

A's News Clips, Wednesday, March 3, 2010

A's bullpen was stellar in 2009 and might get better this year if Joey Devine stays healthy

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's felt confident in their bullpen when last season began.

But they couldn't have guessed the names that emerged to anchor one of the major leagues' top relief corps.

Andrew Bailey went from unheralded rookie to All-Star closer. Michael Wuertz became a dominant setup man after struggling to find his niche in previous seasons with the Chicago Cubs.

And left-hander Craig Breslow, claimed off waivers from the Minnesota Twins in May, wound up appearing in 77 games, second most in the American League.

All of Oakland's key relievers return. And with the possible addition of Joey Devine, who missed last season with an elbow injury, the A's feel any lead they take into the late innings is in good hands.

"They're the tourniquet of the team," starting pitcher Dallas Braden said of the bullpen. "They can stop the bleeding. They can prevent the bleeding."

A's relievers led the AL last season in ERA (3.46) and strikeouts (514). They led the majors in strikeout-to-walk ratio (2.65-to-1) and opponents' on-base percentage (.307). They also converted 76 percent of save opportunities, third-best in the AL.

"As a bullpen, we think if we can take a lead into the sixth inning we should be in pretty good shape," Breslow said.

Bailey remains the unquestioned closer after registering 26 saves and a 1.84 ERA in 2009.

But a healthy return from Devine would be big. He was superb in 2008, notching a 0.59 ERA in

42 appearances. He's steadily recovering from last April's elbow ligament replacement surgery but might not be ready by Opening Day.

If and when Devine returns to full strength, A's manager Bob Geren is enthused about the late-inning flexibility he'll have.

Devine, Wuertz and Brad Ziegler — who has 18 saves over the past two seasons — can serve as setup men or close when Bailey needs a rest.

"Having four guys that can pitch the eighth and ninth is outstanding," Geren said.

But there's room for improvement from last season. A's relievers ranked 10th out of 14 AL teams in inherited runners who scored (35.5 percent).

They certainly could benefit from a lighter workload. The bullpen logged 559¹/₃ innings — most in the AL and second-most in Oakland history.

After last season's AL Rookie of the Year campaign, Bailey will attract attention.

But just as important for the bullpen is whether Wuertz produces numbers similar to 2009. He was solid in five seasons with Chicago but took things to another level last season. He held opponents to a .188 batting average and led AL relievers with 102 strikeouts in 782¹/₃ innings, walking just 23.

The A's acquired Wuertz from the Cubs last February for outfielder Richie Robnett and infielder Justin Sellers.

"Getting traded over here, I knew I had a good opportunity," Wuertz said. "Everything fell into place, and more than anything it was confidence in myself."

The A's will break camp with seven relievers — Bailey, Wuertz, Ziegler, Breslow and Devine (if healthy) should be five of them. Those fighting for the other spots include lefties Jerry Blevins and Brad Kilby and right-handers John Meloan and Bobby Cassevah, a Rule 5 draftee.

"As soon as Opening Day comes it doesn't matter what we did last year," Breslow said. "We have to re-establish ourselves."

A's notebook: Ex-Cal Bears pitcher Tyson Ross impresses manager Bob Geren

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Tyson Ross was a little erratic in Tuesday's intrasquad game at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, but the 6-foot-6 right-hander is making a good impression on the A's in the big picture.

Ross, a Bishop O'Dowd High product who played at Cal, is participating in his second big league camp after the A's selected him in the second round of the 2008 draft.

He earned a late-season promotion from Single-A Stockton to Double-A Midland in 2009 and turned in his best work at the higher level.

Ross went 3-1 with a 1.17 ERA over his final four starts with Midland. He combined to go 10-10 with a 4.09 ERA in 27 starts in 2009.

Baseball America ranks him as the A's No. 6 prospect and rated his slider the best in the farm system.

"He's coming along," A's manager Bob Geren said. "He has a sharp breaking ball and good movement on his fastball."

Ross walked two but didn't allow a run in his one inning Tuesday.

