

A's News Clips, Thursday, December 16, 2010

Oft-injured Rich Harden, A's reach agreement to bring back pitcher to Oakland

By Joe Stiglich jstiglich@bayareanewsgroup.com

The A's have a deal to bring right-hander Rich Harden back to Oakland, a source confirmed to Bay Area News Group on Wednesday.

There's no word when a physical or other details will be completed, so an announcement could be several days away. A's officials don't comment on free agents until contracts are finalized, but Harden, 29, reportedly would get a one-year deal for \$1.5 million plus incentives.

The A's are looking for bullpen depth, but with the No. 5 starter's spot up for grabs, Harden is a natural candidate for that role, as well. All but 10 of his 155 major league appearances have come as a starter, though several teams were thought to be eyeing him in a relief role this winter.

Harden spent the first five-plus seasons of his major-league career with the A's (2003-08). Numerous injuries, though, limited Harden to 45 starts over his final three-plus seasons in Oakland.

The A's traded him to the Chicago Cubs in July 2008.

Harden battled shoulder and glute injuries with Texas in 2010, going 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 games (18 starts).

As the A's add insurance for a pitching staff that took injury hits last season, they are turning to players who are health risks themselves, albeit low-cost ones. They signed Brandon McCarthy, a fifth-starter option who's been hindered by shoulder problems, to a \$1 million deal Monday.

Will the A's add another hitter to complement new DH Hideki Matsui? General manager Billy Beane said Tuesday he would consider trades to improve the team. Keep in mind third baseman Adrian Beltre remains available as a free agent option, and his price may drop the longer he remains unsigned.

In other news, the A's signed reliever Vinnie Chulk to a minor league deal with an invitation to spring training.

A's close to deal to bring back pitcher Rich Harden

By Joe Stiglich, [Oakland Tribune](#)

The A's are closing in on a deal to bring right-hander Rich Harden back to Oakland, a source confirmed to Bay Area News Group.

But there's no word when a physical or other details will be completed, so an announcement isn't likely until later in the week. A's officials don't comment on free agents until contracts are finalized, but Harden reportedly would get a one-year deal for \$1.5 million, plus incentives.

Harden, 29, spent the first five-plus seasons of his career with the A's (2003-08). Though many felt his natural stuff was better than the "Big Three" of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito, continued injury struggles kept Harden off the mound for much of that tenure.

The A's traded him and pitcher Chad Gaudin to the Chicago Cubs in July 2008 for pitcher Sean Gallagher, catcher Josh Donaldson and outfielders Matt Murton and Eric Patterson. Only Donaldson remains in Oakland's organization.

Harden signed a one-year, \$7.5 million deal with the Texas Rangers last winter but battled shoulder and glute injuries. He went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 games (18 starts) and was left off the Rangers' postseason roster.

The A's have at least four candidates to be their No. 5 starter, but they're also looking for bullpen depth, so it's likely they view Harden as a reliever.

All but 10 of Harden's 155 major league appearances have come as a starter, but several teams were thought to be eyeing him in a relief role this season.

Harden returns to A's as candidate for bullpen

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Rich Harden, once one of the aces of Oakland's rotation, has agreed to a one-year deal with the club worth \$1.5 million plus incentives, but the deal is pending a physical later in the week.

That is not insignificant. Harden has been on the disabled list nine times in his career, and he went from starter to reliever to released by the Rangers last season. He was not on the postseason roster.

The A's are looking at Harden primarily as a bullpen option, with former Texas starter **Brandon McCarthy** signed earlier in the week as a fifth-starter possibility. Many in baseball believe that Harden's fastball/changeup combo works best in relief and that that role also will help keep him healthy.

Harden, 29, went 36-19 in five-plus seasons with the A's, but he was on the DL six times.

Harden received multiple offers, including at least one that was for more than what the A's offered, but he is close to A's pitching coach **Ron Romanick**. Harden is also close to his sister, **Kristin**, who has lived in the Bay Area since he first joined the A's.

A's tickets: **Hideki Matsui's** signing generated some box-office buzz, according to **Steve Fanelli**, executive director of ticket sales.

