

Oakland A's Kurt Suzuki looking to bounce back from last season's offensive struggles

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- Several theories exist for why Kurt Suzuki struggled so much with the bat last season.

He was hitting out of place in the A's lineup.

He felt pressure from signing a four-year, \$16.25 million contract extension in July.

He was sidetracked by a rib cage strain that sent him to the disabled list.

Suzuki himself doesn't find it so complicated.

"It was plain and simple -- I sucked," the A's catcher said Wednesday. "I didn't do what I felt I was capable of doing."

Suzuki's batting average dropped from .274 in 2009 to .242 last season. And although catchers are judged, first and foremost, by their defense and handling of pitchers, Suzuki has become an integral part of Oakland's offense in his three-plus big league seasons.

He vows to keep it simple this season.

"I had never changed my swing and my stance my whole career as much as I did last year," he said. "(Former hitting coach Jim) Skaalen was the supportive guy trying to keep me sane. He could see I was driving myself crazy. I was bringing him my ideas, and I'd have a different idea every day."

Suzuki was a fish out of water last season in Oakland's power-challenged lineup.

He hit third or fourth in 107 of the 131 games in which he played, even though his use-the-whole-field approach is better suited for the second spot or toward the bottom of the order. He admits he was swinging for the fences and abandoning the compact swing that produced so many line drives in 2009.

With the A's having added designated hitter Hideki Matsui and outfielders David DeJesus and Josh Willingham to this year's lineup, Suzuki will drop in the order and carry less of the burden.

"I just think the mental side of hitting this year is going to be easier for him," A's manager Bob Geren said. "He'll hit a little lower in the order and he won't necessarily have to be the guy."

Suzuki has improved defensively since he broke into the majors, and he earns raves from A's pitchers for his game-calling and calming influence.

But he would like to improve a weak spot -- his throwing.

A's pitchers have done well in recent seasons controlling the opponents' running game. So it can go unnoticed that Suzuki threw out just 13.2 percent of attempted base stealers last season (10 of 76).

That was the third-lowest percentage in the American League, and the lowest in Oakland history. He nailed just 17.3 percent of runners in 2009.

Acknowledging a need for improvement, Suzuki incorporated a different offseason workout regimen.

"I was really tight and stiff last year," Suzuki said. "This (winter) I did a lot more flexibility training, tried to get my range of motion back. I already feel it. My body feels completely different."

He also worked to get more leg explosiveness, as evidenced through a YouTube clip of Suzuki jumping flat-footed out of a swimming pool and planting cleanly on the concrete.

He noted that leaping from a pool and landing barefoot on a slippery surface wasn't the safest way to test himself.

"I looked at it again and said, 'Oh shoot, I'm not doing that anymore.' "

Most of his training was less adventurous.

Suzuki hit in the cage, but he didn't want his mind cluttered as he arrived in Phoenix for the A's first pitchers-and-catchers workout Wednesday.

"It was good to get away this offseason, try to let everything go, try to start fresh," he said.

Oakland A's notebook: Dallas Braden shows his appreciation to catcher Landon Powell

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- Dallas Braden knows how to show appreciation.

The left-hander sent teammate Landon Powell and Powell's wife, Allyson, on an all-expenses-paid vacation to Maui in January -- a gesture of thanks for Powell catching Braden's perfect game last May.

Braden told Powell the present was coming during the A's final road trip last season. He put up the couple at the Four Seasons.

"I was shocked," Powell said Wednesday. "I told him he didn't have to do that. He told me he wanted to. It was a classy thing to do."

After throwing his Mother's Day perfecto, Braden gave each of his teammates an expensive bottle of Crown Royal whiskey to deliver the message that it was a team accomplishment.

But he's enjoyed a special bond with Powell, who started just 30 games as Kurt Suzuki's backup last season but was often behind the plate for Braden's starts. Powell also caught Braden frequently in the minors.

"I just wanted to make sure he understood how much it meant to me that day," Braden said.

Manager Bob Geren said relievers Craig Breslow and Michael Wuertz will join closer Andrew Bailey in logging a lighter workload early in camp.

The A's want to ensure Bailey stays healthy after he had September elbow surgery. Wuertz was bothered by a shoulder injury early last season, coming off a 2009 season in which he made 74 appearances. And Breslow has been the bullpen's workhorse for the past two years, combining for 152 appearances in that span.