He said the biggest adjustment from college ball to the pros has been relying more on his fastball.

"In college I was just flipping sliders in there a lot," he said. "But it's a long season and if you're going to succeed, you've got to throw fastballs."

Geren doesn't expect center fielder Coco Crisp to play defense in a game until late in the Cactus League season. But he doesn't sound concerned about Crisp being ready for Opening Day.

Crisp is working his throwing arm into shape after right shoulder surgery last June. He had his left shoulder operated on in July.

Crisp will get time at DH in exhibitions to accumulate at-bats.

Third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff suffered a bruised chin Monday when he was hit by a line drive during batting practice. He's day-to-day and said he felt much better Tuesday.

Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden both looked sharp in their one inning of work Tuesday, as the A's "home" team beat the "visitors" 5-3 in four innings. Outfielder Michael Taylor had two singles and an RBI.

Eric Chavez played three innings at first base and went 0-for-2.

The A's will play a two-inning intrasquad game today.

Long-ball hitter is a long shot

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Bob Geren has seen hundreds of homers in the big leagues, but one was belted with so much authority that he recalls it clearly.

Dallas McPherson crushed an opposite-field shot off then-A's closer Octavio Dotel with one out in the ninth on Sept. 24, 2004, at Anaheim, and it is etched in Geren's memory.

"He hit one as far to left field as our right-handers did," the A's manager said Tuesday. "I talked to Dallas when we signed him, and he remembered it perfectly. It was a long one."

McPherson, now 29, was once one of the jewels of the Angels' superb minor-league system. He was touted as a future star, especially after winning Minor League Player of the Year honors in 2004. The following year, he began to have back and hip problems, and he hasn't had a completely healthy season since.

In 2005, he had hip surgery. In 2007, he had to have vertebrae fused because of spinal fractures, and the next year, he led all of minor-league baseball in homers. Last year, however, he needed more back surgery, this time to shave down a bone used in the first surgery that had grown too much and created trouble with a nerve.

The A's know all about third basemen and backs. Eric Chavez, who has won six Gold Gloves at third for Oakland, is also trying to come back after a second back surgery. "We shared a couple of back stories already," McPherson said. "I'm sure we'll talk about it more."

"His is more extensive," Chavez said. "It sounds awful. It's amazing he's still here and playing, and looks as strong as he looks. That gives me hope."

Largely because of Chavez's uncertain status, since the A's signed McPherson in November, they've traded for a starting third baseman, Kevin Kouzmanoff, and another corner infielder, Jake Fox. This will make it tough for McPherson to make the squad in April, though he'll provide excellent depth at Triple-A Sacramento - or, if he has a big-league opportunity elsewhere, Oakland might allow him to take it.

"There are a lot of different faces, but I still feel like I have a good opportunity here," McPherson said. "We'll see how it plays out. I'll just go out there and be as good as I can be, and hopefully build on that."

"He has to show he's healthy and back to the form he was before," Geren said. "There's no question about the talent. Guys like that can create their own opportunities, for sure."

Rosales' look is all-too familiar

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

If you squint your eyes and look across the diamond, it appears as if **Bobby Crosby** is still manning shortstop for the A's this spring.

That's not Crosby, it's **Adam Rosales**, but from a distance, especially, he's got the same look: the height, the frame, the high socks, the No. 7 jersey. Rosales has darker hair and different facial features, but otherwise ... it's eerie.

"Oh my gosh, it's unbelievable," said second baseman **Mark Ellis**, who played alongside Crosby for his entire time with Oakland and counts Crosby among his best friend. "The first day I saw Adam, when I saw him swing the bat, it's exactly alike, and the way he walks, everything. Then I saw him in uniform, and with the number and the socks up ... it's the same."

Eric Chavez, who also played with Crosby from 2003 to 2009, did a double take, too.

"Totally," Chavez said. "It's so funny. We were laughing because he looks just like Bobby out there."

