

A's News Clips, Tuesday, March 8, 2011

Oakland A's notebook: Reliever Joey Devine walks four of five Mariners he faces

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- For the second straight day, an A's pitcher coming back from elbow ligament reconstructive surgery hit a big rock in the road.

Reliever Joey Devine, who had allowed just one hit and two walks in three prior one-inning outings this spring, was less than divine Monday in his first try at pitching after just one day off.

Devine, who has not pitched since the 2008 season when he posted a 6-1 record with an 0.59 ERA in 42 outings, looked like a guy who has been off two years. He faced five Seattle Mariners and issued four walks, throwing 18 balls in 24 pitches before being yanked with one out in the fourth inning.

"I was off mechanically, I had no feeling out there," said the 27-year-old right-hander. "I was forcing the ball to home plate, whereas my previous three outings I was nice and easy and just delivering it."

Devine is vying for one of seven spots in the Oakland bullpen, but like Josh Outman, a fifth-starter candidate who struggled mightily Sunday, Devine learned that getting back in a groove after being out so long will be a process. The good news is that he felt good physically.

"It just shows that I still need to work on some mechanics," Devine said. "It's not a routine yet. I have to be able to throw on one day's rest and back-to-back in order to help this team win."

After pitching four times in Oakland's first 10 spring games, Devine hopes to take a couple days off to iron out his mechanical issues and let his body rest. But his goal is to be a workhorse out of the bullpen sooner than later, and he believes there is enough time left this spring to get to that point.

"I want to prove to the ballclub and prove to myself that I can pitch when called," he said. "When the season rolls around, I want to be the guy who can throw every day."

Hideki Matsui got his first hit in an A's uniform after starting spring training 0 for 8. It wasn't the prettiest hit -- an opposite-field pop-up down the left field line, but it did come against AL Cy Young Award winner Felix Hernandez. In his second at-bat against Hernandez, Matsui hit a rocket to center that was hauled in by Franklin Gutierrez.

"He hit the ball harder the time he didn't get a hit," said manager Bob Geren. He's a good hitter -- no worries."

The A's and Mariners had roughly 60 members of Japanese media on hand at Phoenix Municipal Stadium for the first spring meeting between Matsui and Ichiro Suzuki. Ichiro, as did Matsui, singled in three trips.

Relievers Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow, who have yet to pitch in a spring game, both threw simulated outings in hopes of making their first appearances Thursday. Both pitchers threw well, but Breslow's hamstring cramped up on him while he was doing conditioning work afterward.

Geren said Breslow would be re-evaluated today, but his status may be iffy for Thursday. He added that if Bailey has no ill effects from his Monday simulation he will pitch in a game Thursday.

Shortstop Cliff Pennington, still taking it easy after offseason surgery on his left shoulder, took right-handed swings against Breslow during the simulated outing. Pennington, a switch hitter, made his spring debut Sunday but batted only left-handed.

In an otherwise uneventful 6-3 loss to the Mariners, the A's did get five of their 10 hits off Hernandez, who was making his first appearance of the spring for Seattle. On Hernandez's second pitch in the first inning, David DeJesus hit a shot back through the box that narrowly missed the head of the Mariners ace.

"I thought we hit the ball pretty hard against the Cy Young Award winner," said Geren. "It was his first time out, but he went almost three innings. He was throwing the ball well, and we squared up quite a few balls."

Chin Music: A's face Felix Hernandez in his Cactus League debut

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/7/2011 10:27AM

Are the A's getting a preview of what's to come opening night? Felix Hernandez takes the mound today for his first start of the spring, and there's a great chance he'll also be pitching the April 1 opener at the Oakland Coliseum. Ichiro Suzuki is in Seattle's lineup today and Hideki Matsui is at DH for the A's, which is creating a buzz among the many Japanese reporters on hand.

