

Path of the Pros: Brad Ziegler

Released prospect becomes Major League record holder

By Brittany Ghiroli / Special to MLB.com

For a 20th-round Draft pick who, at 23, was already on the elder end of the prospect spectrum, reaching the Major Leagues was a far-reaching dream.

Toss in getting served release papers six innings into his professional career, a stint in independent baseball and two skulls fractures -- one that very easily could have ended his life, let alone his days as a pitcher -- and you'll still have only part of the story of Brad Ziegler's evolution into one of the game's best submarine-style relievers.

"I'm a big believer that things happen for a reason," Ziegler said. "And I don't always understand them until later."

In a span of five seasons, the former Phillies castaway joined the A's and became a Major League record holder with a pair of spikes enshrined at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Ziegler's feat is even more impressive considering the leap of faith he took toward the end of the 2006 season, switching from overhand throwing to submarine style.

Although Ziegler wasn't immediately sold on the idea when then-Minor League instructor Ron Romanick -- now Oakland's bullpen coach -- initially approached him, the increased odds of reaching the Major Leagues were enough to persuade Ziegler to **give it a shot**.

"[The A's] were willing to take the time to teach [me] this in Arizona," Ziegler recalled. "That, to me, felt like the first real investment they had made in me after three seasons. So I decided I was not going to let my stubbornness get in the way."

Romanick, who'd been a Major League pitcher for three seasons, had converted several players to submarine-style while serving as a pitching instructor in Seattle. Ziegler's long and lanky build, coupled with the above-average defensive skills necessary for such a ground-ball inducing motion, made the 26-year-old a prime candidate to make the switch.

"He wanted to make it [to the Majors]," Romanick said of Ziegler. "He has a fire in his belly which you have to have to make it in any sport ... that was the sell of [making the switch]. We were embarking on an approach that allowed his gifts to come to this level."

Despite a respectable season at Double-A Midland, in which he posted the second-lowest ERA in the Texas League, Ziegler headed to Arizona at the end of the year to start his tutelage with Romanick.

The mechanical overhaul was hardly glamorous. In addition to core and back work to avoid injuries associated with his new arm slot, Ziegler spent three weeks laboriously mimicking his new throwing motion without a baseball. He worked with Romanick for

two or three hours daily, studied photographs and watched video to help foster a better mental image of his motion.

Ziegler laughs when imagining what thoughts may have crossed the minds of some of the prospects in attendance during that instructional league.

"I'd show up at 9 or 10 a.m. and there would be all these young Draft picks, and here I am 27 [years old] just going through the motions of a delivery by myself in the outfield," he recalled. "To me, guys had to just look at it and [think], 'What in the world is this guy doing? How can this be productive to a guy that's 27 years old?' They probably thought I was trying to grab on to one last chance."

In Ziegler's mind, it was a far different story.

"I felt like it was just something to take me to the next level," he said of adopting the submarine style, which also called for him to trade in his starting duties and learn how to warm up as a reliever.

Growing pains aside, Ziegler and Romanick couldn't have predicted just how quickly the new motion would catch on. In his first rollout as a reliever, Ziegler dominated in Double-A, pitching to a 4-0 record with a 1.14 ERA in 15 appearances.

He was quickly promoted to Triple-A Sacramento, where manager Tony DeFrancesco would routinely watch from the dugout as Ziegler's sinkerball kept opposing hitters tied in knots.

"He was pretty much unhittable at that level," DeFrancesco said. "He worked hard on his delivery and movement."

Still in the infancy of his new motion, Ziegler was constantly tweaking arm angles, and he developed a change-up in Sacramento that helped keep left-handed hitters off balance. He discovered the best way to drop and add velocity to his fastball, and as his comfort level improved, so did Ziegler's command.

"With Brad, as he worked through this stuff to figure out this approach, [the mind-set] was, don't change or go back to what you know," Romanick said. "Instead, fight through this and ingrain this. And because of his attitude and his makeup, he's been able to do that."

"He never looks at being passed over in a negative way. He just tries harder and stays patient and is absolutely relentless."

That patience was tested when Ziegler didn't break camp with the A's in 2008, despite being told by one club official that he would have been called up in '07 if the team had been contending for a playoff spot. With a July 1 opt-out clause as his deadline for

making it in Oakland, Ziegler allowed just one earned run in 19 Triple-A games to start the season.

