

A's News Clips, Monday, March 8, 2010

A's prospect Carter making noise with his bat

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times

Chris Carter proves to be a handful for opposing pitchers when he steps into the batter's box.

He also is quite the challenge during an interview.

Carter is polite and accommodating with the media, but he generally is a man of few words.

The A's don't mind if their top prospect speaks softly as long as he continues carrying a big stick.

Manager Bob Geren envisions Carter, 23, someday anchoring the middle of his lineup, an image that doesn't appear to be far down the road.

The first baseman already was considered the A's best power-hitting prospect after belting 39 home runs for Single-A Stockton in 2008.

He turned heads last season by hitting .329, spending most of the year with Double-A Midland but getting promoted to Triple-A Sacramento in late August.

It was a dramatic jump from his .259 mark in 2008, leading the A's to believe they have more than an all-or-nothing slugger.

Carter hit 28 homers with 115 RBIs last season and led all of the minor leagues with 179 hits.

"It was kind of a big leap last year from a guy with a lot of power and potential to a guy who has a chance to be a great all-around hitter," A's assistant general manager David Forst said.

Carter didn't take long to make an impact this spring, launching a mammoth home run in the eighth inning of the A's exhibition opener against the Chicago Cubs on Thursday.

Daric Barton is penciled in as the A's starting first baseman, and Eric Chavez will get significant innings there if healthy. But when the A's are convinced Carter is ready, they won't waste time calling him up.

"When" is the key word.

The A's don't want to rush Carter, who has just 54 at-bats at Triple-A and struck out 133 times last season.

But they're not afraid to throw him into the fire either. Pitchers Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey all made last season's Opening Day roster, even though none had played a full season higher than Double-A.

There is some thought that the A's might delay Carter's debut so the clock won't start on his big league service time, which determines how quickly he would become eligible for salary arbitration.

Forst said that won't factor heavily in the decision-making.

"It's not an exact science by any means," he said. "I can tell you that as much as people like to talk about it, the service clock is not a big determining factor. We have an obligation to put the best 25 guys out there, and if (Carter) is, that clock goes out the window."

The A's might prefer a larger body of work from Carter at Triple-A. But there's no doubt he made big strides last season.

"It was just being ready every pitch of every at-bat," said Carter, whom the A's acquired from Arizona in the Dan Haren trade in 2007. "I just calmed down and learned to relax and be more selective."

Outfielder Corey Brown, a teammate last season at Midland, said Carter does a good job of not getting down on himself during slumps.

Brown added that Carter's quiet demeanor with reporters is just an extension of his personality among friends.

"Sometimes when we see guys that are as good as that, it's good to know that they're humble and don't really have to say too much," Brown said.

Notes: Sunday's A's-Angels game was rained out. Anderson will start for Oakland today against the Cubs in Phoenix, with Gio Gonzalez and Jason Jennings also pitching. "... Eric Patterson took four stitches above his left eye after a bad-hop grounder caught him Saturday while he was playing second base. He's cleared to return today.

Oakland A's notebook: Bob Geren doesn't think Justin Duchscherer will be ready for start of the season

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

A's manager Bob Geren said he's doubtful right-hander Justin Duchscherer will have thrown enough pitches to be ready for the season-opening rotation.

That's an assessment his two-time All-Star pitcher didn't agree with.

Duchscherer hasn't thrown off a mound since Feb. 19 following surgery to relieve lower back pain.

He's on a throwing program, and though he's tentatively set to return to the mound Wednesday, it's unknown when he'll appear in his first game.

"He's still optimistic about Opening Day, but I don't think so," Geren said before Saturday's 4-2 win over the Angels. "Getting built up to the 100-pitch mark is difficult to do without six starts (during spring training)."

Told of Geren's feeling that he won't be ready, Duchscherer responded:

"That's news to me."

Geren wants his starting pitchers capable of throwing 100 pitches to start the season.

Duchscherer said because he doesn't rely heavily on velocity, he won't need as many outings to build up arm strength. He believes four or five starts could get his pitch count to 75 and be sufficient.

"That way, the next one I could go about 90," Duchscherer said. "As efficient as I feel like I can be, I can get at least six innings in 90 pitches."

Geren mentioned Jason Jennings, Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Vin Mazzaro as candidates to fill in the rotation if Duchscherer isn't ready.

Jennings, signed last Sunday, is scheduled for his first Cactus League appearance Monday against the Cubs.

Coco Crisp played in his first game Saturday, serving as DH and going 2-for-3 with a double from the leadoff spot.

Dallas Braden allowed one run in two innings. His left foot is still "numb and tingly" from nerve damage that ended his 2009 season early, but he said the pain has subsided greatly.

Geren noted the effective relief outing of Tyson Ross, who struck out two in two shutout innings.

Reliever Joey Devine had his best bullpen session of the spring Friday, Geren said. Still no word on when Devine will appear in a game after missing last season with an elbow injury

Chin Music: Brett Anderson to start Monday against Cubs

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times, 3/6/2010

Update on A's pitching plans: With today's rainout, Brett Anderson now will start tomorrow vs. Cubs at Phoenix Muni, with Gio Gonzalez and newly signed Jason Jennings following him.

