

A's News Clips, Monday, February 28, 2011

Trevor Cahill isn't concerned over short stint as Oakland A's go on to beat Chicago Cubs in exhibition opener

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

MESA, Ariz. -- Trevor Cahill lasted just one-third of an inning Sunday in the A's exhibition opener, giving up four runs on five hits against the Chicago Cubs.

He wasn't fretting about it much.

Likewise, the A's won't put much stock in their 15-7 pounding of the Cubs at HoHoKam Park. The game featured 34 hits and the kind of sloppiness often found in early Cactus League contests.

Cahill hardly resembled his efficient All-Star form of a year ago, departing after seven hitters and with his team in a 4-0 hole.

"You obviously want to do good all the time, but you'd rather have a bad outing come right now than later on," he said.

The right-hander notched 18 wins last season, but that doesn't make him immune to first-game jitters. Just like his 2010 exhibition debut, which also came against the Cubs at HoHoKam, Cahill said he felt butterflies.

"I had some nerves just because it's the first game," he said. "It's the first time we're not in control, when there's actually umpires and stuff."

The game began under sunshine and blue skies, surprising considering that hail fell about 90 minutes before first pitch.

Cahill walked leadoff man Kosuke Fukudome, then allowed three straight singles that gave the Cubs a 2-0 lead. After Carlos Pena hit into a fielder's choice, Alfonso Soriano yanked a two-run double down the left-field line.

Geovany Soto followed with a single to left and Cahill was done. Tyson Ross relieved him and immediately induced an inning-ending double play from Blake DeWitt.

A's manager Bob Geren said Cahill was off a bit with his mechanics.

Cahill was slated to throw about 35 pitches and needed to throw in the bullpen to complete his full day's work.

"I went down there and threw a simulated inning "... no hits," he quipped.

He was unaware that A's leadoff man Coco Crisp delivered a third-inning grand slam off Matt Garza that tied the game 4-4. That was biggest blow of an 18-hit onslaught against eight Cubs pitchers, though starter Carlos Zambrano held Oakland hitless in two shutout innings.

Geren got a look at three of the pitchers battling to be his fifth starter.

Ross, the former Bishop O'Dowd High and Cal star, allowed one hit in 12/3 innings. Josh Outman threw two shutout innings and Bobby Cramer gave up one run over two innings.

Reliever Joey Devine (1-0), who, like Outman, is coming back from Tommy John elbow surgery, allowed one hit and one walk in a scoreless third inning.

He hadn't faced another major league team since a March 4, 2009 exhibition.

Devine, a potentially key addition to the A's bullpen, touched 93 mph with his fastball and said his elbow felt good afterward.

"That's the most important thing, whether I went three-up-three-down or didn't get an out," he said.

Left fielder Josh Willingham, in his A's debut, went 2 for 3 with an RBI.

Geren downplayed the performances of his front-line players but said he was pleased with the way some of the minor league prospects swung the bat.

Outfielder Michael Choice, the A's first-round pick last June, went 2 for 3 with two runs. He also impressed in intrasquad games leading up to Sunday.

Crisp cautioned not to get caught up in the early exhibition results.

"You're trying to get used to the guys alongside you, building team chemistry. I think those are the main things coming in," he said.

Oakland A's notebook: Coco Crisp look all right from left side

By Joe Stiglich_Oakland Tribune

MESA, Ariz. -- Switch-hitter Coco Crisp said his right-handed swing typically rounds into form each year before his left-handed one.

That didn't appear the case for the center fielder in the third inning Sunday. Crisp, batting left-handed against Chicago Cubs right-hander Matt Garza, turned on an 0-1 pitch and crushed it over the right-field wall for a game-tying grand slam in the A's 15-7 victory.

"Usually my right side comes first because it's my natural side, and I'm trying to transfer it over," Crisp said.

That at-bat fared better than Crisp's first, when he looked like a hitter shaking off the winter rust. He struck out swinging against Carlos Zambrano and said the right-hander's fastball looked "105 miles per hour."

"It hit the catcher's mitt, then I decided to swing," he said.

The A's will look for Crisp, their leadoff man, mainly to ignite rallies by getting on base. But they'll take any occasional pop he provides.

"I'd like to see him get 80 homers," manager Bob Geren joked. "(Results) don't make too much difference this early, but it's always good for his confidence."

Eric Sogard drew the start at shortstop in the A's victory, with Steve Tolleson playing second base. Both are competing to win the backup infielder job -- as is Andy LaRoche -- with Adam Rosales sidelined by a foot injury.

Tolleson might be a front-runner based on the time he spent in the majors last season with the A's. He's a more experienced shortstop than Sogard and LaRoche.

But Geren spoke highly of the way Sogard has swung the bat so far, adding: "I just haven't seen Sogard play (shortstop), and I'd like to see him."

With starter Cliff Pennington limited early in camp as he recovers from left shoulder surgery, Geren said the player who handles shortstop the best will win the backup job.

Sogard handled all the routine plays that came his way. He went 1 for 2 with a single and sacrifice fly.

Right fielder David DeJesus was ill and did not play. "... The A's agreed to one-year contracts with all 21 of their players not yet eligible for arbitration.

