

Oakland A's notebook: Fifth starter down to three-man fight

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune 2/25/2010

Trevor Cahill spent the entire 2009 season in the A's starting rotation but finds nothing guaranteed entering this year.

Vin Mazzaro also got a taste of life as a big league starter. As did Gio Gonzalez.

Those three are the main contestants in one of the more intriguing roster battles in A's camp — the fight for the No. 5 starter's spot.

With the A's having added Ben Sheets and re-signed Justin Duchscherer, just one rotation spot is there for the taking.

"I was fortunate enough to pitch all of last year," Cahill said. "I could have pitched a lot better. I've got to learn how to make those really bad games not (so) terrible."

For one, he must keep the ball in the yard. Cahill went 10-13 with a 4.63 ERA but allowed 27 homers, an Oakland rookie record.

Twenty-one of those were surrendered to left-handers, tying for the American League lead. But that full year of starting experience could give the edge to Cahill, who turns 22 on Monday.

A's manager Bob Geren wants Cahill, a sinkerballer, to work on his slider, giving him another weapon against lefties.

Mazzaro, 23, is healthy after shoulder tendinitis ended his 2009 season early. Called up in June, he won his first two starts with 132/3 combined scoreless innings. Then he endured an eight-game losing streak and finished 4-9 with a 5.32 ERA in 17 starts.

"It's always about the competition," Mazzaro said. "I'm definitely going to fight and work harder."

Geren says Gonzalez, 24, might have the best stuff on the entire staff. But the A's want to see the pitcher who threw impressively in consecutive starts at Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park, not the one who allowed 11 earned runs in 22/3 innings against Minnesota.

Of the three, Gonzalez is the only one with relief experience in the bigs. It seems he'd get the most consideration for the bullpen if he doesn't land the starting role.

With outfielder Coco Crisp still working his throwing arm into shape after shoulder surgery, Geren said he'd give Crisp the option of serving as DH in early exhibitions so he can get his at-bats.

Crisp, signed to a one-year, \$5.25 million deal in the winter, is the projected starting center fielder.

Duchscherer returned to the clubhouse Wednesday after a procedure Tuesday to relieve pain in his sacroiliac joint (lower back).

He was still groggy from the effects of the sedative he was given, so he was held out of activity. Duchscherer will get treatment this morning before determining when he might start throwing again.

"I'm not going to push myself," Duchscherer said. "I've got six weeks."

Doctors burned off the nerve endings in the SI joint to relieve the pain. Duchscherer was told the nerve endings could grow back, but he could get the procedure done again if necessary.

Geren said Sheets had good movement on his pitches during a "simulated" bullpen session, in which infielder Corey Wimberly stood in as a batter.

A March 6 exhibition against the Angels will not be broadcast on KTRB-860 as planned because of a conflict with the Stanford-Cal men's basketball game.

Chin Music: Justin Duchscherer update

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/24/2010

We just talked to Justin Duchscherer, who is still a bit dazed from the sedative for his surgery. He's not even allowed to drive today. His fiance had to drop him off at the park. "I don't feel anything. I feel great right now, just tired." He was supposed to have the procedure to relieve pain in his sacroiliac joint Monday, but he was allergic to the sedative they were going to use. It was pushed back to Tuesday, and they had to give him a large-sized dose of Ativan to put him under. As a result, he's done little more than sleep since yesterday afternoon.

He plans to come in tomorrow morning, get some treatment and see how he feels. He won't rush getting back to throwing, but he's hardly concerned about falling too far behind. "For me, it's just a matter of getting out there. Once I get out there, things take care of themselves. ... I'm not going to push myself. I've got six weeks."

The procedure involved burning off the nerve endings in his SI joint (located very low in his back), where the pain was. Apparently, the nerve endings can grow back in as soon as six months, but he can get the procedure done as often as needed. And there's no guarantee the nerve endings ever grow back and continue to bother him.

So there's everything you ever needed to know about this topic, and I hope I never have to write about Duke's SI joint (or anyone else's) ever again. It can't be all that exciting to read about either 😊... Bottom line — he'll start throwing when he feels able to, which shouldn't be too long ...

