

A's News Clips, Monday, February 1, 2010

Michael Wuertz agrees to two-year, \$5.25 million contract with A's

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune 1/30/2010

Michael Wuertz's stellar relief work last season didn't create much buzz, but it didn't go unnoticed by the A's brass.

The team rewarded the right-handed setup man Friday with a two-year, \$5.25 million contract that includes a \$3.5 million club option for 2012. Wuertz, 31, was the A's last unsigned arbitration-eligible player.

"I'm relieved to have a little bit of security here," Wuertz said in a phone interview.

"It's just a big thing for me and my family. We really enjoyed Oakland last year, and I'm ready to be part of something special, with some of the new guys we brought in."

Wuertz, acquired from the Chicago Cubs last February, was asking for \$2.9 million in arbitration, while the club offered \$1.9 million.

A source confirmed he'll get \$2.2 million in 2010 and \$2.8 million in 2011, with a \$250,000 buyout if his option isn't exercised.

Wuertz went 6-1 with a 2.63 ERA last season in a team-high 74 appearances. His 102 strikeouts led AL relievers.

That was enough for the A's to extend a multiyear offer, though they typically stick to one-year deals for arbitration-eligible players.

Oakland awards Wuertz with rare multi-year deal

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 1/30/2010

It isn't often that Oakland offers multi-year deals to its arbitration-eligible players, but Michael Wuertz's impressive performance as the A's set-up man in 2009 has earned him a two-year contract with a club option for 2012.

The right-hander will earn \$2.2 million this year, \$2.8 million next year, and the A's hold a \$3.5 million option for 2012, with a buyout of \$250,000.

That option year covers what would have been Wuertz's first year of free agency, which really appealed to the A's after Wuertz's 2.63 ERA and 102 strikeouts in 782/3 innings in 2009.

"He is very consistent," Oakland assistant general manager David Forst said. "He very quickly made Bob (Geren, the A's manager) feel comfortable using him late in games. He's the same guy no matter where he pitches."

Wuertz, 31, went 6-1 with four saves in a team-high 74 appearances. His strikeout total was the sixth highest by a reliever in Oakland history; Rollie Fingers, Dennis Eckersley and Wuertz are the only Oakland relievers with 100-plus strikeout seasons. Opponents hit .188 against him.

"Obviously, coming off last year, a deal like this is something you hope for rather than having to go through the arbitration process," Wuertz said. "I'm feeling relieved, in a way."

Wuertz was the A's final arbitration-eligible player. The A's had filed an arbitration figure of \$1.9 million and he had filed for \$2.9 million.

Wuertz, A's avoid arbitration

Right-handed pitcher agrees to two-year deal with an option

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 1/30/2010

OAKLAND -- The A's completed a busy offseason week by agreeing to terms Friday with right-handed pitcher Michael Wuertz on a two-year deal with a club option for 2012.

The contract is reportedly worth \$5.25 million.

The 31-year-old reliever was the only remaining arbitration-eligible player on the A's roster. Last week, the club agreed to one-year contracts with outfielder Rajai Davis and newly acquired third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff.

"It's definitely comforting having that out of the way now," Wuertz told MLB.com from his Scottsdale, Ariz., home. "It's nice to have a little security for me and my family for the next couple years.

"I'm happy we were able to get something figured out pretty quickly because I really enjoyed my time with the club last year, and now this will hopefully make it more of a home for me."

The A's reliever is especially thankful for the multiyear facet of the contract, which he said will ease his mind about securing a settled work location for at least a couple years with his family -- including 7-month-old son Braxton -- in tow.

Wuertz quietly represented one of the top setup men in all of baseball last season, posting a 6-1 record with four saves and a 2.63 ERA in a team-leading 74 appearances for the A's. Furthermore, he led American League relievers and tied for second in the Majors with a career-high 102 strikeouts, which also signified the sixth-highest total by a reliever in Oakland history.