Fanelli said his office received about 500 season-ticket renewals this week. Also, Wednesday was the first day for fans to purchase a Friday-game ticket plan, and Fanelli said 600 packages were sold, equating to 2,400 tickets.

Last year's first day for the same package generated 200 sales (800 tickets), Fanelli said.

Individual-game tickets go on sale Jan. 29.

"Yesterday was our biggest renewal day of the year," Fanelli said of Tuesday, the day of Matsui's news conference.

On the impact of Matsui, Fanelli said, "I think we'll know the true meaning when we go on sale with individual tickets in January."

The A's open the season against the Mariners, and there's talk of a Japanese Heritage Day featuring Matsui and Seattle's **Ichiro Suzuki**.

Chulk signs: The A's signed former Giants reliever **Vinnie Chulk** to a minor-league deal. Chulk, who will turn 32 on Sunday, pitched at Triple-A Indianapolis last season and also played for the Hiroshima Carp in Japan.

Staff Writer John Shea contributed to this report.

Champions' winter: The mayor of Arlington, Texas, and the World Series trophy visit City Hall. **E1**

Rich Harden's career stats

Yr	Tm	W-L	ERA	IP	BB	SO
'03	A's	5-4	4.46	74.2	40	67
'04	A's	11-7	3.99	189.2	81	167
'05	A's	10-5	2.53	128	43	121
'06	A's	4-0	4.24	46.2	26	49
'07	A's	1-2	2.45	25.2	11	27
'08	A's/Cubs	10-2	2.07	148	61	181
'09	Cubs	9-9	4.09	141	67	171
'10	Rangers	5-5	5.58	92	62	75
8 seasons	55-34	3.63	845.2	391	858	

Drumbeat: Willingham deal in the works with Nationals

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser 12/16/2010 10:01am

I have confirmation from a major-league source that this morning's report that the A's are trying to obtain Josh Willingham from the Nationals is accurate; talks are taking place right now.

Ken Rosenthal of Fox Sports was the first to report the Willingham trade talks. The A's would send two minor-leaguers to Washington, according to Rosenthal.

That would give Oakland a right-handed bat with some power - Willingham has hit as many as 26 in a season. He was batting .281 with 15 homers and 44 RBIs at the break last year, but a knee injury limited him after that and he eventually needed knee surgery in late August.

The A's outfield still would be very good defensively, with Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus, with Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson available as left- and right-handed hitting options on the bench.

Willingham, who will be 32 next season, made \$4.6 million last year and he is likely to head over \$6 million in arbitration this winter. The Nationals wanted to clear some payroll to obtain some pitching and a first baseman.

I'm heading off on a long-delayed vacation but will try to get more information to the office if and when I hear anything.

So is this enough? Or do the A's still need more offense after adding DeJesus, Matsui, and apparently quite soon, Willingham? Seems to me as if they're getting pretty close to done, but should they still pursue Beltre if the price is right and if he convinces them he really does want to play for the A's after two snubs?

Drumbeat: Harden deal waits on physical, plus Matsui leftovers

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser, 12/15/2010 10:47AM

Rich Harden has agreed to terms to return to the A's on a one-year deal worth \$1.5 million plus incentives, but it is pending a physical that will not be completed until later this week. With a player with Harden's injury history, that is not a small consideration. So the signing is not official, and it probably will not be until Friday at the earliest, and possibly even early next week.

Harden, 29, will be a bullpen option, and he adds depth to a good relief corps that has had some injuries - Andrew Bailey had a minor elbow cleanup before the end of the season, Jerry Blevins has had hip surgery, Michael Wuertz had some nagging issues during the season. Harden was a closer in college, and there always have been many in the game who believed he'd be a standout reliever, especially considering that his various injuries have limited his availability and innings as a starter.

There is no doubt that Harden has dazzling talent, and he'll be returning to work with one of his favorite people in baseball, Ron Romanick, who has been a mentor and a sounding board for Harden. In addition, Harden's sister still lives in the Bay Area, so even though he had better offers elsewhere, there is a good comfort factor in the Bay Area. He wasn't always happy with his medical treatment in Oakland, but the training staff and the orthopedists are new.