Chin Music: A's update: Justin Duchscherer, Lenny DiNardo and Michael Wuertz's slider

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/24/2010

Just a quick note on the morning's activities:

—Rajai Davis showed up this morning, and it's now easier to count which position players aren't here yet as opposed to which ones are. Jack Cust and Kevin Kouzmanoff are two of the bigger names who have yet to make an appearance, but they should be rolling in by tomorrow, obviously, when everyone's required to be here.

—Still no word on when Justin Duchscherer might crank up his throwing again, but Bob Geren said Duke is only one or two days behind as of today. Each day missed puts him a little further back though, so we'll keep an eye on that. Maybe Duchscherer will be around later to shed some light.

—Something I wasn't aware of when I wrote about Jake Fox in Tuesday's notebook: Fox is out of minor league options. I had been led to believe he had options left. This definitely will make the roster battle more interesting. Fox appeared to have his work cut out to make the 25-man roster, but if the A's want to send him to the minors, he first must be exposed to other teams through waivers (outfielder/second baseman Eric Patterson is in the same situation, and this can work to both players' advantage in making the team). Of course, Eric Chavez's health is always a big variable, and if he's not ready, then Fox might be needed regardless.

—Left-hander Lenny DiNardo has been slowed by a strained arch in his left foot, but he said he felt a lot better today than yesterday. Don't forget about this guy as a swingman option for this pitching staff. He was pretty serviceable in that role in 2008 for the A's. I'm not saying I expect DiNardo to make a major run at a roster spot, but he's a known quantity to the A's. And if injuries linger with some guys, who knows?

—Once we got injury stuff out of the way, we actually got to talk baseball w/Geren. He was talking about Michael Wuertz's slider, saying it's unusual for a right-hander's slider to be so effective against lefty hitters, as Wuertz's is. Many right-handers start their sliders over the middle of the plate and break it toward a hitter's feet. That leaves them vulnerable to the home run ball if they hang a pitch. Wuertz can work his slider that way, but he can also go back door, starting it outside and bringing it back in to catch the plate for called strikes. "It's not only a good one, but he can locate it," Geren said.

Geren gets fired up talking about this kind of stuff. Sometimes I believe he thinks the beat writers are only interested in injuries/negative news. We only hit him with injury stuff because we have to provide updates, especially on the big-name guys. Truth is, I like chatting w/him about the hard-core baseball stuff. It's interesting, and Geren gets more animated talking about the inner workings of the game than anything else ...

I guess my "quick note" wasn't so quick after all!

Nerve procedure for sleepy Duchscherer

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Justin Duchscherer wasn't quite sure how the area around his sacroiliac joint felt Wednesday. He was still sedated from the previous day's procedure to burn the nerve ends near the joint to alleviate discomfort.

"I don't feel anything," the right-handed starter said with a big grin. "I feel great right now. More than anything, I'm tired."

Duchscherer has done little except sleep since the procedure, in part because the initial round of sedation didn't do the trick, so he got another helping. The nerve ablation had been scheduled for Monday, but because of a previous bad reaction to the sedation drug Versed, he went in Tuesday instead, and doctors substituted Ativan, which worked like a charm. Asked about the procedure, Duchscherer responded, "I don't remember."

Before sedation, though, doctors showed him what was involved: Radio frequency is delivered through needles to three areas near the joint.

"It's a little scary," Duchscherer said. "The thought of it isn't much fun."

Duchscherer will be reassessed today, but he is likely to be back on the mound in the next several days. He emphasized that he is only a few days behind Oakland's other starters.

"A couple of days difference isn't going to kill me," Duchscherer said.

Briefly: Corner infielder/catcher **Jake Fox** is out of options, making that battle for the bench even more interesting. Fox has an excellent shot to make the roster no matter what, but with no options remaining, he's a near lock unless he has an absolutely abysmal spring. ... Opening Night starter **Ben Sheets** threw his bullpen session Wednesday with infielder **Corey Wimberly** standing in the box (but not swinging). He'll next pitch Sunday against A's hitters at Papago Park. ... Outfielder **Coco Crisp** might be the designated hitter early in the spring to save wear on his surgically repaired shoulder. ... Catcher **Landon Powell** will not get any time at first base this spring or, probably, this year. ... DH **Jack Cust**, third baseman **Kevin Kouzmanoff** and infielder **Gregorio Petit**, are all expected in camp today. Only catcher **Joel Galarraga**, stuck in Mexico with visa trouble, is expected to be missing.

