

A's News Clips, Tuesday, October 5, 2010

Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane looks to upgrade offense in offseason

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

It can be argued that the A's offer more entertainment during the winter than during the regular season.

Though they haven't produced a winning record in four years, the A's usually pack a newsworthy wallop in the offseason. They typically pull off a trade or free-agent signing that raises eyebrows, and they are always rumored to be on the verge of others.

Their fan base will eagerly anticipate what's in store this winter.

With one of the American League's top pitching staffs in place, the A's would appear to be legitimate contenders in 2011 if they can find a power hitter or two.

But general manager Billy Beane, speaking at his season-ending media session Monday at the Oakland Coliseum, said he doesn't believe the answer lies in simply shopping for sluggers.

"(Offense) is an area we're going to be looking at, but somewhat more strategically than just looking at someone's power numbers," Beane said. "Ultimately we'd like to get as many multitalented players as possible, and that includes the other side of the (game) -- defense and running the bases."

But there's no denying the A's suffered in 2010 with a lineup that hit just 109 home runs, third fewest in the majors and Oakland's lowest total since the 1979 club had 109.

They will have some financial flexibility this winter, clearing \$9 million if, as expected, they cut ties with oft-injured third baseman Eric Chavez (who made \$12 million in 2010 and has a \$3 million buyout).

Ben Sheets' one-year deal expires, freeing up another \$10 million.

The A's must decide whether to pick up options on second baseman Mark Ellis (\$6 million) and center fielder Coco Crisp (\$5.75 million).

But with a young starting rotation that led the major leagues with a 3.47 ERA, the A's have every reason to upgrade their offense in any manner possible.

To acquire a hitter via trade, though, they would have to part with some of their quality pitching.

"That's why we've got to be pretty thoughtful in what we consider doing," Beane said.

Other issues he addressed:

Outside of the Ellis decision, the rest of the starting infield likely will return. Beane raved about his infield defense as a whole, and the development of first baseman Daric Barton and shortstop Cliff Pennington in particular.

"Daric showed himself to be, in my opinion, the best defensive first baseman in the league," Beane said. "I thought he made significant strides offensively. "... We have no intention of taking him off first base."

Consequently, Chris Carter is likely to remain in the outfield.

On Sunday, manager Bob Geren spoke highly of third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff, saying he expected Kouzmanoff to hit better next season after taking a year to adjust to AL pitching. Kouzmanoff hit just .247 with a team-high 16 homers and 71 RBIs.

In Barton and Kouzmanoff, the A's have corner infielders who combined for just 26 homers in 2010, underscoring the importance of adding power elsewhere.

Beane hinted the A's could look to upgrade the outfield. Tampa Bay's Carl Crawford would fit the type of multidimensional player Beane covets, but the free agent could be too pricey.

Crisp seems likely to return despite his injury-plagued year. Beane stopped short of anointing Carter the starting left fielder.

That leaves Rajai Davis, Gabe Gross, Jeremy Hermida, Conor Jackson and Ryan Sweeney as arbitration-eligible outfielders on whom the A's must decide whether to tender contracts.

Sweeney (right knee) and Jackson (sports hernia) will be coming off season-ending surgeries. None of the outfielders, besides Carter, offer much power.

It figures the A's will explore outside DH options, considering Jack Cust had just 13 homers in 2010.

The A's won't decide on the options for Ellis and Crisp (and Chavez, for that matter) until after next week's organizational meetings. That's when any potential changes to Geren's coaching staff could also be discussed.

Note: Infielder Aki Iwamura was released Monday.

Oakland A's GM Billy Beane expects word from MLB on recommended stadium site soon

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

A's general manager Billy Beane expressed optimism Monday that the team will receive a recommended stadium site from Major League Baseball soon.

It's been 18 months since MLB commissioner Bud Selig appointed a committee to research and recommend a Bay Area stadium site for the A's.

Beane's comments were vague.

"I think we're going to be playing in a new stadium at some point here soon," said Beane, also a minority owner in the club. "... I have no inside (information). The only thing we've been told is that (the report will come) sooner than later. I know that's pretty ambiguous, but we anticipate it being sooner than later, and hopefully very soon."

The A's have stated their desire to move from Oakland to San Jose, and the committee reportedly examined both cities. Even if the A's get approved to build a stadium somewhere, it likely wouldn't be ready for a few seasons.

"I think Billy and I are of the mind that we can't think of anything else that is left untouched," A's co-owner Lew Wolff said. "I think we're optimistic that we'll get some kind of decision there."

Oakland A's payroll situation for 2011

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

Expiring contracts

Player Money freed

Justin Duchscherer \$1.75M

Ben Sheets \$10M

Under contract

Player 2011 salary

Brett Anderson \$1.25M

Eric Chavez \$12.5M*

Coco Crisp \$5.75M*

Mark Ellis \$6M*

Kurt Suzuki \$3.438M

Michael Wuertz \$2.8M

*Club options

Arbitration eligible

Player Expected salary

Boof Bonser \$700K

Dallas Braden \$1.2-1.5M

Craig Breslow \$800K-\$1M

Jack Cust \$2.6-2.8M

Rajai Davis \$2M

Joey Devine \$560K

Gabe Gross \$1M

Jeremy Hermida \$3.3-3.5M

Conor Jackson \$3.1-3.3M

Kevin Kouzmanoff \$3.7-4M

Ryan Sweeney \$1-1.2M

Pre-arbitration players aren't listed.

A's: Pitching-rich team to shop for some pop

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland has a few decisions to make this winter - how to add some pop to the lineup, which outfielders to winnow out - but pitching issues are far down the list, with nothing urgent to consider apart from maybe the fifth starter spot.

That's unusual. Nearly every major-league team has some pitching questions after the season. But the A's, particularly with their top-notch collection of young starters, are set.

Last year, Brett Anderson emerged as a potential ace at the age of 21. This year, with Anderson battling a few injuries, Trevor Cahill, 22, was an All-Star and won 18 games, and Gio Gonzalez, 24, won 15.

"The bright spot was watching those guys bust out as beautiful butterflies," said starter Dallas Braden, who provided the season's top highlight by pitching the 19th perfect game in major-league history. "Last year, they were ugly caterpillars."

Despite season-ending injuries to Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer, the rotation flourished, and the A's led the league with a 3.56 ERA. The fifth starter spot for next year is unclear, although Vin Mazzaro is the front-runner if he isn't traded for a bat, with Tyson Ross, Josh Outman and Bobby Cramer also possibilities.

The bullpen muddled through fairly well, despite its own injury problems, but the unit fell into disarray toward the end of the season when closer Andrew Bailey had minor elbow surgery and Michael Wuertz was out with thumb tendinitis. Relief pitching should be a strength next year, given better health and the return of Joey Devine (out all year after Tommy John surgery) in a setup-type spot.

The A's need for a bat or two is well detailed - the team's 109 homers were the second fewest in the league. The fact there is so much focus on adding a hitter is a compliment, really. The consensus is that with a little more offense, the A's will be a contender, because the pitching is so good.

"Obviously, we've got some things we still need to do to go from a .500 team to a playoff team," shortstop Cliff Pennington said. "We've got the pitching, we played some good defense - more pop, and we've got a shot."