The lineups:

A's

DeJesus CF
Jackson 1B
Matsui DH
Kouzmanoff 3B
Carter LF
Carson RF
Powell C
Tolleson 2B
Green SS

Moscoso RHP

Mariners

Ichiro RF
Figgins 3B
Gutierrez CF
Carp 1B
Wilson 2B
Ryan SS
Saunders LF
Gimenez C
Mangini DH

Hernandez RHP

—Things are a bit rocky for left-hander Josh Outman right now, and he doesn't hide that. He's allowed 11 hits, six walks and six earned runs in three outings (4 2/3 innings). It's not all that shocking that Outman is struggling after being sidelined since June 2009 by elbow surgery, but he's still frustrated.

"It sounds kind of stupid to say I felt good (against San Diego on Sunday), but physically my arm felt fine," Outman said. "Just mechanically, I'm not where I need to be and it's obvious by the performance. It's just when I get up to game speed, I'm not where I need to be with making pitches and throwing ball where I need to throw it. The result is not great. It's good that it's not the end of March yet. But at the same time, I feel like my command has kind of gone backward as the exertion level is going up."

—I considered Outman the front-runner for the No. 5 starter spot entering camp, and if he rights the ship I think he still is. But Bobby Cramer and Tyson Ross have sure looked good so far in their push for the job. A's manager Bob Geren has been impressed with Ross, saying the right-hander hit 95 mph seven times Sunday against the Brewers. And Brandon McCarthy remains in the mix as well. Rich Harden has yet to get back on the mound since suffering a side muscle injury, so his chances of being ready for the start of the season look remote.

—Daric Barton is day-to-day after bruising his right calf during a collision at first base yesterday. Barton jumped for a high throw from Kevin Kouzmanoff and got hit while in the air. "It should be minor," Barton said. "It's kind of like a charlie horse, a knot. Just some tightness. The runner hit me. It could have been his foot, knee, shin ... Whatever it was, he got me pretty good. He knocked my feet out from under me."

—Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow were scheduled to throw in a simulated game today, and if that goes well, manager Bob Geren said they'd pitch in their first exhibition Thursday.

—For what it's worth:

- *Outfielder Matt Carson is tied for second in the Cactus League with three doubles.
- *Coco Crisp is 7 for 15 (.467) through five games.
- *Mark Ellis is 5 for 12 (.417) in four games.
- *Conor Jackson is 0 for 14 through five games, but he's hit a few balls on the nose.
- *Michael Taylor is 1 for 13 since hitting a three-run homer last Monday.
- *Hideki Matsui is 0 for 8 through four games with four walks.

—I'm heading home for a few days, but Carl Steward is on the scene and will be providing your daily coverage in the paper and on the blog ...

Brian Fuentes: From a modest start to bold relief

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Take heart, young athletes, if your performance doesn't quite match up with your desire to succeed. For one of the best relief pitchers in baseball was cut from his high school team.

"I really wasn't that good a player," A's left-hander Brian Fuentes said. "Honestly, I wasn't that skillful."

Fuentes was a first baseman and an outfielder back then at Merced High, and getting left off the team stung.

"It was like the end of the world, getting cut from the team," Fuentes said. "I was really embarrassed. I'd never been cut from anything. It was a tough time, but I kind of rode it out. And I'm glad I stuck with it. I was raised not to be a quitter."

He decided to dedicate himself to pitching when he went back out for baseball as a senior, and he made the team, and, eventually, he found his calling: Fuentes is a four-time All-Star, and he has recorded the most saves by a left-hander in the major leagues since 2005.

It's not quite Michael Jordan getting cut from his junior high team, but it's in the discussion.

"I remember he was really disappointed," said Jason Guerrero, who has been a friend of Fuentes' since they were toddlers. "I felt bad for the guy, but he got his act together, he went back out there, and he did all right."

Fuentes had hit a growth spurt, for one thing. He zoomed from 5-foot-8 to 6-2 during his senior year and his first year at Merced College, and he started to throw hard. The only problem was that he didn't have control of his body - or his pitches.

