

A's News Clips, Tuesday, December 14, 2010

Former Yankees and Angels slugger Hideki Matsui to sign with the Oakland A's

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Hideki Matsui is set to be introduced as the A's new designated hitter today at an afternoon news conference, a source confirmed to Bay Area News Group.

The A's have waited to make an official announcement because Matsui, 36, wasn't scheduled to take his physical in the Bay Area until this morning.

It's expected Matsui will sign a one-year deal in the neighborhood of the \$6 million he made with the Los Angeles Angels last season.

Some concrete news did stream from A's headquarters Monday, as free-agent right-hander Brandon McCarthy agreed to a one-year, \$1 million deal that includes incentives. McCarthy, 27, adds depth as the A's search for a fifth starter to round out their rotation.

But improving an anemic offense tops the A's priority list, and with Matsui, they finally found a middle-of-the-lineup caliber hitter willing to call the Coliseum home.

How much impact Matsui can make remains to be seen, as he's certainly on the downside of his career. He's hit .290 with 161 homers over eight major league seasons -- the first seven with the New York Yankees. He was 28 when he left Japan to join the Yankees.

One major league scout, who requested anonymity, said Matsui "at one time was a very good player who could do a lot of things. He's not that guy at all anymore."

But Matsui's numbers last season -- a .274 average with 21 homers and 84 RBIs -- represent a significant upgrade over anyone from Oakland's 2010 lineup.

Just as intriguing is the impact Matsui might have on the A's poor attendance if he sparks interest among the Bay Area's Asian fan base.

A Japanese press corps of roughly 50 covered Matsui on a daily basis last year with the Angels, and about 10 Japanese reporters showed up Monday at the Coliseum in anticipation of today's announcement.

"We saw a surge (in attendance) perhaps in the first month in interest from the Asian community," said Tim Mead, the Angels vice president of communications. "He made an impact, I think, with the expansion of our brand overseas. NHK (Japan's major public broadcasting company), certainly their coverage went from Yankee blue to Angel red. You will be absolutely amazed."

McCarthy -- 20-24 with a 4.56 ERA in 110 career appearances with the White Sox and Rangers -- has been plagued with right shoulder problems. But A's assistant general manager David Forst said the team did thorough research on McCarthy and that he looked sharp in the Dominican Winter League.

He'll compete with Josh Outman, Bobby Cramer and Tyson Ross to be the fifth starter.

The A's also announced that reliever Joey Devine agreed to a one-year, \$557,500 contract to avoid arbitration.

The Hideki Matsui file

Age: 36 Position: OF/DH

Bats: Left Throws: Right

2010 statistics (With Angels)

G AB H HR RBI AVG

145 482 132 21 84 .274

Career statistics

1,061 3,830 1,109 161 681 .290

Chin Music: Can Joey Devine make his long-awaited return to A's bullpen?

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 12/13/2010 8:12PM

Obviously, the A's big news today revolves around the additions of designated hitter Hideki Matsui (to be announced tomorrow) and right-hander Brandon McCarthy. In an under-the-radar transaction, the A's also signed reliever Joey Devine to a \$557,500 one-year deal, avoiding arbitration with him. I couldn't squeeze much about Devine into the main story, but this guy is a potentially big storyline if he can stay healthy after missing the last two seasons recovering from elbow ligament replacement surgery. I talked to Devine today, and he's feeling encouraged his right elbow will be ready for spring training. It's guarded optimism on his part, based on the struggles he's faced in 2009 and 2010. But he pitched in some instructional league games in October and came out of those feeling good physically. He hasn't thrown since then — Dr. James Andrews, who performed Devine's surgery, recommended he give his elbow some rest — but Devine expects to resume throwing again in a few days to start preparing for the season.

Anyone who's followed this team knows not to get too excited about Devine until he's pitching in spring training games with no setbacks. But a healthy season from him would be a huge boost for Oakland's bullpen. We've seen the A's linked to free agent relievers this winter, and they could use a little more depth in their middle relief. Devine certainly could help fill that need ...

