

A's News Clips, Wednesday, March 10, 2010

Cliff Pennington looks to nail down starting shortstop job with Oakland Athletics

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

A's shortstop Cliff Pennington became a father in November.

But when he wasn't busy changing diapers, he was keeping up with the A's offseason maneuverings.

He's aware the team explored other shortstop options, reportedly offering Marco Scutaro a three-year contract to return to Oakland.

Such news didn't bother Pennington, but he acknowledged it provides motivation this spring as he tries to prove he's the full-time answer at the position.

"If they want to bring somebody in, that's fine. I go out there and play my game and do what I can do," Pennington said. "They're trying to make moves to improve the team."

The A's think highly of Pennington, a 2005 first-round pick. That's why he received a 60-game trial run at shortstop to close last season after Orlando Cabrera was traded.

But the A's have stopped short of anointing Pennington, 25, the unquestioned starter entering this season. They traded for utility infielder Adam Rosales partly for his ability to play shortstop.

Pennington and Rosales each drew two starts through the first four Cactus League games, and both were needed Tuesday as the A's played split-squad games.

A's manager Bob Geren was asked Monday if the shortstop job was up for grabs.

"There's a competition everywhere," Geren said. "It's a big-league camp. Everybody has to earn it, either through past performance or what they're doing at the current time."

The switch-hitting Pennington batted .279 with four homers and 21 RBIs last season after being called up July 31. He also had seven stolen bases, and the A's have him working on his bunting and baserunning this spring to take greater advantage of his speed.

Pennington has received instruction from Rickey Henderson, who's been in camp as a baserunning tutor.

"He has things in his game that are very exciting," Geren said. "He can handle the bat a little bit, he's got a cannon for an arm. He's still young and still improving. We've talked to him about a few things — being the best bunter he can be, the best fielder, the best base runner."

Geren called Pennington the front-runner at shortstop. But with the A's placing an emphasis on better defense this season, Pennington's glove work ultimately might decide whether he sticks at the position.

He didn't make an error over his first 32 games in 2009 but committed eight over his final 28. Yet A's infield coach Mike Gallego is looking beyond stats in gauging Pennington's development.

"What I'm looking for from Cliff is the ability to take control, be the quarterback out there," Gallego said. "He has the talent. But I want him not to play so conservatively ... be aggressive. When he has confidence, he can play with anybody. When he doesn't, that's when he makes his mistakes."

Pennington said he draws confidence from his extended stint in the A's lineup last season.

He went home to the Houston area in the offseason and had a busier agenda than usual.

His wife, Missy, gave birth to their first child — a son, Brady — in November. Rather than leave for Phoenix in January as in the past, Pennington found a facility near his home and maintained his usual regimen.

Now he's trying to nail down his first Opening Day roster spot and starting job.

"By no means am I taking anything for granted," he said.

A's notebook: Oakland Athletics reliever Joey Devine experiencing tendinitis in right forearm

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The peaks and valleys continue for Joey Devine as he tries to work his way back to the A's bullpen.

The reliever is experiencing tendinitis in his right forearm, which is likely to keep him off the mound for a short period and decrease the chances he'll be ready by Opening Day.

Devine made it through a 30-pitch bullpen session Tuesday but couldn't muster his typical velocity when he tried cranking up his fastball.

"When I tried throwing hard, it wasn't coming out the way I wanted it to come out," Devine said.

Recent reports on Devine were good as he'd been throwing from the mound every three days. Ever the optimist, he said his latest setback is typical in the recovery from elbow ligament replacement surgery, and he'd rather get it out of the way in spring training.

The news was better regarding starting pitcher Justin Duchscherer, who threw 33 pitches and reported his lower back felt good. It marked the first time he'd thrown from a mound since Feb. 19.

Max Stassi, the 18-year old catcher from Yuba City High, homered in the bottom of the seventh as an A's split squad played the Texas Rangers to a 8-8 tie in Phoenix.

In the top of the ninth, Stassi took a foul tip off his right knee and had to exit the game. He was diagnosed with a contusion and said he'd miss about a week. He also said he was being reassigned to minor league camp today, though that wasn't confirmed by A's officials.

Stassi, a fourth-round draft pick in June, made quite an impression with the poise he showed in a big league atmosphere.

"I had a great time," Stassi said. "I'll take all the stuff that Landon (Powell) and Kurt (Suzuki) taught me."

Former Athletic Rich Harden started for Texas and allowed four runs in 22/3 innings.

The A's other split squad lost 11-10 to the Kansas City Royals in Surprise. Jack Cust hit a two-run homer in the first and starting pitcher Vin Mazzaro went three innings and allowed just one hit.

