

A's News Clips, Tuesday, March 16, 2010

A's notebook: Battered Ben Sheets can't get an out

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The hits in the first inning of the Cincinnati Reds' 13-5 win over the A's on Monday came in all varieties against Ben Sheets — line drives, seeing-eye singles, even a towering homer mixed in for good measure.

The A's Opening Night starter faced 10 hitters and left without recording an out. His final line: 0 innings pitched, eight hits, 10 runs (nine earned), one walk and an ERA that reads 31.15 after three Cactus League starts.

"People have had bad springs before, but this is taking it to a whole new level," Sheets acknowledged.

The A's are more concerned with how Sheets' surgically repaired right elbow is doing. And that's what made his afternoon an odd one.

He said he felt better physically than he has all spring, and his fastball hit 91 mph according to one scout's radar gun. Sheets said he feels that's about normal for him at this stage of camp.

But after missing all of last season, Sheets' mechanics remain "a work in progress" in his words. His command is off as a result, particularly with his curve.

Chris Dickerson led off the bottom of the first with a ground-rule double on which A's left fielder Jake Fox never had a read.

Five of the next seven batters got hits. Another reached via walk and another on Mark Ellis' misplay of a chopper.

Dickerson then delivered the crowning blow — a two-run homer deep to right on a 3-2 fastball that chased Sheets.

"I don't mind giving up 10 runs in the spring if I go four innings," Sheets said. "But to not get an out is embarrassing."

Sheets has three starts remaining to straighten things out before the April 5 opener against Seattle.

Adam Rosales, a former Red, was greeted warmly by his old teammates, then continued building his case for consideration as the A's starting shortstop.

Rosales went 3-for-3 and looked sharp defensively. He's hitting .450 in nine games.

"It's been a great experience for me," Rosales said. "I hope I get a chance to contribute."

Second baseman Aaron Miles, whom the A's dealt in the February trade that netted Rosales, went 0-for-3 with a run and RBI for Cincinnati. Miles, from Antioch, is expected to make the roster as a backup infielder.

Geren continues to be impressed with hard-throwing reliever Henry Rodriguez, who pitched a scoreless inning.

The A's sent Rule 5 pitcher Bobby Cassevah back to the Los Angeles Angels. Cassevah either had to remain on Oakland's 25-man roster all season or be offered back to the Angels, his original organization, for \$25,000.

Also Monday, the A's optioned right-handers Clayton Mortensen and Fautino De Los Santos and left-hander Pedro Figueroa to the minors.

The A's enjoy a day off today. Justin Duchscherer is scheduled to pitch in a minor league intrasquad game Wednesday, and Joey Devine, temporarily shut down with forearm tendinitis, will play catch.

Updated w/quotes: Sheets roughed up for 9 ER without getting an out

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times, 1:57PM

It was a short — and disastrous — outing for Ben Sheets against the Reds in Goodyear. He faced 10 hitters and left without recording an out: 10 runs (9 earned) on 8 hits with one walk. Every hitter he faced crossed the plate.

You can't put a ton of stock into spring numbers, particularly after just three starts, but the stats aren't pretty for Sheets so far — 4 1/3 IP, 17 H, 18 R, 15 ER, 2 BB, 1 K ... Yikes.

Addressing the media afterward, Sheets said his arm actually felt better today than it did in his previous two starts. He threw mostly fastballs but said his mechanics are still "a work in progress," and thus his command is suffering.

"When you can't even get out of the first inning, it's ridiculous," he said. "I don't mind giving up 10 runs in the spring if I go four innings. But to not get an out is embarrassing."

He seemed pretty level-headed about everything, saying he's got three starts left to pull it together for Opening Night. A scout's radar gun had Sheets hitting 91 mph, and the right-hander thinks that's about right for him at this point in spring training.

He was hardly sugar-coating his outing, giving reporters this gem: "People have had bad springs before, but this is taking it to a whole new level."

Reds lead 11-4 in the sixth. ... Fernando Hernandez relieved Sheets and threw two scoreless innings w/two strikeouts, and Jason Jennings went 2 2/3 innings, allowing one run on four hits. Kurt Suzuki doubled in two runs in the third.

Update: Angels take back Bobby Cassevah

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times, 3/15/2010 9:53AM

Just passing along that the Angels have taken back Rule 5 pitcher Bobby Cassevah. They'll pay the A's \$25,000 for his rights ...

A's send Mortensen, De Los Santos, Figueroa to minors; Rule 5 pitcher Cassevah offered back to Angels

By Joe Stiglich, Contra Costa Times, 3/15/2010 9:31AM

I'm still getting back in the groove after returning from the Bay Area, but it's hard not to notice the A's clubhouse is less crowded these days. Ten players were sent to the minors yesterday, and three more got sent down this morning — pitchers Clayton Mortensen, Fautino De Los Santos and Pedro Figueroa. Mortensen was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento while De Los Santos and Figueroa were optioned to Double-A Midland. The A's can still change their minds about what minor league club each starts the season with, but this setup sounds right for all three considering their development.

Geren had good things to say about all three. De Los Santos is starting his first full season after recovering from Tommy John surgery, and he had a couple of rough outings in Cactus League games. Figueroa, a lefty, pitched at Single-A last season and earned Organizational Pitcher of the Year honors.

"They both have a mid-90's fastball with movement and seem to be mentally tough individuals," Geren said.

As for Mortensen, Geren wants him to improve in holding runners on base.

—Rule 5 pitcher Bobby Cassevah was offered back to the Angels this morning. No word yet if the Angels will take him back. Quick refresher on this somewhat confusing topic: The A's selected Cassevah from the Angels in the Rule 5 draft in December, paying \$50,000 for his rights. He either had to stay on the A's 25-man roster all season or be offered back to the Angels for \$25,000. If the Angels don't take him back, the A's retain his rights and can send him to the minors.

–Jake Fox, who homered yesterday to halt a spring slump, gets a start in left field today against Cincinnati. This guy has bounced all over the diamond, no surprise since versatility is his calling card. But Geren said he's most curious to see how Fox handles his catching duties. That's the spot he's played the least in the past three seasons.

–Ben Sheets, Jason Jennings and Henry Rodriguez are three notables who take the mound today. Here's the rest of the A's lineup:

Rajai CF
Ellis 2B
Suzuki C
Kouzmanoff 3B
Sweeney RF
Cust DH
Barton 1B
Fox LF
Rosales SS

Sheets

Sheets feels 'great,' but he can't get anyone out

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Ben Sheets could find a little humor in his hideous day, because it's not yet the regular season.

After allowing 10 runs without recording an out in the A's 13-5 loss to the Reds on Monday, the A's new \$10 million starter said, "I know people have had bad springs, but this is taking it to a whole new level."

Because Sheets has missed much of the past three seasons with injuries, including all of last year after elbow surgery, the first concern after such a stumble would be his health. However, Sheets emphasized that he felt the best he has all spring, much better than he had in his previous start, when he had trouble getting loose.

"I felt great," he said several times.

