

A's News Clips, Friday, March 26, 2010

A's notebook: Ben Sheets struggles, but he and manager Bob Geren aren't overly concerned

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Ben Sheets says he's still a "work in progress" with just one spring start left before his opening night assignment on April 5 against the Seattle Mariners.

That doesn't have the right-hander, or A's manager Bob Geren, overly concerned.

Sheets labored at times Thursday during a six-inning stint against a Giants Triple-A squad at Papago Park Baseball Complex.

He allowed three runs and nine hits, including a two-run home run by Eddy Martinez-Esteve. He struck out three with one walk in 85 pitches.

The A's pitched Sheets in the informal setting of a minor league exhibition so they could guarantee he got six innings worth of work.

Sheets was happy to get the workload but said his fastball lacked zip from his previous start. He described his changeup as "terrible." But he stressed that he still feels he's making headway toward being ready for the regular season after missing all of 2009 with an elbow injury.

"I'm getting there," he said. "It's still like it's up and down. I'd rather it be a smooth, gradual climb."

"I think he's gotten better every time out," Geren said. "The feel of his breaking ball, he's been happier with it every time he's gone out."

Right-hander Jason Jennings started in Sheets' place and allowed two runs and four hits in three innings during a 6-3 loss to the Giants on Thursday night.

His biggest accomplishment: Avoiding major injury when he was struck on the glove hand by a liner off the bat of Bengie Molina in the third inning.

Jennings' hand was bruised, but he said it was nothing that would keep him off the mound. He would appear to be on the outside looking in when it comes to the fifth starter competition, but he still could be considered as a long reliever.

Recently acquired reliever Edwar Ramirez made his A's debut and threw a scoreless inning with one strikeout. Michael Wuertz also worked one inning and allowed one hit with one strikeout.

Geren said he'll experiment with different batting orders through the rest of Cactus League play, which wraps up Wednesday.

But he said he's leaning toward starting the season with Coco Crisp hitting leadoff and Rajai Davis in the No. 2 spot.

With lack of power, Oakland A's turn to their running game

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's didn't strike fear in teams with their offensive production last season, but at least they have forced opponents to rewrite their scouting reports.

After years of being known as a station-to-station ballclub, the A's became one of the major leagues' most aggressive baserunning teams in 2009.

Better baserunning has been a point of emphasis the past few springs. But manager Bob Geren is setting the bar higher for a lineup that still features more speed and athleticism than muscle.

"We went from being one of the worst (teams on the bases), to the middle of the pack, to one of the best last year," Geren said. "And we want to be the best. If any one thing has been emphasized, that's it."

The A's tried importing some power last season, but hitters such as Jason Giambi and Matt Holliday didn't have the intended impact.

So the A's leaned on their running game after the All-Star break and reaped the benefits. They ranked eighth in the American League with 54 stolen bases before the break but led the league (and the majors) with 79 after the break.

They increased their run production from 4.2 per game before the break (12th in the AL) to 5.2 after the break (fourth in the AL).

Not coincidentally, the A's also improved in the standings, going 37-49 before the break and 38-38 afterward.

Outfielder Gabe Gross, who signed with Oakland after spending last season with the Tampa Bay Rays, said he noticed a shift in the A's identity in 2009.

"It was a little bit different element playing them," Gross said. "Before that, you almost felt like it was a team philosophy not to take chances on the basepaths. "... We've got guys that can run and are going to run. It's not just stealing bases but going first to third and making sure you're scoring from second on a single through the infield."

New center fielder Coco Crisp will join left fielder Rajai Davis to give the A's a speedy 1-2 punch atop the batting order.

Players such as right fielder Ryan Sweeney, shortstop Cliff Pennington and even catcher Kurt Suzuki haven't posted high stolen base totals in recent seasons, but they can take an extra base.

"We don't have a whole lot of people who can hit 30 homers," Sweeney said. "We're going to have to play small ball. We've got good pitching and defense. If we can put a few runs on the board, we're going to win."

But it's worth noting the A's are trying to strike a balance offensively.

They traded for third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff, a 20-homer threat. They re-signed Jack Cust, who has topped 25 homers in each of the past three seasons. And if Eric Chavez can stay healthy, he will provide another power threat, though it may be in a part-time role.

General manager Billy Beane, talking at the beginning of camp, stressed the A's can't be a one-dimensional team that relies on its running game.

"It's nice to have a combination, but you've got to have power to win in this league, period," Beane said. "We need to get some guys to surround Raj and Coco with some home runs and extra bases."

