

A's News Clips, Monday, February 21, 2011

Reliever Grant Balfour brings heat, intensity to the Oakland Athletics

By Joe Stiglich. Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- A's reliever Grant Balfour is carrying himself quietly now, but teammates and fans will see a different person when he takes the mound.

The hard-throwing Australian, signed as a free agent over the winter, is known for being one of the major leagues' most intense competitors.

Balfour will yell at himself to get fired up. Quite often, a stream of profanity can be heard in the opposing dugout after he throws a pitch.

It's purely self-motivation, Balfour explains. But he cares less if opposing hitters take issue with it.

"You get hitters that get to first base and do all this other (garbage)," Balfour said, pointing to the sky to demonstrate. "They're gonna do what they want to do. I'm not out there showing up the hitters, so there shouldn't be a problem with it. If they see me cussing or whatever, I'm not swearing at them. I'm swearing at myself."

Over the past three seasons, the "Mad Australian" has posted a strikeout rate of 10.29 per nine innings, third-best among American League relievers.

The A's signed him to a two-year, \$8.1 million deal in January, and he's part of a strong core of setup men being looked upon to transfer leads to closer Andrew Bailey.

Balfour, 33, also brings a dose of attitude that generally isn't found elsewhere on Oakland's roster, and manager Bob Geren believes that has value.

"It's not an act, that's just his personality," Geren said. "How might that rub off on other guys? It's always nice to have a couple of fiery guys to get you through the lulls of the season. If it's genuine, that's fine. If it looks like an act, it's tired. But his is not."

That intensity has its origins.

Balfour spent parts of three seasons with the Minnesota Twins before elbow and shoulder surgery sidelined him for the entire 2005 season. He didn't land a secure spot in the big leagues until 2008 with the Tampa Bay Rays, at age 30.

Balfour said he's attacked the game with more passion since that long journey back to the majors.

"He wears his heart on his sleeve," said Corinne Shandley, Balfour's younger sister. "I love watching my brother because I can tell exactly what's going on in his mind, where he's at in that moment."

And what of Balfour's R-rated dialogue with himself?

"We're Australian," Shandley explained, "so we like to cuss."

Balfour hails from a continent obsessed with rugby and cricket, but he was raised in a baseball family.

His father, David, was general manager of the Sydney Blues baseball club, and his mother, Lynn, coached the sport. Shandley, who now lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, grew up playing organized hardball against boys.

Balfour's grandfather, Ken Holden, was such a baseball fan that he was buried in a Rays jersey.

"Everybody stood up for the seventh-inning stretch and did 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame' at his funeral," Shandley said.

Balfour played catcher as a youth before shifting to pitcher. He traveled the world playing on national all-star teams but was surrounded by more highly touted prospects.

Howard Norsetter, the Twins' international scouting coordinator, watched Balfour back then and remembers a skinny teenager who hardly lit up the radar gun.

"Three things stood out," Norsetter said by phone from Australia. "He had that beautiful arm action. Second, he was very athletic with zero body fat. And the third thing was his work habits were impeccable. He just outworked everybody else in all aspects."

Norsetter eventually signed Balfour, who filled out physically and developed a mid-90s fastball.

In 2008, he posted a 1.54 ERA and helped Tampa Bay to the World Series.

His ERA jumped to 4.81 a year later, but he reduced his walk total during a solid 2010 season and helped the Rays return to the postseason.

The A's have little playoff experience throughout their roster, so Balfour might prove valuable in that regard.

He said getting a taste of the postseason leaves a player unsatisfied with anything less.

"If you don't go to the playoffs, you just feel like you didn't meet expectations," Balfour said. "You get that feeling (of the postseason), it's an unbelievable feeling."

Oakland A's notebook: Athletics have special greeting to mark new DH Hideki Matsui's arrival

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- The A's had a welcome gift waiting for their new designated hitter Sunday.