The 12-year veteran, who spent his first 11 seasons with the Cubs organization before being dealt to Oakland last offseason, enjoyed a career-high first season with his new team. Wuertz's saves represented a career-high, as did his innings pitched (78 2/3).

Wuertz said he's been working out by his home in Scottsdale since the beginning of January and is more than ready to join fellow pitchers and battery mates in Arizona on the A's Feb. 20 reporting date.

"I get to work out and then come home and be a dad," he said. "This is a great situation for my family."

A's appear to have deal with Gross

Free-agent outfielder reportedly agrees to one-year contract

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 2/1/2010

OAKLAND -- A team source confirmed to MLB.com on Sunday that the A's have agreed to a one-year deal with free agent Gabe Gross.

The club has not announced the deal, but the outfielder's contract, according to the source, is worth \$750,000 with plate-appearance incentives that can bring it to \$1 million.

Gross hit .227 with six home runs and 36 RBIs in 282 at-bats while starting in 67 games in right field last year for Tampa Bay. He is a career .239 hitter with a .337 on-base percentage and .399 slugging percentage.

The 30-year-old Gross, who will enter his sixth big league season with his fourth team, presumably represents the A's top option for a fourth outfielder and gives Oakland a left-handed option off the bench. He has experience at all three outfield positions.

The signing of Gross gives the A's a 41-man roster, meaning another transaction will have to be made when the deal is officially announced by the club to make room for the newest outfielder.

The carpenter who rebuilt Kouzmanoff's swing

A's third baseman was so-so player until friend's father took him under wing

By JIM ARMSTRONG, DENVER POST 1/31/2010

A kid from Evergreen, where baseball diamonds spend half the year covered by snow, becoming a starter in the bigs? No way.

The Oakland A's Kevin Kouzmanoff couldn't have done it without a lot of help from his friends, and a father who provided the genes, the means and the emotional cushion to survive the bumps along the way.

Then there's perhaps the most important link in this fairy tale, Troy Slinkard, Kouzmanoff's hitting guru for the past nine years.

The guru is actually a 55-year-old carpenter who works on custom homes.

But Slinkard is a carpenter fascinated by the mechanics of a baseball swing who helped turn a so-so high school player into an established major leaguer who'll make \$3.1 million this year.

Kouzmanoff hit .300, give or take, during his senior year at Evergreen High School. It was only on a fluke, when he was asked to fill out the infield of a local traveling team, that he played an inning after graduation.

"It wasn't like he was all-conference," said his father, Marc Kouzmanoff. "Every year he played, from high school on, I thought, 'Well, this is the last year I'll ever see him play.' We had zero offers. Nothing."

Somehow this accidental tourist found his way to the big leagues, and he has Slinkard to thank.

"If it wasn't for Troy, I wouldn't be in the position I am today," said Kouzmanoff, 28. "He's a big reason for my success. That's the reason I come back to Colorado, to hit with him. He's not only a good family friend and my coach, he's my partner."

Others have helped as well, lobbing soft tosses, throwing batting practice and honing their swings amid the heavy metal music at Nick's Pro Fitness center. Ryan Mulhern, Kouzmanoff's old roomie in the Cleveland Indians' minor-league system, is here. So are J.T. Putt, a Regis University player, and Dane Kapande — the next great prospect from the Slinkard School of Hitting, if there were such a thing — the 11-year-old son of Nick Kapande, who owns the fitness center.

And no, Slinkard isn't interested in taking on any new projects.

Teaching young hitters is a hobby and he only works with a small inner circle, usually kids of close friends. He steadfastly refuses to be paid for his tutelage, now going on a decade. "I prefer a low profile," he said.

His reward comes on those summer nights when he flips on his satellite dish and watches Kouzmanoff step into the box.

"I can't describe to you what that feels like," said Slinkard. "It's still amazing to me every time I turn on the TV. My wife and I look at each other and say, 'Isn't that the guy who used to hit in our driveway and our basement?'"