According to an American League scout sitting behind the plate, Sheets' fastball was hitting 91-92 mph, which is about where he should be this time of year, but his fastball was "big," or awfully straight. Sheets said most of the Reds' eight hits against him came on fastballs; he also walked a batter.

"Everything was clicking, but it was one of those days - they were hitting everything, there's nothing you can do," A's catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "The positive thing is Ben felt great."

Sheets might have had a less frightful performance with better defensive play. Jake Fox lost Chris Dickerson's leadoff flyball in the sun and fell down in front of the warning track, and Dickerson wound up with a ground-rule double. Later, Aaron Miles hit a grounder to second that Mark Ellis misplayed.

Sheets' final pitch was belted to right, a two-run homer by Dickerson.

"I had to come out. That was terrible," Sheets said.

Sheets didn't stay in long enough to complete his work; he went to the bullpen to throw two more innings' worth of pitches.

"When you can't get out of the first inning, it's ridiculous," Sheets said. "To not get an out is embarrassing."

Sheets' ERA stands at 31.15. Will he be ready for Opening Night on April 5?

"I believe I'm going to be OK," he said. "If I take the stuff I had today, I'm going to get outs. My command is off, but that's why you come to spring training."

Sheets has said all spring that he usually has poor results during the Cactus League, and he recalls a game against the Angels in 2002 in which he allowed nine consecutive hits. "So that was a little better than this," he said.

Briefly: Rule-5 draftee **Bobby Cassevah**, a right-handed reliever, was returned to the Angels for \$25,000. ... The A's sent right-handers **Fautino De Los Santos** and **Clayton Mortensen** and left-hander **Pedro Figueroa** to minor-league camp. ... The A's had begun the security clearance to sign Dominican right-hander **Michael Feliz** when Feliz was suspended for using a performance-enhancing substance, voiding the contract.

Drumbeat: Around the A'sosphere: Kendall implicates Crosby, too

Vlae Kershner, SF Chronicle, 3/15/2010

Former Oakland A's catcher Jason Kendall and his wife Chantel, in the middle of a divorce, have managed to implicate not only Kendall but former teammate Bobby Crosby in a scandal involving the misuse of the attention-deficit disorder drug Adderall, which has amphetamine-like effects in large doses (see his deposition). I've always figured Jason as a slam-dunk for a manager's job someday, but this puts that in jeopardy.

Sky Andrecheck at Baseball Analysts came up with a model that compares the attendance of various teams after controlling for won-lost record, new stadiums and other factors. His conclusion: The A's get only about 80 percent as much attendance as the average team, tied with the Rays for second weakest above only the Marlins, and Charlie Finley never should have moved from Kansas City to the saturated Bay Area market. Oh well. It's been a fun 42 years anyhow.

On that front, Baseball Prospectus notes that the upcoming task force report on the A's stadium situation could set a price for territorial rights negotiations between the Giants and A's over San Jose. That, in turn, would set a baseline for what the Rays would have to pay the Yankees and Mets to move into northern New Jersey, presumably reducing the edge those teams have in paying for free agents.

Drumbeat: Sheets allows 10 runs without recording an out - updated

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Goodyear, Ariz. 3/15/2010 1:34PM

UPDATE: Sheets says he feels great physically. He spoke at length about his bumner of a day, which I'm including below.

Ben Sheets will be the A's Opening Night starter, and the team must hope he gets things straightened out by then, because today against the Reds, the \$10 million right-hander had an extraordinarily poor outing.

"I know people have had bad springs, but this is taking it to a whole new level," Sheets just told us after going to throw two more innings' worth of pitches in the bullpen.

Sheets didn't retire a batter - although Mark Ellis did flub a grounder by Aaron Miles - and the Reds scored 10 runs, nine earned while he was on the mound. A two-run homer by Chris Dickerson chased Sheets, whose spring ERA is over 31.00. (Petaluma's Jonny Gomes also had a two-run double.)

Sheets said the Reds mostly hit fastballs, maybe one curveball. His fastball was registering 91 mph. His breaking ball isn't as sharp as he'd like and his mechanics might be a little off, but that's what spring training is for, Sheets said - polishing everything up.

"When you can't get out of the first inning, it's ridiculous," he said. "To not get an out is embarrassing. But I felt great."

Sheets said it felt as if he'd thrown 1,000 pitches that inning.

"It's going to get better," he said. "My second start, I felt the worse because I couldn't get loose. Today, I felt like the velocity was there.

"I want to be successful, no doubt. We're close to the season, I want some success to build on. I believe I'm going to be OK. If I take the stuff I had today, I'm going to get outs. My command is off, but that's why you come to spring training. ... The breaking ball is still not where I'd like it to be, but there are three weeks left."

Sheets said during spring training in 2002, he allowed nine consecutive hits to the Angels, but then struck out three. "So that was a little better than this," he said.

"It all equals out," Sheets said, suggesting with a grin that maybe these will come off some of his run total during the season.

Asked about getting taken out of the game, Sheets said, "I had to come out. That was terrible."

BACK TO ORIGINAL POST, emphasizing again that Sheets says he's fine:

Sheets missed all of last season because of elbow surgery, and this was just his third start of the spring; you do have a wonder a bit if he's entirely healthy. But he also has told us numerous times that he always has terrible spring trainings.

Still, I've never seen anything like this. I don't think Sheets even got his scheduled work in - he was supposed to go three or four innings, getting up around 50 pitches or so.

It looks as if he's going to go get more work in the bullpen as a result. I'll include some comments from him once he talks to us; I'm hoping Sheets is his usual wry, self-deprecating self, but it's quite possible he'd be pretty grouchy after that. I would be.

I'd be hugely surprised if Sheets isn't back on track to start the season, given his talent when he's healthy. I do very much hope he is healthy.

Drumbeat: More cuts, Cassevah offered back - updated

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix 3/15/2010 10:15AM

UPDATE: Cassevah has been officially returned to the Angels for \$25,000.

As I tweeted about 45 minutes ago - @susanslusser - the A's have offered reliever Bobby Cassevah back to the Angels; there's no word yet on whether the Angels will pay the \$25K to take him back or if they'll allow Oakland to keep him. I know minor-league catcher Josh Donaldson will be rooting for the Angels to return his lifelong pal; the two dream of playing for the same big-league team.

The A's also sent pitchers Fautino De Los Santos, Pedro Figueroa and Clayton Mortenson to minor-league camp today, another indication that both Joey Devine and Justin Duchscherer will be getting worked into games soon; reliever Michael Wuertz will make his spring debut Wednesday.

Manager Bob Geren liked the power arms De Los Santos and Figueroa displayed; they're definitely ones to keep an eye on for the future. Mortensen just needs to work on his location and on controlling the running game, Geren said.

The lineup today at the Reds: Davis CF, Ellis 2B, Suzuki C, Kouzmanoff 3B, Sweeney RF, Cust DH, Barton 1B, Fox LF, Rosales SS. Ben Sheets is starting.