Hideki Matsui reported to camp and found a giant, inflatable Godzilla doll waiting at his locker inside Phoenix Municipal Stadium, a joking reference to Matsui's nickname. The doll was decked out in an A's jersey with Matsui's No. 55.

It was a good-natured gag hatched by pitcher Dallas Braden, even if it went off like a surprise party where nobody yelled "Surprise!" Matsui entered the clubhouse and was obviously stunned to see all eyes -- players, coaches, and a huge throng of reporters -- waiting to see his reaction.

It took him a few moments to see the doll, but then he broke into a big grin.

"I sensed everybody just kind of staring at me," Matsui said through his interpreter, Roger Kahlon. "It was kind of awkward. I didn't know what was going on."

Manager Bob Geren summed up the silent reaction well: "It was like a comedian who opens with his first joke and "... crickets."

The Godzilla doll was wearing the yellow jersey the A's will use as alternate home uniforms this season. That caught Matsui's eye -- his high school team wore a similar look.

"It's been 20 years since I've seen yellow uniforms like this," he said.

Matsui will take the field Monday morning for the first full-squad workout at Papago Park Baseball Complex.

Geren said he hadn't decided where Matsui would hit in his batting order yet, but a good bet is the fifth spot.

Geren said he wants to avoid lining up three left-handed hitters in a row. With switch-hitter Coco Crisp leading off, Daric Barton and David DeJesus -- both lefties -- are logical candidates to hit second and third.

Josh Willingham, a right-handed hitter, could bat cleanup before the left-handed hitting Matsui.

Matsui said he has no preference for where he hits.

"I can even lead off, if that works," he quipped.

It rained for part of Sunday, and the A's canceled hitting and defensive drills. "... The tentative schedule has Trevor Cahill, Tyson Ross and Joey Devine throwing in Thursday's intrasquad game at Phoenix Muni. Braden would go Friday and Brett Anderson and Gio Gonzalez on Saturday in intrasquad games.

Chin Music: Hideki Matsui reports to camp — where might he hit in A's lineup?

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/20/2011 9:55AM

We had a little more intrigue than normal in the A's clubhouse this morning with Hideki Matsui reporting. He'll work out and then finish shooting the commercial he began filming Saturday at Papago Park.

Dallas Braden had a gift waiting for Matsui at his locker: A large inflatable Godzilla doll dressed in an A's uniform. Very quality effort, though the reaction once Matsui arrived was a bit awkward. Matsui saw the doll but wasn't quite sure how to react to a room full of people staring at him. And the rest of the A's weren't quite sure whether to clap. Somewhere, a pin dropped and I clearly heard it. It was a good gesture, however, to welcome Matsui. It will be interesting to see how he assimilates into the clubhouse with the language barrier, but he's got a reputation for being a great guy, and he's plenty used to the situation after eight seasons in the United States.

With 30-35 members of the Japanese media on hand (that's what's expected as a daily turnout this season), manager Bob Geren had a big crowd for his morning media session. He said he hadn't decided where Matsui would bat in the order, but he's considering him in the fourth or fifth spot. A logical batting order would go Crisp, Barton, DeJesus, Willingham and Matsui in the 1-5 spots. But Geren said he doesn't want more than two lefties hitting together in a row near the top of the lineup. And against right-handed pitchers, Willingham would be the only right-handed bat with the switch-hitting Crisp batting from the left side. So perhaps we could see an order that goes Crisp, DeJesus, Willingham and Matsui in the top four spots, with Barton dropping down a bit. It's not clear how this will shake out right now. Geren said he probably won't start playing an opening day-type lineup until the second half of the Cactus League schedule.

It's freezing today, by the way. Not that I expect a lot of sympathy from readers in the Bay Area, as I hear it's been nasty there too. We got heavy rain last night, and the temperature is in the low 50's right now. OK, so it's not that cold, but it's all relative. When it's normally in the 70's here, you want to crank up the heater on days like this.

That's all for now ...