"I was like a baby giraffe," he said. "I was trying to learn how to use my muscles. I could throw hard, but I had no idea where it was going."

Most coaches would welcome a hard-throwing lefty immediately, but Fuentes had to redshirt his first year of college.

"He was pretty raw," then-Merced pitching coach Derek Peterson said. "A tremendous arm, but a bit wild. He'd walk the bases loaded and strike out the side."

Wild man

Peterson said that Fuentes had so little control, he threw a ball that completely missed the batting cage while throwing batting practice. He was banned from throwing to the Merced hitters because he kept hitting them, Fuentes said.

He put it together, though, slowly but surely.

"We knew if he could harness all of that, he was going to be good," Peterson said.

It wasn't until summer ball, a game at St. Mary's, that the breakthrough really occurred. Peterson said Fuentes was hitting 93 mph and blowing batters away.

"Until then, no one had talked about drafting him," Peterson said. "No four-year colleges were calling. And Brian is so modest, I'm not even sure he realized what he did that day, but all of a sudden, the phone started ringing."

He was still not a polished product, however. Drafted by the Mariners in 1995, he was mostly a starter the first five years in the minors, with unspectacular results. Near the end of the 2000 season, though, some of Seattle's minor-league coaches, including former Cal player Bryan Price, worked with Fuentes on dropping down to the side.

Bingo. Fuentes worked on it only briefly before using it in a game, and that was his ticket to the big leagues.

"I ran with it," he said. "I took to it right away."

Fuentes' delivery is, as he said, "really unorthodox. I know it looks horrible."

'Deceptive'

He has a pause in his motion, and the ball comes at hitters from an unusual angle.

"He's deceptive," A's first baseman Daric Barton said. "I always think it's coming inside, and he paints it away - it just seems to disappear. It's an awkward at-bat. His arm slot, the delivery, the whole thing is weird."

Fuentes was toughened up by pitching in Colorado after being traded there from Seattle. The Rockies' hitter-friendly ballpark made him ready for anything ("That was a great opportunity to cut my teeth," he said), and so did bouncing back and forth between closing and setting up. He'd had to do some persuading just to get a look as a closer - most teams see a left-hander and peg him for a specialist.

"When I went to the bullpen, they said, 'You want to close? You can't close. You're a lefty sidearm guy,'" Fuentes said. "I've always been the one to try to debunk the myth of the left-handed specialist."

Fuentes won't close in Oakland; that's Andrew Bailey's job. But he'll get save opportunities and he'll do plenty of setup work in what might be the league's best bullpen.

Favorite son

His friends in Merced are thrilled - they believe there will be a strong contingent from the area traveling to see Fuentes pitch on a regular basis. He's a favorite son of the town; his father, David, is a retired Merced police officer, everyone knows his family, and Fuentes still lives there in the offseason.

He does a lot of unpublicized work in and around Merced, and he helps out the program at Merced College. In return, the town loves him for coming back, for staying in Merced with his wife and four children.

"Most guys who have made it are living in Arizona or someplace, not Merced," Merced College head coach Chris Pedretti said. "But Brian built a home here. He said this is where he wants to be. It's awesome for all of us, he helps out so much. He's so nice, he's so humble, you'd never know he's made millions of dollars."

"It's nice to have positive things to give back, to help change the perception of where I'm from," Fuentes said. "It bugs me when people talk badly about my town. There's a new hospital, there's the UC, it's a very resilient place that is bouncing back."

Very much like Fuentes, who has made a career of getting past every obstacle.

"Brian has never quit on anything," Peterson said. "He's just found a way to keep finding a way, and he's doing it really well. It's been amazing to watch."

Joey Devine walks 4 of 5 batters

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Joey Devine's performance on Monday seemed almost comical, but for someone who spent nearly two years recuperating from Tommy John surgery, he wasn't laughing it off.

Five batters, four walks, one puzzled A's reliever.