Last year, Texas beat the A's when it came to DL stays - and now the A's have picked up oft-injured Rangers starter Brandon McCarthy and, within a few days, Harden.

The A's have one more open spot on the 40-man roster, and it will be full when Harden comes aboard. But even though the team would have to chop a prospect or a role player to do it, I still believe that Oakland should add someone such as Adrian Beltre - hurt feelings aside - or Magglio Ordonez as the extra bat the A's still need. The team has money to spend. They've added only around \$7 million in free agents so far, counting Harden.

I couldn't get to everything from the Matsui press conference yesterday, including a follow-up of his No. 55 jersey - Josh Outman had told The Chronicle the day before that he'd hand it over and hope Matsui is a stand-up guy; it's customary to get something for surrendering a jersey number. Matsui said yesterday that maybe he'll take Outman to dinner this spring. Not exactly a Rolex, but then again, I don't think Outman was going to have any real say in the matter.

The A's will have to get used to a lot of reporters in the clubhouse, something unusual for them, and although the Japanese reporters really do focus almost entirely on Matsui, Japanese-American catcher Kurt Suzuki proved very popular when the A's went to Japan in 2008. He's looking forward to any additional interest he said, and he'd also like to learn more about Japanese culture from Matsui.

GM Billy Beane mentioned yesterday that the A's had enjoyed that trip to Japan so much that they immediately volunteered to go again. He said that most of the players who were on that trip probably have a sense of what the media attention will be like with the addition of Matsui, and they'll probably handle it pretty well. I'm guessing some of them will revel in it. Dallas Braden, never absent when a microphone is around, could wind up a big star in Japan.

If you didn't see it this morning, Braden told me yesterday about his trip to Thailand with Brian Wilson. It's the second item in the article.

Harden returns to A's on one-year deal

By Mark Bowman / MLB.com

Rich Harden has opted to return to the A's with the hope of rekindling the optimism that surrounded him when he began his career in the Bay Area.

A Major League source confirmed on Wednesday that Harden and the A's have agreed to the terms on a one-year deal. The club will not officially announce the deal until the 29-year-old right-hander receives all necessary medical clearance.

It appears the A's plan to use Harden as a reliever. This may help the injury-plagued hurler stay healthy over the course of an entire season. But there's a chance he could compete for the fifth-starter's spot, which had been reserved for Hisashi Iwakuma before he was assigned back to his Japanese club last week after Oakland couldn't reach a deal with the right-hander.

Since going 11-7 with a 3.99 ERA in 31 starts during the 2004 season, Harden's career has been hampered by a rash of various injuries. He has made at least 20 starts in just two of the six seasons that have followed.

Harden went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA while making just 20 appearances (18 starts) for the Rangers this past season. He didn't appear in the postseason and was designated for assignment once the season concluded.

While pitching for the A's from 2003 until midway through the '08 season, Harden was 36-19 with a 3.42 ERA. He and Chad Gaudin were traded to the Cubs on July 8, 2008, in exchange for Josh Donaldson, Matt Murton, Sean Gallagher and Eric Patterson.

AL West looks to overcome Hot Stove misses

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

Welcome to Heartbreak Hotel, also known as the American League West.

Discovering that the euphoria of their first World Series had a quick expiration date, the Texas Rangers must move on without Cliff Lee, who did so much to take them on that joyride through Tampa Bay and New York to San Francisco and the Fall Classic.

When Lee decided that, on the whole, he'd rather be in Philadelphia, it was a severe jolt to the Lone Star State's collective ego, to say nothing of president Nolan Ryan's projected pitching staff.

Lee's rejection of Texas came close on the heels of Carl Crawford's selection of Boston's chowder -- and dollars -- over the beaches and temperate climate offered by the Angels.

Like the Rangers, the Angels, in the wake of their first losing season since 2003, are left to figure out ways to compensate for the speed, defense and offense they'd hoped Crawford would provide.

Even the Oakland Athletics felt the sting of rejection when free-agent third baseman Adrian Beltre -- who could set off a bidding war between the Angels and Rangers -- decided he'd wait out the market rather than accept their reported five-year, \$64 million offer. Boras maintains that the A's are still in the mix for Beltre. Japanese pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma also walked away from a potential deal with Oakland.