"It would be nice to have a little more power in the middle of the lineup," Anderson said. "What we've got going here is pretty special."

After the team banded nine homers in the final four games, sweeping the Mariners, even manager Bob Geren acknowledged, "You envision what adding some homers does in a series like this, with the pitching and the defense. ... It equals a lot of wins."

The front office will explore every means to boost the offense, according to general manager Billy Beane. That includes trades and the free-agent market.

"We'll use every available option," Beane said, without elaboration. The club has organizational meetings next week, and some ideas will be kicked around there.

Beane has emphasized that the budget isn't set yet, but however anyone wants to spin it, the team certainly does have a lot of money coming off the books - for starters, Sheets (\$10 million) won't be back, and the A's aren't expected to pick up Eric Chavez's \$12 million option.

Wherever Oakland's extra offense is added will determine some of the team's other issues, such as the large group of arbitration-eligible players, which includes a number of outfielders (Rajai Davis, Gabe Gross, Jeremy Hermida, Conor Jackson, Ryan Sweeney) and a designated hitter, Jack Cust. Several will be non-tendered - for starters, Gross is a good bet, and Cust was last year and is likely to be again.

Beane emphasized that he doesn't want to add power at the expense of defense, noting in particular that the team has no intention of moving Daric Barton from first base. That points to DH as an obvious spot to find more home runs.

Beane disputed, however, that the main drag on the A's season was the lack of power. "It was our health," he said. "That was the biggest issue. I'd take health over power."

The A's used the disabled list 23 times, second most in Oakland history, and that's not even counting Bailey, Wuertz and another key reliever, Jerry Blevins, hurt in September. Chavez played little, Coco Crisp spent long stretches on the DL, and Mark Ellis and Kurt Suzuki spent time out of action.

There were many positives along with the rotation. With the many bullpen injuries, left-hander Craig Breslow emerged as a versatile workhorse. Pennington showed signs of becoming a good big-league shortstop, if he can become a little more consistent. Barton was steady at the plate and in the field, and Ellis had a tremendous final five weeks of the season. Plus, the A's stole 156 bases, 50 of them by Davis. ("The alternative A's universe: speed, defense and baserunning," Beane joked.)

Also encouraging for the power-poor A's: Chris Carter, once past his career-opening 0-for-33, looked as if he might be in the lineup for good - he broke the slump, hitting .342 with three homers in his last 37 at-bats.

There's no doubt that the team's promise, fueled by the young pitching, has the entire group excited.

"We're getting better," Suzuki said. "Better and better."

"It makes you a little hungrier," Wuertz said. "I think we're all hungrier, knowing what type of team we'll have."

Billy Beane hopeful about A's getting new park

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland needs to attract a big-bat free agent or two. One major impediment, however, is the building the A's play in. General manager Billy Beane says the dilapidated Oakland Coliseum has impeded the team from signing players and might again this season.

Beane believes that is going to change soon. Beane said he doesn't have any special insight into the team's pursuit of a stadium in San Jose - Major League Baseball's blue-ribbon panel has yet to issue its report on the A's stadium issue - but he is optimistic that signs point to a new facility.

"I think we'll be playing in a new stadium at some point here soon," Beane said at his annual postseason media session Monday at the Coliseum. "And what's important when you enter a new stadium is preparing to go in with the best team possible."

Asked why he is so positive about approval for a venue, Beane said, "My own gut feeling is we have to at some point, and I'm an optimist. ... The only thing we've been told is that (the panel's recommendation) will be sooner rather than later. We anticipate it being soon. Hopefully, very soon."

Even if the A's were to get the OK for a new stadium this winter, there wouldn't be a stadium to move into for two years or more, so it wouldn't be an immediate selling point for any offensive-minded free agents the team might target. Where it would help, Beane said, "is that it would allow us to start to plan around the guys we have here and hopefully not have a revolving door like there was the past decade."

The Coliseum has been a deterrent for several free agents in recent years, according to Beane, and he tried to convince one that at least the playing surface is among the best in baseball thanks to groundskeeper Clay Wood.

"He said, 'You're right ... until August.' I didn't have an answer for him," Beane said of the mess the field becomes after the Raiders begin play.

Briefly: Beane said the team options on Mark Ellis, Coco Crisp and Eric Chavez will be discussed next week during organizational meetings in Arizona. The status of the coaching staff also will be considered. ... The only coach potentially on the hot seat is hitting coach Jim Skaalen, but the team's lack of power was a roster issue rather than a coaching issue. ... The A's released infielder Aki Iwamura on Monday. Iwamura was signed to fill in last month when Kevin Kouzmanoff was out with back spasms.

2010 A's highlights

San Francisco Chronicle

-- Twenty-seven men up, 27 down. On May 9, Mother's Day, Dallas Braden threw the 19th perfect game in major-league history, not allowing a man to reach base in a 4-0 win over Tampa Bay. This was followed in short order by highlight No. 2:

-- Braden's grandmother Peggy Lindsey saying, "Stick it, A-Rod!" after Braden's accomplishment, in response to Alex Rodriguez's mocking comments about Braden's career win total two weeks earlier.

-- And No. 3, along the same lines, Braden yelling at A-Rod, the Yankees star, to "Get off my mound!" after Rodriguez ran across the mound to get back to first base after a foul ball. Thus began an entertaining war of words that lasted until A-Rod heard Lindsey's comment. "Uncle," he said.

-- Trevor Cahill, age 22, makes the All-Star team and then goes on to win 18 games, making him the first pitcher in the league 22 or under to win that many since Bret Saberhagen won 20 for Kansas City in 1985.

-- Chris Carter hit his first major-league homer on Sept. 22 and finished with three in his final 33 at-bats, making the 23-year-old a strong candidate to be an everyday player next year.

-- Mark Ellis' September batting average: .413. He set an Oakland record for hits in the month, with 43. Chances his option will be picked up: greatly improved.

-- Maybe not a highlight as far as Matt Carson is concerned, but astonishing nonetheless: The A's outfielder ran full speed into the wall in center, face first, on June 9, a jarring collision that left him with a sore jaw and provided lots of YouTube footage.

-- Flashy double play by non-flashy duo: Ellis and shortstop Cliff Pennington turned a key double play in the 10th inning against Boston on July 21, with Pennington going up the middle for a bouncer by Bill Hall and making a sideways flip that Ellis caught barehanded and then winged to first for the second out.

-- Bobby Cramer, age 30, was pitching in the Mexican League earlier in the summer, and he'd been a substitute teacher and worked for Shell Oil while out of the game for two years. On Sept. 13, the left-hander made his major-league debut at Kansas City and won. He finished 2-1 with a 3.04 ERA.

-- Oakland swept Seattle in a four-game series to finish the season and avoid a losing record. The team hit nine homers in the series, assuring them of a second-place finish alone in the AL West.

Beane being cautious with A's uncertain future

GM feels verdict on stadium approval coming sooner than later

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In looking forward, Billy Beane is not simply thinking about short-term help, the kind that brings about quick, but not necessarily sustainable, success.

