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Inbox: Why the A's don't need Young

Beat reporter Jane Lee answers questions from A's fans

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Why are the A's not making a serious push for Michael Young? That could be a huge piece toward making the A's puzzle complete. Package Dallas Braden and Kevin Kouzmanoff for Young. We need another real bat, not David DeJesus. He is just Ryan Sweeney with a fancier name.

-- Phil K., Reno, Nev.

I've received several varieties of this question throughout the week, and hopefully I can shed some light on why it really doesn't need to be asked again. Young is undoubtedly a valued player, one respected to the utmost degree around the league for his abilities both as an athlete -- he's a gamer in every sense of the word -- and as a leader. But the A's are no match for his three-year, \$48 million price tag. Nor are they on his list of teams to which he'd accept a trade, unless they've changed their name to the Angels, Astros, Cardinals, Dodgers, Padres, Rockies, Twins or Yankees.

Young has publicly stated he'd consider another team depending on the situation, but history tells us Oakland doesn't exactly have the easiest time reeling in players. The club is also not about to spend big money on a 34-year-old who doesn't boast the defensive abilities mirroring that of the team's other infielders. Among all American League third-base qualifiers last year, Young ranked last in fielding percentage (.950), zone rating (.765) and range factor per nine innings (2.36). His glove has never been his strong suit, and while the A's would surely enjoy his bat in the lineup, I can't see them spending that kind of money unless both of those facets of his game were above-average.

It's also worth noting that Young's home and road career splits show that he has benefited greatly from the hitter-friendly confines of Rangers Ballpark, where his career line is .322/.372/.487. When playing in Oakland, however, he has a career .284/.327/.418 line, not to mention just nine home runs in 366 at-bats. Overall, his career road splits are .279/.322/.411.

It's hard to say where Young will be on Opening Day, but I think it's a safe bet to say he won't be wearing white cleats.

What impact, if any, will the departure of Curt Young have on the pitching staff this season?

-- Russell S., Livermore, Calif.

In no way do I want to undermine the brilliant coaching abilities of Young, who I greatly respect, but I don't see his absence being a factor in how the A's pitching staff performs this year. Young deservedly received a great opportunity in Boston, where I'm sure he'll represent a sound influence for the Red Sox, but A's hurlers will be in fine hands in new pitching coach Ron Romanick. Much of Young's success in Oakland was aided by Romanick, who spent the previous three seasons as his bullpen coach. And in the nine years prior, Romanick was employed as the club's Minor League roving instructor -- a role that proved instrumental to the development of several of the team's current starting pitchers, including Trevor Cahill and Dallas Braden.

All that is a long way of saying he's no stranger to this staff. He works harder than almost anyone I've ever met, and it shows on the mound via his students. Ever since his arrival in Oakland, he's prided himself in the construction of throwing programs for the entire pitching staff, whether it be in the form of an offseason routine or rehab schedule. He was the main figure responsible for Brad Ziegler's successful conversion into a submarine pitcher, and he's currently helping Rich Harden transform back into his old self.

Romanick knows each of his pitchers inside and out, and I think his constant drive to better them -- whether that be through mechanical or mental practices -- will definitely continue what Young started.

Part of the A's game strategy has been to run up the pitch count and get to the weaker pitchers between the starter and closer. With such a deep bullpen, the A's don't have that soft spot. Do you expect a quicker hook to keep starters fresh? Could Harden be a No. 5 starter with a low pitch limit backed up by a deep bullpen?

-- Tom G., Fairfield, Calif.

I honestly don't see much of a change in this regard, only because Bob Geren has already demonstrated quick use of the hook when it comes to his starters. He's a manager who has never been afraid to turn to his bullpen, something we saw last year when starters were often pulled a little bit prematurely. I'd suspect much of the same this year, but that deep bullpen

you spoke of will offset much of the late-inning struggles that occurred in 2010. Last year's bullpen was very good, of course, but it often provided a little more drama than necessary -- which could have been a result of overworked arms. Now, there's no need for overworked arms thanks to abounding depth.

As for Harden, I don't think he wins a starting job with a pitch limit. Even a bullpen boasting this kind of depth can get a little banged up throughout the season, so a team is always going to want to carry five starters who can go deep in the game, as opposed to one or two who can only offer so much. If, by season's start, the team feels Harden need be restricted to 70 or 80 pitches per outing, then he may be suited for a bullpen role after all.

What will the pitching rotation and lineup look like on April 1?

-- Jason M., San Jose, Calif.

