

**Oakland A's owner interested in buying some San Jose redevelopment property**

**Proceeds would help pay for last of proposed ballpark site**

By Tracy Seipel tseipel@mercurynews.com

Oakland A's owner Lew Wolff on Friday confirmed that he's interested in acquiring two of the parcels the San Jose Redevelopment Agency is selling to buy other land the agency needs to sew up a proposed downtown ballpark site.

And yes, that ballpark may one day accommodate ... the A's.

Two of the six parcels up for bids are linked to the Fairmont Hotel, which Wolff owns: the 440-space garage under the hotel and the hotel's annex retail area. The retail annex includes McCormick & Schmick's seafood restaurant, Bijan Bakery and a 7,030-square-foot vacant space that Wolff wants to turn into a conference center that would contribute business to the hotel.

"If they're available at a price we are comfortable with, it's a plus," Wolff said.

But, he said, even if another buyer purchased the two pieces, "we are more interested in getting the agency the most money possible." Redevelopment Agency chief Harry Mavrogenes has estimated it could cost about \$20 million to buy the last two parcels in the ballpark site, though he said Friday their value has dropped.

The six pieces of agency land, priced at a total of about \$26 million, are on sale until 4 p.m. Jan. 31. The agency has posted detailed information about each property on its website ([www.sjredevelopment.org/realestate.html](http://www.sjredevelopment.org/realestate.html)).

Mavrogenes said the agency already has received dozens of calls about the sale. But he would not release the appraised values of the individual parcels, saying that would "compromise our ability to get top dollar."

Calls to City Attorney Rick Doyle's office to determine if there is any conflict of interest in selling the land to Wolff, then using his money to buy the ballpark land that will benefit him, were not returned Friday.

Mavrogenes said as long as Wolff is the top bidder, he sees no problem.

But Marc Morris, a spokesman for the anti-stadium group Better Sense San Jose, calls the prospect "just too cozy and convenient. He gives the money to the RDA, who buys the land and gives the land back to him. It doesn't pass the smell test."

Mavrogenes has said he expects escrow to close on all six properties by June 30. That would coincide with the state Legislature's deadline to adopt a budget for 2011-12; Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed budget includes eliminating the state's redevelopment agencies and ultimately distributing the property taxes they collect to local governments.

But state finance officials also have said that if the Legislature were to decide on the fate of the agencies before June 30, it could immediately stop any new contracting by redevelopment agencies.

The possibility of a tighter deadline could give prospective buyers the upper hand, some local commercial real estate brokers said.

"If the seller has a time crunch, that of course creates an environment for opportunity for the purchaser," said Eric Fox, a partner with Cassidy Turley CPS.

But, he said, the agency over time "has been very successful at getting pricing for their land that exceeded where a lot of people would have expected them to sell. I wouldn't put it past them to outperform."

Meanwhile, Andre Walewski of Collier's Parrish International said he's already heard from interested buyers, "but it would be at a very discounted price." Mavrogenes says he won't move the parcels if the price isn't right and might instead offer other agency land for sale.

The garage under the Fairmont generates about \$306,188 in net revenues annually for the agency. The McCormick & Schmick's and Bijan Bakery properties rent for \$16,275 a month and \$6,213 a month, respectively.

The four remaining parcels for sale, all downtown, include three parking lots and some retail space on Paseo de San Antonio near San Jose State. The agency added that retail space, currently home to a Togo's, a sushi restaurant and a hair salon, to the list of properties just this week.

## **Oakland Athletics reach deal with veteran reliever Brian Fuentes**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 1/17/2011

The bullpen, already an area of strength for the A's, is getting stronger.

Oakland has reached a two-year deal with left-handed reliever Brian Fuentes, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press on Sunday.

Fuentes is the second highly regarded free-agent reliever the A's have roped in over the past three days. After being passed over by hitters they pursued earlier this winter -- and failing to sign Japanese pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma -- Oakland has money to spend late in the free-agent shopping season.

They're now splurging a bit to build one of the American League's top relief corps.

On Friday, the A's agreed to terms with right-hander Grant Balfour on a two-year, \$8.1 million contract with a 2013 club option at \$4.5 million, though his deal is pending a physical.