He's had no choice but to do so in the past. But in speaking to reporters in an informal postseason address at the Oakland Coliseum on Monday, the A's general manager noted he's carrying a cautious-heavy approach when preparing for 2011 and beyond.

Much of that mindset comes from the unknown that is his club's future home, an area of concern that affects several aspects of any potential offseason moves, particularly those involving offensive additions. A new stadium approval -- a decision Beane feels is coming "sooner than later" -- would likely dictate his budget, possibly restricting him in the free-agent pool until a move-in day is on the calendar.

"What's important is making sure to enter that new stadium with the best personnel as possible," he said. "Successful stadiums are the result of having great teams playing, so that's obviously something we'll be keeping one eye on as we consider long-term expenditures."

Yet, on the flip side, the team's current home limits Beane and his wheeling-and-dealing plans, as well.

"We've found the last couple years, it's been challenging," he said. "We've lost some players because of it.

"I was talking to one free agent last year, trying to tell him to concentrate on the field, that we had the best playing facility in the league, the best groundskeeper in the league. He said, 'You're right -- until August.'"

Beane couldn't argue, knowing full well the Oakland Raiders quickly tarnish what's only partly theirs when football season begins. Adrian Beltre and Marco Scutaro represented two known players who chose not to sign with the A's last year, and there's no telling who will be faced with the same decision this winter.

The obvious answer is a power threat, someone to hold up a speedy but semi-weak lineup. Beane said he does not have a "strong feeling at this point" on where that will come from, whether it be through free agency or trade. But that's not even his biggest concern right now. At least, that's the sentiment he expressed when asked if he would make a definitive statement on whether the team will assuredly add offense.

"We will attempt to make our team better," Beane said. "It's a worn-out statement, but the biggest impact on why we weren't competing up to last week was our health. I'd take health over power right now and take my chances.

"That being said, [offense] is an area we're going to be looking at, but somewhat more strategically than just looking at someone's power numbers. Ultimately, we'd like to get as many multitalented players as possible, and that includes the other side of the diamond -- defense and running the bases as well, because we were a very good baserunning team this year."

The A's -- led by the fast-moving Rajai Davis, Coco Crisp and Cliff Pennington -- compiled 156 stolen bases, which was the ninth-best single-season total in Oakland history and the most by an A's team since the 1989 club had 157. The club's total ranked third in both the American League and the Majors.

At the same time, Oakland had the second-fewest home runs in the AL, along with a .378 slugging percentage and a .241 average with runners in scoring position, both of which were second lowest in the league. Kevin Kouzmanoff led the A's with 16 long balls, the fewest by a team leader in Oakland history.

"We need power, which is true, but I'm not quite sure it's that simple," Beane said. "One of the strengths of this team is its team defense, so just to take a look at one area of need and identify a player and plug him in somewhere, you have to understand how that's going to impact one of the things that was very successful for us. The trick will be trying to address that need and not take away from a trend."

When considering a handful of surprises that came out of Oakland this year, chiefly hurler Trevor Cahill's early success as part of a rotation that led the AL with a 3.47 ERA, Beane was quick to mention a helpful defense that committed just 99 errors, which was fifth fewest in the league.

An impressive infield was mainly responsible for such a mark. Not only did the A's -- as expected -- receive sturdy hands from the likes of Kouzmanoff and the Gold Glove-caliber play of Mark Ellis, but they witnessed rapid progression from youngsters Daric Barton and Cliff Pennington.

The youth movement taking place in Oakland highlights several players -- Barton and Pennington included -- who Beane hopes will stick around for several years to come. Again, though, the probability of such a scene unfolding will rest in the hands of Commissioner Bud Selig, whose decision to appoint a three-panel committee to study the A's stadium options came nearly two years ago.

"I think we're going to be planning a new stadium at some point soon," Beane said. "That's just my own gut feeling. We have to at some point. I'm an optimist.

"I think it will allow us to start to plan around some of these guys here from a long-term standpoint. Hopefully, it's not a revolving door, like it's been the last decade. Hopefully, we could do some long-term planning, which we really haven't been able to do. I think it would be pretty invigorating for everybody involved, and I think everybody would sort of be relieved having a direction for the franchise."

Right now, though, Beane must focus on more immediate questions, including the 2011 club options attached to Ellis (\$6 million) and Crisp (\$5.75 million). Those decisions, along with Eric Chavez's hefty option -- almost assuredly to be declined -- and the fate of the coaching staff, are expected to come as soon as next week, but not anytime before.

"Probably more sooner than later is the best that I can tell you," Beane said. "We're having some organizational meetings next week. A small group of upper management will fly down and spend about four days discussing things. I want to get the benefit of those guys' opinions too."

Beyond that, Beane said it's much too early to consider non-tender candidates -- "That doesn't have to be done until December," he said, "and I haven't even done my Christmas shopping yet" -- and available players on the lot.

"Every year has attractive free agents, some more than others," Beane said. "I would suspect there are some players that a lot of teams would have interest in. But as far as our interest in individual players, looking at the overall makeup of the team from this point going forward, what we can conceivably have in terms of budget will obviously be considered."

Beane, at least, is thankful he won't have to reach out for pitching, as the club is expected to retain Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden (arbitration-eligible) so long as one doesn't have to be sacrificed for that needed power.

"You never know in the winter what's going to be available to you, and with pitching you're always on the lookout for, but the idea that that it's not at the top of the list is nice, particularly in our market," Beane said. "We set out to create an organic pitching staff, and by and large, we have."

Injuries, lack of pop prevailing theme in A's year

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- An all-too-familiar storyline, one narrated by an overflowing bucket of injuries and not very much offense, was on display -- yet again -- in Oakland this year.

Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer were expected to commandeer a baby-faced rotation, despite not having pitched an inning in 2009 due to their own bouts with injuries. Eric Chavez, coming off a healthy Spring Training, was going to DH his way back into an everyday role. And Coco Crisp, never mind a pair of shoulder surgeries in '09, was supposed to be something of a sparkplug at the top of a speedy lineup.

Crisp was, but for less than half a season's worth of time as a result of hard-luck injuries. Sheets and Duchscherer? Both were shut down by the end of July. And Chavez, looking to make good on his team-high \$12 million salary, hit a dismal .234 in 33 games before succumbing to an unwelcome pair of bulging disks in his neck and is now considering retirement.

Thus, the veteran fallout made for quite the youth movement, especially on the mound -- where a handful of young 20-somethings offered the A's a super-sized helping of optimism. Hurler Trevor Cahill's coming-out party was complemented by Gio Gonzalez's breakout season, and Brett Anderson's numbers -- albeit limited due to two separate disabled-list stints -- now have A's fans ready for the 2011 unveiling of The Big Three Version 2.0.

However, despite the starting-pitching staff's ability to compile the best ERA in the American League, the A's found themselves thinly spread in the batter's box. When scoring fewer than four runs, Oakland managed to win fewer than 18 games. Fittingly, when it scored four runs or more, it won more than 60 contests.

And so, the 2010 season offered good and bad, the former on display via a high-caliber pitching staff and the latter seen through a weak offense derailed by injuries to the likes of Crisp, Mark Ellis, Kurt Suzuki, Kevin Kouzmanoff and midseason acquisition Conor Jackson. All in all, the A's used the DL 23 times -- second most in Oakland history -- and managed to have at least five players on the DL all year.