A's greet Hideki Matsui with monstrous surprise

[Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Hideki Matsui turned the corner, stepped into the A's clubhouse and was greeted with dozens of people, all waiting for him, and dead silence.

"I sensed everyone staring at me," Matsui said through his translator, **Roger Kahlon**. "It was kind of awkward. I didn't know if I looked weird or did something."

As the A's new designated hitter was directed to his locker, he spotted the 6-foot inflatable Godzilla doll dressed in a Matsui jersey. Matsui threw back his head and laughed, and the tension was abated.

"To be welcomed in this manner is a pleasure, but Godzilla is the last character I ever thought I'd be welcomed by," Matsui said with a smile. "I was really surprised. I wondered when they told me to come by at 8:30 a.m. I didn't understand, but now I clearly know why."

Pitcher **Dallas Braden**, the mastermind behind the Godzilla doll, was almost as popular as Matsui on Sunday. Braden regaled the Japanese media in a media session, explaining his welcome gesture for Matsui and also discussing his love of Japan; he'd enjoyed the A's trip there in 2008, he went back during the offseason - and he even bought a heated Japanese toilet and had it shipped back home.

Matsui spoke to Braden a bit and met some of his other new teammates. Matsui also rode the exercise bike, stretched and hit in the batting cage in preparation for today's first workout with the A's full squad.

A's manager **Bob Geren** said that Matsui will hit in the middle of the order, but he hasn't decided the specific spot because he is still trying to determine whether **Daric Barton** will remain high in the order. Barton is usually the A's No. 2 hitter, but Geren also could use offseason acquisition **David DeJesus** there, or he could hit Barton second and DeJesus third. **Josh Willingham** would come next, in either scenario, followed by Matsui. Matsui said Sunday that he has no preference whatsoever where he hits; he bats where he's told.

One day earlier, Matsui said he hoped to get in a little work in the outfield, and though Geren wasn't ready to agree to that immediately, he said it might not be a bad idea for Matsui to keep those skills fresh, even though he's a full-time DH.

Also on Saturday, Matsui's father, **Masao**, told reporters that he believes his son will hit 30 homers and bat .300 this year.

Asked about that Sunday, Matsui paused a moment and said, "Those are pretty good numbers. If I reached those numbers, it would definitely help the team."

Does he have any goals when it comes to the running game, something the A's emphasize?

"Let's see," he said. "I'll try to get one."

Briefly: The A's will stretch at their Papago Park minor-league complex at 9:45 a.m. Hitters will take batting practice off Oakland pitchers beginning about 11:40. ... Today's pitchers: **Trevor Cahill**, **Bobby Cramer**, **Tyson Ross**, **Josh Outman**, **Brad Ziegler**, **Joey Devine** and **Danny Farquhar**, which is also the group expected to go in Thursday's intrasquad game and in Sunday's Cactus League opener, assuming continued good health. ... Judging by the current pitching schedule, Cahill, Braden (who threw Saturday) and either **Brett Anderson** or **Gio Gonzalez** (who both threw Sunday) are set to go in order during the season, but there is no way to know who would pitch Opening Night yet and, of course, there might be many changes before then.

Drumbeat: Matsui mania, day two, plus lineup stuff

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Phoenix 2/20/2011 9:28AM

There was great anticipation for Hideki Matsui's arrival in the A's clubhouse today, and when he did walk in, the atmosphere was slightly awkward initially: Dozens of media and players all staring at Matsui, who came to a stop and looked startled.

There was a smattering of applause, and then Matsui was directed to his locker - where the 6-foot Godzilla dressed in an A's uniform was waiting. Matsui threw back his head and laughed, breaking some tension, and then the whole thing broke up. Back to business.

It was an unusual scene, overall. Hushed. Willie Eyre, sitting against the wall, said, "Well, I've never seen anything like this before."

In the dugout 30 minutes later, manager Bob Geren faced his biggest crowd of the spring, with 30 or more Japanese reporters and photographers. It was such a big group, that as we waited for Geren to come out, various players (Landon Powell, Andrew Bailey) stopped to pretend they were conducting a press conference.