A source told Bay Area News Group that Fuentes will get a two-year deal with a club option for a third year. Fox Sports' Ken Rosenthal reported Fuentes will get more than \$5 million per season.

Fuentes, 35, is a four-time All-Star who has averaged 31 saves over the past six seasons with the Colorado Rockies, Los Angeles Angels and Minnesota Twins.

## **Chin Music: A's, reliever Grant Balfour are a good match**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 1/14/2010 2:28PM

Bolstering the bullpen was a priority for the A's, and they did just that Friday by agreeing to a two-year, \$8.1 million contract with right-hander [Grant Balfour](#). You can read [details of the deal](#) on our Web site, but here's my take on it:

It's an aggressive move, and one that I like for a few reasons. The A's had the ingredients for a strong bullpen even without Balfour. But there are mild concerns with closer Andrew Bailey and lefty Jerry Blevins both coming off surgery and set-up man Michael Wuertz having been bothered by shoulder problems last year. Joey Devine could be a terrific addition if healthy but he hasn't appeared in a game since 2008. Depth was definitely needed. Also, Balfour brings substantial postseason experience, having been to the playoffs with the Rays in 2008 and 2010, and the Twins in 2004. On paper, I'd say the A's look like a contender for the AL West title. But it's a roster that lacks much big-game experience, so adding a battle-tested reliever is important. And Balfour is a strikeout pitcher. As ESPN's Jayson Stark notes, Balfour has the third-best strikeout rate (10.29 per nine innings pitched) of all AL relievers over the past three years. The ability to miss bats is important in the late innings, and the A's have several relievers with the stuff to do it — Bailey, Balfour, Devine (if healthy), Wuertz (if he rebounds from an inconsistent 2010) and Craig Breslow, whose 71 strikeouts last season set an Oakland record for lefty relievers.

Plus, I'd expect Balfour will bring an intangible element. The Australian has the reputation for being a wild man on the mound, cussing at himself to get fired up and occasionally jawing with hitters (he exchanged words with Orlando Cabrera during the 2008 ALDS). Tampa Bay manager Joe Maddon once compared Balfour's temperament on the mound to that of Al "The Mad Hungarian" Hrabosky. Adding a little fire to the current collection of personalities in the A's clubhouse won't hurt.

I know blog posts have been sparse lately (I was supposed to get some vacation this week, but the A's aren't cooperating). With 32 days left before Oakland's pitchers and catchers report, let's hear some thoughts on how you think this team is coming together ...

## **Drumbeat: Are A's team to beat in the AL West?**

John Shea on the Brian Fuentes news . . . San Francisco Chronicle, 1/16/2011 7:34PM

Is it a blessing in disguise the A's didn't sign Japanese pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma? It would have been a \$19.1 million posting fee and millions more in salary.

Without Iwakuma, who probably was an end-of-the-rotation guy anyway, the A's have been buying a lot of other talent. The latest is lefty reliever Brian Fuentes, a Merced guy who's still able at 35. The Chronicle confirmed reports that the A's are close to finalizing a two-year deal.

Fuentes will get more than the \$8.1 million committed to Grant Balfour, who's also getting a two-year deal. Announcements will come this week after they pass physicals.

Fuentes had a 2.81 ERA, 1.063 WHIP and 25 saves (24 with the Angels, one with the Twins) and apparently is insurance in case Andrew Bailey isn't fully recovered from September elbow surgery.

If Bailey's healthy, and if Joey Devine's healthy, and if Rich Harden's healthy, where will Billy Beane fit all these relievers? The bullpen was deep already, and now Balfour and Fuentes join right-handers Michael Wuertz and Brad Ziegler and lefties Craig Breslow and Jerry Blevins.

With the four main members of a rotation that led the league in ERA still aboard, and with Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and David DeJesus added to an offense that cried for upgrades, the A's clearly have been the division's busiest team.

Are they the best team?

Considering the Angels struck out on Carl Crawford (but have Kendry Morales coming back) and the Rangers failed to re-sign Cliff Lee (then added Adrian Beltre), the A's certainly will get lots of love when it's time to predict division winners.

