

A's Daily News Clips; February 28

What if? Sheets, A's can only imagine the possibilities

By Joe Stiglich/ Bay Area News Group. 2/28/10

Ben Sheets isn't interested in playing the "what if" game.

When healthy, he's proven to be one of the most dominant pitchers in baseball.

But the injuries that have sidetracked his career beg the question: What might the A's new ace have accomplished by now with some better luck?

Sheets made five trips to the disabled list from 2005-2008 with the Milwaukee Brewers, then missed all of last season while recovering from elbow surgery.

"I don't let it consume me," Sheets said of his health woes. "But I wonder what type of pitcher I'd have been in those years."

The A's signed the right-hander to a one-year, \$10 million contract in January, a high-risk, high-reward proposition for a team that doesn't normally invest big dollars in starting pitchers.

"If he didn't have the injury, you've got a guy who probably signs back in November to a long-term deal," A's general manager Billy Beane said on the day of the signing.

"Is there a risk? Yeah, that's life on the edge a little bit," Beane continued. "But it's a great risk for us. We'll take it."

Sheets, 31, notched 264 strikeouts to go with his 2.70 ERA in 2004 with the Brewers. But over the next three seasons, he battled injuries to his shoulder, finger and hamstring.

Sheets made 31 starts and posted a 3.09 ERA in 2008 before his elbow trouble surfaced in September of that season. After failing a physical with Texas prior to last season, he
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opted for surgery to repair the flexor tendon in his elbow .

Sheets has appeared loose since reporting to A's camp and has been quick with the one-liners around reporters.

That light-hearted demeanor disappears when Sheets is on the mound, opposing hitters said.

"He's just a bulldog, man. He's coming after you," Chicago Cubs first baseman Derrek Lee said. "It's just been unfortunate he's had (the injuries), or you'd be talking about one of the top pitchers around."

Upon signing with the A's, Sheets requested the team's scouting reports on opposing teams but says he doesn't overload himself with information.

"If I face somebody for however many times, I kind of know how I want to approach them," he said.

Sheets takes that simple approach to the mound. He runs a fastball into the mid 90's and complements it with a hard curveball. He relies predominantly on those two pitches, though Lee said Sheets will mix in a changeup.

"He's a guy with a power arm and two big-time pitches," Giants left fielder Mark DeRosa said of his impressions from facing Sheets while with the Cubs from 2007-08. —... You have to be disciplined. When he's on, he can make you look foolish."

A Louisiana native, Sheets starred at Northeastern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana-Monroe) and still lives in his home state. A diehard Saints fan, he was in attendance earlier this month when the Saints won their first Super Bowl in Miami.

He's met Drew Brees one time — the two share the same financial advisor — and said he draws inspiration from the Saints quarterback. Brees overcame a shoulder injury a few years back and has since developed into one of the NFL's elite quarterbacks.

"He was there four years ago, coming off shoulder injury," Sheets said. "I look back, I hope I can parallel that."

Rickey's on hand at A's camp and school is in session

By Joe Stiglich/ San Jose Mercury. 2/28/10

PHOENIX — A group of A's, about 15 players deep, gathered around Rickey Henderson on Saturday to listen to the Hall of Famer talk about the finer points of baserunning.

Then a large mob of fans swarmed Henderson for autographs as he exited the fields at Papago Park Baseball Complex.

Indeed, all eyes were on Henderson during his first day working as a special instructor with the team for which he played 12 of his 25 seasons.

Henderson, who has a home in the Phoenix area, will be back today and said he'll drop in and out of A's camp over the next week to help out.

"It's fun to talk to the guys that love stealing bases, "... but you can go from first to third and win a ballgame even with the slowest guys," he said. "So if they know how to run the base paths, they'll be more successful."

Henderson, 51, seemed right at home as an instructor and still looked in terrific physical shape. A's general manager Billy Beane said it's possible Henderson will take on a more extensive instructing role with the team. But both he and Henderson said things would have to work around Henderson's schedule.