Chin Music: Hideki Matsui announcement to come Tuesday; A's also close to signing right-hander Brandon McCarthy

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 12/13/2010 3:00PM

Hideki Matsui is expected to be introduced as the newest Athletic on Tuesday during an afternoon press conference. It's my understanding he won't take his physical until Tuesday morning. That's why the A's are waiting to make an official announcement on Matsui, 36, who will take over as the team's new designated hitter. No details yet on contract terms, but I expect it to be a one-year deal in the neighborhood of the \$6 million he made last year with the Los Angeles Angels.

The A's may have more news tomorrow, as a source confirmed for me that the team is close to a deal with former Texas Rangers right-hander Brandon McCarthy. McCarthy, 27, has struggled with right shoulder problems in recent years. He suffered a stress fracture in the shoulder last season and made just 11 appearances (nine starts) at Triple-A. The last thing the A's need is another pitcher with an extensive injury history, right? But I like the move to bring in somebody to compete for that fifth starter's spot. The A's are high on Josh Outman if he can rebound fully from elbow ligament replacement surgery. I'd say if he has a healthy spring and pitches well, Outman is the front runner for the job. But there's no guarantee Outman will be healthy, or that Tyson Ross or Bobby Cramer are ready to be a full-time big league starter. Word is that McCarthy pitched well this winter in the Dominican Republic, so perhaps he's worth the gamble ...

Committee to decide whether to commission study for proposed A's ballpark

By Cecily Burt, Oakland Tribune 12/14/2010

Oakland's community and economic development committee will decide today whether to spend a quarter of a million dollars in redevelopment money for a ballpark study.

The funds to pay for the environmental study of the proposed Victory Court ballpark site -- the location preferred by Major League Baseball -- would come out of money earmarked for a new parking garage at 21st Street and Telegraph Avenue.

Several new condominiums, eateries and bars have opened in the area, but public parking has been lacking since the Sears garage was demolished to make way for Forest City's Uptown development.

In August, city staff put out a call for bids to study the potential environmental impacts of building a new 39,000-seat stadium for the Oakland A's at the Victory Court ballpark site. The agency received five bids and staff is recommending that LSA Associates, Inc., which has offices in Berkeley and San Francisco, be awarded the contract to prepare the report.

If the transfer of money from the Central District redevelopment funds to pay for the study is approved, available funding for the garage would be reduced to \$18.3 million.

A's owner Lew Wolff wants to move the team from Oakland to San Jose. However, such a move requires approval by Major League Baseball, not to mention a vote by San Jose residents, before the South Bay city can commit any public funds to the project.

Oakland officials are trying to prove that it has an acceptable site for a new stadium and that it is making every effort to keep the team in the East Bay.

The committee meets at 1:30 p.m. today at Oakland City Hall, 1 Frank Ogawa Plaza.

A's, Hideki Matsui agree to 1-year deal

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Godzilla is now playing for the A's, one of his favorite teams as a teenager.

This afternoon at the Coliseum, the A's will introduce onetime Yankees outfielder Hideki Matsui as their designated hitter for 2011, according to multiple sources, pending a physical this morning. The one-year deal is expected to be somewhat less than the \$6 million Matsui made with the Angels last season, the sources said.

Matsui has said that he was a fan of the "Bash Brothers" teams of the late 1980s, and that he had an A's cap in his room at home.

Today's event will be a big one in Japan, where Matsui remains immensely popular. Ten Japanese reporters had the Coliseum staked out Monday, hoping for a glimpse of Matsui or members of the A's front office.

Matsui will be introduced with his familiar No. 55, first given to him in Japan as a nod to Sadaharu Oh's season home run record.

Left-hander Josh Outman had worn the number since coming to the A's, but he said Monday that if Matsui wants it, he won't complain. "Hopefully, he'll hit 30 home runs for us," Outman said. "It will be nice to have him in the middle of the lineup. ... It's tough to lose when you've got Godzilla."