Team rep Ziegler loves his job

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Brad Ziegler is the A's player representative and hopes to keep the role at least until a new collective bargaining agreement is reached. The current labor contract expires after the 2011 season.

Exciting stuff? It is to Ziegler.

"I'm fascinated by the inner workings of the game," he said.

Ziegler, whose main gig is contributing to one of the American League's deepest bullpens, keeps A's players informed on labor issues as player rep. The hottest: whether big-leaguers soon will be tested for human growth hormone.

Most players in the A's clubhouse were subject to steroid testing from their first day in pro ball and consider giving urine samples part of the game. They're not old enough to know any other way.

But because HGH isn't detected in urine, and because scientists apparently now can detect it in blood, another heated clash on performance-enhancing drugs is anticipated between Major League Baseball and the players' union.

The union's new executive director, Michael Weiner, met with A's players on Saturday.

"He assured us that if we're going to be tested for HGH, we'll make sure we know the science behind the testing is accurate, and we'll know it won't affect our privacy or performance on the field," Ziegler said. "If I'm getting ready to play a game in Kansas City in the middle of August, and it's 110 degrees and humid, and they're drawing blood on me, is that going to make me weaker and affect my performance on the field?"

"Also, I understand HGH is tough to detect because it's out of your bloodstream within 24 hours. So if you didn't take it the day before. ...

"It's a lot to consider. One positive of a test on a rugby player in Europe does not mean the test is foolproof."

British rugby player Terry Newton was the first pro athlete banned from competition, for two years, after testing positive for HGH in November. He admitted guilt, and baseball Commissioner Bud Selig immediately looked into implementing blood-testing for minor-leaguers - because they're not covered by the players' union.

For big-leaguers to be tested, approval is needed from the union. Under Don Fehr, the union got a black eye for vehemently trying to prevent steroid testing, so Weiner and his membership must consider both the validity of blood-testing and the negative PR they'd receive for opposing it.

While it's speculated that HGH use is rampant in baseball because there's no testing, Ziegler disagrees, saying, "At this point, guys are pretty scared to get caught. Nobody wants to be alienated in the press and suspended 50 games. Guys can get punished just by being around it - if the FBI is looking at a doctor (such as Canadian physician Anthony Galea, who is currently under investigation), and your name shows up on a form, you're automatically associated with it."

Briefly: Rain washed out the A's-Angels game in Tempe. Brett Anderson will start today against the Cubs, and Gio Gonzalez and Jason Jennings will pitch in relief. ... Eric Patterson needed four stitches to close the wound above his left eye after being hit by a ball while trying to backhand a grounder Saturday.

Drumbeat: To play or not to play (UPDATE: Game called off)

John Shea reporting from A's camp . . . 3/7/2010

The A's are warming up as if they'll go to Tempe to play the Angels, but the game could be called off because of rain. Other games around the Cactus League already have been canceled.

Brett Anderson is scheduled to make his first start, and Eric Chavez is penciled in as the first baseman for the second time in three days. Chavez has played just one regular-season game at first: Aug. 21, 2001, against the Indians.

Is there a secret to making the transition from third to first?

"I told him to go home and watch a few games in the mirror . . . I was joking with him," manager Bob Geren said.

Eric Patterson is back in camp, working out with four stitches above his left eye. He was hit by a ball while trying to backhand a grounder Saturday. Geren said Patterson will be available to play Monday.

Patterson wasn't charged with an error even though the scoreboard showed E-4. Before a running drill this morning, Geren explained to him that the scorekeeper ruled it a hit, but coach Mike Gallego, a former infielder, kidded Patterson that it should have been an error and he should have made the play.

At least it seemed as if Gallego was kidding.

Here's the A's lineup: CF Davis, 2B Ellis, C Suzuki, 3B Kouzmanoff, 1B Chavez, DH Cust, LF Taylor, RF Buck, SS Rosales. LHP Anderson on mound.

UPDATE

The A's just announced their game in Tempe was canceled. Here in Phoenix, when the rain came, players and coaches ran into the clubhouse. A tarp covers the infield.

Geren said Anderson will start Monday (Cubs at Phoenix) with Gio Gonzalez working in relief.

Inbox: Where does Rosales fit in?

MLB.com's Lee answers your Athletics questions

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

What have you seen from Adam Rosales? I like his enthusiasm and hope the A's use him as much as possible this year, but does he even have a guaranteed roster spot?
-- Tyler P., Dublin, Calif.

I've only been around Rosales a few short weeks, but I can tell you I like what I see. I suggest you watch him closely this spring, as he's looked very impressive in every opportunity handed his way thus far -- including two spring starts in the infield.

Upon his arrival in Oakland, it was presumed Rosales would be the team's go-to guy as a utility infielder. However, I'm starting to think he could make a push for a starting job at shortstop since the club still doesn't seem entirely sold on Cliff Pennington as the everyday guy. Right now, Pennington obviously has the edge, but Rosales may stir up some second thoughts if he consistently shows pop at the plate and above-average defensive skills -- although, at the moment, said skills appear average. He hit a home run in his first Cactus League game against the Cubs and collected another hit in Saturday's battle with the Angels.

Rosales is expected to get plenty of playing time in the coming weeks, and I think fans will grow to like him just as quickly as his team has done. He looks eerily similar to Bobby Crosby -- even wears No. 7 and the high socks -- and boasts an Eric Byrnes-type energy.

