

A's News Clips, Friday, January 29, 2010

A's owner Lew Wolff still waiting for stadium resolution

By Mark Purdy, Mercury News Columnist 1/29/2010

The long winter of Lew Wolff's impatience continues.

The A's owner has been waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting . . . for Major League Baseball and commissioner Bud Selig to decide whether it would be possible for Wolff to pursue building a ballpark in downtown San Jose.

Today's update: Wait for a further update. In the future. At a later time. On the horizon.

Seriously, this is getting silly. Wolff isn't the only person who deserves an answer soon. So do the baseball fans of Northern California and the politicians of the Bay Area's four largest cities. Oh, yes. And the Giants, too.

We are nearing the one-year anniversary of the so-called "Blue Ribbon Panel" that was appointed by Selig to evaluate the A's ballpark situation. The Blue-Ribboners have spent months diligently examining the prospects of a new A's facility in Oakland, Fremont and San Jose. The information has been passed along to Selig. He has deliberated, asked for more facts, received them, deliberated some more.

And that's where we stand. The Blue-Ribboners are scheduled for another sit-down with Selig next month, according to one source. But there's still no word on when Selig will have an announcement on the issue. There's still no word about a decision whether the A's can pursue a San Jose ballpark option, overruling the Giants' territorial rights claim to Santa Clara County.

There is word, however, that Wolff and his ownership partners are getting antsy as the weeks pass. We all know the background. Wolff and Selig were fraternity brothers back in the day, at the University of Wisconsin. Initially, the thinking was that such a relationship would work in Wolff's favor when it came to getting favorable due-process treatment from the baseball commissioner. But now you must wonder if, because of their long friendship, Wolff is being way too tolerant of Selig's familiar pattern of dithering and loitering on important baseball matters. It's fine to trust a pal. It's also OK to upgrade a nudge into a harder shove, if necessary. Wolff could be upgrading.

Wolff's other Bay Area sports venture, the Earthquakes soccer team, made a little news Thursday. The team broke ground on a new practice field/training facility near San Jose Mineta Airport. The master plan eventually calls for a soccer-specific stadium to be built next door. But no one is kidding anyone. A new A's downtown ballpark here, privately built, remains Wolff's top priority.

Under orders from Selig, Wolff is remaining publicly silent on all this stuff. So is Giants owner Bill Neukom, incredibly enough. Neukom, after vociferously speaking out about the territorial rights issue all last year, was offered the chance to appear at a San Jose panel discussion on the topic this week. Neukom declined, citing Selig's edict to keep all mouths shut until there is territorial rights closure.

So let's get to the closure, already. What is Selig waiting for? He may believe there is no urgency. But unlike the All-Star Game, he can't let this end in a tie. As the 73-year-old Wolff frequently says, he doesn't have a dozen years to dawdle around on this project. And in San Jose, people are ready to get on with a ballpark election later this year. The city needs to move on with Downtown Plan B, if baseball can't be a part of it.

It's an accepted truth that if Selig asks MLB owners to approve a territorial rights alteration, they will do so. So if the Selig Blue-Ribboners got it right, they have concluded that an A's relocation to San Jose is in Major League Baseball's best interests. And if Selig gets it right, he will agree and find a way to mollify the Giants and allow Wolff to move ahead.

Because here is a piece of the puzzle that no one seems to be considering: If Selig should announce, after perusing the Blue-Ribboners' information, that Wolff should instead pursue a Fremont ballpark option, Wolff does not have to do it. Baseball can't force Wolff to build a ballpark anywhere. It can only tell him where he cannot build a ballpark.

This matters. Wolff is not going to go through the Oakland or Fremont circus again. Within the past few months, both cities have offered up "new" sites and plans for the A's. But the "new" Fremont site is hot air trapped inside a smoky mirror. The proposed land for the site is part of the soon-to-be-defunct NUMMI plant — yet Fremont politicians did not

even contact NUMMI officials before making their big announcement. Meanwhile, a Fremont citizens group is angry about the proposal's reported \$65 million cost to build ballpark infrastructure.

And in Oakland? That city's "effort" to retain the A's is going through yet another round of "Hey-we-found-some-more-possible-ballpark-locations!" Wolff can take an hour and a half to explain how he went around in circles trying to get anywhere in Oakland under relentlessly ineffective former mayor Jerry Brown and relentlessly ineffective current mayor Ron Dellums.

Bottom line: Wolff has not yet reached the boiling point where he's threatening to leave the Bay Area — or, more likely, sell to another owner who would move the team out of Northern California. But the teapot is building steam. It's hot stove season in more ways than one. Time to tend to this burner, commissioner.

Low-budget A's stay off union's list

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer 1/29/2010

The Marlins were busted for pocketing revenue-sharing checks and forced to increase spending following complaints by the players' union. They responded by signing pitcher Josh Johnson to a \$39 million contract and saying Dan Uggla is no longer trade bait.

The union reportedly targeted the Marlins, Padres, Pirates and Rays as teams that weren't investing enough based on the revenue-sharing formula outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. Those four teams ranked among the majors' bottom six in 2009 payroll.

So did the A's.

How did they get excused? After all, they were last in American League attendance last year.

"That's because we have the lowest revenues," general manager Billy Beane said. "Our payroll's low because our revenues are low."

In fact, Beane said the current payroll is slightly lower than last year's season-opening payroll even with Ben Sheets aboard at \$10 million - a signing the A's say wasn't done to keep the union off their backs.

As to why the A's didn't make the union's hit list, Beane said, "It's never been an issue with us. We spend what we have. That's why you never see our name mentioned."

The A's were aggressive with certain free agents. Before signing Sheets, they made runs at infielders Marco Scutaro and Adrian Beltre, both of whom preferred Boston, and Cuban pitcher Aroldis Chapman, who signed with the Reds.

"We've invested in other areas, too," said Beane, referring to the draft, farm system and international pursuits (Michael Ynoa, for instance), though the union is concerned only about its big-league membership.

While the Marlins get a new yard in 2012, the A's have no ballpark resolution. Attendance dropped each of the past six seasons, though let's not forget the upper deck is closed and FanFest is canceled.

The A's say the only hope is relocating to San Jose. In the meantime, it's believed they receive \$30 million in revenue sharing. Apparently, they're doing enough with that not to be lumped with the Marlins.

Taylor joins Carter atop A's system

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

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 1/29/2010

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.