Right-hander signs: The A's made one acquisition Monday, signing 6-foot-7 right-hander Brandon McCarthy, 27, to a one-year deal worth a guaranteed \$1 million; incentives could more than double that amount. McCarthy was once among the most touted young pitchers in baseball, but he has been on the 60-day disabled list in each of the past three years because of a recurring stress fracture in his right shoulder.

McCarthy said that a new daily shoulder program has allowed him to pitch pain-free since he started it this past season. Assistant general manager David Forst said that the A's got a good medical report on McCarthy and also liked his performance during the summer at Triple-A (4-2, 3.36 ERA) and in the Dominican Republic, where he went 2-0 with a 1.96 ERA and struck out 11 and walked three in 23 innings. His fastball is around the 93 mph mark.

McCarthy will be in the mix for the fifth-starter spot, along with Outman, Tyson Ross and Bobby Cramer.

"It's been a long time, but at this stage, I'm as optimistic as I can be," McCarthy said. "Now I'm pitching, and I'm competing."

Devine deal: The A's signed arbitration-eligible reliever Joey Devine to a one-year deal worth about \$560,000. Devine, who had Tommy John surgery in 2009, said he is feeling good and he'll resume his throwing program Saturday.

Hideki Matsui's career stats

Position: DH Bats: Left Throws: Right Ht./Wt.: 6-2, 210 Age: 36

Yr	Tm	G	AB	R	H	2B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	BA	OBP	SLG
'03	NY Yankees	163	623	82	179	42	16	106	63	86	.287	.353	.435
'04	NY Yankees	162	584	109	174	34	31	108	88	103	.298	.390	.522
'05	NY Yankees	162	629	108	192	45	23	116	63	78	.305	.367	.496
'06	NY Yankees	51	172	32	52	9	8	29	27	23	.302	.393	.494
'07	NY Yankees	143	547	100	156	28	25	103	73	73	.285	.367	.488
'08	NY Yankees	93	337	43	99	17	9	45	38	47	.294	.370	.424
'09	NY Yankees	142	456	62	125	21	28	90	64	75	.274	.367	.509
'10	LAA	145	482	55	132	24	21	84	67	98	.274	.361	.459
8 seasons		1061	3830	591	1109	220	161	681	483	583	.290	.369	.479

The real Godzilla

A glance at Hideki Matsui. Career stats on Page B4.

-- Born June 12, 1974, in Ishikawa, Japan.

-- Hit .615 to win World Series MVP for 2009 Yankees.

-- When he left Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants to play in the States in 2003, he was Japan's most popular player, coming off a 50-homer season.

Drumbeat: Matsui gets physical tomorrow, then press conference in afternoon

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser 12/13/2010 2:15PM

Hideki Matsui won't take his A's physical until tomorrow morning, The Chronicle has learned from two sources, so there won't be any announcement today, unless it's one of those "pending a physical" types of announcements, and the A's don't really do those.

So the press conference introducing Matsui as the A's DH, on a one-year deal, will be tomorrow afternoon.

UPDATE: Brandon McCarthy agreed to a one-year deal with the A's, the team just announced. The Chronicle has learned that the contract is worth \$1 million guaranteed, and there are incentives that could increase the amount.

ESPN's Buster Olney has reported that the A's are also close to a deal with right-handed starter Brandon McCarthy, who missed last year because of a stress fracture in his shoulder. I haven't had that deal confirmed, but I do know of the team's interest in McCarthy as a potential fifth-starter candidate, and I wouldn't be surprised if the offer is similar to the one the A's made Justin Duchscherer last year, incentives heavy. Right now, the A's have some interesting possibilities in the mix - Bobby Cramer, Tyson Ross, Josh Outman - but not a lot of experience.

Also, the A's like to have lots of depth after all the DL issues they've had the past three years. Gio Gonzalez was the A's only pitcher to spend the entire season in the major-league rotation, so having some extra options....always a good thing.

Joey Devine avoided arbitration today with a one-year deal worth about \$560,000. If he's healthy, more than a year and a half after Tommy John surgery, the Oakland bullpen will be even deeper and better, and it's a good unit to begin with. Plus, Andrew Bailey is coming off a minor elbow cleanup and Michael Wuertz had some nagging injuries last year - as with the rotation, the A's want to be covered in the event of any problems.