That said, Rosales does not have a roster spot locked up just yet, but I'd be very surprised if you don't see him in Oakland come Opening Day. If he doesn't outplay Pennington this spring, he'll perfectly represent the sort of infield depth every big league bench should have.

Do the A's get to use a designated hitter at the National League parks during Spring Training? It seems there are a lot of NL teams out there, so if they're always playing them, how is Jack Cust going to get any playing time?

-- Ronny S., Galt, Calif.

You're right, there are plenty National League teams who call Arizona home in the spring -- eight to be exact. Some teams give the American League squads the option of using the DH, which manager Bob Geren will take advantage of every chance he gets. Cust, Eric Chavez, Landon Powell and Jake Fox should all see time at the DH spot this month. Even Coco Crisp, who made his Cactus League debut leading off as designated hitter Saturday, will continue to get starts there as he rehabs his surgically repaired shoulder.

Geren's trying to give everyone their due time there, so it's fair to say he'd much rather save his pitchers from what's often a wasted at-bat if he has the choice of bringing in one of the power-hitting guys mentioned above.

Meanwhile, Geren insists we'll eventually be seeing Cust in action in the outfield this spring -- primarily in left. After all, the club still views Cust as an immediate replacement option in the event one or more of the outfield regulars goes down.

So what's the real scoop on Eric Chavez? Everyone seems to think he can play just as well at first base as he can at third, but I have a hard time believing he can make the switch so quickly. I've always loved Eric, but he must look like a lost puppy out there.

-- Nolan R., Alameda, Calif.

I'll admit that seeing Chavez over at first is a weird sight, but I wouldn't exactly call him a lost puppy. He's a happy puppy still learning to adjust to his surroundings, if anything. He's lost some weight and really looks the best I've seen him in years. I don't think he'll win a seventh Gold Glove this season, but at the same time, he looks to be extremely agile at the bag and very capable of all the responsibilities that go along with being there.

Chavez was taking ground balls with expected starting first baseman Daric Barton on Sunday morning, and based on his arm and foot movement, you wouldn't know he just started learning the position less than a month ago. The footwork can be improved, but he's been diligently working with infield coach Mike Gallego on doing just that.

I have to say I wasn't sold on Chavez's supposed clean bill of health heading into camp, but I think he's surprised plenty of people -- including himself -- with the ease at which he's performed thus far. Still, we have to keep in mind he's only seen action in one spring game, so it's a little early to start making a push for a Comeback Player of the Year nod.

Of all the younger players in camp, who has made the biggest impression?

-- Bobby C., Midland, Texas

That's a tough one, especially considering it's still early in camp and 96 percent of the guys here could fall under that "younger" category. I think catcher Max Stassi, who turns 19 next week, has blown everyone away with his unbelievably mature presence. Based on what I've seen on the field, though, I'd probably have to go with Tyson Ross. The Cal product followed starter Dallas Braden with two shutout innings of one-hit ball while striking out a pair of Angels on Saturday. His slider, when on, can do a whole lot of damage, and he's also got a sharp breaking ball to mix things up with an impressive fastball.

Geren has raved about the movement on Ross' pitches, and I'd have to think that if he can keep his control in check, it won't be long before he gets a crack at big league action.

Whatever happened to the Oakland A's commercials starring the players they used to have a few years ago? They were really fun to watch. Are they going to be bringing those back this year?

-- Eddie R., Sacramento, Calif.

Yes, sir. They're very much back this year. And from what I'm hearing, they're supposed to be highly entertaining. Multiple people close to the team have assured me they're funny, so I have just as high hopes for them as you do.

As for details, I don't have many right now, but I'll be getting a sneak peek at the commercials March 20, so keep your eyes out for more information in a couple weeks. Production, which began more than a month ago, is still under way. But you can expect to see a lot of your favorites -- including Ryan Sweeney, Mark Ellis, Kurt Suzuki and Andrew Bailey -- make their way to your television in April.

Braden upbeat in return to mound

Lety pitcher happy with first spring outing

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Dallas Braden felt the tingles in more ways than one Saturday.

Making his Cactus League debut against the Angels -- not to mention his first start since last August -- the A's lefty felt his normal giddy self as he took to the mound.

"I get nervous every fifth day," Braden said. "I figure the day that goes away is the day I saddle up behind the 7-Eleven desk."

Then there's his infamous left foot, the one that sidelined him last season and left question marks surrounding his ability to rejoin the rotation.

"For the record, the foot is numb and the foot is tingling," he said. "And that's always going to be there in my opinion because it hasn't changed since day one."

No need to worry, though, folks. Neither form of the tingles presented any cause for concern Saturday, as Braden went the expected two innings, giving up one run on two hits and a walk while fanning one. The 26-year-old southpaw threw 31 pitches, 20 of which were strikes, in the A's 4-2 win over the visiting Angels at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

"Overall I felt pretty good," he said. "That's the first time I've faced a hitter since August, so overall, mechanically, I felt good. The fastball command can always be better, whether or not you throw nine out of 10 strikes -- 10 is obviously better."