"The old Joey before surgery, I would've ... let it upset me for the rest of spring training because it's an embarrassment," Devine said. "But I'm not going to let it beat me up. There are a lot of things more important in life than four walks."

Devine cited misaligned mechanics.

On the bright side, addressing a mechanical concern is a lot better than addressing a health concern. Devine missed two seasons because of the elbow injury.

In his first three spring training outings, Devine tossed three scoreless innings. Monday's appearance, in a 6-3 loss to Seattle, was his first on one day's rest. Eight of his first nine pitches were balls, and he repeatedly missed inside and made batters jump out of the way.

Once pitching coach **Ron Romanick** came to the mound, Devine began missing badly outside.

Briefly: One day after sustaining a bruised right calf, **Daric Barton** limped through the clubhouse but said it's not serious. ... **Josh Outman**, a leading candidate for the final rotation spot, met with Romanick to discuss mechanics one day after getting rocked by the Padres. ... Reliever **Andrew Bailey** will make his Cactus League debut Thursday. ... **Cliff Pennington**, who's somewhat tentative swinging right-handed after left shoulder surgery, took a few swings at pitches on the side and said he felt fine.

Cactus League recap

Score: Mariners 6, A's 3

Notable: The third basemen drove in all of Oakland's runs - Kevin Kouzmanoff with an RBI single in the third (off Felix Hernandez, who was making his Cactus League debut) and Andy LaRoche with a two-run homer in the ninth. ... Hideki Matsui got his first hit, a bloop first-inning single to left, after opening 0-for-8. Both Matsui and countryman Ichiro Suzuki were 1-for-3. ... Cuban defector Yadel Marti, 31, who had been slowed with a blister issue, threw two scoreless innings, and manager Bob Geren raved about his control.

Today's game: Padres (Dustin Moseley) vs. A's (Trevor Cahill), 12:05 p.m.

Drumbeat: It's Hideki Matsui vs. Ichiro Suzuki . . . oh, also A's-Mariners

John Shea reporting from Phoenix Muni Stadium, where it'll be standing room only in the press box today with the Hideki Matsui-Ichiro Suzuki show . . . 3/7/2011 9:57AM

Daric Barton hadn't been slated to be in today's lineup, but he wouldn't have played anyway. He limped around the clubhouse this morning and is 50-50 for tomorrow, Bob Geren said. His right calf is hurting after his collision at first base yesterday.

Barton said it's a charlie horse sensation and told Geren he had a "jammed calf." Geren said it was a contusion. Whatever it is, Barton said it's not serious.

"Should be minor," he said. "Just some tightness."

Another follow-up on yesterday: the Josh Outman struggles. The candidate for the final rotation spot got hit hard by the Padres and met with pitching coach Ron Rommanick this morning to discuss mechanics and other issues.

"We'll try to hammer it out as much as we can until my next start," Outman said. "Mechanically, I'm not where I need to be, and it's obvious by the performances."

Elsewhere in A's camp, relievers Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow are facing hitters. With no setbacks, each would make his Cactus League debut Thursday. One of the hitters will be Cliff Pennington, who's somewhat tentative swinging right-handed after left shoulder surgery. He'll try to swing righty.

Ichiro will be in right field today. Matsui will be the DH and isn't slated to play the outfield at all in spring training games. The A's are being protective of his knees, but Matsui still is working in the outfield with coach Tye Waller.

Here's the lineup: CF DeJesus, 1B Jackson, DH Matsui, 3B Kouzmanoff, LF Carter, RF Carson, C Powell, 2B Tolleson, SS Green. Moscoso is pitching.

The Jack Cust-less Mariners: RF Suzuki, 3B Figgins, CF Gutierrez, 1B Carp, 2B Wilson, SS Ryan, LF Saunders, C Gimenez, DH Mangini. King Felix on the hill.