Being the trendy pick doesn't mean all that much. Last year's was Seattle. Then again, it's impossible to ignore all the significant additions by the A's, who were second last year at 81-81.

## **A's signings bolster bullpen, but what's left on free-agent market?**

Sam McPherson, examiner.com, 1/17/2011

The Oakland Athletics have spent some money this offseason, for once, and they dug deeper into the organization wallet over the last few days to sign top-notch, free-agent relievers Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes.

Balfour is a 33-year old righty from Australia who spent the last three-plus seasons with the Tampa Bay Rays, posting a 2.28 ERA in 55 1/3 innings. Over his major-league career, Balfour has struck out 311 batters in 273 2/3 innings.

Fuentes, a 35-year old lefty, has 187 career saves but finished last season in a set-up role with the Minnesota Twins. His career 3.41 ERA and 573 strikeouts in 525 innings offer some stability from the other side of the mound.

While the A's had a solid bullpen in 2010, the addition of Balfour and Fuentes adds some excellent depth to the relief corps. The new additions to the Oakland staff have the ability to both set up and close games if need be, and if Michael Wuertz can return to his 2009 form, the A's have some serious arms to finish the tight contests on a day-to-day basis.

As spring training looms on the near horizon, what else does Oakland need to do before preparing for the 2011 season? Better yet, is there any player still out there the A's could really use?

Sure, Manny Ramirez is still out there, but Oakland already signed a designated hitter, so he's not a realistic option. Nor do the A's need that kind of headache on their roster. But some affordable offensive depth could still be had, especially from the right side of the plate.

For example, a cheap player like Jorge Cantu could provide good right-handed depth off the bench and at the corner infield positions. He played three different infield positions last season (1B, 2B, 3B), and at age 28, his inconsistent career might be at the point it takes off. That could certainly be worth a financial risk for a player with three All-Star level seasons on his resume already (2005, 2008 and 2009).

Otherwise, there is not much out there on the market still that would actually make sense for Oakland

## **The next big swing: Who is 2011's CarGo?**

By Anthony Castrovino / MLB.com

Less than three months removed from his 25th birthday, Carlos Gonzalez signed a seven-year, \$80 million contract with the Rockies last week.

This brings up an important question: Why am I not friends with Gonzalez?

And it also brings up another equally important question: Who will follow the CarGo criterion and leap into the limelight in 2011?

Remember that Gonzalez's first foray into the big leagues, with the A's in '08, was hardly a harbinger of things to come -- as he labored to a .242 average and a .634 OPS in 302 at-bats. And his initial break-in with the Rockies in '09, after he was acquired as part of the Matt Holliday trade, didn't start off so swell, either. He was batting .202 at the All-Star break, 27 games into his tenure.

But the clues to CarGo's rise began to emerge in the second half of that season. A .320 average and a .992 OPS in 62 games down the stretch and a 10-for-17 showing in the postseason showed him beginning to live up to his potential. And in 2010, he exploded -- a .336 average, a .974 OPS, 34 homers, 117 RBIs and a third-place finish in the National League MVP Award voting.

If we follow CarGo's example, we can pick out several up-and-coming position player talents who might be on the precipice of greatness in '11. With that in mind, here are a few guys you might want to befriend -- or, at a minimum, draft on your fantasy team:

**Drew Stubbs, CF, Reds:** Cincinnati already got cozy with Jay Bruce this winter and just locked in reigning MVP Joey Votto. In Stubbs, they might have another young player who might one day be deemed worthy of a long-term investment, if his 2010 is any indication.

Granted, it wasn't a season that got off to the smoothest of starts. In the first half, Stubbs labored through several slumps, struck out a ton and seemed destined for Triple-A Louisville. But he had the backing of manager Dusty Baker (just as Gonzalez had the backing of Jim Tracy in '09) and responded with a .308 average and a .943 OPS in the season's final two months -- in the midst of a playoff race, no less.

Stubbs was one of only two players in the Majors last season with at least 20 homers and 30 stolen bases. He'll have to prove he's not too streaky to be trusted in the leadoff spot and that he can do as much damage on the road as he does in the cozy confines of Great American Ball Park. But that second-half surge makes him a name worth tracking in the coming year.

