

A's News Clips, Wednesday, December 30, 2009

Cuban pitcher wooed

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 12/30/09

With the A's poised to add their two-time All-Star back into the fold this morning, the team is now turning its attention to Cuban defector Aroldis Chapman.

Oakland is in the thick of the bidding for the left-hander, according to major-league sources, and there is no reason to think the A's can't lure Chapman away from some of the big-money teams, the way they did with Dominican phenom Michael Ynoa two years ago. Oakland paid Ynoa a record-setting \$4.25 million bonus, beating out the Yankees, among others.

Assistant general manager David Forst and two other members of the front office recently saw Chapman throw a side session in Houston, and the delegation came away impressed. Chapman's fastball has topped 100 mph.

The money looks to have gone up, as well. Chapman could be looking for something close to \$20 million. His former representatives fielded at least one offer in the \$15 million range, and the Marlins are believed to have made a \$13 million bid recently.

Chapman has incentive to sign by midnight Thursday - his bonus would be taxed if he signs in 2010 instead of 2009.

Justin Duchscherer had a physical late Tuesday afternoon in Phoenix, and the A's are planning to officially announce his one-year deal this morning. The contract is worth \$2 million in guaranteed salary, but could go up to \$5.5 million with incentives.

Like the Giants, the A's have expressed interest in free-agent third baseman Adrian Beltre, but the talks have not progressed much beyond the initial stages.

A's GM Billy Beane and Giants GM Brian Sabean take different approaches to beefing up their lineups

By Gary Peterson, Oakland Tribune columnist 12/30/09

AS THE 2009 season drew to a close, Athletics general manager Billy Beane and Giants GM Brian Sabean held similar feelings about their respective teams. They liked their pitching more than their hitting.

What to do? Beane, not surprisingly, addressed his team's lack of punch with a flurry of low-level moves.

To the offense that ranked last in the American League in home runs, total bases and slugging percentage, Beane added the versatile bats of Jake Fox and Aaron Miles. Then he subtracted free-swinging Jack Cust. Then he signed Coco Crisp to a one-year deal.

His most intriguing move (thus far) was to horn in on the Cliff Lee/Roy Halladay blockbuster to exchange infield prospect Brett Wallace for outfield prospect Michael Taylor. The A's plan on giving Taylor every chance to win a starting job during spring training.

Sabean was equally predictable. After two months of contemplation, he made his biggest offseason move (to date) Tuesday, signing veteran Mark DeRosa to a two-year, \$12 million contract. DeRosa joins a team that finished 13th or worse in the National League in runs, homers, total bases, on-base percentage and slugging percentage.

Two men, two approaches. Beane goes for a guy who might have a decent career, Sabean goes for a guy who's already had a decent career. Must be time for the first bar stool wager of the 2010 baseball season:

Which guy winds up the better acquisition?

Taylor is the smart bet, if only because he won't be asked to be as good as quickly as will DeRosa. If Taylor starts the season in Triple-A, it's not a big deal. Based on his minor league numbers (20 homers, 21 stolen bases, .320 average at two stops in 2009), he's projected as a Jermaine Dye-esque five-tool player. Teams will exercise patience with a five-tool prospect.

Especially these A's. For one thing, no one is touting them as a playoff contender. For another, Taylor, who just turned 24, fits their demographic. Of the six pitchers who started at least 12 games for Oakland in 2009, Dallas Braden is the geezer at 26. Rookie of the Year closer Andrew Bailey is 25.

You could imagine Taylor growing together with this group — and the half-dozen or so position players the A's have assembled on the farm. The natural historical reference would be the young A's team that moved here from Kansas City 42 seasons ago, with Reggie Jackson, Sal Bando, Campy Campaneris, Joe Rudi, Catfish Hunter, Blue Moon Odom and Rollie Fingers all between 21 and 26 and ready to bust loose.

That bar's so high it needs a flight attendant. But at least now, after three seemingly rudderless seasons, Beane can point to a fully stocked pipeline. As one among many, Taylor won't be asked to carry anything beyond his own weight.

DeRosa? He'd be well advised to hit the ground raking. Based on their 16-game improvement from 2008 to '09, the Giants are allowing themselves to believe they're on the cusp of something special. Maybe even next-year special. That's linear thinking, but debatable logic, even if your Tim Lincecum-fueled pitching staff finished second in the league in ERA and your 88 wins in 2009 would have won the NL West by four games in '08.

