

A's News Clips, Wednesday, December 15, 2010

Light-hitting Oakland A's add some pop by signing free agent Hideki Matsui

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's can only hope their play in 2011 generates the type of media stir they created with Tuesday's introduction of their new designated hitter.

Close to 200 people -- a large majority from Japanese media outlets -- crammed into the Oakland Coliseum's interview room for the arrival of Hideki Matsui, who signed a one-year, \$4.25 million contract and became just the third Japanese player to wear an A's uniform.

"Holy cow," A's general manager Billy Beane said, surveying the scene as he took his seat next to Matsui.

Oakland's floundering offense instantly becomes more credible with Matsui, 36, who is past his prime but still will command pitchers' respect in the middle of the order.

But given last season's offensive struggles by the A's, Matsui alone might not be enough for the team to generate more runs. And Beane said more moves might come.

"This is a good step," Beane said of Matsui's addition. "We still have a lot of offseason left, and we're going to continue to improve other areas of the club, not just offense. "... (But) certainly offense will be the focus."

He left open the possibility of swinging a trade to improve the team rather than relying solely on free agency, an about-face from the team's stated intentions earlier this winter.

"It's getting a little late (to sign free agents)," Beane said. "There's not a lot of guys out there, but there are some guys we have some interest in. "... We have to be open-minded to (possible trades). But the first guys people ask for are our pitchers. We're going to hold on to those guys as much as we can."

The A's have just \$35,447,500 committed to their 2011 payroll, although salaries for five players eligible for arbitration will increase that figure, so they are in good shape to sign more free agents.

But they're reluctant to sign hitters who might make them weaker defensively, even though a lack of offense is their most glaring shortcoming.

A source confirmed the A's have talked with free-agent pitcher Rich Harden -- who spent five-plus injury-prone seasons with the team (2003-08).

Their biggest offseason catch so far is Matsui, the 2009 World Series MVP with the nickname "Godzilla." Before signing with the New York Yankees in 2003, he built a reputation as the top power hitter in Japan's professional leagues.

He hit .274 with 21 homers and 84 RBIs last season with the Los Angeles Angels, and A's manager Bob Geren said Matsui will hit fourth or fifth.

"I really look forward to this team," Matsui said through his interpreter, Roger Kahlon. "There's definitely a strong possibility for us to make the postseason."

He shared that he was a fan of the "Bash Brothers"-era A's while a teenager in Japan, though he confessed he had no idea Beane played for those teams.

He did say he's read "Moneyball," and asked for his impression of Beane from afar, Matsui offered: "He's not like a general manager. I feel he's like somebody you meet in the financial district in San Francisco."

In attendance Tuesday was Hiroshi Inomata, the Consul General of Japan in San Francisco. And there's thought the A's could benefit from a marketing standpoint from Matsui's global appeal.

Matsui said he's hopeful his presence will bring more Asian fans to A's games.

Beane was asked if Matsui's potential payoff from a marketing standpoint factored into the motivation to sign him.

"I think (Tuesday's turnout) shows you people are interested in Hideki Matsui around the world," Beane said. "That in itself is good. (But) people come out to watch him as a baseball player, first and foremost."

Poole: Offseason acquisitions are making Oakland A's relevant again

By Monte Poole, Oakland Tribune columnist

After four years on the sideline of the local sports landscape, mostly dropping out of real competition to shout intentions to move, the folks in charge of the Oakland Baseball Company are showing signs of going back to their core business.

By rumor and hint and actual action, the goal for 2011 seems to be about shedding the recent irrelevance and getting back to the thing that matters most.

Back to baseball, the actual game.

The A's on Tuesday introduced Hideki Matsui as a member of their team, signing the free-agent designated hitter to a one-year contract at a palatable base salary of \$4.25 million. The line-drive hitter should bring some left-handed thump to the middle of what has been a lightweight Oakland lineup and some presence to what has been a low-wattage clubhouse.

Arriving a month after David DeJesus was acquired through a trade with Kansas City, Matsui, 36, is the second respected bat acquired by the A's this offseason. More to the point, though, A's general manager Billy Beane sounds as if he's seeking more -- hitters and pitchers.

