siege of long-term injuries that will see the A's use the DL 17 times for a cumulative loss of 989 games by the affected players.

Trevor Cahill, 21 and one of the rookies whose door was opened by the loss of Duchscherer, hurls 6 1/3 no-hit innings in his second big-league start on April 12. The game is predictive both of young pitchers' impact on the team, and of the frustrations they will endure: After Adrian Beltre breaks up the no-no with a single, he scores on a two-out double by Mike Sweeney. Cahill and the A's lose, 1-0.

May

With three-quarters of their infield -- Eric Chavez, Mark Ellis, Garciaparra -- disabled, the A's make a deal with Tampa Bay for Adam Kennedy, another veteran who is an instant hit. Make that, hits: He gets two-plus base knocks in 10 of his first 18 games. "It's just a short window," he protests against acclaim. "If it continues for three months, we can talk." By the end of the season, he will be able to talk about finishing third on the team both with a .289 average and with 63 RBIs.

Arriving on the same May 8 as does Kennedy is Andrew Bailey's first save, against the Toronto Blue Jays. The 25-year-old righty will also make up for his belated launch, his 26 saves -- the last 21 consecutively -- breaking the club rookie record of 23 set in 2005 by Huston Street.

On the 23rd, leading off the bottom of the fourth inning, Giambi leans into a full-count offering from Dan Haren and smokes it deep down the right-field line for career homer No. 400. He becomes the 44th player in Major League history to reach that round number.

June

On the 22nd, Columbia Pictures pulls the plug on "Moneyball," the film adaptation of the best-seller set to star Brad Pitt as Beane. The studio doesn't say whether the A's last-place standing -- 15-25, already nine games behind the Angels -- has anything to do with the decision.

Chavez, who got into only eight games earlier in the season and has been on the DL since late April, commits to having yet-another operation on his troublesome back. It will be the esteemed third baseman's fifth surgery since September 2007 -- a stretch during which, by comparison, he has personally operated on pitchers for home runs only twice.

July

The revolving door spins the other way for three veteran "guests," and so do team fortunes. Holliday goes to St. Louis on the 24th, Cabrera goes to the Twins on the 31st, and Giambi had gone on the DL on the 20th (never to again play for the A's before drawing his release in early August). From the last day any of those appeared in a box score -- July 30, Cabrera -- the A's will go 32-29, compared to 43-58 before.

Brett Anderson's nascent career spikes with a 1.87 ERA in five starts during the month. The 21-year-old left-hander with the admirable control unfurls 6 2/3 perfect innings against the Angels (broken up by Bobby Abreu's single) -- two weeks after a two-hit gem in Boston for Oakland's first complete game in over a year. Those sparkling efforts bridge a 23-inning scoreless streak for the youngster.

The A's are on such a positive upswing, they hardly notice entering the All-Star Game break with a losing record (37-49) for the first time since 1999, when they were 43-44.

This must be what the Mamas and the Papas meant when they sang, "Monday, Monday, sometimes it just turns out that way ..." Two-and-a-half innings into the July 20 game, the Twins had sent 24 men to bat, of whom 15 reached base and 12 scored for a 12-2 lead. By the bottom of the seventh, it was still 13-7. By the end of the seventh, it was euphoria, with the A's leading 14-13. Holliday's grand slam tied it and Jack Cust's homer untied it on back-to-back pitches. That was the final score in the largest comeback in Oakland history.

August

On the 5th, when Chad Reineke took the Oakland Coliseum mound against Texas, he became the A's sixth consecutive rookie starter, matching an Oakland record, and the big deal made of that was a bit premature. The rookie string would continue for 10 more starts, before Brett Tomko interrupted it on the 17th against the Yankees. Then, it started up again, and by season's end rookies had started 116 of the 162 games. You couldn't wipe the smile off catcher Kurt Suzuki's face: "They're young, they're talented, they kind of grow up together. That's the fun part."

