

A's News Clips, Tuesday, January 4, 2011

Inbox: What's left on A's agenda

Beat reporter Jane Lee answers fans' questions

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Do you think the A's are done making moves? I think they need one more power bat. While many fans are pleased with the Hideki Matsui signing, I still don't see him as much of an upgrade over Jack Cust. I also think David DeJesus and Rajai Davis are one in the same, and Josh Willingham isn't going to take the offense to the playoffs all by himself.

-- Nate P., Concord, Calif.

How about a little optimism to start the new year? The A's deserve at least that when looking at what they've been able to accomplish this winter, especially in comparison with their American League West counterparts. It seems the A's are quite pleased with their offensive additions in Matsui, DeJesus and Willingham and don't plan on pursuing another big hitter. At the same time, the club would contend that, at no point during the year, are they ever quite done making moves. That's not to say, however, that a power bat is headed to Oakland by month's end. If anything, the A's stand a chance to add an extra reliever.

Together, Matsui, DeJesus and Willingham give the team a well-rounded group of hitters who are capable of aiding in the production of more runs than the 2010 A's core tallied. I realize these players aren't exactly sexy names when sitting alongside the Jayson Werths and Adrian Beltrés of the baseball world, but they're not boring ones either. They're upgraded impact players who, alongside the AL's best young pitching staff, could help keep the A's in playoff contention.

Do you believe that Matsui will really be better for the A's than a full season of Chris Carter at DH without a veteran breathing down his neck and taking his at-bats?

-- Tyler P., Modesto, Calif.

I do, simply because Matsui boasts far more experience in the role and Carter is not even viewed by the A's as a full-time DH possibility at the moment. He only has 70 Major League at-bats under his belt, and the A's would like to watch how he develops as an outfielder so as not to immediately put aside what they believe is impressive athletic ability. Handing a 24-year-old rookie DH duties on a daily basis is quite rare, and Carter seemingly still has to prove himself as an everyday hitter at the big league level. With a large dose of outfielders already in tow, Carter may have to wait to do so should the likes of DeJesus, Coco Crisp, Willingham, Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson stay healthy. Carter may have to start the year at Triple-A, though I'm sure the A's brass would like to find a way to keep him on the 25-man roster to continue his Major League grooming process.

I've heard from several A's fans who are not keen on this scenario, but it's important to keep in mind that the A's new outfield additions give them what they were lacking last season -- quality depth. Carter, though young and inexperienced, is very much considered part of that group.

Please tell me there's still hope that Beltre will end up in Oakland. I've given up on believing all of the rumors that are out there about him since they seem to change on a daily basis.

-- Scott S., Fresno, Calif.

No matter what you choose to believe, rumors tend to drive the Hot Stove season, and there's been absolutely no shortage of ones involving Beltre. The most recent rumblings have the third baseman geared for Texas, though many still see the Angels as favorites. Either way, I hate to burst your bubble, but the likelihood of the A's landing Beltre as opposed to one of their division rivals appears to be thinning by the day. Oakland officials, per a longstanding club policy, are not commenting on the free agent, but FOXSports.com reported just days ago that the A's and Beltre's agent, Scott Boras, are no longer in discussions.

Texas and Los Angeles are clearly willing to offer Beltre more money than Oakland could realistically afford, and Boras seems intent on giving his client the biggest deal out there. Still, I've said this before and I'll say it again: I'm not counting Beltre out of the picture until he signs elsewhere. Though it might take a miracle this time, surprising moves are one of Billy Beane's fortes, and I've learned not to rule anything out when it comes to his working ways.

Can you explain the arbitration process? At the beginning of the offseason, I remember reading that there were several A's players eligible for arbitration, but I don't really understand how it all works and why it's necessary.
-- Karen F., Tracy, Calif.

The confusion that often comes along with salary arbitration is shared by many, so I'll try to explain it as best as possible. A player with three or more years of service time, but less than six, may file for salary arbitration. In addition, a player can be classified as a Super Two and be eligible for arbitration with less than three years of service. The Super Two tag means that the player ranked among the highest 17 percent of players who have tallied between two and three years of service time. That threshold is always changing, with the cutoff this year coming at two years, 122 days.