After Geren finished his session, all the Japanese media moved down the dugout for another scrum: to listen to the translation of Geren's words. I wonder if his asides and jokes are part of that - he sometimes launches into tangents about his dog, Hank Geren (say it aloud), or about hockey. Today, it was classic cars.

Matsui hasn't emerged from the clubhouse, and everyone else is wrapping up their work for the day because of the miserable wet, cold weather.

I asked Geren a bit about the lineup and if he's decided where exactly Matsui will hit, and he said it depends on if Daric Barton remains up near the top (Crisp, Barton, DeJesus, Willingham, Matsui) or not (Matsui then batting cleanup). He usually doesn't like having two left-handed hitters such as Barton and DeJesus hitting back-to-back up top, but he noted that Barton hits lefties well, sometimes better than right-handers.

I asked about Matsui getting some time in the outfield and while it sounds as if that hasn't been entirely decided, Geren said it might be good for Matsui to keep those skills fresh, presumably for interleague play. My guess is that it will depend on how Matsui's knees are feeling.

Tomorrow will be the first full-squad workout at Papago Park. I'll try to get an exact time and add it here later.

UPDATE: If you hadn't already seen it on my Twitter feed, the A's will stretch tomorrow at 9:45 at the minor-league complex and hitters will take batting practice off pitchers starting at about 11:40 a.m. Trevor Cahill, Bobby Cramer, Tyson Ross, Josh Outman, Brad Ziegler, Joey Devine, Danny Farquhar will be throwing.

Matsui greeted by ... Godzilla?

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- An amused Andrew Bailey sat on the stationary bike Sunday morning, his eyes wandering the clubhouse as a large handful of Japanese reporters filed into the room in anticipation of Hideki Matsui's arrival.

"It feels like Santa's coming to town," Bailey said, teammates laughing nearby as the A's closer broke out into Christmas song.

Down the line stood an inflatable Godzilla that was nearly dressed head to toe in a yellow A's jersey, jock strap and blinding white cleats -- all courtesy of resident clubhouse jokester Dallas Braden, who bought the spikes in Japan.

All of the buzz, evocative of a New Year's Eve countdown, came to a sudden silence when Matsui, casually dressed in jeans and a gray hooded sweatshirt, slowly walked into the clubhouse. Stares abounded, but mouths remained quiet for a few slightly awkward seconds while a startled Matsui waved and made his way toward his inflatable twin at his locker.

"When he came in, I don't think he saw it at first," manager Bob Geren said. "When he did, he said that it was funny, and it loosened everyone up. There was a moment there where we weren't sure if he thought it was funny or not. It was like a comedian opening at a night club, and he does his first joke and it's like crickets. But then they start laughing later."

Matsui, speaking through translator Roger Kahlon later in the day, admittedly felt the same way.

"I sensed everyone was staring at me, so it was kind of awkward," he said. "I don't know if I looked weird or I did something, or what was going on."

Ultimately, though, much humor was found in Braden's creation -- Oakland's alternate home yellow jersey reminds Matsui of his high school uniform -- and vast appreciation was felt by the team's overall welcome effort.

"I was really surprised," Matsui said. "I was really wondering when I was told to come by about 8:30 and really didn't understand, and now I clearly know why. It was just a very pleasant surprise."

"Godzilla is the last character I ever thought would welcome me."

It was back to business quickly after, as Matsui met a few teammates and got acquainted with his surroundings. He never made it onto the field, though, as a downpour of rain shortened the day's workouts. Still, he was able to hit in the indoor batting cages and undergo light stretching.

Sunny weather is expected for Monday, when Matsui is slated to take part in the team's first full-squad workout. He'll primarily take part in hitting activities, Geren said, but will be given the chance to use his glove in the outfield for insurance sake.

