

A's News Clips, Friday, February 19, 2010

A'S FIVE QUESTIONS

A battle for spots at end of roster

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 2/19/2010

A perennial question heads up the list of most pressing topics for the A's going into this spring, but Eric Chavez aside, Oakland is fairly well set in terms of the roster, especially for a club that is coming off a last-place finish.

With pitchers and catchers reporting Saturday, the A's have one final spot in the rotation open, but there's a reasonably clear favorite for the job. There might be some jostling for the extra outfield spot, but that, too, seems a foregone conclusion. A couple of high-profile prospects will be trying to make the team, but that is far more likely to happen in June than April.

Barring injuries or trades, Oakland's main personnel uncertainty revolves around Chavez. His iffy health has been a mainstay of this annual prespring feature for four consecutive years, but this time, there's a dramatic twist:

1. Will Chavez play another regular-season game in the majors?

Chavez told reporters at the team's recent preseason media session that if he has more physical problems, he plans to retire.

The six-time Gold Glove third baseman has had two back surgeries and three shoulder operations in the past two years, and while he has rehabbed extensively and is feeling good going into the spring, Chavez is just as tired as everyone else about his uncertain status.

Chavez often says he feels terrible that he has not been able to fulfill his \$66 million contract, the richest ever given by the A's. He's a hard worker, not a complainer; he's a leader in the clubhouse and, entering his 12th year with the club, he's Oakland's longest-tenured player by far.

Chavez and the A's would like nothing more than for him to have a productive, healthy season, but the past three years were enough for the team to plan around him - the A's traded for an everyday third baseman, Kevin Kouzmanoff, last month.

2. So where would Chavez play and what happens if he can't?

In the final year of his contract, Chavez will be Oakland's utility player if healthy, with some chance he'll wind up at first base semiregularly if neither Daric Barton nor Chris Carter fares well there. But if Chavez can't go, that opens a spot that most likely would go to Eric Patterson, Adam Rosales or Jake Fox. (One of those three is likely to be on the roster even if Chavez is OK.)

3. What is the plan for Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor?

The team's two best young position-player prospects probably won't compete for roster jobs this spring: The A's have other options at first base and in the outfield, and when possible, they prefer to wait to bring up their best young prospects in order to avoid the possibility of a fourth arbitration year (see: Lincecum, Tim).

But that doesn't mean that this spring is just another camp for the two. Carter, the A's minor-league player of the year, has great power, and that's something Oakland is sorely lacking. A monster spring and a corresponding weak effort from Barton, and the A's could decide to ignore service-time issues and hand Carter a job.

Taylor might have a tougher road. The A's would bring up either man only to play every day, and Oakland already has a relatively set starting outfield of Coco Crisp, Rajai Davis and Ryan Sweeney.

4. Who is the fourth outfielder?

Oakland signed Gabe Gross to a one-year deal, but Travis Buck could still be an option at some point, despite how far he's fallen from the A's radar. Patterson, who also can play second, is out of options, so he'll get serious consideration. This could be more of a horse race than Gross' signing suggested.

5. The fifth starter is Trevor Cahill, isn't it?

It's hard to imagine a scenario in which the right-hander isn't in the rotation. He made 32 starts last season as a rookie, and while the A's have two more experienced starters now in Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer to go with Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden, Cahill has enormous promise. Plus, lefty Gio Gonzalez might be a good fit in the bullpen, and right-hander Vin Mazzaro is coming off shoulder tendinitis.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that each of the three will be in the rotation at some point this season, considering recent history and the fact that Sheets is coming off Tommy John surgery,

Duchscherer has had some injuries the past few years, and even Braden had a lingering foot problem last year.

Oakland A's Prospect Profile: Eric Sogard, 2B

Melissa Lockard
OaklandClubhouse.com

Feb 19, 2010

In mid-January, the Oakland A's completed a four-player trade with the San Diego Padres, sending Scott Hairston and Aaron Cunningham south for Kevin Kouzmanoff and Eric Sogard. Sogard was the only player involved in the deal without major league experience, but that may not be the case for much longer, as the second baseman is making steady progress to the big leagues. We profile Sogard inside.

Name: Eric Sogard
Born: May 22, 1986
Height: 5'10"
Weight: 180
Bat/Throw: L/R

Background

Sogard was drafted by the San Diego Padres in the second round of the 2007 draft after a successful three-year career at Arizona State. The Phoenix native posted OPSs higher than 1000 during both his sophomore and junior seasons with the Sun Devils. After signing with the Padres for \$400,000, he had a mediocre professional debut in 2007 with short-season Eugene (730 OPS) and Low-A Fort Wayne (657 OPS), although he posted a solid 25:29 BB:K ratio.