A's pregame update: Geren likes Coco Crisp at leadoff, Rajai Davis batting second

By Joe Stiglich, Thursday, March 25th, 2010 at 3:58 pm

A couple quick tidbits before the A's and Giants do battle in Scottsdale:

Bob Geren just shared some thoughts w/reporters on the batting order he's thinking of for the regular season. He likes Coco Crisp in the leadoff spot and Rajai Davis batting second, which is how he did things last night. But he said he'll tinker with the order in the remaining exhibitions to find a 1 thru 9 sequence that he's happy with.

Although Kurt Suzuki has hit third for most of the spring, we could see Ryan Sweeney get time there as well. Sweeney is hitting third tonight and Suzuki will bat fifth. And whoever hits in the No. 3 slot might affect who bats leadoff, or vice versa, as Geren likes to go left-right-left-right as much as possible.

Anyway, here's your full A's lineup for tonight:

Rajai CF
Barton 1B
Sweeney RF
Kouzmanoff 3B
Suzuki C

Ellis 2B
Buck LF
Pennington SS
Jennings P

Short and sweet w/the blog today ... Enjoy tonight's game on CSNBA

Present looks bright for A's arm of the future

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Five rookie pitchers got their shots in the A's rotation last season, but the young starter turning heads this spring probably won't get his shot in Oakland until next year.

Former Cal pitcher Tyson Ross has 12 strikeouts in 82/3 innings, including seven in three innings against Arizona a week ago.

The 22-year-old has been drawing raves all spring, but catcher Josh Donaldson has seen him on a regular basis the past two years.

"When Tyson is on, he's really good," Donaldson said. "He doesn't need his best stuff to get people out, but he can hit 93 to 97 mph and it's not easy to pick up. He's the best pitcher I've caught in the minor leagues. If he stays healthy, I know he'll have a long tenure in the major leagues. "

The knock on Ross since the A's drafted him in the second round in 2008 has been his mechanics. He's tall, 6-foot-6, but he has a very short stride, which can put a lot of extra stress on the arm. That made some teams leery about him in the draft.

The A's have worked with Ross on lengthening his stride, and he has - a bit. It still appears short in relation to his long legs, but it's a work in progress. Still, the change seems to be helping.

"I do try to stride farther," Ross said with a smile. "But with my mechanics, I'm not going to look like Tim Lincecum overnight.

"I'm trying to finish my pitches a lot better. That keeps the ball down, gives me better velocity. And we've worked on the whole mental approach, slowing myself down. I used to just get out there and throw it."

A's minor-league pitching instructor Gil Patterson said that Ross' stride might be a bit longer and his extension is better, but the biggest change for Ross has been in his mental approach: Patterson thinks that Ross was trying to be a little too fine, unnecessarily.

"He throws a great sinker, a power sinker like Roy Halladay," Patterson said. "Telling Tyson that he's a power pitcher has helped him. He's not a finesse guy, so he doesn't need to have that approach."

To go along with the sinker and Ross' slider, Patterson has shown Ross the cutter that he's incorporated so successfully into other pitchers' repertoires. Andrew Bailey is a prime example. Ross also has changed the grip on his changeup, using one that Marcus McBeth showed him instead of his traditional circle change; he's now using the new pitch far more often.

With their wealth of young pitching, the A's can afford to bring Ross along slowly. He made a successful jump from Class-A Stockton to Double-A Midland near the end of last season, and he was particularly good in the Texas League playoffs, with a 1.46 ERA and 19 strikeouts in 121/3 innings.

"At that point, I wasn't working on things, so I wasn't thinking about everything," he said. "I was just going out and competing."

Ross might not start this season at Triple-A Sacramento, but it's a good bet he'll end up there. If he performs well there, he could be an option in Oakland next season, if not in September.

"I don't know where I'll start or where I'll end up," he said. "I'm just trying to get better and better."

Sheets working out kinks

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Before the rest of the A's faced the Giants on Thursday night, **Ben Sheets** also pitched against the Giants - the Fresno Giants.

In his second-to-last appearance before the regular season, Sheets gave up three runs, nine hits (including three doubles and a homer) and a walk in six innings in the Triple-A game at Papago Park. He also struck out three.

Afterward, Sheets described his changeup as a "terrible pitch" and estimated he had allowed five hits while throwing it.

Nevertheless, Sheets accomplished what he wanted, getting in a lot of innings and 85 pitches. Plus, his fastball hit 92 mph - right about where it's been most of the spring, but surprising to Sheets because he had thought the pitch had less zip Thursday.

