

A's Daily News Clips. March 28, 2010

'Composure' is Gio-centric scheme for A's starter

Joe Stiglich/ Bay Area News Group. 3/27/10

SURPRISE, Ariz. — Catcher Kurt Suzuki gets his exercise when Gio Gonzalez is pitching. Suzuki frequently makes the jog to the mound to offer calming words for Gonzalez when an inning gets rocky.

But when Gonzalez has his stuff working, no one makes Suzuki's job easier.

"His curve ball is probably one of the best in the game," Suzuki said. "He's got life on his heater, and now he's including that changeup. It's improving every day.

"It's fun to catch when he's on. Put it that way."

Manager Bob Geren has said Gonzalez possesses the best natural stuff of anyone on his pitching staff. Now the A's are trying to decide if Gonzalez, 24, is ready to translate his potential into regular success as a big league starter.

The left-hander is locked in a competition with Trevor Cahill to be the A's fifth starter, a battle that became a two-horse race after starting pitcher Vin Mazzaro was optioned to the minors Saturday along with first baseman Chris Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor.

Gonzalez showed flashes of dominance last season but was wildly inconsistent. He went 6-7 with a 5.75 ERA in 20 games (17 starts) and averaged 9.94 strikeouts per nine innings, a ratio that was the best in franchise history based on a minimum of 90 innings.

But he also led the American League with 5.11 walks per nine innings.

"He's had some great games in the big leagues," A's assistant general manager David Forst said, "And he's had some not-so-great games."

"Composure" is the buzz word surrounding Gonzalez, as it has been since he made his debut in August 2008. Gonzalez wears his emotions on his sleeve while pitching, which is why Suzuki wears out the sod between home plate and the mound.

"I'm an aggressive pitcher," Gonzalez said. "I want to get (every) out. I want to show these guys I've got something in the tank. "... It's good to have that emotion and feeling, but controlling it is what's going to work for me."

To that end, Gonzalez has posted a 3.46 ERA through four spring appearances (three starts). And Geren was pleased that the lefty threw his change-up effectively against the Dodgers on Wednesday, using it to climb back into counts after falling behind.

Gonzalez largely has been a two-pitch guy to this point, but he said he's gaining confidence with his change-up.

"If he can add a changeup, he can maybe go through a lineup without even using his curve ball one time," Suzuki said. "He's got such good life on his (fastball), it would allow him to go deeper in games."

Gonzalez's stuff is more dominant stuff than Cahill's. But Cahill, 22, is the more-seasoned pitcher after spending all of 2009 in the A's rotation. He's making his pitch for the No. 5 job with a solid spring of his own. He's allowed only three earned runs in 132/3 innings over his past three outings.

Both have two appearances left. Gonzalez drew Wednesday's start with Cahill relieving him. Geren said he didn't know yet who would start Monday against Seattle.

Of the two, Gonzalez is the only one with experience in the bullpen. If Gonzalez doesn't earn the starting job, Forst wouldn't say whether the A's would prefer keeping him as a long reliever or have him start in Triple-A.

"He's pitched like he wants to win a job," Forst said. "(But) for us, it's a matter of results and getting consistent quality starts."

A's notebook: Prospects Chris Carter, Michael Taylor sent to Sacramento

Joe Stiglich/ Bay Area News Group. 3/27/10

SURPRISE, Ariz. — First baseman Chris Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor were sent to the minors Saturday morning, though manager Bob Geren said he feels both of the A's top prospects can help the big league club at some point this season.

Right-hander Vin Mazzaro, who made 17 starts as a rookie last season, also was demoted before the A's dropped a 14-12 game to the Kansas City Royals. That leaves Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez as the finalists for the fifth starter's spot.

Carter, Mazzaro and Taylor all will head to Triple-A Sacramento.

Geren described the potential of Carter and Taylor as "off the charts," and the A's expect each to develop into middle-of-the-lineup hitters.

"They're guys that can create their opportunities by dominating (in the minors). I let them know that," Geren said. "I think they can be dominating players at this level."

Carter, 23, hit a tape-measure homer in the Cactus League opener but batted just .160 with two RBIs in 25 at-bats. Taylor, 24, batted .189 in 37 at-bats.