The fact is, 16-game jumps are more difficult than the Giants made them appear last summer. But that doesn't make for much of a marketing slogan. So expect the Giants and their fans to expect more of the same in 2010. And heaven help DeRosa if he's the only big offensive move Sabeen makes between now and then.

In fairness, DeRosa is no slug. But he's miscast if he's perceived as a run-producing savior in the manner of, say, Jeff Kent. DeRosa hit a career-high 23 homers at age 34 last season. That's a red flag, in that there's no guarantee it will happen again. He also struck out a career-high 121 times — another red flag, in that there's no guarantee it won't.

He's never been asked to be an uber-contributor. Of his 3,556 career plate appearances, only 42 have come hitting third or fourth. He has hit second (589) and fifth (495). Mostly he's batted sixth (942).

He can be expected to upgrade the Giants offense. But can he be expected to be the difference-maker Giants fans want him to be based on their delusions of the heart? Put it this way: He's got tougher work ahead of him than Taylor.

Must be why it pays better.

Prospectus Q&A: Eric Kubota

by David Laurila, Baseball Prospectus 12/29/09

Eric Kubota isn't a household name in Oakland—at least not to the casual fan—but few people have played a bigger role in building the A's. The club's scouting director since 2002, Kubota has been with the organization since 1984—long before Moneyball—and part of the baseball operations staff since 1989. A graduate of Cal-Berkeley who began working with the A's while he was still a political science undergraduate, Kubota served as the assistant director of scouting, Pacific-Rim coordinator, and supervisor of international scouting before moving into his current position.

*Editor's note: This interview took place prior to the deal that sent **Brett Wallace** to Toronto in exchange for **Michael Taylor**.*

David Laurila: The 2009 draft was your eighth as the A's director of amateur scouting. What do you know now that you didn't know when you first got the position?

Eric Kubota: That's a good question. I think I know that I know less now than I thought I did then. I mean, that's the nature of the job. The more you know about scouting, the more you know about the draft, and the more you know about prospects, the more you find out that there is more to learn. That's a great part about this job: it's a never-ending quest to continue to improve.

DL: What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses?

EK: I think that I manage people; I think that our staff likes to work for me. At least I hope so. I believe I'm a strong evaluator. I always need to force myself to continue to be a little more innovative on the scouting side, because I was actually brought up more from an old-school scouting standpoint. Really, my mentor was an old-school scout, and I try to push myself, and I need to do it more to expand my horizons as far as alternative methods of evaluating.

DL: Innovation is important, and I assume that an old-school background is as well?

EK: I think that the foundation is very important. Ultimately, scouting comes down to evaluating players and breaking down talent—tools, and things like that—so I think that foundation is necessary to build upon. But I don't think that foundation necessarily comes from being in any one place; it doesn't mean you have to be an ex-player or ex-coach. That foundation can be gained by many different methods, but you need to have that basic foundation.

DL: Has your use of psychological evaluation changed over the years?

EK: We use it as an additional tool. I think we're always looking for different ways of doing that, and I'm not sure that we've found one particular method that really is 100 percent foolproof. You have to take it with a grain of salt sometimes, but yeah, we're always looking for better ways to evaluate the mental things, and psychological things, but I wouldn't say that it's necessarily changed.

DL: What has changed in your nine years on the job?

EK: Well, I go beyond just my nine years as scouting director, and when I first joined the A's, we didn't have cell phones or voicemail; we didn't have anything like that. We wrote our reports on carbon paper, basically. Just the use of computers, and the information that is available on the Internet... it's unbelievable, the avenues that have opened up to help us evaluate.

DL: Has the organization's draft philosophy changed?

EK: I think that our overriding philosophy has always been to try to find ways to get better, and I don't think that has changed. I think that people from the outside probably look at our philosophy and say that it has changed, because the *Moneyball* draft was heavily documented—just how college-heavy it was—and we did basically take all college players. That's really changed over those nine years, but I don't necessarily think it's been a change in our philosophy. Our philosophy has simply been to look for innovative ways to get better.

DL: Some general managers are more hands-on than others when it comes to the draft. Where does **Billy Beane** fit into that equation?

EK: Billy loves the draft, and he loves the draft period. He'll go out and see some players, but he's very supportive of what I do and what our department does, and we all are part of a big discussion. It's obviously, ultimately, his responsibility, but he gives us a lot of leeway and a lot of support to do our job the way we want to do it.