"The only reason to not keep him out here is he looks better in uniform than anybody else," Beane cracked.

The A's want Henderson, the majors' career leader in stolen bases (1,406) and runs scored (2,295), to spend considerable time with the top stealing threats such as Rajai Davis, Coco Crisp and Cliff Pennington.

Henderson talked at length with both Davis and Crisp, and Henderson seems to have taken a special interest in Davis, a leadoff candidate for the A's whom Henderson said has the ability to steal 75 to 80 bases. Davis had 41 steals last season.

"It's not just speed," Henderson said. "There were a whole lot of players in the league that I thought were faster than myself."

Henderson said he's emphasizing the importance of getting good jumps and reading a pitcher's move to Davis, and that he talked to Crisp about techniques for sliding head-first into bases. He said he thinks too many players run too upright and pound their bodies into the ground when diving, which risks injury.

"The theory to me when you're sliding head first "... is how close can you get to the dirt before you have to dive?" Henderson said.

Davis said he absorbed plenty in one session with the Hall of Famer. "Just talking to him enlightened me."

Suzuki expected to take it up a notch

Susan Slusser/ Chronicle Staff Writer. 2/28/10

Kurt Suzuki is a relentless overachiever. His story is much told; walk-on at Cal State Fullerton to College World Series starter, not highly touted as a minor-leaguer and now one of the top catchers in the AL.

Suzuki was the A's most consistent performer last year. He was one of the team's best offensive players, and he did a marvelous job working with an extremely young pitching staff. He's durable. He's got some power. He's fast. A leader in the clubhouse.

So what will he do next? Is there another level the 26-year-old can reach?

"It's too hard for me to say," Suzuki said. "I try to get better every day, whatever the day brings. When Don Wakamatsu was here, he'd say, 'Just stick with the process. Keep doing the same things.' "

The A's would take the same things, of course. Suzuki works beautifully with the pitchers, he hit .274 with 15 homers (second most on the club) and a team-high 88 RBIs. But TV broadcaster Ray Fosse, a close observer of Oakland catchers and a former All-Star at the position, said there will be plenty more from Suzuki.

"Each year, Kurt has gotten better and better," Fosse said. "He's very strong, he's very flexible, he's young. He does his job extremely well. I think there's no end to what he could do."

Like many people, Fosse felt that Suzuki played at an All-Star level last season. Of course, the AL All-Star starting catching spot is sewn up already, so Suzuki would have to be selected to the team by the players or by the All-Star manager.

"Kurt's not Joe Mauer," said Fosse of the Minnesota Twins' star. "But Joe Mauer is a freak."

It's true that Suzuki is unlikely to lead the league in hitting, a la Mauer, and he might not hit 30 homers. But he is capable of knocking 20 out, and he has speed - could he go 20-20? A stretch, maybe, but not impossible. And he's expected to bat third in the order much of the time - that's where teams often put their best, and most versatile, hitters.

"You can hit him anywhere, second, fourth, anyplace," said former A's bench coach Wakamatsu, who is now Seattle's manager. "He's just such a driven player in everything he does, and he has so much more talent in use - he's bigger and stronger, and he'll hit with more power. ... He is such a fast study, and he wants to be the best catcher in baseball."

There's a strain of thought that Suzuki's numbers will go up this season because he won't have to baby along so much of the rotation, which at times last year featured five rookies. Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer will be the No. 1 and 2 starters, and the young pitchers have some experience now.

That doesn't lessen the load for Suzuki at all, Fosse argued. Suzuki is a tireless worker, and he's still going to be studying just as much video, and doing as much physical and mental preparation as possible.

Suzuki will be arbitration eligible this winter, and if he's the A's most valuable everyday player, it might behoove the team to think about a multiyear deal. That's something the A's plan to begin thinking about, although the first order of business will be to get his one-year deal for 2010 completed.