Chin Music: A's relievers still being handled carefully; the batting order takes shape

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/28/2011 9:22AM

Hideki Matsui makes his A's debut today, but don't read too much into the rest of the lineup against the Angels with so many regulars getting the day off. David DeJesus is still trying to shake off a stomach bug, but it's possible he'll play tomorrow against the Reds. Here's your starting nine:

Ellis 2B
Suzuki C
Matsui DH
Jackson 1B
Kouzmanoff 3B
Carson CF
Carter LF
Taylor RF
Tolleson SS

Braden P

**Joel Pineiro is on the hill for the Angels.

—Michael Wuertz is scheduled to throw off the mound Thursday for the first time since his shoulder soreness started. Fellow reliever Craig Breslow has had some tenderness in his throwing arm, according to manager Bob Geren, so there's no indication yet when he'll appear in a game. Closer Andrew Bailey is probably 5-7 days away from his first game. Those are three key guys in the bullpen, but I'd attribute their inactivity to the A's precaution as opposed to anything seriously bothering any of these guys. The plan has been to limit their throwing early to preserve them for the regular season.

—A little insight into the batting order: Geren said he wants a right-handed hitter to bat behind Hideki Matsui (the likely No. 5 hitter). He mentioned Kurt Suzuki, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Mark Ellis as possibilities for the sixth spot. So bit by bit, we can piece together how the order will look. If I had to project right now, I'd say: Crisp, Barton, DeJesus, Willingham, Matsui, Kouzmanoff/Suzuki, Ellis, Pennington.

How would that lineup strike you, A's fans?

Trevor Cahill falters, but Coco Crisp is grand

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Oakland's Cactus League opener featured hail as the team arrived at the stadium, a rough outing for the A's All-Star starter and a grand slam by the leadoff hitter.

So in sort of roundabout fashion, Oakland beat the Cubs 15-7 at HoHoKam Stadium, with that game-tying blast by Coco Crisp and a go-ahead sacrifice fly by roster hopeful Eric Sogard. New left fielder Josh Willingham added an RBI single in the fifth, and many minor-leaguers took it from there as the A's compiled 18 hits.

Trevor Cahill, the A's likely Opening Night starter, faced seven batters and retired only one, allowing five hits, a walk and four runs, but he wasn't overly concerned. Last year at this point, he was vying for the fifth-starter spot. This time, he's assured his place in the rotation, and he said he felt he was making decent pitches Sunday.

"Obviously, you want to do well all the time, but I'd rather have a bad outing now than later," he said. "For right now, it's all right."

Crisp struck out in his first at-bat against Carlos Zambrano ("It felt like he was throwing 105 mph," Crisp said). In his next time at-bat, following hits by Landon Powell and Sogard and a walk by Steve Tolleson, Crisp connected on a sinker up in the

zone from Matt Garza. Crisp joked that the wind helped him, but he got all of it, a little unusual for this time of year because, Crisp said, his left-handed swing usually takes a little longer to come around than his swing from the right side.

Some of the key spring competitions got under way, with one in particular in the spotlight Sunday. Sogard and Tolleson, Triple-A Sacramento's middle infielders last season, saw their usual roles reversed - Sogard was at shortstop and Tolleson at second.

The A's are essentially auditioning for a backup infielder, because Adam Rosales won't be ready to play until May 1 or so after foot surgery. Sogard is the only possibility currently on the 40-man roster, but he has been almost entirely a second baseman at Arizona State and in the minors.

Sogard started working with A's infield coach Mike Gallego six weeks before camp opened, and he said he is feeling comfortable on the left side - he had played shortstop his whole life until he got to college. He also spent a month-plus playing shortstop at Triple-A Sacramento last season when Tolleson was called up to Oakland.

"I'm excited for the opportunity," Sogard said. "Someone is going to need to fill in there."

Manager Bob Geren said he had liked Sogard's at-bats last fall, when he went 3-for-7, and he was looking forward to seeing Sogard at shortstop because he hasn't seen him there.

"Whoever played shortstop best will win, I'm going to be honest," Geren said of the backup job, before adding that there are some other factors to consider, too. Going strictly by defensive play there, Double-A Midland's Josh Horton is considered the best true shortstop of the bunch, but he's a real long shot for the job, at least right now.

According to A's special assistant Billy Owens, Sogard doesn't have a bazooka for an arm, but, he said, "He gets the job done, and he's an overachiever. Don't be fooled by the glasses; Eric Sogard isn't intimidated. He can play."

Owens noted that everywhere he has been, Sogard has had more walks than strikeouts.

Getting a brief call-up last fall gave Sogard a taste of major-league life, and he said, "That was huge to get that experience, get my feet wet. I proved to myself I can compete at that level."

First-step quickness is one area on which Sogard has worked with Gallego, cutting down the angles a bit, and Sogard also has asked starting shortstop Cliff Pennington for advice.

The A's like Sogard a lot, and he's still on the younger side, at 24, compared with Tolleson and Andy LaRoche, nonroster hopefuls who are both 27. LaRoche was at third Sunday and went 0-for-3.

Giants beat: Coach Carney Lansford says he feels right at home in Colorado after a frustrating tenure in S.F. **B5**

Gerut done: Former Stanford outfielder Jody Gerut calls it quits after six years in the big leagues. **B5**

Cactus League recap

Sunday's score: A's 15, Cubs 7

Notable: Trevor Cahill faced seven men and retired only one, allowing five hits, a walk and four runs in the A's opener. ... Michael Choice, the A's top pick in 2010, singled in his first two spring at-bats. ... Matt Carson had two doubles and Jai Miller a triple.

Quotable: "He's got power. ... I'd like to see him hit 80 home runs."

- A's manager Bob Geren, joking about Coco Crisp's home run potential after his grand slam Sunday.

Today's game: A's (Dallas Braden) at Angels (Joel Piñeiro), 12:05 p.m. Radio: none.

A's pitchers glad to be back after surgery

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Ariz. - **Joey Devine** said he was nervous all day before he pitched Sunday. After all, he hadn't pitched in a real game against big-leaguers in more than two years.

