

A's News Clips, Wednesday, January 12, 2011

Kouzmanoff eager to stake his claim for A's

Brushing off Beltre talk, third baseman ready to prove himself

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- In exactly six weeks, Kevin Kouzmanoff will report to the A's Spring Training facilities at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

He'll go about his normal workout routine in the ensuing days. He'll catch up with old teammates, and he'll meet new ones. At some point, he'll quietly trot out to third base, as he's done countless times throughout his big league career. He'll take his grounders. Lots of them.

It's there, on the left side of the infield, where Kouzmanoff finds much comfort and joy. That he knows.

But there's an unsettling unknown this time around, that which comes in the form of Oakland's teetering interest in having him there. After an offseason during which the club pursued not just one other third baseman but two, will Kouzmanoff's potentially awkward return bring about an elephant in the room?

If it does, Kouzmanoff will make sure the gray creature's stay is short. He's not oblivious to Oakland's winter workings and strong pursuit of Adrian Beltre, but he's also not about to waste any time letting leftovers of the ordeal interfere with his preparation for what he plans on making a successful 2011 season. That's just not the way Kouzmanoff, a professional in every sense of the word, works.

That's not to say, though, that Oakland's unwavering attempts at landing Beltre -- now with the Rangers -- by way of a reported six-year deal worth \$76 million didn't faze him.

"I knew the A's had some money to spend," Kouzmanoff told MLB.com by phone from his offseason home in Denver this week. "Beltre's a good ballplayer, and he was in high demand. There I am kind of sitting off to the side thinking, 'Where do I fit? Obviously, the A's don't really like me that much at third base if they're trying to get another third baseman.' But at the same time, I'm also realizing it's just business, and if they can lock someone down for a certain number of years, an All-Star third baseman who can hit 25 to 30 home runs in the Coliseum, then I really have no say in it."

It marked the second straight year in which the A's unsuccessfully tried to lure Beltre, who opted for six years and \$96 million in the Lone Star State. It also represented their second-known interest in a third baseman not named Kouzmanoff, as they employed Edwin Encarnacion for 20 days before non-tendering him in early December.

Several people saw Kouzmanoff as the likely non-tender choice over the power that came with Encarnacion, both of whom share the same agent. Kouzmanoff, himself, was among that crowd, as he admitted to viewing the possibility of being released a real one.

"I guess you can say I am a little surprised to be with the team right now because of the interest they showed in other third basemen," he said. "They got one third baseman, and then they tried to go out and get another one, so I feel like I'm kinda third in line now. But I think that I'm a good enough third baseman to where I wouldn't have a problem finding a job if someone else were to come in and play third base for the Oakland A's."

There were also the early offseason trade rumors, some linking Kouzmanoff to a hometown deal with the Rockies, others considering a reunion with Cleveland, the organization that drafted him in 2003. But Kouzmanoff's offseason agenda rarely, if at all, involves baseball gossip.

"I know that our names are going to be floating around," he said. "There are always rumors. I get filled in from other people. I don't really pay attention to that stuff, but if my name does show up in an article, my friends give me all the details vs. me jumping on my computer and looking at it."

Kouzmanoff probably wouldn't have liked what he saw, anyway. At least not following a season in which the 29-year-old put together the worst offensive performance of his career, compiling career lows in batting average (.247), on-base percentage (.283), slugging percentage (.396) and OPS (.679) while taking over the beloved Eric Chavez's territory.

But Kouzmanoff doesn't need to see those numbers, or hear fans or media repeat them, to understand that his 2010 campaign, his first full season in the American League, was something of a disappointment.

"I was unsatisfied with my season last year," he said. "It didn't help me being hurt for three weeks with my back. I felt like I was seeing the ball really well and was going good, and then I got hurt. That kinda put a stop to things.

"But I think I've established myself as a third baseman who can hit some home runs and drive in some runs. Personally, I think I can do better. I'm going to try to do better this year. I'm going to work as hard as I can to do that. I was new with the club last year, and I was maybe trying to do too much, prove to my teammates and to the fans that I belong there. I may have put a little extra pressure on myself."

Now, with Beltre and Encarnacion in the rearview mirror, does a different sense of pressure come into play, the motivating type that has Kouzmanoff wanting to prove he can do his best efforts of matching the talent of the two that got away?

"I think if they were happy with me at third base, they wouldn't consider going out and getting someone else," he said. "I knew for sure that if they were going to get Beltre that I was gone. I'm still here, though, and I want to do the best I can. I've worked hard this offseason. I'm hitting baseballs, trying to get faster, getting in good shape. I want to prove to them that I can play third base just as good as anybody else. I feel great."

Kouzmanoff believes the power is within him, that he's capable of hitting 25 home runs and driving in at least 90 runs. But he's also aware that those numbers don't come without discipline, one of the facets of his game on which he's focused this offseason. In 2010, he swung at 43.3 percent of first pitches he saw, which ranked fourth most in the AL.

"I think there are things mentally I can work on, like being more patient at the plate," he said. "It's a matter of seeing a good pitch to hit and taking advantage of it and putting the barrel on the ball. I like to swing the bat. I don't walk much. I think everyone knows that. I just need to pick out better pitches and make sure I don't miss. I'm just trying to engrain a swing that will maximize my potential of hitting the ball every time. Sometimes I move my hands too much, which causes me to be late, or I put my front foot down too late or early."