"One of the benefits of having a young team and paring back the last few years is that you'll get to a point where you'll have major league players at low cost and you'll have some flexibility, which is where we're at this year," Beane said. "Is it relative to everybody else, to some of the deals that are out there? No. But for us, it's a little more unique.

"So we have been able to be a little more aggressive. And we still have some of the offseason, so we'll see where it goes. We plan on trying to be aggressive."

It sounds as if Beane is moving out of his minority-owner seat and back into his baseball GM seat, which would be the best kind of news for those still paying attention to the A's.

And it might be enough to get the attention of those who have tuned out the club amid the fuss about the Coliseum, the chatter about leaving Oakland, the "Moneyball" movie and, through it all, four consecutive non-winning seasons.

As tough as it has been lately for committed fans, watching a dull team going nowhere, it got tougher for A's fans in 2010 because the Giants won the World Series.

"But we made a conscious effort a few years ago in saying, 'Listen we're going to take a step back,' which we did," Beane said. "We successfully did that.

"This year, with the development of the young pitching, we have a chance of taking a step forward -- which, hopefully, would put the focus back on (baseball)."

This was Beane's way of conceding that after eight straight winning seasons, the last four editions of the A's stunk it up, by their "own doing."

And as the baseball suffered, what also happened was that the most interesting dialogue related to the team was about its future destination.

It now seems, as some have assumed all along, that future likely will be in Oakland, at least as the first option. That was the talk in the wake of the winter meetings last week and it always was the most logical option, no matter what managing partner Lew Wolff said, or how firmly he said it, because Oakland was the place with the standing ballpark.

Even if that ballpark was one that Beane in recent years has cited as a liability in his pursuit of free agents.

Not so Tuesday, when Beane and Matsui good-naturedly massaged a room filled with about 200 reporters, reporter types, innocuous gawkers and A's employees.

"This could be a fun town when we're winning," Beane said. "It's a lotta fun. Sometimes I have to remind some of the people who aren't familiar with that atmosphere -- the last few years, drawing players here has been tough. But I remind them to talk to some of the guys who were here just a few years ago and they'll tell you this is still one of the funnest places to play when you're winning.

"So, ultimately, we do hope to get to that. I do think there's some really great things (about) this town, this city and even this stadium, when you have a winning team."

The game has changed in Oakland, and so has the tune. Matsui's arrival, after DeJesus', is a part of that. Third baseman Adrian Beltre, for one, remains available.

With the contracts of Eric Chavez and Ben Sheets off the books, Beane still has money to spend. He says he plans to spend it.

He should. It's time for the franchise to get back to baseball. Time for the A's to matter again.

A's ballpark clears early hurdle

Angela Woodall, Oakland Tribune

The proposal to build a 39,000-seat ballpark near the Oakland Estuary cleared its first financial hurdle Tuesday by garnering enough support to move forward on funding an environmental impact review.

The 3-1 vote came during a regular City Council Community and Economic Development Agency meeting. The vote was pushed up so that the full City Council can decide Tuesday on whether to allow the city to pay environmental and planning consultants LSA Associates Inc. \$750,000 for the report.

The decision marks an early but significant step in the effort to build a new ballpark for the Oakland A's.

The city chose the Victory Court site after representatives from Major League Baseball signaled they preferred that waterfront location over others proposed nearby.

The city has to move quickly on the environmental review in order to build the ballpark by Opening Day 2015. But Councilmember Ignacio De La Fuente (Glenview-Fruitvale) held out Tuesday for a guarantee from MLB or A's co-owner Lew Wolff that they will consider keeping the team in Oakland. Wolff is determined to take the team to San Jose.

"Everything is just nebulous," De La Fuente said Tuesday before opposing the proposal. He has cited the 1994 deal with the Oakland Raiders, which brought the team back from Los Angeles, in his opposition.

The deal ended up costing the public millions of dollars because attendance never lived up to expectations. De La Fuente said he will not repeat the same mistake with an A's ballpark that could cost \$500 million to build.

"The only one spending any money is the city," De La Fuente said.