"Obviously, it's crossed my mind," Suzuki said of a long-term contract. "This is the organization that groomed me, that gave me an opportunity. I'm a guy who thinks whatever is fair is fair, I'm not going to want anything outrageous.

"I want to be here as long as I can. Is that realistic? I don't know, but it's cool to think about."

The Drumbeat: Henderson says Davis could get 75-80 stolen bases

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer. 2/27/10

Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson spent a good 30 minutes on Saturday at Papago Park talking to Rajai Davis, the A's top base stealer, and afterward, Henderson declared that Davis could steal 75-80 bases this season.

Said Davis, "Easy. ... Sleeping."

The A's would like the outfielder to have more confidence in his running, so his attitude is a good start. Henderson said that Davis needs to have "no fear."

In addition, Henderson said, Davis' balance could be better, because he's been flat-footed. Henderson got him up on his toes, and that will help. Davis said his work with Henderson will help him get a more explosive start off the bag.

Henderson also worked with outfielder Coco Crisp, who likes to slide headfirst but has two surgically repaired shoulders.

Henderson showed him some techniques to limit the pounding on his shoulders by coming in lower and more smoothly.

Henderson will be around much of the week as a baserunning instructor. Said general manager Billy Beane, who was Henderson's teammate in Oakland in 1989, "The only reason not to keep him out here too long is that he looks better in the uniform than anyone else."

Briefly: The A's are going to take a cautious approach with Justin Duchscherer as he comes back from irritation around the sacroiliac joint; he'll be back on the mound in about two weeks. ... Dallas Braden, Brett Anderson and Tyson Ross will be among those pitching in Tuesday's intrasquad game at Phoenix Muni, while Gio Gonzalez will be in Wednesday's game. ... Gonzalez was among those in action Saturday, and he said Jack Cust and Eric Chavez told him his stuff "looks explosive." ... Hitters remarked on how hard Fautino De Los Santos was throwing; the minor-league reliever also is the fastest runner among the A's pitchers and jumped 10 feet in the long-jump test last week. "It looked like a video-game jump," one observer said. ... Today's

workout has been pushed back to a noon start at Papago. ... Catcher Joel Galarraga reported to camp. ... Chavez took grounders at first, third and short, and manager Bob Geren said he looked good everywhere.

The Drumbeat: Threat of rain scrambles schedule, and other tidbits

Susan Slusser/ The Chronicle. 2/27/10

Just a quick update from Papago Park, where the schedule was flipped this morning because of rain forecast for later in the day. Batting practice will bet at 10:20 or so rather than an hour later.

Tomorrow, everything has been moved later because of the rain. The team will stretch at Papago at noon rather than 9:30 a.m., so I'd anticipate batting practice would start somewhere between 1-2 p.m. Ben Sheets will be among the pitchers in action tomorrow.

Rickey Henderson is here; he just got changed and went onto the field and I believe his baserunning station will still begin about 10:30 or so. It's great to see him working with the A's again. It's like it always should have been this way, just a natural, obvious fit. Especially since these are the new, runnin' A's.

Joel Galarraga, the last man to report, made it into camp a little earlier than the team expected. The catcher, a Cuban defector now living in Mexico, was slowed by visa trouble, but he probably wasn't going to be catching bullpens everyday with the rest of the catchers. He missed nearly all of last season with injuries and the A's need to assess where he is.

UPDATE: Galarraga did catch a bullpen session today and manager Bob Geren said that Galarraga is not limited this spring despite DHing during winter ball because of last year's arm injuries.

Kurt Suzuki is from Hawaii, so I asked him about his family in light of the tsunami warning for the islands later today. He is concerned for Hawaii, particularly people in the Hilo area, which often gets hit hardest by tsunamis, but he said his family is on higher ground and a little inland and he believes they are not in the path of danger.