Geren estimated those three would pitch in eight to 10 Cactus League games, with other bullpen regulars getting 10 to 13.

Braden and fifth-starter candidate Brandon McCarthy were among those throwing bullpen sessions during the A's first official workout at Phoenix Municipal Stadium. Geren said Braden looked "midseason-form sharp." "... Former A's first baseman Scott Hatteberg, who retired in 2008, is a guest instructor in camp. He'll scout for the A's throughout the season." ... The first three full-squad workouts will take place at Papago Park Baseball Complex on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, followed by intrasquad games at Phoenix Muni the next three days to lead into the Feb. 27 exhibition opener against the Chicago Cubs.

Chin Music: A's pitchers and catchers hit the field

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/16/2011 10:28AM

The first blog from spring training has arrived ... I'll try to post each morning, but that could change slightly depending on how heavy/light news is. And if news develops throughout the day, I'll throw it on here too. You can also get updates at twitter.com/joestiglich

--A's pitchers and catchers just took the field for their first workout. The sun is out and it's good baseball weather, though not as picturesque as yesterday. We may get a little rain over the weekend, but nothing that's expected to disrupt things too much once the full squad holds its first workout Monday. But you didn't come here for weather reports ...

--Manager Bob Geren held his first extended media session today. The most noteworthy item was that relievers Andrew Bailey, Craig Breslow and Michael Wuertz will be brought along more slowly than the other relievers. That's a precautionary move and probably a smart one -- Breslow has thrown a ton of innings over the past two seasons, Bailey is coming off minor elbow surgery and Wuertz had a shoulder injury early last season after he logged a ton of innings in 2009. The A's will budget most relievers for 10-13 Cactus League outings, but Bailey, Breslow and Wuertz (no, that's not a law firm) will be closer to the 8-10 range.

--How's this for showing gratitude? Dallas Braden sent catcher Landon Powell and his wife, Allyson, on an all-expenses paid trip to Maui in January to show his appreciation for Powell catching his perfect game. Braden put them up at the Four Seasons. I mentioned in today's paper that Bailey and pitcher Brett Anderson have lost weight. Throw Powell in the mix, too. He says he's lost 15 pounds.

--It was interesting seeing new bench coach Joel Skinner, a former catcher, huddled with all of Oakland's catchers and dishing some wisdom earlier this morning. In the opening days of spring training, players take time to get acquainted with each other. But this spring, Oakland's players are also feeling out several new coaches. Skinner and hitting coach Gerald Perry are new to the staff, and Ron Romanick has shifted from bullpen coach to pitching coach.

Obviously, the big news will be whatever impact new players such as Hideki Matsui and Josh Willingham have on the team, but this reshuffled coaching staff is an under-the-radar factor to watch.

—One final note for those who might be visiting Phoenix next week: The A's changed their practice schedule. They will only work out at Papago Park on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before shifting back to Phoenix Municipal Stadium for intrasquad games Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

That's all for now ...

Long and short on pitchers acquired from Jays

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Trystan Magnuson and **Danny Farquhar** won't be mistaken for each other - Magnuson is 6-foot-7 and Farquhar is 5-11 - but the two are very much linked already as far as their new team is concerned.

The A's acquired both pitchers from Toronto in the **Rajai Davis** deal in November, and they've been assigned numbers 63 (Farquhar) and 64 (Magnuson). They locker next to each other. And that's OK with the right-handers - they were roommates in the Blue Jays' system, so they were happy to be traded together.

"We're a package," Farquhar said.

The day of the trade was unusual for both. Magnuson was in the Dominican Republic serving on a mission, and, he said, "The teams couldn't reach me. I didn't have a phone. I got an e-mail about it, and I had to Google myself to find out what happened."

Farquhar, who turns 24 today, had been linked in trade rumors a day earlier, which he'd heard when his mother called him, "freaking out" about Internet reports. So he'd thought he might be going to Florida.

"They'd offered me up for **Dan Uggla** the day before, so I told my roommates, 'I'm getting traded today,' " Farquhar said. "I wasn't expecting Oakland. I didn't know anything about them except the white spikes."

Magnuson, 25, is a Canadian going from a home-country team to a United States club for the first time.

"I'm absolutely fine with it," he said. "This seems like a great organization for a pitcher."

Magnuson was spotted chatting with the A's other Canadian, **Rich Harden**, before Wednesday's workout.