Mathematical elimination, however, didn't come until eight days before the season finale, as the club displayed a respectable finish on an otherwise frustrating year full of an onslaught of injuries that compromised a chance at the division title.

When looking back at the season that was, the A's will likely think back on what could have been, given a healthy squad and a power bat or two. Still, it was one that lent more-than-enough hope for a 2011 playoff berth.

Record: 81-81, second place in American League West.

Defining moment: On July 31, general manager Billy Beane and Co. quietly went into the night without making so much as a peep at the Trade Deadline. The A's decision not to add some pop to a lackluster offense sent a rather direct message to fans that they were going to make do with what was on hand, that they didn't necessarily feel close enough to Texas in the division standings to make a serious run for the title and that maybe their time wasn't this year but next.

What went right: Pitching, pitching and more pitching. Cahill began the season on the DL, tiptoed around Triple-A Sacramento for two outings and then returned to Oakland and transformed into an All-Star worthy of mention around the Cy Young community. Anderson, whom the A's locked up to a four-year deal in April, continually showed that -- when healthy -- he could be a legitimate No. 1 starter. Gonzalez, without much ruckus, got his emotions in control and put up equally impressive numbers. Not to be outdone was Dallas Braden, who perhaps offered baseball's greatest moment of the year in the form of a perfect game on Mother's Day. The A's lefty, despite a month-long DL stint, continually showed frequent flashes of brilliance with his repertoire. Furthermore, the bullpen was outstanding throughout, notably in the work of Craig Breslow and Andrew Bailey, the latter who earned himself a second All-Star nod.

What went wrong: A packed trainer's room didn't help, but Ellis -- who missed a month due to a strained left hamstring -- often noted throughout the year that injuries can't be used as an excuse. So, then, we turn to the lineup. Suzuki, whom the A's handed a four-year contract extension in July, endured somewhat of a disappointing season at the plate. Kouzmanoff posted similar numbers as Suzuki, and his streaky ways didn't give the club much consistency. The A's hoped their new third baseman would lead the team in homers, and he did -- with 16. Jack Cust, who began the year in the Minors, compiled a higher season average, but didn't offer the power they were looking for when he returned to Oakland. And the outfield, seemingly always playing musical chairs, didn't do much of anything with the bat.

Biggest surprise: Aside from Cahill and Gonzalez's maturing processes taking full effect, the A's finally found consistency from Daric Barton in the form of a steady defensive presence at first base along with a respectable No. 2 hitter who can tally walks like no other. This was Barton's year to sink or swim, and he succeeded in the latter much thanks to an injury-free year. The A's are in dire need of a lineup threat to drive in Barton, a disciplined hitter who may be primed for growing into power.

If health is on their side, A's in good shape

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- When the A's were officially taken out of postseason running, a scene that had the Rangers celebrating on Oakland's turf, several green and gold members expressed a strong belief in being the team to beat in the American League West next year.

They want their own celebration, and their general manager is hoping they can have just that in 2011.

"I think we've got a foundation in place, one that certainly allows us to compete," Billy Beane said. "Quite frankly, I think we could have competed even longer this year had we kept more guys on the field. In our market, where the competition is so strong, it makes things tougher when you're dealing with all the injuries we've had."

There were 23 disabled-list stints accounted for in Oakland this year, not to mention separate injury battles fought by Kevin Kouzmanoff, Andrew Bailey, Jerry Blevins and Michael Wuertz toward the end of the season that never required a DL trip because of the expanded roster.

Needless to say, health -- seemingly as always -- wasn't on Oakland's side this year. However, a youthful pitching staff was, and all the key parts are expected to remain intact come April when the new season opens. Beane realizes it's that type of pitching that doesn't come around very often, so to have so much of it has him and the rest of his staff wanting to make good on it.

"You have to have pitching to win, and we've got it," he said. "With that talent, we're not far from where we want to be. But first and foremost, the most important thing is staying healthy. That would be the one thing I'd take over anything else."

The A's also wouldn't mind some offense, a facet of their game missing much-needed power. But the cautious and realistic side of Beane isn't ready to sign off on any offseason wish lists. Rather, "it's too early to say" what could happen, too early to determine whether the A's brass will reach into the free-agent pool, swap a couple players or simply wait on Minor League talent to develop into offensive threats.

"We'll assess where our Minor League guys are and determine if that help needs to come from elsewhere," Beane said.

Beane's front-office army has more than a couple of decisions to make before Spring Training arrives, some fairly no-brainers (bringing back arbitration-eligible guys like Craig Breslow and Dallas Braden), some seemingly difficult (whether to cut ties with Mark Ellis).

Then there are other questions. What's the long-term plan for Chris Carter? Is Jack Cust let go for good this time? How long before Michael Taylor gets an invitation to The Show?

Beane is understandably reluctant to address such queries, ones that could have a domino effect on other parts of the organization.

"These are decisions we will discuss when the time is right," he said. "But you look at this team and you see talent, so I like what we have and, if we can avoid injuries, we'll be in a good place. We're definitely headed in the right direction."

Contract issues

Free agents: Justin Duchscherer, RHP; Ben Sheets, RHP.

Eligible for arbitration: Craig Breslow, LHP; Dallas Braden, LHP; Ryan Sweeney, OF; Kevin Kouzmanoff, 3B; Rajai Davis, OF; Boof Bonser, RHP; Joey Devine, RHP; Jeremy Hermida, OF; Conor Jackson, OF; Jack Cust, OF; Gabe Gross, OF; Travis Buck, OF; Akinori Iwamura, IF.

Player options: None.

Club options: Mark Ellis, 2B, \$6 million; Eric Chavez, DH, \$12.5 million; Coco Crisp, OF, \$5.75 million.

Non-tender possibilities: Hermida, Bonser, Jackson, Cust, Gross, Buck, Iwamura.

A position-by-position look at where the 2010 roster stands going into 2011. The arrows represent a trend line for each player.

Catchers

▲ Kurt Suzuki: Resumes role as club's most valued player.

■ Landon Powell: Solid backstop likely the backup.

▲ Josh Donaldson: Continues grooming process at Triple-A Sacramento.

The A's are seemingly set behind the plate for the next three years, maybe four. At least that was the idea behind handing Suzuki a four-year contract extension this season that takes him through 2013 with a club option for '14. Powell is very much respected and liked by the A's staff, but should Oakland choose to part ways with him, Donaldson's taste of the Majors this season could land him in that backup role. However, another few months in the Minors wouldn't hurt, either.

First base

▲ Daric Barton: Possibly expendable, but the club likes his defensive presence.

▲ Chris Carter: His experience here lends the A's flexibility in other areas.

▼ Jeff Larish: Received limited playing time, likely the odd man out.

Barton had yet another opportunity to seize the starting role at first base, and he did -- in a big way. Not only did he provide the A's something of a consistent presence in the No. 2 spot in the lineup, but he sported himself as one of the league's most exciting defensive players, all the while staying healthy. Beane said he's quite pleased with Barton, but that doesn't mean he's a lock to stay put. Acquiring a power-hitting first baseman is not out of the question, nor is signing a DH and transporting Carter back to first. Larish struggled in his last of two stints with the A's, and he never appeared to be part of the future puzzle.