Not much weight, if any, can be placed on results from the opening week of games. So the lone fact that Braden entered and exited the mound healthy was cause enough for relieving sighs. Anything extra was just that.

"I was on the mound," Braden said. "I was throwing a baseball. That's all I care about."

Said manager Bob Geren: "That was an excellent first outing. He pitched well on both sides of the plate."

Following his start, Braden greeted media with his normal gregarious personality but kept the overdone foot talk to a minimum, simply wanting to focus on what he likes to call "0-10" -- pronounced oh-ten -- baseball.

"The amount of pain is nowhere near what it was when I was sidelined after the procedure, so as far as that is concerned, that is in the past," he said. "That's '09 baseball. We're in 0-10 baseball. That's right -- 0-10, not 2010. I'm making a hard push for that."

Eccentric talk aside, Braden hopes his body is anything but that in the coming weeks. He can take the tingles. And the two numb toes. But not when they combine to create any sort of discomfort.

"The approach I'm taking is I'm going to see how human I can be," he said. "And by that, I mean show up, do what I need to do as a baseball player, and if I feel anything or feel it's going to be cause for concern, I'll take necessary action. Until then, I'm a normal dude with a little less feeling than some other guys."

And until then, he's penciled into the middle of the rotation. Don't expect any erasers to come out, though.

"It's going to take you cutting my foot off for me to not be able to play," he said.

Oakland A's Front Office Q&A: Dan Kantrovitz

Melissa Lockard
OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 8, 2010

Over past few years, the Oakland A's have recommitted to their international scouting and development program. Now overseeing those efforts is Dan Kantrovitz, who joined the A's as the Coordinator of International Operations/Baseball Operations Analyst over the summer. He recently answered questions via e-mail about his position with the team and the A's international program.

Over the summer, the Oakland A's welcomed Dan Kantrovitz into their front office as the team's Coordinator of International Operations/Baseball Operations Analyst. Kantrovitz joined the A's from Harvard University, where he had completed a master's degree in Statistics.

Kantrovitz got his start in professional baseball with the [St. Louis Cardinals](#) on the field. He was the team's 25th round draft selection in 2001 out of Brown University, where the shortstop had earned two All-Ivy League first team selections and finished seventh in league history in hits with 207. He spent one season in the minor leagues with St. Louis before a shoulder injury ended his playing career.

The Missouri native got back into baseball a few years later with a company that did baseball analysis for major league organizations. He was hired by St. Louis to be in the team's front office in 2004 and Kantrovitz spent four years with the Cardinals, filling a number of roles, including serving as the Director of College Scouting.

Since joining the A's over the summer, Kantrovitz has traveled the globe, coordinating the team's efforts to scout the best talent in the world. We recently caught-up with Kantrovitz via e-mail to find out more about his position with the A's and the team's international program...

OaklandClubhouse.com: Can you describe your position with the team and what you are responsible for in terms of the international program?

Dan Kantrovitz: This time of year, the majority of my time is spent on international scouting. Since the beginning of the year, I will have traveled to the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Mexico, Taiwan and Korea...in some cases, I have traveled to these countries multiple times.

In addition to scouting, I am responsible for managing our scouts and personnel throughout the world as well as some administrative duties such as scheduling, overseeing budgets and assisting in the contractual/visa/legal processes for foreign players.

Also, being based in the front office in Oakland, I am able to work with Billy [Beane], David [Forst] and Farhan [Zaidi] on dealings related to our minor and major league teams. It's a solid mix of being able to contribute with certain skills and experiences that I bring to the table as well as being able to learn from some of the best executives in the game.

OC: You were the Director of College Scouting for the St. Louis Cardinals. How different is it for you to cover the international market as opposed to the US?

DK: I was lucky to have had a broad-based scouting background with the Cardinals that included a heavy dose of international work. As a result, transitioning to the international side with the A's has felt very natural.

When I worked for the Cardinals, Jeff Luhnow (VP of Scouting/PD) and John Mozeliak (GM) took a vested interest in my development early on. In particular, Jeff gave me quite a bit of responsibility on the international side. When I started back in 2004, I spent nearly the entire summer (after the draft) living at our complex in the Dominican assisting in everything from academy administration to July 2nd scouting to on-the-field player development operations.

On top of the international work, some of my scouting coverage included the Cape Cod league, Area Code games, Arizona Fall League, some minor league affiliates, the occasional Major League team, as well as area scout responsibilities. Then, when we were targeting more college players in the draft, it made sense to tailor my coverage to those players we would be drafting (hence the college scouting).

The opportunities with the Cardinals definitely helped me hit the ground running here in Oakland and also have enabled me to focus on a niche of scouting that I am extremely passionate about - international scouting.

OC: Generally speaking, what is the team's current approach to international scouting? Is the focus mostly Latin America, or are you covering the Pacific Rim as well?

DK: Our current approach is based on actual data and analysis whenever possible. In fact, I would bet we have done as much homework as anybody on the various international markets. But, at the end of the day, our current approach might be best described as opportunistic and aggressive.

While responding to your questions, I am currently in the Pac Rim with two of our scouts (Adam Hislop and Lewis Kim)...so clearly we are covering the Pac Rim. It is just a matter of time before we sign our first Taiwanese and Korean amateur players.