Hatteberg's role: Scott Hatteberg, now a special assistant with the club after playing for the A's in the mid-2000s, was on the field Wednesday. His duties are a little undefined as he tries out everything, but he expects to do a little scouting and player evaluation and a little on-field work.

Hatteberg will be portrayed by **Chris Pratt** of "Parks and Recreation" in the "Moneyball" movie, scheduled to be released Sept. 23.

"I think it should be enjoyable," he said. "All the guys involved are big names - I'm watching the Oscars and they're all up for awards."

Hatteberg went to the set with his family one day last summer, which his daughters enjoyed, and he thought Pratt captured his movements well. "Oafish," Hatteberg said with a grin.

Hatteberg initially was scheduled to play himself when the production was still helmed by **Steven Soderbergh**, and, he said, "We were ready to shoot, 24 hours away," when the movie was shut down. Hatteberg wasn't disappointed, though. "I was so nervous about it," he said. "It's a big project. I didn't want to mess up."

Briefly: Manager **Bob Geren** said the A's pitchers are working on a once-every-three-days throwing schedule this spring rather than their traditional every-other-day approach. The change, suggested by new pitching coach **Ron Romanick**, should cut down wear and tear. ... According to Geren, high-mileage relievers **Andrew Bailey**, **Craig Breslow** and **Michael Wuertz** will throw in only eight-10 games this spring, also to provide more rest. ... The team will play three intrasquad games, rather than the usual two, Feb. 24-25-26 at Phoenix Municipal Stadium; going by the current schedule, **Dallas Braden** and **Brandon McCarthy** would work in the first one. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the A's will work out at the minor-league complex at Papago Park. ... Braden looked in "midseason form," catcher **Kurt Suzuki** said after Braden's bullpen session Wednesday. ... Suzuki has a goatee this spring. "Terrible," second baseman **Mark Ellis** said. "Awful."

Drumbeat: First official workout is underway at Phoenix Muni

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix, 2/16/2011 10:08AM

It's the first official day of camp here at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, but really, the A's have been working for a while now - the pitchers are on a different throwing schedule so they all showed up five or six days early and they are almost a week into their spring bullpen sessions now.

New pitching coach Ron Romanick crunched the numbers and realized that if all the pitchers threw every other day the first two weeks of the spring, that would translate into a high innings total by the end of the season. So Romanick suggested having everyone go once every three days initially, which eases the pitchers back in more gently and saves some wear and tear.

Some of the relievers are on a lighter schedule this spring, period. Andrew Bailey, who is coming off minor elbow surgery, and Michael Wuertz and Craig Breslow all have had high innings totals, plus that extra bit of workload that is often overlooked: they've been up a lot in the bullpen during games the past two years. So they are each going to work in eight-10 games this spring, down several from previous years.

Jerry Blevins (hip surgery) will be held out of some pitchers' fielding practice but he's otherwise right with everyone else.

Some other notes from today: Scott Hatteberg is on the field today, helping out the coaching staff ("I'm wandering," he said) and learning some of the on-field ropes from the non-player vantage point. Manager Bob Geren noted that he was Hatteberg's catching instructor with the Red Sox 17 years ago. "That's why (the A's) made him a first baseman," Geren joked.

The A's will have intrasquad games here at the stadium on Feb. 24-25-26, times to be determined, and they'll be on the field at Papago Park the three days before that, Feb. 21-22-23, as the position players hit off the pitchers.

Until then, they'll be based at Phoenix Muni. The catchers will generally be on the field to hit at 9 a.m., with the pitchers taking the field for stretch half an hour later. If the schedule adjusts, I'm trying to let interested fans know by Twitter, @susanslusser.

Dallas Braden and Brandon McCarthy are among those throwing today and Brett Anderson and Gio Gonzalez are among those going tomorrow.

Most unexpected sight of the day: Kurt Suzuki with a goatee.

Anderson has the look of maturing pitcher

After injury-filled 2010, A's 23-year-old lefty says health is top goal

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Brett Anderson has long sported the bed-head look and ho-hum mannerisms.

He's a self-proclaimed "boring" person, and he's simply OK with the fact that he'll never be the most glamorous pitcher to grace a big league mound.

"It's inevitable that I'm going to be the dirtiest guy out there because I'm not athletic and fall down," he said. "But as long as I don't get hurt and I get people out, I don't really care what I look like."

