

A's News Clips, Thursday, March 11, 2010

Oakland A's notebook: Oft-injured Eric Chavez rediscovers stroke and health

By Curtis Pashelka, Oakland Tribune

Eric Chavez looked like his old self during the A's game against the Chicago White Sox on Wednesday as he hit two home runs, including one in the first inning to right-center field that manager Bob Geren estimated to be close to 500 feet.

Chavez said he's also starting to feel a bit like his old self.

"It's not a question of my ability or hand-eye coordination. It's more physical," said Chavez, who hit cleanup and went 2-for-3 with three RBIs in the A's 9-5 loss at Municipal Stadium. "I just told (A's trainer Steve Sayles) today, for the last two days, my body's felt as good as its ever felt."

Chavez is now 4-for-8 in three Cactus League games, and his homers were his first in any game since he hit two during spring training last year. He also started at first base.

The A's understandably are taking a cautious approach this spring with a number of banged-up players. Chavez, who has had five surgeries (three on his shoulders, two on his back) since September 2007, won't play again until Saturday. He had his second microdiscectomy operation on his back last June.

Chavez said if things continue to progress, he could start to play five or six innings on back-to-back days in a week or so.

"During batting practice, I thought it was the loosest and best I've seen him swing in a long time," Geren said.

Chavez has cut back dramatically on his throwing, estimating he's played catch only four or five times since spring training began. His right shoulder still isn't totally pain free, so he wants to get comfortable at the plate and at first base before he thinks about returning to third base.

"As long as I stay away from as many throws as I possibly can," he said, "I have a fighting chance with my shoulder."

Chavez said the first 45 minutes are the most critical of the day when he's "walking on eggshells" after he wakes up.

Coco Crisp's debut in center field will have to wait, as he has a left hamstring strain. The injury occurred during Tuesday's game against Texas when he leaned over to pick up his bat in the on-deck circle. Geren said Crisp is day-to-day. Crisp, who didn't believe the injury was serious, was being used as a designated hitter but was supposed to play in the outfield this weekend. He had surgery on both shoulders last summer.

As a precautionary measure, Joey Devine won't pitch for five or seven days. The right-handed reliever — who had Tommy John surgery last April — reported some elbow soreness and inner forearm tendinitis after he threw a side session Tuesday.

Ben Sheets felt he took a step in the right direction in his second start Wednesday by utilizing his changeup more. The right-hander allowed five earned runs, all in the third inning, and five hits in 22/3 innings. Sheets said the velocity on his fastball was down, but Geren liked the way Sheets threw his changeup and curveball.

Outfielder Travis Buck, who was kept out of Tuesday's split-squad game against Kansas City because of dizziness, felt better and was a late-inning replacement Wednesday. Buck had his left ear flushed out Wednesday morning.

Righty John Meloan has elbow soreness and was examined by Dr. Doug Freedberg on Wednesday. Meloan pitched two-thirds of an inning against the Royals on Tuesday and gave up two hits and two earned runs. ... The commissioner's office announced the New York Mets' waiver claim of former A's reliever Jay Marshall has been voided. Marshall was returned to the A's, who then released him. ... Pitcher Justin Duchscherer is tentatively scheduled to face hitters Friday. Duchscherer threw 32 pitches in a bullpen session Tuesday and reported no problems.

Chin Music: Joey Devine to not pitch for 5-7 days

By Curtis Pashelka, Contra Costa Times, 3/10/2010

Hey everyone. This is Curtis Pashelka filling in for Joe Stiglich, whose taking some well-deserved days off. A few things to report from Phoenix Muni, where the sun is actually shining, before the start of today's A's game against the White Sox.

Right-hander Joey Devine will not pitch for the next 5-7 days after he reported elbow soreness after throwing a side session Tuesday. Geren didn't want to say what that did to Devine's chances of being ready for opening day in less than four weeks, but it's not exactly a step in the right direction.

Outfielder Travis Buck, who was kept out of yesterday's game against Kansas City because of dizziness, said he felt better and that he had his left ear flushed out this morning. He said he would be okay to play today, and A's manager Bob Geren said if Buck goes through his morning workout without any problems, that he's probably insert Buck in the later innings.

Buck said he felt fine in the morning but started to feel dizzy on the bus ride over to Surprise.

Coco Crisp has a strained left hamstring. Geren said the injury is not severe and that Crisp is day-to-day.

Righty John Meloan has elbow soreness and will be checked out this afternoon by a local doctor. Meloan pitched two-thirds of an inning against Kansas City and gave up two hits and two earned runs.

The commissioner's office also announced today that the Mets' waiver claim of former A's reliever Jay Marshall has been voided. Marshall was returned to the A's, who then released him. Marshall was 5-3 with seven saves and a 3.20 ERA in 50 games for Triple-A Sacramento. For the A's, Marshall was 1-4 with a 7.66 ERA in 61 appearances over two seasons for the A's.

I asked Mark Ellis about the retirement of Nomar Garciaparra, and it was news to him. But Ellis said he and other A's learned a lot from the oft-injured Garciaparra, just about the way he prepared every day and persevered.

The lineups:

A's — Davis CF, Pennington SS, Suzuki C, Chavez 1B, Cust DH, Taylor LF, Gross RF, Patterson 2B, Tolleson 3B, Sheets RHP.

White Sox — Danks RF, Vizquel 2B, Pierzynski C, Jones CF, Rios DH, Kroeger 1B, Morel 3B, De Aza LF, Ramirez SS, Hudson RHP.

Chavez seeks enjoyment in his waning career

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Eric Chavez said he's just trying to enjoy what remains of his career as much as possible, and if that includes home runs like the two he hit Wednesday, all the better.

"I already know the window for my career is very short," said Chavez, who has had two back surgeries and three shoulder surgeries. "I don't know how short."

Chavez hit a massive two-run homer slightly to the right of center in the first inning of the A's 9-5 loss to the White Sox, then added a solo shot to right in the sixth.

"The last two or three days, my body has felt as good as it's ever felt," Chavez said.

That said, he wakes up in pain every day and he has to be careful for the first 45 minutes to make sure he loosens up correctly. His right shoulder is still barking at him. But he's becoming more accustomed to first base, and he said he has "a fighting chance" as long as he limits his throws.

Chavez knows that unplanned everyday use affected **Nomar Garciaparra's** health and his effectiveness last season with Oakland, and Chavez knows that even if he feels great, he must be careful about overuse.

"Hopefully, we've all become more educated," he said when asked about Garciaparra's retirement Wednesday.

Injury wrap: Coco Crisp said he tweaked his left hamstring Tuesday while bending over to pick up his bat in the on-deck circle, but judging by a previous severe right hamstring injury in the minors, Crisp believes that this one is not too serious, and he shouldn't miss much time.