The A's skipper, while addressing more than 30 reporters (nearly 25 made up the Japanese contingent) on Sunday morning, noted that Matsui will likely rotate with Josh Willingham in the fourth and fifth spots of the lineup this season. Much of the decision, he said, will be based on Daric Barton and David DeJesus' positioning in the No. 2 and 3 holes.

Matsui said he has no preference as to where he's placed in the lineup, though he joked that he can also lead off and add one stolen base to the numbers -- .300 average, 30 homers -- his father, Masao, predicted for his son just a day prior.

"Those are pretty good numbers," Matsui said. "If I can reach those numbers, that's definitely going to be a help to the team."

The two-time All-Star hit .274 with 21 homers and 84 RBIs for the Angels in 2010, following a year that saw him tally 28 homers and 90 RBIs with the Yankees. Those numbers have impressed Geren and Co. just as much as his professional presence.

"We're happy he's here," Geren said. "He looks like he's going to have a good time with these guys."

Donaldson seeking A's backup catcher gig

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Unlike previous years in Phoenix, there are few noteworthy position battles on display at A's camp this spring outside the fifth-starter competition.

Josh Donaldson wouldn't mind changing that.

The 25-year-old A's backstop, who enjoyed a pair of brief stints in the big leagues last season, is ready to have some fun making competition out of the backup catcher's job. Having fun, by his standard, is proving his worth on a Major League roster.

"This is probably the first year for me I can really say that, that I feel like I have a real good opportunity to make the team out of camp," Donaldson said. "I tried to put in a good offseason, and when the games start I'll hopefully perform well."

Standing in the way of Donaldson's advancement is incumbent backup catcher Landon Powell, whose offensive numbers -- he hit just .214 in 112 at-bats last year -- aren't so much valued by the team as is his overall presence. Powell, who will turn 29 in March, handed the baseball community one of its finest moments in 2010 by combining with southpaw Dallas Braden on a perfect game.

He's greatly respected by the A's pitching staff, though his roster status isn't quite set in stone because of the arrivals of not only Donaldson but highly touted 19-year-old prospect Max Stassi, who is also in camp. The latter is expected to take the reins in Oakland following the indefinite departure time of Kurt Suzuki, who last year signed a four-year, \$16.25-million contract, taking him through his arbitration years and possibly into the first year of free agency, if an \$8.5 million option is exercised in 2014.

In the meantime, Donaldson will be given every opportunity to make his case following a 2010 campaign that saw him post a .238 average but tally 18 home runs and 67 RBIs in 86 contests with Triple-A Sacramento. He appeared in 14 games for the A's, gathering five hits in 32 at-bats through two separate stints -- the first of which unexpectedly came in May when Kurt Suzuki went down to injury.

"Once you get that taste," he said, "you want to get there and stay."

In an effort to do so, Donaldson lost 15 pounds this winter while transforming his body into a rather lean figure so as to shed pounds but remain strong to keep up with the quickness seen at the Major League level.

"The pace of the game, from a defensive standpoint, was fine because I've caught the majority of the guys here," Donaldson said. "I've had the opportunity to come into four Major League camps now. But I was surprised, just from the difference at the plate from Spring Training to the real games, just because it is a bit quicker. "

As a result, though, Donaldson matured as a hitter, recognizing the facets of a player's game that make the difference between a good hitter and a great hitter -- the latter who "makes it look easy and simple," he noted.

"My swing at the beginning was maybe a little too long, and I'm trying to get it to be short and compact," he said. "You don't see a lot of hitters up here that make it look hard. I've cleaned up the little stuff to help me."

Behind the plate, Donaldson has learned how to separate himself from the offensive mentality, thus allowing him to solely focus on his No. 1 priority -- taking care of his batterymates.

"As long as those guys are doing well and I feel like I'm doing my job, the rest will take care of itself," he said. "When I first started catching, I was always told you have to be two different people, and there has to be a switch for each. When it's defense, that's all it is. When it's offense, now it's time to focus on that. Everybody is looking at the catcher -- the pitcher, all the other position players. We don't have the fortune of really taking a back seat to the game. If we do, we get exposed."