Much-maligned and soon to be cut loose by not being offered a 2010 contract, Cust made a jaw-dropping last impression with a torrid week from 19-26. In those seven games, he batted .522 (12-for-23) with four home runs and seven RBIs. As such, he sounded reveille for an offensive reawakening that would see the A's lead the Majors in scoring in September while batting .297 as a team.

September

The A's treat the last month of this season as a springboard into the next one, going 17-10 to end a string of eight consecutive losing months reverting to June 2008. Twenty-three of the 27 games are started by the rookies, who pick up a dozen of the wins. The furious finish is highlighted by a season-long seven-game winning streak during which Oakland outscores Texas and Cleveland, 45-12.

On the 12th, Bailey closes out a 4-2 win at Minnesota for save No. 24, breaking Street's 2005 club record for rookies. Naturally, he does so in hitless fashion: He will pitch hitless ball in half of his final total of 26 games, in those games totaling 16 innings and 18 strikeouts.

October

Losses in all four of the month's games add up to a season-ending seven-game losing streak, but the curtain doesn't drop without fanfare. Suzuki takes one of the deepest bows, as his 88 RBIs make him just the second catcher in franchise history to top the team. The first, as you doubtless know, was Frankie Hayes, with 78 in 1944 in Philadelphia.

In the first inning of the season's ultimate game, Brad Kilby fans the Angels' Bobby Abreu on three pitches. It is the staff's 1,118th strikeout of the season, setting a new franchise record; seven pitchers combine for seven whiffs on the day, setting the new record at 1,124.

Work on the future continues in the Arizona Fall League, which Grant Desme starts with a loud bang. Playing for the Phoenix Desert Dogs, the outfield prospect slugs 10 homers in 10 games on the early way to earning Most Valuable Player honors in the high-caliber postseason league.

November

Bailey, who hails from Voorhees, NJ, just outside Philadelphia, earns the Native Son Award from that city's sportswriters. The next day, it gets even better: Bailey is chosen American League Rookie of the Year. He is the second Oakland relief pitcher in five years to win the award (Street, 2005), the third A's player honored in six years and the seventh since 1986.

A year that began with the two blasts from the past turns into the stretch with another: McGwire joins Tony La Russa's coaching staff as the Cardinals' batting coach.

December

The reconstruction continues a couple of days prior to the Winter Meetings as the A's acquire a heavy bat (Jake Fox) and a versatile glove (Aaron Miles) in a four-player trade with the Cubs for a pair of Minor Leaguers (Matt Spencer and Ronny Moria). Fox immediately becomes a prime candidate to succeed Cust as the DH, and Miles' ability to play anywhere on the field will make him valuable on a team which values flexibility.

Crashing the three-team swap party in which two recent Cy Young Award winners change uniforms, the A's acquire star-in-waiting outfielder Michael Taylor, from Toronto (where he had figuratively stopped over as part of the Phillies' package for Roy Halladay). A 6-foot-6, 250-pound line-drive hitter with speed, Taylor evokes comparisons to either Jermaine Dye or Frank Thomas or a pro football linebacker, depending on who is doing the comparing. Just another reason to be eager for Spring Training to arrive.

Monaghan's on the Hill gives sports fans another option

By Angela Woodall, Oakland Tribune 12/25/09

For years, Cesare's Restaurant stood at the foot of Mountain Boulevard, serving Italian food to generations in Oakland. But on Tuesday night, neighbors and local celebrities alike filed in to the squat building just off Joaquin Miller Road to welcome the latest incarnation: Monaghan's on the Hill.

The sports bar and restaurant is run by David and Sharon Newell, who celebrated their engagement over cocktails in that spot years ago.

"We love to eat and watch sports," Sharon Newell said during the grand opening Tuesday as bagpipers hired for the opening-night party played "San Patricio" in the background.

"We just really think there's a need for a place to go for casual dining and a sports bar up here," she added.

The closest option in the hilly Montclair neighborhood is Crogan's Restaurant and Bar more than a mile away on La Salle Avenue.