On Saturday, Sheets' next day to start after today, the A's have split-squad games. Sheets will start here at Phoenix against the Cubs while Jason Jennings and Vin Mazzaro will go at Goodyear against the Indians, with Jennings starting, according to Geren.

Could Jennings sneak in and win that fifth spot in the rotation? Probably unlikely, considering that the three youngsters - Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Mazzaro - have all shown some good things this spring. But Jennings appears to have a solid shot at a roster spot as a spot starter and middle/long reliever. And you never know what will happen the next three weeks....

I just saw the final version of the A's Beat from this morning's Chronicle, and I know the one first posted last night had this info: Eric Chavez is working out at shortstop now and he told me yesterday that he expects to play there soon. That

information was cut from the final, printed version of the story, but don't be surprised to see Chavez getting a few innings there in the near future.

If he shows he can handle the spot without problem - his throwing shoulder will be the issue - then the battle for the final roster spot might be between projected utility infielder Adam Rosales and incumbent shortstop Cliff Pennington. That means Rosales probably would open the season at Triple-A Sacramento because if Chavez is the utility infielder, Rosales would have to beat out Pennington for the starting shortstop spot. Both men are playing well this spring; it might be a real horse race, but Pennington's done nothing to lose the spot.

Rosales posts three hits in A's loss

Oakland out of it early as Sheets unable to record an out

By Mark Sheldon / MLB.com

REDS 13, ATHLETICS 5

*at Goodyear, Ariz.
Monday, March 15*

Reds at the plate: Cincinnati sent 13 men to the plate in the bottom of the first, including the first 10 who reached base. Chris Dickerson was 4-for-4 with two RBIs and three runs scored. Dickerson was a triple short of the cycle and hit a two-run homer to right field during his second at-bat in the first inning. Orlando Cabrera was 2-for-4 with an RBI double. Jonny Gomes was 2-for-3 with two RBIs. Wladimir Balentien added an opposite-field, two-run homer to right field in the sixth.

A's at the plate: Shortstop contender and former Reds player Adam Rosales was 3-for-3 with an RBI and a run scored. He's batting .450 this spring. In a four-run top of the third, Rajai Davis hit an RBI single, Kurt Suzuki hit a two-run double and Kevin Kouzmanoff added an RBI single.

Reds on the mound: In his third outing as he seeks the rotation's fifth spot, Mike Lincoln went three innings and allowed four earned runs and five hits with two strikeouts. Lincoln retired his first six batters. Francisco Cordero pitched one scoreless inning with two hits and one strikeout. Travis Wood, who is also seeking the fifth spot, pitched three innings and allowed one hit and earned run with three walks and four strikeouts.

A's on the mound: It was the roughest of rough days for starter Ben Sheets, who faced 10 batters without retiring a batter in the first inning. Of his 10 runs allowed, nine were earned on eight hits with one walk. Fernando Hernandez took over and pitched two scoreless innings with two strikeouts. Jason Jennings allowed one earned run and four hits over 2 2/3 innings. He issued one walk and fanned two. Over 1 1/3 innings, Jerry Blevins gave up two earned runs and one hit on Balentien's homer.

Worth noting: Former Reds star Eric Davis, an instructor in camp, was given a nice ovation by the crowd of 4,602 when he took over as first-base coach in the fourth inning. Davis, a two-time All-Star, was part of the 1990 World Series-winning Reds team that defeated the A's in four games.

Cactus League records: Reds 5-4-1; A's 6-5-1

Up next: Brandon Phillips, Jay Bruce and Cabrera will be in the lineup when the Reds travel to Tucson, Ariz., to face the D-backs at 4:05 p.m. ET. Johnny Cueto will start for the Reds against Arizona's Edwin Jackson. Also in the lineup will be prospect Juan Francisco, who will make his first start of spring in left field. Francisco, normally a third baseman, is seeking to make the club with his power bat.

Left-hander Dallas Braden will throw in an intrasquad game at the A's Minor League complex Tuesday to stay on schedule while the rest of the team enjoys its first off-day. Cactus League action will resume Wednesday for Oakland, which will face former A's pitcher Barry Zito and the Giants at Phoenix Municipal Stadium beginning at 1:05 p.m. PT. Lefty Brett Anderson looks to continue work on his changeup and improve his 6.23 spring ERA as he makes his third start of the spring.

Sheets doesn't record out in third start

Oakland right-hander allows 10 runs in outing against Reds

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Ben Sheets' worst career spring outing turned out to be one of his best.

At least that's what his body told him.

The right-hander, acquired by Oakland for \$10 million as a free agent this offseason, faced 10 Reds batters without recording an out while making his third spring start Monday at Goodyear Ballpark in a 13-5 loss.

He walked off the mound with nine earned runs, 10 total and eight hits, including a two-run homer, etched to his name to inflate his spring ERA to 31.15 before right-handed reliever Fernando Hernandez recorded three quick outs to end the frame.

It marked the second consecutive outing in which Sheets has allowed at least five runs, but when the 31-year-old pitcher faced media following the rocky first inning, he appeared calm.

"I felt great," said Sheets, who missed all of last season following surgery to repair a partial tear in the pitcher's flexor tendon. "Today was a good day, and I felt like I was going to get in some good work."

Effective or not, there's no doubt Sheets got in his allotted work. In fact, he had to throw a bullpen session after being pulled just to reach a 60-pitch mark -- which was the day's initial goal.

"I heard I threw 35 pitches," he said. "It seems like that would have been enough, because it felt like I threw 1,000."

There's no denying Sheets was hit hard more than once -- including the home run by Cincinnati's Chris Dickerson -- but he also watched potential outs transform into lucky hits to begin the first-inning escapade. In his first of two at-bats in the frame, Dickerson hit a fly ball to center field that was lost in the sun by a stumbling Jake Fox and deemed a ground-rule double. Orlando Cabrera then followed with a hard-hit bouncing ball to the mound that Sheets couldn't quite grasp.

"I could have at least got an out if I had caught a ball back to me," Sheets said. "That ball was hit right to me. Maybe I can get into a rhythm if I get that out, I don't know."

Instead, Sheets allowed the next five runners on base before watching another could-be out turn into yet another baserunner when Mark Ellis committed a rare error to set up a two-run double off the bat of Wilkin Castillo. Dickerson followed with his first home run of the spring, cueing the inevitable.

"I knew I was coming out," Sheets said. "I needed to come out. That was a bad one."

"When you can't even get out of the first inning, that's ridiculous. I don't mind giving up 10 in spring if I can get in four innings. But when you can't get an out, that's embarrassing."

Still, both Sheets and batterymate Kurt Suzuki insisted Monday's outing served as no indication of questionable health.

"He felt good, that's what matters," Suzuki said. "He was throwing at least six miles per hour faster than his last start. That's exciting. A couple balls were hit hard and a couple weren't, but obviously the results weren't very good."

Sheets was clocked as high as 91 on the gun while throwing almost all fastballs with a couple breaking balls in between. Velocity is not an issue, he said, as much as his breaking ball and command.