Second base

■ Mark Ellis: Possibly represents the club's biggest offseason decision.

■ Adam Rosales: Continues role as ultra-utility infielder.

▲ Eric Sogard: Starting job his to win -- or lose -- if Ellis leaves.

▲ Adrian Cardenas: Solid backup option at Triple-A.

Ellis' clubhouse leadership, built on a veteran presence and Gold Glove-caliber defense, could easily be taken away should the A's elect to decline his 2011 club option. His potential absence may lend Sogard the chance to grab hold of the starting position following a standout year at Sacramento, where he hit .300 while playing respectable defense all over the infield. Not too far behind him is Cardenas, who will likely open the season at Triple-A, but could join up-and-coming shortstop Grant Green as an exciting middle-infield threat in the not-too-distant future for years to come. If you're wondering about Jemile Weeks, the 2008 first-round Draft pick was shut down one too many times with injuries this year and will probably open the season at Double-A Midland again.

Shortstop

- ↑ Cliff Pennington: Builds status as a rising defensive star.
- Adam Rosales: See above.
- ↑ Grant Green: Continues climb through the Minors.

Pennington has officially solidified himself as the captain of the left side of the infield and will be counted on to continually garner a leadership role on a youthful A's team. Despite leading the AL in errors this season, arguably in part to how many balls he reaches compared to other shortstops, he has made tremendous progress. He also lends the club a good dose of speed at the bottom of the lineup, which should again nicely complement Crisp's presence at the top. Green is likely primed for Double-A after a sound season with Class A Stockton, where he hit .318 but committed 37 errors. Rosales is expected to be Pennington's backup.

Third base

- ↑ Kevin Kouzmanoff: Returns to offer productive offensive and defensive numbers.
- ↓ Akinori Iwamura: Likely gone after fulfilling month-long backup role.
- Dallas McPherson: Offers power but appears injury-prone.
- ↑ Steve Tolleson: Could be odd man out (again) without impressive spring showing.

Unless the A's go with what would be a surprising decision to non-tender Kouzmanoff's contract, the 29-year-old third baseman is expected to again be at the hot corner, where he's a sure bet for solid defense. He also led the team in homers and, if the A's were to acquire a middle-of-the-order power threat, Kouzmanoff would likely be able to slide to the sixth spot -- very much suitable for his abilities -- on a daily basis. Iwamura simply represented a nice rent-a-player during Kouzmanoff's September back battle, but he likely won't be in camp alongside McPherson and Tolleson, both of whom will be fighting for an Opening Day roster spot. Rosales can also play third base.

Outfield

- ↓ Travis Buck: Has likely reached the finish line with Oakland.
- ↑ Chris Carter: Could be hosting a coming-out party at the plate.
- Matt Carson: If not traded, fights for backup role in spring.
- ↑ Coco Crisp: Offers huge lineup presence if awarded club option.
- ↓ Rajai Davis: Could turn into bench player if club sticks with Carter in left.
- ↓ Gabe Gross: Wearing another uniform by spring.
- ↓ Jeremy Hermida: Likely on the move again.
- ↓ Conor Jackson: Short and disappointing A's stint has 2011 contract in question.
- ↑ Ryan Sweeney: Healthy knees allow return to starting right-field position.
- ↑ Michael Taylor: Has yet to prove himself, thus starts year in Sacramento.

Buck, Gross and Hermida likely won't be wearing an A's uniform next season. Jackson's status is far from certain after a never-ending bout with injuries arrived with him from Arizona in June. And Buck, once the promising golden boy, was essentially written off one final time when he wasn't included in the September callup list. Next year's starting outfield, given full health, could consist of Carter in left, Crisp in center and Sweeney in right. Carson, meanwhile, has a chance to stick around on the bench, depending on any offseason moves. And Taylor, now the team's biggest prospect with Carter already in the mix, will likely be held back at Triple-A again following an up-and-down 2010 season. That doesn't mean he won't get an opportunity to compete for a big league job, though.

Designated hitter

- ↓ Jack Cust: Decreased power numbers likely leaves him looking for another team.
- Landon Powell: Offers flexibility here.

It's more than likely neither Cust or Powell will be in this spot next season. In fact, it could be that no one on the current A's roster is -- Carter potentially being an exception -- if the club makes an offseason push for a veteran slugger like Adam Dunn or Hideki Matsui. Cust garnered a higher average but lacked greatly in the home run department. Powell, meanwhile, started in the DH spot just one time this year. Nevertheless, it's an area of concern for an A's team that ranked near the bottom in the Majors in homers this year.

Rotation

- 👦 Brett Anderson: Healthy year makes for equally healthy numbers.
- 👦 Trevor Cahill: Quietly runs another Cy Young campaign.
- 👦 Bobby Cramer: Successful September stint puts him in rotation running.
- 👦 Dallas Braden: Offers club leadership, consistency in fourth spot.
- 👦 Gio Gonzalez: Breakthrough 2010 season leads to potential 20-win 2011 campaign.
- 👦 Vin Mazzaro: Trade bait for a big bat.
- 👦 Clayton Mortensen: Needs big spring for shot at fifth spot.
- 👦 Josh Outman: Elbow to dictate his play in fifth-starter competition.
- 👦 Tyson Ross: Needs a complete healthy season in Triple-A rotation.

Cahill, Anderson, Gonzalez and Braden -- perhaps in that very order -- round out the first four spots of the 2011 rotation, assuming all are healthy, when camp breaks. That is, of course, if the A's can keep hold of all of them through on offseason which is likely to include much interest in the young hurlers by teams willing to unload a bat or two. However, Mazzaro may be the one to go if that's the case. If he stays put, though, he'll get a chance to once again earn that fifth spot, although a motivated Outman and equally inspired Cramer won't make it easy. Mortensen, at this point, will need a beyond stellar spring to break through with these guys. He could once again find himself starting the year at Sacramento, where Ross will likely keep him company while proving himself both healthy and big league-ready as a starter. By season's start, though, the A's are primed to boast one of the league's best -- if not the best -- starting staffs.

Bullpen

- 👦 Andrew Bailey: Clean elbow could lead to career numbers.
- 👦 Jerry Blevins: 2010 strides pave way for big role in '11.
- 👦 Craig Breslow: Continues role as bullpen workhorse.
- 👦 Joey Devine: Set to endure a spring tryout of sorts after two straight blank seasons.
- 👦 Justin James: September callup could quietly work his way into 'pen.
- 👦 Henry Rodriguez: No command, no guaranteed bullpen spot.
- 👦 Ross Wolf: Prime candidate for spring chopping block.
- 👦 Michael Wuertz: Slider irrelevant without a healthy body.
- 👦 Brad Ziegler: Entering first arbitration year.