In a perfect world, the rotation will be filled out by Cahill -- his 2010 campaign presumably equals Opening Day starter status -- along with Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez, Braden and either Harden or Josh Outman as the fifth starter. The lineup could be written several ways, but I think this is a definite possibility: Coco Crisp (CF), Daric Barton (1B), DeJesus (RF), Josh Willingham (LF), Hideki Matsui (DH), Kurt Suzuki (C), Kouzmanoff (3B), Mark Ellis (2B), Cliff Pennington (SS). Granted, that's assuming all of the above are healthy come April.

What do you think of Barton? What does he need to do this year to keep Chris Carter from taking his spot? I like Barton, but it doesn't seem like he has much job security.

-- Mark F., Anaheim

I wouldn't worry about Barton's job security too much. The A's brass has made it very clear this winter -- while previously speaking amidst overhyped trade rumors for a veteran first baseman and Carter talk -- that Barton is unequivocally the starting first baseman. Even though first base feels like home to Carter, the A's at this point would much rather see him primarily work in the outfield and allow Barton to continue building upon what's already an impressive defensive showing.

I think Barton definitely established himself as a Major League first basemen last year. Now, I'd like to see him become a productive one at the plate. He gives the club lots of walks and a high on-base percentage, but he drove in only 57 runs and collected just 10 homers with a .405 slugging percentage -- which ranked eighth of nine qualifying AL first baseman -- in 159 games in 2010. Those numbers aren't what is expected from this power position, so if he really wants long-term job security, I think he'll have to start swinging the bat more.

What's been your favorite A's storyline of the offseason? I've been a fan of the team for a long time, and I can't remember witnessing such a productive offseason unfold quite like this one in awhile. It's an exciting time to be an A's fan!

-- Brandon N., Hayward, Calif.

Well, I think it goes without saying that what the team has managed to do this winter as a sum -- make a weak offense better and a great pitching staff even greater -- is, in itself, a great story. But when I consider some of the more intriguing moments of the offseason, I can't help but think of one name: Hisashi Iwakuma.

It seems like just yesterday the A's swooped in and made the winning bid for this Japanese right-hander, who, early on in the process, was expected to be the club's fifth starter. Fast forward through a 30-day negotiating period and failed attempts at reaching an agreement, and the A's suddenly had a lot more cash in their pocket than they would have had Iwakuma signed. And by more cash, I'm talking about \$19.1 million in posting fees (which they got back), along with at least \$16 million that would have been spread over four years. That kind of money wasn't enough for Iwakuma, who indirectly allowed the A's to use a surplus of salary to spend on the likes of Matsui, Willingham, Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes.

The A's were obviously very high on Iwakuma, as evidenced by their sky-high posting fee, but I don't think anyone in the front office would argue that his decision to return to Japan necessarily ended up being a bad thing after all. It seems more like a blessing in disguise to me.

Urban: Fan guide to Spring Training 2011

[Mychael Urban](#), CSNBayArea.com

Spring training is old hat for the players, who know where to go, when to go and what to expect -- day and night.

That's not always the case for fans.

Some, of course, are annual visitors, so they've figured out their favorite hangs -- day and night -- and have the routine associated with catching the team of their choice in action down cold. First-timers, however, need a little help so they don't waste any of the time and money they've invested in the "bucket list" trip that is a few days in the desert with big-league baseball as the backdrop.

We're here for you. Presenting CSNBayArea.com's first annual Fan's Guide to Spring Training, which offers for your consideration a variety of tips -- day and night -- for Giants and A's fans that should aid even those veteran "campers" familiar with the local landscape.

When to go: There's no bad time, really, but if you're a first-timer, you'll obviously want to catch some Cactus League action. If you don't yet have tickets, though, you're in for a bit of a challenge, and you should be prepared to drop some regular-season coin.

As defending world champions, the Giants know they're going to be hosting massive crowds at Scottsdale Stadium; their opener is Feb. 25 against the visiting Diamondbacks, and stadium seating for the entire Cactus League season is virtually sold out. So if you want one of those spots, you're likely going to have to go through a broker or hope to get lucky outside the yard on the day of the game. A better option, if you're OK with parking your butt on the sloped lawn beyond the outfield walls, might be to snap up some of those tickets, some of which will be available on game day.

The A's play at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, and given the high expectations that will follow them into camp this year, they're going to be entertaining some pretty big crowds, too. Traditionally, they draw their biggest crowds for games against the Giants, Cubs, Diamondbacks and Dodgers, so avoid those dates if at all possible. You should be able to score some seats for any other opponent through the team's website or at the stadium box office, and there really isn't a bad seat in the house.