"After the last warm-up pitch, when they threw the ball around the field, I realized, 'I'm finally back,' " the A's reliever said.

Devine worked one inning in the A's Cactus League opener and gave up a hit and a walk in Oakland's win over the Cubs, but after losing two seasons to Tommy John surgery, the results were secondary as far as he was concerned.

"I just wanted to finish my outing without any pain, if it was three-up, three-down or if I didn't get an out," he said. "I wanted to be able to walk away feeling good."

Josh Outman, also coming off 2009 Tommy John surgery, was of the same mind after allowing three hits in two innings. He was nervous initially, and his command was a little off, but, he said, "I got through it and felt good."

Outman is a candidate for the fifth spot in the rotation, as are **Tyson Ross** and **Bobby Cramer**, who also worked Sunday. Ross came into the game with two on and one out in the first and got a double-play ball, and he allowed a hit and struck out one the next inning. Cramer gave up two hits, a walk and a run in two innings.

Reliever updates: **Michael Wuertz** resumed throwing (long toss) after being shut down for several days with shoulder tendinitis. He's likely to get into his first exhibition game toward the end of next week.

Andrew Bailey threw a 30-pitch bullpen session Saturday, and he'll do so again Tuesday before throwing live batting practice Friday. He'll make his Cactus League debut a week from today if all goes as planned.

Briefly: **Hideki Matsui** will make his A's spring debut today, getting two or three at-bats against his former team, the Angels. ... New outfielder **David DeJesus** was out of action because he arrived at Phoenix Muni feeling sick, according to manager **Bob Geren**. It's likely DeJesus will get an extra day to recover and play in Tuesday's home opener against the Reds. ... Matsui was greeted by screaming fans when he walked onto the field at Phoenix Muni. "That must be an interesting feeling," said Geren, whose morning interview session was interrupted by the squeals. "It's like the red carpet every day." Matsui made the Japanese fans' day by signing autographs. ... The A's came to terms with all 21 of their pre-arbitration players, including Bailey, **Trevor Cahill**, **Daric Barton** and **Gio Gonzalez**.

Healthy Crisp could be big bonus for Oakland

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

MESA, Ariz. -- A healthy Coco Crisp could do wonders at the top of the lineup this season for what could be an improved A's team.

Crisp tends to play the modest card and downplay his role, but Oakland's other starting eight would likely say that the center fielder represents an unmatched sparkplug when present in the lineup.

Everyone in attendance at the Cubs' HoHoKam Park got a taste of that notion Sunday when Crisp wiped away a 4-0 deficit with one swing of the bat -- a grand slam to right field off Matt Garza in the top of the third inning of the A's 15-7 win.

"The wind helped me," Crisp said.

The shot came two innings after the A's outfielder came up empty against Carlos Zambrano, who struck out Crisp to start the game. Crisp said it "felt like he was throwing 105 mph" but noted that he was trying to set the bar low, anyway.

The switch-hitting Crisp makes use of the mundane days of Spring Training by easing back into a comfort zone from the left side of the plate, as his natural side is on the right. But even though Sunday was the first game, Crisp said he's "feeling pretty good from both sides already."

All of Crisp, in fact, is feeling good. The veteran outfielder entered last spring coming off two shoulder surgeries, and he endured a frustrating 2010 campaign because of a handful of injuries that allowed him to play in just 75 games.

"Everyone wants to win these games," Crisp said, "but it's about feeling healthy and building chemistry with your teammates. I feel as healthy as I have in a long time."

Cahill unconcerned with shaky first outing

MESA, Ariz. -- Trevor Cahill realizes that lofty expectations follow his every move after an All-Star 2010 campaign, but he's not about to get worked up about a shaky spring outing.

Especially the first one.

The A's right-hander notched just one out in Sunday's 15-7 win over the Cubs, surrendering four runs on five hits with one walk while facing seven batters in the first inning. Four of the five hits were on the ground, and he insisted he "felt pretty good."

"I thought I made some pretty good pitches," Cahill said. "They just hit them."

Cahill threw just under 30 pitches in his brief outing and finished his work in the bullpen with a simulated inning.

"No hits," he said with a smile.

It was around this time last year when Cahill was duking it out with Gio Gonzalez for the fifth spot in the rotation. Now, Cahill, who turns 23 on Tuesday, is viewed as a potential Opening Day starter after pitching to an 18-8 record and a 2.97 ERA in his sophomore season. That didn't take away from first-time jitters, though.

"I still had some nerves, just because it's the first game and there were actually umpires and stuff," Cahill said. "It's a lot different than just throwing to hitters with a pitching coach standing behind you."

"Obviously, you want to do good all the time, but I'd rather have a bad outing come right now than later on."

Ross, Cramer get in positive work in opener

MESA, Ariz. -- Though all eyes on the fifth-starter race were seemingly geared toward Josh Outman, who graced a big league mound for the first time in nearly two years Sunday, another pair of hurlers garnered attention when they made their opening case for a rotation spot as well.

Tyson Ross and Bobby Cramer, both considered options to join Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden in an exceptional rotation this year, each received a good dose of work in the A's Cactus League opener.

Ross, coming off a shortened season with stints in both Oakland and Triple-A Sacramento, made a grand entrance in the first inning by bailing starter Trevor Cahill out of a two-on, one-out situation via a fastball-induced double play from Blake DeWitt.

The 23-year-old, who noted a conscious effort in improving his fastball command this spring, went on to pitch 1 2/3 innings, compiling a line of one hit with one strikeout.