The \$750,000 for the report would come from redevelopment funds set aside for a garage planned for 21st Street and Telegraph Avenue. Councilmember Nancy Nadel (West Oakland-Downtown) objected to taking money from the garage to pay for a "pie in the sky" project when parking is becoming a problem in the Uptown entertainment district.

In the end, the committee added a provision that allows the city to cancel the contract with LSA Associates and pay only for work that has been finished.

"All we are doing is holding out our options. If we do not start this EIR, we will not be able to compete," Councilmember Jane Brunner (North Oakland) said. MLB has shown it is interested, she added. "We need to stay interested also."

Hideki Matsui gives A's a face and presence

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Hideki Matsui brings international stardom to the A's, along with nearly 500 home runs, counting his days in Japan and in the major leagues. He was the MVP of a World Series, and he provides a real presence, a face, for a young and promising team.

Plus, after signing a one-year deal worth \$4.25 million with Oakland on Tuesday, he's no longer with a division rival.

"To have Godzilla by the bay instead of Anaheim - that's big for us," A's starter Dallas Braden said. "It's awesome. This guy brings a totally different ingredient."

During a news conference at the Coliseum, A's general manager Billy Beane said that the team had wanted to go after Matsui when he left the Yankees after the 2009 season, but the Angels moved too quickly. "We jumped on board pretty quick this year," Beane said.

Matsui, who followed the Oakland teams of the late '80s in Japan, said he appreciated the fact that the A's pursued him so strongly. He likes the team's promise, saying he believes the A's have "a strong chance to go to the postseason."

"Hopefully, I can lead by example and really help propel them to the next level," Matsui said through his longtime translator, Roger Kahlon.

Matsui, who has hit 493 homers between Japan and the big leagues, is expected to be a full-time designated hitter and bat in the middle of the order, probably cleanup. His problematic knees have improved, and he will work out in the outfield and be available to play there during interleague games.

A's catcher Kurt Suzuki said, "I like this. I think it's great for us young hitters to have a guy like Matsui around. It gives us someone to look up to. He's done it all, he's a champion and he's a pure professional.

"Everyone says Oakland doesn't have any pop, but adding Matsui gives us more power. It doesn't matter how old he is, he's a threat in the lineup, a presence."

Matsui is 36, and his home run total dipped from 28 with New York in 2009 to 21 last season. The A's were second-to-last in the American League in homers. Will signing only Matsui be enough, considering that initially the club was talking about adding both third baseman Adrian Beltre and a DH?

Beane said that the team is still looking to add players, and the priority remains offense. With the free-agent market thinning, the A's might consider trades, Beane said, but he added that they'd prefer not to move their best young starters. Some high-profile teams, especially the Yankees, need pitching and might be willing to deal a big bat to get it.

Oakland has more money available than usual this winter and hasn't spent a ton. There's a small chance the A's could revisit the idea of signing Beltre, even though they withdrew their offer to him earlier in the month, convinced he does not want to play in Oakland.

If Magglio Ordoñez still can play the outfield on a surgically repaired ankle, he'd have to be a consideration for a team that has lacked power on the corners. His agent, Scott Boras, has called the market for Ordoñez "impressive," however, which might put him out of range.

Among the A's free-agent pitcher targets: onetime A's starter Rich Harden, who is a potential bullpen option. The team also has talked to former Oakland All-Star Justin Duchscherer.

Japanese media follow Matsui to Oakland

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle, 12/15/2010

It's not just him. Matsui goes nowhere alone. He keeps a lot of company, including an interpreter (Roger Kahlon), media coordinator (Isao Hirooka) and a conga line of reporters who track his every step.

The A's had three traveling beat writers last season. Next year, add 15 to 20 more. Plus TV crews. The Coliseum press box, rarely full for baseball games, could overflow. In the clubhouse, Matsui gets the Barry Bonds treatment, a swarm of reporters following just him.

A's games are expected to be televised live to Japan, just as Angels games were last season when Matsui was Anaheim-based.

"Oakland will be very famous in Japan," said Gaku Tashiro of Sankei Sports, who has covered Matsui throughout his eight-year big-league career. But will the A's be famous in Oakland? Matsui's 2009 Angels averaged 40,004 fans per game.