Rosales, 26, was acquired from Cincinnati last month along with since-released **Willy Taveras** in exchange for **Aaron Miles** and cash. Rosales can play all over the infield and said he played left field this winter in Mexico.

Rosales provided an RBI single in the A's first intrasquad game Tuesday, and mega-prospect **Michael Taylor** had two singles and an RBI. **Dallas Braden** pitched a scoreless inning, allowing one hit, and **Brett Anderson** gave up three groundball hits, including Taylor's RBI single. Anderson's side won 5-3.

"Both those guys threw very well," manager **Bob Geren** said. "Braden was real sharp considering the time off he's had. Anderson just gave up a couple of soft hits."

Briefly: Third baseman **Kevin Kouzmanoff** is day-to-day with a bruised shin. ... **Coco Crisp** (shoulders) won't play in the outfield in games until much later in the Cactus League season. ... Reliever **Joey Devine** said he's throwing off the mound every other day and expects to throw a 30-pitch bullpen session today. He'll throw to hitters soon - later this week or early next week - then get into games "right around the corner," he said. ... Right-hander **Jason Jennings** is likely to get into games beginning early next week. ... Today's intrasquad game will be around noon and will last two innings.

Lineups for first intrasquad game, etc.

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix:

It's a four-inning intrasquad game here at 12:30 p.m. or so, with Dallas Braden and Brett Anderson starting.

Anderson's team: Davis lf, Pennington ss, Chavez 1b, Fox 3b, Cust dh, Gross cf, Buck rf, Powell c, Cardenas 2b.

Braden team: Crisp dh, Barton 1b, Sweeney rf, Taylor lf, McPherson 3b, Patterson cf, Rosales ss, Donaldson c, Weeks 2b.

Manager Bob Geren said that Gross is in center because he wants Davis to play in left as much as possible and Crisp isn't quite ready to play in the field yet. (You'll note that both men are batting leadoff. Once the season starts, it's probably Davis leading off and Crisp second.)

Geren said most, if not all, the team's position players will see action, so I'd think Chris Carter will be at first at some point. I'm looking forward to seeing Michael Taylor hitting cleanup against Anderson, and to seeing Eric Chavez play first in game conditions.

It also is nice to see Dallas McPherson back in a game - he's had as many back issues as Chavez the past few years, but he was once one of the Angels' star prospects, and Geren was raving about a homer McPherson hit against Oakland at Anaheim a few years ago, an opposite-field shot that both men recall perfectly. "And I've seen a few home runs between then and now," Geren said.

Tomorrow's intrasquad will be at about noon or 12:30, and will go two innings.

Cactus League features record 15 teams this year

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle, 3/2/2010

hub while Arizona was the quaint alternative, home for West Coast teams and the Cubs. Two decades ago, the Cactus League was down to eight teams - including the Angels in Palm Springs and Padres in Yuma - and facing extinction.

Look at it now.

It's up to 15 teams, most in history, and is the preferred choice for logistics and variety. One by one, the desert drew teams from Florida. Phoenix suburbs, offering sweetheart deals and all-encompassing complexes, emerged out of nowhere. Peoria, Surprise, Glendale and Goodyear host two teams apiece.

The Reds are the 15th Arizona team, moving from Sarasota, Fla., to join their state rivals, the Indians, in Goodyear. You'd think it would be a scheduling nightmare, but MLB told teams to take at least two days off and schedule at least two split-squad games. The A's have four, the Giants three. Most days, at least seven games are played.

"There were times we thought this league was folding. Everyone was talking about moving to Florida," said **Mickey Morabito**, the A's traveling secretary since 1980 who has a hand in spring-training scheduling. "Arizona was always considered the cute, little hideaway. One year, Las Vegas talked about building a complex and taking two of the teams."

Arizona countered with the passing of Proposition 302, which levied extra hotel and car-rental taxes, making tourists foot the bill for new and upgraded facilities.