Reliever **Joey Devine** will be shut down for a few days to a week with tendinitis in his right forearm. However, Devine said he believes he will immediately work in games once the tendinitis calms down. He called the tightness "entirely normal" for a pitcher coming back from elbow ligament replacement surgery.

Justin Duchscherer will throw to hitters Friday, according to manager **Bob Geren**. Presumably, if that goes well, game action could follow next week.

Right-hander **John Meloan** had X-rays and was diagnosed with elbow irritation. He will try throwing again today.

Outfielder **Travis Buck** had his left ear flushed Wednesday; he'd been unable to play the previous day because of dizziness, and he had trouble with vertigo in 2008 after running into the wall while making a catch at Triple-A Sacramento. He said he needs to get his ear cleaned periodically or he has some equilibrium problems. He finished up Wednesday's game in right.

Marshall returned, released: The Mets claimed left-handed reliever **Jay Marshall** in January, but Marshall didn't arrive at New York's camp, staying home with right shoulder tendinitis. That's the same problem that ended his season in September, so the Mets disputed the waiver claim, saying that the injury was pre-existing.

The commissioner's office agreed and voided the original transaction Wednesday, returning Marshall to the A's, who had to repay the \$25,000 claim fee to New York. Oakland believed that Marshall had recovered from his injury.

"It still feels the same as it did in September," Marshall told The Chronicle by phone.

With no room on the 40-man roster, the A's released Marshall. He said he was aware of the dispute, so the move didn't come as a shock.

Briefly: Ben Sheets allowed six runs, five earned, in the third inning. Sheets isn't concerned; he usually doesn't have great spring results. He used his changeup a lot, which is unusual. ... Outfielder **Michael Taylor** made a nice running catch on **Jordan Danks** leading off the fourth. ... Buck and **Rajai Davis** both made errors.

Service time can influence call-up time

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Lots of reasons to follow Jason Heyward. He was considered the top player in the minor leagues last season. He's one of the biggest stories in spring training, playing like an All-Star in the Braves' camp. By all accounts, the 20-year-old should be Atlanta's right fielder in the Giants' home opener April 9.

But there's a reason he might open another season in the minors: service time.

Last year, the Braves kept pitcher Tommy Hanson on the farm until early June though he certainly was ready for the majors. By doing so, the Braves will control Hanson for another year before he's eligible for arbitration, a process that generally increases a player's salary multifold. That he was 11-4 with a 2.89 ERA suggests he could have been called up earlier.

But ultimately, the Braves will save cash, which is why Heyward is on the bubble.

Even if they keep him in the minors for a few weeks - as the Rays did with Evan Longoria at the start of 2008 - they could save millions by slowing his free-agent clock. Six years are required for free agency, and a full season is at least 172 days. Longoria got in 170.

In recent examples, the Giants and A's handled things differently.

Tim Lincecum made his big-league debut May 6, 2007. If it was May 14, he wouldn't have gotten his two-year, \$23 million contract because he wouldn't have been eligible for arbitration. Three years are required for eligibility, but two-year players with the top 17 percent of service time ("Super Twos") also are eligible, and Lincecum was one.

Conversely, the A's waited until early June 2007 to call up promising catcher Kurt Suzuki. A little earlier, and he would have been arbitration eligible by now. Instead, his 2010 salary is relatively low, and arbitration won't come until next winter.

There's nothing a player can do about it. It's the clubs' right. Suzuki can seek a contract that gets him through part of his arbitration years - "It would be nice," Suzuki said - but he and his agent, Dan Horwits, said this week there have been no conversations with the A's about a new deal.

Another reason to follow Jason Heyward.

Drumbeat: Jay Marshall returned, briefly; injury updates

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix

When the A's waived Jay Marshall in January, I joked on the Drumbeat that he'd probably be back again sometime, because the lefty sidearmer always seems to bounce back and forth between Oakland and other teams.

Well, today, Marshall was returned to the A's because of a disputed waiver claim - the Mets say that Marshall had a pre-existing shoulder injury and the Commissioner's office voided the transaction. So Oakland will have to return the \$25,000 waiver fee, and the team released Marshall, because the 40-man roster is packed, which is why he was waived in the first place.

Marshall's 2009 season ended slightly early in September because of shoulder tendinitis, but the A's believed him to have fully recovered. He's in limbo now, unless a team wants to take a flier on a player who has been unable to participate in camp because of an injury.

Lots on the injury front today:

Coco Crisp will miss several days with a left hamstring strain; it's not severe, Crisp said. He had right hamstring strains in the minors but he said his left one had been the "well behaved" one. He's not worried he'll miss much time.

Joey Devine said he had some normal tendinitis issues with his right elbow after his 30-pitch bullpen session yesterday and he won't throw for several days, he said; manager Bob Geren said it will be more like five to seven days of inaction. Devine said he expects to throw in games immediately after that. (He had Tommy John surgery last April.)

Travis Buck had his left ear flushed out this morning and he's fine after yesterday's bout of dizziness kept him from playing; you might recall he missed a chunk of the 2008 season at Triple-A Sacramento with vertigo after slamming the left side of his head against the outfield wall making a catch. He'll be in today's game if he gets through the morning workout OK and he's still out there, so so far so good.

Starter John Meloan will get his right elbow checked this afternoon because of soreness; he left yesterday's game in the middle of the eighth inning with the problem.

Justin Duchscherer came out of yesterday's 32-pitch session well, Geren said, and the plan is for Duchscherer to throw to hitters on Friday. The next step after that likely would be to pitch in a game.

Nomar Garciaparra announced his retirement today, which wasn't a surprise but I still believe the guy can hit when healthy; it would have been nice to see him get one more opportunity. It was a treat to get to see him play last year, even in a somewhat limited capacity, and as I mentioned recently, he was a true pro and a good role model for the team's younger players.

Results not getting to healthy Sheets

Righty encouraged despite getting hit hard by White Sox

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Ben Sheets' first two starts with the A's haven't exactly been cause for celebration, but the right-hander wants to stress that they also haven't been cause for concern.

Sheets was roughed up by the White Sox on Wednesday, surrendering all five earned runs in the third frame of a 2 2/3-inning performance. However, he is healthy -- a simple but significant note in his efforts to come back from a year in which he didn't pitch due to right elbow surgery.

"I felt good this outing," Sheets said. "I felt even better than the last time out, and that's what you want to happen every time."

Sheets, who has exclusively thrown a fastball and curveball since he was 11 years old, made impressive strides with his changeup Wednesday. Couple that improvement with his health status, and Sheets is far less concerned with his spring ERA, which is now up to 12.46.

"I'm trying to mow them down," Sheets said. "It just doesn't go down. I'm not trying to give up five or six runs. It's March 10 and you have bad days. I don't think it's outside the ordinary. I think this is a normal Spring Training for me. I haven't had much success down here. I just try and get better every time out. I'm definitely not result-oriented.