DL: You're saying that he does more than simply rubber-stamp the decisions of your department?

EK: I would say that Billy is heavily involved in all of the discussions that we have when we're talking about the draft and who we're going to take, so yes, I would say that he isn't rubber-stamping anything. Not by a long shot. Ultimately, Billy Beane is the GM. He's in charge of baseball operations, and being in charge of baseball operations, he's in charge of the draft.

DL: How closely do you work with Keith Lieppman, the club's director of player development?

EK: I couldn't imagine any two people working more closely together. We have known each other for so long, and have such familiarity and trust in one another, that it's a wonderful relationship. It's to my benefit that I have the luxury of working with the best player development person in baseball.

DL: In an interview with Baseball Prospectus in early 2008, Lieppman said, "There are certain things about the A's, where it's just 'this is who we are, and this is how we do things.'" Does that spill over into the relationship with scouting?

EK: I think so. I mean, there's certainly no outside influence in how we do things. We're pretty comfortable in our own skin, so to speak, and we're going to do things the way we do them. We're just so lucky that we have the kind of relationship that we do, which is very unusual in baseball. There is generally a lot of infighting between scouting and player development, because scouts are always invested in the players we send there, and if they don't do as well, sometimes we look for reasons outside of ourselves. For that reason, we're just lucky, in Oakland, to have a great relationship.

DL: Are there certain players available in the draft that other teams see as desirable, but aren't fits for your organization?

EK: Yes, certainly, and that's the case with everybody. There's a famous line in scouting that it only takes one in thirty teams to like somebody for him to be a first-round pick. And the other way it goes is that we might like a guy in the first round that 29 other teams don't like in the first round. But we're not drafting for those 29 other clubs; we're drafting to pick the right person for us.

DL: Can you give any examples?

EK: It's hard to give a specific example, but I think you can look back at the *Moneyball* draft and a lot of people were saying, "What the heck were they doing?" We were doing what we thought was, at the time, the best... we were trying something that we thought had an opportunity to work well, and 29 other clubs probably didn't agree with it at that time. That's just the nature of scouting. Scouting is a very, very subjective business.

DL: Just how important are plate discipline and strike-zone judgment when you're looking at players?

EK: We certainly have valued those kinds of things very highly, especially back in the early part of the decade. *Moneyball* was very dependent on those kinds of things. It's a lot like that in the big leagues now, too. As more people have gotten access to more information, those players, rather than being undervalued, sometimes they end up being overvalued because of the same reasons. There's just more access to information, and more analysis done on amateur stats, so you have to keep looking for ways to find, you know, maybe needles in the haystack, so to speak.

DL: Can plate discipline be taught and, if so, can you determine which players it can more easily be taught to?

EK: That's an age-old debate, and we have that debate all the time. We talk about it, because there are lots of players that we want to pursue in the draft who don't really exhibit that. Sometimes you have to look at the at-bats and see whether they're swinging, even though their walk numbers aren't necessarily the walk-strikeout, plate discipline... however you want to evaluate it. You have to look, and actually evaluate the at-bat, and decide. Are they swinging at balls that are out of the strike zone, or is it just a situation where they are very aggressive in the strike zone? You can be disciplined and not necessarily walk a lot. You're just getting a lot of pitches that you like to swing at, in the zone. But we have that debate all the time, and I'm not sure that there is an easy answer to whether it can be taught, to be honest.

DL: Do you think it will ever be possible to quantify injury risk in young pitchers?

EK: I'm not that sure that it ever will be. I think that we go into it with the knowledge that young pitchers—that all pitchers—get hurt. We're going into it almost expecting that to a certain degree. We're factoring that in, and I don't think that there will ever be an easy way to quantify it.

DL: Are the A's among the least likely organizations to draft a high school pitcher in the first round?

EK: I don't know if I could say that, because you never know. I mean, the draft comes down to... you rank your players, you weigh all of your risks, and you line them up, so it may work out that there is a high school pitcher there when it is our turn to pick. So it's really hard for me to say that. **Trevor Cahill** was a high school pitcher, and while he wasn't a first-rounder, he was our first pick in that draft.

DL: Dustin Ackley went second overall in this year's draft. Knowing that it was unlikely he would still be available when your pick came up, did you spend much time looking at him?