**Mike Stanton, RF, Marlins:** My colleague Joe Frisaro brought up an interesting point about Stanton in his blog, "[The Fish Pond](#)," last week. Frisaro noted that the Marlins' franchise record of 42 homers in a season, set by Gary Sheffield in 1996, could be challenged in 2011 -- by a guy in his first full season.

That guy, of course, is Stanton, who joined the Fish last June and smacked 22 homers in his first 359 at-bats -- an average of one homer every 16.3 at-bats. This was nothing particularly new for Stanton, who had 88 homers in 1,139 at-bats in the Minors from 2008-10. But it was still pretty impressive stuff for a guy who just turned 21 in November.

Realistically, it's doubtful Stanton will challenge Sheffield's mark (only nine players in history have hit 30 or more homers at the age of 21), but he is a relatively safe bet to become one of the league's elite power hitters at an impressionable age. With great power, of course, comes some trade-offs -- namely, a high strikeout total and low average -- but with power numbers in decline across baseball, Stanton is quite a commodity.

**Carlos Santana, C, Indians:** If any young player has had an incentive to make a name for *himself*, it's Santana, who has already had to endure more than his fair share of references to a certain guitar hero. But baseball people have known this Santana to be special in his own right, so his 2010 debut was much-anticipated.

Santana rumbled into the big leagues in June, only to limp out two months later, the victim of a gruesome home-plate collision that wrenched his knee and left a lot of us feeling queasy.

In 2011, Santana will be back, fresh off knee surgery and hopeful of building on the potential he showed in his first 46 games at this level. What's notable about Santana is that even as his bat cooled after a scintillating start (he hit .345 in his first 18 games, then .207 in his last 28), he continued to draw walks. His patience and plate discipline, combined with his power, give him a chance to become a star.

**Chris Johnson, 3B, Astros:** Before 2010, I'm not sure even Johnson knew who he was. And to be sure, there are probably plenty of baseball fans who still don't know who Johnson is. He's never been labeled a prime prospect, but his second-half performance was a major key to the Astros springing to life after a woeful start.

Maybe what Johnson did was a fluke, but it's certainly worth noting that among first-year players with at least 200 plate appearances, his adjusted OPS (123) ranked third, behind Jason Heyward (131) and Buster Posey (129). That's pretty strong company, and Johnson made it happen by batting .316 and slugging at a .510 clip in the second half.

**Pedro Alvarez, 3B, Pirates:** Like Stanton, Alvarez, the second overall pick in the 2008 First-Year Player Draft, has 30-homer potential as a sophomore, and that's special stuff.

What's particularly notable about Alvarez's big league break-in was the way he finished. He hit .306 with a .932 OPS, six homers, 10 doubles and 27 RBIs in his last 29 games. You try not to place too much emphasis on September performance when talking about players on a team woefully out of the race, but Alvarez's grand finale was definitely applaudable, much like CarGo's strong finish in '09. Coincidence? We'll see in 2011.

## **Brian Fuentes signing with Oakland**

By [Paul White](#), USA TODAY 1/17/2011

Add Brian Fuentes to the list of established closers willing to step back into a set-up role.

The Oakland Athletics are on the verge of signing free-agent lefty Fuentes, who has closed for the Rockies and most recently the Angels, according to several reports in the San Francisco Bay Area.

He'll fit in behind Oakland closer Andrew Bailey and join a bullpen that also is adding free agent Grant Balfour, part of the Tampa Bay relief corps the past four seasons. Fuentes has 187 career saves, including a career-high and AL-leading 48 with the Angels in 2009. He had 23 for the Angels last season before an August trade to Minnesota, where he set up for Matt Capps.

Fuentes is the third free-agent closer to agree to a lesser role for an AL team this winter. The Red Sox added Bobby Jenks, who had 173 career saves with the White Sox, to set up Jonathan Papelbon, and 2010 AL saves leader Rafael Soriano left Tampa Bay for a subordinate role to Mariano Rivera with the Yankees.

## **Lefty Fuentes agrees to two-year deal with A's**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Just two days after coming to terms with right-hander Grant Balfour, the A's showed no signs of slowing down in their offseason attempts to solidify bullpen depth.