"In the third inning, I was throwing more changeups, and I felt I threw it pretty well today."

Manager Bob Geren was even more impressed.

"That was the best changeup I've seen from him," the A's skipper said. "He's known as a two-pitch guy, so that can only help him. I was happy with the way he was throwing his off-speed pitches."

Sheets' next start is slated for Monday against the Reds, and he'll then be making four more spring starts before taking the mound for the A's Opening Day game with the visiting Mariners.

Chavez homers twice in A's loss

First baseman's pop can't pick up Sheets vs. White Sox

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

WHITE SOX 9, A'S 5

at Phoenix

Wednesday, March 10

White Sox at the plate: After going down quickly in the first two innings, the White Sox exploded for seven runs in the third. Andruw Jones tallied a two-run triple and A.J. Pierzynski drove in another two runs with a base hit, while Brent Morel added an RBI double and Alejandro De Aza had two hits and an RBI. Alex Rios also drove in a run during the frame. Chicago had 14 hits on the day.

Athletics at the plate: Eric Chavez, while getting six innings of work at first base, collected his first two home runs of the spring -- a two-run shot in the first and a solo homer in the sixth. The A's also got two hits from outfielder Gabe Gross, along with a double off the bat of Jack Cust and base hits from Kurt Suzuki, Eric Sogard, Josh Donaldson and Steve Tolleson.

White Sox on the mound: Right-hander Daniel Hudson surrendered four hits, including the two-run homer to Chavez in the first, while walking one and striking out one in two innings of work. Hudson was followed by southpaw Randy Williams, who shut down the A's in two quick frames before giving way to Jeff Marquez. The right-hander pitched two innings and gave up Chavez's other home run in the sixth. Cleveland Santeliz pitched the eighth and gave up an RBI base hit by Donaldson in the eighth.

Athletics on the mound: Ben Sheets, making just his second start since 2008, scattered five earned runs in 2 2/3 innings of work. The A's right-hander, slated to be the team's ace, breezed through the first two innings before facing eight batters and surrendering five hits and a walk in the third frame. He said his fastball speed was a notch down, but liked the way his changeup was working. Cedrick Bowers gave up a run in 1 1/3 innings, and Lenny DiNardo surrendered two. Meanwhile, Andrew Bailey, Craig Breslow and Brad Kilby each pitched a scoreless inning.

Worth noting: A's outfielder Travis Buck, who was scratched from Tuesday's split-squad game against the Royals due to dizziness, made his return to the field in the seventh inning. He made a fielding error on his first play, but then threw out a runner at second in the ninth. Buck went 0-for-1 at the plate.

Cactus League records: Athletics 2-4-1; White Sox 3-3-1

Up next: Freddy Garcia gets the call on Thursday at 2:05 p.m. CT, as the White Sox play host to the Indians for the first time this spring. Garcia looked sharp in his first outing last Saturday, when the White Sox played the Dodgers in split-squad action, and is primed for the fifth spot in the team's rotation. The game will be followed by Jake Peavy's Woodjock 2010 concert later that night in Scottsdale, with teammates Scott Linebrink, Omar Vizquel and Gordon Beckham all performing. Part of the roster then embarks on Friday for two games against the Cubs in Las Vegas.

The A's to Maryvale Baseball Park on Thursday for a 12:05 p.m. PT meeting with the Brewers, with Dallas Braden slated to take the mound for the second time this spring. The A's left-hander, coming back from a season cut short due to a foot injury, tossed two innings and scattered two hits and a run with one walk and one strikeout in his first outing. The A's posted a 8-7 victory over the Brewers in their first meeting March 5.

Hamstring delays Crisp's outfield debut

Speedster day-to-day; Buck improving; Devine out one week

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Coco Crisp, among several A's players circling the injury circuit, was deemed day-to-day with a strained left hamstring Wednesday morning.

Crisp was 1-for-3 in Tuesday's game against the visiting Rangers and was replaced in the fourth inning by Joel Galarraga after reaching base. The newly acquired outfielder experienced a few strained hamstrings in the Minors and does not consider the setback serious.

Crisp, 30, missed the majority of 2009 after undergoing shoulder surgery. In an attempt to assure Crisp of a complete bill of health come Opening Day, the A's have taken caution with his shoulder by only using him in the designated hitter spot. Crisp was expected to see action in the outfield by week's end, but that time will now have to wait until next week.

Travis Buck, on the other hand, could potentially be back in the outfield as early as Wednesday's game against the visiting White Sox. He was scratched from Tuesday's split-squad contest at the Royals ballpark with dizziness, and he wasn't in the starting lineup Wednesday.

Buck, vying for a backup outfield spot, had his left ear flushed Wednesday morning. He missed a large part of the 2008 season at Triple-A Sacramento with vertigo after taking a hard hit to the left side of his head against the outfield wall while making a catch. He also collided with outfielder Chris Denorfia in Sacramento last year.

"We're just going to try to flush out the ear on a regular basis," Buck said. "My head feels fine. We have to make sure everything's clear and monitor my equilibrium."

Buck will proceed with normal baseball activity, and if all goes well during morning drills, could enter Wednesday's game in the late innings.

In other injury news, Joey Devine -- reported as having tendinitis in his right forearm after throwing 30 pitches off the mound Tuesday -- will not throw for a week, manager Bob Geren said. The right-handed reliever missed all of last year after undergoing Tommy John surgery on April 21, and he is still hopeful to be ready by Opening Day.

Dribblers: Right-hander Justin Duchscherer, who underwent a nerve ablation procedure on Feb. 23, threw off the mound Tuesday for the first time since the operation and is tentatively scheduled to face live hitters Friday. ... Righty John Meloan, who left Tuesday's split-squad game accompanied by a trainer in the eighth inning with a 1-0 count on the batter, will see Dr. Douglas Freedberg on Wednesday afternoon because of elbow soreness. ... Catcher Max Stassi, who will turn 19 on Monday, is day-to-day and "feeling much better" after taking a foul ball to his right knee Tuesday. He was under the impression he was being sent to Minor League camp Wednesday, but Geren said there have yet to be any discussions on cuts.

Lee's Leftovers: A's react to Nomar's retirement

Nomar Garciaparra officially announced his retirement today, and while the news didn't surprise many around the A's clubhouse, it gave them reason to talk about the role he's played not just as a player but also as a person for the game of baseball. I was around Nomar a bit last year when he was with the A's and was always struck by the way he carried himself as a true pro and as a mentor to a lot of the younger guys. Some around the clubhouse hadn't heard the news when approached about it, but everyone pretty much had the same thing to say: Great guy. Great player. The A's were truly lucky to have him around for a year...