"It's nice to have an alternative," said Montclair resident Marty Lurie, host of the A's pregame talk show "Right Off the Bat." Monaghan's is a natural progression for Oakland, Lurie said Tuesday, surrounded by at least another 100 people including Raiders Chief Executive Amy Trask, 49ers broadcaster Ted Robinson, and Bay Area media personality Rich "Big Vinny" Lieberman.

"This is good for Oakland," Lurie added. "There's plenty of room for it."

The address — 2820 Mountain Blvd. — has a storied past. The first to fill it was the Mission Bell, a rambling adobe bar. The only thing that changed during the supposedly dry years of Prohibition was the quality of the liquor and the peephole on the front door, according to an old yellowed Oakland Tribune story from four decades ago.

The name changed in 1944 to Don and Ann's, the first bar in California to be granted a liquor license after the repeal of Prohibition.

Everything else pretty much stayed the same until a fire in 1966 reduced the inside to charred ruins, including the 100-year-old back bar that came from The Old Poodle Dog, a French restaurant in San Francisco that opened during the Gold Rush and the surge of 49ers (the miners, not the football team).

Then Cesare Marigonda, who learned the restaurant trade as a young man working in some of San Francisco's oldest Italian eateries, took over. Now in retirement, he can be found many an afternoon at Caffè 817 in Old Oakland tutoring students in Italian.

Subsequent operators took over but kept the name Cesare's until the last set of owners renamed it Del Novio. Then in September, the Newells took over.

The couple spent months stripping the 80-year-old restaurant bare. They replaced the dark walls and worn floors with an interior that feels like a Lake Tahoe ski lodge — complete with a gas fireplace, rustic wood ceilings and exposed beams. They painted the walls caramel and red and decorated them with Raiders, 49ers, A's and Giants jerseys.

A painting in one of the dining rooms shows Muhammad Ali standing victorious over Sonny Liston in a famous 1964 bout. Another portrait shows two hockey players squaring off against each other. Two outdoor patios ring the restaurant, which seats nearly 250 total.

Sharon Newell, a Chicago native, refused to reveal her sports team affiliations. But David Newell is a fan of the Raiders, 49ers and Cal Bears. He grew up in Oakland's Dimond district, which lies below the ridge upon which Monaghan's is perched in the diminutive Woodminster Shopping Center.

In all its incarnations, the restaurant was his family's favorite — the kind of place where Sunday dinners are eaten and birthdays are celebrated — well before the Oakland California Temple opened down the hill in 1964.

"David always wanted a business in this place," Sharon Newell said.

The couple also operates Monaghan's in San Francisco's Marina district. That business is strictly a sports pub popular with college alumni clubs who come to watch their teams on big-screen TVs that ring the bar.

Monaghan's offers "all games, all sports," as Sharon Newell summed it up. "Except blacked-out Raiders games," she added.

The Newells carried over the same setup to the Oakland locale, except they teamed up with executive chef Brian Hill, owner of Taste of Joy on Grand Avenue.

"I'm introducing Southern comfort food to the hills," Hill said. "It's a great twist."

Duchscherer, A's close to deal

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 12/25/09

The A's and pitcher Justin Duchscherer have a one-year deal pending, according to multiple sources. From the details of the agreement, it appears that, barring other moves, the A's are likely to install Duchscherer as their No. 1 starter.

The base salary is \$2 million, but Duchscherer could earn as much as \$5.5 million with incentives, should he reach benchmarks of 30 starts and 200 innings. The deal is done, pending a physical, but might not be announced until after Christmas.

Duchscherer's agent, Damon Lapa, said at the start of the free-agent period that the two-time All-Star was clear with teams that he wanted to be a starter, and considering the incentives package, it seems the A's have agreed that will be the right-hander's role.

That means, as things stand now, that Duchscherer is probably the team's No. 1 starter. He had been projected as the top starter for last season, but then missed the whole year, first with an elbow problem and then during treatment for clinical depression.

He would be followed in the rotation this coming season by left-handers Dallas Braden and Brett Anderson and right-hander Trevor Cahill. The fifth spot will be up for grabs between righty Vin Mazzaro and lefty Gio Gonzalez, with Josh Outman a possibility when he returns from elbow surgery after the All-Star break.