"That was a nice way to start the spring," Ross said. "It's nice to get in there and get some outs. I felt pretty good."

Ross is no stranger to relief appearances, as he maintained a bullpen job during the first half of the 2010 season with the A's before the organization decided to stretch him out as a starter -- his natural role -- with the River Cats. He was ultimately shut down in August with a strained right elbow, which has been no cause for concern so far.

"As soon as that phone rings and they call your name, you get that adrenaline rush and don't have time to get nervous," Ross said. "That probably helped out a little bit."

Later in the game, Cramer took to the mound for two innings, allowing one run on two hits with a walk against nine batters. It was his first career Cactus League outing, as the 31-year-old is enjoying his first big league camp experience after walking away from 2010 as one of the club's feel-good stories of the year.

Cramer began his professional career in 2003 and spent two seasons ('05 and '06) away from the game before embarking on a journey that took him through independent ball, winter ball and the Mexican League prior to his long-awaited Major League debut with Oakland as a September callup.

A's agree with all 21 pre-arbitration players

MESA, Ariz. -- The A's announced Sunday that they have agreed to terms on one-year contracts with each of their 21 pre-arbitration players on the 40-man roster.

Headlining the list are 2010 All-Stars Andrew Bailey and Trevor Cahill, along with fellow hurlers Gio Gonzalez, Jerry Blevins, Josh Outman and Tyson Ross and infielders Cliff Pennington, Daric Barton and Adam Rosales.

Also included on the list are outfielders Chris Carter and Michael Taylor, infielders Adrian Cardenas, Sean Doolittle and Eric Sogard, catchers Landon Powell and Josh Donaldson and hurlers Bobby Cramer, Fautino De Los Santos, Pedro Figueroa, Trystan Magnuson and Guillermo Moscoso.

Worth noting

Sunday's win marked the A's first Cactus League-opening victory since 2003. ... Josh Willingham, Anthony Recker, Jai Miller, Matt Carson and 2010 first-round Draft pick Michael Choice each collected two hits against the Cubs. "The little I've seen from [Choice], I like what he's done," said manager Bob Geren. "He's very aggressive, very confident." ... The fight for the infield-utility spot began Sunday, with first looks given to Eric Sogard, Steve Tolleson and Andy LaRoche. Sogard started at shortstop, while Tolleson played second base and LaRoche manned the hot corner. Geren believes a roster spot will be awarded to the player who "plays shortstop best," given that Cliff Pennington is coming off shoulder surgery. Josh Horton will also be considered. ... David DeJesus is doubtful for Monday's road contest against the Angels, Geren said. DeJesus, who was also supposed to play in Sunday's game, is feeling ill.

Devine, Outman make it through spring debuts

On comeback trail, duo work scoreless outings against Cubs

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

MESA, Ariz. -- Never mind that it was nothing more than an exhibition game, that fewer than 10,000 fans sat in the stands and players were shuffled in and out as quickly as they are in a Little League contest.

For comeback hopefuls Josh Outman and Joey Devine, Sunday's Cactus League-opening 15-7 win over the Cubs was as real as it gets.

"I was nervous all day," Devine said. "I just had the butterflies. I was just so anxious."

That's because Devine hadn't faced opposing big league hitters in a quasi-official setting in more than two years. Same for Outman, who, like his teammate, has spent countless months rehabbing from Tommy John surgery.

"I haven't seen this many fans and this kind of environment in a long time, and it just felt like baseball again," Devine said. "It was so nice to get back to."

Results, then, weren't as significant as their overall physical state by day's end. In that regard, both "felt good."

Devine, looking to again prove his worth as a quality member of the bullpen this spring, gave up one hit and one walk while facing five batters. The right-handed reliever noticed an improved change in his mechanics since his shaky intrasquad performance three days prior, and he is already gearing up to take to the mound again.

"I was locating my fastball, for the most part, really well," Devine said. "My breaking ball still needs a little more arm speed to get it back to where it was before I got hurt, but as far as location, to compare this to my last outing, it was so much better. I just did a couple things mechanically to slow things down, and it seemed to work. Now it's just a matter of developing arm speed, taking that into my next outing and keep building."

A beaming Devine said he realized he was "finally back" as he made his last warmup pitch and watched teammates throw the ball around the field. The next thing he knew, "I walked away feeling good."

"That's the most promising thing, whether I went three up, three down or whether I wasn't able to get an out," he said. "It's been so long, and I just wanted to get a feeling for what it was like again."

Outman, meanwhile, shared the same sense of optimism following a two-inning stint. The left-handed hurler, vying for the fifth spot in the rotation after being shut down in July of 2009, dueled nine Cubs batters and surrendered three hits but no runs. Manager Bob Geren deemed it a "decent outing" -- a fair assessment, given the situation.

"I was a little nervous," Outman said. "That was my first time out there in a year and a half facing Major League hitters, and some good ones at that. Command wasn't where I wanted it to be, but I felt good, and I can build on that for next time."

The southpaw, sporting high yellow socks in his spring debut, said nerves may have played a part in his command struggles and that his focus was mainly on trying not to overthrow the ball.

"The game's moving a little faster than it was in instructional league," Outman said with a smile, "so I'd like to slow things down the next time."

Both hurlers are slated to pitch again on Wednesday when Oakland hosts Cleveland.

Crisp's grand slam sparks rout in spring opener

By Carrie Muskat / MLB.com

MESA, Ariz. -- Coco Crisp belted a grand slam and Eric Sogard hit a go-ahead sacrifice fly Sunday before the A's broke it open in a 15-7 victory over the Cubs in the Cactus League opener for both teams.