It was less than three years ago Donaldson was shipped to Oakland alongside Sean Gallagher, Eric Patterson and Matt Murton from the Cubs in exchange for pitchers Rich Harden and Chad Gaudin. Now, Donaldson -- formerly a 2007 first-round sandwich pick by the Cubs -- has a locker just feet away from Harden, who rejoined the A's this winter.

"It's funny the way things work out and how quickly things can change in this game," Donaldson said. "Hopefully my hard work has paid off over the last 20 years that I've played baseball. If I get that opportunity to be a part of this team, I feel I can be successful."

A's manager Bob Geren, far from ready to name Suzuki's backup, will be watching Donaldson closely this spring.

"I've always been impressed with his hitting, and he made big strides defensively last year," the A's skipper said. "Getting a little taste of the big leagues and seeing how everyone prepares, that's going to make him that much better. He's coming in with the chance to break the team.

"Landon has obviously done a fine job, but Josh is obviously a fine player as well, so we've got some good players fighting for spots."

Hideki Matsui gets an A's-style greeting from new teammates

By Jorge L. Ortiz, USA TODAY 2/21/2011

PHOENIX – Matsui-san, welcome to the Oakland A's clubhouse. It's a bit different from what you were used to during your seven seasons with the New York Yankees.

A large inflatable Godzilla dressed in A's gear greeted new designated hitter Hideki Matsui upon his arrival at the team's clubhouse Sunday morning, courtesy of the fertile mind of pitcher Dallas Braden.

Matsui's reaction was eagerly anticipated by his new teammates, who were playing off his nickname. The Japanese slugger, who had heard stories about the A's famously loose clubhouse, got a kick out of the gag.

"I was really surprised," Matsui said through interpreter Roger Kahlon. "I was really wondering when I was told to come by about 8:30 in the morning and really didn't understand. Now I clearly know why. It was a very pleasant surprise.

"Godzilla is the last character I ever thought would welcome me."

The A's signed Matsui to a one-year, \$4.25 million contract in hopes he will charge up an offense that finished next-to-last in the AL in home runs and slugging percentage last season.

In his one year with the Los Angeles Angels in 2010, Matsui batted .274 with 21 homers and 84 RBI after a slow start.

Oakland also added outfielders Josh Willingham and David DeJesus in the offseason, but neither one comes in with Matsui's credentials – he has had four 100-RBI seasons and was the 2009 World Series MVP with the Yankees – or a large contingent of reporters and photographers chronicling nearly his every move.

Braden, who found the inflatable Godzilla on eBay through his agent, said the often-overlooked A's could benefit from all the attention Matsui commands, even if most of it come from the Japanese media.

"I've gotten the understanding there's going to be an entourage of media following him around, and while that might be normal for him, it's definitely not normal for us, small market that we've been in," Braden said.

"This was just to lighten the mood and say, 'You're definitely welcome with open arms here. We're excited to have you. You are a beast. You are Godzilla, and now you are our Godzilla.' "

A's closer Bailey still learning on the job

The Associated Press

PHOENIX—Oakland Athletics closer Andrew Bailey was glad to see the arrival of designated hitter Hideki Matsui at spring camp on Sunday.

"He sums it all up. He's the World Series MVP (in 2009, with the New York Yankees). He gives us professionalism, veteran leadership and experience," Bailey said.

In time, Matsui also should come to appreciate what Bailey can offer.

The 26-year-old right-hander was American League Rookie of the Year in 2009 and an AL All-Star in 2009 and 2010. He has a 1.70 ERA in 132 1-3 career innings.

And, in two seasons as the A's closer, he has 51 saves.

Had it not been for injuries, he might have had more. He spent a month and a half on the disabled list in 2010 and on Sept. 24 had surgery to remove debris from his right elbow.

He says he feels fine now, and Athletics manager Bob Geren doesn't anticipate any difficulties after watching him throw here.