Travis Buck was scratched from right field before the game with dizziness, but no further information was available.

When will Posey lead the next Giants generation, the A's young sluggers, and other Spring Questions

Tim Kawakami, San Jose Mercury News, 3/9/2010

** Didn't put this in the column, but obviously the largest Spring Question in sports: **When will Tiger Woods play again?** I've blogged that I was guessing, due to complicated issues, he might not play at all in 2010. Sounds very much that I was dead wrong and maybe those issues untangled quickly right as I was typing those words.*

If he's practicing like crazy in Florida now, which is the word, then maybe he's aiming to get back for Bay Hill late this month and then for the Masters. We shall see. When I'm wrong, I'm W-R-O-N-G.

-One added thought to the top note on the Giants and Posey: I've said this before but this is a good time to re-iterate that this really feels like a bridge year, despite the 16-victory leap last year.

Bill Neukom kept the free-agent signings to two years and only gave Brian Sabean and Bruce Bochy two-year extensions. They have that young pitching staff. Maybe Posey's not ready, but he's close. They have some more hitting talent coming through the system.

So 2010 might be the period in between—the pitchers are here, the hitters are coming, and Mark DeRosa, Aubrey Huff, Freddy Sanchez and Bengie Molina are the way-station veterans filling in for now.

I very much agree with this strategy, by the way. If everything breaks right, the Giants still might win the NL West. If, as usual, not everything goes right, the Giants are NOT on the hook for terrible long-term deals to mediocre old players.

—*the column*/

Sooner or later, Tim Lincecum pitching to Buster Posey every fifth day will be more than a distant concept and far-off Giants marketing possibility.

Lincecum to Posey will define the Giants — who they are and where they might end up.

But for now, it's just anticipation. Which gives this combination top billing in my list of big Spring Questions, as we emphasize the new and scrutinize the old...

Spring Question No. 1: Is Posey anywhere close to proving he can handle catching Lincecum?

Bengie Molina obviously is the Giants' 2010 starting catcher, and Lincecum and manager Bruce Bochy are more than comfortable with that.

But every bit of the Giants' long-range plan focuses on Posey catching Lincecum (and Matt Cain) and providing a decade of thump and athleticism in the middle of the lineup alongside Pablo Sandoval.

Posey's scheduled Cactus League start to catch Lincecum on Sunday was rained out; Lincecum got his work in with another catcher. So the Lincecum-Posey combo will have to wait for a while.

Meanwhile, Posey probably will see more time at first base in the spring.

No doubt, Bochy is extra cautious about sending a neophyte to deal with the tricky stuff of Lincecum, Cain and Jonathan Sanchez.

After signing for \$6 million as the No 5 pick overall in 2008, then racing through the system in 2009, Posey was called up last September.

Posey caught only 40 innings and got 17 at-bats with the Giants. (He caught Lincecum once, on Sept. 25, in a 3-0 loss to the Cubs. Lincecum went seven innings, giving up six hits and two earned runs.)

Then came the surprise re-signing of Molina, Posey's expected ticket to Fresno this April and the continued mystery about Posey's ETA as the Giants' catcher.

But if Posey clicks with Lincecum and blasts away with the bat this spring — or if Molina gets dinged up — the schedule could get moved up.

And if Posey can't prove to Bochy that he can handle Lincecum this spring, the long-range plan might get pushed back longer and longer "...

Spring Question No. 2: Will the A's see enough from their two promising sluggers — Michael Taylor and Chris Carter — to keep either on the 25-man roster?

Basically, Taylor and Carter represent the A's latest hopes for high-voltage energy in the lineup, after fizzles by Bobby Crosby, Dan Johnson, Travis Buck, Daric Barton and several others.

Best guess is that neither makes it onto the big league roster right away. But the A's could use a pleasant surprise or two.

That next generation of A's power will show up at some point. They've been waiting for only about a decade or so.

Spring Question No. 3: How many more times will we see Monta Ellis and Andris Biedrins in Warriors uniforms?

Ellis (back strain) might play a handful of games the rest of this season; Biedrins (set to undergo surgery to repair a torn abdominal muscle) almost certainly is done for the season.

After that? If Don Nelson is still the coach and Chris Cohan is still the owner, it's likely that one or both players will be traded this summer. And it's very likely that both of the team's longest-tenured players will fully support changes in scenery.

If you like them and happen to see them in the next few months, maybe you ought to say goodbye.

Spring Question No. 4: Will the Warriors, currently 17-46, win seven of their final 19 games to get Nelson the all-time victories mark?