Mazzaro posted a 6.28 ERA in five appearances.

Right-hander Justin Duchscherer got knocked around by the Royals, lasting just three-plus innings, allowing nine hits and getting charged with eight earned runs.

He has one exhibition start remaining, Thursday against the Giants. He said he expects his velocity to increase and his stuff to get sharper. He also said that three total starts can have him ready for the regular season.

Duchscherer missed much of the spring with a lower back injury.

Kevin Kouzmanoff hit his third homer for the A's. He had three RBIs as did Mark Ellis, who is hitting .389.

Reliever Joey Devine (forearm tendinitis) said he'll remain in Arizona for extended spring training. He hasn't pitched in a game yet. Andrew Bailey, Michael Wuertz, Brad Ziegler and Craig Breslow will occupy four of the A's bullpen spots. Jerry Blevins, Brad Kilby, Jason Jennings and Henry Rodriguez figure to battle for the remaining three spots, with Gonzalez a possibility if he's not the fifth starter.

Chin Music: A's send down Vin Mazzaro, Chris Carter, Michael Taylor; Joey Devine to stay at extended spring training

By Joe Stiglich/ Bay Area News Group. 3/27/10

Lots of news this morning at A's camp. Here's what ya need to know before the A's take on the Royals in Surprise. Yes, this makes two drives to Surprise in two days for me. Crazy...

—Right-hander Vin Mazzaro, first baseman Chris Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor all were sent to the minors. With Mazzaro's demotion, the fifth-starter race boils down to Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, as it had been shaping up anyhow. It'll be interesting to see which pitcher draws the start Monday, when both are scheduled to pitch. Gonzalez started Wednesday night with Cahill entering in relief.

Mazzaro addressed reporters as he was packing his things. He said he was a bit surprised to get the news just one day after he thought he pitched well against Texas. "I thought I did a pretty good job," Mazzaro said. "Somebody's gotta go, right?" He plans to work on his fastball command in Triple-A Sacramento's rotation. Mazzaro did have a decent outing yesterday, allowing two runs over four innings. But he walked three guys in each of his last two appearances, and given that Cahill and Gonzalez have looked pretty strong, the odds weren't in Mazzaro's favor.

A's manager Bob Geren addressed reporters before news of Mazzaro's demotion surfaced. But Geren had strong praise for Carter and Taylor, ranked first and second, respectively, by Baseball America on the A's list of top prospects. Each had moments where they showed their considerable upside, but it's clear both also could use more seasoning. Geren said he could see both getting called up sometime this season. "They're both off-the-chart ceiling-type players, guys that can create their opportunities by dominating (in the minors)," Geren said. "... I think they can be dominating players at this level."

Geren also spoke highly of Daric Barton's work at first base, and I'm sure that made it an easier call to send Carter down.

—Reliever Joey Devine, still sidelined with forearm tendinitis, told me he'll stay in Arizona for extended spring training when the A's break camp. Then he would go on a minor league rehab assignment when he's ready, after which he presumably would be called up.

The writing was on the wall that the A's would be starting the season without him. It's still a blow for the bullpen, but if Andrew Bailey, Michael Wuertz and Craig Breslow all return to health by Opening Day, the 'pen still looks in pretty good shape to me.

Devine's absence means there's an extra opportunity for a reliever to make this team. Bailey, Wuertz, Breslow and Brad Ziegler will take four of the seven spots. I see Jerry Blevins, Brad Kilby, Henry Rodriguez and Jason Jennings fighting for the final three slots, and perhaps Gio Gonzalez if he's not the fifth starter. Right now, I'd put my money on Blevins and Jennings (as a long man) taking two of those three spots. Kilby hasn't allowed a run in his past two outings, and Rodriguez's dynamite arm obviously is tempting. Watch those two carefully over their remaining spring outings.

And finally, today's lineup:

Crisp CF
Barton 1B
Sweeney RF
Kouzmanoff 3B
Suzuki C
Cust DH
Ellis 2B
Buck LF
Pennington SS

Duchscherer P

Duchscherer feels OK after taking a beating

Susan Slusser/ Chronicle Staff Writer. 3/28/10

Surprise, Ariz. --

Justin Duchscherer's second start of the spring was reminiscent of Ben Sheets' and Jason Jennings' dreadful outings earlier in the month. He gave up nine hits and 11 runs, eight earned, in three innings in the A's 14-12 loss to Kansas City.