The next season Sogard was sent to the California League and he put together a huge season for the Lake Elsinore Storm. In 133 games, he posted a .308/.394/.453 line. Sogard walked 79 times against only 62 strike-outs for a 1.27 BB:K ratio that was tops in the California League. He scored 97 runs, drove-in 87, hit 10 homers, cracked 42 doubles and stole 16 bases.

Sogard came down-to-earth to some extent in 2009 with Double-A San Antonio of the Texas League, although he still had a solid season, posting a .293/.370/.400 line. Once again, he walked more than he struck-out (58 walks to 47 strike-outs). San Diego Padres' minor league hitting coordinator Tony Muser – in an interview with OaklandClubhouse.com sister website MadFriars.com – chalked up some of the dip in Sogard's numbers with San Antonio to the difference between the home ballparks for San Antonio and Lake Elsinore, but was impressed that despite the difficulties that the Missions' home ballpark presented, Sogard stayed true to his swing.

"[I]n San Antonio the ballpark is not conducive for an offensive game. A lot of our kids come in there, wind holds balls up, winds always blowing in from right center, and when success doesn't happen they try to do more. He didn't change his swing as much," Muser told MadFriars.com.

Sogard's three-year tenure in the Padres' organization came to an end in mid-January when he was traded to the A's along with third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff for outfielders Scott Hairston and Aaron Cunningham. After the trade, the middle infielder was invited to participate in the A's major league spring training camp.

Scouting Report

Sogard fits the profile of a prototypical A's prospect, so it comes as no surprise that the A's front office have had their eyes on him since he was in college.

"He's a player we liked dating back to the '07 draft. He finished up at ASU with outstanding seasons as a sophomore and junior, so he certainly was on our radar from a performance perspective, particularly given his elite-level plate discipline," Farhan Zaidi, A's Director of Baseball Operations, said.

"He has continued to perform at a high level as a pro, and we've been able to get a lot of looks at him in the Cal and Texas Leagues. Offensively, his plate discipline has translated well at the pro level, and he's continued to show solid extra-base hit power for a middle infielder."

Sogard is an intelligent hitter with well above-average plate discipline and an uncomplicated swing. He has good gap power, although, according to Muser, he can sometimes try too hard to swing for the fences.

"He probably has a simplest swing as anybody in our system. He's quiet, gets the bat head to the ball very quickly. He has the same approach all the time. Probably mentally collected better than anybody we have, just a very good approach," Muser told MadFriars.com before the trade.

"For me, he has the ability to use the other side of the field better, but it's not consistent with him. He can turn on a baseball, but the power factor with Sogie is he wants to do it a little bit too much, even though his pace and approach is very good. Getting stronger to left center field to me is where he would have to improve.

"But when you talk about just offense, very simple approach, very simple swing; and the maintenance, not a lot of adjustment. He doesn't try to do more than he's capable of doing. He stays on pace. I'd like to see him get a little bit more aggressive and a little bit better effort early in the count to really get after a baseball. But with two strikes, he's got the perfect approach to a baseball."

Defensively, Sogard has spent most of his professional career at second base, although he does have limited experience at short and third base, as well. Scouts have generally rated Sogard's defense as average, but he has rated above-average in Sean Smith's Baseballprojection.com TotalZone defensive metric, earning a +2 and a +12 rating in 2008 and 2009, respectively. The A's have indicated that they plan to try Sogard at multiple defensive positions this season. He has average speed, but he hasn't had great success stealing bases in the pros, having been caught 17 times in 49 opportunities.

Outlook

Upon arriving in Oakland, Sogard became one of the A's top middle infield prospects, ranking only behind top prospects [Adrian Cardenas](#) and [Jemile Weeks](#) among A's second base prospects. Unfortunately for Sogard, both Cardenas and Weeks are at that Double-A/Triple-A level that Sogard is also at. Consequently, he will have a much better opportunity to make it to the big leagues quickly with Oakland if he can show that he can handle other positions in addition to second base.

Sogard's approach at the plate fits the A's to a tee. He profiles as a classic number two hitter, similar to former A's third baseman Carney Lansford with his ability to make contact with two strikes, see a lot of pitches and hit for average.

Sogard will be at the A's big league camp, but he is there more to make an impression on

Oakland's coaching staff than compete for a major league job at the start of this season. The A's began the off-season relatively thin in the upper levels of the minor leagues, but the organization now has decent depth, having acquired Sogard, [Adam Rosales](#) and [Steven Tolleson](#) and having snuck [Gregorio Petit](#) through waivers. Rosales is expected to win the A's Opening Day back-up middle infield job; consequently, Sogard will likely be competing with fellow major league camp attendees Petit, Tolleson, Cardenas and Weeks for a spot in Triple-A with Sacramento.