With his frustration mounting, Ziegler remembers calling home and telling his father he intended to sign with another team as soon as the calendar flipped to July.

Fortunately for Oakland, Ziegler never got his fresh start. He got called up the next day and went on to hurl 39 1/3 consecutive scoreless relief innings, a Major League record for a player beginning his career.

While Ziegler downplays the record, modestly giving credit to his defense, Romanick is quick to point out that Ziegler's body of work is extraordinary.

"You are climbing a mountain," Romanick said of the work involved in switching to submarine-style pitching. "For every Brad Ziegler, there's a couple more guys [learning submarine style] who don't make it.

"I'd love to have more like Ziegy; he's got the whole package."

Minor League career breakdown

2003: After signing with Philadelphia, Ziegler struggled with tendinitis and following just six innings with Batavia was released at the end of the season. "I was frustrated," Ziegler said. "It just felt like I hadn't been given a chance."

2004: While pitching in the independent league, the right-hander was signed to a Minor League deal by Oakland, where Ziegler was assigned to Class A Advanced Modesto.

2005: Ziegler split the season between the A's new Class A Advanced affiliate in Stockton and Double-A Midland.

2006: Despite posting a 3.37 ERA for the 'Hounds, Ziegler agreed to overhaul his pitching motion to submarine style.

2007: Ziegler's new motion helped the River Cats to a Pacific Coast League championship. In 35 games, he went 8-3 with a 2.96 ERA.

2008: After allowing just one earned run in 19 appearances, Ziegler made his Major League debut in relief on May 31.

Taylor joins Carter atop A's system

Highly touted hitters crack MLB.com's Top 50 Prospects

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A's fans across the nation had barely gotten to know Brett Wallace before reports surfaced in December that he was headed out of town.

The highly touted third-base prospect -- deemed the heir apparent to six-time Gold Glove third baseman Eric Chavez after being acquired in the Matt Holliday trade -- had

represented a glimpse of hope for a rebuilding Oakland team. But as part of the deal, hot-shot hitting prospect Michael Taylor was apparently traveling westbound.

Soon enough, club officials confirmed the prospect swap. And, suddenly, a newly formed calm but giddy feeling swept the green and gold followers off their feet again.

Taylor, who turned 24 just days later, was part of the package the Phillies sent to Toronto as their share of the hefty price for Roy Halladay.

In turn, the Blue Jays then dealt Taylor to the A's for the 23-year-old Wallace.

"We're very excited," A's assistant general manager David Forst said at the time. "We sent to Toronto a player we like quite a bit, but, with our depth at the corner infield positions, Michael is a really good fit for us.

"He has a chance to be a superstar in the outfield. He'll come into Spring Training with a chance to prove he is Major League-ready."

The Stanford product, rated 35th on MLB.com's Top 50 Prospects list, is not alone in that regard. He joins Chris Carter -- ranked 37th -- as Oakland's top two near-ready candidates for The Show.

And while the 6-foot-6 Taylor has an inch or two on Carter, both have extensively proved their gift with a power-heavy bat.

In 2 1/2 Minor League seasons, the right-handed-hitting Taylor has a .312 average with 45 home runs and 205 RBIs. Meanwhile, all Carter has done in two years is hit 67 homers and drive in 219 runs -- not to mention rank among the Minor League leaders in nearly every offensive category both seasons.

Furthermore, Carter garnered Texas League MVP honors at age 22 after raising his average nearly 80 points while spending most of 2009 at Double-A Midland. Oh, and he also earned the A's Player of the Year honor for the second year in a row after getting a small taste of Triple-A ball.

The accomplishments he's reached over two years in the organization, coupled with the strides he made in some key intangible areas in '09, have placed him firmly in Oakland's big league picture at first base in the not-too-distant future.

"Once he gets familiar with a level, he makes adjustments quickly," said Keith Lieppman, A's director of player development. "My sense is that he's further down the road than we might have thought and is capable of rising to the occasion."

The ideal situation, general manager Billy Beane has said, would be allowing Carter some more time at Triple-A Sacramento while giving the more experienced, but still unproven Daric Barton full-time responsibilities at first base in Oakland.