The back end of the bullpen is again expected to be fairly dominant, especially with Bailey leading the way. The A's closer was limited this year due to a grab bag of injuries, yet he still managed to tally 25 saves and a 1.47 ERA in 47 appearances. Those numbers have the team longing to see what he can do with a full season, something Bailey hopes he can achieve as early as 2011 following rehab from season-ending elbow cleanup surgery he underwent in September. He figures to be joined by the left-handed Breslow and right-handed Wuertz, the two likely candidates for setup positions. Ziegler and Rodriguez should again lend the A's a unique mix of differing right-handed talent, while Devine will look to join them if he can finally rid himself of right elbow issues. Thus, if the former six enjoy a successfully quiet spring, Blevins should be set to round out the relief corps. James and Wolf, meanwhile, will at least attempt to make a competition out of the bullpen spots. Given Oakland's history in the health department, though, either could be in green and gold on Opening Day.

Athletics part ways with Iwamura

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's wasted no time shuffling their 40-man roster on Monday, releasing infielder Akinori Iwamura less than 24 hours after closing out the season.

Iwamura, signed by the club as a free agent on Sept. 13, was never considered as anything more than temporary help while regular third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff recovered from lower back pain.

The 31-year-old veteran, now a free agent, hit .129 with four RBIs in 10 games with the A's. His short stint with Oakland marked a continual struggle in the Majors this season, as he was on Pittsburgh's Opening Day roster but posted a .182 average in 54 games before being optioned to Triple-A Indianapolis.

There he hit .264 with three home runs and 16 RBIs before being designated for assignment on Sept. 7, when the Indians' season ended. He was outrighted by the Pirates on Sept. 9 and released the next day, when the A's brought him into the fold for the remaining three weeks of the season.

This transaction is the first of the Athletics' offseason, and a few other housekeeping moves could be made this week, general manager Billy Beane said on Monday. However, Beane noted that the bigger decisions -- including the options on Mark Ellis and Coco Crisp -- won't be made until at least next week.

Major Lee-ague: Leftovers from The Day After

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 10/4/2010 5:47PM

The Day After, as in the day following the 2010 season that was, placed Billy Beane inside Bob Geren's office this morning, informally holding court with a handful of us reporters while the rest of the A's clubhouse was turning into offseason mode. Most of Beane's 30-minute session is highlighted in this story on the A's site, but here's some leftover bullet points that I figured would best be shared than left idling on a word document on my computer.

- When asked about individual accomplishments that stood out, Beane first mentioned **Trevor Cahill**. Said Beane: "When you think about him starting the season on the DL -- and he was probably going to start the year in Sacramento anyway -- and for him to come out and win 18 games with a sub-three ERA and lead the league in opponents batting average, it's hard to not look at that and have that one stand out.
- That said, Beane said he wasn't so much surprised by Cahill's success, but more so in how quickly it came about. Same for **Gio Gonzalez**. "Both just developed so quick. This was where I hoped they'd be a year from now."
- Meanwhile, Beane admitted **Craig Breslow** was a pleasant surprise. Breslow ranked second among AL relievers with 75 games pitched, tied for fourth with 74 2/3 innings and tied for sixth with 71 strikeouts. "I think Craig not only established himself as a valuable member of the club, but he also brings a real balance and intellectual leadership for these young guys," Beane said. "He's the kind of guy who, as a general manager, is the kind of mature leadership you like these kids to be around. I know he's been voted the smartest guy in the league, but to be around him every day, you really see how he carries and conducts himself, and how guys really turn to him."
- When approached about the long-term plan for **Chris Carter**, Beane said "I think it's our intention" to keep him in the outfield. Continued Beane: "**Daric Barton** has solidified himself at first, and I think Chris is a good enough athlete to make the transition. He really just went out there a couple weeks before he came up, so I think we need to give him some time. He does have power. So getting back to Daric, he showed himself to be, in my opinion, the best first baseman in the league. He's also made significant strides offensively. I was quite pleased with what he did there this year, and I have no intention of taking him off first base." That's quite a bold statement and only proves the club's intent to stick with Barton.
- With Carter slated to be the club's Opening Day left fielder next year -- though Beane noted he doesn't want to make a definitive statement regarding that notion -- the A's could be looking at an outfield of Carter in left, **Coco Crisp** in center and **Ryan Sweeney** in right. It's likely the A's will pick up Crisp's 2011 club option, and they "feel pretty good" about Sweeney's ability to be ready by season's start following knee rehab. However, Beane noted a lot of the outfield makeup "depends on if there are any adds as well. Some of the dynamics of the outfield will be affected by any trades or signings."
- Finally, general thoughts from Beane on moving forward: "I think we're excited about the offseason. We came in with the youngest team in the big leagues, and we left with the youngest team in the big leagues, but I think we did some things and accomplished some things that you wouldn't normally anticipate with a team with this kind of youth and experience. To have the No. 1 pitching staff in the American League is difficult no matter what your payroll is, and to do it with these kids and their inexperience is quite a statement and quite a building block for us going forward."

That's all I've got for you today, but you can regularly check this blog along with the A's site throughout the offseason for all your A's news.

A's 2011 goal: Stay healthy

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — A's general manager Billy Beane leaned back in the manager's office, ticking off all the club's plans for the offseason.

Surprisingly, adding power to the A's finesse offense isn't atop the agenda.

Instead, Beane said Oakland's main focus for the winter will be keeping the players already on the roster healthy and available after yet another injury-plagued season in which the A's managed to keep things interesting until late in the year.

Those injuries were the biggest stain on Oakland's season, which ended with a four-game sweep of the Seattle Mariners over the weekend.

That allowed the A's to finish with a .500 record (81-81) and in second place in the AL West.

"The biggest impact on why we weren't competing up to last week was our health," Beane said in between bites of tapioca pudding. "I'd take health over power right now and take my chances."

The A's used the disabled list 23 times in 2009, two shy of the franchise record set in 2008.

Oakland's pitching staff was hit particularly hard, with season-ending injuries suffered by starters Ben Sheets and Justin Duchscherer. Ace Brett Anderson and All-Star closer Andrew Bailey also missed significant stretches during the year.

The offense also took a hit.

Six-time Gold Glove third baseman Eric Chavez played in only 33 games before being sidelined for the year because of back and shoulder issues. Center fielder Coco Crisp missed most of the first half of the year with leg injuries while right fielder Ryan Sweeney skipped the final 73 games due to a knee injury.

Despite all that, Oakland stayed competitive in the AL West and contended for the division title until losing three of four to first-place Texas in late September.

"Given the adversity that the club had, particularly through the injuries and the injuries that really decimated the last couple weeks of the season, I was real happy. These guys could have folded tent and given up but they didn't," Beane said.

"We did some things and accomplished some things that you wouldn't normally anticipate a team with this kind of youth and inexperience to accomplish."

The most memorable highlight was left-hander Dallas Braden's perfect game against Tampa Bay on May 9, the first by an A's pitcher since Hall of Famer Catfish Hunter did it in 1968.

As a staff, Oakland led the American League in ERA (3.56) and shutouts (17) while holding opponents to a .245 batting average.

Trevor Cahill, who began the season on the disabled list after losing out to Gio Gonzalez for the fifth spot in the A's rotation, finished with a team-high 18 wins. Gonzalez overcame inconsistency issues to add 15 wins while Braden had 11, which alleviated the losses of Sheets and Duchscherer.