Beltre reportedly is hoping to get a deal in the \$80 million range across five seasons, but nobody ever really knows what his agent, Scott Boras, is calculating. Certainly few insiders anticipated the seven-year, \$126 million deal Boras extracted for outfielder Jayson Werth from Washington.

The A's are hoping Hideki Matsui can add muscle and accomplished outfielder David DeJesus delivers quality offensive production. They're banking on a superb collection of young arms to come together and hopefully emulate the World Series champion Giants on the other side of the Bay Bridge.

Rounding out the division, the Seattle Mariners are hoping to play their way back to respectability with improved offense in support of King Felix Hernandez. Justin Smoak, the prize the Mariners sought from the Rangers in the Lee deal, figures to be a big part of it, along with new acquisitions Miguel Olivo and Jack Cust.

The landscape has changed in the AL West. No longer are the Angels, with five division crowns in six previous seasons, the team with targets on the back of those red uniforms. That distinction now belongs to the Rangers, even without their departed ace, Lee.

"I don't know how other people feel, but I have a lot of respect for the teams in our division," Rangers manager Ron Washington said. "I respect what the Angels have done, and I respect Oakland and Seattle. It's a good, competitive division."

The Angels, Athletics and Mariners are aware of the challenges ahead in trying to keep up with the new division kings, who have depth on the field and on the mound to be contenders in 2011 and for years to come.

Here is how the AL West shapes up in the aftermath of the Winter Meetings, with more work to be done in all four locales.

Los Angeles Angels

What they've done: The Angels signed a pair of free-agent left-handed relievers to deepen and balance a bullpen in need of repairs. Scott Downs, one of the game's premier setup men, agreed to a three-year, \$15 million deal, while Hisanori Takahashi accepted a two-year, \$8 million pact. This appears to have the pitching staff complete. The Angels like their rotation almost as much as the Phillies like their mega-million group.

Left to do: Spurned in their attempt to sign Crawford, the Angels focused their immediate attention on upgrading the bullpen. The club needs to beef up the offense, ideally at third base and possibly in left field. Beltre is on their radar; the challenge is hammering out a deal they consider reasonable with Boras, who owns prime box-seat real estate inside Angel Stadium but is not known to be a fan of any particular club. The Rangers are also interested in Beltre, whose arrival would force another position switch (or trade) for franchise centerpiece Michael Young. A number of veteran outfielders remain in the free-agent market, including former Angels superstar Vladimir Guerrero, believed to be on his way back to Texas. The need for a leadoff man could turn their attention to Johnny Damon or Scott Podsednik.

Where they stand: The Angels feel they will be stronger out of the gate with Dan Haren, a midseason acquisition from Arizona, joining Jered Weaver, Ervin Santana, Joel Pineiro and Scott Kazmir in a potentially lethal rotation. The anticipated return of Kendry Morales, who missed two-thirds of the season after a freak home-plate celebration of a game-winning grand slam, brings missing thump back to the middle of the order. They're not the run-and-stun Angels of the Chone Figgins days, but they have the athletes to return to that style if Maicer Izturis stays healthy, Erick Aybar plays to his potential and ultra-swift Peter Bourjos hits well enough to hold down the center-field job. The bullpen figures to be improved, even though critics are not convinced the club is content with Fernando Rodney and young Jordan Walden or Kevin Jepsen as closing options. Boras client Rafael Soriano is still available, at a high cost.

Oakland Athletics

What they've done: The A's acquired DeJesus from the Royals for left-hander Justin Marks and righty Vin Mazzaro. They landed a pair of right-handers, Danny Farquhar and Trystan Magnuson, from the Jays in exchange for Rajai Davis. Looking to add some thump, the A's signed free-agent outfielder and designated hitter Matsui to a one-year, \$7 million deal. Matsui had a .507 slugging mark, while batting fourth, and finished second on the Angels in RBIs (84) and third in homers (21). He can play a day or two in left per week. If Brandon McCarthy's right shoulder is as healthy as he says, the Oakland A's landed another potential starter for their rotation with the agreement on a one-year deal for the free-agent right-hander. Shoulder problems have limited him to 22 Major League starts over the past three seasons, but he threw well at the end of last season in Triple-A ball and then in the Dominican Winter League, convincing the A's he's worth a \$1 million pact with performance incentives.