This 6-foot-4 A's lefty, who routinely stumbled during starts last year, is simply a rugged 23-year-old who split his childhood days between Texas and Oklahoma, a fast -- albeit soft -- talker who moves at his own pace, does his own thing. During the offseason, he works out in the morning and plays video games in the afternoon -- a routine perhaps reflecting that of a college athlete?

"I never got to go to college," Anderson said, "but I'm doing all the things you'd think college kids would do."

Maybe, except a typical college kid likely isn't extending Spring Break into six weeks, or using that time to prepare for a third season in the Majors as Anderson, a second-round Draft pick out of high school, is doing at the moment.

The A's southpaw is coming off a shortened 2010 season, one that saw him make just 19 starts as a result of two separate DL stints stemming from elbow issues. Those are seemingly resolved now, but they've left Anderson -- who lost 10 pounds this winter -- heeding a new goal entering the 2011 campaign.

"Normally, there are certain things you set out to do or work on," he said, "but none of that really matters if you're not healthy. That's my No. 1 priority this season, to stay healthy. When I've been healthy, I've performed. I had a pretty good first year, and I think that carried over into last year during the times I wasn't injured. So if I'm healthy, I'll throw up decent numbers. I'm focused on making 28 or 32 starts."

Anderson's 2009 rookie year, which saw him go 11-11 with a 4.06 ERA in 30 starts, preceded 2010 numbers that included a 7-6 record, 2.80 ERA and 1.19 WHIP, along with 75 strikeouts next to 22 walks through 112 1/3 innings.

Thirteen of his 19 outings were quality starts, which the A's young arms mastered last year when they turned in 103 of them to lead all of baseball. Of the 103, an Oakland-record 18 came in a row and represented the most since the Braves compiled 21 straight in 1997.

"You don't want to be the guy that screws that up," Anderson said. "Obviously, those guys are performing and you want to be right there along with them. You want to keep that going. If they're doing well, you want to do well. You don't want to be the weak link, so I think that just pushes everyone in a positive way."

"You really don't see that too often, having your one through five guys getting the job done. For all those guys to have a good outing by baseball standards that many times in a row, that's something really special."

A's fans haven't exactly seen something of the special sorts like the trio that is Anderson, Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez since the glory days of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito. Anderson is no stranger to the comparisons of the current A's staff that have recently been drawn to the "Big Three," but, in typical fashion, he takes them in stride.

"It's good to be compared with those guys because of the runs they had going into the playoffs, but we don't really think about that stuff," he said. "I think it's more fun for the media and the fans to do that because they're seeing us from a different perspective. It is fun, though, to hear your name mentioned in the same breath."

Anderson hears not only those comparisons but a handful of other remarks from students of his father, Frank, the head baseball coach at Oklahoma State. They pick his brain about anything and everything related to the big leagues, where he's matured greatly since his days at Stillwater (Okla.) High School.

"Different things in your life change you as a person," he said. "Being in the big leagues does change you, for better or for worse. It's a big part of your life. Going from high school to professional baseball changed me more than anything because you're out of your home at 18 without family and trying to figure things out for yourself and make a living."

Anderson's family watches every one of his starts thanks to the Internet, and his father's nerves are greater than his own during those games, he said. Confidence was Anderson's biggest addition last season, and manager Bob Geren also sees potential improvement in other areas as well.

"Brett had a couple injuries last year, so the big thing is to change his routine between starts to try to keep him healthy and reduce the chance of him getting injured," he said. "We want to see him working on both sides of the plate. Obviously, some guys hit certain spots better than others. We want to try to keep his positives where they are and try to work on his weaknesses. He's a smart guy, so I know he'll continue to make adjustments."

A's to reduce workload of arms early this spring

New pitching coach Romanick hopes to limit fatigue, injuries

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The workload that was thrust upon the A's pitching staff last season has influenced a change in plans this spring, with hurlers throwing once every three days as opposed to every other day for at least the first couple of weeks of camp.

The switch, constructed by new pitching coach Ron Romanick, will afford the team's pitchers an extra day off between sessions in an effort to avoid much of the wear and tear and, often times, injury that comes along with the lengthy season, as was the case last year when multiple arms landed on the disabled list.

Wednesday marked the first official workout day for A's pitchers and catchers, held at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, but this routine has already been under way for nearly a week so as to balance everyone's schedule.