"I think there's a couple miles per hour left when the lights come on and the adrenaline kicks in," he said. "But my breaking ball is not where I want it to be right now. We've still got three weeks left, and this is only my third outing."

"My command is also off right now. That's why we come to Spring Training -- to sharpen it up. You always fight to make changes in Spring Training, so hopefully today is the day I start getting over it all."

Sheets is expected to lead a rather young A's rotation as the team's Opening Day starter and, along with his manager, believes he is capable of the All-Star presence he lent Milwaukee for the first eight years of his career.

"His velocity looked really good," A's skipper Bob Geren said. "When he made mistakes, they hit them. But he said he felt good, so we have to go with that. He definitely threw the ball better, the results just weren't there. He said that was the best he's felt, period."

Although Sheets is the first to admit he's never fared well in Spring Training, he couldn't recall a poorer outing than the one at Goodyear Park. A nine-hit excursion against the Angels in 2002 came close to matching Monday's results, but Sheets noted he was able to at least get out of that inning by striking out three.

"You like to get outs when you feel that good," he said. "You need your pitches to be put in play. That's how you get outs.

"Eventually the lights are going to turn on, so I have to start getting better. I want to be successful, there's no doubt. We're starting to get closer to the season. I believe I'm going to be OK."

Sheets pulled plenty of positives from his third start and noted the different feeling he experienced compared to his previous start, which resulted in five runs through 2 2/3 innings against the White Sox.

"I'd take the first two innings today over the first two innings of the last game," he said. "I got outs, but there was no rhyme or reason why I got through those two innings. That last start was horrible. I felt terrible.

"As a pitcher, you judge yourself and you're honest with yourself, and it ain't always indicative of how you pitch. I'm not saying I pitched good today -- because I didn't -- but sometimes you have a lot of success when you pitch [poorly]."

Despite not bringing out his best stuff Monday, Sheets busted out his usual wit and good humor -- which stood as another sign that the new A's pitcher is still feeling just fine.

"I felt great, I don't know what else to say," he said. "People have had bad springs before, but this is just taking it to a whole new level."

Lee's Leftovers: Monday morning tidbits

First, your starting lineup against the Reds in Goodyear, with **Ben Sheets** (who manager Bob Geren hopes will go four innings) scheduled to make his third start of the spring:

Davis CF

Ellis 2B

Suzuki C

Kouzmanoff 3B

Sweeney RF

Cust DH

Barton 1B

Fox LF

Rosales SS

Also scheduled to throw: Jennings, Ziegler, Rodriguez, Blevins, Hernandez, McBeth

Today will mark **Kurt Suzuki's** first back-to-back start behind the plate, as Geren is beginning to get his projected starters gradually acclimated with playing on consecutive days. The team has a day off tomorrow, and Geren said you can expect to see a lot of the other regulars (**Mark Ellis, Kevin Kouzmanoff**, etc) start to play back-to-back days beginning Wednesday.

Dribblers: Geren noted that **Coco Crisp** is "progressing well" and is back to his throwing program. He should be returning to the lineup in the "near future," Geren said. ... **Jason Jennings**, who has suddenly put himself in a good position to battle for a roster spot, will start one of Oakland's split-squad games (likely on the road against the Indians) on Saturday, when Sheets is slated to take the mound in the other game (at home versus the Cubs). **Vin Mazzaro** is also scheduled to throw that day as well. ... **Joey Devine**, who is currently treating tendinitis in his surgically repaired pitching arm, is scheduled to throw what Geren deemed "light to medium" toss on Wednesday, the same day **Justin Duchscherer** is supposed to throw in a simulated game at 10 a.m. over at Papago Park's Minor League facilities.

The most recent A's cuts: right-handed pitchers **Clayton Mortensen** (optioned to Triple-A) and **Fautino De Los Santos** (sent to Double-A) and left-hander **Pedro Figueroa** (also reassigned to Double-A). Meanwhile, Oakland offered Rule 5 pick **Bobby Cassevah** back to the Angels, who in turn accepted the right-hander. More on all four of these guys can be found at the A's site shortly.

Oakland A's Depth Chart: Catcher

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 15, 2010

One of the Oakland A's deepest positions at catcher, with two young catchers at the major league level and a strong trio of experienced backstops in the upper levels of the minor leagues. We take a closer look at the A's major league and Triple-A level depth chart at catcher inside...

Incumbent Starter: Kurt Suzuki

Suzuki took over the A's starting catcher job in July 2007 and he has quickly become arguably the team's most valuable player. One of the AL's top defensive catchers, Suzuki had his best offensive season in the major leagues in 2009, batting .274 with a career-best 15 homers and 88 RBIs. He also stole a career-high eight bases.

Perhaps most important was his games played total: 147. Throughout his career, Suzuki has been a remarkably durable player, a rarity on an A's roster rife with players who have long injury histories. Since being drafted in 2004, Suzuki has appeared in more than 100 games every season (in 2006 he played in 99 games with Double-A Midland, but he also spent August that season playing for Team USA in the Pan-Am Games), and he has played in more than 140 games in each of the past two seasons.

Suzuki's durability has been an important factor in the success of the A's pitching staff the past three seasons, especially the development of the team's younger hurlers. Suzuki has been praised for his preparation before games and his game-calling skills in general. His offensive production might improve with more days off during the season (his career post-All-Star splits are lower than his pre-All-Star totals), but the A's haven't been able to afford to bench Suzuki much the past two seasons as the team has introduced a slew of young pitchers. With a more experienced pitching staff expected for 2010 in Oakland, the A's may be more willing to give Suzuki regular time off, especially early in the season.

First Line of Defense: Landon Powell

One of the reasons the A's may be able to give Suzuki more scheduled rest in 2010 is the emergence of Powell as the team's back-up catcher. Powell made his major league debut last season and was productive in limited action, slugging .429 and playing solid defense. Powell was especially productive as a left-handed hitter, posting an 829 OPS in 101 at-bats.

Unlike Suzuki, Powell has not been blessed with good health during his professional career. He has had two ACL tears and a third, more minor surgery on his knee. He has also had to work through a condition called chronic autoimmune hepatitis that can attack the liver and requires him to take a series of medications. The medications cause fatigue and weight gain and limited Powell's availability at times last season. Powell has reportedly been weaned off of one of the medications, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, and he came into spring camp in better shape than the year before.

If Jake Fox is on the roster as expected (more on him in a moment), the A's may be more willing to play Powell more often not only as a starting catcher but also as an occasional DH and pinch-hitter late in games since Fox can serve as an emergency third catcher. With more regular at-bats, Powell should be able to up his OBP significantly (it was under .300 during his rookie season, but has been high historically throughout his minor league career) and, with his power, could have

one of the better OPSs on the A's, albeit in a back-up role.