A's see speed as big key to success Davis, Crisp expected to lead running game

By Jane Lee / MLB.com. 2/27/10

PHOENIX -- Rajai Davis on Saturday spoke honestly and carefully about why speed is so significant to this 2010 A's ballclub.

"Well," he said, "we have to have something."

That something may not be power, but it's the reason Davis is saying the team is "going to do some great things."

And with baserunning legend Rickey Henderson in town as a special instructor for the next week, much attention in A's camp has suddenly turned to the club's potential success this season as measured by speed.

"I'm glad that they're showing an interest in baserunning," Henderson said. "I'm thinking that the whole Major League is starting to get back there. There are certain areas in the game and certain years in the game you have success. We started seeing a lot of success in guys hitting home runs, and now we're not seeing as many home runs, so we have to go back to the fundamentals.

"We can manifest more runs by doing the fundamental stuff than by having guys just hit home runs. I think it's good for baseball to go out and create runs instead of just waiting on one big hit."

The A's have the type of players to create such a running environment, which will presumably be led by Davis and newcomer Coco Crisp at the top of the lineup. Crisp owns a 162-game stolen-base average of 27, while Davis' mark of 41 last year bumped his average up to 45.

As a team, the A's ranked fourth in basestealing in all of baseball and finished seventh in stolen-base percentage (73.5) last year. They are also still riding on momentum from a second-half finish that saw 79 stolen bases following the All-Star break, which ranked first in baseball and greatly surpassed their first-half number of 54.

"I liked our percentage, our attempts last year," manager Bob Geren said. "Seeing as how we have most of the same personnel and also added, I would suspect there to be a touch more this year. I always believe that the guys who can steal bases should."

Added Davis: "Speed helps you when you get on base, and it really changes the game. Pitchers start thinking differently, and sometimes they focus more on the baserunner than the batter. All I know is they pay attention to me when I'm on base."

Oakland also hopes to concentrate on what many in the organization, including strength and conditioning coach Bob Alejo, are calling an underrated aspect of the game: defensive speed.

"I don't know how speed affects the games," Alejo said, "but I know it certainly affects the teams. You want to use it as a tool if you have it. It gives you lots of options, defensively and offensively. I think on defense is where most people don't realize how important it is."

Speed, he said, often translates into more successful plate appearances -- a notion the rather powerless A's are hoping takes effect this year.

"Typically, the fastest guys jump the farthest, and the guys who jump the farthest are also fast," said Alejo. "When you train, you try to produce efforts in both those categories to improve power. If everything correlates the way it should -- you run fast and jump far -- you're probably going to be explosive at the plate as well."

Alejo recently timed all the players in camp and finally answered a long-standing question: Who is faster, Davis or Crisp?

"Well, I think I edged him out a little," said Davis, who claims to have only been beaten in a speed race just once in his life.

And while the A's outfielder notes that speed "never takes a break" or enters a slump as does hitting, the power of the long ball is undeniable. Despite finishing fourth in stolen bases, Oakland last season also finished at the bottom of the league in homers.

"I wish we had Babe Ruth from 1 to 9," A's general manager Billy Beane said with a laugh. "Let's face it.

"The best team that's been here in my era was the '89 team, which had Rickey at the top and all the big guys in the middle. But don't forget that Rickey also hit homers, so he was sort of a double threat. At the end of the day, it's nice to have the combination, and you have to have power to win in this league. No amount of running around the bases is going to score you enough runs. I wish all nine guys hit 40 homers, to be totally frank. That's my first choice."

Still, Beane is confident in what speed brings to his low-budget team.

"It was the one bright spot in our offense last year and one of the ways we created runs,," he said. "We made huge strides last year, and we'll have to continue to do that because we're not exactly a power-laden club as we sit right now. Hopefully you have a club that gives you a nice combination, which is really what everyone is trying to achieve."