Left-handed reliever Brian Fuentes has agreed to a two-year deal with the A's, a source told The Associate Press on Sunday. The deal is pending a physical.

The A's, who have a longstanding policy of not discussing free agents, are not commenting on the matter.

Fuentes, 35, recorded 24 saves, a 2.81 ERA and a 1.08 WHIP while averaging 8.8 strikeouts per nine innings for the Angels and Twins last season, which came on the heels of a 2009 campaign in which he led the American League with 48 saves.

The veteran will be entering his 10th full big league season and could stand to lend the A's another closer option next to righty Andrew Bailey, who is coming off minor elbow surgery. They'd presumably be joined in the bullpen by lefties Craig Breslow and Jerry Blevins, along with right-handers Balfour, Michael Wuertz and Brad Ziegler. The injury-prone club, which placed several relief arms on the disabled list last year, is also hoping to have a healthy Joey Devine in tow.

Those names have the A's primed to boast one of the best relief corps in the league, while at the same time matching the talent of what is expected to be one of the most formidable starting staffs. Oakland's mound presence will be aided by an upgraded offense that now includes the likes of Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and David DeJesus -- all facets that could potentially keep the A's in playoff contention this year.

Balfour is expected to officially join the A's on Monday as part of a two-year, \$8.1 million contract -- which includes a club option for 2013 -- once he passes a physical.

## **A's agree to one-year deal with Ziegler**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 1/16/2011

OAKLAND -- The A's and right-handed reliever Brad Ziegler avoided arbitration on Saturday with a one-year contract worth \$1.25 million.

It marks a substantial raise for the 31-year-old sidearmer, who took home \$410,000 during a 2010 campaign that saw him go 3-7 with a 3.26 ERA and 1.35 WHIP in 64 relief appearances.

Ziegler, who was deemed arbitration-eligible thanks to his Super Two status, also held the opposition to a .241 batting average, including a .179 mark with runners in scoring position and two outs. Furthermore, he allowed just 22.6 percent of his inherited runners to score and proved to be a key relief component down the stretch in the absence of several injured bullpen mates.

The righty owns a career 2.51 ERA and 18 saves spanning 180 relief appearances over three seasons with the A's, who have used the offseason to build one of the more formidable bullpens in the league. Along with Ziegler and 2010 regulars Andrew Bailey, Craig Breslow, Michael Wuertz and Jerry Blevins, Oakland has added righty Grant Balfour and expects to get back a healthy Joey Devine. Reports also surfaced Saturday of the club's strong interest in left-hander Brian Fuentes.

With Ziegler locked up, the A's now have five remaining arbitration-eligible players: Breslow, Dallas Braden, Conor Jackson, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Josh Willingham.

Each player and the A's will exchange offers on Jan. 18 if a contract is not finalized before then. If the sides subsequently 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.

However, the A's have enjoyed much success in avoiding such hearings, which would be scheduled sometime between Feb. 1-21.

## **Oakland A's optimistic about offseason moves**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune 1/16/2011

They began the winter with a nice wad of cash to spend, only to find their money was hard to give away.

But even as the A's have been denied in their pursuit of their top free agent targets, there's reason for fans to be encouraged with spring training less than five weeks away.

Take a look at the offseason moves that have -- or haven't -- been made around the American League West, and Oakland hasn't exactly lost ground to its division rivals. Indeed, the A's are in pretty nice shape.

Defending AL champion Texas signed third baseman Adrian Beltre, who repeatedly stiff-armed the A's and their overtures, but the Rangers lost ace Cliff Lee to the Philadelphia Phillies. The Los Angeles Angels' additions so far consist of relievers Scott Downs and Hisanori Takahashi, and they have yet to address offensive shortcomings.

The Seattle Mariners were 61-101 last season and will simply try steadying themselves under new manager Eric Wedge.

Oakland was spurned by free agent hitters Beltre and Lance Berkman but added designated hitter Hideki Matsui (via free agency) and outfielders David DeJesus and Josh Willingham (via trade).

None of those moves sent shock waves through the majors. But with the emergence of the A's young rotation in 2010, even moderate improvement offensively could make a difference in 2011.