Said manager **Bob Geren**: "He had a fantastic career. He's obviously best known for what he did in Boston, so it's good to see him retire as a Red Sox. He was a great player on the field, and when he wasn't on the field he made some great contributions in helping the young guys in the clubhouse."

General manager **Billy Beane** also had nothing but gracious words to say about Nomar and really stressed how blessed he is to know him as a person. "He was a great talent," Beane said. "He had a huge impact on the game."

Cohn: Why hitting two homers doesn't excite Chavez

LOWELL COHN, The Press Democrat

Eric Chavez hit two home runs on Wednesday in the cool, thin, desert air. The first home run was a shot and it reminded everyone Chavez used to be a hitter. He had a quick bat and power and a handsome swing and one assumes — one hopes — he has them still.

So it was surprising afterward — after he had pumped weights and iced his back and broke into an athletic sweat — well, it was surprising how utterly unmoved he was by his accomplishments on this very special day.

Remember, he played eight games last season — eight games. That's not playing. That's clearing his throat. In the A's media guide, under 2009 highlights, the A's list his season-ending surgery for the third season in a row. That one was back surgery, his fifth surgery since Sept. 2007, bringing his grand total for surgeries to five — three shoulder, two back. His final shoulder surgery had preceded spring training 2009. I could go on, but you get the point. It is revealing when multiple surgeries dominate the highlights column.

A few words in praise of Chavez before I let him speak. Fans should commend him for submitting to the surgeries. He has a guaranteed contract (this is his final year) and he could have said the heck with it and retired a highly rich man. But he's undergone risky surgeries just so he could play, even though he hasn't played a lot. This doesn't make him a saint. It makes him a dedicated ballplayer and it makes him a guy who tries to earn his dough.

But he is a day-to-dayer. He came to spring training last year and felt good — not as good as now — and things fell apart. He knows the feeling of anticipation destroyed by reality. That's why he keeps his tone neutral.

"It went downhill for me fast last year with the shoulder," he said. "I'm not saying I've been shoulder pain-free because I haven't. I've been trying to improve or maintain. Right now my focus is just daily feeling good, knowing when I come to the park what I can do and can't do."

It's interesting what he can do and can't do. He can't play catch. Consider that. He has been a great third baseman but the idea of standing at third and fielding a routine grounder hit by a coach and then — here's the rub — throwing the ball to first base, even throwing it easily, represents a form of self-destruction or at its extreme a kind of masochism. His injured right shoulder is a potential enemy — as is the left. So he doesn't throw. He rarely plays catch like you might play with your kid in the driveway. Risky in the extreme.

He will concentrate on playing first base and hitting, and somewhere down the line — who knows how far — he will move to third some of the time and then he will throw. He is a whole ballplayer who still plays half-ball.

Another thing he can't do. Let's be more precise. It's something he's afraid to do. That would be taking a coast-to-coast flight. It may not scare you to fly from Oakland to New York but you haven't had the two back operations. He's afraid of his back seizing up on a flight. He can't sit more than 45 minutes. Mostly, he stands in the aisle or walks around. He's considered lying down but he prefers standing, which makes him a coast-to-coast stander.

And then there's the issue of waking up. Waking up? Yes, waking up and not knowing who he is and if the shoulders and back want to cooperate with Project Chavez.

"I already know how I'm going to feel when I wake up," he said. "The first 45 minutes are the most critical of my day. I feel like something could go wrong. I've got to be careful. I'm walking on egg shells. That's why you hear caution (in his voice) because as good as I feel when I get going, I know how I feel when I'm sitting around the house and get up in the morning. There's a little bit of fear in that, but I'm going to bet on myself."

All of that would explain his flat tone, his neutral tone, his tone of wariness.

So, what did the two home runs tell him?

"Just that it's in there," he said. "But like I told you before, the ability is never what's been in question. It's just feeling good. The pain in the shoulder the last two days, it's unbelievable, it's been kind of pain-free. But I also know no matter how good I feel tomorrow may be a different story. That's why I'm cautious. I'm just thankful to be here today in a uniform. I'm never going to be completely healed of anything."

Urban: Suzuki is Baseball's MUP

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

Imagine you're a fairly established young executive, comfortable beyond words with your senior supervisor, who's a little bit older, a lot more experienced and expertly guides you through the daily travails of the gig.

It's a perfect fit in every way -- until you show up for work one day and are told that your mentor has moved on. Replacing him will be a junior executive who only recently joined the firm. He's younger than you and has quite a bit to learn about the business, but for better or worse he's your new direct report.

Just like that, your comfort level is gone. And you aren't shy about expressing that, knowing full well that your words will somehow get back to the new guy.

Now imagine being the new guy.

This is the scenario that played out in real life midway through the 2007 season, when ultra-respected A's catcher Jason Kendall was traded to the Cubs and replaced by rookie Kurt Suzuki, who had to hear the team's pitchers -- Dan Haren, Joe Blanton and Rich Harden among them -- publicly lament the sudden change.

Not exactly the ideal way to get a career off the ground, is it? Yet as the 2010 season dawns, Suzuki is to the A's pitching staff exactly what Kendall used to be. In fact, Suzuki is even better than Kendall ever was with Oakland.

Not only has he overcome the myriad obstacles associated with coming in unwanted and earned the kind of trust and admiration Kendall once enjoyed among the pitchers, but Suzuki has developed into the team's best all-around player.

Despite being widely considered among baseball insiders as the American League's best catcher not named Joe Mauer, Suzuki remains largely anonymous nationally.

Mauer is the reigning AL MVP. Suzuki might be the entire game's MUP -- Most Underrated Player.

"Kurt probably should have been an All-Star [in 2009], and there's no doubt in my mind that he *will* be an All-Star soon," said CSN California baseball analyst Shooty Babbitt, who played for the A's in 1981 and has been a big-league scout for years. "This is a kid who 'gets it' in every way. He's smart, he's a hard worker, and he improves in every area -- every area, man -- every year. If there's somebody out there who gets more out of his talent than Kurt Suzuki, I want to see him."

Thus, the A's would be wise to make Suzuki, 26, the centerpiece around which they build while trying to restore the glory of 2000-2006, a seven-year stretch that produced five playoff teams.

An affable native of Hawaii who went from walking on at powerhouse Cal State-Fullerton to College World Series hero and second-round draftee in 2004, Suzuki emerged as a middle-of-the-order mainstay last season and led the A's with a career-best 88 RBIs.

He also posted career highs in home runs (15), doubles (37) and slugging percentage (.421) -- all while leading AL catchers in games started and played for the second consecutive season, expertly handling the youngest starting rotation in the Majors and one of the league's best bullpens, and emerging as a fan and media favorite.

In his spare time, he raised money for Jon Wilhite, a college teammate who suffered near-fatal injuries in the accident that stole the life of Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt. For that and similar altruistic efforts, Suzuki was nominated for the national Roberto Clemente Award for dedication to community service.