OC: How much does your statistical background play a role in your scouting efforts? Is there much statistical analysis involved in the scouting of international amateurs, or is that analysis still more useful with players coming out of organized high school and collegiate leagues?

DK: My stats professors may cringe when I say this, but so far the Spanish classes I took in graduate school have been more applicable to the scouting efforts than a particular stats course. Although Dominican-Spanish is a lot different than what they teach in a Harvard classroom, I do have almost daily communication with our personnel in Latin America in their native language. That said, I got a master's degree in statistics because I enjoy working with data and those skills enable me to contribute on various projects within our front office that otherwise I might not be involved.

OC: How has your experience as a minor league player influenced you as a scout?

DK: Being at minor league spring training and riding the bench in the Appy League was a magical experience. Although for me, more influential in developing scouting instincts was the nearly 20 years of working to improve myself as a baseball player, observing how other players developed, and being around some excellent coaches.

OC: Who was the better shortstop in college, you or David Forst?

DK: Hmmm...that sounds like a loaded question...I'm gonna have to pass.

OC: Has the team made any international signings this off-season? If so, can you tell us a little about the players and how they project down the road?

DK: You'll have to check back in a couple weeks. We are all excited about a couple players we have recently agreed to terms with, but right now, I am unable to comment further.

OC: Has the Michael Ynoa signing given the A's more cache when pursuing "bigger name" international amateur free agents in the DR?

DK: I think that is overrated. The buscon (Latin-American version of an agent) mentality is more "what have you done for me lately." And, while everybody here, including me, is very excited about Michael Ynoa, I have not seen us get much mileage out of his signing in that way.

OC: There have been a few clubs who have signed European players lately. Is that a market the team is looking at?

DK: Yes. After we researched the European market, I went to the World Cup last year in Holland and Italy and we ended up hiring a new scout (Tom Gillespie) based in Europe. We believe a value proposition exists to have a presence there.

OC: Wilfredo Solano was the A's most high-profile July 2nd signing this past year. What can you tell us about him as a player and will he debut in the DSL this season?

DK: The plan for Wilfredo is to debut in the DSL. I joined the A's after the team had scouted him but, Billy Owens, Julio Franco and our scouts in Venezuela did an outstanding job with him.

He's got a short, compact powerful stroke combined with a clean, athletic and projectable body. His hands keep up with the speed of the game to play either 3B or SS and he has plenty of arm for anywhere on the diamond. Also impressive is that he was our top performer in English classes this past fall. We are all excited about Wilfredo.

Play ball: Head to Arizona for spring training

By Gary A. Warner, Orange County Register

The elbow is fine. The knee is OK. The new kid is ready to step up. The old veteran still has it. A slump is history.

In baseball's Cactus League spring training, last year is over and this year isn't quite here yet. Optimism blooms in the Arizona desert, yet to wilt in the heat of 162 games across a long, hot summer.

Thirteen baseball teams began to show up in the Valley of the Sun around Phoenix in mid-February, with two more reporting south in Tucson. They'll be at practice through the end of March.

A trip to the Cactus League is like a visit to a baseball mall. So many teams packed so close together. In Florida, the distance between rival teams is measured in miles. In Arizona, sometimes it's a matter of blocks. Increasingly, teams share facilities, like the Dodgers' year-old ballpark in Glendale, split with the Chicago White Sox.

In the Phoenix area, it's possible to pick one hotel in one town as your base — say, Tempe or Scottsdale or Phoenix — and easily drive to nine stadiums, with two more just down the interstate in Tucson. It's an exciting time to be a baseball fan in a region awash with fans from around the country.

I arrived in Tempe early for the PFP — pitcher's fielding practice. Fans know it as the "pitchers and catchers report." For a week the throwers and the guys who throw it back work out the kinks of the offseason. A few position players trickle in for early workouts.

I love the "pitchers and catchers" period. It's the quiet prelude to the preseason. Baseball in February is the game at its most pure and languid — tossing, bunting, fielding, stretching. Baskets filled with batting-practice baseballs, red bags of bats and gloves strung out along the foul lines. Clusters of coaches drilling the basics over and over again.

"Man on second, man on second!" shouted minor-league pitching coach Ken Patterson to a group of young pitchers learning to cover first base. "That doesn't mean check second base — it means check third base!"

At Tempe, the Angels in red jerseys sprint and jog and sprint some more.

"This (expletive) ain't (expletive) fun," said a flushed Joe Saunders as he stopped running to chug some Gatorade before heading back out onto the track to run some more.

You can hear the players say what they do because in these early days, they outnumber fans 3-to-1. It's not just because of the dearth of fans motivated enough to watch a morning of squats, pepper and batting practice, but for the sheer number of players.

Spring training isn't just for the cleanup hitter making \$6 million a year, but for the backup shortstop playing on the lowest rungs of the minor leagues.

In Scottsdale, it's not just about the vaunted Giants pitching trio of Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain and Barry Zito, but a chance to evaluate the outfield prospects of Francisco Peguero, Darren Ford, Roger Kieschnick, Thomas Neal and others.

In Phoenix, it's about watching Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson work one-on-one as a special instructor with A's center fielders Rajai Davis and Coco Crisp.

And for some fans, it's less about the teams playing and more about the game of baseball itself. Such is the case for Jonathan Perlman of San Francisco.