"It's getting there," Sheets said of his progress this spring. He missed all of last year after elbow surgery and the main thing, manager **Bob Geren** said, is that Sheets is healthy.

Sheets will make his final spring start Tuesday, then have five days off before taking the ball Opening Night against the Mariners.

Briefly: Geren is now considering batting **Ryan Sweeney** third and **Kurt Suzuki** fifth during the regular season, as he did Thursday night, and hitting **Coco Crisp** leadoff and **Rajai Davis** second. He liked the job Davis did hitting second last year, Geren said, and to follow the right-handed hitter with a lefty, he has moved Sweeney up. ... **Mark Ellis** was back after missing two games with hamstring tightness, and he had an RBI single. ... **Jason Jennings** had a wrap on his left hand after being hit by a **Bengie Molina** liner in the third; he stayed in the game and said later he was fine. ... Jennings is returning home to Texas today because of a death in the family. He expects to return Monday. ... **Edwar Ramirez** made his A's debut - one inning, one strikeout. ... Minor-leaguer **Michael Ynoa** worked two innings for Class-A Kane County and allowed one hit, according to minor-league instructor **Gil Patterson**. Ynoa, 18, is expected to remain at extended spring training before going to a short-season A-ball team.

Drumbeat: Sheets gets in work in minor-league game; lineup shifts

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Ben Sheets gave up three runs, nine hits and a walk in six innings against the Giants' Triple-A Fresno team today at Papago Park, and he also struck out three.

Afterward, Sheets said his changeup wasn't very good; he thought five of the hits had come on it. (He allowed a two-run homer in the second; that came on a curveball.)

Nevertheless, Sheets accomplished what he wanted to, getting in a lot of innings and 85 pitches. His fastball hit 92 mph, according to A's minor-league pitcher Matt Wright, manning the radar gun and charting pitches today.

Sheets will make his final start before the regular season on Tuesday, and he's not concerned about his mediocre to occasionally disastrous (10 batters faced, none retired) spring results. Since he hasn't pitched in more than a year, the main thing is that he's healthy and that he gets in his work. He always has awful springs, he said, and Sheets seems like a fellow who knows himself pretty well. He's known for his bulldog mentality, and those guys tend to be able to turn it on when the games mean something.

Mark Ellis is back in the lineup, as he'd said yesterday. He missed two games with hamstring tightness.

Here's the lineup: Davis cf, Barton 1b, Sweeney rf, Kouzmanoff 3b, Suzuki c, Ellis 2b, Buck lf, Pennington ss, Jennings p.

It sounds as if manager Bob Geren is now leaning toward batting Sweeney third and Suzuki fifth during the regular season, and hitting Coco Crisp leadoff and Rajai Davis second. He liked the job Davis did hitting second last year, he said, and to follow the right-handed hitter with a lefty, he's moved Sweeney up.

Since Suzuki has a little power (at least for this lineup), hitting him fifth isn't a bad move.

The standout in that minor-league game today, btw, was Josh Donaldson. The catcher hit a two-run homer, doubled and singled and he had at least three RBIs by the time Sheets came out of the game. I'm trying to find out if he added a triple to his total, but he is a catcher, even if only recently converted, so a cycle might be tough with the triple remaining. He was just crushing the ball today.

Pennington raps two hits vs. Giants

Jennings fans four in three innings; Buck tallies triple

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

GIANTS 6, A'S 3

at Scottsdale, Ariz.

Thursday, March 25

Athletics at the plate: Ryan Sweeney, Mark Ellis and Cliff Pennington all drove in runs for the A's, who collected a total of five hits on the night. Travis Buck went 1-for-2 with a triple and scored Oakland's third and final run on a hit down the right-field line off the bat of Pennington in the sixth. The A's shortstop went 2-for-3.

Giants at the plate: Aaron Rowand notched two hits and scored two runs, and the Giants also got multihit games from John Bowker and Bengie Molina, the latter tallying a pair of RBIs. Pablo Sandoval, Mark DeRosa, Juan Uribe and Nate Schierholtz contributed hits for San Francisco as well.

Athletics on the mound: Right-handed starter Jason Jennings scattered four hits, two runs, three walks and four strikeouts through three innings before being relieved by Brad Ziegler. The A's righty surrendered another two runs while allowing three hits in an inning. Michael Wuertz, making just his second spring appearance, got in an inning of work and gave up just one hit while fanning one. Newcomer Edwar Ramirez, acquired via trade Wednesday, also pitched an inning of relief and struck out one before prospect Tyson Ross gave up two runs (one earned) in the seventh.