Oakland's lack of offense kept the team from being a more serious contender. The A's hit just 109 home runs and scored 663 runs, their second-fewest in the last 28 non-strike seasons.

"I don't think it's as linear as saying 'We need power,'" Beane said. "(That's) true but I'm not quite sure it's that simple. The trick will be trying to address that need and not take away from a strength."

Beane will discuss how to do that when he and other members of his staff convene next week in Arizona for an organizational meeting to map out the team's offseason plans.

Among the topics being discussed will be what to do with potential free agents Chavez and Crisp. The A's have club options for both players, and while it's likely Crisp — who hit .279 and stole 32 bases — will be back, the situation with the oft-injured Chavez isn't so clear.

Oakland also has a club option for second baseman Mark Ellis while Duchscherer is scheduled to become a free agent. Beane said he intends to talk to Ellis' agent to touch bases but doesn't expect an announcement on the situation anytime soon.

Then there is the issue of the A's stadium. The Oakland Coliseum is one of just two multipurpose stadiums in the league — the A's share it with the NFL's Oakland Raiders — and owner Lew Wolff has already selected an architect to design a proposed privately funded stadium.

Beane feels a new venue is critical to the A's ability to sign free agents.

"We've been told it will be more sooner than later," Beane said. "I know that's pretty ambiguous, but we anticipate it being soon, hopefully very soon. We've found the last couple years it's been challenging (and) we've lost some players because of it."

Longworth: A's 2010 -- That's a Wrap

Kate Longworth, CSNBayArea.com 10/5/2010

OAKLAND -- It was a bittersweet day at the Coliseum. Boxes were being packed and staff and media members were bidding farewell to the A's season. Usually the clubhouse is full of life and energy, but Monday the only thing that remained were various Green & Gold uniforms hanging in locker room stalls where there once were photos and personal possessions. The players have gone home for the offseason (many of them left last night straight from Seattle), and all that was left Monday was Billy Beane and Bob Geren discussing the season that was.

The A's finished the season at .500, good for second place in the AL West, and their 81 wins were the most the team has had since 2006. Beane said the second-place finish did mean something to him, saying he was impressed by the pride in his players, giving it their all to the final out Sunday in Seattle.

Coming into September, the A's still had a postseason prayer and although it was Texas that ran away in the end, the A's have many of their own victories to take from this season. There was that "perfect day" back in May with Dallas Braden on the mound. And there's the "Babyfaced Assassin" -- Trevor Cahill. The All-Star right-hander started the season on the disabled list, and finished the season as the anchor one of the best (if not the best) young pitching staffs in the majors. Beane said this year's pitching staff was a good "building block" for the future, and although he's not surprised by what he saw skill-wise from his young arms, he was pleasantly surprised by how quickly they matured.

Beane also pointed to the outstanding defense he saw from the A's this year, especially among the infielders. He singled out Mark Ellis, Cliff Pennington and Daric Barton. And with Barton making a case as "one of the best defensive first baseman" Beane did say Chris Carter will continue to develop in the outfield. As for Mike Taylor, who battled injuries in Sacramento, he's off to Phoenix for the Arizona Fall League. Beane said it was too soon to put expectations on Taylor for spring training.

And it's too soon to discuss options when it comes to Ellis' and Coco Crisp's contracts, Beane said. But he will be reaching out to their agents soon enough, as a courtesy. He also said the A's will continue to have some roster moves in the next couple of weeks (starting Monday with the release of IF Aki Iwamura).

Now, not to bury the lead, but we've got to talk the stadium situation when it comes to the A's. Beane says a new park is in the future "sooner than later" and said once it happens it'll be better for the fanbase and the players. He reiterated that what makes "great ballparks" are "great teams." He also said it's been a challenge the past couple years when it comes to recruiting players to the A's. He talked specifically about a conversation he had with a free agent last year where he pointed out that the A's boast the "best playing surface" in the league, and the player agreed, and then said "you're right, until August."

So what free agents will the A's target this offseason? Beane recognizes the team needs power, but he doesn't want to overlook that the A's are built on a sound defensive core, and he plans to keep that intact. When his pitching staff was brought up as a perhaps "target" for future trade talks, he said they made an effort to bring up this "organic" group and they'll try to keep that, but he did joke, "yeah I don't think (other teams) will be coming after our power."

Beane had glowing marks for Craig Breslow, saying "his intellectual and mature leadership is what you want these kids to be around." He's also optimistic about Andrew Bailey's recovery, and Ryan Sweeney's return for spring training. And Josh Outman and Joey Devine are also coming along very strong, according to Beane.

Urban: Bay Ball, The Finale

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com 10/5/2010

Six months of regular-season Bay Ball in the books, and both teams got to end it on a high note. The Giants, of course, will play on, and their victory on Sunday was one for the ages. The A's, too, had the most satisfying finale possible under their particular set of circumstances.

So for the last time in 2010, we dive into McCovey Cove with an ear-to-ear grin, virtually floating above the whitecaps on the way to Jack London Square for some quick looks forward and back ...

... Incredible weekend of tension, drama and -- ultimately -- pure and unbridled jubilation at AT&T Park. Torture? No. That would have been losing Sunday. This was bliss. Everywhere you turned, a spectacular season-long saga was coming to a storybook conclusion.

... Although the reward wasn't nearly as overwhelming, the A's had quite the weekend themselves in closing out a four-game road sweep of the Mariners to reach two significant goals: They gave manager Bob Geren his first non-losing season and fought off the rival Angels for second place in the American League West. Give Dallas Braden credit for, in the immediate aftermath, refusing to fully embrace the loser's mentality of embracing moral victories, but give Oakland even more credit for staying relentless and driven to the finish line.

... Jonathan Sanchez could very well be one of the 10 worst-hitting pitchers in the big-league history, but he came up with one of the 10 biggest hits of the Giants' season with that third-inning triple off Mat "I'd make a *horrible* GM" Latos.

... If there's any justice in the sports world, and if there's even an ounce of sentimentality in the A's front office, Mark Ellis will be back next season. The team holds a \$6 million option for 2011 on their longtime second baseman, who led the team in batting and provided his customary Gold Glove-quality defense in his eighth season in Oakland, and that's a fairly steep price for a guy with limited pop who'll turn 34 next June. But you can't put a price on integrity, professionalism, leadership and class. Ellis has as much of those intangibles as any player in the game.

... On the heels of Barry Zito's woeful lost shot at cleansing redemption, it sure was nice to see Pablo Sandoval redeem himself for the error that contributed to Saturday's gloom by starting the biggest double play of the Giants' season in the sixth inning Sunday.

... Rajai Davis closed out a splendid closing kick for the A's by going 2-for-5 on Sunday; the speedy outfielder batted a combined .333 in 111 at-bats and claimed 11 of his 50 stolen bases in September and October. Now the big question: Did he lock up a roster spot for 2011? Oakland is expected to pick up its option on center fielder Coco Crisp, Ryan Sweeney returns as the starting right fielder, and Chris Carter's bat likely takes him into spring training next February as a frontrunner to start in left. Yet Crisp and Sweeney have extensive injury histories. There are two ways to go here: Sell high with Davis, whose speed will surely make him attractive to any team looking for a top-of-the-order igniter, or keep him in the fold as a fourth outfielder/insurance policy.

