

A's News Clips, Friday, February 18, 2011

Oakland A's Rich Harden sidelined at spring camp

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- The A's are just three days into spring training and already face their first notable injury.

Right-hander Rich Harden will be shut down for the next two weeks with stiffness in his right side, manager Bob Geren announced Thursday.

Harden, a fifth-starter candidate, felt pain underneath his right arm while throwing a bullpen session Tuesday. The training staff monitored his status for two days before the decision to shelve him.

"We'll wait until he's pain-free," Geren said. "It's estimated that would be two weeks."

Neither Geren nor Harden expressed concern that he would be sidelined long-term.

But the injury casts doubt on whether Harden, 29, can be ready for the start of the regular season. The A's also view him as a potential reliever. He wouldn't require as much time to rebuild arm strength in that role.

The A's have high hopes for this season, but they're getting an early -- and unwelcome -- reminder of the injury woes that have sabotaged them for the past four seasons.

And though team officials are confident with the overall depth they added during the offseason, Thursday's development highlights the gamble they took by targeting players with spotty health histories.

Harden, who was drafted by the A's and pitched for them from 2003-08, has been injury-prone throughout his career. After being released by the Texas Rangers in October, he re-signed with Oakland on a one-year, \$1.5 million deal.

Harden said he spent time this winter with A's pitching coach Ron Romanick -- who also worked with him throughout his minor league career -- to iron out mechanical flaws that led to bouts of wildness when he pitched for Texas.

"Mechanically, I was feeling like I'm where I need to be," he said. "The ball was coming out real good."

But physical ailments are nothing new for him. Long considered one of the major leagues' most naturally gifted pitchers, he's logged nine stints on the disabled list in his eight-year career.

"It's frustrating," he said of his current injury. "But I still feel like I can go out there and be healthy for the season after this."

With Harden sidelined, the primary fifth-starter candidates become left-handers Josh Outman and Bobby Cramer, and right-handers Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross (Cal/Bishop O'Dowd).

Geren, without prompting, also tossed right-hander Guillermo Moscoso's name into the mix. Moscoso, acquired from Texas in December for right-hander Ryan Kelly, spent most of 2010 at Triple-A.

Some in the above-mentioned group raise health concerns along with Harden.

Outman hasn't pitched in the majors since June 2009 because of ligament replacement surgery in his elbow. McCarthy, who signed a \$1 million deal in December, has a history of shoulder problems. Ross was shut down in August and missed the rest of the season with a sprained elbow.

"I don't think it changes anything," A's assistant general manager David Forst said of Harden's injury. "We added depth in the offseason, and we still feel very comfortable with it."

Notes: Forst said there are no plans to sign a backup shortstop in light of Adam Rosales' foot injury, which might sideline him past opening day. Eric Sogard and Steve Tolleson are the current backups behind starter Cliff Pennington, who will miss early exhibition games while recovering from left shoulder surgery but should be ready for the April 1 opener against Seattle. "... Geren says he has a "real good idea" of who his opening-day starter will be but isn't ready to announce it. "...

Daric Barton, Mark Ellis and David DeJesus are among the projected position-player starters already in camp. Reporting deadline is Sunday.

Chin Music: Competition is on for A's backup infielder spot

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/18/2011 10:40AM

Position players continue to trickle into A's camp. I saw Conor Jackson and second base prospect Adrian Cardenas this morning. Word is that Hideki Matsui will be here Saturday, but I'm not sure if he'll be addressing the media then or wait until Sunday, which is the reporting deadline.

Adam Rosales will wear a walking boot on his right foot for two more weeks, so he won't be hitting the field any time soon. That means there's open competition for the backup infielder spot, and the ability to play shortstop is key for whoever claims it. Among the candidates manager Bob Geren touched on this morning:

Steve Tolleson: I'd put this guy as the front runner. He got his feet wet with 25 games in the majors last season and did a capable job. Tolleson spent more time at shortstop than any other position last season at Triple-A Sacramento, but he can also play third base, second base and left field.

Eric Sogard: The A's like this Arizona State alum, especially for his bat. He's also the only one of the backup infield candidates who's already on the 40-man roster, but Geren said that wouldn't be a factor. "The best guys will be on the team." Sogard is more of a second baseman, though the A's have exposed him to shortstop.

Andy LaRoche: The most intriguing name, just because he was such a highly touted prospect for the Dodgers. LaRoche didn't pan out with the Pirates over the past two-plus seasons, and he's never played shortstop in his professional career (third base is his main position). But Geren said LaRoche, Sogard and Tolleson will get most of the innings at short until starter Cliff Pennington is ready. Pennington is being brought along slowly after offseason surgery on his left shoulder.

Josh Horton: A's farm director Keith Lieppman has raved to me in the past about Horton, a 2007 second-round pick. Geren identified Horton as the strongest defensive shortstop of all the candidates based on reports he's gotten. He said he hasn't seen Horton much in person.

Grant Green: Finally, the name you were waiting for, right? The 2009 first-round pick enjoyed a fine offensive year with Single-A Stockton in 2010 but still has a long way to go defensively. Since Green was drafted, there's been speculation about him moving to third base or second base. For now, he's a shortstop. "He's still a ways away," Geren said. Green is expected to begin the season at Double-A Midland, and the A's consider Double-A a good measuring stick for how close a prospect is to being big-league ready.

Chin Music: Rich Harden to miss two weeks with strain in right side

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/17/2011 10:36AM

The first A's injury news for 2011 came down today, as right-hander Rich Harden will be shut down for two weeks with a strain in his right side, just underneath his arm. You can read the nuts and bolts of the story by clicking on the above link. But here's the rundown:

Harden, a fifth starter candidate and potential reliever, felt pain about 10-15 pitches into a bullpen session on Tuesday. Pitching coach Ron Romanick decided to shut him down, and manager Bob Geren announced Harden won't throw for approximately two weeks. "The exact words from (the training staff) was we'll wait until he's pain free," Geren said. "It's estimated it would be two weeks. Obviously we want to make sure when he cranks it back up that he's ready to go."

The glass-is-half-full outlook: The A's now have the depth on their pitching staff to withstand such injuries. Spring camp is just three days old and Harden has plenty of time to come back. In talking to him this morning, he didn't seem concerned that this would be a long-term problem.

The glass-is-half-empty outlook: This is an all-too-familiar theme developing for the A's, and we haven't even reached March yet. The A's know Harden's injury history from his first stint with the team, and should have taken that into consideration before re-signing him this winter. Plus, the other pitchers who now move into contention to be the fifth starter also are injury risks. Josh Outman is trying to come back from major elbow surgery and Brandon McCarthy has long had shoulder problems (though he's healthy now). Tyson Ross and Bobby Cramer also are possibilities for the spot. And keep an eye on

right-hander Guillermo Moscoso, an under-the-radar acquisition from Texas this winter. Geren said he looked good yesterday and considers Moscoso in the mix to be the No. 5 starter.

A's manager has options for Opening Day starter

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Bob Geren won't name the A's Opening Day starter until well into spring training, largely because he has so many good options.

Geren pointed out Thursday that **Trevor Cahill** is an All-Star, **Dallas Braden** has started Opening Day before, and **Brett Anderson** is considered by many to be the most talented of the bunch. So he'll wait and see how things develop this spring, depending on which pitchers might need an extra day of rest here and there and other schedule issues such as rainouts.

There are other considerations, too, such as setting up the rotation to start the season and trying to match top starters against opposing teams' counterparts for at least the first few weeks. Less important, Geren said, is trying to find good matchups against specific teams, because the A's starters are so young, they don't have extensive track records against their opponents.

Opening Day also can be seen as a reward for a starter, but that doesn't narrow things down much either, given Cahill's All-Star appearance, Braden's perfect game and the fact that **Gio Gonzalez** didn't miss a start last year.