Sheets' debut will seem familiar

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 2/24/2010

Ben Sheets' first start in an Oakland uniform will come against the only other major-league team for which he has pitched.

Manager **Bob Geren** said Tuesday that the right-hander will start the A's second spring game, March 5 against the Brewers at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Asked about facing his longtime team, Sheets joked, "The fact is that the first game of every spring I pitch against Brewers - in an intrasquad game."

This, of course, is slightly different, but still, Sheets said, "I don't know if will have the same impact as it would if I was lined up at Miller Park. It will be weird, but if I get everyone out or if they score 10 runs, who cares? It's spring training. It's not going to hurt my feelings either way."

The four-time All-Star quickly added, "Don't get me wrong: I'd like to get everyone out. All the time."

Trevor Cahill, the front-runner for the final spot in the rotation, will start the Cactus League opener against the Cubs on March 4 at Mesa. **Clayton Mortensen** also will pitch in that game.

Briefly: Justin Duchscherer's procedure to eliminate irritation in his sacroiliac joint went well. He is expected back today, although he is unlikely to throw. ... **Eric Chavez** took grounders at first during an informal workout with about 15 other position players and he said he's starting to get a little more comfortable there, although he doesn't like using the first baseman's glove. He won't take grounders at third or short in order to save wear and tear on his shoulder. ... **Joey Devine**, coming back from elbow surgery, threw a 20-pitch bullpen session and said it was "free and easy." ... Left-hander **Lenny DiNardo** said that the left arch strain on the trainer's report Tuesday was "a false alarm." X-rays were fine and he was feeling much improved; he might try to throw today.

Drumbeat: Duchscherer's a little out of it, but OK after procedure

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix

Right-hander Justin Duchscherer told us right away he was still feeling the effects of sedation after his nerve ablation procedure yesterday, and it was quickly obvious that, yes, Duchscherer is still out of it. So much so that I asked if he'd driven himself to Phoenix Muni and he said no way, he's not allowed to drive yet; his fiancée had brought him over.

"I don't feel anything," he said, smiling widely. "I feel great right now. More than anything, I'm tired."

That's despite sleeping essentially from 2 p.m. on yesterday. Duchscherer woke up for at an hour at 9 p.m., then went back to sleep until this morning. "I need to clear my head," he said.

The procedure originally was scheduled for Monday but Duchscherer has had a bad reaction in the past to the drug Versed, which was going to be used. So it was re-scheduled for yesterday, and Duchscherer was given Ativan, instead - quite a lot of it because initially it wasn't enough. "And then....I don't remember," Duchscherer said.

Before sedation, though, doctors showed him what the procedure would entail. Radio frequency is delivered through needles to three areas around the sacroiliac joint, which is between the spine and pelvis, and the nerve ends are burned.

"It's a little scary," Duchscherer said. "The thought of it isn't much fun."

The procedure often must be repeated in six months to a year when the nerves regenerate, but sometimes no repeat is necessary if the source of the original irritation is gone.

Duchscherer said he'll be reassessed tomorrow and he expects to get some treatment. In general, the procedure only causes soreness for a few days, and while Duchscherer said he isn't going to push it this early in the spring, it's likely he'll be back on the mound in the next week.

He threw a 20-pitch bullpen on Friday and, he said, "It felt as good as it has in years."

He's only a few days behind the other starters, so at this point, he might be looking at making his first spring game appearance more toward the middle of March.

"A couple of days difference isn't going to kill me," Duchscherer said. "If I was a power guy, maybe it would be different, but that's not the way I pitch."

Drumbeat: Whoops - Jake Fox IS out of options - updated

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix

****UPDATE****OK, there has been a lot more discussion this morning about Jake Fox's options, and he still doesn't have any left. The issues revolved around when his contract was first purchased (July 2007) and whether he then spent enough time in the minors after that to qualify that as an option year.

Here is the timeline that a member of the A's front office forwarded me:

Fox selected to ML roster July 19, 2007.

Optioned July 27.

Recalled Aug. 14. (No optioned used, not 20 days)

Optioned Aug. 24 for remainder of season. (Option)

Also optioned in 2008 and 2009.

Apparently the Aug. 24 transaction was not accounted for on various sites, which seems to have led to a lot of confusion and probably more wasted time than members of the A's front office might have liked. Thanks to them for their patience in helping clear this up; I'm impressed how many people took an interest in this and tried to track down as much information as possible.