Emergency Third Option/Spot Starter: Jake Fox

When Fox was acquired by the A's from the [Chicago Cubs](#) in December, he was originally thought to be a candidate as the team's everyday third baseman. Then when the A's acquired [Kevin Kouzmanoff](#) for that role, Fox became a more likely candidate to serve as a super-utility player. Fox has more recently been thought of as a corner infielder/outfielder, but he has spent the bulk of his professional career behind the plate. The University of [Michigan](#) alum was a catcher in college and played primarily behind the plate from 2003-2006 in the Cubs' chain. His bat was advancing quicker than his defensive abilities, however, so the Cubs moved Fox into the infield/outfield role in 2007.

Although Fox doesn't have a reputation as a strong defensive catcher, he has been getting plenty of work there with the A's this spring, an indication that Oakland is weighing whether he would be a legitimate option for a spot start or a mid-game substitution during the regular season. Fox isn't guaranteed a roster spot with the A's on Opening Day, but he is out of options and the A's gave up a significant amount to acquire him (three players plus a sum of money in the form of absorbing much of the contract of Aaron Miles). That combined with Fox's defensive versatility make him an attractive candidate to be on the Opening Day roster. As mentioned previously, Fox's presence on the roster would free the A's up to use Powell more frequently.

Triple-A Depth: [Josh Donaldson](#), [Anthony Recker](#), [Joel Galarraga](#)

Catcher is arguably the deepest position in the A's system, and that is none more evident than at the Triple-A level, where the A's have three legitimate Triple-A starting catchers who will be vying for regular playing time in 2010 (and, perhaps, a spot on the Sacramento roster, as the A's may send one of these catchers to Double-A in order to give all three adequate time behind the plate).

Recker and Galarraga both saw time at Sacramento last season. Recker had a solid season with the River Cats, hitting 12 homers and posting a 782 OPS in 78 games (he also had a 911 OPS in 16 games with Double-A Midland). The A's 2005 18th round pick is having a solid spring in big league camp and could be positioning himself as a first option for the A's should either Suzuki or Powell suffer an injury. He has two hits in five at-bats, including a homerun. Recker has also flashed a strong throwing arm. He survived the first round of spring cuts and could see more playing time in big league camp this week.

Galarraga was signed by the A's out of the Mexican League last season and, after some visa troubles, the native of Cuba got off to a fast start with Sacramento. He hit .375 with a 925 OPS in 13 games before he injured his throwing shoulder. That shoulder eventually required surgery and cost him the rest of the season. He has been limited this spring and it isn't clear whether he will be 100 percent at the start of the year. Galarraga is the most experienced catcher of this trio. The soon-to-be 28 year old has played professionally in Cuba and in Mexico in addition to his brief time in the minor leagues last season. He will probably see time with Sacramento this season even if he doesn't start the year there.

Donaldson is the A's best catching prospect in the upper levels of their minor league system. The [Auburn](#) alum was acquired in a trade with the Cubs in 2008 and he has shown a solid bat since arriving in the A's organization. He hit .330 with a 955 OPS in 47 games with High-A Stockton in 2008 and batted .270 with a 795 OPS in 124 games with Double-A Midland last season. Donaldson has an above-average feel for the strike-zone and good gap power for a catcher. His defense is still a work-in-progress, although he has improved every year in the minor leagues. He was a third baseman at the start of his college career and he could see time at third and at first this season in addition to being behind the plate. Donaldson has two hits in seven at-bats this spring (including a homerun), but he has had trouble controlling the running game. He should be the River Cats' main catcher this season, but he will likely only get a promotion to Oakland before September if there will be significant playing time available for him.

Athletics' Ben Sheets gives up 10 runs, gets nobody out

Gabe Lacques, USA Today, 3/15/2010

You might say Ben Sheets hit a speed bump today in his recovery from elbow surgery.

The Oakland Athletics signed the powerful right-hander to a one-year, \$10 million deal, betting on the fact he'd be recovered from a torn flexor tendon in his elbow and able to lead their stable of young, promising pitchers.

In Sheets' second Cactus League outing, the number 10 figured again - as in 10 runs given up.

The Cincinnati Reds peppered Sheets for 10 runs, nine earned, in the first inning Monday. Sheets got nobody out.

Reds outfielder Chris Dickerson hit a home run and doubled in the inning and Sheets gave up eight hits and a walk. His ERA after two spring starts: 31.15. Fernando Hernandez came on in relief of Sheets and averted further damage.

According to Susan Slusser of the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), Sheets said he felt as good, physically, as he has all spring, and his fastball reached 91 mph.

"I know people have had bad springs but this is taking it to a whole new level," Sheets said.

Sheets shelled again

ASSOCIATED PRESS

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Ben Sheets was battered for 10 runs without retiring a batter in his latest poor showing, and the Cincinnati Reds beat the Oakland Athletics 13-5 in a spring-training game Monday.

Sheets signed a one-year, \$10 million contract with Oakland after missing last season with elbow problems that required surgery. He gave up eight hits and a walk, and another batter reached on an error.

Chris Dickerson ended Sheets' day with a two-run homer in his second at-bat of the first inning. Sheets has allowed 18 runs in 4½ innings over three spring outings.

One of the hits came off a comeback grounder that bounced off Sheets' glove, keeping the rally going.

"It was a bad one," Sheets said. "I could at least get an out if I could catch the ball. I don't care whether they called it a hit or an error. It was hit right to me.

"I felt great," he said. "The problem is my good pitches were just a strike and my bad ones were hits. You need your good pitches to be put in play. That's how you get outs. When you can't even get out of the first inning, it's ridiculous."

Sheets gave up six runs against the White Sox on March 10, a game he still considers his low point of spring training.

"The second start (against Chicago), I felt worse," Sheets said. "I felt terrible. This start was probably the best. I threw 91 mph, which is reasonable. I want to be successful. The lights are going to come on as long as I'm feeling OK."

Manager Bob Geren saw progress in Sheets' outing.

"He definitely threw the ball better this time," Geren said.

"The results weren't there. It's the best he's thrown since he's been here. I'll stay encouraged that way. This guy's an All-Star. He didn't like his performance. I'm not worried about his ego."

Mike Lincoln, who is competing for the fifth spot in Cincinnati's rotation, retired the first six batters before giving up four runs in the third.

"I felt good today," said Lincoln, who had neck surgery last year. "I stayed nice and loose even after that long inning. That last inning I still felt good."

Dickerson, who is competing for the starting job in left with ex-Casa Grande star Jonny Gomes, also had a double off Sheets and went 4 for 4, raising his batting average to .429.

"Hey, man, that's how you do it," manager Dusty Baker said. "The thing about it is you go play your way into it. You don't talk your way into it."

NOTES

Oakland RHP Jason Jennings changed his number from 77 to 29 for the rest of spring training.

Oakland pitching prospect Travis Wood threw three innings, allowing one run. It's the only run he has given up in seven innings. Wood had a 1.21 ERA in the Southern League last season.

Gomes had two hits, raising his spring-training average to .333.

Feeling protective of A's prospect Tyson Ross

Lowell Cohn, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 3/16/2010

This is about Tyson Ross, a pitcher and rising star in the Oakland A's organization. He deserves a column because one day soon he may be a starter on the Oakland staff.