Brad Ziegler was among 20 players awarded Super Two status this year, which made him arbitration-eligible alongside Joey Devine, Craig Breslow, Dallas Braden, Ryan Sweeney, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Jackson -- all of whom were tendered contracts by the A's. Since then, Devine and Sweeney have agreed to terms on a 2011 contract, thus avoiding arbitration.

Beginning Wednesday, the A's and their five remaining arbitration-eligible players will face the salary-arbitration filing period. Each player and the club then exchange offers on Jan. 18. If the sides can't reach an agreement on a contract, a three-judge panel will conduct a hearing and assign the player either the club's offer or his offer -- nothing in between -- as his salary for 2011.

The A's, however, have enjoyed great success with avoiding arbitration hearings, so expect them to come to contract terms with Ziegler, Breslow, Braden, Kouzmanoff and Jackson fairly soon.

What happened to Michael Choice? I don't see his name anywhere in the Minors.
-- Joseph B., Irvington, N.J.

Choice, the A's 2010 first-round Draft pick (10th overall) out of the University of Texas-Arlington, quietly put together a strong showing in his first few months of professional ball. The 21-year-old prospect took part in just a handful of games with the rookie-level Arizona League before being shipped off to short-season Class A Vancouver in August. Choice quickly took over center-field duties and mainly hit third, batting .284/.388/.627 with seven homers and 26 RBIs over just 27 games. He somehow managed to finish eighth in homers in the league and would have easily led the league in slugging percentage had he accrued enough plate appearances. He also went 6-for-7 in stolen-base opportunities.

It's likely Choice will be a non-roster invitee at Spring Training this year and, given a solid camp showing, could start the season at Class A Stockton.

2010 Oakland A's Position Analysis: Right Field

Sam McPherson, January 3rd, 2011

Perhaps more than any other position on the field and at the plate, the Oakland Athletics rightfielding was a certifiable mess in 2010.

In 162 games, eight different players combined for a .247 batting average, seven home runs, 59 RBI, 11 stolen bases and a ridiculously-bad .628 OPS mark. Yes, those were the worst numbers in the league, basically, far below the American League averages for the position, team-by-team: .275 average, 20 HRs, 84 RBI, 12 SBs and a .790 OPS.

In a traditional position of strength, the A's had nothing to offer but scraps, whiffs and eternal vacancy.

And it probably cost them a few wins: consider the team's 23-20 record in one-run ballgames. An extra home run or extra-base hit here and there would have made a difference in those close losses.

The main culprit of mediocrity in right field was Ryan Sweeney: in 298 at-bats over 80 games, he hit .289 -- but with only one home run. His .379 slugging percentage was built primarily on his 20 doubles, and he drove in a mere 35 runs. Without any speed to offer (only one stolen base), Sweeney was a slap hitter in a position that demands some significant power for the lineup.

Sweeney's season was cut short due to injuries, yet the A's didn't find anyone better to fill his easily-replaceable shoes. So things went from bad to worse with the seven other guys filling in for Sweeney.

Gabe Gross hit an atrocious .163 with one home run in 92 ABs, while Rajai Davis managed a .271 mark in 85 ABs in right field (with only one home run, as well). Strangely enough, the leader in home runs for Oakland rightfielders in 2010 was Matt Carson: his four dingers in only 58 at-bats gave him a meager .417 SLG at the position, however, simply because he had only 11 hits total in those at-bats.

Midseason pick-up Jeremy Hermida tossed in 61 ABs as the only other "contributor" worth noting, but his .246 average and .653 OPS were obviously not saving the team from the vacancy in the lineup.

If the A's had been able to find any average player to fit into this position for even half the season (after Sweeney went down), they might have been able to make a run at the AL West title in those August days when the pitching staff was mowing down opponents.

Instead, Oakland continued to struggle scoring, and the right field position was just a black hole for the organization in 2010.