They've got eight reasonably winnable games — home vs. Toronto, home vs. New Orleans, home vs. Memphis, at the Clippers, home vs. the Knicks, at Washington, at Minnesota and at the Clippers again.

To get Nelson his record, the Warriors probably need to go at least 5-3 in those "winnable" games, and snag a few more victories from the less likely list.

My guess: They'll fall one or two victories short. Uh oh.

Then, unless Cohan sells soon, it'd be up to Cohan and Robert Rowell to decide if Nelson's worth keeping around.

By the way, Nelson will not voluntarily walk away even if he gets the record in a few weeks. He's owed \$6 million next season, and he's not leaving that on the table.

So everything's working out just great for the Warriors, as usual. They'll be counting on the ticket-draw of a last-gasp record chase by a coach hanging around mostly for the money.

Get your season tickets now. Plenty available.

Sliding toward return to field

Speedy Crisp edges closer to playing center for Oakland

[John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

The A's aren't shelling out \$5.25 million for Coco Crisp to be their designated hitter. But for the third time in four days, Crisp was the DH on Tuesday as he recoups from surgeries in both shoulders.

"He's a guy who needs to play the field," second baseman Mark Ellis said.

Crisp, one of the best defenders in today's game never to win a Gold Glove, said he anticipates debuting in center field late this week. The A's, who are emphasizing speed and defense much more than in previous years, have the complete package with Crisp, their new leadoff hitter who's known for his speed in the field and on the bases.

So much so that Rajai Davis - last year's center fielder and leadoff man - now plays left and bats second.

"Our team's kind of built around speed now with the outfield the way it is," Ellis said of the Davis-Crisp-Ryan Sweeney alignment. "We'll run more and create some more runs because we don't have the big boppers who'll hit 30 or 35 home runs."

Crisp, 30, with his fourth team, is a .277 lifetime hitter with a .331 on-base percentage. He stole 28 bases in the Red Sox's run to the 2007 title and had 429 chances (in 153 games) without an error, a record among Boston outfielders.

He had shoulder problems with Kansas City last season that shelved him in mid-June, and he had surgeries to repair labrum and rotator-cuff tears. He throws mornings before workouts under the supervision of bullpen coach Ron Romanick and isn't being rushed.

When he returns, Crisp said he "won't be timid or reserved" and will continue sliding headfirst, though he expects his slides will be less violent after receiving tips from stolen-base king Rickey Henderson on how to land more smoothly. Henderson had him picture an airplane landing and stressed the importance of a low center of gravity before beginning the slide.

"He talked about being lower to the ground instead of sliding like Pete Rose," Crisp said, "and keep your hands in and don't extend the arms."

Why wouldn't Crisp, with tender shoulders, simply slide feet first?

"I slow down," he said. "Only time I slide feet first is when I know I'll have enough time to get in there."

Though Crisp gets plenty of assistance nowadays, it wasn't always the case. He began his minor-league career as a middle infielder, trying to emulate Ozzie Smith, and "kind of learned to play the outfield in the big leagues on the fly. I jumped around and played the outfield like an infielder."

He eventually figured it out.

"He makes it look very easy," Ellis said. "I know he's taken a lot of hits away from me over the years."

So far, all Crisp has done in games is hit and run the bases. He's 4-for-8 with a steal. He and the A's await the next step, into center field.

Harden glowing over Canada gold

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

After pitching 22/3 innings against the A's on Monday, **Rich Harden** said, "It was a good one, an exciting game. It was definitely nice. I was stressed out that game. It was good for the sport. Really got people involved."

A spring training game?

No, the Olympic gold-medal hockey game.

Harden, a native of Victoria, British Columbia, played hockey as a kid, remains an avid fan and celebrated the Canadians' victory over the Americans. After the game, he spoke with his sister, who watched at a San Francisco tavern.

"They had a bunch of Canadians in there and were celebrating pretty good," Harden said. "The phone got passed around the bar, and I was talking to all these random people."

Harden, who signed with the Rangers for a one-year guarantee of \$7.5 million, is back in the AL West after spending a year and a half with the Cubs. He played in Oakland from 2003 to 2008.

"It's strange being on the visiting side," said Harden, who faced the A's for the first time and yielded four runs, all in the third inning. "It brings back some good memories."

Harden is expected to start the Rangers' season opener.

Briefly: Joey Devine threw 30 pitches on the side and felt "tightness" and won't throw for three or four days, he said. He had Tommy John surgery in April. ... **Justin Duchscherer** threw off a mound and said he felt fine. ... In an 8-8 A's-Rangers tie, catcher **Max Stassi**, who turns 19 on Monday, had two huge memories - a home run and a deeply bruised right knee, sustained on a foul tip. He said he'll miss a week and report to minor-league camp today. ... **Trevor Cahill** surrendered three runs in two innings. ... In a split-squad game, the A's lost 11-10 to the Royals in Surprise, Ariz. **Jack Cust** hit a colossal homer, and **Vin Mazzaro** yielded one hit in three innings. ... **Travis Buck** was scratched with dizziness.