"I'm a Giants fan, but in the spring, I'm really just a baseball fan," Perlman said while watching the A's work out in Phoenix. "I try to get out to all 11 (Arizona) parks. There's no better way to see the mechanics of the game and the promise of the players than during spring training. I'd go to Florida, too, if it wasn't so far away."

Associated Press contributed to this story.

GIANTS: Scottsdale Stadium, 7408 E. Osborn Road, Scottsdale; 800-225-2277. The Giants play 15 home games. Single-game tickets for basic games cost \$7-\$24, for feature games (including against Arizona, Seattle and San Diego) cost \$13-\$28, and for premium games (including the A's, Los Angeles Angels and Cleveland) cost \$15-\$30. Season tickets are priced from \$120 to \$375. Day of game tickets cost \$1 more. Purchase tickets at www.sfgiants.com or 877-473-4849. For Charro Lodge and Pavilion tickets, visit www.charros.com/lodge or call 480-990-2977.

A'S: Phoenix Municipal Stadium, 5999 E. Van Buren St., Phoenix; 602-392-0074. The A's play 16 home games. Single-game tickets range from \$10 to \$30. Season tickets cost \$150-\$375. Outfield reserve tickets are \$3 each on Family Days (March 9 and March 31). Two-game packs also are available for six games. Purchase tickets at www.athletics.mlb.com or 877-493-2255.

CAMELBACK RANCH: Teams "" Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago White Sox; 10710 W. Camelback Road, Glendale; 623-877-8585.

DIABLO STADIUM: Team "" Los Angeles Angels; 2200 West Alameda Drive, Tempe; 480-350-5205.

HOHOKAM PARK: Team "" Chicago Cubs; 1235 N. Center St., Mesa; 800-905-3315.

GOODYEAR BALLPARK: Team "" Cleveland Indians; 1933 S. Ballpark Way, Goodyear; 623-882-3120.

MARYVALE BASEBALL PARK: Team "" Milwaukee Brewers; 3600 N. 51st Ave., Phoenix; 602-534-6449.

PEORIA SPORTS COMPLEX: Teams "" Seattle Mariners and San Diego Padres; 16101 N. 83rd Ave., Peoria; 623-773-8720.

SURPRISE RECREATION CAMPUS: Teams "" Kansas City Royals and Texas Rangers; 15960 N. Bullard Ave., Surprise; 623-222-2222.

HI CORBETT FIELD: Team "" Colorado Rockies; 3400 E. Camino Campestre, Tucson; 520-327-9467.

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Sheets Brings New Mind-Set to A's Team in Need of Change

By TYLER KEPNER, New York Times, 3/6/2010

PHOENIX — Every day he reports to work at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, Ben Sheets greets his fellow Oakland Athletics this way: "Good morning, champions!" His teammates, who are coming off a last-place finish in the American League West, love him for it.

"That's the mind-set we need around here, and he reinforces it every day," said Dallas Braden, a pitcher with one full season in the majors. "Whether it's with a smile on his face or a scowl — which we haven't seen yet — every day it's upbeat and it's all positive. That's something we kind of missed."

The A's have missed the playoffs the last three seasons, and Sheets has never been. Before Friday, when he threw 32 pitches in an 8-7 victory over his old team, the Milwaukee Brewers, Sheets had not pitched in a game since Sept. 27, 2008.

The Brewers clinched their first playoff spot in 26 years the day after that, but Sheets was too hurt to continue. He had surgery to repair a torn flexor tendon last February, sitting out 2009 and leaving a legacy of pain and pride in Milwaukee.

"When I got there, we were losing 106 games," Sheets said. "When I left there, we were a playoff team. So I don't know what would be disappointing. I gave what I had at the time. It cost me a whole year giving that, too. I'm fine with where I was at and I'm fine where I'm at right now."

That Sheets is in Oakland is somewhat unlikely, considering his guaranteed salary of \$10 million. Teams like the Mets were willing to offer an incentive-based contract, but the A's overwhelmed him.

"There's no reward without some risk, right?" said Lewis Wolff, the Athletics' owner. "If he's feeling well, we've captured something terrific. And we know he wants to play. We reached a little further, and we need to, because we don't necessarily have the best facilities and things, and we wanted to make sure we eliminated the competition. You've got to reach. Billy and his people did just a great job."

General Manager Billy Beane had offered contracts to several position players — Adrian Beltre, Jamey Carroll, Marco Scutaro — before turning to Sheets. The A's needed a veteran on a staff that had 116 games started by rookies last season, the most in the majors in 11 years.

A four-time All-Star, Sheets could help the Athletics contend, or he could become a valuable trading chip. Either way, Oakland figures to benefit as long as he stays healthy. That is the pivotal question for a pitcher who has not thrown 200 innings in a season since 2004.

"Nobody knows on any of these guys," Beane said, referring to Sheets's health. "But if he's not a rehab guy, we probably can't get him on a one-year deal. It's a risk worth taking, given that a guy with Ben's track record would normally command a significant contract for a number of years."

Sheets worked one and two-thirds innings on Friday, allowing four hits and two runs (one earned), with no walks and a strikeout. He fell behind in counts and struggled with his curveball in the second inning.