Suzuki also was named the 2009 recipient of the Jim "Catfish" Hunter Award, the highest honor A's players can bestow upon a teammate.

"Suzuki doesn't have Mauer's numbers and probably never will, but Mauer's not human. He's in a class by himself. Suzuki, though, is at the top of the class under Mauer and is definitely a franchise catcher himself," an executive for a rival AL West club said.

"There aren't many franchise catchers in the game these days, either, and you know [A's general manager] Billy [Beane] is way too smart to not lock him up at least through his arbitration years."

Those years are right around the corner, and whispers out of Phoenix this spring have preliminary talks on an extension underway. Suzuki, known to the A's as "Zook," will be eligible for arbitration next winter and the two winters thereafter, potentially becoming a free agent after the 2013 season.

By then, Max Stassi, the 18-year-old backstop considered a can't-misser, probably will be ready to take over. And we all know what happens when Beane has a younger, cheaper option at any given position.

But until then, it'll be Suzuki's show, and a heck of a show it should be.

By 2012 at the latest, the A's will be making some noise in AL West. Gifted starting pitchers Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill and Vin Mazzaro -- already drawing comparisons to the "Big Three" of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito of the previous decade -- should be prime-timers.

Fellow starters Gio Gonzalez and Josh Outman, who also have front-end stuff, will be right there, too, with bulldog Dallas Braden, currently 26, presumably in the mix as well.

The bullpen could have the devastating late-innings combo of 2009 Rookie of the Year Andrew Bailey and Joey Devine, who is every bit as dirty as Bailey when healthy.

Chris Carter and Michael Taylor will be providing the kind of power production the really good teams typically get from big, strong men who play on the corners of the infield and outfield.

Jemile Weeks, for whom no less an authority than Rickey Henderson has predicted big things, will have taken over for the venerable Mark Ellis at second base. Across the bag could be last June's No. 1 pick, Grant Green, at shortstop.

Don't sleep on Ryan Sweeney, either. He's still all of 25 and a Gold Glove waiting to happen.

In other words, there are plenty of reasons to be excited about the future if you're an A's fan, and talk of an extension for Suzuki is among them.

As for the present, Suzuki is the headliner in Oakland, deservedly so. And if there's any justice in baseball, he'll be making his debut on the national stage this summer at the All-Star Game in Anaheim.

Giants: Sandoval hits grand slam; A's: Sheets roughed up

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pablo Sandoval now has bragging rights over Carlos Zambrano, the pitcher he grew up idolizing back home in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. Still, the Giants third baseman isn't ready to boast just yet.

"I'm not going to tell him anything," Sandoval said Wednesday after his grand slam off Zambrano led the Giants to a 5-1 victory over the Chicago Cubs at Mesa, Ariz. "I don't want to remember that. That's spring training."

Sandoval said if he homers off Zambrano during the season, "I'm going to call him and say, 'I got you!'"

He said Zambrano was talking trash when the two recently had dinner together, but there wasn't much Sandoval could say back. In their only matchup last season, Sandoval went hitless in four at-bats.

"It's different in the season," Sandoval said. "He's one of the best pitchers in the National League."

With three All-Star Game appearances, Zambrano used to be just that, but he won only nine games last season. So he worked out hard over the winter and arrived to camp in top shape.

He said he wasn't the least bit discouraged after giving up five third-inning runs on three soft singles, a hit batter and Sandoval's homer.

"They got lucky with bloopers, and their big man ... obviously, he's a good hitter. I have to give him credit," Zambrano said.

"This is spring training. Just get my work in and build my arm. My fastball is running good and all my pitches are good."

While Zambrano struggled in 2009, the 23-year-old Sandoval was a revelation in his first full big-league season, batting .330 with 25 homers and 90 RBIs. He already has driven in eight runs this spring.

"I've been watching him since he was 7, 8 years old; I knew that guy had something special," said Zambrano, who is five years older than Sandoval. "He's going to be one of the best hitters in the National League, and he proved it last year."

Jonathan Sanchez allowed three singles, walked none and struck out five in three shutout innings for the Giants, who are 7-1.

"My fastball was jumping out of my hand, I had a good split and my curveball was working," said Sanchez, who pitched a no-hitter last July 10 and finished the season with 177 strikeouts in 163 1-3 innings. "I'm not ready, but I'm close."

WHITE SOX 9, ATHLETICS 5

At Phoenix, Ben Sheets considered his short outing in a loss to the Chicago White Sox a step in the right direction. He regularly threw his change-up.

Sheets, who missed all of 2009 recovering from elbow surgery, allowed six runs — five earned — on five hits with a walk in 2½ innings of his second spring start.

"I'm trying to mow them down. It just don't go down," Sheets said. "I'm not trying to give up five or six runs. It's March 10 and you have bad days. I don't think it's outside the ordinary. I think this is a normal spring training for me. I haven't had much success down here. I just try and get better every time out. I'm definitely not result-oriented."

The Athletics got a big lift from their other comeback kid: Eric Chavez.

He hit his first two home runs of the spring, including a two-run shot in the first off winning pitcher Daniel Hudson and then a sixth-inning solo drive.

Chavez, a converted first baseman and six-time Gold Glove at third, was forced to switch positions following five operations since Sept. 5, 2007. Two of those were microdiscectomy surgeries in different spots in his back, and he also has undergone three shoulder surgeries.

So, his powerful swings were a positive sign to say the least.

Even if they don't really count. For Chavez, he knows he still has it in him.

He is still in pain and fears what might happen next, the setback that could derail his career for good.

"I'm completely confident," he said. "I just never know what's in store for tomorrow. I'm just at peace with waking up every day coming to the field and enjoying myself, and I'm in no position to start predicting what's going to happen tomorrow."

Chavez appeared in only eight games in 2009. He had one hit in his last 22 at-bats and was in an 0-for-15 stretch. He hit .100 with one RBI. That's after he played in only 23 games in 2008, and 90 in '07.

Manager Bob Geren said Chavez looked loose and strong during perhaps his best batting practice yet since the team arrived in the desert last month.

MLB experts bat around ideas on improving the game

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Eight baseball men, representing virtually every facet of the game, gathered in the twilight for a roundtable discussion on ways to improve the national pastime.

It was nearly midnight by the time they walked out of a Scottsdale restaurant.

They agreed. They disagreed. They yelled to be heard. They shut up to listen.

They departed with a greater appreciation of one another, knowing their ideas might shake the game's foundation, but make it better for future generations.

REPLAY: New attention on replay reviews

THE STRIKE ZONE: Inconsistent application of the zone

SPEED OF PLAY: Trying to reduce the time of play

"I hope people take these ideas to heart, because they came from the heart," Los Angeles Angels All-Star center fielder Torii Hunter says. "We all love the game. We owe everything to it. Now, we want to make it better.