It would be nice if MLB just provided full information about option status every spring so we could avoid all this; I remember one spring telling Dan Meyer that he had a fourth option and how upset he was to learn that. He'd had no idea. Safe to say, that ruined his spring and probably a lot of his year. Options are one of the trickier bits of business around, which is why I usually just ask the experts.

Coming into spring camp, the A's had been saying that Eric Patterson is the only player on the bubble of a roster spot who is out of options, and word was that corner infielder/catcher/DH Jake Fox had a option left.

I checked with Fox this morning, however, because I'd heard from so many people who'd said he's out of options, and he insisted that he was out and was horrified to think otherwise. He said his agents also had confirmed that.

So I asked the A's yet again, and - yes, Jake Fox is right. He's out of options. "Brain cramp" on the A's part, I was told.

So, anyway, this does kind of change the complexion of all those pre-camp roster battle stories your A's media have been writing. But maybe the fact that Patterson has been described as the only A's bubble-guy without options means that the team considered Fox a lock to make the roster. Well, the option status kind of confirms that, although I suppose any combination of a healthy Eric Chavez and a poor spring showing by Fox could induce the A's to designate Fox and hope he clears waivers, or trade him.

The fact that there's no relying on Chavez's health, though, makes Fox's position pretty secure. Along with that option status.

Outfielder Rajai Davis reported this morning, as did right-handed fireballer Henry Rodriguez, who looked so intriguing last September. Of the A's regulars, the only one we haven't seen yet is Kevin Kouzmanoff, though that doesn't mean he hasn't popped in at some point either here or over at the minor-league complex. (Oh, and Jack Cust has yet to show, either. You'd think with the bad weather on the East Coast that Cust and Davis would have shown up a month or two early to Arizona, but when I asked Davis about that, he said he'd spent a lot of time shoveling snow, but he's so committed to working with his local church he couldn't get away early.)

Nearly all the pitchers are in action today, with only one, Clayton Mortensen, scheduled to throw a bullpen session tomorrow. Manager Bob Geren said the extra day of rest for the pitchers had been built into the schedule.

Justin Duchscherer is expected to stop by today after his nerve ablation procedure yesterday; he's still a little on the sore side, apparently, but he's only a few days behind the other starters at this point and it's believed he'll be OK to throw within the week.

A's hurlers owe much to bullpen coach

Romanick has been integral to advancing careers

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 2/25/2010

PHOENIX -- Ron Romanick is never quite done with his homework.

The A's bullpen coach is constantly seeking knowledge. After all, it's what aids him in his quest to strengthen baseball's future on the mound.

Brad Ziegler credits him with creating a "comfortable bullpen atmosphere." Dallas Braden calls him a "great baseball mind." Joey Devine admires his "great memory."

All of it comes from the homework. However, none of the material Romanick has come across -- in books and online -- during his 18 years of coaching experience could prevent a hospital visit two years ago.

It was a rainy day in Kansas City when A's pitchers took the field to get some throwing in before a game against the Royals. Romanick caught Devine, who alerted his coach that a sinker was coming.

"It cut instead of sank," Ziegler recalls. "It hit him square in the mouth."

One stitched lip and concussion later, Romanick was back during the seventh inning in the 'pen, where unofficial interim bullpen coach Alan Embree mocked him all night.

Embree is long gone, but the jokes are very much still present. In fact, almost every day.

Devine, sidelined all of last season after Tommy John surgery, has been throwing to Romanick on a regular basis as part of a rehab program his bullpen coach created for him.

"Every morning when he goes out with Joey," Ziegler says, "we all ask him, 'Are you sure you want to be squatting down catching Joey?' Joey thinks about it every single time he throws to him."

No need to worry, says Devine, who still feels horrible about the incident. "He now wears a mask," he affirms with a grin.

Needless to say, Romanick's trip to the emergency room didn't force him to take a step back for any period of time. He's always moving forward, both with his players and the programs he develops for them. And no one talks enough about his work than those who have seen it blossom -- including Devine, Ziegler and Braden.

Romanick, 49, enters his third season on the A's Major League staff as bullpen coach after spending nine seasons as the club's Minor League roving pitching instructor. He also served as a pitching coordinator for the Mariners organization for seven seasons -- a time that followed a brief three-year professional playing career.