Marked franchise needs early success

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle, 3/8/2011

The year was 1981, Billy Martin's second season as the A's manager, and a sizzling start made them the biggest story in sports. They won their first 11 games, stood at 17-1 in the last week of April and made the cover of Sports Illustrated with their "Five Aces" starting rotation.

The Coliseum was a happening place back then. Aside from the expected near-sellouts for the Yankees and Red Sox, the A's drew crowds of 32,000 or better for the Blue Jays, Orioles, Rangers, White Sox and Royals. It was a different ballpark from the one we see now, with gorgeous views of the distant Oakland hills, but this was just two years removed from a season in which a six-game April homestand drew 12,683 fans total — including a lamentable 653 one night against Seattle.

The '81 season comes to mind because this year's Oakland team, as promising as it might be, is badly in need of a quick start.

The A's get no boost of confidence from their co-owner, Lew Wolff, who disparages the Coliseum at every turn and is determined to swing his specialty — a real-estate deal — in San Jose.

If you can believe this, the man still hasn't come to his senses. In a recent interview with Bloomberg News, he called out Giants management — team President Larry Baer in particular — for being “so adamant that we will hurt their team by being 50 miles away. It's so ridiculous to me. This is really a shovel-ready project that is being stopped by a disagreement with the Giants.”

Listen, Wolff might have the right idea. San Jose sounds like a spectacular venue for the resurrection of the A's franchise. But how many years would pass before they actually broke ground, free of the territorialrights restriction? Has it ever occurred to Wolff that there's a team playing in Oakland right now, and that with some clever marketing, a few thousand on-the-fence fans might get hooked?

Lesson from S.F.

There hasn't been a more destitute big-league setting than Candlestick Park, but in the hands of manager Roger Craig, some enthusiastic players and marketing whiz Pat Gallagher, the Giants' make-it-work philosophy created a delightful sort of cult following in the late 1980s and early '90s.

As much as I like the A's chances in the American League West, I have a terrible feeling that the Coliseum's gloomy atmosphere — cultivated and groomed by Wolff as he surveys the barren landscape — could bring the team down. Nobody likes to play in a near-empty stadium. There are nights when the A's might as well be in Wyoming, or Prague, for all the support they're getting.

Meanwhile, as Major League Baseball prepares for initial talks on a new collective bargaining agreement, there is talk of wiping Oakland off the map. Nobody's entirely happy with a setup that places six teams in one division (the NL Central) and four teams in another (the AL West), or creates such inherent unfairness in the interleague schedules (the Cubs play the Yankees and Boston, while the Cardinals draw Baltimore and Toronto).

During his time on the set of ESPN's “Baseball Tonight,” Buck Showalter (now the Orioles' manager) came up with a realignment plan that has gained momentum: Wipe out two teams, so the total is 28. Each team would play six games against the 27 opponents — three at home, three on the road — working out to a 162-game schedule. Four divisions in all, with seven teams each.

The pitfalls are obvious, including the total disintegration of league distinctions and the absence of geographic rivalries.

Feel free to call it a terrible idea, and it hardly has universal support. The point is that it's being discussed and that the two teams whose futures are in question are the A's and Rays.

According to a recent New York Daily News report, it would cost each of the 28 teams \$25 million in a collective process to buy out Oakland and Tampa Bay.

Possible steps

Baseball has the right to propose contraction in that manner, and to appease the union over the loss of jobs, rosters could expand from 25 players to 27, along with a special draft (with concessions to high-priced veterans) for players who are suddenly without a team.

Go ahead, call it speculation well detached from reality. Just know that a high-profile topic among the owners goes something like, “How can we get rid of Oakland?” In the words of one executive who spoke to the Daily News, “How much longer can you expect all the other teams to subsidize two teams, in futile situations, with revenue sharing to keep them afloat?”

The message from here: Start fast, A's. Shut down the opposition just as Mike Norris, Steve McCatty, Rick Langford and Matt Keough did 30 years ago.

Make some headlines and get people interested. Turn your homestands into weeklong festivals. Nothing forestalls a grim future like living in the present.