"Defensively, we think [Sogard]'s a good second baseman and has the hands, arm, and aptitude to handle SS and 3B as well. We have prioritized shoring up our organizational middle infield depth this offseason, and we think Sogard has the versatility to potentially fit in at multiple spots, and the advanced hitting approach to be a factor at the major league level relatively soon," Zaidi said.

Division Preview

AL West

by John Perrotto, Baseball Prospectus, 2/19/2010

Baseball's smallest division figures to be one of its most interesting in 2010. The [Los Angeles Angels](#) have won three straight American League West titles, and five of the past six.

However, they appear vulnerable after losing ace pitcher [John Lackey](#) to the [Boston Red Sox](#) as a free agent, third baseman/leadoff hitter/defensive whiz [Chone Figgins](#) to the division rival [Seattle Mariners](#) as a free agent, and designated hitter [Vladimir Guerrero](#) to another division rival, the [Texas Rangers](#).

Meanwhile, the Mariners and Rangers are looking for more after being surprise teams last season. The Mariners have added a second ace, [Cliff Lee](#), to team with [Felix Hernandez](#) in the rotation—and the Rangers' financial situation should improve now that the [Nolan Ryan](#)/Chuck Greenberg group is ready to assume ownership. PECOTA expects a shakeup in the AL West this season.

Texas Rangers

Projected record: 87-75

Why They Might Win: Pitching and defense went from being a perennial weakness to a strength last season; this should also be true in 2010. They were fourth in the AL in runs allowed (an average of 4.57 a game) thanks to the fine work of new pitching coach [Mike Maddux](#), and they ranked second in the league in defensive efficiency, a simple metric that measures the number of balls in play that are turned into outs.

Why They Might Not Win: They are pinning a lot of hope on [Rich Harden](#) staying healthy and being their top starter, even though he has topped 150 innings just once in six full major-league seasons. They are also counting on an untested [Julio Borbon](#) in center field; PECOTA projects him for just a .335 on base percentage and a .404 slugging percentage.

Player Who Could Surprise: [Colby Lewis](#) returns stateside after spending the past two seasons pitching in Japan. PECOTA believes the time abroad has helped the Rangers' first-

round draft pick from 1999—it projects Lewis to post a fine 3.84 ERA in 165 innings.

Player Who Could Disappoint: [Scott Feldman](#) seemingly came out of nowhere to lead the team with 17 victories last season. PECOTA doesn't see a repeat, forecasting a 9-9 record and 4.78 ERA in 157 innings.

Seattle Mariners

Projected record: 83-79

Why They Might Win: They have two of the best starting pitchers in the game in Hernandez and Lee. The defense that will back up the duo led the AL in defensive efficiency last season.

[Ichiro Suzuki](#) and Figgins should form a dynamic 1-2 punch at the top of the batting order.

Why They Might Not Win: They went 85-77 last season despite giving up more runs than they scored. Teams that do this will historically *regress* the next season. [Milton Bradley](#) can help the offense if he's healthy, but with his history of outbursts, he might also destroy the outstanding clubhouse chemistry.

Player Who Could Surprise: [Brandon League](#), acquired from the [Toronto Blue Jays](#) in an off-season trade, is projected to have a 3.34 ERA in 55 innings by PECOTA. That could make the flamethrower the much-needed reliable set-up man for closer [David Aardsma](#).

Player Who Could Disappoint: Lee is projected for a 3.67 ERA in 204 innings by PECOTA, which certainly isn't bad, yet that would be a letdown for Mariners fans, after he posted a combined 2.89 ERA mark in the past two seasons.

Oakland Athletics

Projected record: 82-80

Why They Might Win: If [Ben Sheets](#) and [Justin Duchscherer](#) are healthy and return to their old form, they would anchor a rotation that could include a number of intriguing young pitchers, including [Brett Anderson](#), [Trevor Cahill](#), [Dallas Braden](#), [Gio Gonzalez](#), and [Vin Mazzaro](#). [Andrew Bailey](#) is back to close after being the AL Rookie of the Year last season.

Why They Might Not Win: They were ninth in the AL in runs scored last season but traded their big bopper, [Matt Holliday](#), to the [Cardinals](#) last July, and got more mileage than the law allows out of [Adam Kennedy](#), who was allowed to walk as a free agent in the offseason. They were also ninth in the league in defensive efficiency.

Player Who Could Surprise: Duchscherer is projected by PECOTA to have a solid 3.97 ERA, albeit in 97 innings, after missing all of last season with elbow and hip injuries.

Player Who Could Disappoint: The Athletics spent big money (at least for them) when they gave a one-year, \$10 million contract to Sheets as a free agent, even though he sat out last season while recovering from shoulder surgery. PECOTA isn't optimistic about a big return on the investment, as Sheets is tabbed for just five wins and 92 innings.