Cubs starter Carlos Zambrano faced the minimum over his two innings, striking out the first two batters of the game. He walked Kurt Suzuki to start the second but got Andy LaRoche to hit into a double play.

Matt Garza (0-1), making his first appearance for the Cubs, didn't fare as well. The A's loaded the bases in the third on two hits and a walk against the right-hander. Crisp, who is 1-for-13 against Garza in his regular-season career, tied the game with his first spring homer. Garza faced eight batters that inning.

Matt Carson doubled to lead off the Oakland fourth and scored one out later on Sogard's fly ball to center. The A's took advantage of two errors by Tyler Colvin in right field and added seven more runs in the seventh off Justin Berg to stretch the lead to 13-4.

The Cubs took a 4-0 lead in the first inning against A's starter Trevor Cahill, as Marlon Byrd and Aramis Ramirez each hit RBI singles and Alfonso Soriano added a two-run double. Cahill was relieved after facing seven batters in the first.

Up next:Hideki Matsui is scheduled to make his debut for the A's on Monday when they face his former Angels team at Tempe Diablo Stadium at 12:05 p.m. PT. The veteran slugger, brought in during the winter as part of Oakland's conscious effort to upgrade a weak offense, will see at least two at-bats in the designated hitter's role. Also penciled in to make their Cactus League debuts are infielders Mark Ellis and Kevin Kouzmanoff.

Pitching at the forefront in the AL West

All four clubs have stars, depth in rotation and bullpen

By T.R. Sullivan / MLB.com

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- The numbers tell the story -- the American League West had four of the top six pitching staffs in the American League in 2010.

The Athletics talented young staff led with a 3.58 ERA. The Mariners, despite losing 101 games, finished tied for third with a 3.93 ERA the Rangers. The Angels came in sixth at 4.04.

Six of the top 10 American League pitchers in ERA were from the West, and only Cliff Lee is gone. Mariners ace Felix Hernandez had the lowest ERA in the league, and he won the Cy Young Award. Rangers closer Neftali Feliz, who was third in the league with 40 saves, was the Rookie of the Year.

Welcome to the AL West, where excellent pitching has become the dominant trait, and the common denominator among the four teams in baseball's smallest division. Only the National League East -- which doesn't have to deal with the designated hitter -- had a slightly lower collective ERA than the AL West in 2010.

"This division certainly has great pitching," Rangers manager Ron Washington said. "Anaheim has great pitching, Oakland has great pitching and Seattle has great pitching. Our pitching is going to be fine if we stay healthy. If you want to win this division, you certainly better be able to pitch."

The Rangers did just that last season. They still put out an All-Star lineup, led by AL Most Valuable Player Josh Hamilton. But their relentless pursuit of pitching over the past several years finally paid off, with the lowest team ERA since 1990 and their highest ranking since leading the league in pitching in 1983.

"All clubs will say pitching is what gives you an opportunity to win," Mariners pitching coach Carl Willis said. "And certainly in a division where you have the caliber of pitching that we do, it becomes even more important, because you're envisioning lower-scoring games because of that pitching. It just becomes a little bit magnified."

Pitching took the Rangers to their first World Series in franchise history. They will miss Lee, who was brilliant in the first two rounds against the Rays and Yankees, but still have C.J. Wilson and Colby Lewis. Former NL Cy Young winner Brandon Webb, after missing two seasons due to a shoulder injury, could help ease the loss of Lee.

ERA by division

Division	ERA
NL East	3.82
AL West	3.87
NL West	3.93
AL East	4.17
NL Central	4.24
AL Central	4.32

The Rangers are also considering the possibility of moving Feliz to the rotation, but they still have plenty of young pitching talent to choose from beyond him, including Tommy Hunter, Derek Holland, Michael Kirkman, Matt Harrison and Alexi Ogando.

"They've got some underrated pitchers over there," Mariners designated hitter Jack Cust said. "They're definitely a good staff. Obviously Cliff helped, but he probably helped them for this year, too, just showing them things. He's a guy who doesn't walk anybody, and makes you beat him. I think a lot of those younger guys probably learned a lot from him."

The most interesting pitching contrast within the division is between the starting rotations of the Angels and the Athletics. The Angels have the proven veterans, while the Athletics pitchers are just getting started.

The Angels starting five of Jered Weaver, Joel Pineiro, Dan Haren, Scott Kazmir and Ervin Santana have made a combined 953 starts in the Major Leagues and won 394 games.

The Athletics are looking at a possible rotation of Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez, Dallas Braden, Trevor Cahill and Brandon McCarthy that has a combined 113 wins and 300 Major League starts. McCarthy is far from a lock, and if the Athletics decide that Tyson Ross, a second-round pick in 2008, is ready or Josh Outman is fully recovered from Tommy John elbow reconstruction surgery, their rotation could get even younger and less experienced.

"The addition of Haren last year really strengthened the Angels starting five, but being on this side is just as nice," said Athletics reliever Brian Fuentes, who was with the Angels in 2009-10. "I'm really excited about the group of guys we have here. It's one of the best starting rotations in not just the league, but in all of baseball. With one more year of experience, you assume they can only get better.

"There's going to be a lot of good matchups. If you look at the Angels' veteran staff and our young staff, each is strong in their own way. I'm sure there are going to be some low-scoring games."

The Mariners, despite the presence of Hernandez, admittedly don't have the depth that the other three teams do. Their high ranking in pitching last year was helped considerably by having Lee for a half-season, but also Jason Vargas (9-12, 3.78) and Doug Fister (6-14, 4.11) pitched better than their won-loss records indicated.