But he was pitching competitively, and for now, that is enough. He said the outing could not have gone better, and he continues to build strength. His outgoing personality is already in form.

The longest-tenured Athletics are infielders Mark Ellis and Eric Chavez, who are quieter than Sheets. Ellis said Sheets was reviving a clubhouse that used to be boisterous.

"We don't have a ton of personality on this team," said Ellis, who joined the A's in 2002. "But he has that personality we've been lacking."

Of course, the continued development of starters Braden, Brett Anderson and Trevor Cahill will matter more than a lively clubhouse. Helping the younger pitchers is part of Sheets's new job description, and he is taking to it.

For 20 minutes during batting practice Friday, Braden sat on an upside-down plastic bucket and listened to Sheets talk about his approach to exhibition games. Sheets is only 31, but he said he could benefit from his role as a mentor.

"It's kind of cool," Sheets said. "When you talk about pitching, sometimes the teacher learns as much as the student. To hear myself speak on some things, you go, whoa, I kind of got away from that myself. I think it's going to help me."

Sheets said it did not feel strange to face the Brewers because the team has changed since he left. He said he held no grudges against the Brewers for failing to re-sign him after 2008, although he admitted he was hurt by their initial reluctance to pay for his operation.

"I think they agreed to it after," he said. "But I know I've got paperwork that's about 15 feet high."

Sheets said he did not regret his decision to keep pitching in 2008, and to his former teammates, there is no doubting his sacrifice. Sheets pitched as long as he could, ultimately costing himself a year's salary. The A's, of all teams, have rewarded him.

"I'm excited he's back out there," the Brewers' Ryan Braun said. "And I'm glad he got paid."

Change Happens in Oakland, and Ellis Has Seen It All

By TYLER KEPNER, New York Times, 3/5/2010

PHOENIX – Lewis Wolff, the owner of the Oakland Athletics, stood beside his team's dugout Friday morning at Phoenix Municipal Stadium. He was dressed in an A's golf shirt, green-and-gold mesh shorts, white socks and sneakers, drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup. A genial, white-haired grandfather of three, his name will not be confused with Steinbrenner.

Wolff got to town on Wednesday, and said he was looking forward to watching Friday's exhibition home opener with Mark Atanasio, the owner of the visiting Milwaukee Brewers. On Thursday, Wolff had dinner with Commissioner Bud Selig, who has offered his friend some advice.

"My feeling is, I love the players; in fact, I fall in love with them too much," Wolff said. "The commissioner told me, 'One thing when you have a team, don't get too close to the players because the next day they're gone someplace else.'"

It is a familiar lesson for Oakland players. Just ask second baseman Mark Ellis.

Ellis was watching another spring game on Thursday, and, naturally, he saw some ex-teammates on the field. In this case, it was Chad Gaudin and Nick Swisher of the Yankees. But in almost every game, Ellis will see a friend or two. He might lead the majors in former teammates.

"It probably ranks right up there," Ellis said Friday morning. "Pretty much every team. It's crazy, it's nuts. But that's kind of the way you operate it with a small-market team like this, unless you want to be stagnant. Some teams are stagnant, they're not proactive at all, they don't try to move guys. They definitely try to do that here."

The Athletics are famous for moving players in and out rapidly, trying to get the maximum return on their value before they get too expensive. Nearly everybody moves on, it seems, except Ellis. Only Eric Chavez, who made his debut for the A's in 1998, has been here longer.

The difference is that Chavez was once a superstar, with a \$66 million contract that expires this season and has proved to be an unwise investment. Ellis has been a relative bargain, earning about \$16 million since joining the A's in the trade that

sent Johnny Damon from Kansas City to Oakland on Jan. 8, 2001. He makes \$5.5 million this season, the highest salary of his career.

Ellis has been unspectacular but steady, with a .265 average, a good glove and decent power for a second baseman. He has been on playoff teams and last place teams and always keeps coming back.

"I've wanted to stay here because I'm comfortable here, I like it here, and I like the direction that we're going," Ellis said. "Even though we've had a couple of down years now, if you can start with a good pitching staff and start playing defense, you're going to have a chance to win ballgames, especially in our division.

"What's kept me here? I don't know, I guess it's consistency, just being able to fit in well, being on the field. It's just a good organization to be in. I'm proud to be in this organization and proud to be around these guys."

Ellis and the A's will get their first look at new ace Ben Sheets on Friday against the Brewers, Sheets' former team. Sheets missed last season after undergoing elbow surgery in Feb. 2009. The A's guaranteed him \$10 million after several free-agent position players – Adrian Beltre, Marco Scutaro, Jamey Carroll – turned down their offers.

"He's looked just like you would expect him to look at any other spring training," Oakland Manager Bob Geren said. "We've seen him on opening day of spring training, it seems like, numerous times. As far as where he'll be compared to the other pitchers, he's the same."

Incidentally, a random note about the A's spring home, where I've never been before today: it is located next to the local zoo. In the morning, before the fans come in and the loudspeakers start pumping music, you can hear the monkeys making a ruckus out beyond center field. Absolutely hilarious.