Like Sheets, the main thing for Duchscherer after missing a full season is that he's healthy and getting his work in. He felt as if he was just missing Saturday, then, behind in the count, he had to go over the plate - and he was getting drilled. He said when his fastball is back up around 87-88 mph, he'll have the late break on his stuff that has made him so successful.

"I'm not trying to minimize how bad my butt got kicked, but the reality is that it's a spring training game," Duchscherer said.

Manager Bob Geren said Duchscherer was just "off a little." When asked about Duchscherer's readiness to start the regular season, Geren replied that Duchscherer will get another start before then.

Mazzaro, Carter, Taylor cut: Oakland's fifth-starter race is down to two. Vin Mazzaro was sent to minor-league camp, leaving Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez to battle it out.

"It's not that big a surprise," Mazzaro said. "I thought I did all right, but I guess not good enough."

Mazzaro's ERA was 6.28; Cahill is at 4.02, and Gonzalez is at 3.46. It's going to be a close call between Cahill and Gonzalez. Cahill was in the rotation all of last year and has done nothing to lose the spot, while Gonzalez has shown some flashes of dominance this spring - along with the occasional emotional moment that sometimes gets him in trouble.

Top prospects Chris Carter and Michael Taylor also were sent out, but Geren said he expects both to help Oakland in the near future.

"Both those guys are going to be middle-of-the-order power guys for a long time, and this is an organization that's lacking a lot of power," infielder Eric Chavez said.

Briefly: Dallas Braden's left shin was still red but noticeably less swollen Saturday. He now believes he has a bug bite rather than what was initially diagnosed as a possible staph infection. Braden, who had a rash on his left foot last year that led to an infection and then permanent nerve damage from a botched biopsy, was given a prescription Friday. He said he'll only get it filled if his shin gets worse. ... Mark Ellis was 3-for-4 with three RBIs and he's hitting .389. ... Cliff Pennington had three hits. He's batting .333 and there's little doubt that he'll be the starting shortstop. ... Eric Patterson had two hits, lifting his average to .288, but a day after flubbing a bunt, he was doubled off second on a lineout to center. ... Edwar Ramirez allowed two hits and a run in two innings, walking one and striking out two.

Graveyard shift not new to Kouzmanoff

Susan Slusser/ Chronicle Staff Writer. 3/28/10

Surprise, Ariz. --

Kevin Kouzmanoff spent the past three seasons playing in what is often considered the worst hitters' park in the big leagues, Petco Park in San Diego.

So he's one of the few players who might not mind the move to the spacious Coliseum. He's like the anti-Matt Holliday. Holliday went from hitter-friendly Coors Field in Denver to the Coliseum last year and he never seemed to get comfortable in his three-plus months in Oakland.

Kouzmanoff might not hit a ton more home runs in Oakland, but at least he's already familiar with the feeling of mashing a pitch only to see it land in a glove at the wall.

"I'm not going to complain about it, because it's not going to change," Kouzmanoff said of his approach toward Petco Park. "The way I see it, if you can't hit home runs, you hit line drives in the gaps.

"It's obviously frustrating to square a ball up, think it's a home run and it doesn't go out. But it's important not to get bent out of shape about it."

The right-handed hitting third baseman hit his third homer of the spring Saturday in the A's 14-12 loss to the Royals, and he had two RBIs to increase his team-leading total this spring to 12. But A's players accustomed to seeing the marine layer dampen homer totals in Oakland aren't necessarily sure that Kouzmanoff will see much benefit in his new workplace.

"He's going from one graveyard to the next," A's starter Dallas Braden said.

"If anything, Petco probably plays easier than the Coliseum," A's designated hitter Jack Cust said. "But Kouzmanoff doesn't look like he's a pull hitter, and that could make a difference. It's not easy to go (to the opposite field) in Oakland, but it could help Kevin because in Petco, it's like 900 feet to right field."

All of Kouzmanoff's nine homers at San Diego went to left or left-center last year, but he said he feels he does have good power to right-center, and hit charts indicate that he hit four or five balls toward right at Petco last year that probably would have gone out in Oakland.