Briefly: Cuban defector **Yadel Marti** had one of the best bullpen sessions Thursday. Marti, who is expected to be in the minors this season, threw 25 pitches, and catcher **Anthony Recker** said, "He barely missed a spot. He was very efficient, it was fun catching him." ... **Andrew Bailey**, coming off minor elbow surgery, called his bullpen session "pain free." ... Fifth-starter candidate **Brandon McCarthy** did something unusual: He showed minor-league pitching instructor **Gil Patterson**, a cutter guru, a new grip for the pitch that Patterson had never seen. "Works great," Patterson said. ... **Hideki Matsui** is scheduled to arrive in Arizona today and he's expected to shoot a commercial Saturday, but he does not have to report to Phoenix Muni until Sunday. Whenever he does, at least a dozen Japanese reporters are here waiting for him.

Rich Harden hurt in quest for A's 5th starter spot

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

For a guy who got hurt the day pitchers and catchers reported and who is fighting for a roster spot, Rich Harden didn't sound too downcast Thursday.

The oft-injured Harden will miss the next several weeks with what he described as lat stiffness under his right arm - which, Harden said, is the same injury he had early in the 2008 season. He went on to have nice results that year, going 10-2 with a 2.07 ERA.

"I've got to be positive about it," Harden said. "In 2008 when I did it, I had 23 starts left and I thought I pitched well."

Harden felt the stiffness while throwing a bullpen session Tuesday. He said he believes the injury is similar to the 2008 issue because he did the same workout that offseason that he did this winter with present A's pitching coach Ron Romanick.

Each time, Harden said, he began pitching properly again, with improved mechanics, and his theory is that he's using his muscles differently when he does so. So even with careful preparation and stretching, the muscles bark a bit at some point.

In this case, Harden said his offseason work with Romanick has improved the extension on his delivery so much that he is throwing harder than he had the past two seasons. The lat muscle is involved in deceleration, and perhaps the greater velocity taxed it.

In 2008, Harden was the staff ace until he was traded to the Cubs. This time, he is competing for the fifth-starter spot, and while manager Bob Geren termed the lat injury "a minor setback," Geren added that it could affect a decision on the fifth starter.

This is precisely why the A's have so many options for that spot. Left-hander Bobby Cramer is the only one of the top five candidates not coming off an injury: Harden's ex-Texas teammate Brandon McCarthy has had repeat stress fractures in his shoulder, Josh Outman is coming off Tommy John surgery, and Tyson Ross was shut down last year with an elbow strain. (There's a sixth possibility, too: Geren said that he'd also put Guillermo Moscoso, acquired from Texas last month, in the mix, especially after a strong winter-ball showing in Venezuela, where he had a 2.66 ERA.)

Geren pointed out that, while there is always an emphasis on the fifth-starter spot in spring, almost every team needs more than five starters over the course of the season, so the A's need to have extras in the wings.

"At one point or another, we're going to need someone," he said.

Last spring, the A's fifth-starter battle was between Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill. Cahill opened the season on the DL, then was sent down - and he returned to make the All-Star team. Now, he's arguably the team's No. 1 starter.

If not in the rotation, Harden will be considered for the bullpen.

"I do want to be in the rotation," he said. "If this changes things, I don't know, that's something management is going to have to figure out. ... It's frustrating, but I still feel I can go out and be healthy for the season."

While a reporting-day injury is disheartening, it's still very early in camp, and Harden already had built up to about 40 pitches, so he isn't expected to be too far behind when he resumes throwing in March.

"I told Rich, 'If you're going to be tender, the first day is a good day to do it,' " Oakland general manager Billy Beane said.

Rosales unlikely to play until May 1

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix 2/18/2011 9:10AM

Adam Rosales visited the doctor yesterday and there was one positive development as far as he is concerned: He no longer needs crutches, two-plus months after foot surgery. Rosales was so excited to get rid of the things - he's been on and off crutches since the second half of last season - that he threw them in the dumpster.

Rosales must still wear a walking boot for the next two weeks, however, so he cannot begin baseball activity until sometime in March, and manager Bob Geren said that this puts Rosales' return to the team at more like May 1.

It had been assumed Rosales, the A's backup infielder, would miss the very start of the season, but now that it appears it will be at least a month, the competition for the backup infield spot gains some urgency. Add to that the not insignificant fact that shortstop Cliff Pennington is coming off surgery on his left shoulder and it's even more of a pressing issue. Pennington won't play in the first week of spring games, at least, so the A's will get a good look at all the other top candidates: Eric Sogard, Steve Tolleson, Andy LaRoche and Josh Horton.

Considering Pennington is returning from surgery, ability to play shortstop seems as if it should be a major factor, and if that is the case, Horton, who was at Double-A last year, is probably the best of that bunch. I asked manager Bob Geren about Grant Green, who had a spectacular year at Class-A Stockton last year, but my impression is that Green gets at least another year in the minors. Obviously, they'd want him to play every day, of course, but in the event the A's needed an everyday shortstop at some point if Pennington went down I don't know, I wouldn't mind seeing Green.

LaRoche is primarily a third baseman, Sogard a second baseman and Tolleson can play all three spots - which might give him an edge. LaRoche has by far the most big-league experience, which is a plus, but he's coming off a poor offensive season (.206) with the Pirates.

There is no clear-cut answer here, but as Geren mentioned, everyone will get plenty of time at shortstop early on. And if no one jumps out, I'd imagine the team will be closely watching the waiver wire as the spring winds down.

If you didn't see it in today's Chronicle, Hideki Matsui is expected to arrive in Arizona today and the first time I believe we'll see him is tomorrow afternoon, when he's scheduled to shoot a commercial.

Drumbeat: Harden is the first A's injured player of the spring

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix 2/17/2011 10:08AM

It would be fairly easy to make some sarcastic comments here, with oft-hurt Rich Harden injuring himself on the day pitchers and catchers reported - so Day Zero of the spring, really. But if it's possible to be upbeat about an injury, Harden is, because the lat stiffness he's feeling under his right arm is similar to the problem he had at the start of the 2008 season.

That turned out to be a very good season for Harden, and he said that that 2008 lat issue came after the same offseason workout he just completed with now-pitching coach Ron Romanick. Harden believes that the lat stiffness is the result of regaining proper mechanics with Romanick this offseason; he'd fallen into some bad habits the past two seasons, and he figures that his body is readjusting to proper throwing. Those muscles haven't been worked in the same way for some time. He emphasized that he has been following all the usual preparation procedures and he was loose and ready to pitch when he felt the stiffness on Tuesday.

At any rate, Harden will be shut down for "a few weeks," according to manager Bob Geren, and he'll return to the mound when he is pain free. As far as the A's and Harden are concerned, there are some pluses: The injury is early in the spring, and he's already thrown four bullpen sessions, so he won't be too far behind when he gets back.

Given Harden's extensive injury history, this isn't really some big positive development, though. He feels optimistic, but then again, he missed a lot of last season with Texas with a variety of issues. And, Geren said, this development certainly affects the race for the fifth-starter spot.

If Harden isn't able to somehow jump back into the competition in March, the top remaining candidates are his ex-Rangers teammate Brandon McCarthy, who also has been bedeviled by injuries in recent years, and left-hander Josh Outman, who is coming back from 2009 Tommy John surgery. Bobby Cramer and Tyson Ross are in the mix, too, along with Guillermo Moscoso.

Harden could be a bullpen option if he's not in the rotation, but he's still focused on a starter spot, saying, "I do want to be in the rotation. If this changes things, I don't know, that's something management is going to have to figure out."

A few years ago, someone described Harden to me as a finely tuned Italian sports car: Looks great, performs superbly when everything is exactly right, but one little thing can send it into the mechanic. Harden knows his body well, and he always has felt he has to be 100 percent to be effective, and these muscle strains and bouts of stiffness don't allow him to operate at his best.