If that were all, I wouldn't write about Tyson. In a moment you'll understand why I am calling him Tyson and not Ross. As some of my blog readers know, he went to high school in Oakland with my kid Iggy — Bishop O'Dowd High School, to be precise. Tyson was a year ahead of Iggy and while they didn't generally hang out, they played baseball together and knew and liked each other.

So there is a context to this column. I am writing about my kid's friend and that makes things different and interesting, and that's why I call him Tyson and not Ross. Imagine it's your child I'm writing about, or a friend of your child.

That's how this is for me, and I feel protective and proud.

Tyson is 22. His dad is a pediatrician and his mom is a nurse. He went to Northern Lights elementary school on Redwood Road in the Oakland hills and after that he went to Zion Lutheran on Park Boulevard and then he went to O'Dowd. He attended Cal three years before the A's drafted him in the second round of the 2008 draft.

His closest friends are still kids he grew up with — I know some of them. He plans to finish Cal by taking classes in the offseason. During his first season in the minors, he took a music course online and, after bus trips, would stay up an extra hour or two taking tests. He passed the course and applied the credits toward his Cal degree.

Last year he was in the A's minor-league camp but this year he has a locker in the big camp, across the way from Eric Chavez, although he will start the season in the minors. He is tall and has a shy smile and his fastball tops out at 97 mph and he also throws a sinker, a cut fastball, a slider and a changeup.

The A's are impressed with his composure, impressed with how quickly he's moving up the levels of the minors. Last season he went from Single-A to Double-A and was immediately the best pitcher in his Double-A league. The A's want him to lengthen his stride, they believe it will increase the speed of his pitches.

Last year, Iggy came to spring training and wrote a blog about Tyson. I want to share part of the blog with you. I want you to get a feel for Tyson. I'm quoting my kid and if you think that's a form of nepotism, you're absolutely correct.

I'd share part of my salary for this one column with Iggy but UCLA costs have skyrocketed and his apartment costs me a bundle, so he'll just have to donate his (theoretical) salary to the Cohn cause.

When Iggy first saw the minor-league complex, he wrote: "Papago feels kind of like Bruce Wayne's secret karate academy in the Himalayas in 'Batman Begins.'"

Then he got into Tyson's personality: "Tyson has always been one of the nicest, most polite baseball players. When I played baseball at O'Dowd, there were so many good players that everyone wanted to do the little things to stand out to the coaches as real ballplayers. This meant assuming the 'baseball player persona.' That included chewing tobacco, being loud and obnoxious and sucking up the coaches.

"Tyson never had to do any of that because he was better than everybody else. He didn't have to try to stand out because he was a 6-5 phenom. For him baseball came naturally and he didn't need the baseball persona. In fact, I always felt he made strides to stay normal despite being on the national team, despite being voted 'most likely to be famous' in the yearbook his senior year."

I like that baseball persona part.

I interviewed Tyson the other day. It was early in the morning and we sat in the dugout, Tyson drinking a cup of tea. On the tape of our interview I can hear the birds chirping, a nice poetic touch.

What are his strong points as a pitcher?

"I've got a lot of movement on my pitches," he said, "which is also my downfall because sometimes it's hard to keep it in the zone. I've got a good fastball — it's got some life on it and I always seem to get groundballs, which is good for the defense."

I told him Iggy wrote that he never assumed the baseball-player persona at O'Dowd.

"To each his own," he said. "Same thing here — whatever major-league acting is, dip, spit, all that stuff. If you want to do it, you do it. If you don't, that's fine."

Does he dip and spit?

"Never picked it up. I never really cared for it. I saw other people doing it and never wanted to try."

On the mound, what is he thinking about?

"Just the pitch. Just this one pitch. Clear my head. Look into (Kurt) Suzuki or whoever's catching. See the fingers. If it's a fastball away, all I'm thinking is fastball away. I'm not thinking, 'Blow it by him.' I'm not thinking, 'Please don't hit it.' I'm just thinking fastball away."

You get the point. Tyson is a baseball player through and through.

It's just that he started in a particular place and I happen to know that place. Every ballplayer starts in a particular place. In this sense, Tyson represents all ballplayers — call his story "Portrait of a Baseball Player as a Young Man." And keep reading the book.

The DH: Like? Dislike? Let's review

AL fixture since '73, future of DH merits debate

By Anna Floch / Special to MLB.com

When the Yankees opened the 1973 Baseball season on a clear, cold April day in Boston, Ron Blomberg -- facing legendary pitcher Luis Tiant in the first inning -- drew a bases-loaded walk that could have been just another stat in what became a 15-5 Red Sox victory.

Instead, it was a walk that changed the game of Baseball.

When Blomberg came to the plate as the No. 6 hitter in the Yankees' lineup, he did so as the first designated hitter in Major League Baseball history. Fast forward 37 years, and fans, players and media are still talking about the unique role that the DH plays in the game of Baseball.

It all started on April 6, 1973, and Blomberg was among those who didn't see decades of the DH coming.

"We looked at the DH as a glorified pinch-hitter, and I never thought it was going to stay in the game of Baseball," Blomberg said recently. "I never thought it was going to be around for almost 38 years now."

Indeed, that April day created ripple effects in the sport that linger today. The very existence of the DH remains questionable in the minds of some, yet it has made and extended careers, adding what it was supposed to add to the American League -- another bat to the lineup, and therefore more offense. Its impact can't be denied: Hideki Matsui became the first DH to win World Series MVP honors as the Yankees beat the Phillies last fall, and Hall of Famers such as Paul Molitor, Reggie Jackson, Eddie Murray and Jim Rice are among those with hundreds of games at DH.

But the position remains a hot topic for debate. During recent voting for the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Edgar Martinez did not get the support some believe he deserved, getting 36.2 percent of the vote, a lukewarm reception for one of the first candidates who was a designated hitter for almost the entirety of his career. And in January, when Commissioner Bud Selig convened a special 14-person committee to consider ways of improving on-field issues in the game, there were rumblings that the designated hitter rule would come up as an issue for discussion.

It's a position about which everyone seems to have an opinion.

And it all started with a little walk in Fenway Park.

Today, Blomberg continues to be amazed at how the DH rule has changed the nature of the sport, and he fervently supports what he helped kick off almost 40 years ago.

"The DH is great," Blomberg said. "If you look at the DH realistically, the American League wins more World Series, they win more Interleague games, they win more All-Star Games. Why? They're used to run production. So, I love it."

Of course, not everyone loves it. Some, like Cardinals manager Tony La Russa, who has managed -- and won the World Series -- in both leagues, have mixed feelings about how this rule has changed the game.

"I think it's a significant difference," said La Russa, who is on the Commissioner's committee looking at on-field issues in the game. "It's significant enough to where there are a number of guys that I talk to that feel like it would be appropriate to make it one set of rules. Whichever way you go, I've said I like the National League style because I think you get a chance to see the entire game. There's a lot of stuff that goes on, little things besides the big things.