Angels fans to bring Matsuiland north

Gwen Knapp, San Francisco Chronicle, 3/8/2011

PHOENIX — First came an inflatable Godzilla doll in an A's No. 55 uniform. Now a production inspired by Mickey Mouse's crew has greeted Hideki Matsui.

Matsuiland came to the A's spring-training park over the weekend, and it will move to Oakland's right field on April 1. It's a mobile nation-state defined primarily by a huge sign, the creation of fans to welcome Hideki Matsui to the Angels last season.

Claude Bilodeau, a fan from Downey, and his two brothers, Denis and Rock, crafted the original Matsuiland with both Anaheim's Disneyland and the Dodgers' Mannywood as inspirations. The slugger made it simpler to continue the brief Matsuiland legacy by moving onto one of the two cities in the majors that have "land" at the end of their names. (Matsui says he grew up as an A's fan, so Oakland apparently had that edge on Cleveland.) The original sign was spelled out in Angels red and had a halo hovering over the first "a." The Bilodeaus met Matsui on the Angels' field near the end of last season and arranged to hand over their Angels model to the Matsui baseball museum in Nomi City, Japan, Claude Bilodeau said.

The 2011 version has green and gold letters in the A's classic font.

"We're hoping that the A's fans embrace him," said Bilodeau, toting the 10 letters that make up the new sign and wearing a green T-shirt with "Matsuiland" written on the front. He has admired Matsui from afar for years, as he transitioned from a Japanese superstar to the 2009 World Series MVP for a Yankees team loaded with bigger names.

The denizens of Oakland's right-field bleachers will take custody of the sign (or signs) at the season opener. Ross Retzler, a regular in the section, found Bilodeau through Facebook, and they arranged a meeting.

"One of the things that makes it so cool is that Matsui being a left-handed hitter, most of his home runs will reach where we're sitting," Retzler said.

Matsui collects first hit with A's in loss

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Seattle ace Felix Hernandez christened his Cactus League season with a one-run performance against the A's on Monday, tallying two-plus innings of work in an eventual 6-3 Seattle victory at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

In 2 2/3 innings, Hernandez offered up a walk and five hits, the last of which came in the form of an RBI single from Kevin Kouzmanoff in the third. The 2010 American League Cy Young Award winner also fanned five.

"It was fun," Hernandez said. "It's been awhile since I pitched in a big league game. I felt pretty good, throwing a lot of strikes, I was down in the zone. My breaking ball was good, too. I felt pretty good."

His efforts were aided by an early offensive output from his teammates, who tagged Oakland starter Guillermo Moscoso for two runs -- one earned -- in the third inning. Michael Saunders led off the frame and reached second on a two-base fielding error by A's center fielder David DeJesus. The Mariners' left fielder scored on an RBI double from Chris Gimenez, who ultimately crossed home plate on a run-scoring base hit off the bat of Ichiro Suzuki.

Gimenez got the start behind the plate today after Adam Moore was scratched in the morning due to illness. Miguel Olivo, the Mariners' starting catcher, strained his groin muscle on Saturday and has been sidelined since.

Seattle added to its lead in the fourth when a struggling Joey Devine surrendered four walks in five batters faced. The A's reliever, making his way back to the bullpen following almost two years of Tommy John rehab, lasted just one-third of an inning because of command issues. He walked in a run and was relieved by Gabe DeHoyos, who allowed an inherited runner to score via a wild pitch.

The Mariners' final two runs came in the fifth off Oakland's Fautino De Los Santos, who boarded leadoff hitter Chone Figgins with a walk. Franklin Gutierrez moved Figgins to third with a base hit and advanced to second on a throwing error by DeJesus. A Jack Wilson single then brought Figgins home, and an RBI fielder's choice from Brendan Ryan gave Seattle its sixth run of the day.