If Erik Bedard, who has looked good so far in camp, can make a complete comeback, it would be a huge boost for the rotation, and the Mariners are excited about rookie right-handers Michael Pineda and Blake Beavan. Pineda is definitely in the mix for a spot, while Beavan -- acquired from the Rangers in the Lee trade -- is probably behind veterans Luke French, Nate Robertson and David Pauley.

"We have some guys who have had success, and we have question marks," Mariners general manager Jack Zduriencik said. "We've got guys who are trying to restart their career, and some guys coming back from injuries. Where we stand right now is still a question of how it's all going to fall together. I don't have the answer for that. Health is an issue and how quickly some guys grow up."

But, as Zduriencik said, the Mariners do have the reigning Cy Young winner and that's a nice place to start.

"I faced Felix Hernandez a lot, and have gotten to know him," Rangers infielder Michael Young said. "Not only does he have great stuff, but he really goes out there and competes to win. I have great respect for him. His makeup is off the charts."

The rotation is only part of the equation. The bullpen matters as well, and all four teams face certain question marks about their closer.

Mariners closer David Aardsma had offseason hip surgery, and won't start throwing until mid-spring. Brandon League may have to fill that spot temporarily, but former Orioles closer Chris Ray is also in camp. Andrew Bailey, who had 25 saves last year, anchors an Oakland bullpen that could be as strong as the rotation but he missed time last year with a strained rib-cage muscle and was shut down at the end of the season with a sore elbow.

Fernando Rodney is the Angels closer right now, but he was 0-3 with a 5.65 ERA and four blown saves over his final 30 games, and that may open up an opportunity for somebody else. The Angels have some of the best young power relief arms in the game, including Kevin Jepsen, Jordan Walden, Michael Kohn, Jason Bulger and Francisco Rodriguez.

"With the power arms that we have in the back end of our 'pen, I really feel that we're going to have a closer that is going to emerge." Angels manager Mike Scioscia said.

The Rangers are set as closer with Feliz pitching behind a veteran setup unit that includes left-handers Arthur Rhodes and Darren Oliver, and right-handers Mark Lowe and Darren O'Day. If Feliz moves to the rotation though, the Rangers will be looking for a closer. It could be Lowe, Ogando or a pitcher to be acquired later.

"If Feliz is ready to go into the rotation, I'll take my chances on finding a closer," general manager Jon Daniels said.

All four teams have offensive issues. The Angels, Mariners and Athletics all scored less than 700 runs last year. The Rangers scored 787 runs, fourth most in the league, but still must make up for the loss of Vladimir Guerrero.

But, when it comes to pitching, the AL West appears to be loaded against this season.

Harden's return delayed at least a week

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Rich Harden's return to the mound will likely have to wait at least another week, as the A's look to make sure he's completely ready before allowing him to resume the battle for the fifth starter's spot.

There was speculation that Harden, sidelined since Feb. 15 with stiffness in his pitching arm, might begin throwing again as soon as Sunday or Monday. But manager Bob Geren said Saturday morning that it's best he's given the necessary time to strengthen his arm before picking up a ball again.

Geren noted that there have been no other setbacks with the right-hander. The A's are simply all about taking precautionary steps with their players with guidance from new trainer Nick Paparesta this spring, particularly following three seasons that resulted in a team total of 65 disabled list stints.

It sure doesn't hurt to play it safe with Harden, anyway, as the righty's career has been hampered by a rash of injuries. Since going 11-7 with a 3.99 ERA in 31 starts during the 2004 season, he has made at least 20 starts in just two of the six seasons that have followed and has endured nine disabled-list stints -- six of them coming in Oakland -- throughout his career.

The 29-year-old hurler, embarking on his second tour with the A's following time with the Cubs and Rangers, is part of a fifth-starter competition that also includes Josh Outman, Brandon McCarthy, Tyson Ross, Bobby Cramer and Guillermo Moscoso. The former three appear to be seen as the front-runners, but Geren's not about ready to brush aside Harden's chances.

"Never say never," he said. "[Harden] was in pretty good shape before the setback. When he's ready, we're definitely not counting him out."

Harden, like most other fifth-starter contenders, could potentially be a bullpen option if not part of the rotation at season's start. Given his early setback, that role may appear best suited for Harden at this point, but Geren insisted that he doesn't want to "put any limitations or a timeline on him."

Harden has been rather optimistic about his situation since the onset of his injury, particularly because he experienced the same soreness at the start of the 2008 season and was able to bounce back and put together the best year of his career -- a 10-2 record with a 2.07 ERA in 25 combined starts with Oakland and Chicago.

The veteran hurler, who was up to 40 pitches in his bullpen sessions before being shut down, believes his rehab process was rushed in 2008 and is hopeful that not pushing it this time around will have him back on a mound sooner rather than later.

Worth noting

Right-handed reliever Michael Wuertz (shoulder) has been cleared to begin throwing again Sunday, though the A's will continue to take it easy with him and hold him out of Cactus League action for about 12 days, manager Bob Geren said. ... Oakland's 2010 first-round Draft pick Michael Choice, a non-roster invitee in camp, is the only A's player who collected a hit in each of the team's three intrasquad games this week. ... Gio Gonzalez and Brett Anderson, who will be on the mound in Tuesday's Cactus League home opener, were among seven hurlers who tossed exactly 20 pitches in Saturday's intrasquad contest. Gonzalez faced four batters, allowing one hit and striking out two. Anderson, meanwhile, threw to six hitters and recorded five groundball outs. ... Former umpire Steve Palermo, now a liaison between Major League Baseball and its umpires, engaged in a closed-door meeting with A's staff and players prior to Saturday morning's workouts. Rules changes and on-field issues were addressed, and it marked the first time players -- not just coaches -- were included in the annual session. Geren noted his team was applauded for its efforts in maintaining a quick and steady pace of game. "They said we're probably the best at playing the game the right way," he said. "That's good news."