Henderson shares wisdom with A's Hall of Famer serving as special baserunning instructor

By Jane Lee / MLB.com. 2/27/10

PHOENIX -- Rickey Henderson entered A's camp Saturday playing the part of his usual animated self, his still-chiseled frame and unparalleled enthusiasm for his hometown team on full display.

Luckily for many players, who gathered around the Hall of Famer like kindergartners do on a day of show and tell, he also brought with him a bag of tricks and tales -- and a message or two.

Among them: Once you accept failure, the game is easy.

"You do not fail if you try," Henderson said.

Another piece of advice: Hip action and eyes are invaluable tools.

"We train the whole body except them two things," he said. "You need your eyes in this game."

Finally, and most importantly, have fun. Baseball is a game, so treat it as such.

"When I came to the ballpark, I came to have fun," he said. "Now, kids worry about too much pressure. I went to a game last year and they weren't having any fun. I'd be ready to go home if there wasn't any fun. They're not having fun, and I think that's why they don't play as well."

On Saturday, there was no denying the fun being had by the 51-year-old Henderson, who will be popping in and out of A's camp during the next week as a special instructor on baserunning -- an art he revolutionized as a player in 25 Major League seasons.

"It's fun to me because I still enjoy the game," Henderson said. "I'm hoping I can teach the kids something to have more success. You love the game of baseball, so you love talking about it."

So for two-plus hours on the fields of Papago Park, Henderson shared his insurmountable knowledge and undeniable love of the game with anyone willing to listen. Not coincidentally, the speedy Rajai Davis racked up the most one-on-one time and walked away having tweaked his running approach for the better.

"I got to messing with him, and I showed him little techniques that I went through," said Henderson, who learned the same ones from a speedskater early in his career.

Henderson showed Davis a drill that involves sliding back and forth to make better use of the lower body. Davis lasted two minutes before being told in a playful way he had to hit 15.

"And guess what?" Henderson said. "He couldn't even stand up good. He was all wobbly. He had no balance, but then we kept talking. I said there's something you're doing wrong. Everything he did, he did flat-footed. I asked him how he got to be so fast when he's flat-footed.

"I said, 'Get a little on your toes,' and he never knew it made such a difference. And that's one little thing that changed him already."

Davis, who is expected to join Coco Crisp as the club's one-two punch at the top of the lineup in 2010, stole a team-high 41 bags last year, but Henderson estimated that the A's outfielder has the ability to tally 75 or 80 -- this coming from a remarkably versatile player who owns the all-time records for stolen bases in a season (130) and career (1,406).

"He's a good kid, and to me he's got the heart that he wants to be a basestealer," Henderson said. "The biggest thing is fear that I got to get out of him -- fear in him going out and taking control of the bases and changing the game."

Said Davis: "To get another perspective from a guy who has proven his success at this level in the Major Leagues is a great opportunity. I don't know how many teams get this chance to bring back guys who are in the Hall of Fame."

The swift past and present duo of Henderson and Davis became fast friends again Saturday after having met one another last year at an A's game -- at which a fan took a picture of the two before passing it along to Henderson.

"When I got that picture, I thought, 'They made that picture up,'" he said. "If I had the uniform on, we'd be the same person. Whatever I did, however I was standing, how I was leaning, how my legs were crossed, he had the same thing."

The similarities are endless, as are the possibilities of a speed-driven A's team with Davis and Crisp in tow. The latter, acquired through free agency this offseason, also caught the eye of Henderson, who relayed some advice that could potentially help Crisp and his surgically repaired shoulder maintain a healthy dose of headfirst slides this year.

"Coco's got a great idea of what he's doing," Henderson said. "He's got the injury with his shoulder and he'd still like to go headfirst, so we talked about the pounding. You slide headfirst, and to get away from hurting yourself and banging up your body, you have to ask yourself how close you can get to the dirt before you have to dive."

In doing so, picture an airplane, Henderson suggested. If you want to know what creates a smooth landing, ask a pilot.

"If they have a hard landing, it's because they don't have control of the plane," he said.