Many players prefer Arizona's drier weather and easier travel, and teams like it because they'd rather be on the field than on a bus. While Florida teams routinely bus two-plus hours for games, it happens in Arizona only because of Tucson, which will be wiped off the Cactus League map next year when the Diamondbacks and Rockies relocate to a \$100 million facility in North Scottsdale.

"Knowing about Florida, we can't complain about going to Tucson," Morabito said. "Next year will be great here. The longest bus ride probably will be one hour from Mesa to Surprise. For us (in Phoenix), no team will be farther than 50 minutes away."

No other Florida team is close to moving to Arizona, but the Cubs are threatening to leave Mesa in 2012 for Naples, Fla., if they don't get a \$119 million upgrade. With Prop 302 money running out, a plan to fund the project by charging an extra tax on tickets throughout the Cactus League is being opposed by the other 14 teams. The Cubs want to stay, and expect Arizona to find a way to keep its biggest spring-training draw.

Happy ending? As history goes, it was good for the Giants that **Tim Lincecum** didn't go to an arbitration hearing and win it. The last two players to beat the Giants in arbitration were sent packing.

Not that the Giants would have been eager to discard Lincecum as they did **Darren Lewis** and **A.J. Pierzynski**. But bad blood is bad blood.

Lewis was a Gold Glove center fielder in 1994 and asked for \$1.85 million before the 1995 season. The Giants countered with \$1.025 million. Lewis, who sat in the hearing as Giants lawyers ripped into his ability as a leadoff man and hitter, won. That July, he was shipped to the Reds.

Pierzynski, arbitration eligible in 2004 when he arrived in the deal that sent **Joe Nathan** to Minnesota, won \$3.5 million (the Giants wanted to pay \$2.25 million), one reason the sides had a strained relationship. Pierzynski knew he was a lame duck. He exited the following winter after the Giants refused to offer salary arbitration.

Giambi's outlook: With the A's last season, **Jason Giambi** anticipated some time as a designated hitter and first baseman. But with corner infielders **Eric Chavez** and **Nomar Garciaparra** ailing, Giambi played much more first base than he expected, which he believes led to his health issues and disappointing numbers.

A year later, it might be tough to get time at all. He's a Rockie and unable to be a DH, but the limited time should keep him medically fresh. Plus, first baseman **Todd Helton**, who encouraged Giambi to re-sign in Colorado, vowed to take days off to get Giambi at-bats.

Around the majors: If the Giants still don't have first base ironed out for 2011, several older players are targeted for free agency: **Adam Dunn**, **Derrek Lee** and **Carlos Peña** - plus **Lance Berkman** if the Astros don't pick up his \$15 million option. ... It helps to have a good relationship with your third-base coach. On the links last week, **Gene Lamont** drove a golf cart over Tigers manager **Jim Leyland** and broke his right little toe. Lamont's still in uniform. ... Third baseman **Mike Lowell**, once a big deal in Boston, now backs up **Adrian Beltre** and will be working out at first base. The Red Sox would love to trade him, but interest seems non-existent after hip and thumb surgeries. ... **Johnny Damon** was thrilled to see more players than media in the Tigers' clubhouse. It often was the other way around with the Yankees.

Chavez tests new spot across diamond

Veteran plays first in intrasquad game; Davis tries left

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- More than a few odd scenes emerged from Phoenix Municipal Stadium on Tuesday when the A's played in their first intrasquad game of the spring.

Watching the green and gold face, well, more green and gold is always weird enough.

But perhaps one of the more strange occurrences came when Eric Chavez took the field and didn't run over to third base, where he has earned franchise-player status and collected six Gold Gloves.

Instead, he made the short trot over to one of his new utility homes at first base, where he played for three frames in the four-inning scrimmage. Chavez grounded out in both at-bats and appeared slightly off balance on the back end of a double play, but he also made an impressive catch on a high throw and, most important, left the game unscathed by injury.

"He looked good," manager Bob Geren said. "He still has to get used to the footwork on the bases. That will be the biggest adjustment."