His 2008 Yankees brought in 53,069. He's coming to a team that last season drew 17,511.

"In the past, I did notice the fan situation here," Matsui said, "but the important thing is, if we play well as a team, the fans will follow."

The A's hope for an attendance spike but insist this was all about improving the offense. "I never bought into the whole idea you sign novelty acts," general manager Billy Beane said. "My interest in Hideki is he's a good hitter. If he helps us win, we'll draw people. If there's more beyond that, great. (Attendance) was not a factor at all."

Managing general partner Lew Wolff, while reiterating the signing was a baseball move, called Matsui "perhaps the most revered player by Japanese fans here and abroad," which Wolff admitted can only help attendance.

Other revenue could come in the form of Japanese sponsorships. Last year, the Angels had at least 10.

The Japanese consul general in San Francisco was in attendance Tuesday. In a green tie.

"I'm a great fan of Matsuisan," Hiroshi Inomata said. "I'd really like to see a game. At the same time, I'm in San Francisco, and it's nice to see the Giants as champions. So far, it's OK because Matsui-san plays in the American League. If there's a World Series between the Giants and Athletics, well, it puts me in a rather difficult position."

The A's set up 80 seats for the gathering, and they filled quickly. Throw in nearly 20 cameras, and it was the A's best-attended news conference since the 2006 ALCS.

When Beane walked in and saw the big crowd, he said, "Holy cow — wow, if I'd known it was going to be like this, I would have signed you a long time ago, Hideki." Public-relations man Bob Rose said, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Billy."

It's typical for Matsui, who's not only a fan favorite but also a media favorite. As Tashiro said, "Since 2003, he never said, 'No comment today.' I think he's a very good veteran player for a young A's team. A good person, too. He always pays attention to teammates and isn't selfish — willing to hit a groundball to advance runners — so the young players can see him as a mentor."

Funny guy, too. Several times, Matsui cracked up the audience. He was a fan of the Bash Brothers and apologized for not knowing Beane was on the team. He also said Beane appears less of a GM and more of "someone you'd meet in the Financial District in San Francisco."

When asked about wearing white shoes to complement his green and gold uniform, Matsui said, "I just found that out right now. White shoes? I'll let you know."

Outside, an A's fan hung a Japanese flag. Apparently a big Matsui fan. He wore a Rickey Henderson jersey. Just wait.

Matsui jerseys are coming.

A's complete deal to sign Matsui

One-year contract brings valuable designated hitter into fold

By Chris Haft / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Hideki Matsui's official introduction to the A's on Tuesday turned out to be partly a cultural event, partly a comedy routine and partly a source of good, old-fashioned Hot Stove baseball talk.

Matsui, who agreed to a one-year, \$4.25 million deal that includes \$100,000 in incentive bonuses, is expected to strengthen the A's offense as their designated hitter, a spot where the club was lacking last season.

"He has a combination of power and [hitting] for average and on-base percentage," A's manager Bob Geren said of Matsui, who hit .274 with 21 home runs and 84 RBIs with the Angels last season. "And he can be a situational hitter. He's going to fit in really well. We haven't had anybody with his pedigree and experience."

The A's also have had few athletes who created the kind of fuss Matsui generated with his news conference at the Oakland Coliseum. Approximately 100 reporters from Matsui's native Japan covered the 45-minute session, which also was aired on the Tokyo Broadcasting System.

"Holy cow!" A's general manager Billy Beane exclaimed under his breath when he entered the conference room and observed the throng. To Matsui, Beane said, "If I had known it was going to be like this, I would have signed you a long time ago."

Japan's consul general in San Francisco, Hiroshi Inomata, even showed up. Like Matsui, he received an A's home jersey emblazoned with No. 55, the number the slugger has worn since he achieved stardom with the Yomiuri Giants (1993-2002) and the New York Yankees (2003-09).

"He's a cult figure and rock star in Japan," an admiring Geren said of Matsui, who has compiled a .290 average, 161 home runs, 681 RBIs and an .848 OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage) in eight Major League seasons.

Matsui charmed the audience with his dry wit, which interpreter Roger Kahlon gladly relayed.