"It was a total common sense thing," manager Bob Geren said, "in knowing that we have a really good pitching staff and having a pretty good idea of who is going to be on this team with the exceptions of a few spots. We're going to get our guys ready slowly and make sure they're good to go Opening Day. We don't want to push anyone, so it fits into that scheme. It's a great idea."

Throwing every other day from the start translates into a mile-high innings total by season's end, and several A's pitchers -- including Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill, Dallas Braden and Craig Breslow -- racked up career-high innings totals last year.

For that reason, Breslow is one of a handful of Oakland relievers adhering to a lighter schedule in camp. The A's lefty, who tallied 74 2/3 innings in 2010, is joined by righties Michael Wuertz and Andrew Bailey -- who is coming off minor elbow surgery -- as those who will work in just eight to 10 games as opposed to the normal number, which can reach 13.

Among the hurlers to throw bullpen sessions Wednesday were Braden, whom Geren deemed to be in midseason form, and new right-hander Brandon McCarthy, who looked "pretty sharp," Geren said.

The former Ranger is being stretched out this spring and is considered to be a candidate for the fifth-starter job, though Geren said he also sees potential in him as a bullpen option, as he does Rich Harden and Josh Outman.

Major Lee-ague: Harden shut down with lat strain

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 2/17/2011, 9:17AM

The A's received their first taste of bad news Thursday when manager **Bob Geren** announced that right-hander **Rich Harden**, who has tackled multiple injuries over the last few years, has been shut down for at least a couple of weeks because of stiffness in the lat area of his pitching arm.

Harden, who first endured pain during his 40-pitch bullpen session Tuesday, said it's the same strain he experienced at the beginning of the 2008 season. He rushed the rehab then, which resulted in a rather lengthy healing process. Still, he went on to make 25 starts that year with a 2.07 ERA. That comeback has him feeling optimistic about his chances of returning sooner than later and remaining a candidate for the fifth starter spot. He knows this setback could affect those chances, but admitted "it's out of my hands."

"Obviously with the year I had last year, it was even more exciting coming into this season, working with Ron [Romanick] and feeling good, feeling how I was that year," Harden said. "That's the best I've felt."

The good news is that Harden was essentially ahead of schedule this spring, so he believes he can catch up when healthy. Tuesday marked his fourth bullpen session, and he felt like he was in great shape. The A's aren't rushing his return, and he won't throw again until he's "pain-free," according to Geren.

More to come on MLB.com.

A's Cahill can focus more on mechanics

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Last spring, right-hander Trevor Cahill was worried about whether he would even make the rotation for the Oakland Athletics.

With a spot sewn up this spring, he can concentrate more on mechanics, such as getting a greater command of his fastball and continuing to develop his curveball. He said his arm strength is up.

"It's all about results," he said. "I want to have another good season and pitch into October."

Cahill had hoped to be in the rotation on opening day last season, but instead was put on the disabled list with an injured left shoulder. He was sent to Triple-A Sacramento and started two games to make sure he was ready before being recalled on April 30.

The 22-year-old Cahill took off from there. He had a 7-2 record against AL West teams. He finished with an 18-10 record and 2.97 ERA.

A's manager Bob Geren said Cahill was "one of a few guys to make strides last season."

"When the season started, there was a big improvement needed," Geren said. "Later on, he used different tactics to get left-handed hitters out and learned how to pitch to the 2-3 hitters. He controlled the running game, and he showed that he's a great fielder. In regard to his pitching, he has a great release point. He still has very, very good room to improve and grow."

A native of Oceanside, Calif., Cahill likes to enter games with music from The Doors playing in the background. And when the music's over, he is relaxed.

“I can be serious, but you don’t want to take it too seriously. Otherwise, you can psych yourself out,” he said. “I try not to show too much emotion either way.”

He’ll leave all the emoting until after the game, with what he hopes will be another win.

NOTES: Ron Romanick has replaced Curt Young as pitching coach after Young took a job with the Boston Red Sox. Romanick was formerly the A’s bullpen coach. ... Manager Bob Geren said catcher Kurt Suzuki likely will hit lower in the order this season since the team has acquired veteran DH Hideki Matsui and outfielder David DeJesus. Geren said he doesn’t want Suzuki to feel pressured to produce runs and try to do too much.