

A's Daily News Clips; Saturday, February 26, 2011

Rehabbing shortstop Cliff Pennington told not to dive for balls

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/26/11

PHOENIX -- The A's allowed Cliff Pennington to take the field Friday with one simple instruction: No diving for balls.

Could there be more of a mixed message to send a major league shortstop?

That's where things stand as Pennington makes his way back from offseason surgery to his left (non-throwing) shoulder.

To this point, he's on target to be ready for opening day April 1. But the A's are taking every precaution with him.

Pennington is on board with that philosophy.

"At this stage, you're not laying out for a lot of balls anyway," he said. "You're just trying to get your feet under you."

Just one ball came Pennington's way in Friday's intrasquad game, a soft bouncer off the bat of Conor Jackson on which Pennington ranged right and made an off-balance throw to first base.

The switch-hitter didn't bat, as hitting from the right side still bothers his shoulder. He took soft swings from the right side during batting practice.

"That's the last test," Pennington said.

His health is crucial, because his backup, Adam Rosales, is expected to miss all of April with a foot injury. The A's are trying to identify another backup middle infielder, with Steve Tolleson, Eric Sogard and Andy LaRoche appearing to be the top candidates.

Manager Bob Geren has said Pennington will be held out of the first week of exhibition games. The A's open their Cactus League schedule Sunday against the Chicago Cubs.

Coco Crisp had some fun with teammate Dallas Braden, who took the mound to start the intrasquad game. Crisp stepped to the plate wearing an "A-Rod" name patch taped to his back.

It was a joking reference to Braden's infamous "Get Off My Mound" episode with the New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez last season.

Braden noticed the name patch and threw the game's first pitch about 15 feet behind Crisp, drawing a smile from the hitter.

"I like Alex Rodriguez," Crisp said. "Nothing against him. Dallas is my teammate. Just spring training fun."

After the game, Braden and fellow pitchers Andrew Bailey, Craig Breslow and Brian Fuentes entertained teammates by flying remote-control airplanes all around Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Braden quickly lost control of his plane, as it sailed out of the stadium and crashed on the roof. Bailey retrieved his after losing it over the outfield wall, and Fuentes nearly took out half of the pitching staff when his plane buzzed low along the first-base line.

The A's last three first-round draft picks -- outfielder Michael Choice, shortstop Grant Green and second baseman Jemile Weeks -- all played in the intrasquad game, as did fellow top prospects Chris Carter and Michael Taylor. But it was catcher Max Stassi -- another marquee name drafted in 2009 -- who provided the highlight. He ripped a homer off Guillermo Moscoso that cleared the left field wall and sailed over the rocky slope that sits well behind the wall. Stassi, who turns 20 on March 15, is the youngest player in camp for the second straight year. "... Fifth-starter candidate Brandon McCarthy retired all five batters he faced, ringing up David DeJesus and Taylor looking. "... Catcher Josh Donaldson took a foul tip off his knee, but Geren said he believed Donaldson suffered only a bruise.

Geren targeted March 7 as the day outfielder Ryan Sweeney (right knee) could make his exhibition debut. "... Geren said Hideki Matsui will make his debut Monday against the Los Angeles Angels, the team with which he spent last season. ... Right-hander Rich Harden (right side injury) could resume throwing as early as Sunday.

Chance for young A's to introduce themselves

By Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer, 2/26/11

This is the time of year when some of the A's lower-level prospects make their first appearances on the big-league scene, and sometimes it has been in the works for some time, as in the case of 2010 top draft pick **Michael Choice**.

Sometimes, it's a late decision: Double-A shortstop **Josh Horton**, a 25-year-old who played at the University of North Carolina, was the last man added as a nonroster invite, in large part because of the A's unsettled backup infield spot.

"It was kind of crazy getting the call, but it was nice crazy," said Horton.

He's a longshot to win a job out of camp, but Horton is considered the best defensive shortstop among the group the A's are looking at, and he knows that if nothing else, this is a good chance to make sure the big-league coaching staff knows what he can do, and that includes playing second and third.

Manager **Bob Geren** said that Horton might be a little ahead of most of the players in camp when it comes to swinging the bat because he played three weeks of winter ball in Mexico, an experience that Horton called "really enjoyable, and hopefully some of those hits are left in there." He batted .459 for Obregon.