But in 2008, after that lat issue - which lingered longer than expected because he was encouraged to push it a little too early, everyone here agrees - Harden went 9-2. (He'd won his first start, at Japan, before getting hurt). He had a 2.07 ERA combined between Oakland and the Cubs that year. He made 23 starts after the injury, and I think the A's would take that, especially if he can return to that level of performance.

With Rosales down, A's explore utility options

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Adam Rosales' crutches are gone, but his rehab process is not over.

With his doctor's blessing, the A's infielder rid himself of crutches on Thursday -- "I threw them in the dumpster," he said -- but he will sport a walking boot for at least another two weeks and could possibly not return to the team until May 1, manager Bob Geren said Friday.

Rosales, 27, underwent right foot surgery on Dec. 8, when debris was removed and two screws were inserted to aid in the healing process, which has become lengthier than he initially expected.

"As hard as he would push, as hard as he would work and try to speed it up and be ready for the season," Geren said, "it's more of a healing thing where you want to hold him back."

With Rosales essentially out of the Opening Day mix, Geren will now turn his focus toward a handful of infielders that can fulfill his utility role come season's start. Eric Sogard, Steve Tolleson, Andy LaRoche and Josh Horton are the leading candidates, he said.

"Obviously," Geren said, "I'm going to need somebody that can play third, short and second."

In an ideal world, the chosen one would boast an impressive glove at shortstop, as Cliff Pennington is coming off left shoulder surgery. Horton, who will turn 25 on Saturday, has the most experience at the position and is highly regarded defensively, though he's never played above Double-A.

Sogard and Tolleson have spent time at shortstop as well. Tolleson may have the upper hand because of his ability to play all three positions, but the club is also very high on Sogard, primarily a second baseman.

The newly acquired LaRoche, meanwhile, is the only player of the bunch without shortstop experience, but Geren said he'll receive just as long of a look. The 27-year-old brother of Nationals first baseman Adam LaRoche hit .206 with four home runs and 16 RBIs in 102 games with Pittsburgh last year. Fifty-two of his 58 starts were at third base; he also made appearances at second base and first base.

Outside of those four, 2009 first-round Draft pick Grant Green appears to be the next best option, but Geren noted the organization would prefer to avoid rushing his grooming process. Green, who played for Class A Stockton last year, is said to be far more advanced offensively than defensively and may be a year away from big league action.

Sogard is currently the only one on the club's 40-man roster, though Geren said that will play no factor in his final decision.

"The best guys will be on the team," he said.

Cramer looks to pick up where he left off

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Last week, A's pitcher Bobby Cramer proposed to his girlfriend while recreating their first date.

Fast forward to this week, and Cramer is hoping to recreate some of the magic he found on the big league mound as a September callup last year.

If he's successful in such a venture, he'll have to plan his upcoming wedding -- and a honeymoon in a motor home venturing the country -- accordingly.

"We were thinking October, but I'd like to wait until November," Cramer said. "I don't know at what point during the season I'll be here, but I'd like to think I will and stick 'til the end of the season. I think everybody knows the excitement about this team right now. If everything goes through the way we think it can, hopefully we're still playing around that time of year."

In the meantime, Cramer is undertaking his first big league camp at age 31 after turning heads with a 2-1 record and 3.04 ERA in his first four big league starts last season. He's considered a candidate for the A's fifth-starter spot, but so are Josh Outman, Tyson Ross, Rich Harden and Brandon McCarthy -- all names that are naturally placed before his own. That under-the-radar presence, though, is one with which he's all too familiar.

"You never want to run your mouth, but obviously everyone in this game has an internal confidence in them," he said. "Some people show it a little more than others, but I'm just as confident as everyone else. I believe in myself, and I know what I can do.

"I feel like, from a numbers standpoint, I'm at the short end of the stick because of my service time. But I feel if I stay healthy and pitch the way I've always pitched, I can make staying with this team more of a legitimate chance than most people realize."

Cramer's baseball resume is well known by now, mostly for its storybook ways that include chapters that tell tales from the independent Golden League, multiple winter ball leagues, the Mexican League and the Minors, not to mention injury setbacks and stints at odd jobs during two blank seasons.

A Long Beach State alum, the left-handed Cramer wasn't drafted out of college but, rather, signed as a free agent by Tampa Bay in 2001. Tommy John surgery followed in '02 and delayed his professional debut until the next year. But by '05, Cramer was working in maintenance and safety in Shell's pipeline division and, when that job was no more, he took to teaching high school math in Orange County.

Cramer never completely walked away from the game, though. He enjoyed his season-ticket-holder status at Angel Stadium, where fate ultimately returned him -- only after ensuing years all around the Minors, not to mention time with the Tigres de Quintana Roo in Mexico for much of last year -- on Sept. 29, 2010, when he received his final start as a September callup with the A's against his hometown team.

The rookie did his part with his parents and family watching on, tossing an impressive 6 2/3 innings, giving up just one run on three hits while walking two and striking out four. But lack of run support -- the A's left nine on base that day -- and a walk-off hit from Torii Hunter off Brad Ziegler in the bottom of the 11th left the A's with the loss.

"The job he did -- he did a heckuva job in Anaheim," manager Bob Geren said. "That was a heckuva battle. He threw a ton of pitches. Our bullpen, I remember, was almost nothing that day, and he just kept going. The way he's persevered, when you have a guy that has that kind of demeanor about his game, you love that competitiveness."

It's for that very reason Geren doesn't hesitate when questioned about Cramer's status as a fifth-starter option this spring.

"He's right in that mix," the A's skipper said. "He's scheduled to be a starter through the spring, and he'll be given every opportunity.

"He'll definitely enjoy this a lot more than the young kid who has everything handed to him quickly, and he should."

Cramer's camp arrival was preceded by an offseason that, for the first time in a long time, didn't include winter ball. Instead, it was filled with a calming sense of pride and a healthy dose of hunger.

"I've never been able to experience being able to sit back and relax and enjoy what I was able to do, so that was real nice," he said. "But you can't sit there and think about it all offseason. You have to start thinking about the next season, obviously. Now that I got up there, I know I can handle myself all right. I'd like to get the chance to get there again and stay. I don't want to so much be happy with what I did as much as work on what I can still do."

Cramer's a self-proclaimed tough critic, but "you have to be," he says. He wants to return to his ground-ball roots -- he gave up five home runs in 23 2/3 innings while with the A's after surrendering just 26 in 508 career Minor League frames -- and regain confidence in his changeup. At the same time, he wants to take in every second afforded in the A's clubhouse.

"Those feelings, like the ones when you first make it to the big leagues, they wear off after awhile," he said. "But this, being here in camp with these guys, is a first, so it's nice to enjoy that feeling again."

A's shut down Harden with lat stiffness

Injury-plagued right-hander will miss at least a couple of weeks

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Rich Harden's journey toward a healthy 2011 campaign has endured an early setback, as the right-hander has officially been shut down for at least a couple of weeks because of stiffness in the lat area of his pitching arm.

The 29-year-old hurler, vying for the fifth spot in the rotation as part of his second tour with the A's, first experienced pain during Tuesday's bullpen session. It was very much reminiscent, he said, of the soreness he suffered while throwing a bullpen session upon his arrival in the United States following Oakland's trip to Japan at the end of March three years ago.

Harden managed to make one start in April that year before missing a month because of the same injury. He believes his rehab process was rushed then and is hopeful that not pushing it this time around will have him back on a mound within weeks.

The optimistic Harden also finds a positive in knowing that his return from the injury in 2008 was followed by the best performance of his career -- a 10-2 record with a 2.07 ERA in 25 combined starts with the A's and Cubs. The righty was ahead of schedule this spring -- he was slated to throw 40 pitches on Tuesday -- and still feels confident in his ability to remain a rotation candidate alongside Josh Outman, Tyson Ross, Brandon McCarthy and Bobby Cramer, although Harden admitted, "It's out of my hands."