"But the point I'm making is that if [getting rid of it entirely] was not possible -- and I don't know if it is or not, people say it's tough to dump the DH with the union and stuff like that -- I'd rather have the pitcher hit, but I would have the DH in both leagues. Just because it's a significant enough difference that it doesn't make enough sense to have that kind of a difference between the two leagues."

The original idea of the DH is said to date back to 1906, when Philadelphia A's manager Connie Mack proposed the rule because he felt pitchers were not strong enough hitters to carry their weight in the game. Wildly unpopular at the time, the idea was dropped until the 1920s when John Heydler, then president of the National League, almost convinced NL teams to sign on to the idea as a way to speed up play in the game. That also did not work out, and the idea languished until the late 1960's.

Both AL and NL teams agreed to utilize a designated pinch-hitter (DPH) in 1969 during Spring Training, but there was no strong backing for implementing the rule, so it was dropped and the idea ignored until 1973. That's when A's owner Charlie Finley, who previously had suggested introducing orange baseballs and a designated runner into the game, advocated on behalf of the DH rule to help boost AL attendance, which was lagging behind the NL. AL owners voted on the rule and passed it by an 8-4 margin on Jan. 11, 1973.

Since Blomberg took that first walk as a DH, the position itself has remained largely the same, except for changes in how it has been utilized in the World Series. First, it didn't apply, then it did every other year, and now it applies to games played in AL stadiums, just as it does for Interleague Play.

It has extended careers of hitters, some of whom are Hall of Famers, and it has created a generation of players who at one point or another in their careers never had to worry about using a glove.

"There are certain players that show a good bat throughout their developmental years in the Minor Leagues, and they try to find them a position but nothing seems to work or fit. Or their athleticism makes them more of a liability, so they find their way into a DH role, and one of the benefits is that they do minimize wear and tear and perhaps do play longer," said Molitor, who reluctantly switched to primarily serving as DH at age 34, but won four Silver Sluggers and a World Series title there. "That's one scenario, and then you have players like Jim Thome, who played quite a few years defensively at third base and first base, but soon he got a chance to add at-bats to his career by the availability of the DH role in the American League."

Indeed, many powerful and successful designated hitters have graced the game since Blomberg's historic at-bat in 1973. Among current players, David Ortiz of the Red Sox had three of the best seasons on record as a designated hitter from 2004-06 and stands as the all-time DH home run leader. Martinez, an icon in Seattle, has made equal contributions to the position, and when the award honoring outstanding designated hitters was renamed after Martinez in 2004, he became one of only five players in the history of the sport to have a Major League Baseball award named in his honor. Martinez joined Ted Williams, Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig as the only players with 300 home runs, 500 doubles, a career batting average higher than .300, a career on-base percentage higher than .400 and a career slugging percentage higher than .500.

Frank Thomas' retirement in February meant another great DH -- one who might be too big to keep out of Cooperstown -- will be on the Hall of Fame ballot in 2014. As primarily a DH for the Chicago White Sox, Thomas became the greatest hitter in the history of the club, hitting .300, scoring 100 runs, driving in 100 runs, and walking 100 times in seven consecutive seasons. He ranks 18th all-time with 521 homers, 22nd with 1,704 RBIs and ninth with 1,667 walks.

As a DH for the Brewers and Blue Jays, Molitor finished in the top 10 in batting 11 times. An incredibly strong World Series performer, Molitor left the sport in 1998 with more than 3,300 hits, 230 homers, and 500 steals.

"Personally, I benefited tremendously from it," Molitor said. "I do think the extra bat in the American League provides a little more offense, but not necessarily the strategy of the National League. I understand both arguments. It's hard for me to imagine it going away after however many decades it's been. I think sports enjoys some controversy and the fact that we have it in one league and not the other keeps the DH a subject year in and year out.

"The frustrating part for me is its effect on postseason play, when pitchers who haven't hit except for Interleague Play are forced into situations where other pitchers have had multiple at-bats throughout the year. Just a team, too, that maybe their success was based on the DH's performance, you have that taken away in the most important games of the year. That's one of the negatives of having a split rule like that. But I think the controversy surrounding it, the fact that it's kept in the discussions year after year, maybe it's a good thing."

The discussion continues, and for many the debate is internal, because they can see both sides of the DH coin.

Proponents of the rule believe it has extended the career of players who would otherwise not have an opportunity to play because they are weak in the field or are plagued with injuries. And their presence in lineups can't be denied, nor can their power numbers, year after year.

But La Russa asks the legitimate question: Does that balance out with the loss of strategy?

"There are some hitters who go to bat and don't have to play the defensive side of the game, and it extends your career. There's no doubt that's true," LaRussa said. "Is that a good enough reason? Giving some of these great hitters, or really good hitters, extra at-bats late in their career, when they can't play the defensive side, that's a point for the DH. But does it make up the number of points where the DH is not in the game and you get a chance to see more of the total game? The offensive and defensive strategy, I think that argument wins, for me. That's my opinion."

But as a manager who has seen the DH rule from both sides and who loves every aspect of the game, La Russa does not see a reason why there should be such a drastic rule difference between leagues.

"I wish we would go to one set of rules, whichever one it is," La Russa said.

Change in the sport of Baseball does not come quickly, though. Reflecting upon the obvious strengths of Ortiz, Martinez, Molitor and Harold Baines, who had most of his 2,866 hits from the DH spot, leads one to wonder whether or not these strong hitters could have reached their true potential had it not been for their position as a designated hitter. Yet purists of the sport argue that the rule should be abolished because the current era already is dominated by hitters and it is ultimately an unnecessary rule that twists the harmony of the game.

Even if the current designated hitter rule were to be altered in any way, it is likely that the passionate debate around it will continue. The 14-person committee consisting of four managers, four former and present general managers, four owner representatives, Baseball consultant Frank Robinson and columnist George Will that was recently convened by Commissioner Selig to review on-field issues will most surely have an endless number of topics to consider. There is still no assurance that the DH rule is going to be changed or affected in any way.

Regardless of how the rule progresses in the near future, Blomberg's contribution to the sport is not likely to be forgotten any time soon, a fact of which he is well aware.

"The DH is always going to be by my grave. Nobody can ever take that away. It's going to be that little asterisk -- 'The first DH in Major League history,'" he said.

At least for the near future, it looks like the man without a glove will continue to step up to bat.

Cactus League Cluster Has a Cozy Feel

By [TYLER KEPNER](#)

Bob Apodaca, the pitching coach for the [Colorado Rockies](#), moved through the autograph line outside the clubhouse door at Hi Corbett Field in Tucson earlier this month. He signed for everybody, posing for photographs and making small talk.

A fan asked Apodaca if he was looking forward to next spring, when the Rockies will move to a new facility in Scottsdale that they will share with the [Arizona Diamondbacks](#). With a deft sense of place, Apodaca said he enjoyed Tucson and would miss some things about it.

But, he added, the Rockies had spent six hours on a bus the day before, just to play an exhibition game near Phoenix. That was wasted time, and it was tiring. The fan understood.