Those experiences have helped Romanick form individually designed pitching programs catered toward a player's style and health. He doesn't just produce, though. He directs.

"He's come up with all the ideas for our throwing programs and rehab programs," Ziegler says. "So who better to help the guys run it than the guy who created it? That way we know it's done the right way."

Ziegler, for one, has a hard time imagining where his career would be without Romanick, who has effectively converted the A's right-hander into one of the game's best submarine-style relievers. The 26-year-old Ziegler took a leap of faith in 2006 with his then-Minor League instructor, who convinced the pitcher that the switch would greatly increase his odds of receiving a ticket to The Show.

"I'd like to think that there was still a chance that I might have still gotten to play," says Ziegler, who finished his 2008 rookie season with a 3-0 record and 1.06 ERA. "I don't think I would have been as successful as I have been, and going forward I'm hoping to have a 10- to 12-year career, and he's very much a major part of why that's happened."

Talking and communicating are major aspects of Romanick's programs, which continually make use of repeating and reinforcing. Just ask Braden, who underwent shoulder surgery and turned to Romanick after the 2005 season.

"After I came off surgery, doctors basically told me I wouldn't pitch for a year," the A's left-hander says. "Ron changed that for me. The biggest thing for me was making sure I continue to simulate the same arm speed on my fastball and changeup, so the throwing program was tailored toward that."

However, any athlete who has ever gone through a rehab program knows that they don't always go according to plan. That's no issue for Romanick, who has plans for plans that don't work.

"He does a great job of dealing with setbacks and realizing what needs to change in order to benefit you," Braden says. "There's never a work stoppage because you're always taking a step. Whether it's two big steps or five baby steps forward, it doesn't matter. You're always going to be progressive."

That positive mindset -- prominent in an injury-prone Oakland clubhouse-- has jump-started careers, rebooted careers and led other careers in a healthy direction. Devine, among the countless others, is currently a product of such success. The A's reliever, who went under the knife last April, has already deemed himself way ahead of schedule for a return -- which could come by Opening Day.

"It's just been real good working with Ron," Devine says. "He wants to see us have success. He puts a lot of long, hard hours into what he does and really takes a lot of pride in what he does. He communicates it well and wants to see you get healthy."

Ziegler is all smiles when thinking back to that wet day in Kansas City, when a concussed Romanick returned to the bullpen in more than a slightly loopy state of mind. But when talk turns to the state of mind Ziegler has developed from Romanick's teachings, he's genuinely serious about his praise for the man.

"He knows our deliveries, and he knows what it takes to motivate us," he says. "He's not just the guy who answers the phone down there in the bullpen. He actually plays a big part in helping us develop."

No pain, but no plan set for Duchscherer

Righty feels good, if drowsy, after lower back procedure

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Justin Duchscherer returned to the A's clubhouse on Wednesday, one day after undergoing a procedure to remove nerve ends from a joint that was causing him lower back pain.

The 31-year-old Duchscherer, who still appeared drowsy, will come back Thursday to evaluate what type of baseball activity he'll be allowed to do. It's expected he won't take the mound again for at least a few days.

"I'm not going to try to push myself," Duchscherer said. "I have six weeks before the season starts, so I have time."

The two-time All-Star underwent the procedure at the Arizona Center for Pain Relief, where radio waves were used to burn the irritated nerve of his SI joint, which connects the base of the spine to the pelvic bone.

He was bothered by the same pain last year while rehabbing from minor elbow surgery and received three cortisone shots for the joint, which recently stopped responding to the treatment.

Duchscherer, who missed all of 2009 due to the elbow problems and clinical depression, is expected to lead a rather young rotation alongside newcomer Ben Sheets, and he believes he'll be healthy enough to do so.

"I threw a bullpen the day before camp broke," he said, "and I felt as good as I've ever felt in years. I was pretty much right on schedule."

Duchscherer and A's manager Bob Geren insisted Wednesday that the right-hander is not far behind the other pitchers, and neither expect this week's procedure to hold him back.

"More than anything, I'm just tired," Duchscherer said. "I'm still under the influence of this stuff. I need to clear my head before I know what I'm capable of doing. Tomorrow when I come in, we'll see how I feel."

The right-hander appeared just fine Wednesday thanks to a pretty large dose of drugs used to put him under for the procedure.

"I don't feel anything," he said while sporting a smile. "I feel great right now."