Left to do: The inability to sign Iwakuma created some payroll flexibility. They're also still on the lookout for a starter -- a viable option to include in the fifth-starter mix with McCarthy, Tyson Ross, Josh Outman and Bobby Cramer. An additional reliever also could be on the way. Boras maintained that the A's are still in the mix for Beltre, but Kevin Kouzmanoff provides solid defense and muscle at third. The outfield should be superior defensively, anchored by Coco Crisp in center with Ryan Sweeney and DeJesus on the corners.

Where they stand: With the most underrated defense in the game, featuring Gold Glove candidates at multiple positions, the A's will support their young arms with a succession of defensive gems. Few clubs can match the rotation potential of Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden. McCarthy, if healthy, could be a strong fifth starter. Andrew Bailey is a premium closer supported by high-caliber setup men and middle relievers. The question is whether the A's can score often enough to hang in the race. Matsui is a proven clutch hitter and should help in the middle of the order. DeJesus, a .289 career hitter who bangs the gaps, could be an excellent fit for the sprawl of Oakland, with the bat as well as his glove. Catcher Kurt Suzuki is one of the game's most valuable receivers, highly respected for his game-calling as well as his clutch bat.

Seattle Mariners

What they've done: They haven't made any major splashes, but the Mariners feel they've helped themselves in several areas. They agreed to terms with free-agent catcher Olivo on a two-year, \$7 million deal and landed free-agent designated hitter Cust with a one-year, \$2.5 million pact. Improving infield depth, the Mariners traded pitching prospect Maikel Cleto to the Cardinals for Brendan Ryan, one of the Majors' premier defensive shortstops the past two seasons. Ryan also provides depth at second and third base. Erik Bedard was signed with the hope that he can recapture his once dominant form in support of Hernandez. With the second overall pick in the Rule 5 Draft, right-hander Jose Flores, a 21-year-old reliever in the Cleveland Indians' farm system, was selected by the Mariners. Flores, who pitched with the Class A Lake County Captains in the Midwest League last year, must remain with the Mariners for the entire 2011 season or be offered back to the Indians for \$25,000.

Left to do: Seattle has been seeing what is available in left field to supplement 24-year-old Michael Saunders. The free-agent market is loaded with possibilities. If Ryan hits enough to play second, the Mariners can return Figgins back to third base, where he was a Gold Glove-level defender for the Angels. Ichiro Suzuki and Figgins should be a dynamic tandem at the top of the order, but the club has to be aware of any potential upgrades in the power department.

Where they stand: Olivo should be a major addition behind the plate. Noted for his strong arm and quickness behind the plate, Olivo has averaged 16 home runs and 56 RBIs the past five seasons for Florida, Kansas City and Colorado. He brings toughness and nine seasons of big league experience to the pitching staff. The overall defense is excellent, and could be even better with Ryan playing regularly somewhere in the infield. They'll need to win a lot of 3-2 and 2-1 games unless the offense produces more than it did during a dismal 2010 showing, when it was at the bottom of the heap in most of the important categories: runs scored, homers, batting average, slugging and on-base percentage.

Texas Rangers

What they've done: Virtually the entire offseason focus has been on Lee. Now that he's gone, they can get busy on shoring up other areas and figuring out how to replace an ace. They have replaced Bengie Molina behind the plate with Yorvit Torrealba, who is known for his defense but never has been an offensive threat on Molina's level. Matt Treanor was re-signed as the backup.

Left to do: They've been linked in the rumor mill with Royals ace Zack Greinke, who would come at a steep price in young talent if the Rangers go in that direction. The Rays' Matt Garza also is a trade possibility. Another option is to return closer Neftali Feliz to a starting role. It would take a while to stretch him back out, but Feliz has the overpowering stuff and the temperament to be a dominant starter. Frank Francisco has closing experience, and Soriano -- who figures to command in excess of \$10 million per year -- is available as a free agent. Carl Pavano is the best of the free-agent starters available. There seems to be mutual interest in bringing Guerrero back in the DH role, but the veteran would prefer a multiyear deal and could depart if the right offer presents itself. If the Rangers pursue Beltre, Young would have to move -- to another role (first base or DH) or perhaps another club in a deal.