The A's do their own projections in-house, and while they don't share those, it's safe to assume that they believe Kouzmanoff's numbers will trend upward, or they wouldn't have moved outfielders Scott Hairston and Aaron Cunningham for him. He hit 18 out for the Padres last year, 23 the year before, so mid-20s over a full season with the A's sounds more than reasonable, and that should also lift his batting average a tad.

Kouzmanoff's glove is the main reason the A's got him, of course, with Eric Chavez no longer able to play third base on a regular basis because of shoulder and back injuries. Taking over from a six-time Gold Glove winner, though, can be daunting.

"It's difficult coming to a new team with high expectations for you," infield coach Mike Gallego said. "People think it's automatic; it's not. But Kevin is a grinder, he's out here all the time getting reps. I can't wait to see him play third base every day."

Kouzmanoff hasn't had the best spring defensively. His throws to first base have been off to the point that Gallego joked that maybe Kouzmanoff is just trying to get Chavez extra work there as Chavez learns his new position.

"Mark Ellis keeps telling me what great feeds I'm giving him at second base - but Chavez probably wouldn't say that," Kouzmanoff said with a smile.

"He's been great aside from looking like he's planning to throw a pie," Braden said of some of Kouzmanoff's more awkward throws. "We know what kind of player he is, though. Three errors last year, that's as good a guarantee as death and taxes."

The Drumbeat: Big day of cuts: Mazzaro, Carter, Taylor sent out

Susan Slusser/ Chronicle Staff Writer. 3/28/10

Three players who are very much a part of Oakland's future got sent out this morning before the team leaves for Surprise to play the Royals: Vin Mazzaro, who spent much of last year in Oakland's rotation; and first baseman Chris Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor, who are expected to be in the middle of the A's order in the next year or so.

It has been a spirited contest for the fifth spot in the rotation, and Mazzaro showed some good things, but his ERA is over 6.00 for the spring and Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill have both fared better. Cahill remains the front-runner, but Gonzalez has been brilliant at times this spring, so that remains a close call.

Mazzaro thought he'd done pretty well this spring, "but I guess not good enough," he said. He's disappointed, but not surprised, and he has the right approach, saying, "I'll be seeing you soon."

Carter and Taylor are unquestionably talented, but as manager Bob Geren said this morning, it would be good for both to go to Triple-A Sacramento and "dominate" before coming up to the big-leagues to stay. There's no room for either at this point, anyway; Daric Barton is having a splendid spring at first and Eric Chavez is also playing there regularly (it's going to be interesting to see how that playing time breaks down when the season starts if Barton stays hot), and Gabe Gross appears to have the fourth outfield spot sewn up. Travis Buck is likely to open the season at Triple-A Sacramento because the team has so many outfielders.

Taylor told me this morning he got a lot out of the spring; he had an added degree of difficulty coming from another organization, the Phillies, so as much as anything, he was trying to get familiar with all the players and coaches and to make sure everyone knows him, too. He hit .200, Carter .160 this spring, both maybe pressing a bit to make an impression because they're clearly so close to being big-league ready.

Geren said he believes both will help Oakland in the near future; it wouldn't surprise me if one or both is up by mid-summer and certainly both would be up in September at the very least.

Today's lineup vs. KC: Crisp CF, Barton 1B, Sweeney RF, Kouzmanoff 3B, Suzuki C, Cust DH, Ellis 2B, Buck LF, Pennington SS, Duchschere P.

UPDATE: Thanks for prodding me, Nodaclu! I was in such a rush to get to Surprise, which is a haul from Phoenix, I neglected to update Braden's status: His shin is still red, but far less swollen, and he thinks it's possible he was bitten by a bug or spider. I hope that's the case, but it does seem weird that the problem is right in the same area he's had so many other issues. If I were Braden, I'd have anything dealing with the lower left leg double- and triple-checked, especially if there were the possibility of infection or rash.

As it turns out, they gave Braden a prescription yesterday - and he said he'll use it only if it gets worse. He thinks he's on the mend, so he's med-free so far.

A's option Mazzaro to Sacramento *Control issues still plaguing young right-hander*

PHOENIX -- And then there were two.