Recker Hopes To Power Way To Big Leagues

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 5, 2010

The Oakland A's landed in the win column for the first time in 2010 on Friday, coming back from a six-run deficit to defeat the Milwaukee Brewers, 8-7. The big blow in the game came courtesy of Anthony Recker, whose three-run homer in the sixth inning capped a seven-run A's rally. After finishing the 2009 season on a hot streak at Triple-A, Recker is looking to make the leap to the bigs in 2010.

Over the last five seasons, Anthony Recker has quietly put together some of the best power numbers of any Oakland A's prospect not named Chris Carter. The right-handed hitting catcher has reached double-digits in homeruns in every season since 2006. Recker showed that power on a big stage on Friday when he crushed a long three-run homerun in the A's 8-7 win over the Milwaukee Brewers in the second game of the Cactus League season. The homer was his first in a big league spring training game.

"It was pretty exciting. I had a big smile on my face when I got into the dugout," Recker said.

Recker's big blast came as part of a seven-run rally that erased a five-run deficit in the bottom of the sixth inning. The A's front office has been talking about the significant offensive talent coming up through the system and that talent was on display during that rally, as prospects Recker, Jemile Weeks, Michael Taylor, Chris Carter and Adrian Cardenas all reached base through either a hit or a walk. Recker noted that the young players in A's camp have helped make each other better.

"We've got a really young clubhouse as it is. Even some of the young guys who are on the big league squad and those of us who haven't quite made it there and are trying to get there, it's been definitely really neat to see how we all get along," Recker said.

"We've all come up together and we've all played together and we definitely have that camaraderie. That is something that you can't really teach. It's something that you earn by playing together. Makes it a lot more fun when you are out there on the field to be able to play like that. It allows you to keep it loose and joke around a little bit. Obviously you take the games very seriously, but if you aren't having any fun, you aren't going to do very well."

Recker is part of a talented catching contingent in A's camp that includes Oakland's two young major league catchers, Kurt Suzuki and Landon Powell, and two catchers expected, along with Recker, to contribute to the Sacramento River Cats this season, Josh Donaldson and Joel Galarraga. The youngest player in A's camp is catcher Max Stassi, who was the team's fourth-round pick last season. Recker said that having the 18-year-old Stassi in camp is aiding the relatively veteran catching corps.

"There is a lot of encouragement between each other. One of us does something well – whether it is in a game or during a drill or in BP, whatever it may be – we are giving each other a lot of words of encouragement. It's definitely a fun group,"

Recker said.

“We help each other out a lot, especially with Max being in camp. Such a young guy and so much talent. He’s really soaking up a lot of the things that we are telling him. We are trying to give him some tips and things like that and he’s really sucking that stuff up. Having him here is really helping us because he keeps us focused by asking us questions. That keeps us involved in what we are doing and focused.”

Drafted in the 18th round in 2005, Recker has been making steady progress through the A’s system. He reached Triple-A for the first time last season, appearing in 78 games for the River Cats, as he shared time behind the plate with veteran Eric Munson. Recker said that the mental aspect of the game was the biggest change from Double-A to Triple-A.

“It’s definitely a different game. It’s a little faster. There is a little more thinking involved, behind the plate especially. You really start getting into knowing the pitchers and knowing the hitters that you are facing. In terms of me behind the plate, you start having a game plan. There is a lot more of that involved,” Recker said.

“I think I should have been doing that in Double-A a little more than I was. I kind of took that aspect for granted, I think, because I was always pretty good at reading guys behind the plate and I never really went in with a solid game plan. “

In addition to learning the mental aspects, Recker had to adjust to Triple-A pitching last season. He struggled early on, posting only a .701 OPS before the All-Star break for Sacramento. However, he recovered during the second half of the season, batting .326 with a .933 OPS. Overall, Recker finished the year with a .261/.333/.449 line with 12 homers for Sacramento. Recker also spent a few weeks with Double-A Midland early in the season and he hit .298 with a .911 OPS in 16 games for the Rockhounds, putting his final combined season totals at .267/.342/.462 with 15 homers in 329 at-bats.

Recker was pleased with the way he finished the season, but he wasn’t satisfied with those numbers, putting a lot of work this the off-season in Phoenix in the weight room and on his footwork and agility.

“There are always things that I am focused on working on. No matter what, I am not going to be complacent or completely happy with what I am doing because once that happens, that’s when you start to slip a little bit,” Recker said.

“I was fortunate to have a really good second half and I am hoping to parlay that into a really good start to this season and hopefully getting a shot somewhere in the major leagues. That is obviously my ultimate goal and once I get there, I want to keep working hard to stay there. But I think definitely ending last year on a positive note is going to help me coming into this year.”

Despite those solid numbers, Recker was left exposed to the Rule 5 draft by the A’s this off-season. When he wasn’t protected, Recker was left uncertain as to where he stood in the A’s depth chart, so it was a relief for the Pennsylvania native when he was invited to big league camp.

“You lose a little bit of faith not getting put on the 40-man when you are eligible and not getting Rule 5’d. You hope that nobody is forgetting about you. But you’ve just got to continue to work hard and it’s paying off for me so far,” Recker said.

“Hopefully I just continue to get opportunities and I know that I am going to do my best to take advantage of them. It was definitely good to hear that news. I was relieved and excited at the same time because I felt like I deserved to be here, but, at the same time, you never know what is going to happen.”