I just talked to Devine and he's starting his throwing program again on Saturday; he said everything is feeling good after a year and a half he describes as "miserable."

UPDATE: One of the Japanese writers asked me if I thought Josh Outman would give up No. 55, which has been Matsui's number throughout his career - it was given to him in Japan, a nod to Sadaharu Oh's single-season home-run record.

So I checked with Outman to see if he would - once the signing is official, of course, I'm not trying to get the guy in trouble commenting on free agents not yet under contract. But hypothetically, Outman has no problem handing over No. 55; he assumes that Matsui will make it worth his while somehow, as is customary.

"I'll just give it to him and hope he's a standup guy," Outman said, adding, still hypothetically, "And hopefully, he'll hit 30 home runs- it'll be nice to have him in the middle of the lineup. It's tough to lose when you've got Godzilla."

I'm hearing the A's plan to introduce Matsui as No. 55, so Outman wasn't going to have much shot at making a deal for the number, anyway. As he pointed out to me, he just got assigned it when he arrived, he didn't ask for it. Nomar Garciaparra inquired about Outman's 55 at one point, when he couldn't get No. 5 from Matt Holliday, but he wound up wearing No. 1 instead.

UPDATE: The McCarthy signing also is complete; that's got to be one extensive physical, because he's been on the 60-day DL three years in a row. Drumbeat friend Melissa Lockard tweets that this signing sounds no different than Jason Jennings, but I'm assuming this is a big-league deal, unlike Jennings' - much more like Duchscherer's, especially considering the DL history. One thing to note: McCarthy is only 27 - if he's OK, he might be a little bit of a steal.

I'd heard \$5 million as a possibility for Matsui's deal yesterday, and one national writer hazarded a \$7 million guess. I'm thinking it's somewhere in the middle, probably less than the \$6.5 million he got last year. Mark Ellis and Coco Crisp are both making right around \$6 million. I could see in that ballpark for Matsui. Sheer speculation. Reasonable to think it's in that \$5-7 million range, certainly.

A's expected to ink Matsui following physical

One-year contract brings valuable designated hitter into fold

By Greg Johns / MLB.com

Having brought a big right-hander into their rotation mix on Monday in Brandon McCarthy, the A's are now expected to add a power left-handed bat Tuesday in veteran designated hitter Hideki Matsui.

After a quiet Winter Meetings, the A's are heating things up this week on the free-agency front. Matsui's anticipated signing is a welcome boost for a team that finished 13th out of 14 American League teams last year in home runs and was 11th in scoring.

A's officials are not confirming or commenting on Matsui's situation, but multiple media outlets have reported he's close to an agreement on a one-year deal. The San Francisco Chronicle was the first to report the 36-year-old will take a physical on Tuesday morning prior to an afternoon news conference announcing his new contract.

Meanwhile, the club came to terms Monday with McCarthy, a 6-foot-7 starter who will add further depth to Oakland's strong stable of young arms if he can stay healthy after a run of shoulder problems that he says are now behind him.

McCarthy told MLB.com he agreed to a one-year, \$1 million deal with incentives for more if he stays healthy and pitches well.

The A's finished 81-81 last year with a pitching staff that posted the AL's lowest earned run average, so adding some pop to the lineup figures to be the necessary next step.

The 6-foot-2, 210-pound Matsui hit .290 with 161 home runs and 681 RBIs in eight seasons in the Major Leagues since signing with the Yankees in 2003.

Matsui batted .274 with 21 home runs, 84 RBIs and a .361 on-base percentage last year after signing a one-year, \$6 million deal with the Angels.

Known as a clutch hitter, Matsui rang up a .312 batting average, 10 home runs, 39 RBIs and a .933 OPS in 56 postseason games with the Yankees. He was the World Series Most Valuable Player in '09.

An AL All-Star in 2003 and '04 while playing left field for the Yankees, Matsui has primarily been used as a designated hitter the past three years. He's played in the outfield in just 41 of his 380 games since '07.