Zambrano looks strong in Cubs' 15-7 loss to A's

Associated Press

MESA, Ariz. -- Carlos Zambrano threw free and easy in his spring training debut, working two innings in the Chicago Cubs' 15-7 exhibition loss to the Oakland Athletics on Sunday.

It may be a sign for the fiery right-hander of things to come in 2011 after a difficult 2010 when he was pulled from the rotation and suspended from the team in June after a scuffle with former teammate Derek Lee.

Despite the difficult start -- demoted to the bullpen after four starts -- and being placed on the restricted list while going through anger management, Zambrano salvaged the season by finishing on a tear, going 8-0 with a 1.40 ERA over his last 11 starts.

"Year after year you learn from experience and the things that you do in the past," Zambrano said about the pitching learning curve, but it could be applied to life as well. "That's what I do."

That's what the Cubs are hoping for as they lean on the 29-year-old Venezuelan to help anchor the rotation that has too much talent to finish fifth in the NL Central again.

"After three or four outings and I will be good," Zambrano said. "Today I threw a lot of strikes. I was a little too rushed with (designated hitter Kurt) Suzuki but I was able to get the ground ball for the double play."

Cubs manager Mike Quade saw exactly what he wanted from Zambrano.

"It's fun to watch him," he said. "After such a good first inning, he wavered a little and came back to right the ship. I don't know what his velocities were, but he was throwing well, which is not surprising because when he gets the adrenaline going, look out."

It wasn't as smooth of a debut for Chicago's big offseason acquisition as right-hander Matt Garza, who came over in a trade from Tampa Bay, struggled throwing strictly fastballs and change-ups.

He allowed five earned runs on five hits in his two innings, including a grand slam to Coco Crisp on a change-up, but Garza was more concerned with his hit.

"I didn't want to strike out and look foolish," said Garza. "It was a good jumping off point. I never had a hit ever. It was cool. All of the guys were laughing and joked about it, but today my job was to get outs. I got six of them but not the way I want to go about it."

Garza gave up another run after a leadoff double by right-fielder Matt Carson. He took the loss in the spring training opener for both teams after allowing six base runners in his two innings.

The Cubs' offense started well to get a 4-0 lead off Oakland starter Trevor Cahill as six of the first seven batters reached, including a two-run double by Alfonso Soriano, who had three hits. Starlin Castro and Marlon Byrd each went 2 for 3 to add to the 16-hit attack.

The early lead was erased by Crisp's grand slam and then three errors, two by right-fielder Tyler Colvin, and ineffective pitching (Oakland had 18 hits) made it a rough start to the spring schedule.

"Day one I am not going to be so critical about all of this," Quade said. "We will identify the mistakes, work on them and move on."

And the hope is Zambrano has done the same.

Notes: Quade said that Colvin, who has been getting time at first base to become more versatile, will get a shot at in the infield at some time during the opening week of spring games, possibly Thursday against Texas. ... RHP Randy Wells gets the start Monday against Milwaukee and Ryan Dempster, the Opening Day starter, gets the ball at San Francisco on Tuesday. ... Several of the Cubs players attended a surprise party Saturday night for former Cubs reliever Bobby Howry, who retired after 13 seasons and pitched for five other teams, including the White Sox. ... The A's agreed to terms with all 21 pre-arbitration players on their 40-man roster on one-year contracts for the 2011 season. The list includes RHP Andrew Bailey, 1B Daric Barton, LHP Jerry Blevins, RHP Trevor Cahill, IF Adrian Cardenas, OF Chris Carter, LHP Bobby Cramer, RHP Fautino De Los Santos, C Josh Donaldson, IF Sean Doolittle, LHP Pedro Figueroa, LHP Gio Gonzalez, RHP Trystan Magnuson, RHP Guillermo Moscoso, LHP Josh Outman, SS Cliff Pennington, C Landon Powell, IF Adam Rosales, RHP Tyson Ross, IF Eric Sogard and OF Michael Taylor.

A's Insider notebook: Crisp covers for rusty Cahill

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

MESA, Ariz. -- The A's arrived at HoHoKam Park for their Cactus League opener against the Cubs on Sunday just as the skies stopped pounding the desert with hail.

They spent the rest of the day pounding Chicago pitching, rallying from the 4-0 hole that starter Trevor Cahill dug with an 18-hit attack on the way to a 15-7 victory.

Eight of the hits came from four players -- with two hits each -- who likely won't make the team, but it was one of the regulars who provided the biggest blow of the day. Leadoff man Coco Crisp blasted Cubs newcomer Matt Garza for a third-inning grand slam that tied the score and drew some self-deprecating humor from Cahill, who allowed four runs on five hits and a walk over one-third of an inning.

"You mean I'm off the hook [for the loss]?" Cahill cracked.

Crisp's homer, a no-doubter in any park, provided a glimpse of the sneaky power he possesses. It comes from his quick hands and wrists more than from brute strength, and it's pretty clear that Crisp's hands are just fine thus far.

Cahill, a right-hander who won 18 games last season, said he was generally pleased with his outing despite the ugly bottom line, saying he made plenty of good pitches. They just happened to get whacked.

"Obviously you want to do well all the time," Cahill said, "but I'd rather have a bad outing now than later on. For now, it's all right."