That work, Kouzmanoff hopes, will have him primed for a season that will transform Beltre into something of an apathetic memory in the Bay Area. The arbitration-eligible infielder, who made \$3.1 million last year, is ready to sign a contract and continue moving toward an Opening Day in Oakland, where he's slated to be announced as the team's everyday third baseman.

"I talked to my agent a few days ago, and he said everything is a go," Kouzmanoff said. "Billy Beane said things will be fine and we'll go through the arbitration process. We're going to be friendly about it and get on with the season."

Urban: Bay Ball -- On Sweeney, Sandoval, F.P. ...

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

It's Tuesday, which these days means the final ramp-up to "SportsNet Central's Hot Stove" show. Which means getting ready for another panel of distinguished guests, with radio's Chris Townsend of 860-AM on the A's side of things, former big-league star and current CSN analyst Bip Roberts on the Giants' side, as well as guest appearances from A's assistant general manager David Forst and Giants prospect Thomas Neal.

It promises to be another compelling half-hour of Bay Ball chatter, and as usual we'll be allowing fans to be a part of the show by submitting questions to me at @MURbanCSN. I'll serve as the receptacle for all queries directed at any and all of our guests, particularly Forst, Roberts and Townsend, all of whom will join me live.

For now, though, let's head from the shores of McCovey Cove to Jack London Square and back to get everyone's whistle nice and moist in advance of Tuesday's 6:30 p.m. show ...

... Not long after reading Tuesday morning's report by Hank Schulman of the *Chronicle* that Giants third baseman Pablo Sandoval has lost 17 pounds this offseason, I spoke to a reliable source who told me the number is actually 22. Great news, but the key is keeping that weight off, and losing more.

When position players report to the defending champs' camp in the third week of February, it'd be nice to hear -- and more important, to see -- the Panda some 30 pounds lighter than when we last saw him, as a part-time contributor down the stretch in the fall.

... What must be going through Ryan Sweeney's head right now? I wondered that Monday and reached out to Sweeney, hoping to get his thoughts on the new outfield alignment in Oakland -- Josh Willingham in left, Coco Crisp in center, David DeJesus in right -- that leaves Sweeney, an oft-injured starter for the past three years, heading to camp as a backup.

It should serve as quite the wakeup call; Sweeney is a very gifted athlete, built like an NFL strong safety, but he's reluctant to change his fairly high-average swing in exchange for more prodigious power. Might that mind-set have changed over the winter? Couldn't tell you; Sweeney has a new cell number that I'm still trying to track down. If the mind-set hasn't changed, though, it probably never will. The young man is very sure of himself.

... Weight isn't Sandoval's only problem, of course, but if he's found the kind of discipline it takes to drop significant poundage, that bodes well for his poundage of the ball. He needs discipline at home plate -- without robbing him of the aggression that helped make him so successful in 2009 -- as much as he needs it at the breakfast, lunch and dinner plates.

Getting his eyes right needs to be a priority, too. Goggles, contacts, whatever. He was inconsistent in that regard last season as well, and seeing the ball is a pretty big part of hitting it with authority and regularity.

... With Rajai Davis in Toronto, what happens to the running game of the A's? Davis set the tone during the most exciting and often productive stints of Oakland baseball over the past two seasons with his derring-do, and it's going to take a fully healthy season from Crisp, a little lightning on the bases from DeJesus (an above-average runner), and a step-up season from shortstop Cliff Pennington to ensure that fans don't lament the loss of Davis by season's end.

... Mark DeRosa will be ready for the start of spring training with the Giants, I'm told, and he's heading to camp with a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Good. He's said he has a lot to prove during the second year of his two-year, \$12 million contract that raised some eyebrows when it was announced, and those eyebrows furrowed when DeRosa, penciled in as the starting left fielder last March, had to shut things down because his pre-existing wrist problem required more surgical attention.

DeRosa, who turns 36 on Feb. 26, deserves quite a bit of credit for being that rare player who can lead without having a key role on a team; the impact of his even-keel, veteran presence with the Giants late in the regular season and throughout the playoffs was widely lauded by teammates. But he does, in fact, have a lot to prove, and only by proving it will general manager Brian Sabean not get hammered by his detractors for giving DeRosa such a sweetheart deal.

... Who bats second for the A's this year? It's going to be a tough call for manager Bob Geren. DeJesus' skill set fits the role well, but so does that of first baseman Daric Barton, and neither guy is a classic No. 3 hitter. But something about DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui in the 3-4-5 spots feels so much more legit than does Barton, Willingham and Matsui. Barton can bunt well and gets on base a ton, too, so don't ask too much from him. Plug him in at No. 2 and leave him alone. DeJesus will hit enough doubles to make it seem logical.

... I first met F.P. Santangelo when he was finishing his playing career with the A's, and I liked him immediately. He was a player's player; a red-ass who worked that crimson tail off with a sense of humor and gravity. Those qualities have served him well here in the Bay Area, be it as a Comcast SportsNet analyst for A's and Giants games, as a talk-show host on KNBR, or as a backup in the TV and/or radio booth during Giants broadcasts.

It's that booth role that's always been Santangelo's dream gig -- aside from playing in the bigs, of course -- and he landed one last week when the Nationals named him their new color man on the TV side. I've enjoyed working with Frank Paul, and I wish him all the success in the world.

... And finally, do you know where the World Series trophy is today? Turlock? Schenectady? Boise? Tahoe? Maui? Encino? Doesn't really matter, does it? It's going everywhere, and that's fabulous news for any long-suffering Giants fans who couldn't be in The City for the parade.