Translation: Come in low for less of an impact.

Sounds simple, but that's only because Henderson explained it. And that's why Billy Beane talked to him last summer about getting involved with the club.

"He worked with our kids in instructional league, and he was great," Beane said. "We've got a good group of young, potential basestealing guys. His personality is great to have around. He's quick to smile, and all the guys gravitate toward him.

"The only reason not to keep him out here too long is he looks better in uniform than anybody else."

Rickey Henderson to lead base stealing seminar for A's

Robert Hanashiro/USA Today. 2/28/10

PHOENIX (AP) — Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson arrived at the Oakland Athletics' spring training facilities Saturday and at least a two dozen A's were listening intently as he spoke on stealing bases, among other subjects.

A's manager Bob Geren said Henderson's focus will be on the basepath, but he won't be limited. That's fine with A's outfielder Rajai Davis (FSY), who led the team with 41 steals last year.

"He has a wealth of knowledge and just to know what he knows is beneficial in any way," Davis said. "I want to know what he has to say about stealing bases, playing defense and situational at-bats."

Davis and Henderson even held an impromptu session during batting practice. Henderson gave him a couple of exercises to improve his balance and hip strength. It looked as though the two were skiing standing still.

"It's a speed skating technique I use to build my hips and legs," Henderson said. "In baseball you train the whole body, except for the hip and eyes. It's not just speed but the ability to concentrate on pitchers, how to get a good jump and explode out of the jump."

Henderson, who set major league career records for stolen bases (1,406) and runs scored (2,295), said Davis was capable of stealing 75-80 bases.

"I had to get him on his toes to get his balance," Henderson said. "The biggest thing is getting rid of his fear to get thrown out. He has the heart to be a base stealer and I want him to accept failure. Once you can accept failure, you can have fun and success."

Coco Crisp (FSY), signed as a free agent over the offseason, was another attentive student.

"He has a great idea of what he's doing," Henderson said. "I talked to him about sliding head first and how the closer you get to the dirt before you start your slide, the better it is. I've seen guys bouncing once or twice going head first."

Henderson, a member of the 1989 World Champion A's, enthusiastically embraced a multitude of subjects.

"I love talking about baserunning," Henderson said. "Even the slowest guy can go from first to third and help win a ballgame. I'm glad baseball is showing some interest. There's not as much success with home runs these days so it's good to get back to the fundamentals — go out and create runs instead of waiting for one big hit."

Henderson worked with the A's in their instructional league team and Oakland GM Billy Beane thought it was a natural progression to invite him to spring training.

"Over the summer we talked about getting him more involved, particularly with some of our young guys," Beane said. "It's great to have him around, just his personality. Guys gravitate toward him. Speed was one of the bright spots of our offense last year. You have to have power to win in this league but you need guys with speed who can create opportunities."

Several of the A's best prospects — Michael Taylor, Chris Carter (FSY), Eric Patterson (FSY)— were on hand to glean whatever they could.

"I just want to ask, 'How do you do it and how can I do it?'" said Taylor, who stole over 20 bases in the minors last year. "I'd like to know how he got his jumps and what to look for. Even if I learn one thing, it's worth it."

More established players like Ryan Sweeney, Cliff Pennington (FSY) and Mark Ellis (FSY) were also interested in what Henderson had to say.

"I watched him on the MLB Network talking about stealing third and looking at the pitcher's elbow," Pennington said. "If I can pick his brain it would be great."

Henderson said he'd like to stay more involved.

"It's a great feeling just to be back with kids and give something back that I got from the generation before me," he said. "I still enjoy the game."

NOTES: C Joel Galarraga arrived in camp after solving his visa issues. He sustained an arm injury last summer and is working his way back. ... The A's pushed back Sunday's workout time in an attempt to avoid rain that is expected in the area. ... IF Eric Chavez (FSY) took grounders at every position in the infield and Geren said he was impressive.