That's the way it looks for the A's fifth starter competition, which got a little more interesting on Saturday when the club announced the optioning of right-hander Vin Mazzaro to Triple-A Sacramento.

Outfielder Michael Taylor and first baseman Chris Carter, also expected to play significant roles in Oakland's future, were sent down to the Minors as well.

The news of Mazzaro didn't come as much of a surprise after manager Bob Geren all but ruled him out of the mix during his daily media session on Saturday morning, when he was asked about the way the starter battle was shaping up.

"Both are doing a nice job," Geren said. "We're going to hold off until the end to decide."

Both presumably referred to Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, but the A's skipper switched subjects before saying he would have more to discuss by the end of the day.

Minutes later, though, Mazzaro was found packing his bags, leaving little speculation surrounding Geren's hush answers.

"I'm going to go down to the Minor Leagues and work hard and get back up here," Mazzaro said. "I felt I had done a pretty good job, but someone's got to go, right?"

The A's right-hander started Friday's game against the Rangers in Surprise, Ariz., where he scattered three hits, two runs and two walks in four frames. He quietly impressed in a handful of outings this spring, but his inconsistency led to a 6.28 ERA.

"It's a little bit disappointing after pitching well yesterday," Mazzaro said. "I need to find my fastball. Command is what I've been lacking, but other than that, I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing."

The 23-year-old Mazzaro experienced the same command issues during his lengthy stint with the A's last year, during which he made 17 starts before a shoulder injury in August cut his season short. After lighting it up as a June callup, posting a 0.00 ERA while winning his first two starts, he lost eight consecutive decisions.

Mazzaro was frequently mentioned in the same breath as Cahill and Brett Anderson in terms of talent last spring, but he didn't appear quite as polished in the big league setting. His lack of command led to an even 1-to-1 walks-to-strikeouts ratio during the season, and he tallied eight walks in 14 1/3 innings this spring.

With Mazzaro out of the picture, all eyes will focus on Cahill and Gonzalez in the final week of camp, as the A's continue to trim down their roster and set the starting rotation. Oakland now has 37 players in camp, including three non-roster invitees, after sending down Mazzaro, Carter and Taylor.

The latter two, both watched closely this spring, could very well make their big league debuts this year, Geren said. For the time being, though, the A's are more than set at first base and in the outfield. Daric Barton is enjoying a successful spring at first, where Eric Chavez is also playing regularly. As for the outfield, Oakland has several options in the form of Gabe Gross, Travis Buck, Eric Patterson and Jake Fox.

The A's won't soon forget about Taylor or Carter, though.

"Both are very impressive young men, obviously both on the field and off," Geren said. "They're both off-the-chart-type players. They're guys that can create their own opportunities and dominate at this level. I let them know just that.

"They're special players. I think with their ability level, they could be ready soon. They have the talent and desire to work hard -- it's just a matter of time."

Duchscherer hit hard in loss to Royals

Right-hander allows eight earned runs; Kouzmanoff homers

By Dick Kaegel / MLB.com. 3/27/10

ROYALS 14, A's 12

Surprise, Ariz.

Saturday, March 27

A's at the plate: Kevin Kouzmanoff lofted a two-run homer over the left-field bullpen in a three-run first inning that began with Coco Crisp's single and Daric Barton's RBI double. Crisp had two hits and is 9-for-22 (.409). Kouzmanoff's three RBIs gave him the club lead with 12. Cliff Pennington and Mark Ellis each went 3-for-4 and Ellis boosted his average to .389.

Royals at the plate: Mitch Maier banged a three-run homer and a two-run double, each contributing to a five-run inning. Maier has 14 RBIs and upped his average to .426 (20-for-47). Mike Aviles was 3-for-5 and is batting .514 (19-for-37). David DeJesus was 3-for-4 and raised his average to .333. Brayan Pena drove in three runs with a triple and a single. Kila Ka'aihue snapped a 12-12 tie in the eighth with a solo homer to right field, his club-high fourth.

A's on the mound: Justin Duchscherer, who had four scoreless innings in his first start, this time was charged with 11 runs (eight earned) on nine hits in three-plus innings. Edwar Ramirez, acquired from the Rangers, gave up one run in two innings.