Drumbeat: On Buck, split-squad games and rehabbing pitchers

John Shea reporting from A's camp . . .

It stopped raining in Phoenix, and the A's are playing the Rangers, who have Rich Harden on the mound and Ron Washington in the dugout.

Oakland's lineup: DH Crisp, 2B Ellis, RF Sweeney, 3B Kouzmanoff, 1B Carter, LF Taylor, C Fox, SS Rosales, CF Patterson, RH Cahill on mound.

The A's play an interleague game in Surprise, which is underway. Jack Cust has hit a monster home run, and the A's are leading 5-0 in the second.

Here's that lineup: 1B Barton, CF Gross, DH Cust, C Powell, RF Brown, SS Pennington, 3B Cardenas, 2B Sogard. RH Mazzaro on mound.

Travis Buck was scratched with dizziness and replaced in right field by Corey Brown. The extent of Buck's condition isn't known yet. He had a severe concussion in 2008 after running headfirst into a wall at Triple-A Sacramento. He also collided with outfielder Chris Denorfia last year with Sacramento and had headaches late in the season.

Justin Duchscherer threw 33 pitches off a mound this morning and said he came out OK. Joey Devine also threw off a mound.

Tendinitis is latest obstacle for Devine

A's rehabbing right-hander still has yet to face live hitters

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Rehabbing right-hander Joey Devine is hoping to face live hitters soon, but he'll first have to treat what he calls "a dose of tendinitis" that surfaced this week.

Devine, who missed all of last season after undergoing Tommy John surgery on April 21, has been throwing a bullpen session every three days during Spring Training as part of a rehab program developed by bullpen coach Ron Romanick.

The 26-year-old Devine threw 30 pitches on Tuesday but spoke afterward about a sore forearm that will likely push back his next session a day or two.

"It's just some tightness, some soreness," Devine said. "If the forearm gets sore and tightens up, it's a true indication that your body needs some rest and treatment. When I was trying to throw hard, it wasn't coming out normal."

"It's a phase I have to go through to get to the next step."

The A's reliever does not consider the setback serious, and he hopes to throw one final bullpen session before being allowed to face live hitters. Once past that step, Devine said he'll potentially see game action.

Fellow rehabbing pitcher Justin Duchscherer, who underwent a nerve ablation procedure on Feb. 23, threw off the mound Tuesday for the first time since the operation. He threw 32 pitches, and manager Bob Geren reported that all "went well."

The right-handed starter, who also missed the 2009 season due to an elbow injury, is said to be two or three weeks behind schedule. While Geren has been quoted as saying he doesn't think Duchscherer will have increased his pitch count enough to be ready by Opening Day, the 31-year-old pitcher believes he'll be good to go.

Change is good for Anderson, Gonzalez

A's pitchers getting positive results with expanded arsenal

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Much has been made of Gio Gonzalez's struggles with mound composure ever since he hit the big league scene in 2008.

Those days are gone, he insists.

So, too, are the days in which he only had two pitches in his arsenal.

The left-handed Gonzalez, who, for most of his career, has relied solely on his fastball and curveball, has been working on his changeup since the end of last season. Now, he says it's officially part of his repertoire.

"I was working on it last year but was never too focused on it," Gonzalez said. "I was working on throwing my curveball for strikes.

"I had two and a half pitches, and now I have three."

The addition has lent a slight boost of confidence to Gonzalez, who saw his numbers turn around when he began throwing the changeup more in September. Not coincidentally, he posted a 2-1 record with a 4.50 ERA -- his lowest mark in any month last season -- during those 30 days. The 10 earned runs he allowed in September represented a significant improvement from the 17 and 18 he surrendered in August and July, respectively.

"At the end of the season," he said, "it was actually my go-to pitch."

On Monday, it was just that again, as Gonzalez used it to escape further damage with the Cubs after allowing two RBI sacrifice flies. He forced Chicago's Jeff Baker to pop out, stranding a runner at third in the fourth inning.

"The changeup actually got me out of all the situations where I was in trouble," he said. "It just shows that I have that potential to keep that third pitch in the back pocket. There's more room for improvement, but it's good just to have as many pitches as you can to throw for strikes."

Fellow pitcher Brett Anderson knows the feeling. The A's left-hander, who started Monday's game, realizes how vital the changeup is to his pitching repertoire.