"Hopefully, we'll get someone's attention."

The gathering was inspired by baseball Commissioner Bud Selig's committee to improve the game, a group consisting of four managers, eight current and former executives, one Hall of Fame player and a writer.

The group convened by USA TODAY, however, also included active players, an agent, scouts and an umpire, gathered to examine the same issues Selig's will probe.

But when our panel broke bread and got down to business, it became much more than that.

Four hours of lively debate, ranging from umpiring to pace of play, from drug use to the draft to increasing participation among youth, ensued.

And ideas emerged that, perhaps, Selig might find useful.

"This is about the betterment of the game," agent Scott Boras said afterward. "Our industry is wonderfully successful, but the problem is that we will lose this game if the best players are not playing baseball. We need to change that."

REPLAY

Umpiring controversies in last season's American League division and championship series have placed new attention on whether the use of replay reviews should be increased:

It was Commissioner Bud Selig's worst nightmare.

During last season's playoffs, the nation wasn't transfixed only by the New York Yankees' title run but also by umpiring controversies. Blown calls got plenty of headlines. Three veteran umpire supervisors — Marty Springstead, Richie Garcia and Jim McKean — were fired.

There will forever be missed calls, but the committee believes it might be time to fully embrace instant replay to avoid, well, a replay of last year's postseason.

Umpiring supervisor Steve Palermo, considered baseball's finest umpire until he was forced into retirement after being shot in the spinal cord outside a Dallas restaurant in 1991, doesn't sugarcoat his sentiments. He sympathized with umpire Tim McClelland after his gaffe in Game 4 of the American League Championship Series when it appeared the Angels had tagged two Yankees runners off third base and McClelland called only one of them out. Palermo was angry that no one on McClelland's umpiring crew came to his assistance and overturned the call.

It was no different with Phil Cuzzi's call in the AL Division Series, when Palermo says Minnesota Twins catcher Joe Mauer's apparent double was errantly ruled foul.

Palermo, to this day, doesn't understand why no one else on McClelland's crew seemed to have seen the play.

"We could have reversed it," Palermo says. "You know what? We got six guys on the field. One of those five other guys has got to see it."

Says Tigers TV commentator Rod Allen, "But he's crew chief."

Palermo: "I don't care. I tell young (umpires), 'Look, this is your first year in the big leagues. You respect the veterans, but you don't defer to the veterans. If you see something, you go in, because that crew chief will respect you for coming in there and helping out. It's part of your job to go in there and tell him to get the play right.' "

Then again, if there were replay review, the controversies might have been avoided.

"Would I like it for everything? Sure," Palermo says. "But at some point, you've got to cut it off. If you don't, you're going to put these guys out of game. You're going to have robots umpiring the game."

Says Reds manager Dusty Baker: "I think you've got to leave the human element in the game. I'd like to see some implementation, but not excessive."

Player agent Scott Boras: "I think it's a matter of integrity. A fan doesn't really know the strike zone. A bang-bang play, a fan knows the human element is involved. But with fair and foul calls, every fan can see that. It just makes everybody in the game look ridiculous."

It actually hurts, more than helps, having two extra umpires positioned along the foul lines in the outfield during in postseason play, Palermo says. They're unaccustomed to the position. It makes more sense to simply have replay for all fair and foul calls — as well as for home runs — in the postseason and keep the crew to four umpires.

"I think they may expand to something like that, because, again, you're dealing with a distance," Palermo says. "And you're asking these guys to do something they may have never done."

THE STRIKE ZONE

The rule book defines a strike, but inconsistent application and the use of technology by Major League Baseball and telecasters are doing nothing but causing confusion and delay:

The panel agreed that the enforcement of a consistent strike zone is another way that would help quicken the game.

Reds manager Dusty Baker wishes baseball would return to the days when umpires worked in either the National League or American League. Now, he says, he and the players don't know who calls the high strike, who calls the outside pitch or who has a tight strike zone.

"We just don't know these umpires or the games they call," Baker says. "To me, that's slowed the down the game a whole bunch. The hitters don't know the strike zone, and the catchers don't know how to work an umpire a certain way."

Umpiring supervisor Steve Palermo says it shouldn't matter. There should be a consistent strike zone. Baseball abandoned QuesTec, a monitoring system that was used in 11 ballparks. It now uses the Zone Evaluation system (ZE), software developed by Major League Baseball Advanced Media and Sportvision. It provides data from the cameras in all 30 ballparks. Palermo says its accuracy is within four-tenths of an inch.

"So do you think umpires who worked home plate umpired differently at those QuesTec ballparks?" Hawkins asks Palermo.

Says Palermo: "I asked, and they told me they did umpire differently. But you know what? The amount of strikes per game, the amount of balls, were very, very similar from the 11 parks it was in to the other 19 parks. The numbers were so similar, it almost looked like you made it up."

The biggest misperception, Palermo says, is the strike-zone graphic on TV. It is phony and inaccurate, Palermo insists, making the umpires look terrible.

"They put up the same box for Freddie Patek and Dave Winfield," Palermo says. "You telling me those two strike zones are the same? I don't think so. Not at 6-foot-6 and 5-foot-4. They should say at the bottom of the screen, 'This is for entertainment purposes only.' "

Says longtime scout Gary Hughes: "I hate that damn box on TV. Why don't they eliminate that?"

Baker: "Yeah, how come they don't put the (ZE technology) on TV?"

Palermo: "It's not entertaining enough. (Telecasters) want controversy."

Baker: "Hey, who you telling?"

SPEED OF PLAY

The commissioner's office has been trying to reduce the amount of time needed to play a game, but with the average game time going up last season, new measures are needed:

Major League Baseball officials have been trying to quicken the game, umpire supervisor Steve Palermo says, but the average game time went from 2 hours, 50 minutes in 2008 to 2:52 last year.

"When you got a 15-13 game, it's going to take 3½ hours," Palermo says. "But I don't think it should take 3 hours, 5 minutes to play a 2-1 game. You're putting everybody in a deep freeze by doing that. You might as well have (former North Carolina basketball coach) Dean Smith come out and do Four Corners."

The trouble, Palermo says, is there are certain teams and individuals who continually ignore baseball's directives.

"This is a hot button with the commissioner," Palermo says. "We've got a couple teams — I'm not going to name names, but I think everybody knows who they are — and they're arrogant. They don't think this pertains to them. I had a president of one of those ballclubs tell me the system is flawed. I told him, 'Then how did the 28 other teams conform to what we're asking except for you and your next-door neighbor that you have a rivalry with?' "

Says Los Angeles Angels outfielder Torii Hunter, realizing along with the other panelists that Palermo is alluding to the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox, "Everybody else gets screwed but those two teams."