EK: Ackley is a guy that everybody knew about from his freshman year at North Carolina, so he's a guy that's been on the radar for three years, if not longer. We expected him to go near the top of the first round, so while I saw him, and I saw him more than once, I spent less time than I otherwise would have. I think you make decisions based upon who is most likely to get to you, so you try to see those guys more as the draft gets closer. That's because you have to make decisions, and you have limited time.

DL: You ended up taking Grant Green, out of USC, with your top pick. Do you remember the first time you saw him?

EK: I saw him play in high school. We've known Grant, and we liked him a lot in high school; I saw him in his junior year of high school, as a matter of fact. He's the opposite situation. He's a guy where, probably up until the draft, we didn't think he'd get to us. We still scouted him, and we had a huge body of history on him, but I don't think that, over the course of the spring, he would get to us.

DL: Green is a Scott Boras client. How much of a concern was that to you?

EK: It was a factor, but we have a good relationship with Scott, even though in my time as the scouting director we hadn't taken a Boras client. But yeah, we talked about it, and obviously it wasn't an overriding factor to us.

DL: Your fourth-round pick was Max Stassi, a high school catcher who fell due to signability concerns. That was seemingly a change from your earlier drafts.

EK: Starting a year ago, we've really tried to take some of these kids who were maybe tougher signs later in the draft, and spend some money—invest some money—in those guys down lower, almost as opportunity picks. They were there; they were first-round talents in our opinion, so it's almost a way to get a second first-round pick. Max was a first-round talent in our eyes.

DL: Brett Wallace came over from the Cardinals in the **Matt Holliday** trade. What role did you play in his acquisition?

EK: First off, going into [the 2008] draft, Brett Wallace was probably one of the two or three players we scouted most heavily that spring. I mean, he was a guy that we loved, and I saw a ton of him; we all saw a ton of him. We loved him going in; we took a different guy [**Jemile Weeks**] just because that was the way the decision went at the time, but it didn't change the fact that we loved Brett Wallace. When the opportunity came around to get him, we not only had a great body of history on him, he had gone out in pro ball and done what we had hoped. He had maybe even exceeded our expectations.

DL: Is it fair to say that your reports and advice played a meaningful role in the trade?

EK: It's hard to say. I mean, I'm not sure if it was directly. As an organization, we all had a voice. We all had a part in determining what our feelings were about Wallace. People always ask, "Did you recommend so and so?" I think it's more that all of the information that we gather as a group kind of leads to a decision. There's not one overriding report or opinion.

DL: Where is Jemile Weeks developmentally right now?

EK: He got to Double-A this year, in his first full year, which is... he's done very well. He was in the [Arizona] Fall League and played well. We love Jemile. To be honest, we're just tickled that we have two of the guys we really liked in that draft.

DL: Grant Desme, who you took in the second round in 2007, is an interesting prospect, especially following his outstanding performance in the Arizona Fall League.

EK: Yes, Desme is a great case. He's almost an anti-A's type of guy. He was a toolsy, athletic college player who did have good stats; he had a good batting average and he hit home runs, but he had far more strikeouts than you would have preferred at that time, in just evaluating the numbers. He struck out a lot, but we made a conscious decision that we were going to be less swayed by the fact that he struck out a lot. We were more swayed by his athleticism and his tools and took a chance on his upside, and so far it has paid off. He's finally gotten onto the field, and he had a great year this year, which he carried on into the Fall League.

DL: How close to big league-ready is **Chris Carter**?

EK: I think he's really close. I mean, the guy has gone out and... the year he had this year was unbelievable. He's just an unbelievably talented—physically talented—kid who really turned the corner with a consistent approach this year. He's a right-handed power bat, and it's well documented that we're a little lacking in right-handed power at the big-league level. He's got talent. The sky is the limit for him.

DL: Can you address Michael Ynoa?

EK: He's the kind of guy that any scout who just saw him play catch would almost get goose bumps over. I mean, he's this special talent who, literally, I was very excited just watching him play catch. Anybody who has seen him would say the same thing, I think.

DL: There is obviously one scouting director for each organization. How interchangeable are the 30 of you—are you all the same animal?

EK: No, I don't think so. I think there are many different personalities and many different ways to do the job that I do. I have great friends among those other 29 guys, but if you lined us all up, we're certainly not cut from the same cloth, so to speak. It's not a cookie-cutter situation; we're all different in our own way. There are 30 different clubs, and 30 different philosophies, so there are 30 different guys like me trying to implement that philosophy to our staff. Hopefully I'm doing a good job of that.