Jack Cust, who handled the majority of the A's designated-hitter duty in '09, was non-tendered and signed with the Mariners last week.

Oakland's designated hitters ranked 13th of the 14 AL teams with 15 home runs last season and were seventh in on-base percentage [.338], eighth in RBIs [74], 10th in batting average [.246] and 11th in slugging percentage [.386].

A's sign right-hander McCarthy

Starter could bolster rotation if his shoulder is healthy

By Greg Johns / MLB.com

If Brandon McCarthy's shoulder is as healthy as he says, the Oakland A's landed another potential starter for their rotation Monday with the agreement on a one-year deal for the free-agent pitcher.

Shoulder problems have limited the big right-hander to 22 Major League starts over the past three seasons, but he says those issues are behind him now and he threw well at the end of last season in Triple-A ball and again in the Dominican Winter League.

McCarthy, 27, agreed to a \$1 million deal that includes further incentives if he stays healthy and performs well.

"Everything right now is 100 percent," McCarthy said as he prepared to fly home to Dallas after meeting with A's officials. "No issues have come back up. I just revamped my whole shoulder program and Texas took care of me as well as they could.

"Toward the end of last year I never felt any problems again and that carried over to the Dominican. Right now I'm as positive as I can be."

The 6-foot-7 McCarthy said he's never had surgery on his shoulder, but has been bothered by micro stress fractures in the back of his shoulder blade. He said now that doctors know what they're dealing with, he's going with a new routine and hoping the issue is in the past.

He has a 20-24 record and 4.56 ERA over five seasons with the White Sox and Rangers and was 7-4 with a 4.62 ERA in 17 starts for Texas in '09 before the problem flared up again. He was 4-2 with a 3.36 ERA in 11 appearances for Triple-A Oklahoma City in the Texas Rangers organization last year.

If healthy, he could provide further depth to an Oakland pitching staff that posted the lowest ERA in the American League last year. McCarthy made four starts in the Dominican Winter League and was 2-0 with a 1.96 ERA.

"This is a good setup," he said of the A's. "Over the last few years I've had a chance to see them up close in the AL West and I know how much young talent and cool young clubhouse they've got.

"I hope to just fit in that rotation. Watching [Brett] Anderson and [Trevor] Cahill and [Dallas] Braden and Gio [Gonzalez] the last few years, those are guys with great stuff and composure. My job is to fit in wherever they need me. I'd definitely love and prefer starting and hopefully I can get that fifth spot and hold the line there."

McCarthy was originally selected by the White Sox in the 17th round of the '02 Draft and spent two years in the Major Leagues with Chicago before being traded to the Rangers in '06.

This was his first shot at free agency and he said the experience was interesting.

"A lot of teams checked in and everybody was doing research on the medical issue," he said. "I got some good offers, but Oakland was the best fit. It had everything we needed. It's a great pitcher's ballpark and they showed a good commitment to me. Plus I'm a huge soccer fan and their front office is obsessed with soccer, so that was good to go with it."

Now the key will be kicking his own injury history and proving he's able to be a consistent starter in the Major Leagues once again.

Based on his recent run, the big man feels he's ready. He closed out his season strong at Oklahoma City and carried that over with Toros del Este in the Dominican Winter League.

"That was a good test," he said. "Everything felt good that last month [in Triple-A]. I was throwing 100 pitches a start and bouncing back five days later. That's why I was excited to get back to the Dominican and keep that going.

"And once I got there, no problems. That was a cool experience and just kind of boosted my confidence, knowing we're on the right page and everything feels good."

A's sign reliever Devine to one-year deal

By Greg Johns / MLB.com

Reliever Joey Devine, who hasn't pitched in the Major Leagues since 2008, agreed with the A's on a one-year contract Monday to avoid salary arbitration.

Devine, 27, sat out the last two seasons after undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow. He was 6-1 with a 0.59 ERA in 42 relief appearances for Oakland in '08.