Also making strides at a different but not completely unfamiliar position is Rajai Davis, who was stationed out in left field. Geren hopes to get Davis as much playing time in left as possible this spring, as he is expected to start there come Opening Day while Ryan Sweeney and Coco Crisp control right and center field, respectively.

Even though Davis has just 10 games of left-field experience, he doesn't mind the move from center. After all, he's been moving all over since his junior-college days at the University of Connecticut at Avery Point, where he played shortstop before being drafted by Pittsburgh as a second baseman in 2001.

"I grew up playing everything," Davis said. "I don't mind the switch. When I get out there, I feel more comfortable every day. You have to get your angles down and get used to the curve of the ball, but that's why I've been getting work in during batting practice. That's the best way to learn."

The 29-year-old outfielder not only displayed a new position Tuesday but also a fresh running style, which allowed him to easily steal a base during the game. And for that, Davis credits Rickey Henderson, who is at camp for a week as a special instructor on baserunning.

"He saw it," Davis said with a big grin. "I think I did what he's been showing me, just working on the side-to-side movement to get a good jump."

Davis and Chavez will be afforded another chance to tighten up their new skill sets on Wednesday, as the team takes part in its final intrasquad game -- a short two-inning affair -- before opening Cactus League play on Thursday against the Cubs.

"I'm ready," Davis said. "This is what it's all about. You can work all you want, but the biggest test comes in the games."

Cahill opens fifth-starter fight for A's

Righty faces Cubs on Thursday to start spring schedule

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Perhaps no greater battle in A's camp this spring appears as fierce as the fight for the fifth-starter spot.

Candidates Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Vin Mazzaro -- all under the age of 24 -- are looking to join a rather deep rotation that, barring any health red flags, boasts Ben Sheets, Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden and Justin Duchscherer, who is currently recovering from a nerve ablation procedure.

"When you have the choice for your fifth starter of three guys of that caliber," said manager Bob Geren, "that shows the depth we have. If we have any setbacks or injuries or missed starts, we have some solid candidates for that spot -- plenty more than last year."

One of the three -- the 22-year-old Cahill -- will get the first crack at proving his roster worth on Thursday, as the right-hander leads a youthful group of A's in the team's Cactus League opener against the Cubs.

Also expected to be ready for the club's first Spring Training game are Clayton Mortensen, Jerry Blevins, Justin Souza, Fernando Hernandez, John Meloan, Brad Kilby, Lenny DiNardo and Cedrick Bowers.

Not all may get time on the mound at Chicago's HoHoKam Park in Mesa, Ariz., but plenty opportunity will come during the team's 33-game schedule that includes 16 home games at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Starting Thursday, fans can be on the lookout for the newly acquired Kevin Kouzmanoff, Coco Crisp and former Cubs player Jake Fox, who is expected to contribute at first and third, as well as behind the plate, this spring. Meanwhile, Kouzmanoff will mostly spend time at the hot corner, and Crisp is expected to get at-bats in the DH spot before taking on any outfield duties with his surgically repaired shoulder.

Not to be forgotten, though, is the attempted comeback of injury-prone Eric Chavez, a six-time Gold Glove third baseman who is making an effort to transform into a utility player that can spell Kouzmanoff at third and Daric Barton at first. He should also get plenty offensive opportunities at DH.

"Really this whole winter I've just been excited to get back on the field," Chavez said. "I just want to make a real good run at it. My biggest concern this year is to be productive, and I know for me to have a healthy shoulder I have to minimize my throws and that's what I'm doing. The biggest key for me is to try to be a productive offensive hitter."

As for the club, any talk about keys to success this spring needs to be led with health, which has been inconsistent during the past few seasons.

"I think we've got a talented group of guys," said general manager Billy Beane, "but it doesn't mean anything if they can't stay on the field."