As Wednesday's Coco Crisp signing showed, the A's like to have a lot of depth, given their many injuries the past few years, and having extra starting pitchers is a plus, especially considering that some in that mix can work out of the bullpen, including potentially Gonzalez and Outman.

Giants rumors: Free-agent infielder Juan Uribe is close to returning to San Francisco on a one-year contract with a club option for 2011, Foxsports.com reported. The Giants are still looking for a regular first or third baseman and Uribe could remain in a super-utility role. The team's other targets include free-agent infielder Mark DeRosa, who ESPN.com said is seriously considering a two-year, \$12 million offer.

Uribe, 30, batted .289 with 16 home runs and 55 RBIs in 398 plate appearances last season. He appeared at second base, shortstop and third.

2009 brings memorable end to decade

From Buehrle to Yanks, season was perfect in many ways

By Mark Newman / MLB.com 12/26/09

The Yankees opened a new ballpark and Mariano Rivera closed it in style.

Mark Buehrle threw a perfect game and Dewayne Wise made sure it stayed that way.

Chase Utley hit five homers in a World Series, tying Reggie Jackson's record.

MLB Network launched a 24/7 network and many fans watched live games via mobile on what Macworld just called the Best Multimedia App of 2009.

A remarkable 73,367,659 fans marched into ballparks despite a deep recession -- the fifth-highest overall attendance in Major League Baseball history.

Not one but two Cy Young Award winners were involved in arguably the deal of the century, with Roy Halladay going to the Phillies and Cliff Lee to the Mariners.

What a year. What a decade. What a century. What a 134-year run this has been.

The national pastime is stronger than ever, still breaking in new generations of fans, still there for its longtime lovers, still churning out milestones and records and heroes, still making us scream and shout and shaping the very way sports everywhere are consumed. And yes, still producing Yankees world championships and Broadway parades.

The 2009 Major League Baseball calendar year was different from any other, but just similar enough to every one before it -- and that is why you keep coming back to it. The game is always there, weaving the past with the present and future -- and it will be there in full force at 2010 Spring Training with high hopes across the board.

What else will we remember most about this past year?

Daisuke Matsuzaka and Japan cleaned up in the World Baseball Classic again, winning it for the second time in two tries as Dice-K again went 3-0 to become 6-0 in the event's history.

Ichiro Suzuki, who celebrated with those Japan teammates, later reached 200 hits for a ninth consecutive season. The Mariners' leadoff man passed Wee Willie Keeler as the first to do that. Even more amazing is the fact it was Ichiro's ninth season.

Derek Jeter passed the immortal Lou Gehrig as the all-time hits king in Yankees history -- and his fans won't ever forget how he tied him on that three-hit night following a mini-slump.

The Dodgers were a runaway team for most of the season, but the National League West tightened and it was not until the frantic final weekend that it became clear they were the NL West champs and the resurgent Rockies were the NL Wild Card winners.

Jacoby Ellsbury set a Red Sox record for most steals in a season with 70, including a steal of home against the rival Yankees. Carl Crawford tied a Major League record with six steals in a game on May 3. And the face of basestealing history was put on a plaque as Rickey Henderson was inducted into the Hall of Fame, along with Jim Rice and the late Joe Gordon.

Randy Johnson won his 300th game and Gary Sheffield hit his 500th homer. The former milestone won't happen again for a long time, if ever. The latter has become almost common.

One Pudge, Rodriguez, passed another Pudge, Fisk. For the former, it was his 2,227th game caught, a Major League record for a catcher.

We'll remember the pageantry and the purity of Opening Day, and we'll remember those clinchers if we backed any of the eight teams that experience them.

Beyond Baseball

In many ways, Major League Baseball went Beyond in 2009.

Buehrle hurled the 18th perfect game in MLB history in his thrilling July 29 start against Tampa Bay, and then the White Sox left-hander retired the first 17 Twins he faced to set a Major League record with 45 consecutive outs.