"I came in here, felt like I was in good shape, felt strong," Harden said. "I've got some time, so I have to be positive about it. Obviously, with the year I had last year, it was even more exciting coming into this season, working with [pitching coach] Ron Romanick and feeling good, feeling how I was in '08. That's the best I've felt."

Romanick, who served as the A's bullpen coach during the 2008 season, has closely worked with Harden since the time he was drafted by Oakland in '00. His help, along with the work of new head trainer Nick Paparesta, has Harden feeling geared for a successful rehab process.

However, it's no secret that his health isn't necessarily on his side, as Harden'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.

Most recently, Harden battled shoulder and glute injuries with Texas during the 2010 campaign, pitching to a 5-5 record and 5.58 ERA in 20 games (18 starts). He didn't make any playoff appearances with the American League champion Rangers and was designated for assignment once the season concluded.

During his time with the Rangers, as well as with the Cubs, Harden underwent a series of changes to his mechanics. Thus, he believes his injury may be a result of throwing correctly again and, subsequently, using muscles differently than he has in the past two years.

"I've been back to getting good extension, a lot more than I have the last couple of years," Harden said. "Obviously, the body needs to adjust to it."

"I just have to focus on getting healthy and building up. The hard part is not pushing things. All I can control is what I can do on a daily basis to get better. It's frustrating, but I still feel like I can go out there and do well. I'm hopeful to come back strong and get ready for the season."

Major League: Day 3: Geren undecided on OD starter

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 9/17/2011 6:04PM

Well, it took less than five days for an A's player to get hurt. **Rich Harden, battling a stiff lat muscle under his pitching arm that will keep him out a couple of weeks**, reminded everyone today that health is still very much a concern for this A's team. Signing Harden this winter was a risky move by the A's, especially given the fact they know, possibly more so than any other club, that injury follows his every move. Hopefully this setback isn't the first of many, and Harden genuinely feels optimistic about his chances of returning in time to stake his claim on a rotation spot. If he's not healthy, there are several other fifth starter options. But if you take a close look at those candidates -- **Brandon McCarthy, Josh Outman, Tyson Ross, Bobby Cramer** -- you'll realize nearly all have an injury history as well. This is why depth is so important for this team, which is also including right-hander **Guillermo Moscoso** as a rotation option as well, **Bob Geren** said today. The A's quietly acquired Moscoso from the Rangers this winter in exchange for Minor League hurler Ryan Kelly, and Geren noted he looked good in his bullpen yesterday.

It appears the Opening Day starter is just as unclear as the fifth starter. Last year, Geren essentially named **Ben Sheets** his OD starter on the same day he was introduced at a press conference. This year, though, Geren has four quality options. He said he's considering **Trevor Cahill**, **Brett Anderson**, **Gio Gonzalez** and **Dallas Braden** all as possibilities for the club's season-opening contest against the Mariners. He explained that you could make strong cases for all those guys -- Cahill was an All-Star, Braden threw a perfect game and has OD experience, and Anderson and Gonzalez are both considered to have the best stuff of the staff. That being said, don't expect an official announcement for quite some time. Geren wants to watch how each of them progress throughout the spring and if any endure a setback. He doesn't so much consider who the team is facing because, within a week, rotations are usually altered anyway due to off days, injuries, postponements and the sort. I'd suspect Cahill gets the edge here, but all four are deserving of what's considered to be an honor in baseball. What's your take?

When asked about **David DeJesus**, Geren said he'd like to keep the outfielder in the No. 2 and 3 spots because of his consistent ability to reach base. On days when DeJesus is placed in the third spot, **Daric Barton** would obviously be penciled into the No. 2 hole. However, if DeJesus batted second, Geren said he'd consider moving Barton down into the middle of the lineup. Either way, Geren still views **Coco Crisp** as the team's leadoff hitter, so don't expect to see DeJesus there unless Crisp is out of the lineup. Like the Opening Day starter situation, Geren said he's thought of lineup scenarios but really hasn't drawn out anything concrete. Considering Oakland's injury-prone ways, it makes sense for Geren to play the wait-and-see game this spring.

On a fun note, several A's players have entered camp with happy news from home. **Bobby Cramer** and **Josh Donaldson** both got engaged within the last two weeks, and **Joey Devine** and **Kurt Suzuki** are each anticipating the arrival of a first-born child with their wives this year. I spoke to Cramer for a lengthy time today, and he was telling me that he and his fiance, Kaylynn, have chosen to skip the beach for their honeymoon in favor of a month and a half-long road trip around the U.S. in a motor home. Cramer hasn't seen much of the country, including New York City, so he's anxious to visit several places. Pretty cool, right? You can read more about Cramer and his fight for the fifth starter spot [here](#).

Position players officially report in three days. Whether **Hideki Matsui** arrives before then is unknown, but several Japanese reporters have been eagerly awaiting his arrival. I'll catch up with you from camp tomorrow...

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.

HITTING HOME

HEALTHY BRADEN MAKES A'S HOPEFUL

By [Jason Anderson](#), Stockton Record, 2/17/2011

Oakland Athletics general manager Billy Beane feels he has again assembled one of baseball's best pitching staffs, and he hopes a healthy Dallas Braden will help solidify the starting rotation.

Braden, a Stagg High graduate and Stockton resident, spent time on the disabled list with elbow tendinitis last season. He also pitched with numbness and discomfort in his left foot after a nerve was severed during surgery to remove a cyst in August 2009.

The A's, who have been besieged by career-altering injuries over the past several years, parted ways with Webster Orthopedic Group days after Braden filed a still-pending lawsuit against the team's former medical provider. Doctors tell Braden his foot will never be the same, but Beane is confident Braden can return to form after pitching a perfect game and posting a career-best earned-run average last season.

"With our track record, the injuries are always something I'm concerned with, but Dallas works real hard on his conditioning, and I see it in the weight room," Beane said. "He's healthy now and he's very diligent about taking care of himself, and that should prove to be good for him going forward."

Braden has lowered his ERA each season with the A's, from 6.72 in 2007 to 4.14 in 2008 to 3.89 in 2009 to 3.50 in 2010. He doesn't have an overpowering fastball and doesn't strike out many batters, but he did post a career-high 113 strikeouts in 192 2/3 innings last season.

"Dallas has shown himself to be not just a good major league pitcher, but one who continues to get better," Beane said. "And he's proven to everybody that you don't have to throw 96 mph to be a good pitcher."

Braden is projected to be the third starter in a rotation featuring Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and either Rich Harden or Brandon McCarthy.

"We feel we have one of the best young staffs in the game," Beane said. "That was our club's strength last year. Dallas was one of the main reasons, and he, along with his fellow starters, is one of the main reasons we're excited about this year."

Moving on up?

Former Pacific outfielder Nick Longmire is emerging as a hot prospect in the St. Louis Cardinals organization after being selected in the fifth round of the 2010 draft. Longmire hit .287 with 55 RBI in 68 games for the low-A Quad Cities River Bandits last summer. He will likely start the season with the high-A Palm Beach Cardinals.

Around the horn

» Former Pacific second baseman J.B. Brown was selected in the 14th round by the New York Mets last summer and hit .308 in 57 games for the Brooklyn Cyclones of the Class-A short-season New York-Penn League. Brown could start the season with the Class-A Savannah Sand Gnats.

» Former Pacific third baseman Mike Walker, selected in the 14th round by the Milwaukee Brewers last summer, may start the season with the Class-A Wisconsin Timber Rattlers after hitting .277 for the Rookie Pioneer League Helena Brewers last summer.

» Former Tokay and Delta College shortstop Steve Malcolm was selected in the eighth round by the Philadelphia Phillies last summer and could start the season with the Class-A Lakewood BlueClaws after hitting .253 in 27 games with the rookie ball Gulf Coast League Phillies.