Palermo was particularly annoyed with Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon, who was fined last season for throwing excessive pitches in the bullpen after being summoned, then tore up the letter of discipline in front of sports reporters.

"You know what?" Palermo says. "If somebody acts up, whack them. I'm talking about \$50,000. And then \$100,000. And then \$200,000. You usually get the attention after the \$100,000 mark."

There also was talk about constant trips to the pitcher's mound by catchers and infielders. So why not limit how many times players can visit the mound?

"That would be the greatest way to shorten the game," agent Scott Boras says. "The extra eight to 10 minutes is because of the young pitchers. They're still going through the drill, and the catcher is coming out every couple of pitches."

Or perhaps, as Boras and Reds manager Dusty Baker say, increase the roster to 26 to provide another pitcher; if teams can keep pitchers fresher, they say, it might reduce the need for so many changes.

Panel Part II: Playoffs need fewer days off; shorter spring

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — No one is suggesting the New York Yankees return the 2009 World Series trophy.

And maybe Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Cliff Lee would have still overpowered everyone in the postseason.

But with the abundance of days off in last year's postseason, were the Yankees and Phillies really baseball's two best teams? Or did they benefit from the schedule, gaining an unfair advantage with their two aces?

Major League Baseball needs to revise its postseason schedule, USA TODAY's committee says, if baseball wants to protect the integrity of a true championship season.

PART I: Improving umpiring, pace of play, instant replay

The eight-man committee's solutions:

- Eliminate four extra days off rolled into the postseason since 2007, even if it means reduced TV ratings;
- Shorten spring training, allowing the season to start earlier and end before Halloween.

"I don't think (the postseason) was fair at all," says Los Angeles Angels center fielder Torii Hunter, whose team lost in six games to the Yankees in the American League Championship Series. "We're playing the Yankees, and we feel we can beat these guys. Then, just when we think we got them, we have all of these off days.

"We're changing our pitching and our rotation with all of the off days, and they have a guy like CC Sabathia, who's got three chances to pitch."

The Yankees and Angels played nine games in 21 days through the first two rounds of the postseason. They had almost as much time off in three weeks as they did during the regular season, playing 162 games with 18 days off.

Meanwhile, the Yankees got through the postseason using three starting pitchers, the first champion to pull that off since the 1991 Minnesota Twins.

"The best 25-man roster should be rewarded in the postseason, just as it is in the regular season," agent Scott Boras says. "But by creating more off days, you change that integrity. Now, you only need a 16-man roster and six pitchers instead of 11.

"We were seeing CC in the seventh and eighth innings every start. Cliff Lee, wow, that was one of the best postseason performances you've ever seen. But they were going on regular rest. Back in the day, those great 1 and 2 starters were pitching on three days' rest."

Hitters indeed lost their timing with the days off, Hunter says, which is why many premier hitters struggle in the postseason.

MLB umpire supervisor Steve Palermo says it's not just top starters who get a boost with the decompressed schedule.

"Those fourth and fifth starters are going into the bullpen," Palermo says. "They're coming in for maybe two or three innings and blowing everybody away."

Baseball also needs to avoid the lengthy delay between the starts of series, the committee says. The Angels had three days off before beginning their 2009 postseason. Milwaukee Brewers pitcher LaTroy Hawkins, with the Colorado Rockies in 2007, and Detroit Tigers broadcaster Rod Allen remember the effect on their teams sitting around nearly 10 days before their respective World Series.

"We were a victim of our own success," Hawkins says. "We had all of that time off. Our pitchers never got back into the groove that we had early in the playoffs."

The postseason didn't end last year until Nov. 4, and unless MLB changes its format, Game 7 of the 2010 World Series is scheduled Nov. 4. Cincinnati Reds manager Dusty Baker shudders at what the weather could be like in Minnesota in November with the Twins' new open-air stadium.

Hunter and Hawkins say three and four weeks of spring training, rather than the current six, is enough time for hitters and pitchers, respectively, to prepare.

But revenue is a hurdle. Says Boras: "The trouble is that spring training is now about a \$15 (million) to \$20 million event for teams. They're all making money."

There was talk about returning the regular season to 154 games, but owners and players don't want to forfeit eight games of revenue and salary, respectively.

Baker says, "I like the length of the regular season, because to me, it should be a marathon."

Baker suggests a return to playing two games a day during the League Championship Series, which might hurt TV ratings but reduces days off. But with fewer days off and a shorter spring, would baseball try a revenue-generating extra playoff round?

"(Commissioner) Bud Selig takes a beating, but you cannot deny how great the wild card is," says "J" Harrison, Reds special assistant. "Can you imagine if we added two wild cards and had another round? Hey, it's something to think about."

Panel Part III: Efforts to develop black talent in USA insufficient

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Fans look down from their seats onto the baseball field, see dark-colored skin and might assume they are African-American players.

But increasingly, the players instead hail from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico or Venezuela.

"People see dark faces out there, and the perception is that they're African American," Los Angeles Angels center fielder Torii Hunter says. "They're not us. They're impostors."

"Even people I know come up and say, 'Hey, what color is Vladimir Guerrero? Is he a black player?' I say, 'Come on, he's Dominican. He's not black.' "

Baseball's African-American population is 8%, compared with 28% for foreign players on last year's opening-day rosters.

"As African-American players, we have a theory that baseball can go get an imitator and pass them off as us," Hunter says. "It's like they had to get some kind of dark faces, so they go to the Dominican or Venezuela because you can get them cheaper. It's like, 'Why should I get this kid from the South Side of Chicago and have Scott Boras represent him and pay him \$5 million when you can get a Dominican guy for a bag of chips?'"

"I'm telling you, it's sad."

RBI program

MLB officials certainly recognize the trend. Their RBI program (Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities) is nationwide. They have baseball academies in Compton, Calif., and Houston, with sites approved for Miami and New Orleans.

Yet while their intentions have been honorable, it's become apparent to USA TODAY's committee that other actions could be more effective.

Chicago Cubs special assistant Gary Hughes, who signed Pro Football Hall of Famer John Elway for the New York Yankees and high school basketball All-American Delino DeShields for the Montreal Expos, says it's heartbreaking watching America's athletes shun baseball. It's rare, Hughes says, when he sees more than one African American playing in a college game.

"A lot of people don't understand," Hunter says, "that the percentage of white players in the game is down, too."

The committee suggests altering how the baseball academies operate and scaling back in foreign markets to increase investment at home.

"We have absolutely eradicated a huge part of our game by not investing in a system that attracts an American populace," Boras says.

MLB, or perhaps minor league franchises, he says, should help finance NCAA programs and provide more scholarships. There are only 11 scholarships for Division I baseball teams.

"The colleges have corrupted baseball," says Boras, whose son plays at Southern California, "because they have taken away the scholarships. They've taken away America's pastime from the grass-root level of homes."