Wise went beyond the warning track to help Buehrle finish that perfect game. In the ninth inning at U.S. Cellular Field, the White Sox center fielder personally attached himself to the milestone by crashing into the wall to preserve an out, then tumbling back to his feet.

That catch by Wise was part of a trend in 2009. Aaron Rowand went up to the top of the wall in center to rob Edgar Gonzalez and preserve Jonathan Sanchez's July 10 no-hitter for the Giants. Just four days later, Crawford went up and beyond the wall to rob Brad Hawpe at the 80th All-Star Game, preserving yet another American League victory.

The Major League schedule even went beyond -- beyond October. The Nov. 4 Game 6 clincher matched the 2001 Game 7 finish by the D-backs and Yankees in Arizona as the latest conclusion -- the only two seasons that ever went beyond October. Commissioner Bud Selig later said MLB would try to condense the postseason schedule by eliminating some off days, but in 2010 it would seem likely that the earliest it could end is Halloween. April 5 is the first Monday of games -- only one day earlier than last year.

The Commissioner wasted no time in taking action on that and other key issues. In December, Selig named a Special Committee for On-Field Matters -- a highly unusual and power-packed group that will look at many issues from those to pace of game and more. He promised there would be "no sacred cows."

It was the year President Obama was inaugurated as the first black U.S. president, and it was his emphasis on public service that became the foundation for MLB's year-long campaign of "Going Beyond." Obama himself threw out the first pitch at the All-Star Game in St. Louis, and he joined all living U.S. Presidents for a video tribute that everyone saw when 30 All-Stars Among Us were recognized on the field in pregame ceremonies at that Midsummer Classic.

"Going Beyond" was visible in the "Beyond Baseball" TV commercials and also in the game's community initiatives that reached new heights during the World Series. The themes surrounding the first five games were **Welcome Back Veterans** (Game 1), **Roberto Clemente Award** and Community Service/Volunteerism (Game 2), **Stand Up To Cancer** (Game 3), Youth and **Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities** (Game 4) and **4♦ALS** (Game 5). It was the first time a Fall Classic was presented on a platform of community events.

Jeter not only won that Clemente Award, not only passed Gehrig, not only won it all, but he also won the Hank Aaron Award for outstanding offensive performer in the AL. Alas, his year was not big enough for an AL MVP. That went instead to Joe Mauer, the Twins catcher who is putting together a career that might go beyond what any other catcher has done. Mauer won his second batting title -- even flirted with .400 into the second half of the season.

In the National League, the MVP went to Albert Pujols, who went beyond even his own standards. For the first time, he finished in the top three in each of the Triple Crown categories. The Cardinals' first baseman led baseball with 47 homers, and wound up third in the NL with 135 RBIs and third in batting with a .327 average.

Tim Lincecum of the Giants went beyond one Cy Young Award, taking home another one and teaming with fellow All-Star Matt Cain to form a fearsome 1-2 starting punch. It was a pitching year to remember for Giants fans. Sanchez, just trying to work back into the rotation, threw the first no-hitter of the year, on a magical Friday right before the All-Star Game.

The other Cy went to Zack Greinke, and fans who voted for the 2009 This Year In Baseball Awards determined that he was even more than that -- the game's best starter that season. Period. Other than a beautiful ballpark upgrade, it was easily the bright spot of the year for the Royals, who tied with Cleveland for last in the AL Central at 65-97.

If you were a Mets fan in 2009, you had to be happy about a new Citi Field park -- but it never went beyond that feeling of architectural happiness there. Injuries abound and there was never a second-half run. The duality of Big Apple ballparks only served to show the true nature of baseball. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. And sometimes you can only watch helplessly as Eric Bruntlett of the rival Phillies records an unassisted triple play against you to end the game, as he did on Aug. 23 against the Mets.

Memories of a lifetime

We were reminded as always of the great tradition in play-by-play baseball broadcasting, not only through the usual dulcet and excitable tones that fill our summer, but also through the pangs of sadness when we miss them. Legendary Phillies voice Harry Kalas died on Easter Sunday, and beloved longtime Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell, standing up to inoperable cancer in his 90s, moved everyone with a thank-you speech on Sept. 16 at Comerica Park.