Harden shut down for 2 weeks after latest injury

By JANIE McCAULEY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Rich Harden could only chuckle and shake his head good naturedly at his latest predicament.

Yes, Harden is hurt again.

The Oakland Athletics right-hander is expected to miss two weeks of spring training after experiencing stiffness in the lat muscle below his pitching arm when he tried to throw Tuesday. Two days later, manager Bob Geren said Harden wouldn't pitch again until he is pain-free — and the training staff figures that will take at least a couple of weeks.

"We evaluated him the last two days," Geren said before Thursday's workout. "I just look at it as a setback. I don't look at it as terrible news. ... We'll see when he gets pain-free. It definitely could affect that fifth starter spot. Hopefully it's just a minor setback."

The news that he would be shut down is a tough break for Harden, who is back for a second stint with the A's hoping to crack the rotation in what stands to be quite the competition for the No. 5 job. He was forced to stop his bullpen session after 10 to 15 pitches.

"It's frustrating, but I still feel I can go out there and be healthy for a full season after that," said Harden, who has dealt with this same injury before. "It is what it is. I know I can come back and still pitch well."

Geren acknowledged the 29-year-old Harden, who had thrown three other times off the mound before Tuesday, may have a tougher time cracking the rotation now.

"Really, that's out of my control now," Harden said. "I've got to focus on getting back and getting healthy, building up. The hard part is not pushing too hard too early. ... I was excited to get going because I feel so good."

Harden received a \$1.5 million, one-year contract in December to rejoin the A's. He went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 appearances and 18 starts for the Texas Rangers last season, when he struggled with injuries and control. After beginning the season as the Rangers' No. 2 starter, he walked 62 batters in 92 innings.

Harden worked this winter in Arizona with A's pitching coach Ron Romanick, regularly watching video from his standout 2008 season. That year, Harden went a combined 10-2 with a 2.07 ERA in 25 starts between Oakland and the Cubs. Chicago acquired him on July 8, 2008, in a trade with the A's.

Training with Romanick, Harden said he has improved his mechanics in a way he hopes will help him stay healthy in the long run.

"Maybe my body wasn't used to throwing correctly mechanically," Harden said. "I was sound and throwing solid. I had more extension with a better arm slot and better arm angle. Maybe I had a slight weakness in that area."

Harden spent two stints on the disabled list in 2010, first from June 12-July 30 with a strained left gluteal muscle and later with right shoulder tendinitis.

Harden went 1-2 with a 2.45 ERA in only 25 2-3 innings in 2007 because of an inflamed right shoulder, and didn't pitch after July 7 that year. He threw two simulated games late in the season with the hopes of making two final starts, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth risking further injury.

He was 4-0 in nine games in 2006, spending time on the disabled list with a strained back and then a strained elbow ligament.

Harden is thrilled to be back with a club that knows him so well — and knows his injury history.

"It's the right place," he said.

Urban: Bay Ball's triumphant return to the desert

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Nothing quite beats buzzing back and forth between the shores of McCovey Cove and Jack London Square, but there is seasonal siren song in the desert for anyone who loves Bay Area big-league ball.

It's the short drive between Giants spring training at Scottsdale Stadium and A's camp at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, a tidy little 10-minute jaunt past movie-set-gorgeous mountains and cactus-spotted rock gardens. Destination: baseball nirvana, where the game is pure, the sights and sounds are vivid, and the overall vibe is as relaxed as it'll be all season.

With that in mind, it's time to empty the notebook that filled up over the past few days of making that drive several times a day -- Bay Ball style.

... When Buster Posey's first full swing of the spring produced a majestic drive over the wall in Scottsdale, you couldn't help but think of his brief address to the adoring masses at City Hall after the World Series parade. Enjoy it for a day, a week, maybe a month, he said. What follow seemed to be a plea to everyone on the team to refuse to let the glory of the title mark the end of a journey. Let it be the beginning, and if it's to be so, there's a lot of work to do. Looks like Posey waked the walk this winter.

... The A's reported to Arizona as contenders -- legit contenders, certified by the stuffy so-called experts to the East -- and seemed awfully tight about the heightened expectations. Yeah, right. I've been covering this team for a decade, and while the players have changed over and over and over, the atmosphere remains remarkably similar. Billy Beane has a knack for stocking his roster with humble, quietly confident players who understand how lucky they are to be doing what they do. This group is from that same mold, and they'll handle the extra attention just fine.

... It's already been said a number of times this spring, but it bears repeating because it's so potentially significant to San Francisco's hopes of defending their crown: Pablo Sandoval grew up this winter. He gets it now. Message received. Good for him. Great for the Giants.

... A's lefty Gio Gonzalez did his growing up during the 2010 season, and the process appears to have continued over the winter. He's a ridiculously gifted young man, with a breaking ball not seen in Oakland since Barry Zito was at his best in the early 2000s, and his head is rapidly catching up with his arm.

... Thank you, Aubrey Huff, for acknowledging that all good (and freaky) things eventually run their course. The Rally Thong's retirement is the best news I've heard all spring. It was a nice little morsel for the national media to chew on -- why does it seem so gross to type that? -- during the run through the playoffs, but everything has a shelf life, and the thong's ended with Huff's classic Zoolander bit at City Hall. "Let's just play baseball," Huff said. Great call.

... One of Oakland's more prominent players told me the other day that he has a feeling "something's going to happen while we're here. A trade or something. I just don't think Billy's done." With not a single backup infielder assured of a job and a boatload of relievers and back-end starters at his disposal, Beane certainly seems like a man in need of at least one more move.

... Beane's counterpart, Giants GM Brian Sabean, is a fascinating study during spring training. He's always somewhere, intently watching whatever's most important on the field, but it's a bit of a "Where's Waldo" game to find him. He might be standing in a darkened concourse hallway at the stadium. He might be sitting in the stands. He might be right behind the dugout. He might be up on the right-field arcade. You scan the grass banks beyond the outfield walls and half-expect to see

Sabean, rocking one of his signature AAU basketball street-agent sweatsuits, sprawled out on a blanket, checking in on Brandon Belt's opposite-field swing.

... [David DeJesus](#). All-Star. Just a hunch. Loved that trade. [Vin Mazzaro](#) might very well go on to greatness in [Kansas City](#), but the pitching depth in Oakland and the immediate need for an excellent all-around position player made it a risk well worth taking.

... Belt is a first baseman, period. Soft hands, athletic grace, fluid movement, natural footwork around the bag. Plant him there for the next 10 years and you'll be fine. Huff will be just fine in left field, [Mark DeRosa](#) can do the [Juan Uribe](#) utility thing, and [Pat Burrell](#) can scare people off the bench and in viral fetish videos online.

... What's that, you say? [Rich Harden](#)'s shut down? Oh. OK. What time you want to eat tonight? Same place, same time, same order? Yeah, that sounds about right.

Romanick, A's aiming to lighten pitchers' loads

[Mychael Urban](#), CSNBayArea.com

PHOENIX -- The A's have a new pitching coach this year in Ron Romanick, a longtime member of the organization who was promoted from bullpen coach in the wake of former pitching coach Curt Young's offseason departure.

The A's also have a new throwing routine, which Romanick created after doing some math and looking for a way to lighten his staff's load.

Instead of throwing in the bullpen every other day, which is the norm throughout big-league ball early in spring training, [Oakland's](#) arms will get two days of rest between side sessions for at least the first two weeks of camp.

"Makes sense to me," said closer [Andrew Bailey](#), who is coming off elbow surgery and is one of several relievers who'll be closely monitored -- i.e., dialed back -- by Romanick and A's manager Bob Geren. "Everyone knows that [Romanick] knows what he's doing."

Geren told reporters Wednesday at Phoenix Municipal Stadium that Bailey and setup men [Michael Wuertz](#) and [Craig Breslow](#), all of whom have carried a considerable load over the past couple of years, also will be used more lightly in Cactus League action this spring. Typically, a healthy reliever gets 12-14 spring games under his belt, but the aforementioned trio is scheduled for between eight and 10.