Where they stand: Rangers GM Jon Daniels claims there will be no panic moves made in Texas. This club has been extraordinarily smart in the trade market and free agency in recent seasons, and it has a wealth of prospects and young talent to move if the right commodity -- Greinke, Garza, someone close to that level -- is too good to resist. Texas' last offer to Lee was for \$138 million over six years, with an option for a seventh season.

"Ownership took over in August and by the fall, they were authorizing nine-figure proposals," Daniels said. "Our fans should know they are committed to winning. We would have liked to have him back, but we weren't able to find terms that made sense."

Texas is still blessed with dependable starters in C.J. Wilson, Colby Lewis, Tommy Hunter and Derek Holland. The club has talked about moving setup reliever Alexi Ogando to the rotation, and he also could be a closing option if Feliz starts.

"We knew it could go either way," Daniels said of Lee's big decision. "It doesn't change the fact that we still expect to win next year. The offseason is far from over."

AP source: A's, Harden agree to terms on 1-yr deal

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Baseball Writer

OAKLAND, Calif.—It appears right-hander Rich Harden is returning to his Oakland roots.

Harden has agreed to terms on a one-year contract to rejoin the Athletics. A person with knowledge of the deal confirmed Wednesday to The Associated Press that Harden was coming back to the A's. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because Harden must take a physical—and he has had his share of injury problems—before a formal announcement is made. The A's may announce the deal by the end of the week.

Harden went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 appearances and 18 starts last season for the AL champion Texas Rangers. But he was designated for assignment after the regular season to give him his unconditional release after he struggled with injuries and control.

Harden, who began the season as the Rangers' No. 2 starter, walked 62 batters in 92 innings. He is expected to be used out of the bullpen by A's manager Bob Geren, who has a formidable starting rotation heading into 2011: Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden, Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez.

Oakland had penciled in Hisashi Iwakuma as a possible fifth starter but last week failed to reach agreement with the Japanese right-hander during the allotted 30-day negotiating period, sending him back to his Japanese club.

The No. 5 spot could go to several candidates, including Bobby Cramer, Tyson Ross or left-hander Josh Outman, who missed last year recovering from Tommy John surgery but made a strong impression in the instructional league this fall.

The A's must hope Harden stays healthy by assuming a relief role.

Harden spent two stints on the disabled list in 2010, first from June 12-July 30 with a left gluteal muscle strain and later with right shoulder tendinitis.

Oakland saw him miss his share of time, too.

Harden went 1-2 with a 2.45 ERA in only 25 2-3 innings in 2007 because of an inflamed right shoulder, and didn't pitch after July 7 that year. He threw two simulated games late in the season with the hopes of making two final starts, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth risking further injury.

He was 4-0 in nine games in 2006, spending time on the disabled list with a strained back and then a strained elbow ligament.

A's in talks to acquire OF Willingham

[Mychael Urban](#), CSNBayArea.com

The A's are in talks with the Washington Nationals regarding a trade that would bring outfielder Josh Willingham to Oakland, a pair of major-league sources confirmed to CSNBayArea.com early Thursday.

Willingham, who made \$4.6 million in 2010 and is expected to receive a raise in his final year of arbitration eligibility, batted .268 with 15 home runs, 56 RBIs and a .389 on-base percentage in 114 games for the Nationals last season.

He didn't play after Aug. 15 and had surgery to repair damaged meniscus in his left knee on Aug. 17, but he's expected to be ready for the start of spring training.

Veteran Fox Sports reporter Ken Rosenthal, who broke the story, reported that the A's would send two minor leaguers to the Nationals in the proposed deal. A Washington source told CSNBayArea.com that the Nats are in need of starting pitching, and the top such prospects in the A's organization are Tyson Ross, Bobby Cramer and Clay Mortensen.