If you don't want to fight the Cactus League crowds, and your primary desire is to get as close to your favorite players in as relaxed an environment as possible, don't hesitate to book a last-minute trip to get down there *before* Cactus League action gets underway. Both the Giants and A's open their stadium doors to fans for early morning workouts -- the Giants formally open Feb. 15, the A's on Feb. 16 -- free of charge, and you can't beat the sights and sounds of batting practice under the mid-morning sun.

It's the best players in the world, under virtually no pressure, doing what they do best and having a blast doing it. As such, they're typically receptive to autograph requests when they're done working out, so try to get down near the dugout and foul-line rails as you see your man making his way to the clubhouse.

Where to stay: You're on your own here, folks. If you haven't made a reservation by now, you're in for a search, and you're likely to end up fairly far away from the baseball facilities. The good news is that there's no shortage of options for every budget within driving distance of where you want to be -- Scottsdale.

The high-end places are more likely to have rooms available at this late date, but if you're on a shoestring budget, check out the hotels in nearby Mesa, Tempe and Phoenix.

You can try private rentals online, too, but most of the time those renters are looking for a minimum stay of a week or three.

What to do at night: Party. You're at spring training, for crying out loud. Eat, drink and merrily talk ball with fellow fans.

Old Town Scottsdale, a charming area packed with restaurants and bars, is where you'll likely end up, but it's no secret that CSNBayArea.com's spring training base is just south of Old Town on Scottsdale Road, at Frasher's Steakhouse and Lounge. Run by George Frasher, a gregarious St. Louis native and Cardinals die-hard who's declared Giants and A's fans his spring training favorites, it features an impressive and critically acclaimed menu highlighted by Midwestern staples such as fried ravioli and a gooey butter cake to die for, and the affable employees understand how to make their patrons feel special. The steaks, ribs, chicken and pork chops are moderately priced, and you have your choice between settling into the dining room for a quiet meal or hunkering down in the laid-back lounge, where baseball is king, the music as is eclectic as the often-star-studded clientele, and comfort rules the day.

Frasher's has a lengthy list of celebrities known to drop in frequently every spring, from Brian Wilson and Matt Cain to Dusty Baker and Orlando Cepeda, and last year's first-time visitors included Dallas Braden, Shaquille O'Neal, Nate Schierholtz and Torii Hunter. Barry Zito hosts an annual dinner there for some of the soldiers he helps through his Strikeouts For Troops, Wilson's birthday party kicked off there last spring, and among the other luminaries who've dropped in multiple times over the years are Barry Bonds, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Jim Plunkett and Marcus Allen.

Among the top Old Town dining options are the venerable Pink Pony, a legendary old-school spot favored by baseball scouts, executives and coaches; Saddle Ranch, where you can grab a nice meal *and* ride a mechanical bull to blaring hip-hop and rock music; Don and Charlie's, another old-school spot that doubles as a Scottsdale version of Cooperstown, with

memorabilia all over the place; [Eddie's House](#), an upscale joint that did a fine job of hosting the awards dinner for last month's Giants Fantasy Camp; Sakana, a small but amazing strip-mall sushi spot that you'd be wise to call in advance; the highly respected Italian Grotto; and Los Olivos, which offers excellent, affordable and authentic Mexican food.

After your meal, check out any one or two or five of the clubs. Frasher, something of a night owl himself, suggests Martini Ranch on Sundays, Crown Room on Mondays, Dirty Pretty on Tuesdays, American Junkie on Wednesday and Revolver on Thursdays, to name a few. He also recommends Happy Hour at the Valley Ho pool, Kona Grill or Wildfish. Choices abound.

During the day, don't miss out on Dos Gringos, which advertises heavily throughout the Cactus League as a "great spot to day drink." According to multiple sources, it truly is.

What to avoid: The rental car center at the Phoenix airport is convenient, but they tag you for so many additional fees that you'll feel like you're paying double. Get "off campus" and you'll save considerably.

This should go without saying, but it can't be stressed enough: Don't even think about getting behind the wheel after imbibing. Arizona has some of the most harsh DUI laws in the country, and snagging violators is a big priority in the area. Even if you've had only one, don't risk it. Call a cab or designate a driver. Please.

No matter where you're driving, try to stay off the highways. Arizona drivers are generally brutal, the system can be confusing, and the traffic during anything close to rush hour is awful. Get friendly with a local and find a city-streets route if you can.

Bottom line: It's not going to be cheap. Spring training has gotten expensive. But it's worth the experience. From watching baseball spring to life again during the day to rubbing elbows with some of the game's greats after hours, you'll never look back on a trip to the Valley of the Sun and think, "That drink sure was pricey."

You'll think, "I wish I had more time to stay."