Wednesday featured the first official workout for A's pitchers and catchers, but many of the pitchers have been in town and throwing side sessions for a week to 10 days.

Left-hander [Dallas Braden](#) was the standout among the pitchers who threw in the bullpen Wednesday, according to Geren. Fifth-starter candidate [Brandon McCarthy](#) also was scheduled to throw, and Thursday's list of pitchers throwing in the 'pen includes lefties [Brett Anderson](#) and [Gio Gonzalez](#).

The A's also announced Wednesday that they've made some changes to their upcoming intrasquad-game and workout schedules.

Full workouts will be held at Papago Park, the team's minor-league facility up the road from Phoenix Muni, next Monday through Wednesday. They will be the only big-league workouts at Papago, the rest being held at the stadium. Phoenix Muni also will be the site of intrasquad games on three consecutive days next week, starting Thursday, Feb. 24.

Billy Beane Confident in Oakland's Chances Heading into 2011 MLB Season

February 18, 2011 – 9:40 am by Michael Bean

After several years of reduced payroll and mediocre play, the Oakland Athletics look to be ready to field a contender in 2011. The A's were active this offseason acquiring pieces for once, a stark contrast to in recent years. The offense may actually be dangerous at times, and their pitching staff...well, their pitching staff is what might carry the A's into the postseason for the first time since 2006. Billy Beane, the organization's famous general manager, explains how the struggles of the past few seasons were all part of the process of getting the team to the place it's at now in 2011.

Beane joined **Murph & Mac** on **KNBR** in San Francisco to talk about the A's busy and productive offseason acquiring players, how the past two offseasons afforded Oakland the opportunity to be more aggressive this winter, what he believes free agent acquisition Hideki Matsui can still bring to the table beyond just his presence and experience playing on winning teams, whether he thinks this particular team will benefit or struggle from the expectations of many that they are AL West favorites heading into this season, if he thinks the top of the A's starting rotation can match the greatness of the Zito/Hudson/Mulder trio, his plan for the No. 5 spot in the rotation, and how the Giants winning last year's World Series didn't make him change his approach, but instead only reminded him how great it is when the Bay area has competitive baseball teams to cheer for.

On the team's busy and productive offseason acquiring players:

"Yeah this was the busiest one since I've been here. We weren't able to get everything we went after, but we were able to quickly shift to other areas and other players that were available and get a lot done. I don't think it was a perfect winter but nevertheless very productive."

On why the A's were so active this offseason adding players compared to in recent years when they did little other than to unload much of their talent:

"Yeah if you actually follow the papers you saw that we said that. After the '07 season we were starting to get up there a little bit payroll wise, and quite frankly I didn't think we had the core...we needed more young players than we had. And so we did take a step back and reduce the payroll. And it took a couple of years to develop in particular these young pitchers to the point where we thought it was a good enough team to (A) to add to, and we also had the payroll flexibility. So, yeah, stepping back a few years ago, it was something that we consciously did. It started with the [Dan] Haren trade, and this year we did have a little flexibility relative to what we had in the past. So we were able to do some things."

What he believes Hideki Matsui can still bring to the table beyond just his presence and experience playing on winning teams:

"Well you're right, with a young team, there is something to be said about his presence. He's someone who's hit in the middle of the lineup in Tokyo and New York and Anaheim, so he should have no problem doing it here. And it spreads out our lineup a little bit. From a playing standpoint, after a slow start last season, he still had a pretty good year; I think he hit 21 home runs. I think he's capable of more. He had a little bit of a balky knee at the beginning of last year, which I think contributed to his slow start. He's feeling great now, so I think he's capable of certainly at minimum duplicating what he did last year, and it's quite possible he could do better. And the other thing is he really did want to come here. At the beginning of winter we reached out to few potential free agents, and Hideki was quite adamant that this was his first choice, and that made it a lot easier as well."

On if he thinks this particular team will benefit or struggle from the expectations of many that they are AL West favorites heading into this season:

"It's a good question. I think with different teams they react differently. Murph probably remembers when you were covering us, I think it was the '01 team, we came in and had a relatively experienced but still young team. We had gone to the playoffs in 2000 and we had acquired Johnny Damon. It was a great, great team. We went into spring training and had an unbelievable spring training. We were sort of the talk of the winter and I think we jumped out of the gates and we were absolutely miserable. I think we were 2-12 or something like that; it took us a while. And I think a little bit that that team did react to the expectations and it hurt them. I think for us it's good. I think it's good for the self-esteem with a young club, and I think if you look at the response, we don't have a full squad yet, but just about every player has been in here for over a week, and so I think that's a sign of what they've read and their reaction to what they think the team will be. I mean at the end of the day, I think I'd rather have them say that it's a team that can win than a team that can't win when it's all said and done."

Whether he thinks the top of the A's starting rotation can match the greatness of the Zito/Hudson/Mulder trio:

"We've been hearing that comparison a lot. I think one of the unique things about this group of guys — particularly when you take Anderson, Cahill and Gonzalez— these guys were all high school drafts and they all got to the Big Leagues at the time that Hudson/Mulder/Zito were either juniors in college or just signing. So they're a lot younger than that group and they got here a lot quicker. But listen, that's a tough group to compare yourself to because in Zito's case and in Huddie's case, as soon as they came up they were All Star caliber pitchers from Day 1. Mark it took a year before he made the All Start team. But these guys had some growing pains their first year, which you would expect from 21-year olds to be honest with you. But last year...what they did last year is that they performed last year like I thought they would this year. So I think they really took a giant step forward and really surprised everybody. In Dallas's (Braden) case, Dallas has really been good since he signed a pro contract. He's not a real big guy, so he battled a few injuries coming up. But he's always been a relatively effective pitcher from Day 1. He seems like the old man in the bunch, but he's still in his mid-20s. I think it's a good group. I think it's a little deeper because we have four guys, but I think when it's all said and done they have a chance to accomplish some of the things that the previous group did."

On what the plan is for the No. 5 starter in the rotation:

"For us, we've got a number of candidates in the fifth spot. Brandon McCarthy, Josh Outman whose coming back from the Tommy John — a year and a half, fully healthy and ready to go, Bobby Kramer who came up for us last year and pitched very, very well; and we've got Rich Harden as well. So the idea there amongst those four guys — and they all have talent — is you'd like to get 35 quality starts out of that position, everybody would. But we think the talent level of those guys is above most normal fifth candidates that most clubs have. Although there's a few clubs that may have some more proven guys, it's a good group to choose from. And that will be a good competition to watch in the spring."

Whether the Giants winning last year's World Series has added extra motivation or changed his or the organization's approach in any way:

"Not really and the reason I say that is I think the most intense the rivalry has been that I can remember was probably 20 years ago back when Tony [LaRussa] was here. The late '80s, the '89 World Series and Al Rosen was still over in San Francisco. It seems to me that there was more intensity then than there is now. Now as you said, they're not in our league. Certainly we share the airwaves and the newspapers to some extent, but what I think it did more than anything is it's been awhile since there's been a championship in the Bay area, and I think it kind of reminds you of what it does and how it energizes the area. In particular, I don't think there's any getting around the fact that San Francisco, one of the greatest cities in the world, the Giants certainly one of the biggest franchises in Major League Baseball history, when they win and it's in San Francisco, you realize the sort of impact that it has and the energy that it brings everybody. But I've been sort of been in this game a long time and have been with the A's for 20-something-plus years, so from my standpoint, it didn't really sort of change my day-to-day thinking. And like I said, I think the rivalry was a lot more intense back when I was a player and in the early part of the '90s than it is now."

New season brings unique promotions

By Benjamin Hill / MLB.com

The baseball season has a distinct set of chronological benchmarks -- Opening Day, the All-Star break and pennant races -- that helps contextualize the daily grind while making its considerable heft seem more manageable.