Choice hit a ringing two-run single in the first intrasquad game, and Geren called the 21-year-old "an impressive young man. He hit .284 with seven homers and 26 RBIs in 27 games at short-season Vancouver last season, and he hit .333 in five postseason games for Vancouver and Class-A Kane County.

"I just want to continue to get better," he said.

Briefly: According to Geren, **Rich Harden** (lat stiffness) and **Michael Wuertz** (shoulder tendinitis) could be cleared to resume throwing Sunday or Monday. ... Geren said **Dallas Braden** and **Brandon McCarthy** were in fine form Friday, and McCarthy was clocked at 94 mph. Braden threw his first pitch to **Coco Crisp** behind Crisp's head (by 10 feet, Geren said) because Crisp jokingly wore an "**Alex Rodriguez**" name patch. "True story," Braden said. ... Geren said Ryan Sweeney, who had patella surgery in July, will not play the outfield the first week of games. ... Catcher **Josh Donaldson** was hit hard on the shin guard by a foul tip Friday and did not return. Geren said he'll know more today, but he expects it's a deep bruise. ... Another catcher, **Max Stassi**, homered off **Guillermo Moscoso** during the intrasquad game.

The Drumbeat: Projections Indicate A's Improvement

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer, 2/25/11

A few links for a cold, wet Friday...

Let's start with the positives. The Wall Street Journal analyzed each team's [offseason moves](#) and concluded the Oakland A's tied Washington for fourth best, improving by 3.8 wins, trailing only Baltimore, Milwaukee and St. Louis (not counting the Adam Wainwright loss).

The latest Baseball Prospectus [projections](#) (subscription required) show the A's with 83 wins, two game back of the Rangers and five ahead of the Angels, and a 39.5 percent chance of making the playoffs. The projections have a standard deviation of between six and seven games.

On the negative side, Baseball America demoted Chris Carter from 28th to 91st on its list of [the 100 top prospects](#) and used him as an example of a high-risk right-handed first baseman. (Of course, he could end up as an outfielder or DH). Shortstop Grant Green was the only other A's prospect listed, at No. 63. For Michael Taylor, 29th last year, unranked this year, the good news is that [Don Mattingly helped him](#) take a hitch out of his swing, according to scout.com.

Endangered history: The [Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society](#) is in danger of closing as the people who remember Connie Mack's white elephants [pass away](#) (tip to [AN](#).) A donation or purchase (they sell those [cool 'A' caps](#)) would be welcome. I joined, hey; time to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 4-2 series victory over John McGraw's dratted New York Giants.

You don't need three guesses: [Which owner](#) is not only frustrated by his team's stadium situation, but has problems with his team's spring training stadium situation? Meantime, in the wake of Hank Steinbrenner's hint about contraction, Fox Sports' Ken Rosenthal has [joined the chorus](#) of those who want MLB to approve a San Jose move.

Taylor eager to put 'miserable' year behind him

Touted A's prospect hoping fusion of fun, ability leads to Majors

By Jane Lee, MLB.com, 2/25/2011

PHOENIX -- Multiple questions have been raised regarding Michael Taylor's inconsistent 2010 season.

While embarking on his own search for those very answers, Taylor failed to find all of them -- just the one that mattered.

"I would say the biggest reason why it was a difficult year is because I didn't enjoy myself," he conceded.

Rather, Taylor took to the daily grind that is the regular season without so much as reminding himself that fun is supposed to be synonymous with baseball. He never pouted, but "every person in the world could have told you I wanted to do better."

"I'm kind of a light-hearted guy, pretty jovial, and I think last year was really the first time ever in my career where it got to the point where I was thinking more about what I needed to do to get to the big leagues instead of just trying to enjoy the game," Taylor said. "It ended up making me kinda miserable."

Things didn't necessarily start out that way, though. Following big league camp with the A's, Taylor migrated to Triple-A Sacramento and tallied three consecutive two-hit games to begin the season.

"I felt great," he said. "There I was thinking, 'I'm going to be here for a month, not even.'"

That month surpassed, and Taylor was still a River Cat -- a struggling one, at that. Following his 6-for-12 start, he dropped into an 8-for-47 (.170) slump over his next 13 games and was batting just .232 overall when he was placed on the disabled list May 14 with a strained left calf.