"I'm trying to use it how I'd use it in a game, early in the count -- 1-0, 0-1, 1-1 -- where you can minimize your pitch count," Anderson said. "So I've been really trying to work it into my game."

Seems to be quite the trend these days. Even Trevor Cahill, battling for a rotation spot with Gonzalez and Vin Mazzaro, realizes his changeup could use some work if he wants to be fully effective on the bump.

The right-hander struggled with the pitch in Tuesday's game against the Rangers, as he gave up three runs on four hits while walking one and fanning three through two innings.

"I was fiddling around with the changeup, but it's not where I want it to be," said Cahill, who gave up a two-run single to Julio Borbon on a changeup in the second inning. "I really had it working toward the end of last season, but now I feel it's back where it was at the beginning of last Spring Training.

"It's something I know I need to improve on, but that's why it's good to have this time to work on things."

Kouzmanoff, Stassi take Texas deep

A's 18-year-old catcher exits game with knee contusion

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

ATHLETICS 8, RANGERS 8

at Phoenix

Tuesday, March 9

Rangers at the plate: Ian Kinsler went 2-for-2 with a walk, and Julio Borbon tallied a pair of hits while collecting two RBIs. David Murphy, who replaced Josh Hamilton in the sixth inning, notched one of the biggest hits of the day with a three-run double. Hamilton, Michael Young, Nelson Cruz and Elvis Andrus were also among 10 Rangers to get hits in the game.

Athletics at the plate: Kevin Kouzmanoff, who was hitless in his first six Cactus League at-bats entering the game, enjoyed a big day at the plate. The A's new third baseman collected a three-run homer in the third and added a double in the sixth. Oakland also got run-scoring hits from Coco Crisp and Michael Taylor, and Eric Patterson went 2-for-2 on the day with a triple. Eighteen-year-old catcher Max Stassi made some late-inning noise by launching his first home run of the spring in the seventh.

Rangers on the mound: Former A's right-hander Rich Harden got knocked around a bit in 2 2/3 innings. He allowed two hits, four runs and three walks but also struck out four. After righty Evan Reed gave up another run in the third, left-hander Darren Oliver pitched a perfect fourth frame before Doug Mathis allowed two runs in two innings.

Athletics on the mound: In his second start of the spring, Trevor Cahill lasted just two innings rather than the expected three -- giving up three runs on four hits while walking one and fanning three. He struggled not only with the unusual cold weather but also with his changeup, which was handed to Borbon in the second for a two-run single. Right-hander Justin Souza was also tagged with three runs in just one inning, and Matt Wright and Brad Ziegler also each gave up a run.

Worth noting: Stassi left the game with a right knee contusion in the ninth inning and was replaced by Jake Fox in a confusing series of events. Fox, who started the game at catcher but moved to right field later in the game, replaced Stassi behind the plate. Meanwhile, Adam Rosales -- who started at shortstop -- reentered the game in right to take the place of Fox.

Cactus League records: Athletics 2-3-1; Rangers 1-3-1

Up next: Right-hander Ben Sheets, coming off elbow surgery, is slated to make his second spring start when the A's host the White Sox at Phoenix Municipal Stadium on Wednesday at 12:05 PT. Sheets walked off the mound feeling "great" after scattering four hits on two runs -- one earned -- in 1 2/3 innings in his debut. Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow are among those also scheduled to get work in.

It's an American League West showdown in Surprise, Ariz., when the Rangers play host to the Mariners on Wednesday. C.J. Wilson is scheduled to start for Texas against Seattle's Cliff Lee at 12:05 PT. There has been talk about moving Wilson from the bullpen to the starting rotation, but he could return to his role as the left-handed setup man. Neftali Feliz, Alexi Ogando, Chris Ray and Frank Francisco are also scheduled to pitch for the Rangers.

Cust goes yard against Royals

A's slugger takes advantage of windy conditions

By Dick Kaegel / MLB.com

ROYALS 11, ATHLETICS 10

at Surprise, Ariz.

Tuesday, March 9

A's at the plate: Jack Cust clouted a tape-measure blast in the first inning, a two-run homer that bounced over the stadium's back fence beyond the right-field seating and onto Bullard Avenue. Not that it needed help, but there was a 27-mph wind blowing in that direction. Cust dropped a double inside the left-field line to start the A's three-run fifth. Eric Sogard lined a two-run triple to right field and added an RBI single. Corey Brown had three hits with a walk and two RBIs.