Andy LaRoche capped the scoring with a two-run homer to center field with two outs in the bottom of the ninth. The blast, off righty Jose Flores, also plated Josh Donaldson, who had doubled in the previous at-bat.

In addition to Hernandez's effort, Mariners top pitching prospect Michael Pineda followed up last week's perfect two-inning debut with another two scoreless innings. The Seattle righty allowed just one hit while walking two and striking out one. For the A's, designated hitter Hideki Matsui collected his first hit in green and gold -- a bloop single off Hernandez in the first inning. Matsui is 1-for-11 with four walks in five games this spring.

Up Next for Mariners: Jason Vargas makes his first Cactus League start, and is scheduled for three innings as the Mariners host the Giants in a 12:05 p.m. PT game at Peoria Stadium on Tuesday. Vargas pitched two innings of a simulated game on Friday, as he's being brought along slowly this spring after throwing a career-high 192 2/3 innings last year. Seattle also has a "B" game against the Giants at 10 a.m. PT, with Luke French starting, as the Mariners look to get in extra work for their 33 healthy pitchers in camp.

Up Next for A's: Righty Trevor Cahill makes his third Cactus League start against the visiting Padres, beginning at 12:05 p.m. PT on Tuesday at Phoenix Municipal Stadium. Cahill is looking to improve on his first two outings, in which he allowed six runs, nine hits and two walks in a combined 2 2/3 innings. The 23-year-old right-hander is scheduled for four innings.

A's Devine struggles in fourth spring outing

Pitching on one day's rest not yet 'routine' for rehabbing righty

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Joey Devine's fourth spring outing was rather messy. The reason, pretty clear.

"I was just off mechanically," he said. "I had no feeling out there. I couldn't really feel my release point. I couldn't feel myself centered over the mound. It was just different."

The right-handed reliever, pitching on one day's rest for the first time in more than two years, walked four of five Seattle batters faced, en route to allowing two runs in just one-third of an inning. It followed three consecutive shutout appearances for the comeback hopeful, who is looking to find a way back into the A's bullpen following nearly two years of Tommy John rehab.

This is no time to fret, though. The hard-throwing Devine would much rather spend his spring fine-tuning mechanics than finding health.

"Those things can be ironed out," he said. "Health takes a little time."

Devine's day began with a "wildly effective" warmup session in the bullpen, where he lost any sense of rhythm when the Mariners made a pitching change in the bottom of the third inning. He sat for a few moments and, once back up in the 'pen, never found comfort.

When he entered the game in the fourth, Devine greatly struggled to stay on top of the ball and was subsequently forcing it to home plate, as opposed to his previous outings, when "it was nice and easy." His body was working too fast, his arm unable to keep up, as opposed to an in-sync motion.

Pitching coach Ron Romanick took notice and made a visit to the mound, encouraging Devine to slow everything down.

"I tried to," Devine said, "but I was throwing the ball on the other side of the batter's box when I did. There was no happy medium. It was bad."

The 27-year-old Devine said he'd prefer to get two days of rest before his next outing before continuing on an every-other-day schedule. During that time, he'll watch video and work with mechanic guru Romanick.

"This was really the first test of throwing on a day's rest since the surgery, and it shows that I still need to work on some mechanics," he said. "It's not routine yet."

Devine, sporting a level-headed outlook, is already looking forward to his next outing, as he realizes the only way he's going to get past Monday's funk is to get back on the hill. Much of that mindset comes from the multiple months of grueling and frustrating rehab work, which has changed his perspective on the game.

"Yes, it upsets me, but I'm not going to let it linger," he said. "I'm going to get to the bottom of it, iron it out and take something positive into next outing."

"The more I throw, the better it will be -- no matter if I have another outing like that or not. It's nice to get those kind of outings out of the way."

Devine doesn't mind his spring workload -- he's thrown in four of the club's 10 games -- and is prepared to watch it increase, on pace with his teammates, as camp continues.

"I want to be able to prove to the ballclub and to myself that I can pitch when called," he said. "When the season rolls, I want to be the guy who can throw every day."