"I like what Oakland has done, I really do," said a major league scout who requested anonymity. "I'm a big DeJesus fan. I think he's one of the most underrated players in the game. Their pitching staff, of course, is going to carry them. I think those guys are going to maintain or, if anything, get better."

Still, all enthusiasm should be tempered.

A's general manager Billy Beane talks highly of the depth on his roster, key for a team that's been ravaged by injuries since 2007. But all five projected outfielders missed major time last season with health problems, including DeJesus (right thumb) and Willingham (left knee).

Can Willingham, who hit 102 homers in five full National League seasons, adjust to AL pitchers as well as the tough hitting conditions at the Oakland Coliseum?

Elbow problems landed left-hander Brett Anderson on the DL twice last season, and All-Star closer Andrew Bailey is coming off minor elbow surgery that cut short his season.

Also, the aforementioned scout, while praising the A's moves this winter, still feels they lack a pure power bat.

But the hitters the A's have imported are a welcome sight to starting pitcher Trevor Cahill.

"I've always been a big fan of DeJesus," Cahill said. "I always thought he was a tough out. I think Matsui was a guy we needed -- an RBI guy, and he's always been a clutch guy."

Matsui gives the A's a credible middle-of-the-lineup presence. Just as important, he's a free agent hitter who embraced coming to Oakland. The team reportedly offered Beltre as much as six years and \$76 million and also courted Berkman heavily, only to watch Berkman sign with St. Louis.

Beane has contended the Coliseum -- widely regarded as an outdated venue -- drives players away. However, two agents -- who each have represented major leaguers for many years -- said the A's stadium gets overblown as a factor that's kept many free agents away.

"What is frustrating for them is that none of them believe that they can win (with the A's)," said one agent, requesting anonymity. "A lot of players potentially are only going there to get their money. You look at Minnesota, other small-market teams, and they don't have that attitude. They go in thinking, 'We can win this thing' "... and players don't feel that way in Oakland."

It's worth noting the Minnesota Twins no longer spend like a small-market team since they moved into a new ballpark, Target Field, last season. Their payroll soared past \$100 million in 2010.

The A's -- who went 81-81 last year and haven't posted a winning record since 2006 -- have just \$41,947,500 committed to their 2011 payroll, according to Cot's Baseball Contracts. That's after they agreed with free agent reliever Grant Balfour to a two-year, \$8.1 million deal Friday.

And the A's might not be done fortifying their bullpen. They're known to be eyeing lefty reliever Brian Fuentes.

Oakland still has to negotiate salaries for five players eligible for arbitration -- pitchers Dallas Braden and Craig Breslow; third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff; and outfielders Willingham and Conor Jackson -- so the payroll could easily increase beyond last year's \$58,304,900.

Cahill believes the A's are strong enough to compete with defending division champ Texas even without more additions.

"They've got Nelson Cruz batting sixth. They're a good ballclub," Cahill said. —... But our attitude is we can hang with these guys. We're not going to get 30 homers out of our sixth spot. But we'll score runs when we need them and pitch and play defense."

Note: The A's avoided arbitration with reliever Brad Ziegler, agreeing to a one-year, \$1.25 million deal.

new faces

A look at who the A's have added and subtracted this offseason:

WHO'S IN

RHP Grant Balfour\*

OF David DeJesus

RHP Rich Harden

DH Hideki Matsui  
RHP Brandon McCarthy  
OF Josh Willingham  
WHO'S OUT  
OF Travis Buck  
3B Eric Chavez  
DH Jack Cust  
OF Rajai Davis  
RHP Justin Duchschere  
OF Gabe Gross  
RHP Vin Mazzaro\*\*  
RHP Henry Rodriguez\*\*  
RHP Ben Sheets

\* Balfour's signing is pending a physical

\*\* Mazzaro sent to Royals in trade for DeJesus. Rodriguez sent to Nationals in trade for Willingham.

## **Blue knows how to put on a show**

By Susan Denk, The Hawk Eye, Burlington, Iowa

Jan. 15--Part way through his speech, Vida Blue took the microphone off the podium and stepped off the dais.

"I'm going to be a black Phil Donahue," he said, referring to the former talk-show host.