Willingham, 31, made his big-league debut with the Marlins in 2004 and has averaged more than 20 home runs over the past five seasons; third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff led Oakland with 17 home runs in 2010.

A 17th-round draft pick out of North Alabama in 2000, Willingham went deep a career-high 26 times in 2006 and had a career-high 89 RBIs in 2007.

Primarily a left fielder, Willingham likely would displace Ryan Sweeney as a starting outfielder should the deal be closed, giving the A's a starting outfield of Willingham in left, Coco Crisp in center and David DeJesus -- acquired in a Nov. 10 trade that sent starting pitcher Vin Mazzaro to Kansas City -- in right.

All three players spent considerable time on the disabled list last season; Crisp missed 87 games with the A's while DeJesus missed 71 games with the Royals. Sweeney, who missed 80 games, and Conor Jackson, acquired in a June trade with the Diamondbacks and missed 102 games last season, will serve as Oakland's outfield reserves.

Willingham would be Oakland's third significant offensive upgrade of the offseason, following the trade for DeJesus and the Dec. 14 signing of designated hitter Hideki Matsui.

The A's also have taken steps to deepen their pitching staff. They Brandon McCarthy to the list of candidates competing for the lone opening -- for now -- in the starting rotation via free agency earlier this week, and they've reached an agreement with Rich Harden to return to Oakland, likely as a bullpen candidate, pending the oft-injured right-hander's passing of a physical.

Urban: Harden, Duke and A's history

Mychael Urban , CSNBayArea.com

An official announcement of Rich Harden's return to the A's could come down as early as Wednesday, and there's been talk that Oakland might also be working on an incentive-laden deal for two-time All-Star Justin Duchscherer.

Cue up the sound bite, last heard out of general manager Billy Beane's mouth when the A's welcomed back to their bosom Jason Giambi before the 2009 season: "We're getting the band back together."

It was a cute line at the time, and Beane's affection for Giambi was palpable.

In his first tour with Oakland, Giambi returned the A's to relevance and laid the foundation for a run of four consecutive playoff appearances, helping to make Beane what he is today: a well-respected force in the industry.

For that, it was clear when Giambi was re-introduced to the Bay Area as a graybeard ex-Yankee, Beane will be forever grateful.

How'd that work out, though?

Not well. In fact, it was downright ugly.

Giambi went 0-for-3 on July 19 to drop his batting average to .193, and he never again played for the A's. Hampered by injuries throughout his second tour in Oakland, he was eventually cut loose -- and he was thrilled about it. He didn't vibe with A's manager Bob Geren at all, and when he was picked up by the Rockies he was a new man, batting .350 in a limited role during September.

Beane is too smart to trot out the "band" line when he welcomes back Harden (and, perhaps, Duchscherer). He knows that A's fans are beyond weary when they hear that the team is once again hiring someone with a lengthy injury history.

But hire he must. It's the reality of his situation. If he's going to land someone with a name, it's a name with warts.

David Justice; too old. Mike Piazza; see Justice. Frank Thomas; too old *and* brittle. Giambi; see Thomas. Nomar Garciaparra; see Giambi. Hideki Mastui; see Piazza.

Harden and Duchscherer; too brittle.

Names without warts go elsewhere, and that's not going to change any time soon.

So Beane does his best to find low-risk, high-reward guys. That's Harden to a T.

When he's healthy, he can flat-out dominate even the best big-league hitters. I wrote a book about Oakland's "Big Three" of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito during the 2004 season, and to a man they agreed that Harden, who had made his debut with the A's in 2003, was more gifted than all of them.

Thus, I dedicated an entire chapter of the book to Harden and his immense potential.

Harden in 2004 made 31 starts. The next year he made 19. Then nine. Then four.

It was exasperating for everyone involved. Teammates started to question Harden's toughness, which was incongruous in many ways because he grew up in Canada as a hockey player and has the mound presence of a hard-checking NHL defenseman.

Rich Harden is a badass when he's right, everyone agreed. But there were fairly loud whispers that he needed to be 100 percent right to take the mound, and everyone associated with professional baseball understands that rarely is anyone 100 percent right.