Asked for his impression of Beane, who was seated next to him on the dais, Matsui checked out Beane's coat-and-tie outfit and replied, "He's not like a general manager. I feel like he's somebody you meet in the financial district in San Francisco."

Matsui gained a measure of appreciation for the A's in the late 1980s when Major League telecasts spread to Japan, enabling him and other fans to see the exploits of the "Bash Brothers," Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire. Told that Beane was a reserve outfielder for the 1989 A's, Matsui aroused more laughter by remarking, "I'm sorry. I did not know."

Matsui's remarks about Oakland's uniforms also prompted mild amusement. Asked how he felt about wearing green, he said, "Whether I look good in green or not, I'll leave that to everybody else." Asked what he thought about wearing the A's traditional white shoes, Matsui said, "Actually, I just found that out right now."

A reporter asked Matsui about his house-hunting plans. He replied, "Honestly, I haven't made a decision yet, but is there anything you recommend?"

Make no mistake: Matsui wasn't auditioning to become a late-night talk show host. He was all business when the subject turned to baseball.

Praising Oakland's pitching staff, Matsui said that the club had a "strong possibility" of reaching the postseason. "Hopefully I can lead as an example," he said.

Matsui likes being appreciated as much as any ballplayer. That's why he signed with the A's, who Beane said had coveted him since his Yankees heyday. "The only thing I think was the most important factor was they really wanted me to be here," Matsui said in explaining his decision to join the A's. "They really pursued me."

Matsui insisted that he's unfazed by the A's attendance, which pales in comparison to the home crowds he performed for in New York and Anaheim. "The important thing is, if we play well as a team, I think the fans will follow," he said.

Matsui brushed aside the potential distractions of switching teams and changing homes.

"It all comes down to focusing on baseball," he said. "So it's not something that's really difficult, in my opinion."

Ziegler begins troop visit in Middle East

By Brad Ziegler / MLB.com

Editor's note: A's reliever Brad Ziegler is in the midst of an overseas trip in the Middle East, where he is visiting American troops. While he cannot specify his exact locations due to security purposes, Ziegler will be updating fans on his activities, as well as his thoughts on the adventure, throughout his stay. This is his first entry.

Hey, baseball fans!

It's been an eventful 24 hours so far here on base in the Middle East. I've thoroughly enjoyed meeting the many troops stationed here, and I've tried to do my best to pass along the gratitude that I (and many of you) deeply feel for the sacrifices they're making to protect our nation and preserve our many freedoms. And we don't ever want to forget the sacrifices being made by the families left at home by those who have been deployed -- a gracious "thank you" to all of you.

I'm here with Devon Harris, the captain and driver for the original Jamaican bobsled team. Devon is now a motivational speaker, and he's got a great story of perseverance to tell. Among the many things we have planned with the troops while we're here are a couple viewings of "Cool Runnings" -- a movie that helped make their team famous, but that Devon admits is very much Hollywood-altered. Even still, that should be a blast!

We got to take a tour of the city here outside the base, just to get an idea of what life here is like. It's a beautiful area with a very poor, simple way of life for many of the citizens. However, even when you see similar situations in stories on the news back in the U.S., the television simply doesn't do that scenario justice. It's pretty surreal to see people actually living in these conditions. It further emphasizes the fact that we are a very blessed nation.

After the tour, we returned to the base for lunch. Then we spent the afternoon shopping (both for everyday goods and for souvenirs) and resting. They had a busy evening planned for us, and despite the sometimes brutal travel schedule during the season, I've never before felt jet lag to this extreme.

After we rested up, we had the privilege of meeting the Commanding Officer (CO) on the base, as well as a couple of the other high-ranking officers stationed here (Executive Officer, Command Master Chief, et al). The CO presented both Devon and me with commemorative coins from the base as a token of appreciation for the visit. Awesome stuff ...

After dinner on base, Devon and I changed into our workout clothes and headed over to the base softball/soccer field. We each gave a brief talk about how we've overcome adversity in our careers/lives, then proceeded to participate in a fun "celebrity" softball game with a group of troops and officers, as well as a handful of enthusiastic onlookers rooting for all of us!