That's the guy, all right. The one who strung together a handful of impressive games in a tournament after high school, catching the eye of the baseball coach at Cochise College, a small junior college in southeastern Arizona. But Kouzmanoff's failures there — he hit below .240 with one home run as a freshman — served their purpose. They prompted his father, a former University of Montana linebacker, to make a last-ditch effort at jump-starting his son's baseball career.

Marc Kouzmanoff knew enough about baseball to realize you don't master hitting overnight.

"Most people think a baseball swing is like a golf swing," he said. "You take a lesson, move your hands, change your stance and you'll improve. It doesn't work that way with a baseball swing. You have to implant it and repeat it thousands of times so you do it without thinking."

Enter Slinkard, whose son, Corey, had played with Kevin at Evergreen High School.

Slinkard, fascinated by the similarities among most major leaguers' swings, happened to be building a huge videotape library, taping games or tracking them down on the Internet. Ruth, Cobb, Gehrig, Mays, Mantle, Aaron, Bonds — all were collected.

His video collection was nearing 1,000 when the Kouzmanoffs arrived at his doorstep to compare Kevin's swing to those of several prominent big leaguers, past and present.

That's when a light went on.

"I'll never forget when Kevin first saw himself in the middle of the screen, surrounded by all those hitters," said Slinkard.

"They had beautiful swings. I remember him just staring at the computer in silence as he was clicking frames. Frame by frame, each hitter. To this day, he's still obsessed with it."

Said Kevin: "For some reason, right off the bat, I bought into what Troy was saying. He had guys on video that I really admired. When he put it in slow motion, it captivated my attention. That's when I decided I needed to dedicate myself to it."

Kevin adopted Slinkard's two essentials of hitting, proper launch position and swing plane, and began his evolution into a big league hitter.

His message is simple: Watch how the great hitters swing and find a way to replicate it.

"It's kind of like a college class," said Slinkard. "You have to quantify what great hitters are doing. Kevin liked to sit down and I'd put him on the screen next to Barry Bonds, or Nomar Garciaparra. We'd look at clips over and over and over. He'd see what he needed to work on, we'd talk about it, and he'd practice it.

"Then we'd tape it and compare it to what they were doing. Tape it, compare it. Tape it, compare it.

"I remember him hitting in gardening gloves with blisters on his hands. We'd be out there at 10 o'clock at night and he'd say, 'One more bucket, one more bucket.' "

Kouzmanoff began showing improvement as a sophomore at Cochise, which led to a partial scholarship at Arkansas-Little Rock, followed by an All-America senior year at the University of Nevada, then being chosen in the sixth round of the major league draft by Cleveland.

"When I started seeing results, it made me hungry," said Kouzmanoff. "That's what it took. Snow, day, night, driveway, basement ... it didn't matter. I was going to put in the work."

After tearing up the Indians' farm system for three years, he landed in the majors to stay in September 2006.

And there, he earned a footnote in history. He is, as far as any record keeper can tell him, the only player ever to hit a grand slam on the first pitch thrown to him. The magic moment came on Sept. 2 at The Ballpark at Arlington, home of the Texas Rangers.

Kouzmanoff drove it 417 feet into the center-field bleachers.

Not only that, but Kouzmanoff homered again the next day to break up a no-hit bid by Kevin Millwood.

The Padres traded for him before the 2007 season. He averaged 20 home runs and 82 RBIs in three seasons in San Diego before Oakland traded for him earlier this month.

Kouzmanoff, 28, believes an all-star berth is within reach.

"It's in there somewhere. It's just a matter of finding it and pulling it out," he said.

Bailey's number retired by Wagner College

Rookie of the Year honored in on-campus ceremony

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

OAKLAND -- Some may think Andrew Bailey's got every reason to be a changed person.

Maybe it's because the Oakland pitcher's résumé received quite an upgrade last year. That's what happens when a one-time struggling Minor League starter makes a surprising jump to the big leagues as a reliever and an even more unexpected trip to the All-Star Game.

Don't forget about the American League Rookie of the Year honor, either.