This wasn't the Taylor that A's fans had been promised just months before, when Oakland brought him in via a Minor League swap with Toronto in exchange for highly touted prospect Brett Wallace. That Taylor, the towering 6-foot-5 strong and athletic right fielder, boasted plenty of raw power. He paced Philadelphia's farm system in batting average in both 2008 (.346) and '09 (.320) and ranked 29th on Baseball America's Top 100 Prospects List prior to the start of last season.

Looking to prove his worth in a different city, Taylor set out to climb toward those numbers again when he was reinstated from the DL on May 29. But even then, he admittedly "never really felt great," despite spending countless extra hours in the video room and with hitting coach Brian McArn.

"There was so much pressure for him at the start of the season," said A's director of player personnel Keith Lieppman. "It's easy to get caught up in all that. There were certain times when I knew he was frustrated. But the fact that he kept working, kept searching for answers and was open to so many ideas from different people, it shows the type of player he is. All of those obstacles, he became better because of it."

The numbers showed, in part because of a conscious change in his bat path. He hit .286 over his final 94 games, including a torrid July that saw him compile a .324 average with two homers and 24 RBIs. August proved more difficult, as evidenced by a .238 clip, but Taylor managed to go 16-for-39 (.410) over his final 11 regular-season games to finish the year at .272 with six home runs and 78 RBIs.

The latter marks represented career lows, as did his .392 slugging percentage and .348 on-base percentage. Taylor was left off Oakland's list of September callups, ultimately separated from the promoted Chris Carter, with whom he had come to be mentioned in the same breath.

"We're both big black guys who hit homers in the Minor Leagues," Taylor said, smiling. "It makes sense people talk about us like we're one person. It seems like I've been grouped with someone my whole career, at every level. It's difficult because we're different people, we're different players. People expected us to make our debuts together, but things work out the way they're supposed to."

It took until the Arizona Fall League for Taylor to reach that conclusion. For it was there, only after he put aside his up-and-down season in Sacramento, where he "had a lot of fun."

"I realized how much I can enjoy my days, and then how good I can be because of that," Taylor said. "I wanted to make it to the big leagues last year, and I still do. But if I don't, I'm definitely not going to be miserable. That's for sure. That's never going to happen again. That experience was clutch for me."

"In hindsight, to be honest with you, I was actually pretty proud of the year I had because of how difficult it was. My previous two seasons were relatively easy."

Taylor's path to The Show is still anything but that. Back at big league camp with the A's, he's staring down an outfield crunch. Coco Crisp, David DeJesus, Josh Willingham, Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson, barring any health issues, are all expected to grace the Opening Day roster. Not even Carter appears primed for a spot, leaving Taylor's status pretty self-explanatory.

"I know I'll be starting the year at Triple-A," he said. "The A's are trying to win the division, and they improved this winter the way they thought they could do that. Hopefully, Chris and I put up the season and the type of numbers in Triple-A that make it difficult for them to make those same moves next year."

"I'm going to be happy this year. I don't care where I'm at. Who knows? I might not be playing baseball next year. If you think about it like that, you come out and enjoy every day. No regrets, and just have fun playing."

In the meantime, Taylor is expected to see plenty of at-bats this spring while rotating around the outfield. He'll continue to draw stares from those patiently watching for home runs, and he'll likely remind them that it's probably not worth the wait.

"The crazy thing about it is I've never thought of myself that way, as this big, home run power hitter," Taylor said. "One year, I hit 15 homers, which I don't necessarily consider a ton. I've always been a guy who could hit for average and, because I was doing well, could hit a few homers. That's the way I've always been."

Major League: Day 11: Intersquad roundup

Jane Lee, MLB.com, 2/25/11 3:02 PM

Postgame tidbits: **Dallas Braden**, who was greeted by leadoff hitter **Coco Crisp** donning an A-Rod patch on the back of his uniform, looked to be in midseason form, Geren said. Braden threw 20 pitches and allowed just one hit. ... Catcher **Max Stassi** homered off **Guillermo Moscoso**, while fellow catcher **Josh Donaldson** didn't fare so well in the game, taking a foul ball to his knee. Geren didn't know the extent of the injury but said it's likely a deep bruise. ... Prospect **Sean Doolittle**, who has been sidelined by a left knee injury the past two years, collected his first hit of the spring, a clean single off **Jerry Blevins**. ... Also of note, Geren said after the game that he expects **Rich Harden** to begin throwing again Sunday or Monday.