... Andres Torres was a solid choice for the Willie Mac Award as the Giants' most inspirational player. A better choice might have been splitting the award between Torres and Aubrey Huff. Both players are the baseball equivalent of Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins in "The Shawshank Redemption," having, as Morgan Freeman's character in the movie so eloquently put it, "crawled through a river of [expletive] and came out clean on the other side." Huff's stand-still celebration right after the final out Sunday -- fist in the air, a stoic, Kobe Bryant-esque look of satisfaction on his mug -- was enough to move a grown man to tears.

... Proof that some television executives have and appreciate a great sense of humor: Braden will make his debut as an analyst for the MLB Network on Friday, his first of two games working the Yankees' playoff series. If Braden manages to truly be himself and speak without the mental filter that robs today's game of so much potential color, it could make for some fascinating entertainment.

That's it, folks. The on-the-field focus now shifts entirely to the Giants and the Braves, and what a content plan we have in store over the next week or so for those of you puling for the orange and black. Chats, live in-game blogs, previews, home movies, columns and analysis galore.

The green and gold won't disappear completely; a formal season recap will be coming to this very screen soon. But today is a day for the fans to relax and reflect on a captivating season of Bay Ball on both sides of the bridge, all the while enjoying our offering of peace, your celebratory beverage of choice and LL's "Mama Said Knock You Out" to all.

Murton breaks Ichiro's Japan hits record

By JIM ARMSTRONG, AP Sports

TOKYO (AP)—Former major leaguer Matt Murton broke Ichiro Suzuki's record for the most hits in a single season in Japanese Professional Baseball on Tuesday.

Murton got his 211th hit of the season with a two-run single to center in the second inning for the Hanshin Tigers against the Yakult Swallows.

Suzuki set the previous record of 210 in 1994 for the Orix BlueWave.

When Suzuki set the record, the regular season consisted of 130 games. Since then, the season has been extended by 14 games and Murton was playing in his 142nd game of the season.

"1994 and 2010 are two different seasons," Murton said. "He did it in 130 games. It is what it is, it's a great honor. In terms of Ichiro, this doesn't change anything. He's one of the best players in baseball."

A first-round selection of the Boston Red Sox in 2003, Murton was traded to the Chicago Cubs in 2005 and had brief stints with Oakland and Colorado before coming to Japan this season.

Murton added two more hits in the game to lift his total to 213. He finished the night 3 for 5 with three RBIs. The Tigers routed the Swallows 17-4.

Last month, Suzuki became the first major league player with 10 consecutive 200-hit seasons. Suzuki joined the Seattle Mariners in 2001 after winning the Pacific League batting title for seven straight seasons.

Urban: MLB Power Rankings (10/4/10)

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

1 (1)	Philadelphia Phillies (97-65)	A three-headed monster atop the rotation, balanced offensive attack, MLB leader in wins. Tough to argue this pick.
2 (2)	Tampa Bay Rays (96-66)	Inspired extra-innings victory on Sunday relegated the once-mighty Yankees to Wild Card status.
3 (3)	San Francisco Giants (92-70)	Once again responded to crushing defeat (see: Zito, Barry) with most exciting win of season to wrap up NL West.
4 (8)	Texas Rangers (90-72)	Nobody is going to give them any credit unless they beat the Rays. With Josh Hamilton back, they just might.
5 (5)	Cincinnati Reds (91-71)	Jay Bruce, whose walkoff homer wrapped up NL Central crown, playing Robin to Joey Votto's Batman.
6 (7)	Atlanta Braves (91-71)	NL Wild Card is playing with a purpose this postseason, and that purpose is to extend Bobby Cox's brilliant career.
7 (6)	Minnesota Twins (94-68)	Until <i>Sports Illustrated</i> put him on its cover, Jim Thome was the best-kept secret in baseball this year.
8 (2)	New York Yankees (95-67)	Losing seven of their last 10, including the final two to the Red Sox, could be a bad omen for defending champs.
9 (9)	San Diego Padres (90-72)	Picked to finish last in NL West by virtually everyone, the Friars earned respect but no playoff berth.
10 (10)	Boston Red Sox (89-73)	Battered for most of the season, they played a lot like the city they represent: gritty, passionate, hardcore.
11 (11)	Chicago White Sox (88-	Eighty-eight wins is nothing to sniff at, but internal strife and some horrendous

	74)	slumps proved killers.
12 (13)	St. Louis Cardinals (86-76)	Cue the tape: Is Tony LaRussa coming back? It's nearly as tired as the annual Brett Favre saga.
13 (14)	Toronto Blue Jays (85-77)	A fond farewell to retiring manager Cito Gaston, who got the absolute most out of a powerful but very flawed club.
14 (16)	Oakland A's (81-81)	Not that sweeping the Mariners is any great shakes, but four games on the road to finish at .500? Impressive.
15 (12)	Colorado Rockies (83-79)	From piping hot to iceberg cold, Colorado fell and fell hard. They were No. 1 on this list on Sept. 19!
16 (17)	Florida Marlins (80-82)	Gaby Sanchez doesn't have much of a shot at NL Rookie of the Year, but he's going to be a great one.
17 (18)	Los Angeles Angels (80-82)	GM Tony Reagins has a lot of work to do this winter to restore the shine to the Halos' Halo.
18 (15)	Detroit Tigers (81-81)	Miguel Cabrera's MLB-high 126 RBIs was the bright spot in a largely disappointing year in Detroit.
19 (21)	Los Angeles Dodgers (80-82)	Few managers could have gotten 80 wins out a team this discombobulated. Kudos to Joe Torre.
20 (19)	New York Mets (79-83)	Losing in 14 innings to the Nationals at home on the last day of the season somehow felt right.
21 (23)	Milwaukee Brewers (77-85)	Tough to win with any consistency when you have no more than five quality big-league hurlers.
22 (20)	Houston Astros (76-86)	If you live outside of the greater Houston area and can name 10 Astros, you might need a hobby.
23 (24)	Chicago Cubs (75-87)	Salvaged their season to a degree by going hard for interim manager Mike Quade down the stretch.
24 (22)	Washington Nationals (69-93)	If they don't sign Adam Dunn, who got a standing O during the home finale, the team's (very few) fans will revolt.
25 (27)	Cleveland Indians (69-93)	A non-descript team in a non-descript city played a non-descript season, start to finish.
26 (28)	Kansas City Royals (67-95)	They got after it right to the end, but getting after it doesn't get you much without real talent.
27 (27)	Baltimore Orioles (66-96)	Upgrades needed all over the diamond, but Buck Showalter turned them into a passable big-league club.
28 (26)	Arizona Diamondbacks (65-97)	Nice young pitching, a load of still-young talented position players. Next year's Padres? No.
29 (30)	Seattle Mariners (61-101)	The great defensive experiment was a miserable failure, as evidenced by the miserable sweep at the hands of the A's.
30 (29)	Pittsburgh Pirates (57-105)	Big Ben's suspension is about to end, so the sting of Sunday's loss ... wait ... oh, the Pirates? Whatever.