Royals at the plate: Rick Ankiel lofted a three-run homer over the center-field wall in the Royals' four-run sixth inning. That gave him four RBIs. David DeJesus drilled a two-run triple into the right-field corner and scored on Ankiel's single in the fourth. Mitch Maier hammered a two-run homer to right field in the eighth.

A's on the mound: Starter Vin Mazzaro faced the minimum nine batters in his three innings, although he gave up one hit and one walk. He used 32 pitches, including 19 strikes. Lefty Jerry Blevins was tagged for three runs in the fourth. Clayton Mortensen gave up four runs in the sixth. Fernando Hernandez reeled off a perfect seventh.

Royals on the mound: Robinson Tejeda, bidding for a starting spot, gave up five runs on four hits and three walks in two innings. He threw 45 pitches, and just 22 were strikes. Kyle Davies, competing with Tejeda, followed with two shutout innings but gave up three runs in the fifth on four hits. Philip Humber and Bryan Bullington each gave up one run.

Cactus League records: A's 2-3-1; Royals 3-2

Worth noting: A's right fielder Travis Buck was scratched from the lineup after experiencing dizziness. Brown took his place. ... After morning rain ended, the game began at 57 degrees -- just over the 56-degree temperature in Kansas City and the 53 back home in Oakland. The brisk wind in Surprise made it feel like 51. ... A wind-blown foul ball by the A's Daric Barton fell safely next to home plate, eluding catcher Jason Kendall, Davies and two infielders. ... A's pitcher John Meloan left the game in the eighth with an apparent injury.

Up next: Zack Greinke will get his second start of the spring at 12:05 p.m. PT on Wednesday against the Colorado Rockies at Hi Corbett Field in Tucson. Greinke worked three shutout innings in his first outing, allowing Texas just one hit. Also due to pitch: Brad Thompson, Josh Rupe, Blake Wood, Adam Bostick and Nelson Payano. Mike Aviles, coming back from elbow surgery, is to make his Cactus League debut at second base. The Rockies will start Jeff Francis.

Right-hander Ben Sheets, coming off a blank year due to elbow surgery, is slated to make his second spring start when the A's host the White Sox at Phoenix Municipal Stadium on Wednesday at 12:05 PT. Sheets walked off the mound feeling "great" after scattering four hits on two runs -- one earned -- in 1 2/3 innings in his debut. Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow are among those also scheduled to get work in.

Lee's Leftovers: Injury news: Buck, Stassi, Meloan

2 p.m. I just learned that outfielder **Travis Buck** was scratched from Tuesday's lineup due to dizziness in Surprise, Ariz., where the A's are playing a split-squad game against the Royals. He was replaced in right field by **Corey Brown**, who went 3-for-4 with an RBI ground-rule double, two runs, a stolen base and a walk.

Buck is 1-for-5 at the plate in three games this spring and is fighting for an outfield spot along with Eric Patterson and Gabe Gross. He has made the A's Opening Day roster in each of the last three seasons, but four stints on the disabled list and options to Sacramento in each of the last two years have limited him to just 156 games in that time at the Major League level.

5:30 p.m.: Manager **Bob Geren** had no news on Buck, so I'm assuming he'll be good to go tomorrow, but if I hear anything differently come morning, I'll keep you updated.

In other injury news, 18-year-old catching prospect **Max Stassi** left the A's game against the Rangers in Phoenix in the ninth inning with a right knee contusion after getting hit by a foul ball. The injury came just two frames after Stassi hit his first homer of the spring. "The baseball gods are funny like that," he said after the game.

Stassi doesn't think he'll be game-ready again for about a week, so the next time he sees action will apparently be in Minor League camp, considering he noted that "the bad thing is I'm going down tomorrow." Geren hasn't said anything about cuts, but I wouldn't be too surprised if some were made tomorrow considering Minor League camp is officially underway.

6 p.m. Also just got word that right-handed pitcher **John Meloan** left the game in Surprise accompanied by a trainer in the eighth inning with a 1-0 count on the batter. Will hopefully have more information on him first thing tomorrow.

Another note from that game: **Jack Cust** hit a ball over the right-field wall that bounced on the sidewalk over the fence across the four-lane street on one hop and into the water park. A source who was at the game says the homer was the "farthest anyone can remember seeing a ball hit here."

Lee's Leftovers: **Buck sits with dizziness**

I just learned that outfielder **Travis Buck** was scratched from Tuesday's lineup due to dizziness in Surprise, Ariz., where the A's are playing a split-squad game against the Royals. He was replaced in right field by **Corey Brown**.

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Hopefully I'll hear more on Buck soon...

Stassi goes deep as A's tie Rangers

AP, 3/10/2010

Yuba City High School product Max Stassi, 18, hit his first home run of the spring for the A's on Tuesday in an 8-8 tie with the Rangers.