Lee's Leftovers: Wednesday morning notes: Crisp, Kouz and more

First, your lineups for today's three-inning intrasquad game, which is slated to start at 12:30 here at Phoenix Muni:

Team 1 (Matt Wright SP):

Davis LF

Sogard 2B

Suzuki C

Carter 1B

Cust DH

Buck RF

Wimberly CF

Whitney 3B

Green SS

Bullpen: McBeth, Cassevah

Team 2 (Gonzalez SP):

Ellis 2B

Barton 1B

Sweeney DH

Taylor LF

Fox C

Patterson CF

Rosales SS

Brown RF

Petit 3B

Bullpen: Rodriguez, Demel

Other notes from this morning: Geren said **Coco Crisp** is likely to be playing in center field sooner than he anticipated. Rather than strictly keeping him in the DH role "for a while," Geren hopes to get Crisp in the outfield in as early as a week since the rehab schedule for his surgically repaired shoulder is going so well.

Kevin Kouzmanoff, who was deemed day-to-day yesterday after being hit in his right shin with a line-drive ball, will most likely play in tomorrow's Cactus League opener against the Cubs, Geren said. Kouzmanoff told me he's doing better, but he looked a little slow during running drills this morning, so we'll see how he progresses throughout the day. He's not scheduled to play in the intrasquad game, either.

You also won't be hearing anything today about **Eric Chavez** or **Dallas McPherson**, who both have a scheduled day off.

Joey Devine threw a side session yesterday and could potentially be facing live hitters within the next week, which means he's not too far away from seeing game action.

The A's this morning announced that nationally-syndicated broadcaster **Chris Townsend** will host the A's radio postgame show on XTRA Sports 860 this season. "A's Talk with Chris Townsend" will make its debut tomorrow immediately following the team's opener. **Ken Korach**, **Ray Fosse** and **Vince Controneo** will handle tomorrow's game broadcast, with the pre-game show starting at 11:30am PST. Meanwhile, **Robert Buan** will continue to contribute to the club's postgame show by providing on-site interviews.

Whitney just keeps playing, waiting for his shot

AP, March 2, 2010

Matt Whitney was a big shot in high school, an All-American third baseman and a can't-miss prospect. These days the former first-round draft pick is with his third big-league organization and remains a prospect, though perhaps it's not such a sure thing.

No matter. Whitney, who was assigned Barry Zito's number 75 this spring after signing a minor-league deal with the Oakland Athletics last November, loves the game and says he'll play until teams stop calling.

He reached Triple-A for the first time last year and all indications point to him starting there this year.

"Being able to get the chance to make a team every year is all I can ask for," Whitney said Tuesday. "I want to go out, play my game, and show them what I can do and hope for an opportunity at some point."

He doesn't surf or dabble in eastern philosophies like Zito. Heck, he's not even left-handed. But he shares a passion for the game, and a determination to reach the highest level.

Whitney, who also plays first base, has been dealing with high expectations, disappointments and setbacks since the Cleveland Indians made him their compensation pick after the first round in the 2002 first-year player draft.

"I'm pretty relaxed," Whitney said. "Whether I strikeout or hit a home run I stay even-keeled. I try to stay low-key. I figure we all have some little quirks that makes us crazy. I relax and have fun. I try not to get caught up in what might happen; I try to stay day to day and do as much as I can."

Whitney just turned 26 and is starting his ninth professional season — he missed 2003 with a broken left leg — and remains optimistic despite a series of injuries that limited his development.

"I always like the persevering type stories," A's manager Bob Geren said. "With 30 teams the opportunities are greater that you can break in at a later age. A guy like (Jack) Cust kept fighting to get a chance and he's put together a pretty good major-league career."

Whitney has plenty of competition. The A's also signed former Anaheim Angels corner infielder Dallas McPherson and third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and traded for infielder Jake Fox.

"It can be hard because I know who the guys are in front of me," Whitney said. "I can't even remember when I first started playing. Baseball has been my life for so long I can't see myself shutting it down and going into the real world."

Notes: IF Kevin Kouzmanoff was hit in the shin by a line drive during Monday's batting practice and may need another day before getting back into full swing. ... OF Coco Crisp will not play in the outfield the first week of spring games but will hit as a DH.