It was an especially emotional season around the Los Angeles Angels organization. The Halos went beyond the usual Division Series matchup results against Boston and swept the Red Sox this time -- by beating Jonathan Papelbon at Fenway Park, no less. They were unable to attain their ultimate objective, though, and that was winning it all for a fallen comrade. Pitcher Nick Adenhardt died in a car accident on April 9. We'll always remember the poignant moment when the Angels clinched the AL West title and then as a group visited the mural of Adenhardt on the center-field wall at Angel Stadium.

Your attention, ladies and gentlemen, Bob Sheppard formally retired after being unable to man the mic in 2009. The Yankees' long-time (and we mean long-time) public-address announcer, once dubbed the "Voice of God" by Jackson, will turn 100 next Oct. 20.

On Oct. 20, 1910, the day Sheppard was born, the Philadelphia A's beat the Cubs in Chicago. That was Game 3 of the World Series, giving the A's a 3-0 series lead, and they would win it in five. It ended a run of Fall Classics for the Cubs, and they have never been the same. It was the first of seven consecutive times they lost when playing in the World Series, the most recent of which was in 1945. The last title was in 1908. In 2009, Cubs fans waited again.

The Metrodome went out in 2009, and it went down fighting. The Twins made it to a one-game tiebreaker after an historic collapse by the Tigers, and then the home team won in that unforgettable Tuesday thriller to advance to the playoffs. Now the Twins wait for their new outdoor home at Target Field next April.

In 2009, it sometimes seemed like everyone was hitting for the cycle. Ian Kinsler, a big force in the Rangers' AL West contention for much of the season, became the first player since 1900 to collect six hits and hit for the cycle in a nine-inning game, tying club records with four extra-base hits and five runs in a 19-6 rout of the Orioles on April 15. Troy Tulowitzki had one of the best nights of his young career Aug. 10, hitting for the fifth cycle in Rockies history as part of a 5-for-5, seven-RBI performance in an 11-5 win over the Cubs.

For better or for worse, Alex Rodriguez was almost always there in the news during '09. It started with that bizarre news conference at Spring Training, when teammates stood by as he discussed his confession of having used performance-enhancing substances in the past. Rodriguez missed almost all of April. Then something amazing happened.

A-Rod homered on his first and last swings of the regular season, and that last Sunday featured a three-run homer and grand slam to give him the magic numbers -- 30 homers and 100 RBIs, despite only 124 games. Even more newsworthy, he came through in the clutch in a postseason. The Yanks' third baseman beat Nathan with that huge ninth-inning homer to force extras in Game 2 of the ALDS, and there was that homer he hit off the FOX TV camera in the World Series at Philly. Ultimately, Rodriguez rode on a parade float next to Jay-Z.

It was that kind of year in 2009. And the Yankees finished it just as they did at the *start* of the decade, with a World Series title. It was a perfect ending for them, as it was for Buehrle and Wise on one fine summer day. Now it is time to bid the year and the decade farewell, and think about pitchers and catchers reporting one day that can't come soon enough.

A's, Duchscherer agree on 2010 deal

Right-hander missed past season after elbow surgery

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com 12/24/09

Free agent Justin Duchscherer will be returning for a seventh season with the Oakland A's, agreeing in principle Thursday on a one-year deal that could be worth \$5.5 million if he reaches his incentives, according to ESPN's Jerry Crasnick.

The right-hander made the move from the bullpen to the starting rotation in 2008 and put up dominant numbers. He finished with a 10-8 record and a 2.54 ERA over 22 starts, giving up just 107 hits and 34 walks over 141 2/3 innings, while striking out 95.

But Duchscherer, a two-time All-Star, did not pitch in 2009 after undergoing elbow surgery. He also sought treatment for a bout with clinical depression. Duchscherer figures to challenge for a spot in the A's 2010 starting rotation, battling with a group of young arms, including Dallas Braden, Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, Brett Anderson, Josh Outman and Vin Mazzaro.