I played a sparkling shortstop (haha) and went 4-for-4 with two home runs (including the game-winner), and my team won, 15-14. We had a fantastic time, and we stayed around to sign autographs and pose for pictures for over an hour after the game finished. After receiving some more tokens of appreciation (so thankful!), we headed to "Chow Hall" (as it's commonly called) for a late-night snack with a little NFL action -- Bucs vs. Redskins on the Armed Forces Network. That brought a great sense of being home -- just wish they'd have been showing the Chiefs/Chargers game.

On a good note (at least at the time I'm writing this), my fantasy team is in great shape against the team run by fellow reliever Jerry Blevins after the first round of NFL games, largely due to a monster game by Darren McFadden. It's early in the late-afternoon NFL games, even though it's in the wee hours of the morning here in the Middle East.

Follow me online for quick updates along the way, as well as pictures and videos that will come after the trip has been concluded: <http://twitter.com/bradziegler> and <http://www.facebook.com/bradziegler31>.

Thanks to everyone again for your thoughts and prayers for my safety and the safety of our brave men and women stationed all over the world... Hope to update you again soon! Only time will tell what our schedule holds and how much Internet access we'll have.

Matsui is A's new DH

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OAKLAND — Despite the language barrier, Hideki Matsui cracked jokes with general manager Billy Beane and showed he should fit in quite nicely with the easygoing Athletics.

The A's are thrilled to have him as their new power hitter in the middle of the lineup, not to mention as a veteran clubhouse presence for a young team.

Matsui finalized a \$4.25 million, one-year contract with Oakland on Tuesday after he passed a physical. The sides had agreed to terms over the weekend. Matsui can earn an additional \$100,000 in performance bonuses.

Matsui acknowledged there isn't a big free-agent market for designated hitters.

"The most important factor was they really wanted me to be here, they really pursued me," Matsui said through his interpreter, Roger Kahlon.

Oakland formally introduced Matsui on Tuesday afternoon in a news conference attended by more than 100 media members — mostly Japanese reporters — and featuring 17 television cameras.

"Holy cow!" Beane said upon entering the room. "Wow, if I'd known it was going to be like this, I would have signed you a long time ago, Hideki."

Also in attendance was Hiroshi Inomata, Japan's consul general in San Francisco. Beane presented him with a white No.55 Matsui jersey. One fan hung a Japanese flag outside the Coliseum near where the players exit.

The A's have to hope Matsui will attract more fans after years of poor attendance, despite a run to the AL championship series in 2006.

He provides a reliable bat in the heart of the order that Beane had been seeking this offseason.

"We have a regular, professional middle-of-the-lineup hitter we desperately needed," manager Bob Geren said.

"He has a combination of power and hits for average and on-base percentage. He can also be a situational hitter. We haven't had anybody with his pedigree and experience. He's going to fit in real well. He's a cult figure and rock star in Japan."

Matsui, who turns 37 in June, batted .274 with 21 home runs and 84 RBIs last season with the Angels. In eight years in the majors, he has a .290 batting average, .369 on-base percentage, 161 homers and 681 RBIs. He spent his first seven major-league seasons with the Yankees and was MVP of the 2009 World Series.

Beane called Matsui "one of the greatest hitters in the history of Japanese baseball" and said "our interest goes way back but our ability to sign him came this year."

Regarding having Beane — subject of the best-seller "Moneyball" for his innovative style — as his boss, Matsui said: "He's not like a general manager. I feel like he's someone you meet in the financial district in San Francisco."

When someone asked if he liked his new colors of green and gold, he quipped, "I'll leave that to everybody else."

He has his mind on baseball. His balky knees feel strong and Matsui hopes to improve on two straight seasons in which his batting average was a career-low .274.

There won't be another Japanese player alongside him after all. Last week, Oakland failed to reach agreement on a contract with 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 AL West. That was despite using the disabled list 23 times, two shy of the franchise record set in 2008.

Oakland hasn't reached the playoffs since that '06 run.

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.

"There is a strong possibility for us to go beyond the regular season," Matsui said. "Hopefully I can be an example and help this team and propel them to the next level."