The burnt nerve could grow back, so there is a chance Duchscherer may have to undergo the procedure again, but "it's not guaranteed to come back," he said. Even if it does, whatever caused the original irritation may be gone.

Duchscherer said he was slightly nervous about the procedure, especially upon seeing the equipment used, but he has been through enough to avoid any overly scary thoughts.

"I've been through so many things now that I don't panic anymore," he said.

A's Duchscherer hoping back, hip pain gone

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Justin Duchscherer threw 20 pitches in a bullpen session the day before pitchers and catchers were officially set to report and said he felt better than he had in years. Then the pain came again.

He hasn't been able to throw since.

Duchscherer sought immediate medical attention once he began feeling the pain in his lower back and hip.

"I have been through this so many times I don't panic anymore," Duchscherer said Wednesday. "I just go talk to the trainers and doctors and get their opinion."

This time it led to a medical procedure Tuesday to relieve discomfort in his lower back.

"I needed quite a bit of sedation," Duchscherer said. "They couldn't get me under enough Monday, that's why I had to wait until yesterday. They gave me some and it didn't work, so they gave me more and then I woke up and we were done."

He said he still couldn't feel too much of anything Wednesday and would rest the remainder of the day, then come back ready to do whatever he can to get himself back on schedule.

"When Justin feels ready to go back out on the mound, we'll get him out there," A's manager Bob Geren said. "As of today he's only one or two days behind because he had been throwing."

Duchscherer has had trouble with his hip for several years and has spent time on the disabled list in each of the past four seasons.

Duchscherer's rehab from 2008 elbow surgery was cut short last year after he was diagnosed with clinical depression. He has a 2.82 ERA in 214 career appearances with Oakland.

"It's day-to-day. I'll wait to see how it feels" he said. "I feel great right now. I'm just tired and I feel a little bit groggy. Tomorrow I will come in, get a little treatment. I'll start slow and go from there. I'm not going to push myself. I have six weeks to get ready."

In other developments, left-hander Lenny DiNardo reported that his strained left Achilles' heel was 50 percent and he'll be back on the field in a day or two.

Outfielder Rajai Davis and right-hander Henry Rodriguez reported to camp Wednesday. Official reporting day for position players is Thursday but all but a handful of the 62 expected players are in camp.

Someone to lean on

By Jerry Crasnick, ESPN.com

PHOENIX -- Never mind the challenge Ben Sheets will face in his pursuit of 200 innings. His surgically repaired right flexor tendon will get its biggest workout from all the hand holding he'll be doing this summer.

When the Athletics spent \$10 million on a one-year contract for Sheets, they were betting on a return to form by the pitcher who made four All-Star teams while with Milwaukee, struck out 264 batters at age 25 and averaged 225 innings during a three-year stretch with the Brewers.

And if Sheets isn't vintage Big Ben or Oakland fades from American League West contention by July, general manager Billy Beane will try to flip him at the trade deadline, and Sheets will swap his Kelly green, Fort Knox gold and wedding-gown white for a contending team's colors.

In the meantime, the gregarious, entertaining Sheets will be the voice of wisdom in the clubhouse, dugout, video room and airport terminals across America. Every young staff needs a resident sage, right?

Flash back to last spring, and it's the one thing Oakland's young pitchers were lacking. Lefties Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden and righties Trevor Cahill and Vin Mazzaro arrived in Phoenix with lots of hype, lofty expectations and little understanding of the rigors of a 162-game season.

"We were all young enough and just dumb enough that we really didn't know what was going on," Braden said.

The role of a stabilizing influence was supposed to fall to two-time All-Star Justin Duchscherer. But when Duchscherer missed the entire season with an elbow injury and clinical depression, the A's experienced the pitfalls of excessive youth. Oakland started a rookie pitcher in a franchise-record 116 games, and the rotation ranked 11th in the AL in ERA (4.76) and strikeouts (610) and 13th in innings pitched (888). Only Baltimore's starters logged a lighter workload.

For sure, the kids showed flashes. Anderson tossed a complete-game shutout at Fenway Park and carried a perfect game into the seventh inning against the Angels, and Cahill threw seven scoreless innings against Los Angeles and Texas late in the season. But with no veteran in the rotation, it was left to pitching coach Curt Young, catcher Kurt Suzuki and Braden (the rotation elder at 26) to provide guidance and perspective during the tough times.