He walked through the capacity crowd attending the Burlington Bees Winter Banquet at the Pzazz Convention and Event Center, joking with attendees as he approached fans who had questions.

"Is there a dance to go along with that song?" was the first question for the 1971 Cy Young and MVP Award winner, referring to the song 'Vida Blue' by Albert Jones. The 1971 song was played during Blue's introduction, to much applause and laughter, and some singing by Blue himself.

Another questioner asked if Blue was going across the river, referring to Gulfport, Ill., a place a young Blue frequented when he played for the Bees in 1968 as an 18-year old.

Earlier in his speech, Blue talked about what he remembered from his time in Burlington. His clearest memories in that whirlwind first season of professional baseball for the young man from Mansfield, Louisiana, are of Gulfport and McDonald's, an oft-frequented restaurant for the ball players.

"I was 18 and I was so green behind the ears I had a fungus growing back there," Blue said. "As we come over the (Great River) bridge here (driving in with general manager Chuck Brockett Thursday), I said, 'Oh yes, I got it now. I remember that McDonald's. I'm so old when I was here the drinking age was 18. I went across the river to the strip clubs all the time.'"

While Blue was with the Bees, he struck out 231 batters in 152 innings to lead the Midwest League.

Blue had a explanation for that.

"I led the league in strikeouts, and wild pitches and passed balls, I think," Blue said. "The lighting was so bad, that's why I led the league in strikeouts. I don't think the guys could see the ball. And I didn't know where the hell I was throwing. All the people in the front row, they were putting their lives in danger. I threw hard. I threw very hard, and 90 percent of the time I didn't have a clue, folks, I didn't have a clue where the ball was going.

"I had a great career. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. It all started here in Burlington, Iowa."

Blue won the Cy Young and the MVP in 1971. Only Roger Clemens has won both awards in the same season since Blue. His major league career spanned 17 seasons. Blue played for the Kansas City A's, San Francisco Giants and the Kansas City Royals. He helped the A's to three straight World Series titles from 1972-74 and was a six-time All-Star.

Blue currently works for the Giants, staying involved with the game since his 1986 retirement.

"Baseball is a big part of my life," Blue said. "I still get a chance to put on my uniform. Some days I just get out there and close my eyes and I'm back in Burlington, Iowa. Think about when I was 20 pounds lighter and I'm 21 again. I think just



putting on my uniform from time to time, that allows me to be a little boy again. That's what I enjoyed about playing baseball. It kept the little boy in me and that's not a bad thing some days. Not a bad thing at all."

Blue -- who came back to Burlington in 2001 when he was inducted into the Bees' Hall of Fame -- promised another return trip, this time as incentive with the final auction item of the night.

The item initially was a Blue A's jersey and picture, personally autographed by Blue for the winner.

Brockett and Blue quickly began adding items to sweeten the deal.

Blue said he would return for the annual golf tournament. Brockett added Blue would play with the winner's foursome. Then Blue would accompany the winner to a Bees game. Then the kicker, Blue whispered to Brockett that he would throw batting practice to the winner.

With all the incentives, the package went for \$2,000 to lucky winner Brian Hopkins.

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OTHER BEES BITS: Burlington Mayor Bill Ell got up and read a proclamation from the City Council designating the week of April 6-11 Welcome Home Bees Week. The week encompasses the team's arrival in Burlington from spring training, the annual Meet the Bees, and the 2011 home opener against Peoria. Burlington opens the season April 7 at Clinton, its first game as an Oakland As affiliate since 1974. ... Burlington Baseball Association president Dave Walker surprised the crowd with the announcement of a new Professional Baseball Agreement. The agreement between major league and minor league baseball was extended through 2020 and does not include any additional costs to minor league teams. ... The Bees are setting a goal of 2,000 fans for the season opener. Former Bees player and current Oakland director of player development Keith Lieppman will be in attendance. ... New Bees manager Aaron Nieckula spoke to the crowd, riling them up when he said, "I've got you warmed up enough. I went to the REAL U of I. The University of Illinois." The announcement was greeted by a loud chorus of boos with a handful of cheers thrown in. Trainer Doc Thorson also attended the banquet. Thorson was a trainer with the Bees in 1980 when the team was affiliated with the Milwaukee Brewers.