Holiday wish lists for all 30 MLB teams

Stan McNeal , The Sporting News, 12/24/09

It's the day before Christmas and Santa needs help. Well, here it is. A wish list for him to use when dishing out goods to Major League Baseball teams:

Angels: A dose of faith to offer their fans. The club already has let Chone Figgins, John Lackey and Darren Oliver leave. Here's hoping the Rally Monkey doesn't seek a multiyear deal.

Astros: An outfield wall without that ridiculous yellow line. And if you don't believe it's ridiculous, read the ground rules. Whatever happened to hit the ball over the wall and it's a homer?

Athletics: A healthy back for Eric Chavez. Once the AL's top fielding third baseman (six Gold Gloves), his career has just about ended because of injury. Yet, he'll make \$12 million in 2010 after Oakland already paid him \$31 million to play in 121 games over the past three seasons. Good luck to the next A's player hoping to get a long-term deal from general manager Billy Beane.

Braves: Umpire Bill Hohn for Atlanta's final game of 2010. Bobby Cox is retiring after the upcoming season, and Hohn is not high on his list of favorite umps (admittedly a very short list). Having Hohn call his finale would give Cox an opportunity to add one more ejection to his record.

Blue Jays: Roy Halladay back on the mound at the Rogers Centre. Hey, there's a chance: The Phillies visit Toronto from June 25-27.

Brewers: A helping of old-school humility, and make it a double for Prince Fielder.

Cardinals: A \$115 million payroll. St. Louis fans deserve it.

Cubs: Nothing, really. They got what they wanted last Friday (adios, Milton Bradley).

Diamondbacks: One more season of Randy Johnson. The man who someday will become the Diamondbacks' first Hall of Famer should retire as a Diamondback.

Dodgers: An amicable resolution to the ownership split. Yes, I know. There are limits to Santa's miracles.

Giants: A bat. The bigger, the better.

Indians: A bit of modesty for Grady Sizemore (see: recently leaked near-nude photos). On second thought, if you looked like that, you might want to show off, too.

Mariners: A pronunciation guide. That's zur-EN-sik. As in Jack Zduriencik. As in the man who has made the Mariners matter again.

Marlins: A game on national TV. They won 87 games in 2009 and never played before a national audience.

Mets: A sense of urgency. They have a lot of holes to fill, and they don't appear to be in any hurry to fill them.

Nationals: A meaningful game in September. Wait, let's not get greedy. A meaningful game in May.

Orioles: Cal Ripken's return. As owner.

Padres: A boatload of talent for Adrian Gonzalez. New GM Jed Hoyer knows where to look.

Phillies: A warm October in Philadelphia. Because you know they still will be playing then.

Pirates: A plan. After 17 consecutive losing seasons, they need one other than, "Let's trade our veterans for unproven young players."

Rangers: A spot in the rotation for Neftali Feliz. Why wait?

Reds: A map of the desert. After training in Florida since 1923, the Reds are moving their spring training to Goodyear, Ariz.

Rays: A transfer to a different division. They'd be contenders in any other one.

Red Sox: A trip to the Fountain of Youth. Signing a 34-year-old shortstop and 36-year-old left fielder is no way to get younger.

Rockies: A backup humidifier, just in case. When you look at their roster -- set lineup, deep rotation, steady bullpen -- you can see they really don't need anything.

Royals: More interviews for Zack Greinke. He might not like them, but he sure is good at them. His honesty is refreshing.

Tigers: A bounce-back season by Dontrelle Willis. Good guys deserve something good.

Twins: A short winter. Otherwise, Minnesotans might find that outdoor baseball is not all it's cracked up to be.

White Sox: More candor from manager Ozzie Guillen. Scratch, they're set there. A little more aggressiveness from GM Kenny Williams. No, they're good there. OK, how about a pill for A.J. Pierzynski that would make him less obnoxious? Opponents would go for that.

Yankees: A little adversity. They're making this look too easy.