Royals on the mound: Josh Rupe, hoping to win a bullpen job, was clipped for six runs and six hits in two innings as the starter. Brad Thompson and Bryan Bullington each gave up three runs in three innings.

Cactus League records: A's 11-12-2, Royals 11-10-3.

Worth noting: Neither played, but entering Saturday's games, the Royals' Alberto Callaspo and Billy Butler were 1-2 in hits by AL players with 22 and 21 respectively. ... Rick Ankiel's return to the KC lineup from a 16-day absence because of a sore ankle was scratched. ... The Royals traded Minor League catcher Steve Lerud to the Orioles for a player to be named.

Up next: The Royals' Luke Hochevar will make his fourth start of the Cactus League against the Chicago White Sox at 3:05 p.m. CT on Sunday at Camelback Ranch. Hochevar last faced the Windy City's other club, the Cubs, and held them to one run in five innings. He has a 1.64 ERA, giving up seven runs but just two earned in 11 innings. Blake Wood and Robinson Tejeda also are scheduled to pitch. Charlie Leesman is the White Sox starter.

Brett Anderson and the A's will host the Rockies on Sunday at Phoenix Municipal Stadium beginning at 1 p.m. PT. In three spring starts, the A's lefty has compiled a 3.24 ERA having surrendered three runs in a combined 8 1/3 innings. Relievers Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow, nursing sore elbows, could both potentially make their return to the mound and appear against Colorado as well.

Lee's Leftovers: Duke struggles with command in second outing

By Jane Lee / MLB.com. 3/27/10

From Surprise, Ariz., where the A's just lost 14-12 to the Royals in a rather lengthy spring game...

Justin Duchscherer's second spring start didn't exactly lead to the best of results. In fact, the right-hander couldn't even tally the five ups and downs he set out to get after throwing four shutout innings in his first outing. He lasted three frames (and faced four batters in the fourth inning) while surrendering nine hits, 11 runs (8 earned), no walks - but hit a batter -- and struck out one.

"I was throwing decent pitches," Duchscherer said. "I was just missing and getting myself in bad counts. My mentality is in Spring Training I'm not going to start walking guys, so when I was behind I was throwing pitches over the plate."

"My stuff isn't quite there yet, and I can't pitch over the white. So they took advantage of getting ahead in the count, and I gave them some pretty good pitches to hit. I wanted to get up and down five times, but I didn't quite do that."

The Royals pretty much took batting practice off Duchscherer in the first and third innings, scoring a combined seven runs -- including a three-run homer off the bat of Mitch Maier. In the fourth, a few infield singles, plus a catching error by Daric Barton at first base, led to a bases loaded situation. Duchscherer then allowed a single through the hole at shortstop to bring in yet another run before being replaced by Edwar Ramirez.

The A's righty, who missed all of last year due to elbow surgery and a bout with clinical depression, was sidelined most of camp after undergoing a nerve ablation procedure to relieve pain in his lower back. Duchscherer insists he wasn't in any pain during the game, mentioning "he "felt physically better today," but rather reiterated his lack of command.

"I got behind guys and then attacked the zone, but for me attacking the zone isn't white," he said. "Rather than walk guys, I'd rather say, hey, if you're going to beat me, beat me by hitting the ball."

Duchscherer threw 73 pitches and was hoping to toss 80, but "the innings I pitched were kind of long. Cautiously, they don't want me to throw too many in too short a time," he said.

He'll have one more start, in which he's aiming to throw 85 pitches, before entering the season with what he hopes is a "crisper ball" and "sharper movement." He reached 86 miles per hour -- which is slightly short of what he deemed his "87, 88, 89" midseason form.

"I don't want to go out there and do what I did," Duchscherer said. "I don't want to get my butt kicked, but it is Spring Training and you have to get your work in, so as long as I get my body in a position where I can get six or seven innings, I think if I can get my pitch count to 85 next time, I should be able to go five or six.

"If I can do that, going into the season, I think the progression will be pretty much where it needs to be, and if I can get that sharpness and that extra little life on the ball and working those kinks out, that's the goal."

After the game, manager Bob Geren commented that Duchscherer 's command "wasn't where it usually is." And when asked not once but twice about his pitcher's readiness for the season, Geren only responded by saying he has one more start left.