But those in attendance at a Wagner College men's basketball game Thursday night in Staten Island, N.Y., know Bailey is anything but changed -- aside from the newly acquired Major League No. 40 he sports in green and gold.

The right-handed pitcher wore No. 17 in college, and during a special halftime ceremony Thursday, the Wagner community made sure it's never forgotten as Bailey watched his Seahawks number retired on the walls of the university's Spiro Sports Center arena.

In doing so, Bailey became the fourth Seahawk to have his number retired -- joining Joe Doyle (baseball), Alonzo Patterson (football) and Terrance Bailey (basketball).

"I remember going to that gym and watching all the home basketball games," he said by phone Friday morning on his way to work out his arm. "So I never thought I'd be there retiring my number, especially so soon. Wagner will always have a special place in my heart. That's where I spent four of my years, and that college really got me to the next level.

"It was a great honor. I was very, very surprised that they wanted to do that, but it was very nice of them and turned out amazing. It was good to see everyone and a nice reason to get together, and I feel very privileged to have had that honor."

The always appreciative Bailey, who graduated as the school's all-time strikeout leader in 2006, was surrounded by about 60 friends and family members -- including his parents, grandmother, fiancée Amanda and former college teammates -- for the presentation.

"It's so nice for it to be happening at a small school like this," said Wagner head baseball coach Joe Litterio. "To have one of my guys back here to retire his number was just a great honor. I think it all hit me when we stood out on the court in front of the huge crowd and listened to all of Andrew's accomplishments."

Perhaps equally significant for Litterio was the time Bailey spent beforehand in a locker room with the current Wagner baseball team, which soaked up any and all advice from one of only two Seahawks -- the other being 1965 AL ROY winner Curt Blefary -- to make the professional ranks.

"I basically told them you can have your fun in college," said Bailey, "but if you really want to take your game to the next level and have a shot at the big leagues, you have to put the time in and make sure you get into your own good routine - something that works for you -- and stick with it.

"I wish I had that kind of advice when I was there because I would always try to mix and match stuff, which doesn't always work out. It is kind of weird being on the other end of the spectrum and being the one to give the advice, but I'm trying to help as many people as I can because it's not just my dream, but every kid's to put on a big league baseball uniform. So as long as they want to hear me talk, I'll give them advice."

It's safe to say the 25-year-old Bailey has found comfort in his own routine these days. He saved a rookie club record 26 games -- the last 21 consecutively -- in his first year of big league service. And based on Thursday night's agenda, 2010 is looking pretty promising for a guy who starred in a remarkable 2009 storybook.

"I'm trying to stay away from pinching myself to make myself realize it all because right now I'm on a rollercoaster ride and don't want to get off," he said. "Things have been really good for me this past year, and I'm just looking forward to this year and doing it again.

"Hopefully 20 years down the road when I'm done playing I'll realize how much this first year has meant to me. It does mean a lot to me, though. I understand a lot of things I've been doing, and it's just awesome to be able to do it at such a high level."

Said Litterio: "In my mind, he's had a better chance of anyone I've ever had at getting to the big leagues. No one could say he would get there that quickly, but he did, and I always thought he had the tools and the arm, obviously, to get to that level."

The 11th-year coach also firmly believes Bailey has the right mindset to stay there.

"Andrew's a great kid and always has been on and off the baseball field," Litterio said. "I watched him here for four years, and I don't think any of the fame has changed him one bit. The only thing that's changed is the stories have gotten a lot better. He's humble, and he's appreciative to everyone who has helped him."

In typical Bailey fashion, the A's righty will head to Arizona on Tuesday "to get out there early to get ready and focus on this upcoming season."

"I'm just looking forward to it, and I'm sure that as long as I continue to believe in the process and in the hard work and dedication that I put in during the offseason I can be successful," he said. "This whole year has been a new experience for me, and everyone wants to know how I did it. I honestly just took advantage of some opportunities given to me along the way by the A's and teammates."