"The organization will do what they feel is in his best interest, that is the one thing we look for," Lieppman said. "But he's certainly on the forefront of being there."

Like Taylor, Carter came to the A's in a trade. Originally a 15th-round Draft pick in 2005 out of high school in Las Vegas by the Chicago White Sox, Carter was first dealt to Arizona during the 2007 offseason before being acquired by the A's along with five other players for pitcher Dan Haren on Dec. 14, 2007.

"Every one of our Minor League clubs, everywhere you look, there are guys that Billy traded for that made a mark on our system," Lieppman said.

Taylor has yet to get that opportunity, but chances are he'll get plenty after strutting his stuff in front of the A's community in just three short weeks at Spring Training. Manager Bob Geren, for one, can't wait -- deeming Taylor the guy he's "most excited to see."

"He's a pretty unique package, with his size and speed," Forst said of the outfielder, who notched 21 stolen bases in 26 attempts last season. "We compared him more to an NFL player, frankly."

Taken by Philadelphia in the fifth round of the 2007 First-Year Player Draft, Taylor -- who has been compared to the likes of Jermaine Dye -- now has bona fide potential to break into an already talent-loaded defensive outfield boasting Rajai Davis, Coco Crisp and Ryan Sweeney.

"I do a bit of everything, in all facets of the game," Taylor said. "I can put the ball in play and drive in runs without hitting it out of the park. I can run first-to-third or steal a base. Contributing in all those areas that help the team win is what I focus on as a player."

Beane sees the versatile Taylor taking a similar path to Carter. The club believes a little extra tutoring in the Minors wouldn't hurt either player, who the A's hope will eventually offer the team the type of power for which they've long been desiring.

"Knowing I'm so close keeps me working harder every day trying to get there," Carter said.

Potential Damon reunion on back burner

Infield depth is A's primary focus after Sheets signing

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Several Wednesday morning reports indicated free agent Johnny Damon is keeping an open dialogue with the A's -- a subject on which Billy Beane danced around very carefully just a day before.

The A's general manager, who has a well-known policy of not discussing free agents, paused several times Tuesday as reporters curiously waited to hear any word on a possible Damon reunion following the club's signing of pitcher Ben Sheets to a one-year, \$10 million deal.

When all was said and done, Beane insisted that the team's priority now centers on infield depth. Beane didn't, however, rule out adding an outfielder such as Damon.

"As far as the areas we want to address," Beane said, "it's definitely the infield utility spot, so that's going to be a matter of focus going forward."

"As far as anything beyond that, we'll take a breath, sit down and go from there. I don't think we're going to add people just to add people."

Based on recent club comments, that's essentially what the A's would appear to be doing if they land Damon, who played with Oakland in 2001.

Last week at an A's media event and again Tuesday, manager Bob Geren insisted he may have one of the best defensive outfields in the league with Rajai Davis manning left, Coco Crisp in center and Ryan Sweeney in right with hot-shot prospect Michael Taylor eagerly waiting in the wings.

Needless to say, it would be hard to see the 36-year-old Damon's declining arm fitting into that picture. In fact, a Sports Illustrated poll of 380 big leaguers published last year resulted in 54 percent of respondents naming Damon as owner of the "worst arm" of any outfielder.

Still, the A's strong desire to acquire undervalued talent -- in this case, seen in Damon's ability to hit for average and compile an impressive on-base-percentage -- could result in another Oakland offseason signing.

"If there's a special circumstance, we'll have a discussion on it," Beane said about adding players. "But I don't necessarily see too many guys out there who would fit that bill."

In the early goings of the offseason, Damon -- aided by powerhouse agent Scott Boras -- was looking for a deal similar to the \$13 million salary he earned with New York in 2009 before dropping that request down to two years and \$20 million.

The Yankees have since countered at two years and \$14 million -- an offer Damon declined -- and are now believed to have \$2-3 million in their budget.

"I'm not having any discussions on him," Yankees general manager Brian Cashman told MLB.com on Tuesday. "His abilities exceed the money that I have."

Meanwhile, Beane and company are facing restrictions with their own payroll. So is there even any room for salary flexibility with a player like Damon?

"It's hard to say," Beane said. "That's one area myself, [president] Mike [Crowley] and [owner] Lew [Wolff] will have to sit down and talk about."