The same is true for the offseason.

After successfully navigating through annual offseason rites of passage such as "year in review" and "new logo unveilings," we've arrived at a time when teams throughout the land are announcing their upcoming promotional schedules. As players decamp to their respective Grapefruit and Cactus League destinations, Minor League front offices are again providing fans with fresh (and often quite bizarre) reasons to come out to the ballpark.

This edition of "Minoring in Business" looks at a trio of exciting 2011 promotions, all of which are indicative of the unpredictable originality that remains a hallmark of the industry.

Stockton does Dallas

Oakland A's hurler Dallas Braden entered the national baseball spotlight last season after pitching a perfect game on Mother's Day. Despite his dramatically increased profile, the left-hander's heart will always be in the "209."

That's the area code of Braden's hometown of Stockton, a central California metropolis that also serves as home of the Class A Advanced Ports. Braden pitched for the Ports during the 2005 and 2006 campaigns, and last season returned to Banner Island Ballpark in a gala ceremony staged in honor of his "perfect" accomplishment. After being presented with the key to the city, the free-spirited southpaw proudly lifted his shirt to display the "209" tattoo emblazoned across his abdomen.

And with that, one of 2011's most notable giveaway items was born: the Dallas Braden Bobblebelly.

"In the eyes of Stocktonians, Dallas is the king, he's No. 1," Ports director of marketing Jeremy Neisser said. "And when he showed his tattoo on the field last year, the national media picked it up and that photo surfaced all over. So we said to ourselves, 'This is it right here. We've got to move forward with this and make it into something awesome.'"

The "Bobblebelly" figurine recreates the famous photo, featuring a grinning Braden that "bobbles" at the midsection. The Ports designed this unique item in conjunction with Adobe Graphics and Design, a promotional company previously responsible for such game-changers as the Toledo Mud Hens' "Groundskeeper Chia Head" and the "Ike Davis Bobblelegs" offered by the Brooklyn Cyclones last season.

"We're anticipating a lot of media attention, especially because of where we are in relation to our Major League affiliate," said Neisser. "We're just an hour away from the Bay Area and in between [there and] Sacramento, where they've got the [Triple-A Oakland affiliate] River Cats. From our perspective, any time we can get the media to focus on us instead of MLB, then we know we're doing something right."

And one of the promotion's key supporters will be Braden, himself, who still lives in Stockton and regularly visits the Ports' front office.

"We've kept Dallas in the loop every step of the way," Neisser said. "It was funny. After we showed him the original sketch [of the Bobblebelly], he said, 'Looks good, but can't you give me a six pack?'"

From "Off the Wall" to over it

The Lowell Spinners have never been shy when it comes to promotions. This is a team that has hosted U.S. Sen. Scott Brown for batting practice, staged "Politically Incorrect Night" and attempted to set the world record for "Most People Popping Bubble Wrap at the Same Time."

But what the Spinners have scheduled on July 5 might just be their most audacious promotion yet: the Human Home Run.

After the conclusion of that evening's game, and before the Independence Day fireworks show, stuntman David Smith Jr. will be shot out of a cannon and land in a net placed beyond the outfield wall (they don't call him "The Human Cannonball" for nothing).

The Human Home Run stunt was concocted five years ago, when Spinners vice president of corporate communications Jon Goode pitched the idea to Smith's agent, Gordon Mackay.

"I give Gordon and David a lot of credit because they treated the idea as ours and never pitched it to anyone else," Goode said. "[Mackay] had to come out to the ballpark to make sure this could work. There's a 30-foot drop beyond our left-field fence, and past right field is a bridge and the street, but we were able to find a spot for him to land in right-center."

The Spinners play in the short-season New York Penn League, where Opening Day is still four months away. But last week's "Human Home Run" announcement has ramped up anticipation for the impending campaign.

"We have people asking for tickets already, and even if we do sell out we never want to stop being aggressive with our promotions," Goode said. "That's the challenge of working in Minor League Baseball -- every time you come up with a great promotion you immediately have to start thinking of a way to top it."

YOU make the call

The Bowling Green Hot Rods' "Facebook Fans Night" won't take place until May 18, but in a very real sense it's already well under way. As the team stated in the news release announcing the event, "The promotion allows the team's Facebook fans to customize the entire Hot Rods experience using social media."

Indeed.

Each week leading up to the event, the Hot Rods' Facebook fans (currently at the 7,400 mark) will be asked to vote on one aspect of the game experience. Nearly everything remains to-be-determined, from start time to player uniforms to food and beverage specials.

"We want to interact with the fans and learn from them, and this is something that really allows them to participate in the entire game-planning process," said Hot Rods vice president John Willi. "We already have a great Facebook following, so this seemed like the right way to go about it."

"We got 55 'likes' on the post announcing the promo and I don't think we've ever had that many before" added Hot Rods production manager Atlee McHeffey. "That shows that this is something that people can really get into and something they can tell their friends about."

Hot Rods fans have incentive to spread the word. For every 200 new Facebook fans the team attracts, 50 cents will be deducted from the \$10 ticket price. The initiative already has dropped the price to \$9 and the team will keep dropping it until the \$2.50 mark is hit.

"It's great to drive up the numbers, but one of our main motivations here was simply to learn more about the market and what our fans care about," Willi said. "We're only in our third year here and I'm not sure if the communication has always been a two-way street. Facebook seemed like the best way for us to engage."

Still, there are limits to democracy.

"We have to be smart about this -- it's not like there are going to be 1,000 different game times to choose from," Willi added. "Like anything else, there have to be some safeguards in place."

Winter leaguer restarting his quest to make majors after Navy stint

Drew Schmenner , mydesert.com

After waiting for almost three years, Jonathan Johnston will soon rejoin the organization that he abruptly had to leave.

In June 2008 while playing catcher for Class A Kane County (Ill.), a team affiliated with the Oakland A's, Johnston got a call that ended the ecstasy he felt from scoring the winning run the night before.

He had to report back to duty with the Navy, which had initially arranged for him to pursue his baseball career after he served two years. But he was recalled — ordered to complete his mandatory five years of active service.

No longer on active duty, Johnston, 27, will test himself at the A's minor-league spring training camp in Phoenix after honing his skills the past month in the California Winter League in Palm Springs.

"It's all I want," said Johnston, while sitting in the left-field bleachers at Palm Springs Stadium after finishing a workout Monday. "I need a challenge. There's nothing better than this."

Johnston revels in the friendly confines of the ballpark after waiting more than two years to resume his dream.

"I was just really excited to come out and play baseball again," he said. "I hadn't done it in a while. It really makes you appreciate it when you haven't done something you really love for that long."

In 2006, the New Jersey native batted .317 and stole 35 bases as a senior at the Naval Academy. Based in San Diego after graduation, he met A's scout Craig Weissman and worked out for him. His athleticism, speed and strong arm stood out.

"His make-up and his character is extremely strong — off-the-charts," Weissman said.

In June 2007, one month into his first deployment, Johnston was aboard the U.S.S. Peleliu in the Pacific Ocean when he made a satellite phone call to his mother. She had good news. The A's had drafted him in the 42nd round.

After Johnston finished his four-month deployment, the Navy allowed him to play baseball. He joined the A's in spring training in March 2008, and was assigned to the Midwest League's Kane County Cougars

Oakland A's Roster Battles: 5th Starter

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

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With the Oakland A's spring training camp officially open, the race for the 25 spots on the team's Opening Day roster has begun in earnest. Over the next few weeks, we will look at the hottest roster battles in A's camp, starting with the battle for the fifth spot in the A's rotation.