So far, spring has been a ball for A's Suzuki

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Oakland A's catcher Kurt Suzuki says he is in the best shape of his career, going through a rigorous training regimen.

Part of the training involves taking a super-size ball and draping himself over it. He becomes a human pretzel, twisting and stretching his arms, hips and legs to gain more flexibility. It also helps with endurance.

"I've been working with it for about three months now and I have a good idea of what I'm doing," Suzuki said. "The exercises make me feel good, stretch me out, keep me loose and quick. ... I feel as good now as I've ever felt. You have to be able to bounce back the next day. Because of the position I play, I need to be flexible. It helps with everything, hitting, throwing."

Suzuki said he is far from where he wants to be as an overall player.

"That's the big part," he said. "You need to keep evolving, learning, the more seasons you get under your belt. You have to keep yourself fresh, be at as high of a level as you can. You never want to reach the point where you say, 'I've got it all down.'"

Oakland manager Bob Geren said that Suzuki might hit lower in the order this season, so he wouldn't feel as much pressure to produce offensively and due to the fact that the team acquired a few big run-producers, DH Hideki Matsui and outfielder Josh Willingham.

"I'm sure it's going to change," Suzuki said of the batting order. "He (Geren) asked me how I feel about it. I'll hit second through sixth, whatever best the lineup would be that day."

Suzuki also said he sees limitless potential in the A's young rotation of left-handers, Dallas Braden, Brett Anderson and Gio Gonzalez, and right-hander Trevor Cahill.

"They're so talented," Suzuki said. "I don't think they realize and other people realize how special they are. But they have to keep trying to get better. Who knows what they are capable of? I just want to do whatever I can to help them."

NOTES

Braden started the team's intrasquad game on Friday and the first batter to face him was: Alex Rodriguez? It was actually outfielder Coco Crisp, who had "A-Rod" taped across the back of his green uniform top.

Max Stassi became the second non-roster catcher in as many days to hit a monster home run. The team believes Stassi, who turns 20 on March 15, is a potential star in the making.

Navy Lt. Johnston Attempts To Catch On With A's

By Casey Tefertiller, Baseball America, 2/18/11

OAKLAND—After chasing Somali pirates and patrolling the Persian Gulf, Navy Lt. Jonathan Johnston headed for Palm Springs, Calif., to attend to unfinished business.

The 27-year-old catcher, a 2006 graduate of the Naval Academy, refuses to give up on his dream of playing in the big leagues. But first things first.

Johnston served the better part of the last three years in active duty with the Navy, so this offseason he participated in the California Winter League, a pay-to-play operation where most of his league-mates are hoping to catch a scout's eye.

"My scout, Craig Weissman, told me about the league," Johnston said. "Obviously, from not playing for a couple of years, I wasn't going to get into a major winter league, and this was the best opportunity to get ready for spring training . . . I'm feeling just like I did when I stopped playing."

Unlike his winter teammates, Johnston already has a pro contract. The Athletics selected him in the 42nd round of the 2007 draft and signed him the following February.

Originally, he intended to both play baseball and serve in the Navy reserves. After all, Johnston spent nearly two years on active duty before even signing with Oakland.

He made his pro debut in 2008, playing in 36 games for low Class A Kane County. But then the Navy called him back into active duty that June, putting his baseball career on hold.

For a time, Johnston served on the USS Curts, a frigate that protected vessels off the Somali coast. In one heated moment, he and his crew helped deflect a pirate attack on a Singaporean vessel in the Gulf of Aden.

Now, Johnston prepares for new battles in spring training camp. He knows that making one of Oakland's minor league clubs, most likely as backup catcher, will be no easy task.

Improving the odds, farm director Keith Lieppman liked what he saw of Johnston three seasons ago.

"The thing we noticed about him was that he had excellent tools," he said. "He ran well, threw well, had good skills behind the plate. He showed some power in batting practice.

"He didn't have much of an opportunity to develop, but we felt the tools were there."

Johnston grew up in Trenton, N.J., and was a non-prospect as a 160-pound high schooler. At Annapolis, he grew to 6 feet and about 200 pounds, and his skills grew with him.

A's ACORNS

- The A's expect catcher Ryan Ortiz to be ready to open the season after missing half of 2010 to shoulder surgery.
- Mike Henriques, Oakland's new minor league strength and conditioning coordinator, worked previously with the Padres and with the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers.