

A's News Clips, Tuesday, February 16, 2010

Five issues for the A's

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune 2/16/2010

Five issues for the a's

1. How's the elbow? Three pitchers in camp missed '09 with elbow injuries — starters Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer and reliever Joey Devine. All must rebound and contribute.
2. Chavez's status: The ability of Eric Chavez to stay healthy after enduring five surgeries (including two on his back) over the past three years affects who makes the club, especially at the corner infield spots.
3. Stepping up: Who fills the void if Sheets or Duchscherer goes down? It's likely to be Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez or Vin Mazzaro, all fighting to be the fifth starter.
4. Setting the table: Do Rajai Davis and Coco Crisp bat 1-2 in the order, or vice versa? At least there are options.
5. Make room: Could either of the A's top two prospects — Chris Carter or Michael Taylor — crack the roster and provide much-needed power?

A's didn't sit still, but can they make a move

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times, 2/15/2010

If you prefer offseason baseball news in large quantity, the A's did not disappoint.

They moved aggressively in the free-agent market, throwing \$10 million at right-hander Ben Sheets and spending \$5.25 million for at least one year for Coco Crisp. They swung trades for third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and power-hitting outfield prospect Michael Taylor.

They re-signed two familiar free agents, right-hander Justin Duchscherer and designated hitter Jack Cust.

So with their pitchers and catchers reporting to camp Saturday in Phoenix, the retooled A's appear capable of improving upon last season's 75-87 record, their worst since 1998.

The question is whether they can keep pace in an American League West that looks stronger, top to bottom, than it has in years.

"It's probably the deepest the division has been since I took over" after the 1997 season, A's general manager Billy Beane said.

The three-time defending division champion Los Angeles Angels watched several core pieces depart, including right-hander John Lackey, third baseman Chone Figgins and outfielder/DH Vladimir Guerrero. Newcomers include right-hander Joel Pineiro, DH Hideki Matsui and reliever Fernando Rodney.

The Seattle Mariners, an 85-win club last season, made a splash by signing Figgins and trading for left-hander Cliff Lee, the 2008 American League Cy Young Award winner and pitching hero of the Philadelphia Phillies' run to the World Series last season.

And the Texas Rangers, who finished second in 2009, feature talented young pitchers and draw from perhaps the game's top farm system.

"I don't buy that the Angels got a lot worse," A's manager Bob Geren said. "(People say) they took a step back. I don't buy that. Seattle has improved significantly, Texas has, too. But I think we have."

Realizing their offense still doesn't strike fear, the A's focused on improving their defense around a pitching staff that is the team's strength.

The A's tied for the fourth-most errors in the A.L. last season (105), and only one of the league's 14 teams (Kansas City) gave up more than the 76 unearned runs the A's allowed.

Crisp, on whom the A's hold a \$5.75 million option for 2011, is expected to be flanked by Rajai Davis in left field and Ryan Sweeney in right, giving the A's what they believe is one of the game's top defensive outfielders.

"Our defense last year was well-below average as a team, and it's going to be a lot better this year," Geren said.

A storyline throughout spring training will be the health of Sheets and Duchscherer. They have combined for six All-Star appearances, but both missed the entire 2009 season because of elbow problems. Duchscherer also fought a bout with clinical depression. Both are expected to be 100 percent for the start of camp.

Brett Anderson, 22, who as a rookie went 8-4 with a 2.96 ERA over his final 17 starts last season, has a rotation spot locked up, along with Dallas Braden, 26, who returns from a foot injury that curtailed his season after 22 starts and eight wins.

Trevor Cahill, who turns 22 in March; Gio Gonzalez, 24; and Vin Mazzaro, 23, will be among the group fighting for the fifth spot. All were rookies last season.

"I think we started taking steps in the right direction," Anderson said of the young pitchers. "I had a real strong second half, Trevor made some adjustments and pitched well. Gio has some of the best stuff in the game when he's going right. Vinny kind of got hurt, but we saw what he's capable of. We're right there ready to take that next step."

Having relied more on speed and athleticism the past two seasons, the A's figure to score via the running game more than the long ball. But help in the power department would be a welcome development. The A's had just two players (Cust and Kurt Suzuki) who hit at least 15 homers last season.

Kouzmanoff (59 homers in three full seasons with the San Diego Padres) is expected to add some pop, and Beane thinks Sweeney (12 homers in 948 career at-bats) and first baseman Daric Barton (16 in 678) have potential to hit more home runs.

Eric Chavez could provide another power threat, but the A's envision him in a part-time utility role based on his injury history.

The A's biggest power upgrade might come — at some point this season — from Taylor or first baseman Chris Carter, the organization's top two prospects. Carter was mlb.com's minor league hitter of the year.

They will be watched closely in camp, as will other top prospects such as second baseman Jemile Weeks, infielder Adrian Cardenas and shortstop Grant Green, the A's first-round pick in June.

Oakland A's future uncertain with stakes high for Bay Area's biggest cities

By Kelly Rayburn, [Oakland Tribune](http://OaklandTribune.com) 2/16/2010

The Bay Area's four largest cities are ensnared in a battle over the future of the Oakland A's — and there's no telling who will come out on top.

A three-member committee organized by Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig will likely report to him this week on the options for building a stadium for the A's in Oakland, Fremont or San Jose. All the while the San Francisco Giants, who claim territorial rights to Santa Clara County, are watching as the process unfolds, fearing they will lose a significant share of their fan base if the team is allowed to move to San Jose.

A's co-owner and managing partner Lew Wolff has signaled his hopes of doing just that, however. And San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed said a move to San Jose would benefit his city, the team and the league. "It would be a big plus for

Major League Baseball to have the team in San Jose where they will be more profitable and where they will be a net benefit for the league," he said. "In San Jose, I think everyone understands they won't be a drain on Major League Baseball. They will be a contributing factor."

The A's, with an aging and shared stadium and baseball's worst attendance in 2009, have long been searching for a new home. The team has considered building on the Coliseum's parking lot and constructing a ballpark village in Fremont, among other options. The A's walked away from Fremont a year ago amid opposition from residents and businesses, reopening the jockeying.

Reed said he hoped Wolff would "come back and take a look" at San Jose. Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums and City Council President Jane Brunner wrote Selig, saying they were prepared to do everything "reasonably possible" to keep the team in Oakland. And, most recently, Fremont re-entered the bidding by proposing a 36,000-seat ballpark on land owned by the NUMMI auto plant.

Dellums told a crowd of business leaders at the Hilton Oakland Airport hotel Feb. 4 that he is "cautiously optimistic" the team will stay in Oakland, predicting baseball will decline to clear the way for the A's to move to San Jose — a move that would ultimately require approval by three-quarters of baseball's owners.

"I am not sanguine on the idea that Major League Baseball would want to step into that controversy that pits the Giants (against) the A's," Dellums said. "I think owners are loathe to get involved in that."

Dellums said Oakland represents a better option than Fremont because Oakland's proposed waterfront sites would cut down on vehicle emissions and help revitalize an urban area.

"We'll see what happens with respect to the Oakland A's," he said. "I continue to be cautiously optimistic."

Officials close to the action have stayed mostly mum. Mike Teevan, a spokesman for Major League Baseball, said baseball officials will not discuss the topic for now. The Giants and the A's also declined to comment.

But Wolff didn't parse words in a recent USA Today interview.

"It's like we're being held hostage," he said in a Dec. 31 report. "We tried to make it work in Oakland. We exhausted everything we could in our area. It can't work. For us to compete, we've got to have revenue, and for us to get revenue we have to move to San Jose."

The contenders

It is easy for some people to see why San Jose is an attractive option. It is the only California city north of Los Angeles with more than 1 million people, having more than doubled in population in less than 40 years.

It is wealthier than Oakland, and a move to San Jose would provide the A's with new corporate sponsorship opportunities in Silicon Valley. Such factors could prove particularly important given that a stadium, wherever it is built, will likely be financed primarily or entirely through private funding sources.

"The message we're hearing from CEOs is that San Jose is a major league city," said Carl Guardino, president and CEO of Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which was founded by David Packard in 1977. "The Silicon Valley is the innovation capital of the world. Whether it was the Giants in the early 1990s, or the A's today, (the CEOs) support a major league stadium."

Guardino's remarks were based on a survey that was taken last spring. The Silicon Valley Leadership Group has not formally endorsed the idea of the A's moving to San Jose, he said.

San Jose is currently reviewing plans to develop a 32,000-seat ballpark on a 14-acre plot of land near Diridon Station, across from HP Pavilion, where the San Jose Sharks play. A new stadium would be subject to approval by San Jose voters if the city spends money on the project or gives part or all of the land to the team in a development deal.

In Oakland, city officials and team boosters have been pushing history — four World Series championships and Hall of Fame players such as Rollie Fingers, Jim "Catfish" Hunter, Reggie Jackson, Dennis Eckersley and Rickey Henderson.

"It's a tremendous history that we can't forget," Doug Boxer, a planning commissioner and co-leader of the group Let's Go Oakland, said when the city unveiled three potential waterfront ballpark sites near Jack London Square.

But more than just nostalgia, Oakland supporters are pushing the idea that if A's management builds a baseball-only stadium in Oakland and recommits itself to A's fans, people will flock to games and business opportunities will open up across the East Bay. It happened for the Giants with AT&T Park, they say. Why can't it happen in Oakland?

Efforts to keep the team have drawn the support of some of the East Bay's largest companies, including Clorox, Kaiser Permanente, Matson, Bay Alarm and Signature Properties.

"We're hoping to send the message that (the A's) can find support in the business community," said Mike Ghielmetti, president of Signature Properties, which has plans for a major development near one of the sites where Oakland says it can build a new ballpark. "We want to keep the A's in Oakland as a matter of civic pride, as a matter of good business and as a matter of the long-term redevelopment of the city."

Fremont, meanwhile, is trying to revive its chances after the NUMMI auto plant announced plans to close last year. The proposed Fremont ballpark would be placed between Interstates 880 and 680 and near the Warm Springs BART station, scheduled for completion in 2014.

Fremont Mayor Bob Wasserman said his city's location between Oakland and San Jose makes it the perfect city for a park that could draw from both markets — and beyond. "It's a super location for the A's fan base," Wasserman said. "We can draw from the San Jose area, from the Oakland area and from the Tri-Valley area."

Should baseball refuse to give the go-ahead for the A's to move to San Jose, Fremont, which is in the A's territory, could be an option for the team.

No clear timeline

The commissioner's committee is expected to discuss the ballpark sites, the cities' abilities to make infrastructure improvements, market and corporate vitality, and the politics surrounding a possible move, numerous sources said.

It's not clear the meeting with Selig will yield an immediate decision or even a recommendation on the future home of the A's. The commissioner's reputation is one of a deliberative executive — the type who would want to avoid a messy public fight between the A's and Giants.

San Francisco so far has clung to the Giants' territorial rights, and in December San Francisco City Attorney Dennis Herrera wrote a letter to Selig expressing "grave concern" over a potential A's move to San Jose, which Herrera said would hurt San Francisco's financial interests.

But Stanford economist Roger Noll, an authority on the business of professional sports, does not see the territorial rights issue as a death knell for the A's designs on San Jose. He believes the matter can be settled for the right price: \$20 million or \$30 million.

"My expectation is eventually they will move. How long it will take to move, I don't know," Noll said. "Among all the options the most likely is San Jose."

Retired biotechnology executive Marty Glick, a longtime A's fan and co-leader of Let's Go Oakland with Boxer, hopes not.

"With all due respect to San Jose," he said, "Why would you put a ballpark in the middle of concrete when you could put it on the waterfront?"

Glick, like most others, won't go too far out on a limb to guess what happens next.

"We've made our argument," he said. "Will they buy it? Stay tuned."

Oakland A's Prospect Q&A: Michael Taylor, OF

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Feb 15, 2010

The Oakland A's have had a busy off-season, making numerous moves to improve a team that went a disappointing 75-87 in 2009. While the signing of Ben Sheets might be their most high-profile off-season move, the team's acquisition of Michael Taylor may have the most long-term impact. We caught-up with Taylor, who we ranked as the A's top prospect, just days before he left for spring training.

For a player who has yet to make his major league debut, [Michael Taylor](#) has a lot of national name recognition. The outfielder's name was frequently mentioned in connection with high-profile trades during the lead-up to the July 2009 trade deadline, as Taylor's original organization, the Philadelphia Phillies, attempted to bolster its pitching staff. The Phillies targeted Toronto Blue Jays' ace [Roy Halladay](#) in particular, and Taylor was one of the Philadelphia prospects who was rumored to be heading to Toronto in exchange for Halladay. Philadelphia was unable to complete the deal during the 2009 season, but they were able to consummate the transaction in December. As expected, Taylor was sent to Toronto as part of the Halladay trade. What wasn't expected was that the Blue Jays would immediately send Taylor to Oakland in exchange for the A's top prospect at the time, corner infielder [Brett Wallace](#).

Although Taylor was born and raised on the East Coast and has spent his professional career in the Phillies' chain, he comes to the A's with a Bay Area connection, as he was selected by the Phillies in the fifth round of the 2007 draft out of [Stanford](#) University. Taylor got off to a slow start to his pro career in 2007 when he posted only a 665 OPS for short-season A Willamsport. However, he had a breakthrough season in 2008 when Taylor hit .346 with 19 homers, 88 RBIs and a 968 OPS for the Phillies' Low-A and High-A squads. The Florida native proved that season was no fluke, hitting .320 with 20 homers, 84 RBIs and a 944 OPS in 116 games between Double-A and Triple-A in 2009. The A's are hopeful that those numbers will translate into Taylor becoming a middle-of-the-order threat in the big leagues. A's Director of Baseball Operations Farhan Zaidi recently compared Taylor to [Matt Holliday](#) in an interview with OaklandClubhouse.com.

We spoke to Taylor on Friday just days before he was set to leave a cold and rainy Orlando, Florida, and head west to Phoenix for his first A's big league spring training camp. Taylor is expected to compete for a spot on the A's Opening Day roster this spring.

OaklandClubhouse: What was your reaction when you heard that you were traded? Were you surprised?

Michael Taylor: I wasn't surprised that I was traded, but I hadn't heard much in advance that the A's would be the team. I had a little inclination that there was a possibility that I might be involved in something. I didn't know where or when or how, but it didn't shock me.

OC: You are an East Coast guy, but you did spend time in the Bay Area when you were at Stanford. Are you familiar with the A's organization from those days at Stanford or the Bay Area at least?

MT: Yeah, I am definitely familiar with the Bay Area. I spent the three most important developmental life years out there. Eighteen to 21, your own sort of personal awakening happens during those years. I went to a lot of A's games and I spent a lot of time in San Francisco and Oakland, so I am familiar with both cities. I really enjoy the Bay Area, the environment, the culture, the food, the diversity – all of those different things are really important to me, so I loved my time out there. When I found out that there was the possibility that I would be traded to Oakland, I was excited, not only for the opportunity to join the organization because I know that it is a young team and there are opportunities there, but also because I really do enjoy the area.

OC: The possibility of you being a part of a trade for a big name like Roy Halladay was seemingly bandied about for much of last season. Was it hard to play through trade rumors like that when you were in a situation you were comfortable with?

MT: It was one of those things where I tried not to focus on things that I couldn't control. In the game of baseball with it being such a mental game, it is really important to be focused on the things that you can control and really basing your success on that. It was really wasn't a factor and it fell into that whole scope of things where you can't worry about what other people are doing and what is going on in other organizations or what is going on in your own organization or what is going on beyond what you are doing on a day-in and day-out basis. If you focus on those things, you are going to struggle over a 162 game season. The trade rumors and all of that stuff, it was just another part of that.

I just kind of went to the ballpark. I might have peeked at the rumors here and there after games, but for the most part from seven until whenever the game ended, I was more focused on the tasks I had at hand, which were my at-bats and the plays I had to make and just trying to do what I could do to help our team win. I think if you focus on those things, everything else just sort of takes care of itself.

OC: I read that coming out of college, you employed what some people have dubbed the "Stanford swing," a more line-drive swing, and that you made some adjustments to your swing to generate more loft. Was that something that you were told you needed to change, or was that an adjustment you determined on your own that you had to make?

MT: Here is the thing that is really crazy about the game of baseball. I think that it is definitely meant to be played over a long haul just because of the variability that any one player can have. He can play one way and then be a completely different player two or three months later. That is just the way the game works and that is why you have 500, 600, 700 at-bats because the average of that is what you are as a player. You are always changing and trying to improve in this game.

I definitely went out and worked with people throughout the [Phillies] organization and then put together my own plan on what it was going to take to be successful. I'm still a line-drive hitter. I really don't think I'm that much different [then when he was in college]. When I was a junior, I hit 12 homeruns in 200 some-odd at-bats, so I am probably on somewhat of that same pace over the course of the minor league season. It just looks better over 500 at-bats. My swings are sort of the same. The balls I hit out of the ballpark are the same.

One of the things I think that I have improved upon in pro ball is having a better plan and being more consistent. Playing day-in and day-out sort of helps that for me. I actually enjoy playing everyday rather than playing three days on the weekend and having four days off. For me, it is easier to get into a rhythm and it is easier for me to make adjustments. One of the things I am good at is being able to make adjustments on the fly and stay consistent and stay disciplined. I think all of those things are helpful at the pro ball level and less important at the college and high school levels.

A lot of it was also just a matter of getting better. I think everyone has their own arc on their ability and their skill level. I think one of the unique things about baseball is that projecting players is not a perfect science. They kind of have this standard, but there are guys who are as good as they are ever going to be when they are 19 and they are projected to get better and never do, and there are other players who need more time to grow into their bodies and learn to use the gifts that God gave them. Their skills come out a little later down the road.

As I have gotten older, I have definitely grown into my body. I have always been a big guy, but I didn't necessarily have the strength factor that my body would suggest. People always said, "you have a big league body now." Well, that might have been true, but I wasn't big league strong. [laughs] I was trying to control big limbs with 16, 17, 18 year-old strength. As I have gotten less awkward and have gotten more in control of myself, it has also helped my results and my ability to drill and teach my body the movements that it needs to make. It is a lot of different factors [that have lead to his improvement]. It isn't just the "Stanford swing." Some freedom has helped, but I learned a lot of lessons there that have helped me in pro ball. It has all sort of been one big pie that has started to come together for me. I really can't say it is one thing. It has been a lot of things.

OC: You made the leap from Double-A to Triple-A during last season. Was that the toughest jump, level-wise, or was it when you jumped from A-ball to Double-A?

MT: Honestly, I thought the biggest jump was from Low-A to High-A. I thought the difference in the arms – just ability-wise – from Low-A to High-A was huge. Triple-A, the stuff wasn't any better. What you had were guys who understood how to pitch, so the adjustment was more mental, trying to understand what that pitcher was trying to do to you. You had some help with that because you had scouting reports from guys who had played at that level all year long, so that was helpful to me. The High-A to Double-A jump, the pitching was probably more consistently good, but you didn't see anything that you didn't see in High-A.

The Low-A to High-A jump was night and day. You really started to see the power arms, the first-rounders. There weren't really that many first-round arms in Low-A. When you get to High-A, all of the first-round arms, the guys who are supposed to be impact pitchers at the big league level, they start there. To me, that was the biggest jump. It was a rude awakening because you were going up against guys who had great stuff, so to me, that was the biggest jump that took the longest for me to make.

OC: You spent time in the Mexican League this winter. What was that experience like?

MT: It was different, I'll definitely say that. It was very competitive from the standpoint that it means a lot to the organizations, to the cities, to the towns. You get that here, but it is even more so there. It really is what a lot of people live for there. Opening Night there were 15,000 people there, there were fireworks, the whole deal. It was probably as intense a baseball experience as I probably ever have had.

Baseball-wise, it was a little bit different. They pitch differently. I guess you could liken it to Triple-A, but they throw a lot of breaking balls, a lot of cutters. Very few guys throw hard. The only guys who throw hard are usually the foreign guys, whether that was the American guys or the few Dominican players we had there. Those are the guys who are the traditional American-style pitchers, throwing 91-93. The Mexican guys are more 86-87 cutter guys with big, slow eephuses. Not to say that you aren't going to see that over here, but it isn't as common. It's just another set of adjustments that you have to make. You learn to make a new adjustment, which is always good in baseball.

OC: The A's have made a few deals involving former Phillies prospects recently. Do you know [Gio Gonzalez](#), [Adrian Cardenas](#) or [Josh Outman](#) at all? If so, will knowing them make you more comfortable at the start of big league camp?

MT: I don't know Outman at all. Gio, I played against him in high school. I know AC [Cardenas] pretty well. I played with him in Clearwater for a little bit. I've actually already talked to him and I saw him a few weeks ago. I know a few guys in the organization. I played with [Chris Carter](#) and he was down in Mexico, so I saw him there and I saw him in Hawaii [at the Hawaiian Winter Baseball league in 2008]. I also know [Jemile Weeks](#). I'll kind of lean on them a little bit early I think, just until I get my feet wet and find out how they do things in Oakland and how the organization is run.

I'm not really worried about it. Baseball is baseball everywhere. I have spoken to a lot of people since the trade and they have all been extremely nice. When I got traded, I got phone calls from a lot of people really high up in the organization who had good things to say and were very comforting. I'm going to go out there a little early to meet everyone first and get to know all of the guys and start that rapport. I'm not really worried about [that aspect]. I'm pretty excited to get started and go out west where it is a little warmer. [laughs]

OC: Are you going to camp with the expectation of competing for an Opening Day job, or are you more just looking to make a good first impression on the A's coaching staff?

MT: I am most definitely trying to compete for an Opening Day job. That is just how I am going in there. How realistic that is, I don't know, but I have been told that I'll have every opportunity to impress. That is what I am looking for, but it isn't the end-all, be-all either. I understand that there are a lot of things that go into that. It is a long year. What I am most excited about is having the opportunity. Whether I have a chance to break camp with the big league club or whether I go back to Triple-A, there are still opportunities for me. I'm just going to try to do well. Try to play well, try to get better and eventually break in because I am one of the better outfielders that they have and can play at that level. I'm looking forward to that opportunity and when it comes to spring training, I am definitely going to do everything that I can to win a job – working out here [in Orlando] and working out there and trying to learn everything that I can. If it doesn't happen, I'll go to Triple-A and continue to refine the things that I need to refine to be major league ready.

OC: Is there an outfield position that you feel most comfortable in – right, left, center?

MT: You'd be hard pressed to find a guy who doesn't say that he is most comfortable in center field because you just see everything. That being said, while I run well, I'm not sure I run well enough to cover all of the ground you need to cover in center field. Both of the corner spots are great for me. I really don't think there is that much of a difference. It really depends on the park and where you play. It's easier to play left field in Boston than it is to play right field, so from that standpoint, I'd probably be more comfortable in left. But it doesn't really matter to me. In left field, mistakes don't cost you as much. In right, if you let the ball get behind you and it goes into the corner, the guy winds up on third. That doesn't really happen in left field. It's usually all about making the routine play and throwing to the right base and you are pretty much a solid left fielder. From that standpoint, left field is a little bit easier. But I like both. I like throwing from right field better just because I like to throw to third. Other than that, it doesn't really matter. I'll play anywhere. I'll play shortstop if they want me to. [laughs]

OC: Did you ever play any other sports when you were in high school? Were people always trying to pressure you to play football or basketball because of your height?

MT: I played basketball my freshman year and did pretty well. I was a solid player, but I was a 6'5" center [laughs], so that pretty much puts a limit on how far you are going to be going in the world of basketball. In Florida, sports are a serious thing. It's year-round in every sport these days, so I had to make a choice and I chose baseball because I felt like it was what I was best at. It was a heck of a challenge for me, so that was what I did. My dad never let me play football. People were trying to get me to play football quite a bit, but, to be honest, it's 50 degrees right now [in Orlando] and I would not want to be hit in the cold at all. I'd only want to hit when it is warm, so I am really happy about that decision. [laughs]

A's eager to see results of work in camp

Upgrades, return to health of several should benefit team

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 2/15/2010

OAKLAND -- When the first round of A's players officially report to Phoenix this week, a myriad of expectations will begin battle with realistic counterparts.

Talent will try to reign over health and youth, and general manager Billy Beane will come face-to-face with a roster he's only seen in ink.

Such is the case for a revamped Oakland trying to overcome a 75-87 record and fourth-place division finish in 2009.

The fourth year of manager Bob Geren's tenure begins Feb. 21 at the Papago Park Sports Complex, where workouts begin for 29 pitchers and six catchers -- of which many, including Andrew Bailey and Michael Wuertz, are already there. There are seven non-roster pitchers and four non-roster catchers among the early participants.

When the regular position players work out for the first time on Feb. 26, a total of 62 players -- including 22 non-roster invitees -- will be found in uniform. Among them will be players that came via the numerous moves Beane made this offseason.

The arrival of big-name acquisitions, including Ben Sheets and Kevin Kouzmanoff, has left A's fans slightly more hopeful and the baseball community slightly more intrigued. Still, Beane is careful not to overhype what's yet to be seen.

"It's really hard to judge anything at this point because everything we've done is really on paper," he said. "We'll get a better idea when everyone is in camp and everyone is healthy."

"As for the offseason, I think we addressed a lot of the things we wanted to address without really jeopardizing our future. Ultimately, what we've been trying to do is bring some of the young players along and hope that they develop over the course of the next couple of years. For the time being, there were areas and holes in the club we felt we didn't have any long-term answers to, i.e. third base. We addressed that need and still sort of stayed on plan."

The hot-corner move came in the form of Kouzmanoff, dealt with Minor Leaguer Eric Sogard in a trade with San Diego for outfielders Scott Hairston and Aaron Cunningham. The 26-year-old third baseman is not Eric Chavez in his prime, but he's an above-average defensive player and a solid lineup presence just entering his own.

The transaction came shortly after Beane and Co. were unable to entice Adrian Beltre for more years and more money than the third baseman was eventually given by Boston. Same for Marco Scutaro, who joined the Red Sox as well.

"We went after a number of players that we didn't get, but we were still able to fill the holes we wanted to go into the offseason," Beane said. "All in all, we were able to address most of the glaring needs we saw at the beginning of the offseason. I think this is the hardest we've ever worked during an offseason."

At the same time, Beane is well aware of the talent surrounding his improved ballclub -- so much so that he doesn't even bother with questions related to how the A's will match up against division foes Los Angeles, Seattle and Texas.

"I have no idea yet," he admitted. "We've got a long way to go, and it's a long climb to go from worst to first. So for now, there's no sense in trying to predict that. What you hope for is that the players you've acquired have an impact and the younger players develop at an even quicker rate than you hope for."

"The fact of the matter is we've got a lot less to work with and a lot farther to go than everybody else."

Much of that mind-set relates to the well being of his players. After all, the training room has been a little too busy for Beane's liking in recent years.

"The biggest improvement we can make is our health and the reliability of our players," he said. "That's been our biggest issue. I think one of the things we tried to do this winter was try to acquire players to give us a very deep roster not just for the Major Leagues, but also in a way that allows us to dip down into our Minor League system in case of injuries. Hopefully we can rest players more often than we've been able to in the past."

"So I think health is going to be the most important thing for our roster. I think we've got a talented group of guys, but it doesn't mean anything if they can't stay on the field."

Six players on the A's current 40-man roster -- Justin Duchscherer, Sheets, Josh Outman, Joey Devine, Chavez and Coco Crisp -- are coming back from surgery. Aside from Outman, who is scheduled to return to the field midseason, all are expected to be injury-free and contribute by season's start. Ditto Dallas Braden, whose season was cut short last season after 22 starts due to a foot rash but, based on recent medical reports, should be good to go, according to Beane.

"We may go easy on some of the guys like Coco Crisp just to be cautious," he said, "but I don't think there will be many restrictions."

Beane also mentioned he doesn't anticipate anybody being late to camp, "but that doesn't mean they won't."

The A's general manager on Saturday flew to Arizona, where he was scheduled to meet his family over the weekend. Geren, along with Beane assistants David Forst and Farhan Zaidi, will make the trip by week's end.

"The workload we put in went way later into the offseason," Beane said. "But given the circumstances, I think we're pretty happy with what we were able to accomplish."

Newhouse: Bay Area musician a lot like his baseball-manager dad

By Dave Newhouse, Oakland Tribune columnist 2/15/2010

Tom Rigney's violin strings are positively zinging on the Alameda stage, and with his band, Flambeau, maintaining that same frenetic rhythm, the dancers below move to the hybrid zydeco-bluegrass beat as best they can on a crowded floor.

Rigney? The name has a more familiar baseball sound — the crack of the bat. And Tom Rigney is, indeed, the son of Oakland native Bill Rigney.

Bill Rigney was the San Francisco Giants' first manager in 1958, then managed them again in 1976 after stops in Anaheim and Minnesota. He then ended his 55-year major league career back in his hometown as an adviser to the A's.

Tom Rigney, 62, has been a professional musician for 38 years, so he's right on pace to catch his dad, who died at 83 in 2001, in terms of length of career.

"I will do it," he projected, "as long as anyone will pay a nickel to come see me."

Tom and Flambeau played Feb. 5 at the Eagles Hall in Alameda, where there is a dance every Friday night. Dana DeSimone, who organizes the events, said Flambeau is the most popular attraction.

Spring training is coming around again, but Tom knew in Little League that baseball wasn't his thing. But he pursues his music with such joy, he's like a violinist version of Ernie Banks, the longtime Chicago Cub who always expressed exuberance for playing ball.

However, it wasn't until Tom graduated from UC Santa Barbara and picked up a master's degree in fine arts from Harvard that he discovered the violin. Basically self-taught on the instrument, he began doing concerts in 1972.

The itinerant life of a musician also is reminiscent of baseball — on the road again. Thus the two Rigneys chose similar careers.

"It's a very strange thing," Tom said. "My dad and I, in my college years, sort of parted ways. It was the '60s, and I was experiencing that (decade) politically, socially, culturally. He was of a different generation, with different views.

"But when he came back to manage the Giants in '76, that was the early age of players having agents — and the early prima donnas. This new generation of players was driving him crazy. Well, I had an extremely talented band that was driving me crazy."

Then one night, father and son sat down over a bottle of wine and made peace.

"We wondered how that all happened, ending up in the same business in the same role — he was a manager, I was a band leader," Tom said. "It was a major turn in our relationship, where we saw each other more clearly. From then on, we were quite a bit closer."

Bill never offered Tom career counsel, but the father's example rubbed off on the son.

"He loved what he was doing," Tom said, "at every stage of it — player, manager to ultimately being the grand old sage and consultant, with a repository of more baseball stories than anybody else.

"Subconsciously, I was looking for something like that."

Tom found it in his music — playing, composing and traveling with such bands as Skunk Cabbage, Back in the Saddle, The Sun Dogs and, since 2000, Flambeau.

But he disapproves of those who try to label Flambeau.

"The band is so eclectic, we can fit anywhere," he said. "What I write is a combination of so many styles — Cajun, zydeco, blues, swing, waltzes, European instrumental stuff. I work hard to defy anybody's attempt to describe or limit what I do."

Tom's band plays at night clubs, dance halls, jazz festivals, folk festivals, concerts, cruises — 140 to 150 performances a year. A single father, he lives in Berkeley — whenever he makes it home.

Locally, his band will be at Ashkenaz in Berkeley on Feb. 23, then back at the Eagles Hall in Alameda on March 12.

If you love to dance, especially to a zippier beat, Flambeau's your band.

A s ballpark in San Jose would bring traffic, noise

By John Woolfolk, jwoolfolk@mercurynews.com

San Jose officials acknowledged in a revised report Friday that a baseball stadium near downtown would bring significantly more highway traffic and noise on game days.

But Mayor Chuck Reed and other city leaders said that's to be expected. And the report, Reed said, lays out steps for the city to reduce impacts on surrounding neighborhoods, assuming Major League Baseball's commissioner blesses an Oakland A's move here.

"A lot of cars get on the freeway when a game gets out," Reed said. "This will allow us to deal with the issues. It means the project can move ahead" toward a public vote in November.

Residents and critics will have 45 days to review and comment on the supplemental environmental impact report. The city must respond to those comments before a final report can be certified.

Michelle Brenot, a lawyer who chairs opposition group Stand For San Jose, said she plans to read the phone-book size report carefully before commenting on its findings. Her group, which is affiliated with the minor league San Jose Giants and their parent, the San Francisco Giants, has criticized the proposed ballpark as an inappropriate use of public money at the expense of neighborhoods.

"I'm interested not only in what is good for business in San Jose but for families," Brenot said. "A lot of people are struggling."

City officials dispute the fan group's assertion that building a ballpark would divert tax money from schools, libraries and firefighters. The City Council already has agreed that the team — and not taxpayers — would be responsible for building the \$461 million stadium and financing its operating costs.

Under the current proposal, the city would lease the land to the A's, with minimal impact on the general fund. But experts say the city's economic analysis doesn't include the cost of land needed for a ballpark, or the cost of infrastructure — upgrading intersections around the site, for example. Acquiring the remaining three parcels that make up the site could cost San Jose's Redevelopment Agency tens of millions of dollars.

San Jose began studying and acquiring land for a major league park in 2006, when A's owner Lew Wolff said he was considering moving the team. Though the city completed the environmental review required under state law, it was put on ice when Wolff began looking at a Fremont site. A year ago, he turned to San Jose again, forcing the city to update its review.

The original report envisioned a 45,000-seat stadium, while the revised plan calls for a 36,000-seat park. A data error also tainted the original traffic analysis, and changes in state law now require such reports to consider a project's contribution to global warming.

The updated report acknowledges that Highway 87 and Interstates 280, 680 and 880 all would see significant traffic increases from the project. Among proposed steps to lessen those impacts are preferential parking for carpoolers, increased parking fees and other measures to encourage use of public transit.

Councilman Sam Liccardo, who represents downtown, noted the site is "next door to the largest transit station in the region, with connections to five rail systems."

The report says noise from ballgames can be reduced by using smaller-distributed speakers rather than a few extra-loud, high-mounted ones. Noise from concerts could be limited by setting a decibel cap on the sound boards. And the city or team might install improved insulation and windows in nearby properties, with their owners' consent.

Before such a ballpark can even be considered, however, baseball's owners must allow the A's to breach the Giants' territorial claim to Santa Clara County. Commissioner Bud Selig last year appointed a committee to study the A's options for a new ballpark, and some sources close to the process have indicated that report could go to Selig next week, though its findings likely would remain under wraps for some time.

Reed recently wrote Selig urging quick action, noting that San Jose needs an answer by June to put a measure on the fall ballot.

"I hope you will make a decision soon regarding the team's future," Reed wrote.

Blessed with talent, West divisions are best

Angels, Dodgers poised to face serious challenges in 2010

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com 2/12/2010

For eight days and nights, October tumbling into November, the East owned the grand stage, with the New York Yankees dethroning the Philadelphia Phillies in a rousing World Series.

Yet for the preceding 180 days from April through September, without much acclaim or acknowledgment, the best baseball in the Major Leagues was played out West. This is not a matter of regional bias, perception, interpretation or even debate. It's right there in the numbers.

You could look it up.

The American League West finished 40 games above .500, staking its claim as the dominant division from top to bottom. The National League West came in at 30 games above .500.

Over the course of the 162-game, six-month regular season, the nine clubs composing those two divisions were a commanding 70 games better than the other four divisions.

The only other division that finished above .500 overall was the AL East. Led by the titans in the Bronx and Boston, the AL East reached the finish line plus-32 -- two games better than the oft-maligned NL West.

Somebody had to take a beating. The NL East was 20 games below .500, and the Central was collectively thrashed. The NL Central was 34 games under .500, the AL Central a whopping 48 games below break-even land.

"The only way you can judge a division's strength is how it does outside its division," the Angels' Mike Scioscia, AL Manager of the Year, said. "In the 10 years I've been here, our division has more than held its own. I think it's the most competitive division, top to bottom, in baseball."

Scioscia certainly doesn't expect that to change in 2010.

The AL West kingpins three years running, the Angels know they face stiff challenges from all three division rivals as they go for a fourth title without such familiar faces as Vladimir Guerrero, John Lackey, Chone Figgins, Darren Oliver, Gary Matthews Jr., and Kelvim Escobar.

West is where the winners are

The AL West had the best winning percentage among the six divisions in 2009.

Division	Record	Pct.
AL West	344-304	.531
AL East	421-389	.520
NL West	420-390	.519
NL East	395-415	.488
NL Central	468-502	.482
AL Central	381-429	.470

Replacing the departed are Hideki Matsui, Joel Pineiro, Fernando Rodney and Brian Stokes, along with such in-house athletes as Brandon Wood, Maicer Izturis and Reggie Willits.

Looking to make inroads, Texas, Seattle and Oakland each imported front-end starters with the ability to dominate in Rich Harden, Cliff Lee and Ben Sheets, respectively.

All three clubs feel they have upgraded their lineups and improved their defenses. Operating on the theory that if you can't beat them, sign them, the Mariners and Rangers acquired marquee performers who contributed handsomely to the Angels' recent run of excellence.

With ex-Angels Figgins and Casey Kotchman taking over the corners of the infield, the Mariners have added a pair of professional hitters and superior gloves to a defense widely judged by the computer folks as the best in the game in 2009.

Seattle could field as many as five Gold Glove candidates, with Figgins and Kotchman joining shortstop Jack Wilson and outfielders Franklin Gutierrez and Ichiro Suzuki.

With all this leather behind Felix Hernandez, Lee and Erik Bedard, fronting a pitching staff that led the AL in team ERA, the Mariners figure to win a lot of 2-1 and 3-2 games. They might need to, given that power appears in short supply.

The always-dangerous Rangers lured Guerrero deep in the heart of Texas to a ballpark he has torched over the years, while Oliver, the ageless southpaw, adds stability and dependability to their bullpen.

The Athletics looked elsewhere for home improvements and found them in center field, with Coco Crisp, and at third base, with Kevin Kouzmanoff. Upwardly mobile, the A's plan to rise with the blossoming of youthful talent in all areas.

Certainly optimism is in the air as the pursuers take aim at the three-time division champs.

"I think the opportunity to win presents itself when you're in the AL West," Sheets, the former Brewers ace, said after signing to assume the reins of the Athletics' rotation. "I think last year it proved that everybody was pretty close, and that whoever could make the most moves this offseason could catch the front-runner Angels -- and maybe even pass them up."

His new manager, Bob Geren, has seen too much of Scioscia's troop to count on any slippage.

"I don't buy that the Angels have gotten worse," Geren said. "A lot of people have said they've taken a step backward, but I think they still have a very good team."

"Seattle made significant moves, and Texas did, too. The same can be said for us, so it should be an interesting race. I think you could say our division has more depth than any other right now."

In Southern California, dreams of a first-ever Freeway Series were alive deep into October after the Angels swept the arch-nemesis Red Sox in the AL Division Series and the Dodgers swept the Cardinals in the NLDS.

Second in the Majors in victories, with 97, after dealing with the heartache of Nick Adenhardt's death in a car wreck at the age of 22, the Angels pushed the Yankees to six games in the AL Championship Series before their flame was snuffed in the Bronx. The Dodgers, whose 95 regular-season wins tied them with the Red Sox for third in the Majors, met their Waterloo in Philadelphia at the explosive hands of the Phillies in five NLCS games.

If the exploits of the West stars aren't as highly visible as those of the East and Central, it's largely because their games are starting when folks are tuning in the late news or falling asleep in the population centers east of the Mississippi.

Spectacular efforts by the likes of two-time NL Cy Young Award winner Tim Lincecum of the Giants and Felix Hernandez of the Mariners often go unnoticed in the Eastern time zone until a day later.

2009 NL West standings

Place	Team	Record	GB
1	Dodgers	95-67	-
2	Rockies	92-70	3
3	Giants	88-74	7
4	Padres	75-87	20

Place Team Record GB

5 D-backs 70-92 25

"I can tell you for certain that the West is a lot better than people think," said Angels center fielder Torii Hunter, who left Minnesota for Anaheim after the 2007 season. "The West is for real. Don't sleep on us. And something else -- there's a ton of great young talent coming up in both West divisions. So it should be wild out West for a long time to come."

Even playing under a relative cover of darkness, the youthful talent parade is dazzling, featuring Lincecum, Hernandez, Matt Cain, Pablo Sandoval, Adrian Gonzalez, Troy Tulowitzki, Justin Upton, Mark Reynolds, Matt Kemp, Clayton Kershaw, Kendry Morales, Erick Aybar, Josh Hamilton, Elvis Andrus, Kurt Suzuki and Brett Anderson.

The Wild Card Rockies, three games behind the Dodgers in the NL West, would have taken the NL Central with their 92 wins, one more than the Cards.

The Rangers, who pushed the Angels all season before unraveling in September, would have claimed the AL Central by one game over Minnesota and Detroit, who needed game No. 163 to send the Twins to the postseason.

A distant third in the West, the Mariners would have finished one game behind the Twins and Tigers in the Central.

The West's superiority was driven home in mano-a-mano competition. The AL West was 16 games better than the goliaths of the AL East, with only Oakland (21-23) falling below .500.

The NL West was five games better than the NL East head-to-head. Only last-place Arizona (15-19) did not finish even or better.

Hunter, never shy about expressing an opinion, admits that he wasn't fully aware of the strength of the West until he signed with the Angels.

"I remember watching ESPN in 2008, hearing guys say that the Los Angeles Angels have the best record in baseball, but it's because they beat up on a weak division," Hunter said. "We beat up on everybody that year, not just the West.

"To say we benefit from playing in a weak division, that's just not true. The Rangers, those guys can play. Seattle is tough, and Oakland's got all that young talent. West Coast teams just get no respect. Why? I guess because everybody's asleep in the East when we're doing our thing."

The main knock on the West is that it claimed only two World Series crowns -- by the 2001 D-backs and 2002 Angels -- in the decade just concluded.

Hunter believes that the handicaps of exhaustive travel -- losing hours flying eastbound and spending many more hours in the air than East and Central teams -- can extract a harsh toll over the long haul.

"When I was with the Twins in the AL Central, our flights were an hour, two hours, maybe three," Hunter said. "Here with the Angels, it seems like we're always on planes for four, five, six hours. I had no idea what that would be like. It can get to you."

As do the Angels, their longtime rivals down Interstate 5, the Dodgers understand that they'll be challenged from all directions in 2010.

2009 AL West standings**Place Team Record GB**

1	Angels	97-65	-
2	Rangers	87-75	8
3	Mariners	85-77	10
4	Athletics	75-87	20

A return to Hall of Fame form by Manny Ramirez would make manager Joe Torre beam, but this club is loaded with proven talent, led by Kemp, who is on the verge of joining the game's elite. The maturity of Kershaw and Chad Billingsley as front-line starters could be the difference in another spirited race.

The Dodgers' eternal rivals, the Giants, won 88 games last season but couldn't catch Colorado in the Wild Card race. Manager Bruce Bochy appears to have upgraded the offense behind Lincecum and Cain, with Mark DeRosa and Aubrey Huff complementing the inimitable Sandoval, a hitting machine.

Shot down by the Phillies in the NLDS after their inspired run to the postseason, the Rockies are thinking even bigger under NL Manager of the Year Jim Tracy.

Colorado is rock-solid with Tulowitzki, one of the game's premier players, hitting behind Carlos Gonzalez and Dexter Fowler and in front of the great Todd Helton. As always, pitching will tell the mile-high tale, and there is no shortage of quality arms at Tracy's disposal.

Grounded in '09, the D-backs could rise like a phoenix if Brandon Webb is sound, providing -- along with Dan Haren -- a tandem the equal of any in the game. Upton, Reynolds and Co. figure to provide enough thunder to light the desert sky again.

The Padres are clearly in a rebuilding phase, pondering what to do with their leading man, Gonzalez. The slugging first baseman could tilt a division race in the direction of his new club if he departs the border city. He's that good.