So the A's traded Harden to the Cubs after he went 5-1 with a 2.34 ERA in 13 starts to open the 2008 season.

Harden finished 2008 strong, going 5-1 with a 1.77 ERA over 12 starts for Chicago, and he made 26 starts for them the following year. But after signing with the Rangers last winter, he struggled, again landing on the DL multiple times, the last stint ending his season in August.

Yet his talent remains tantalizing, and after years of resisting a move to the bullpen, Harden finally seems to have seen the light. It's his best shot at staying healthy, of staying employable.

What's the risk? Very little. His salary will be \$1.5 million. Duchscherer would get even less. And because the names without warts won't take Oakland's money, Beane has plenty of it to gamble on guys like Harden.

It's not about getting the band back together. It's about trying to tune a tattered instrument.

Ratto: Oakland still in game for new A's stadium

Ray Ratto, CSNBayArea.com

You knew, you just knew that when the A's San Jose ballpark plan kept running into snag after logjam and procedural hurdle that it was actually a harbinger of "Never mind. We're not that keen on it after all."

And while San Jose has not yet chunked in its interest of grabbing Los Elefantos, Oakland's newfound interest in jumping back into the fray is a clear sign that, after months and even years of resigned indifference, the East Bay's anchor is interested in becoming the ship again.

The city's community and economic development committee approved a \$750,000 environmental impact report (that the city council will approve next week) for a study that will show that the Victory Court stadium site (think the estuary waterfront, cheek by barnacle with the Giants' aging basilisk across the way). And frankly, getting Oakland to spend money on anything related to the A's is in and of itself the civic version of the baseball team signing Albert Pujols. Lew Wolff, the reluctantly public face of majority owner/stealth ninja John Fisher, still wants the San Jose stadium because, well, in considerable part because he's spent so much of the past few years trying to convince fans that Oakland is a political and financial sinkhole and that San Jose is the only alternative.

Well, apparently it isn't, as Major League Baseball has already weighed in on Oakland's site selection as though it believes Oakland is still viable. True, MLB never says no when someone else is footing the bill, and its word on stadium and location matters is always reliable . . . until it isn't.

But the San Jose plan is suddenly the neglected stepchild despite Wolff's plan of holding his breath until you and I turn blue. Rumors during the winter meetings last week that suggested strongly that Major League Baseball (which is Bud Selig about seven owners) favors an Oakland site tend to make a fella go, "Hmmmmmmmmm."

Understand here that MLB goes where the clout is, and Oakland suddenly has surprising clout. Each of the last two mayors have given approximately zero percent of a damn, but they're both gone – one to the governor's mansion in Sacramento, the other to speaking tours. The Jack London area is going some understated but eventually dramatic upgrading (the banks willing), some heavy hitters like Sen. Barbara Boxer have skin (i.e., land) in the game, and in case you haven't noticed, San Jose hasn't moved a millimeter in its ability to make the A's their own.

And history shows that when nothing's happening in baseball, there's a good reason.

It isn't territorial rights, which the Giants wave like a giant foul-line-to-foul-line flag. And it isn't the blue ribbon commission from MLB which is supposed to offer recommendations but in fact offers what it is told by MLB to recommend.

But the point here is that Oakland, sclerotic but stubborn as it is, is playing like it has lapped the field without anyone seeing. And in this economic and political climate, even \$750K for an EIR is a hell of a check-raise.

All of which leaves Wolff and, more to the point, Fisher with a decision to make. Whether to retract everything either of them ever said about Oakland's lack of suitability for their little ball team, or to hammer down a "For Sale" sign and let someone else enjoy the migraines.

And the revenue sharing checks.

We're still in the early stages here, and Oakland could end up mangling the pooch yet again, as it has repeatedly with the A's. But for the moment, the Oakland A's may have a new reason to slap Oakland back on the front of the jerseys again.

And won't that be a press conference to see? "Ladies and gentlemen, Lewis (I Am No Longer Gertrude Stein) Wolff, will answer your questions about Victory Court Ballyard, Automotive Repair Center, Public Library and Dry Cleaners from behind that barricade. Mr. Urban you may begin."