Giants on the mound: Righty Todd Wellemeyer tossed three no-hit frames before allowing three hits and two runs -- one earned -- in the next two innings. He walked two and struck out four in his five-inning stint. Alex Hinshaw then pitched a lone inning and surrendered a run on two hits before right-hander Sergio Romo and lefty Dan Runzler threw consecutive scoreless innings for the Giants.

Worth noting: Jennings was the victim of a hard-hit ball off the bat of Molina in the third when he was nailed by a line drive on the thumb of his non-pitching hand. Jennings stayed in the game but had his left hand wrapped up following his outing. Jennings said it's likely a jam and an MRI shouldn't be necessary.

Cactus League records: Athletics 9-11-2; Giants 18-7

Up next: The A's will enjoy some split-squad action Friday, with Dallas Braden taking the mound against the Cubs in Mesa on MLB.TV and Vin Mazzaro making the start in Surprise against the Rangers. Mazzaro, making a push for the fifth starter spot, will be opposed by former A's pitcher Rich Harden, while Braden will go against Chicago's Carlos Zambrano. Manager Bob Geren will be taking the bus to Surprise but mentioned his starting position players will be spread out between the two sites. Both games are slated for 1:05 p.m. PT.

Tim Lincecum will try to match the durability of his rotation mates Friday when the Giants face the Los Angeles Angels at Scottsdale Stadium. Barry Zito, Matt Cain and Jonathan Sanchez pitched into the seventh inning on consecutive days earlier this week. Lincecum hasn't lasted more than four innings in his three Cactus League starts, though he pitched 5 2/3 innings in a Minor League intrasquad game last Sunday. Lincecum, sporting a 9.39 exhibition ERA, will oppose Angels right-hander Jered Weaver, who owns a similarly inflated ERA of 8.03.

Sheets up, down in six-inning Minors stint

Righty has one more spring outing left before Opening Night

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Ben Sheets' journey to Opening Night made a pit stop at Minor League camp on Thursday.

No need to worry about any setbacks.

Sheets was simply there to ensure six innings of work in what manager Bob Geren called a "controlled environment" at the A's Papago Park.

As a result, the right-handed starter threw 85 pitches while scattering nine hits -- including a home run -- three runs, one walk and three strikeouts in six frames against the Giants' Triple-A team. Sheets wasn't too thrilled with his performance, but he rarely is around this time of year and never puts much stock into spring outings.

"I felt good," Sheets offered. "It wasn't as crisp as last time, but it's a work in progress. My focus was a little broader, and I don't think my fastball had the same zip. It's a different environment, too."

Almost all of the nine hits were hard hit, and the righty said five of them must have come off what he called a "terrible" changeup he'd like to forget altogether. Aside from that, though, Sheets felt confident in his curveball and even more satisfied in lasting six frames.

"That was the goal," Sheets said. "There was a reason I came over here, to get up and down six times. That's how you build strength."

Sheets has one more spring outing, in which he hopes to again throw 85-90 pitches, before taking the mound in Oakland against Seattle on April 5. Despite posting another batch of forgettable Spring Training numbers, Sheets and Geren are confident in his ability to head the rotation this year.

"I think he's gotten better every time out, and he feels good," Geren said. "His velocity has been consistent, and he's been happier with his breaking ball each time he's gone out."

Lee's Leftovers: Thursday pregame notes: Ellis back in lineup

First, your starting lineup against the host Giants here at Scottsdale Stadium: Davis CF, Barton 1B, Sweeney RF, Kouzmanoff 3B, Suzuki C, Ellis 2B, Buck LF, Pennington SS, Jennings SP

We'll also see **Michael Wuertz**, **Tyson Ross** and newcomer **Edwar Ramirez** in action on the mound tonight.

Some pregame notes:

- **Mark Ellis** is back in the lineup after missing two games with tight hamstrings.
- **Rajai Davis** is in the leadoff spot tonight, but when **Coco Crisp** is in the lineup, expect the latter to lead off most times with Davis in the No. 2 hole. "I thought Raj did a real nice job in the second spot last year," manager **Bob Geren** said.
- **Kurt Suzuki** can be found in the fifth spot tonight, and Geren said he'd like to try him there for awhile with **Ryan Sweeney** batting third.
- **Andrew Bailey** (elbow) said he is still slated to throw off the mound Saturday and hopes to be back in a game next week.
- Geren will travel to Surprise tomorrow for the team's split-squad game against the Rangers, while the rest of the team will make the shorter trip to Mesa to face the Cubs. **Vin Mazzaro** is scheduled to go against Texas, and **Dallas Braden** will go in Mesa.