Stassi left the game in the ninth after getting hit in the right knee with a foul ball.

"It got half skin and half shin guard," said Stassi, who expects to report to minor league camp today. "My knee just locked up, and I couldn't move it. I had fun today, though. A lot of good things happened, and I got my feet wet."

Former A's starter Rich Harden breezed through the first two innings but didn't finish the third in his second outing with Texas.

Harden gave up four runs on two hits in 2 2/3 innings to the A's split squad. He struck out four, walked three and threw a wild pitch.

"I felt really good early, the first couple of innings," Harden said. "If I can repeat how I felt the first couple of innings, mechanically be consistent, then I can be consistent throwing strikes and hitting spots."

Royals 11, A's 10 in Surprise, Ariz. – Rick Ankiel homered and drove in four runs as Kansas City rallied from a five-run deficit to beat an A's split squad.

Wind gusts of up to 33 mph played a factor.

Oakland's Jack Cust hit a two-run homer to right in the first that bounced out of the stadium.

"The first one is always a little weird," Cust said. "You usually don't know if it's out, but that one I hit right down the line, and I knew it was out. You don't look at it the whole time, but you kind of see the trajectory.

"Sometimes you hit your best balls when it's windy when you don't need the help. It's kind of weird trotting around the bases again for the first time."

A'S (SS) 8, RANGERS 8

Texas 030 013 100 – 8 14 1

A'S (ss) 005 002 100 – 8 11 0

Harden, E. Reed (3), Oliver (4), Mathis (5), Moscoso (7), Rapada (8), Eyre (9) and Richardson, Ramirez; Cahill, McBeth (3), M. Wright (4), J. Souza (6), Ziegler (7), P. Figueroa (8), Rodriguez (9) and M. Stassi, Fox. HRs–A's, Kouzmanoff (1), M. Stassi (1).

ROYALS 11, A'S (SS) 10

A'S (ss) 230 030 110 – 10 15 2

Kansas City 000 304 022 – 11 12 0

Mazzaro, Blevins (4), Mortensen (5), Hernandez (7), Meloan (8), S. Demel (8) and Powell, J. Donaldson; Tejeda, Davies (3), Humber (6), Bullington (8), Colon (9) and Kendall, Wilson. W–Colon. L–S. Demel. HRs–A's, Cust (1). Kansas City, Ankiel (1), Maier (1).

A's Bullpen A Big Relief

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

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In 2009, if the Oakland A's had the lead when they made the call to the bullpen, they almost always found themselves in the win column. Despite not featuring marquee names, the A's bullpen was an elite group last season. We take a closer look at the A's relief corps inside...

The Oakland A's may not have had a winning team in 2009, but their bullpen was championship-caliber. Led by American League Rookie of the Year closer Andrew Bailey, the A's bullpen was tops in the AL in ERA with a 3.54 mark. A's relievers led the AL in strikeouts (514 in 559.1 innings), innings pitched, OPS against (668) and strikeout-to-walk ratio (2.65). Oakland relievers also blew the fewest number of saves (12) and allowed the fewest number of homeruns (42) despite pitching the most number of innings.

What is even more remarkable is that the A's bullpen managed to put up these numbers despite not having any marquee names. Nineteen pitchers threw relief innings for Oakland in 2009 and only one (Russ Springer) had more than five years of major league experience.

"As far as numbers go, strikeouts are probably the first thing we look at [when evaluating relievers], followed by walk rate – we've really tried to emphasize finding relievers that can come in and throw strikes consistently," A's Director of Baseball Operations Farhan Zaidi.

"We also do look at groundball numbers – that ratio doesn't always translate to the major league level, but is generally an indicator of good stuff."

Going into last spring, Joey Devine and Brad Ziegler were expected to handle the bulk of the closing duties. However, Devine went down in spring training with an elbow injury and Ziegler was felled early in the regular season by a bad case of the flu. While Ziegler eventually recovered and was an integral part of the success of the A's 2009 bullpen, Devine was lost for the season.

Before the start of the spring, the A's anticipated having Devine and Ziegler in the closer role, free agent acquisition Springer and A's veteran Santiago Casilla in a seventh/eighth inning role, Jerry Blevins in the lefty specialist role and low-

profile acquisition [Michael Wuertz](#) in a middle-innings role. By early May, much of this plan had gone awry. Devine was out for the year, Ziegler was struggling with the flu, and Blevins was struggling, period, and had been sent back to the minor leagues. Casilla had a strong April, but he would fall apart in May (9.39 ERA) and by the second half of the season, he was no longer pitching high-leverage innings.