"When you first break in, you go through so many ups, downs and bumps throughout the season," Suzuki said. "When you don't have that veteran presence to lean on and follow and see how he handles certain situations, it's difficult.

"The game speeds up here. It's so fast in the big leagues. I would go out to the mound when I'd see them racing a little bit, and I'd try to slow the pace down and get them back into that relaxed comfort zone where they could perform. As the season went on, they showed how talented and smart they were. They started making the adjustments themselves."

The kids' pulses began racing anew in January. After the A's re-signed Duchscherer to a one-year contract heavy on incentives, Beane pulled off a hot stove shocker. The A's made Sheets the second-highest-paid player on the roster (behind Eric Chavez) even though Sheets hadn't appeared in a major league game since September 2008.

THE YEAR AFTER INJURY ...

The A's are counting on Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer to return to form after missing 2009 with injuries. Here are the numbers for four veteran pitchers (five years or more in the majors) who returned to pitch 150 innings after missing an entire season:

Pitcher	Season/Team	Age	W-L	ERA	IP	BB	SO
Joe Mays	2005 Twins	29	6-10	5.65	156	41	59
Brian Moehler	2005 Marlins	33	6-12	4.55	158.1	42	95
Chris Carpenter	2004 Cardinals	29	15-5	3.46	182	38	152
Jon Lieber	2004 Yankees	34	14-8	4.33	176.2	18	102

Source: Elias Sports Bureau

The signing was momentous enough that several A's remembered precisely where they were when they got the news. Manager Bob Geren was having a flat tire repaired when Beane called, and he had to step outside to escape the noise from his lug nuts being removed.

Braden was so excited, he tracked down Sheets' phone number and sent his new teammate a "Welcome to Oakland " text message. To his delight, Sheets responded almost immediately.

"He told me, 'I want you to get your working boots on, because it's going to be a fun year,'" Braden said. "That was awesome to hear. Here's a four-time All-Star texting me back when he's got nothing invested yet. And he's ready to work. You hear that and you know you've got the right guy."

With camp just under way, Braden has made it clear that he'll be hanging on Sheets' every word.

"By the end of the year, I'll have Dallas throwing right-handed," Sheets said.

The Oakland staff is an intriguing blend of personalities. Anderson is the businesslike coach's son from Oklahoma, Cahill the laid-back Californian. Gio Gonzalez is emotional, Mazzaro intense. And Braden has a touch of Bill "Spaceman" Lee to him. He arrived at camp and regaled sportswriters with stories from his offseason trip to Amsterdam, which was highlighted by a visit to the always-entertaining medieval torture museum.

"It was the coldest winter in Europe in 35 years, and I was making snow angels in the middle of Dam Square," Braden said. "It was awesome."

Now the clubhouse bouillabaisse includes Sheets, with his Louisiana good ol' boy charm and Brett Favre everyman quality. Sheets is funny, outgoing and the guy most likely to be overseeing the fantasy football draft if he's still around in August. Mention his .076 career batting average, and Sheets will do a hilarious, self-deprecating riff on his futility at the plate. He is quick to point out that former Brewers manager Ned Yost once batted him eighth in the lineup.

"Bob [Geren] has already talked to me about DHing and pinch hitting in critical moments, but only with a real tough lefty on the mound," Sheets said. "Like CC Sabathia."

Are You Experienced?

If Ben Sheets is healthy, he will provide the Athletics with a veteran presence -- and more career innings than the rest of the A's projected rotation combined.

Pitcher	'10 Age	Career IP
Ben Sheets	31	1,428
J. Duchscherer	30	426.2
Trevor Cahill	22	178.2
Brett Anderson	22	175.1
Gio Gonzalez	24	132.2
Vin Mazzaro	23	91.1

Sheets the pitcher knows what it's like to be young and mentorless in the big leagues. Jamey Wright helped him get comfortable in the Milwaukee clubhouse, and he learned a lot from pitching coaches Dave Stewart and Mike Maddux. But Sheets remembers feeling a trace of envy when Kevin Millwood relayed how it felt to pitch in Atlanta and have access to the accrued knowledge of Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and John Smoltz.

"He had Smoltz, a power pitcher, Glavine, a lefty, and Maddux, a location righty who could move the ball all over the place," Sheets said. "No matter what the question, he had a different type pitcher who could answer it."