The right-hander has a 2.48 ERA in 67 career appearances, having pitched the first three years of his Major League career with Atlanta.

No contract terms were released, but Devine earned \$557,500 in '10.

Oakland now has five remaining players eligible for arbitration: pitchers Dallas Braden, Craig Breslow and Brad Ziegler, outfielder Conor Jackson and third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff.

AP source: A's and Hideki Matsui nearing deal

By JANIE McCAULEY, AP Baseball Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) - Free agent slugger Hideki Matsui and the Oakland Athletics worked Monday to finalize a contract that would make him the team's new designated hitter.

A person with knowledge of the deal confirmed to The Associated Press that the sides were close. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because there was no formal announcement.

The A's also agreed to terms with right-hander Joey Devine on a one-year contract worth \$557,500, leaving five players eligible for arbitration: Dallas Braden, Craig Breslow, Conor Jackson, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Brad Ziegler.

Oakland general manager Billy Beane has been looking for a DH this winter to boost production in the middle of the batting order. The A's hit just 109 homers and scored 663 runs last season, their second-fewest in the last 28 non-strike seasons.

The 36-year-old Matsui batted .274 with 21 home runs and 84 RBIs last season with the Los Angeles Angels, the Athletics' AL West rival. He spent his first seven major league seasons with the New York Yankees and was MVP of the 2009 World Series.

Last week, Oakland failed to reach agreement on a contract with Japanese pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma during the allotted 30-day negotiating period.

With a talented young pitching staff, the A's stayed in the division chase until late in the season, losing out to Texas, and finished 81-81 for second place in the division. That was despite using the disabled list 23 times, two shy of the franchise record set in 2008.

Manager Bob Geren was forced to mix and match in the designated hitter spot after six-time Gold Glove third baseman Eric Chavez wound up injured yet again and played in only 33 games. Jack Cust, who played 88 games at DH in 2010, signed last week with the Seattle Mariners.

Devine, who gets the same deal he had last season, missed the past two seasons recovering from reconstructive Tommy John elbow surgery in April 2009. He last pitched in the majors in 2008, going 6-1 with a 0.59 ERA in 42 relief appearances for Oakland.

Urban: Matsui, DeJesus might be enough for A's

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

As early as Monday, the A's are expected to announce that they've reached a contract agreement with designated hitter Hideki Matsui.

Matsui, 36, has been Oakland's top DH target from Day One of the offseason, so if a deal is reached, it's a rare victory in what -- thus far -- has been a winter of discontent.

If it's the only victory, it's not quite enough to get anyone overly jazzed about the A's as legitimate title contenders in 2011.

Landing target No. 1, third baseman Adrian Beltre, and Matsui would have done that for sure.

Landing Matsui alone, however, should at least allow for dreamers to dream.

Will Matsui improve Oakland's offense? Sure. He hit 21 homers in a down year for the Angels last season, and Kevin Kouzmanoff was the A's leader in long balls last season with 17.

"Godzilla," as Matsui is known in his native Japan, is an on-base machine, too. His .361 OBP last season was his lowest since it was .353 during his rookie season with the Yankees in 2003.

You have to use the word "rookie" loosely when it comes to players such as Matsui, of course. He was a legend during nine seasons with a Yomiuri Giants in Japan, where he hit 50 homers the year before leaving for America.

Don't forget about Oakland's David DeJesus trade, either. DeJesus certainly isn't a power hitter, and that's what the A's know they most need, but he's a very good all-around player whose game on both sides of the ball should play well in the large outfield gaps at the Oakland Coliseum.

Is DeJesus a legitimate No. 3 hitter? Not really. He is the best option for the role on the A's roster at present, though -- unless you have some strange Daric Barton obsession/delusion.

Barton is an excellent defensive first baseman who handles the bat well and takes more than his share of walks, but he's never going to be a 20-homer guy in the big leagues. He's a No. 2, 6 or 7 in an ideal world, with Kouzmanoff a No. 5 at best.

Is Matsui a legitimate No. 4 hitter? Again, that's a bit of a stretch, especially when you factor in his age and the new yard he'll be calling home. When you think cleanup hitter, you think 30-homer guys, and Matsui hasn't hit more than 28 homers since 2004.

This while playing in both old and new Yankee Stadium, mind you. Those parks were/are heaven for left-handed power hitters. The Coliseum can be hell.

Yet like DeJesus, Matsui is more of a gap-to-gap guy. He's no great shakes on the bases, but he hits plenty of balls the other way into the left-center alley, and that should translate to plenty of doubles.

It's important not to get caught up in the concept of power here. Sure, a guy who can give you the lightning strike that is a three-run homer is a great luxury, and the A's enjoyed such luxuries when Jason Giambi, Miguel Tejada, Jermaine Dye and Frank Thomas were menacing opponents at various stages over the past decade.

But these aren't your older brother's A's. They are your A's, and your A's are going to have to hope they hit enough two-run doubles to mitigate the dearth of three-run homers.

Assuming complimentary players such as Coco Crisp, Barton, Kurt Suzuki and Ryan Sweeney stay healthy and live up to their potential, DeJesus and Matsui can hit those doubles -- and they'll be hitting them for a most thankful band of young pitchers who have been trying to make due with RBI singles and sacrifice flies for the better part of the past three years.

Starters Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden -- four-fifths of a rotation that might be adding Brandon McCarthy via free agency soon -- have been conditioned to keep games close, to walk a tightrope without a safety net.

Give them something of a net, even if it's a little tattered -- DeJesus has a recent injury history and Matsui is on the wrong side of his prime -- and they just might justify the Oakland brass' contention that playoff contention is closer than we might think.

2010 Year In Review: Cougars Hitters, P1

David Malamut, OaklandClubhouse.com

Dec 8, 2010

Our 2010 Year in Review series continues, with a move from the mound to the plate. In a three-part series, David Malamut takes a look at the hitters for the 2010 Kane County Cougars. He begins with the catchers.

2010 Kane County Cougars

Team Batting Average: .255 (9th out of 16 teams)

Team OBP: .337 (3rd)

Team OPS: 710 (9th)

HRs: 66 (13th)

The Catchers

This year the Cougars had a top catching prospect in Athletics' system, 2009 4th round pick Max Stassi. He played most of the games at catcher for Kane County this year. He would be backed up for most of the year by second-year Cougars catcher Juan Nunez. Chris Affinito also played in a few games at the position.

Stassi would show some big improvement throughout the year. At the start of the year, his defense was questionable. He did not get his throws down to second very well and did not get down on the ball to block it. As the season went along, Stassi was always out there early, working on the defensive part of his game and it showed. As the season came to a close he was really starting to play very well behind the plate.

Throughout the season throwing out runners he would be 42-125 which is .336%. That is a great number considering he was something like 0 for his first 20 or so on the year. At the start of the year, almost all of the throws would be on the shortstop side of the bag, but he got a lot better.

During the year there was also a marked improvement on his blocking balls that were down or in the dirt. He still would have 10 passed balls and make 14 errors, but most of the errors were throws in the start of the year. At the end of the season he got down and blocked balls low and outside a lot better.

He was also dealing with a lot of injuries throughout the year, but battled through those and improved significantly. He would miss five games in July because of a left thumb injury and he would have minor injuries the whole year.

Hitting-wise, he struggled. Some might say the worst thing that he did this year to himself was hit two homers in early April. He struggled, but he was very beat up, and a lot of the time he was moving runners along and doing some little things to get runners into scoring position. He gave up a lot of at bats because of how beat up he was.

Then there is the strike outs; 141 strikeouts is something to worry about. At the start and towards the middle of the season he almost always started out each at bat 0-2, which is going to result in a lot of strike outs. He also is a very patient hitter, too patient, and that is one thing that led to a lot of the strikeouts. He would walk 45 times during the year.

All told, Stassi played in 110 games as a 19-year-old catcher in his first full season in pro ball, netting 465 at-bats and 94 hits. He would tie for the team lead in homers with 13 and also drive in 51 runs. He had a OPS of .690. Considering his age, position and the nature of the league, it wasn't a bad offensive performance.

Nunez played in 44 games, hitting .171 on the year with one homer and six RBI. He did get a few big hits in the games he played. His average was bad but he did some good things.

Defensively, he is a work in progress, as he doesn't block the ball down very well. He would have six passed balls and 10 errors this year and he threw out 19% of runners attempting to steal.

Affinito really didn't have that much of an opportunity to play catcher this year. He played six games behind the plate, mostly when Nunez couldn't go and Stassi was hurt. He had one big game offensively in which he hit three homers. He would also spend time with Vancouver and the A's Rookie League team in Arizona.

2010 Year In Review: Cougars Hitters, P2

Our 2010 Year in Review series continues, with a move from the mound to the plate. In a three-part series, David Malamut takes a look at the hitters for the 2010 Kane County Cougars. He continues with the infielders.

2010 Kane County Cougars

Team Batting Average: .255 (9th out of 16 teams)

Team OBP: .337 (3rd)

Team OPS: .710 (9th)

HRs: 66 (13th)

Runs Scored: 669 (6th)

The Cougars infield in 2010 played great as a whole, and some of them showed a lot of progress throughout the year. [Anthony Aliotti](#), [Conner Crumbliss](#), [Michael Gilmartin](#) and [Leonardo Gil](#) made up the everyday infield. [Jason Christian](#) and [Nino Leyja](#) also made contributions.

Aliotti played 133 games, hitting .278 as the everyday first baseman and regular clean-up hitter. He wasn't a traditional clean-up hitter, as he had only five homers, but he chipped in 77 runs batted in, along with 29 doubles. His problem was 132 strikeouts, although he balanced that with 92 walks and a .397 OBP. Aliotti did have 14 stolen bases in 18 chances and scored 75 runs, but grounded into nine double plays. As the season progressed, he improved at the plate, putting up a 715 OPS before the All-Star break and an 826 OPS after. His defense was good at first, as he could pick the ball well out of the dirt and saved numerous errors for other Cougars' infielders.

Crumbliss spent his second pro season with the Cougars and really played well. He led the league in walks with 126, while hitting .271. His .421 OBP was second in the league behind [Jason Hagerty](#). Most of the year he lead-off or hit second. Crumbliss hit five homers and drove in 56 runs in 134 games. He scored 95 runs and stole 24 bases in 32 chances. Like Aliotti, Crumbliss improved as the season went on, batting .245/.400/.318 before the break and .295/.441/.419 after. He really doesn't have that one tool that jumps out at you, but is a solid ballplayer.

Gilmartin struggled this year but showed signs of what he could become. He only hit .245 in 119 games five homers and 53 runs batted in, mostly hitting low in the order. Gilmartin struck out 118 times and only walked 46 times. After the All-Star break, Gilmartin had a 791 OPS, an improvement of more than 100 points over his first half. His defense got better as the year moved on at shortstop. He committed a lot of errors, but showed good range and got to a lot of balls. His throwing was off as he rushed a lot.

Gil played great throughout the season. This was his second year in Kane County. He was a middle of the order hitter most of the year for the Cougars, as well as their third baseman. In 118 games he hit .252 with 13 homers and 72 runs batted in. He had 26 doubles and six triples. Gil only walked 26 times though, and struck out 107 in 437 at bats, and his OBP was a paltry .296. His .428 SLG was tops among Cougars' regulars, however, and it will be interesting to see what kind of power numbers he can put up in Stockton.

Christian began the year in Stockton, but an injury cost him his spot on that roster and he returned to the Cougars during the second half of the season. He played 58 games in Kane County this year, playing second, short and third. He hit .277 with four homers and 32 runs batted in. He also stole 11 bases and scored 31 runs. Christian looked a bit rusty when he first returned to the Cougars, but he was swinging the bat really well over the final month of the season.

Leyja played in 19 games and hit .224 for the Cougars. He played a lot of second and third throughout the season, but was sent down to Vancouver for most of the second half of the year.