The Oakland A's starting rotation finished the 2010 season with the best group ERA of any rotation in the American League at 3.47. The A's also led the league in shut-outs and batting average against. Despite those great numbers, many are expecting the A's pitching staff to be even better in 2011, thanks in large part to the assumed maturation of the team's top four starters: [Brett Anderson](#), [Trevor Cahill](#), [Gio Gonzalez](#) and [Dallas Braden](#). All under the age of 28, the A's Fab Four will take the bulk of the team's innings this season, if all goes according to Oakland's master plan. But who will be the A's Fifth Beatles in 2011?

The candidates for the final spot in the A's rotation are plentiful. Spurred by the fact that 10 different pitchers made starts for the A's in 2010, the Oakland front office stacked the spring training roster with pitchers who could compete for the fifth starter's role. Some of the candidates were already in-house: [Bobby Cramer](#), [Tyson Ross](#) and [Josh Outman](#) each made starts for the A's at some point over the last two seasons. Others were brought in as free agents: [Brandon McCarthy](#) and [Rich Harden](#) were signed to major league deals after spending the 2010 season in the Texas Rangers' organization. There are also a few darkhorse candidates who could factor into the race should injuries begin to pile up (namely [Guillermo Moscoso](#) and [Yadel Marti](#)).

Given that the team needed 10 different starters to get through last season, chances are that more than one pitcher from this list will ultimately play a significant role in the A's rotation. In fact, in many ways the A's are already planning for that scenario. Oakland's Director of Baseball Operations Farhan Zaidi, in an interview with OaklandClubhouse last month, described the A's pitching depth in discussing the team's decision to bring back the oft-injured Harden: "I think you have to go in hoping that you get 20-25 Rich Harden starts, which is actually very, very valuable, and have the depth to work around that if there are times during the season when he needs time off to recover. And I think we do have that depth."

That depth as it relates to Harden is already being tested. On Thursday morning, the team announced that Harden would be shut-down from his throwing program for two weeks with soreness in his lat region. That inactivity could prevent Harden from winning the fifth starter spot, a spot that he would clearly be the favorite for if he were to stay healthy. Harden struggled in 2010 with the Rangers, but he and A's pitching coach Ron Romanick both believe that Harden will be able to return to the form he had with the A's back in 2008, when he had a 2.34 ERA in 77 innings before being traded to the Chicago Cubs.

If Harden doesn't win the job out of camp, the competition intensifies. McCarthy, the former Texas and Chicago White Sox starter, has the most major league starting experience of the remaining candidates. Once considered one of the top young starters in the American League, McCarthy has fallen on hard times of late thanks to a series of injuries. He made 17 starts for Texas in 2009, but was limited to only 56.1 innings – all at Triple-A – in 2010 thanks to shoulder problems. The 6'7" right-hander made four starts in the Dominican Winter League this off-season and is reportedly healthy. He will be stretched out as a starter, but could also be considered for a spot as a long reliever in the A's bullpen. McCarthy has a minor league option remaining, as well, so if he doesn't win a big league job out of camp, he will serve as insurance for whoever does win that fifth starter job while at Triple-A Sacramento.

Of the remaining candidates for the fifth starter spot, Cramer had the most starts for the A's in 2010 with four. Ironically, he wasn't even pitching for the A's organization for the majority of the 2010 season. The A's had lent him to the Quintana Roo Tigres of the Mexican Summer League, but after he won the Mexican League's Pitcher of the Year award and posted a 1.94 ERA in seven starts for Sacramento, Cramer was called on to be the team's fifth starter in September. He acquitted himself well, posting a 3.04 ERA in 23.2 innings.

Cramer has an injury history of his own, having battled numerous arm problems throughout his professional career, but he made 31 starts and threw 200 innings last season without missing a start. Should he win the job, Cramer will give the A's the unique distinction of having four left-handers in the rotation. Despite pitching in the big leagues last season, Cramer is attending his first big league spring training this year and has the fewest number of big league innings of any of the A's main fifth starter candidates. Like fellow lefty Braden, Cramer relies on keeping hitters off-balance and a solid off-speed pitch to get outs.

Another southpaw, Outman, will be a major player in the A's fifth starter race. Outman won the A's fifth starter spot in 2009 with a good spring and he wound-up posting a 3.48 ERA and striking out 53 in 67.1 innings that season before he was shut-down with a sore elbow that resulted in Tommy John surgery. Outman's rehab concluded at the end of the 2010 season and he was able to throw in live games during the A's fall Instructional League, so he should be able to participate in spring

training with few restrictions.

Before the injury, Outman had excellent pure stuff, and surprising velocity for a left-hander of his size (he is listed at 6'1"). Assuming he comes back with that same level of stuff, he could be the leading candidate for the spot. However, many pitchers struggle with command issues while coming back from Tommy John surgery. The A's may also want to limit Outman's innings in 2011 to build him up for a full 2012 season, so starting him in Triple-A on a modified starter's schedule or in the bullpen could provide the A's with an opportunity to keep him under 30 starts and 200 innings.

Ross, like McCarthy, is a towering right-hander who has had his share of injury problems during his short career. Ross, the A's 2008 second-round pick out of Cal, was a surprise member of the Oakland bullpen at the start of the 2010 season, but he was a starter throughout his collegiate and minor league career. When he was sent down to the minor leagues by the A's in July, Ross was moved into the Sacramento starting rotation. He pitched well for the River Cats (3.55 ERA and 30 strikeouts in 25.1 innings), but Ross was sidelined after only six starts with a shoulder strain. He rehabbed the shoulder during the off-season and enters camp healthy.

Although Ross made 26 appearances (including two starts) for the A's last season, he is still in the learning stage of his professional career. Ross has had only one full season in the minor leagues (2009 when he made 27 starts for High-A Stockton and Double-A Midland) and he has never thrown more than 170 innings in a season in his career. Ross has had minor arm problems dating back to college and is coming off of a season in which he threw only 64.2 innings total. This is all a long way of saying that should Ross win the fifth starter spot out of camp, he will likely be on an innings limit for most of the season. There is also a case to be made that the soon-to-be 24-year-old needs more seasoning in Triple-A before becoming a full-time big league starter. That being said, of this group, only Harden has better pure stuff than Ross.

The two other starters in A's camp are new to the organization: right-handers Guillermo Moscoso and Yadel Marti. Neither pitcher is a serious candidate to win a rotation spot this spring, but both could position themselves for a look down-the-road should the A's experience the same level of injuries they did in 2010.

Moscoso was acquired in a trade by the A's from the Rangers for minor leaguer Ryan Kelly in January. The Venezuelan right-hander made 22 starts and one relief appearance for Triple-A Oklahoma last season, posting a 5.18 ERA in 123.1 innings. He pitched well this winter for the Caracas Leones of the Venezuelan Winter League, putting up a 2.66 ERA in 40.2 innings, mostly as a starter. Moscoso was once a top prospect in the Detroit Tigers chain and has some experience relieving in addition to starting. He has made 11 major league appearances, all in relief.

Marti is the only non-roster starting pitcher invited to big league camp. The A's signed the former Cuban national team ace to a minor league contract last year. Before signing with Oakland, Marti made eight starts in the Mexican Summer League last season, posting a 4.19 ERA in 43 innings for Veracruz. The 5'11" right-hander made the World Baseball Classic All-Tournament team in 2006 as a reliever and was a star as a starter for the Cuban team during the 2007 World Cup. Marti defected from Cuba in 2008 and played in the Dominican Republic and in Mexico over the past two years. He is a big wildcard in A's camp, as Marti has never played affiliated baseball and he is 31 years old, but he has experience pitching against high-level competition on some big stages.

Given the A's injury history over the last few seasons, chances are that the fifth spot in Oakland's rotation will be filled by more than one pitcher over the course of the season. In addition, Anderson and Braden are coming off of injury problems in 2010, so their innings may be monitored closely over the course of the 162-game schedule. Consequently, how these pitchers perform in camp could go a long way towards determining not only who breaks camp with the A's on April 1, but also who the team turns to when the first DL stint is announced.