Veterans, by virtue of their experience, are more adept than rookies at anticipating turning points and spotting subtle cues. As Braden points out, a savvy pitcher can tell a lot from the way a hitter *takes* a pitch, much less swings at it. If Sheets throws his curveball on a 1-1 count, Braden wants to know why. If Sheets shakes off the catcher in a big spot, Braden will ask about that, too.

"We have an absolute proven All-Star in Sheets, and the same with Duchscherer," Braden said. "You're talking about two guys who have been through the wars and can give us some insight in a different way than we're used to getting. We have two beautiful minds to pick from now."

Like Randy Johnson, Sheets would rather have the kids approach him for advice than cram it down their throats. He also is more interested in schooling them on pitch selection and the art of navigating a lineup than dispensing personal insights -- like his favorite restaurant in Seattle or his thoughts on the proper amount to tip the clubhouse attendants.

"You have to act like a big leaguer, obviously, but the important part for me is out there on the field," Sheets said. "You can act like a big leaguer all you want here [in the dugout]. If you can't do it on the field, it doesn't matter."

Sheets is in a good place at age 31. His arm feels fine, he'll be working in a pitcher-friendly park this summer, and he has a chance to shoot for a bigger payday next winter with a healthy and productive season.

As a fringe benefit, school is officially in session. Even if Sheets is just passing through town, he has a chance to leave his young rotation-mates in Oakland with something to remember.

Quick pitch: Ozzie Guillen's Twitter account getting him in hot water

Bob Nightengale, USA Today, 2/25/2010

The job of a baseball writer every morning used to be opening your door, walking to your driveway, and picking up your local newspapers to find out the latest news.

These days, you wake up, check out the newspaper internet sites, the on-line sites, ESPN, CBS Sports, the local papers, and oh yeah, the Twitter and Facebook accounts of ballplayers and managers.

And if you're a member of the Chicago White Sox beat crew, you don't let a minute go by without checking on manager Ozzie Guillen's latest Twitter posting.

Guillen, who said he was already bored on the third day of camp, already has been approached by general manager Kenny Williams, wondering in so many words if his foray into the world of microblogging is such a good idea.

Guillen vows that he will stick to non-White Sox news, and promised he won't let it interfere with baseball.

"I guess I can't have fun," Guillen told the Chicago Tribune. "I flunked in school five times, and I never had as much trouble as I'm having right now. Why do I have to explain to people why I'm doing this? Like I said, I talked to Kenny about it, it's not anything that involves the ballclub.

"There are a lot of people in baseball that have Twitter. Why me? Why do I have to explain why I have Twitter? Obviously, I know I'm the manager of the team and the face of the ballclub, but there are a couple guys out there, I won't say any names, that have Twitter.

"I guess they're not famous, or people don't care about it. The one thing I promise people, well I don't have to promise, but (owner) Jerry (Reinsdorf) and Kenny. It's nothing to do with the White Sox. I hope I don't have to say I got in a fight with my wife last night."

Joe Maddon of Tampa Bay and Tony La Russa of St. Louis are the only other known managers with Twitter accounts.

In other news we'll be following today:

--Texas Rangers left fielder Josh Hamilton, who suffered a bruised left shoulder and neck spasms Wednesday during workouts. No X-rays were taken and no tests have been scheduled. The Rangers badly need him to stay healthy.

"It's embarrassing," Hamilton told reporters. "I just fell and landed on my shoulder and bruised my shoulder a little bit. We'll give it 12 to 24 hours and see how it goes."

--The Diamondbacks' negotiations with right fielder Justin Upton, third baseman Mark Reynolds and catcher Miguel Montero about long-term contracts.

--Red Sox reliever Jonathan Papelbon, who awoke with a sore back this week, is scheduled to throw his first live batting practice.

--Colorado Rockies shortstop Troy Tulowitzki, who soon will be leaving camp to attend the funeral of his cousin, Lexy Winters, who died Monday from skin cancer.

--Oakland A's starter Justin Duchscherer, who had a procedure to burn nerve endings in his elbow, and likely will miss the next few days.

--San Francisco Giants third baseman Mark DeRosa, who still hasn't swung at bat since undergoing off-season wrist surgery, but insists he'll be ready in a week,

--Tampa Bay Rays infielder/DH Willy Aybar, who left the clubhouse wearing a splint on his wrist, but says he'll be fine in a few days.