In truth, it rarely takes six hours to drive from Tucson to the Phoenix suburbs and back. Without traffic, a one-way trip can be completed in less than two hours. But it is still a nuisance, or what passes for one in Arizona, which is easily the best place to be for spring training.

Half the teams train there now, and when the Diamondbacks and the Rockies abandon Tucson, the entire Cactus League will be in greater Phoenix. No training site will be much more than an hour from any other. The highway system is convenient. Notwithstanding [the Twitter rage of White Sox Manager Ozzie Guillen](#), who posted this message last Wednesday — “I hate the traffic I arizona aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa” — the traffic really isn’t bad.

In any case, Guillen should know it is all relative. As a player, he often trained in Florida, which has lost the [Dodgers](#), the [Reds](#), the [Indians](#), the [Royals](#) and the [Rangers](#) in the last eight years.

Yes, there are some nice facilities in Florida. The [Yankees’](#) home in Tampa — [George M. Steinbrenner Field](#), located at One Steinbrenner Drive — is a suitable fortress for baseball’s royalty. The [Pirates](#) still play at [quaint old McKechnie Field in Bradenton](#), which did not install lights until 2008.

The modernized Joker Marchant Stadium in Lakeland is a comfortable home for the [Tigers](#), whose farmhands stay in an adjacent complex called Tiger Town. Tiffany lamps with the Tigers logo hang above the pool tables in the rec hall.

The problem with Florida is the spacing. Four lonely teams train on the east coast — the [Nationals](#) in Viera, the [Mets](#) in Port St. Lucie and the [Cardinals](#) and the [Marlins](#) in Jupiter. Sites in West Palm Beach, Cocoa Beach, Vero Beach and Fort Lauderdale have been abandoned.

The teams in the center of the state — the [Astros](#) in Kissimmee and the [Braves](#) at Disney World — are not especially convenient. Toll roads abound, Disney traffic is always threatening, and nobody in Florida seems to like driving on Interstate 4.

That is to say nothing of the two-and-a-half hour haul from Tampa to Fort Myers, where the [Red Sox](#) and the [Twins](#) train. The Sunshine Skyway Bridge is a marvel, but not enough to make the trip much fun. And some trips — Port St. Lucie to Fort Myers takes 2 hours 55 minutes, for example — just seem cruel.

A fan can have a fun vacation in either spot, of course. There is a charm in bouncing around the Grapefruit League, staying in cheap hotels, spotting the towering Waffle House signs and pulling in for breakfast before the game.

But Arizona is just so much easier. If you love baseball, book a week in the Cactus League next March. Pick a hotel in Tempe or Scottsdale or Phoenix and stay in one spot the whole time.

Roam the two-team complexes for morning workouts in Glendale, Goodyear, Peoria or Surprise, and then stay for a game. Or hop back in the car and see one someplace else.

Check out the [Athletics](#) at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, where you can hear monkeys from the zoo just beyond center field. See the Cubs in Mesa at HoHoKam Park, across the street from a graveyard. (The metaphor there is just too easy.)

Enjoy a [Giants](#) game in Scottsdale and then feast at Don & Charlie's, home of the most impressive memorabilia collection west of Cooperstown, N.Y. There's an actual Gold Glove award behind the bar, but you can't tell who won it; the nameplate is covered by a photograph of an old catcher named Bob Uecker.

Of course, some things are universal in either locale. [Cubs](#) Manager [Lou Piniella](#) has his photograph on the wall at Donatello in Tampa, between the piano bar and the dining room. He also has an autographed magazine cover at the Don & Charlie's hostess stand.

Born and raised in Tampa, Piniella said he had never seen snow until he trained with the Indians in Tucson, where distant snow-capped mountains form the skyline. He roamed [Mount Lemmon](#), and also experienced a culinary first that is still an Arizona specialty.

"There were no tacos in Florida," Piniella said. "They had Cuban food and Spanish food. But I didn't know what a taco was."

A's Make First Re-Assignments Of The Spring

OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 14, 2010

The Oakland A's made their first cuts of the spring on Sunday, sending 10 players to minor league camp on the same day that position players were scheduled to report to the A's complex at Papago Park for minor league spring training.

The Oakland A's announced their first cuts from major league camp of the spring, sending 10 players to their minor league complex at Papago Park. The 10 players represented a mix of young prospects and minor league veterans expected to start the season at Triple-A.

In the young prospects category, the A's sent down reliever [Sam Demel](#), infielders [Jemile Weeks](#) and [Grant Green](#) and catcher [Max Stassi](#). The A's also re-assigned veteran pitchers [Matt Wright](#) and Cedric Bowers, catcher [Joel Galarraga](#) and infielders [Dallas McPherson](#), [Matt Whitney](#) and [Corey Wimberly](#).

Demel, in his first big league spring training, allowed four runs on nine hits in three innings of work. The A's 2007 third-round pick also saved one game in two chances. The hard-throwing right-hander will be in the mix to close games for the [Sacramento River Cats](#) this season. Bowers and Wright were minor league free agent signings and are in their first season in the A's organization. Bowers won a game and allowed one run on five hits in 4.2 innings. He walked three and struck-out four. Wright tossed five innings over two appearances, allowing two runs on five hits. He struck-out two and didn't walk a batter.

Weeks and Green are the A's 2008 and 2009 first-round picks, respectively. Weeks was participating in his second major league spring training, although he was limited during last year's spring training by a hip injury. He appeared in six games this spring, collecting one hit in six at-bats. He drove-in two, scored three times and stole a base. Green had only two at-bats and he struggled defensively in his first big league spring training, committing two errors. Weeks will be competing during minor league camp to start the season in Triple-A, while Green is expected to start his first full professional season with High-A Stockton.

McPherson was somewhat of a surprise cut this early in camp. Before the A's acquired [Kevin Kouzmanoff](#) in January, McPherson was considered a strong candidate to compete for the A's third base job. The minor league free agent signing got only seven at-bats in big league camp. He scored three runs and hit a homerun. McPherson's last full minor league season was in 2008 when he led the minor leagues in homeruns. A's prospect [Chris Carter](#) was second and the two could represent a significant portion of the middle of the River Cats' line-up this season.

Whitney, a minor league free agent signing, was in his first big league camp with the A's. The former Cleveland first-round pick had only four at-bats and he collected one hit. Wimberly, in his second big league camp with the A's, didn't make an appearance in a big league game. He has been limited by a calf strain. Wimberly was sidelined for a third of last season with a broken hamate bone.

With Galarraga and Stassi heading down to minor league camp, the A's now have four catchers in big league camp: [Kurt Suzuki](#), [Landon Powell](#), [Josh Donaldson](#) and [Anthony Recker](#). Galarraga, in his second spring with the A's, appeared in only two games and had one hit in two at-bats. He is coming off of major shoulder surgery that was performed during last season. Stassi, the youngest player in A's camp (he turns 19 on Monday), had an impressive first big league camp. He had a hit in three at-bats, a homerun. Stassi is a candidate to start the season with Low-A Kane County.