Says Cincinnati Reds manager Dusty Baker, "Killed it."

Baseball's amateur draft also creates a problem, Boras says, for the unwillingness to pay the same draft bonuses received by NFL and NBA players.

Scouting system faulted

There also might be flaws in the scouting system. Milwaukee Brewers pitcher LaTroy Hawkins, who grew up in Gary, Ind., and Hunter, from Pine Bluff, Ark., say few scouts bothered to watch them in high school. Too much crime, they say, too much poverty.

"It's not just the white scouts," Hunter says. "Most black scouts aren't going there either. I thought most guys would want to go into those areas to find the next Jackie Robinson or Hank Aaron."

Says J Harrison, the Reds special assistant and former amateur scout: "I wish this game would take more chances on black athletes. We need to go watch a football game like we have in the past and take a chance on a guy."

Out-of-reach academies

The urban academies were designed to help attract inner-city athletes, but the major problem is transportation.

It's common for high schools to arrange transportation for their kids to attend practices and games, but how do kids get to the academies if no one is home to drive them?

"I've seen it operate in (Compton)," Boras says. "It does not work. These inner-city kids are out because they can't afford to travel there."

Says Hunter: "I looked at all of the (charity) work I've been doing, and 60% to 70% of the African-American homes are single-parent homes. And they're all mothers. It's hard for a mother to take their kids to practice every day, pay the \$1,200 a month to travel and \$1,200 for a tournament team."

One solution, the committee suggests, is to bring equipment, better fields and qualified instructors — such as retired major leaguers — to the neighborhoods rather than construct complexes in locations difficult to reach.

Baseball spends \$8 million to \$12 million a team, Boras says, scouting and developing players in Latin America countries. Yet that same amount might be better spent in the USA, the committee says, developing American kids.

Boras notes there has been a paucity of South Korean impact players — four have had careers longer than five years — relative to the money spent scouting there.

"The bottom line is that your money is better spent here," Boras says. "If you add up the money spent in the Asian markets in the last decade and took that and set up a true inner-cities system — using former players and an administrative body sponsored by baseball — we would reach more people."

"We will lose this game if the best athletes are not playing baseball."

Panel Part IV: A less-costly process discussed for draft

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Agent Scott Boras is the man baseball loves to hate.

It's not enough that he's blamed for baseball's escalating salary structure, but he's considered in some quarters almost personally responsible for ruining Major League Baseball's amateur draft with outrageous bonus demands for amateur clients.

The draft was designed to provide baseball's greatest amateur talent to its worst teams, but often the best player is bypassed by cellar dwellers for financial reasons.

The Washington Nationals might have reveled in No. 1 pick Stephen Strasburg's dazzling debut Tuesday, but seven months ago there was the daunting prospect they couldn't afford him.

"If we had the same rules as the NBA and NFL," Detroit Tigers broadcaster Rod Allen says, "the Washington Nationals could have either taken Strasburg or traded down. They could have gotten a couple of players who already are in the big leagues or prospects."

"But the way it's set up now, they had no choice."

Strasburg, represented by Boras, signed a four-year, \$15.1 million contract, the richest in draft history, minutes before the Nationals lost the rights to negotiate with him.

And yet three months later Strasburg's contract was dwarfed by a pitcher not subject to the draft. Cuban defector Ardlis Chapman signed a \$30 million contract with the Cincinnati Reds.

"There's no question," Boras says, "the draft needs to be completely redone. It's not working."

Major League Baseball can't agree more. But the \$7 billion industry question is, how can it be changed? There has been talk of a hard slotting system similar to the NBA's or an international draft.

TORII HUNTER: Candid comments cause stir

Key ideas

USA TODAY's eight-person committee emerged from a four-hour roundtable discussion with imaginative solutions.

- The elite players in the draft, a consensus top 40 chosen by scouting directors, would be granted free agency, just like the international players. There would be no worldwide draft, but the disparity between American and foreign players would be greatly narrowed.
- The rest of the players would go into two eight-round drafts — one for collegiate players, one for high school players. The worst team would get the No. 1 collegian and the No. 1 high schooler. Players drafted would not receive a signing bonus but a three-year contract for \$30,000 a season. If clubs want to retain the player after three years, they would pay \$150,000 for the following season and \$250,000 apiece for the next two years.
- The players who aren't drafted can either go to college or enter a developmental league for 60 days, giving every team another chance to sign them. If not selected, the players would get the message that pro baseball might not be in their immediate future.

"This system allows us to make less mistakes," Boras says. "It allows players the opportunity to get a qualified amount of money to play baseball and allows the elite players to be separated and treated the same as the international player."

"It's a whole different level of thinking," Milwaukee Brewers pitcher LaTroy Hawkins says. "I love it."

The idea is to ensure that only the truly elite players are drafted. There would be college scholarships awaiting those who don't make it. And fewer kids would be deceived about their chances of being a big-leaguer.

"In this system, everybody thinks this is about money," Boras says. "No, this is about saving money. It allows for less mistakes. It's about not seeing kids get hurt.

"They're drafting kids and taking them out of college. They're saying, 'You have a chance to play pro baseball,' when truthfully they don't. Right now, 98% of the kids that are signed are later released. Let's stop sending false messages that players drafted in rounds nine through 50 are going to be in the major leagues.

"We're spending 45% of our money on players drafted after the fifth round. Owners say our draft budget went from \$5 million to \$9 million because of you. I tell them, 'No, the \$5 million you spent (on one player) was right. The other \$4 million you just wasted.' "

Improving scouts' efficiency

The committee also says this system would increase the efficiency of the top amateur scouts.

"Given the system now," Chicago Cubs special assistant Gary Hughes says, "I didn't see all of our guys. Or even close. Maybe 10%. So you better have good scouts. There are guys that won't draft a player unless they've seen them. And shame on them."

Says Boras: "The problem with the draft is that the man who best knows the commodity is completely removed. When a guy with the experience of someone like Gary only sees 10% of the guys they sign, something is wrong. With this, you'll have more eyes on fewer guys."

Every player drafted will also be provided money for college costs. This provides a safety net for players who fail to reach the big leagues and benefits baseball in its efforts to persuade athletes to avoid other sports.

"I know if I hadn't made it to the majors," Los Angeles Angels center fielder Torii Hunter says, "I'd be 28, 29, with no work experience. I'd be fortunate to make \$30,000 a year because that's the only thing I know.

"That's why I really want my kids to go to college."

The concept, the committee acknowledges, will need fine-tuning. But it wonders if the proposal will be taken seriously by owners, particularly considering it is largely Boras' brainchild.

"You know what you need," Hughes told Boras. "You need to sell that to (well-regarded baseball executive) Roland Hemond and have him believe in it too. Let him sell it, because you've got no chance."