Five surgeries leave Chavez feeling mortal

A'S VET SAYS HE'S OK WITH A LIMITED ROLE

By Paul Gutierrez

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OAKLAND – There is a different look in Eric Chavez's eyes these days.

The confidence is still there for the A's six-time Gold Glove third baseman. Doubt, though, has crept in.

Enduring five surgeries – two on his back, two on his right shoulder and one on his left shoulder – in less than 22 months has Chavez feeling, well, mortal.

The past three consecutive seasons have ended prematurely, denying him the promise of living up to the gargantuan – by the A's "Moneyball" standards – six-year, \$66 million contract extension he signed in 2004 that concludes this season.

"This is it," Chavez said with a sigh this week at an A's media function. "If I have back issues or my shoulder's hurting and I don't make it through the year, then you'll probably never see me on the field ever again."

Chavy the Contrarian has become Chavy the Realist.

And Chavez, chosen by general manager Billy Beane as the franchise cornerstone over the likes of Jason Giambi and Miguel Tejada with that contract, is now a part-time player. At best.

Chavez has missed so many games – 365 of Oakland's 486 games since the start of the 2007 season – people are still having problems pronouncing his last name (it's CHAH-vez, not shuh-VEZ).

"I just grew up hearing 'shuh-VEZ,'" he said with an uneasy laugh. "So I went with it."

Twenty-four days before pitchers and catchers report to Phoenix for spring training Feb. 20, Chavez and the A's are looking forward to his return in a limited role.

"To not have to go out and play every day," mused manager Bob Geren, "is going to help his chances."

Not only are the A's not counting on Chavez to be an everyday player, they are reveling in boasting a \$12 million utility player.

That's why Beane traded for Kevin Kouzmanoff earlier this month, to be the regular third baseman.

With what he's gone through injury-wise since winning his first playoff series – an American League Division Series against Minnesota in 2006 – Chavez is not threatened by Kouzmanoff's arrival.

Mostly because it's not his gig anymore.

By his count, and if he's healthy, Chavez sees himself moving across the diamond to play first base three days a week, spelling Kouzmanoff at third once or twice a week. And, depending on what Jack Cust is doing, Chavez may serve as the A's designated hitter once a week.

"That would be so easy for him," Geren said of Chavez playing first. "He has six Gold Gloves, right?"

Chavez, 32, also has been told to prepare for potential backup work at shortstop and in the outfield. Chavez played shortstop in high school and was to play the position at USC. But the night before classes began at USC, he signed with the A's, who had made him the No. 10 overall pick in the 1996 draft.

Alas, it all comes back to his health. How will his back and shoulders react to the stress? How will his mind and pride adjust to a backup role?

He never fully embraced the "Face of the Franchise" tag upon the departures of Giambi and Tejada and deferred to the likes of Frank Thomas and Nick Swisher in the 2006 run to the American League Championship Series against Detroit.

It's no surprise, then, that he speaks softly but excitedly about being Oakland's "dark horse," a complementary widget in the A's machine that is not "counted on" to hit 30 home runs with 98 RBIs in 150 games, as he averaged from 2000 through 2005.

But in the next breath, that old competitor comes out as he wistfully wonders what it will feel like if he's "sitting on 24 or 25 (homers) with 80 (RBIs) at the end of August."

Then, he said, people will forget about his rash of injuries that limited him to 90 games in 2007, 23 in 2008 and eight last season.

Instead, people will celebrate the longest-tenured member of the A's who is entering his 13th season in Oakland. Only Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson has spent more seasons in an A's uniform, 14.

That's why the upcoming weeks are so important as he continues to swing a bat and starts to field grounders.

Real life, meanwhile, prepares the married father of three – Diego, 5, Dolce, 2, and Cruz Cesar, six months – for life after baseball.

He broke into a huge grin when asked if people should feel sorry for him.

"Nope," he said quickly. "I have a good life. Other than being disappointed and not being able to be on the field, I've been pretty blessed in my life. No one should feel sorry for me. Trust me, I feel like I've already had a good career, a long career. Longer than most. More productive than most."

There is a \$12.5 million team option for 2011 on Chavez, a \$3 million buyout.

"By spring training, I want no surprises," he said. "If I'm the ace in the hole and I can help the team, that's the icing on the cake."