"If you didn't know (he had surgery), you wouldn't notice after watching him out there," Geren said. "Where he's at with velocity, everything seems to be there."

Oakland signed left-hander Brian Fuentes as a free agent in January. But despite 187 career saves, Fuentes mainly will be in a setup role and Bailey will continue to be the closer.

"Bailey is definitely the closer, and Brian understands that," Geren said.

Bailey is not taking anything for granted. He dropped 15 pounds over the winter, and now is at 235.

"I don't know as we have any roles yet," he said. "We have a deep bullpen and there are a lot of different options. I'm cool with it."

He will absorb what he can from Fuentes, just as he did from Michael Wuertz and Russ Springer when he was learning the ropes as a closer in 2009. Bailey began his career as a starter and has 47 minor-league starts.

"My first career save was in the big leagues," Bailey said, almost sounding amazed.

The Athletics wanted him to try closing in 2008 while pitching in the Arizona Fall League.

"I was struggling bad as a starter," he said. "There was always that one bad inning. I'd have a few shutout innings and then a really bad one. Before you knew it, my ERA had gone through the roof.

"When I first started closing in the Fall League, I'm sure there was some 'Is he going to make it?'"

"I looked at it as an opportunity rather than a demotion."

A closer has to have a positive outlook, Bailey says.

"You can't be afraid. You have to come in and shut the door," he said. "It's 'me vs. you.' You have to allow them to hit the ball sometimes, make the defense work for you.

"The great thing about this role is that you get to come to the ballpark every day and have a chance to pitch. There's that pressure, that adrenalin rush."

Notes: Position players don't officially work out for the first time until Monday, but Matsui went through a light workout, taking some swings in the covered batting cage. It rained most of the morning and the temperature was around 50. He will be the DH, but could see some time in the outfield this spring. "It's not bad for him to keep those skills up," Geren said. ... first baseman Daric Barton and outfielder David DeJesus likely will alternate in the second and third spots in the batting

order.

A's notebook: Matsui reacts to Braden's prank

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

PHOENIX -- Sunday was reporting day for position players at A's camp, but there weren't many position players to be found at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

That's just how Oakland manager Bob Geren had hoped it would be. Most of the team's position players have been at camp and working out daily, some arriving even before pitchers and catchers reported, so Geren "strongly suggested" to them that they stay away Sunday and rest up for Monday's first full-squad workout.

"I didn't tell them they *couldn't* come," Geren said. "But a lot of these guys have been working out every day, and I thought it would be a good idea for them to take advantage of what might be their last day off for a long time. The majority of them listened."

BRADEN'S PET LIZARD

One of the handful of position players who was on hand was Hideki Matsui, and resident clubhouse clown Dallas Braden came up with a unique way to welcome him to the clubhouse.

Playing off Matsui's nickname, Braden dressed a blow-up doll of Godzilla -- he said he bought it online -- in an A's jersey and cap, with a jock strap and white shoes, and had it waiting in front of the Japanese superstar's locker when he arrived.

"I got tired of waiting for the real Godzilla to get here, so I went out and got my own," Braden said.

Matsui displayed a deft comic touch when he saw the creature, remaining silent and stoic just long enough to make everyone in on the joke wonder if they'd made a big mistake.

"There was a moment there," Geren said, "when we didn't know if he thought it was funny."

Only then did Matsui break into a smile, allowing his deferential young new teammate to breathe again.

MORE GODZILLA

Surrounded by the large crowd of Japanese media assigned to the Matsui beat, Geren said Matsui will bat fourth or fifth in the lineup, depending on who bats second and third.

It's more likely to be fifth, because the second and third spots are almost sure to be occupied by Daric Barton and David DeJesus, though not necessarily in that order. The order doesn't much matter because Barton and DeJesus are left-handed hitters, as is Matsui, and Geren is a big fan of going left-right-left in the order as much as possible.

Josh Willingham, a right-handed hitter, might have the best pure power on the team anyway, so he's a natural fit at cleanup.