Despite the unraveling of the “master plan,” as it were, the A’s still managed to put together the AL’s best bullpen on the fly. Bailey, who began the spring as a relatively unknown non-roster invitee, went from pitching in low-pressure situations to being the team’s closer by mid-May. He would wind-up being an AL All-Star and the league’s Rookie of the Year, posting a 1.84 ERA and an 0.88 WHIP.

Wuertz, who was acquired by the A’s from the [Chicago Cubs](#) for two minor leaguers ([Richie Robnett](#) and [Justin Sellers](#)) who were traded away by Chicago before mid-season, became one of the AL’s top set-up men. He led all AL relievers in strikeouts with 102 and posted a 2.63 ERA. The A’s addressed the lefty specialist role in mid-May by combing the waiver wire and picking up [Craig Breslow](#) from the [Minnesota Twins](#). Breslow would go on to appear in 60 games for the A’s and he had a 2.60 ERA.

The A’s continued to plug holes in their bullpen throughout the season. Springer was traded in July and his innings were picked up by rookie [Jeff Gray](#), who had a 3.76 ERA in 24 appearances (note: Gray was traded this off-season to the Cubs). During the season’s final month, Oakland found success using September call-ups. Blevins spent all of June through August in Triple-A, but he was outstanding after being called up to Oakland in September, posting a 2.30 ERA in 15.2 innings. [Brad Kilby](#) made his major league debut in September and he ended up being one of the A’s top relievers the rest of the year, allowing only one run in 15 innings. [John Meloan](#), another waiver-wire acquisition, joined the team in mid-September and he didn’t allow a run in six appearances (8.1 innings), while top prospect [Henry Rodriguez](#) made his much anticipated debut in late September and he allowed only a run in four innings of work.

“You get a little energy with the young guys. They tell you where they are going to pitch. The Andrew Bailey story, that doesn’t happen very often. That’s kind of atypical to do that. The same thing with Brad Ziegler the year before. Those are nice, nice stories. When they happen, you are just thankful that they can do that,” A’s bullpen coach Ron Romanick said.

“Those guys kind of fed off of each other and you earn your innings. [A’s manager] Bob [Geren] does a very good job of letting guys show what they can do.”

The A’s have had a knack for building successful bullpens for a number of years. The team actually posted a better bullpen ERA in 2008 (3.50), good for second in the American League, and in 2006, the AL West Division-winning A’s led the American League in saves and were third in the AL in ERA.

While the A’s 2009, 2008 and 2006 bullpens have success in common, they were all built with significantly different personnel. As the cost of signing relievers on the free agent market has risen, the A’s have managed to find top relievers on the cheap.

“We really try to use a balance of scouting reports and stats when evaluating relievers. Obviously we look for guys with plus velocity, but I think the bigger issue is finding relievers with a ‘weapon,’ or plus pitch, which isn’t always their fastball – an example being Wuertz’s slider,” Zaidi said.

“When evaluating relievers’ minor league track records, we don’t just look at their numbers, we look for a scouting explanation for their success. We probably place a little more emphasis on identifying those ‘weapons’ rather than just stopping at the numbers than we did a few years ago.”

The A’s will be returning the core of their league-leading 2009 bullpen in 2010, but there is still a lot of healthy competition this spring to determine who will fill out the bullpen. In addition to September call-ups Blevins, Kilby, Meloan and Rodriguez, minor league free agent signings [Marcus McBeth](#), [Jason Jennings](#) and [Fernando Hernandez](#) and prospect Sam Demel are all in the mix for spots in the A’s Opening Day bullpen.

“Each year the personality [of the bullpen] is a little different than the year before. I’m looking forward to seeing how things mix out. We have some guys who are coming from the minor leagues and from other organizations who will influence that,” Romanick said.

“You try to minimize the injuries and if everyone is a little salty fighting for innings, that is a good thing. I don’t want guys to be complacent. I want guys to be competitive in a fun-spirited way and push each other. It is a competitive game and I want somebody who is mad if they are not pitching, in the right way. I want them competitive, but at the same time pulling for each other, and last year, that’s what they did. They were a very good group.

Anything can happen. Andrew Bailey wasn’t even on the radar last year. It took a zero ERA and some injuries for him to make the club, but he did. So he sets the precedent for the next guy that it can be done. You want to promote that so guys come up hungry and you address what they can do and what they can’t do and you make sure that they get it done if they don’t get that opportunity right away. I am always selling that. You’ve got to do what your talent will allow you to achieve up here and don’t take shortcuts down there so that when you get up here you have to learn something and it’s really hard. You don’t want to learn a lesson that way.”