A LONG TIME COMING

Righty reliever Joey Devine and lefty Josh Outman, a leading candidate for the No. 5 spot in the rotation, made their long-awaited returns to competitive action Sunday. Devine gave up a hit and a walk while throwing a scoreless third inning, and Outman followed with two shutout innings of three-hit work.

Devine hadn't pitched in a big-league game since 2008. Outman last faced big-league hitters in mid-2009.

"After the last warmup pitch, when they threw the ball around the infield, I realized, 'I'm finally back,'" said Devine, who admitted he was nervous all day before taking the mound. "I just wanted to finish my outing without any pain ... I wanted to be able to walk away feeling good."

Both pitchers are nearing full recovery of the Tommy John surgeries that interrupted their blossoming careers, so at this point in camp, the results were a secondary concern.

"I got through it and felt good," Outman said, and that should have A's fans feeling pretty good, too.

SICK BAY

New outfielder David DeJesus did not play because he wasn't feeling well in the morning, and Geren suggested he'll probably give DeJesus another day off Monday, putting him in line to make his A's debut in the team's home opener Tuesday.

Righty reliever Michael Wuertz was cleared to play long toss Sunday after several days of inactivity to combat a minor case of shoulder tendinitis. He could make his way into a game by the end of the week, Geren said.

Shortstop Cliff Pennington looks like a man dying to get into a game, but it probably won't happen for another week. The team's unofficial medical motto this year -- "Don't Rush It" -- means that every precaution will be taken as Pennington builds strength in his surgically repaired left shoulder.

MATSUI-MANIA

Hideki Matsui did not make the trip to Mesa; he'll make his A's debut Sunday against the Angels, for whom he played last season. His lack of action didn't stop the horde of Japanese media that tracks his every move from showing up for Geren's morning press briefing at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, though, and the session was interrupted briefly by fans screaming as "Godzilla" took the field.

Just another day in the life of an international superstar.

"That must be an interesting feeling," said Geren. "It's like walking the red carpet every day."

GAMERS

Tyson Ross, another candidate for the No. 5 spot in the rotation, took over for Cahill with two on and one out in the first inning and promptly got out of the jam with a double play. He also worked a scoreless second inning, allowing one hit. ... Bobby Cramer, also fighting for No. 5, gave up a run on two hits and a walk over two innings of work. ... Outfielder Michael Choice, Oakland's top pick in the 2010 draft, singled in his first two at-bats and scored two runs. One of his hits came on a fairly routine ground ball to second base that he simply beat out with hustle and speed. Moments later he scored easily from first base on a double high off the wall by catcher Anthony Recker. ... Outfielders Matt Carson (two doubles) and Jai Miller

(single, triple), Choice and Recker each had two hits, as did newcomer Josh Willingham, who chipped in with an RBI single. Daric Barton doubled, too. ... Brad Ziegler gave up a hit and a walk while wrapping up the victory with a scoreless ninth inning.

A's arming themselves for title run

Oakland borrows page from Giants' playbook

by Scott Bordow, Arizona Republic, 2/27/2011

Headline: "Bay-area team rides strong pitching from starters to World Series triumph."

The San Francisco Giants in 2010? Absolutely.

The Oakland A's in 2011? Well, let's just say there's more than one Bay-area team building its hopes around a collection of young arms.

The A's likely aren't talented enough to duplicate the Giants' feat, but for the first time in years, they'll be in the news for something other than their annual fire sale.

In fact, given their young arms, the confidence they gained after going 81-81 and the off-season acquisitions of veterans David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui, there's reason to believe the A's can contend in the American League West.

"One of the benefits of having a young team and paring back the last few years is that you'll get to a point where you'll have major-league players at low cost and you'll have some flexibility, which is where we're at this year," General Manager Billy Beane told reporters. "So we have been able to be a little more aggressive.

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

It is that young and inexpensive pitching staff that has A's fans so excited.

Last year, Gio Gonzalez, Dallas Braden and Trevor Cahill combined for 34 victories. Gonzalez is 25 years old, Braden 27 and Cahill, seen by baseball people as a potential Cy Young Award winner, is 22. Throw in 22-year-old left-hander Brett Anderson, who went 7-6 with a 2.80 ERA, and the A's have the makings of a dominant staff that can grow together, just as Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain, Jonathan Sanchez and Madison Bumgarner did with San Francisco.

"One thing that's really clear is that, starting from their starting pitching to the closer, they have a solid pitching staff," Matsui said.

Ah, yes, the closer. That would be 26-year-old Andrew Bailey, who's made two consecutive All-Star teams and finished 2010 with 25 saves, a 1.47 ERA and a 0.96 walks and hits per inning pitched. Bailey had cleanup surgery on his right elbow with two weeks left in last season, but he's expected to be ready for spring training.

If the A's have any shot of unseating the Texas Rangers, however, they'll have to score far more runs than they did last year.

That's where Willingham, Matsui and DeJesus come in. Matsui gives the A's a competent full-time designated hitter (he had 21 homers and 84 RBIs for the Angels in '10), Willingham hit 16 homers for Washington despite missing the last six weeks of the season, and DeJesus hit .318 with a .384 on-base percentage for Kansas City.

For Oakland's offense to truly get a jump-start, however, first baseman/left fielder Chris Carter will have to figure out how to hit major-league pitching. Carter put up prodigious power numbers in the minors - he had 28 homers at Triple-A Sacramento last year - but went 0 for 33 upon being called up before finally getting his first hit.

Even with the off-season acquisitions, the A's won't win many 7-6 games. But that's OK. The Giants were ninth in the National League in runs scored last year and, at last check, they wound up doing pretty well.

And if it worked for one Bay-area team, why not a second?