Matsui was signed to be Oakland's full-time DH, but on Saturday he said he hoped to play in the outfield some this spring, and Geren likes the idea of Matsui keeping his defensive skills from rusting up entirely. Matsui has appeared in 18 games as an outfielder since the end of the 2008 season.

FINISH WITH A FLOURISH

The A's timed their workout perfectly, with the last pitch of the last scheduled bullpen session being delivered about 10 seconds before the darkish sky finally delivered on its morning-long threat.

The pitcher who wrapped things up was right-hander Fautino De Los Santos, a tantalizingly talented 25-year-old who has a fastball that's been clocked in triple digits.

"Gasolina," Geren said to bench coach Joel Skinner as they watched De Los Santos unleash a series of punishing fastballs.

Acquired in the trade that sent Nick Swisher to the White Sox before the 2008 season, De Los Santos is a converted starter who hasn't played above Double-A ball, but as soon as he shows he can harness his electric stuff and dramatically improve upon his 2010 average of 4.5 walks per nine innings, he'll be on the fast track for a job in the big-league bullpen.

Fingers known for mound success and moustache

Justin Rust, The Daily Republic (Mitchell, SD), 2/21/2011

Rollie Fingers was the smallest kid on his high school baseball team. He weighed 140 pounds.

But when he was a junior in high school, one person made a suggestion to Fingers that changed his life.

"I never thought of being a ballplayer until a scout for the Minnesota Twins asked if I ever thought of being a ballplayer," he said during the Leadership Banquet at the Sherman Center on Dakota Wesleyan's campus Saturday night. "That's when I started to work hard. To follow that dream, you have to work hard."

Fingers played for the Oakland Athletics from 1968 to 1976, a team that won three World Series (1972, 1973 and 1974). He played for the San Diego Padres from 1977 to 1980 and finished his career from 1981 to 1985 with the Milwaukee Brewers, missing the 1983 season because of an injury that cost him the end of the 1982 season and the World Series that year.

Fingers was named the American League Most Valuable Player and won the Cy Young Award in 1981 when he led the league in saves with 28, won six games and had an earned run average of 1.04. Fingers was elected into the baseball Hall of Fame in 1992.

But even with the numbers he put up, Fingers' greatest claim to fame may be the handlebar moustache he started growing in 1972 during spring training and still wears today.

Fingers said he and a few other teammates grew facial hair in order to get the manager to make Reggie Jackson shave his facial hair.

"All the guys in the ballclub, we got on Reggie to shave his moustache and he wouldn't," he said. "There were three or four of us who decided to grow a moustache then, and we thought our manager, Dick Williams, would make us shave our mustaches off and then Reggie would have to, too."

"But our owner Charlie Finley found out what we were doing and thought it was a great idea. Finley was a little goofy, and he told everyone if they grew a moustache, they would get \$300. The fans ate it up and the press ate it up, and that's how it all started."

Since Fingers grew the moustache, there is only one time he has considered shaving it, he said.

Fingers said he once surrendered home runs on both ends of a doubleheader and was furious when the second game was over. He picked up a razor but changed his mind at the last second.

"That's the closest I have ever come to shaving it."

Fingers was named the World Series MVP in 1974, but he said a fellow teammate was just as deserving of the award — Rapid City native and Athletics second baseman Dick Green.

"Dick went something like 0-for-16 and I get on him to this day that if he would've gotten one hit, he would've got the car," he said. "Dick Green was probably the best second baseman I ever played with. In 1974, he made probably six or seven plays during the World Series that would've been plays of the week now."

The event was attended by 175 people, who listened to not only Fingers speak, but also former U.S. Sen. George McGovern.

"Rollie has a much better win-loss record than I do," McGovern said.

McGovern talked about why he never played athletics. He said his dad steered him away from sports.

“Each time I said I was going to go out for football or something, my dad said, ‘Why not go out for debate’ or something,” he said. “Then, in the Army, I ran 25 miles and I always thought I missed out on athletics.”