Bailey and Breslow may debut Thursday

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Thursday's meeting with the Royals could mark the spring debuts of relievers Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow, depending on how each feels in the coming days following Monday's simulated game.

According to manager Bob Geren, Bailey looked "sharp" in his outing. He said the same of Breslow, who developed a hamstring cramp and, thus, may be no sure thing for Thursday's contest should it become an ongoing issue.

Geren wouldn't deem either pitcher certain for Thursday, but noted that the current plan is to have them each go one inning "if they come in tomorrow and the next day feeling good."

The A's have been taking it slow with the relief duo, as Bailey is coming off minor elbow surgery and Breslow is making his way back from a team-leading 75 appearances last year.

"Both looked awesome," said Cliff Pennington, who faced each on Monday. "We all know they're good pitchers, and it's good to see them in live action again, even if it wasn't a real game."

Barton likely back in two more days

PHOENIX -- Daric Barton's right calf contusion has him doubtful for Tuesday's scheduled start against the visiting Padres, but manager Bob Geren said the A's first baseman should be back in action in another two days.

Barton was hurt when he collided with San Diego's Logan Forsythe following a high throw from Kevin Kouzmanoff in the fourth inning of Sunday's split-squad game in Peoria. He was immediately replaced in the game by Andy LaRoche and deemed day-to-day.

The A's don't consider Barton's injury to be of the serious nature, but they're taking a cautious approach with each of their players this year after three consecutive seasons of at least 23 disabled list stints.

In Barton's stead, Geren has options in LaRoche, Conor Jackson and Chris Carter.

Worth noting

Rich Harden (lat muscle) began his second cycle of two days of throwing and one off on Monday. Pitching coach Ron Romanick would like to see him go through three cycles before having him throw off the mound again. Only 20 days remain in camp, so it appears unlikely that Harden will be ready by the start of the season. ... Ryan Sweeney is scheduled to make his spring debut in Wednesday's road contest against the Rangers in Surprise, Ariz. He'll play all over the outfield this spring, Geren said. ... Kevin Kouzmanoff collected two hits in Monday's game and is now batting .500 with six RBIs in five contests this spring.

Major Lee-ague: Mariners vs. A's: Pregame notes

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 3/7/2011 9:15AM

Good morning from Phoenix Muni. Here are a few quick updates:

- **Daric Barton** is still limping around after his collision yesterday and won't play today. It was a scheduled day off for him anyway, and he's still being considered day-to-day.
- **Rich Harden** will begin his second cycle of two days of throwing and one off. Pitching coach **Ron Romanick** would like to see him go through three cycles before having him throw off the mound again. There's only 20 days left of camp, so it's looking more and more likely that he won't be ready by the start of the season.
- **Andrew Bailey** and **Craig Breslow** will face hitters for a second time and, if all goes well, they'll both see their first Cactus League action on Thursday. Among the hitters slated to face them is **Cliff Pennington**, who will test out his right-

handed swing. Pennington was strictly instructed to only swing from the left side in his debut Sunday because his surgically-repaired left shoulder is still adjusting to the right-handed motion.

- **Ryan Sweeney** is scheduled to make his debut in Wednesday's road contest against the Rangers in Surprise. He'll play all over the outfield this spring, Geren said.

And your starting lineups for today's contest, scheduled to begin at 12:05 p.m. PT:

OAKLAND

DeJesus CF

Jackson 1B

Matsui DH

Kouzmanoff 3B

Carter LF

Carson RF

Powell C

Tolleson 2B

Green SS

Moscoso P

Also scheduled to pitch: Gabe DeHoyos, Fautino De Los Santos, Joey Devine, Willie Eyre, Yadel Marti, Brad Ziegler

SEATTLE

Suzuki RF

Figgins 3B

Gutierrez CF

Carp 1B

Wilson 2B

Ryan SS

Saunders LF

Gimenez C

Mangini DH

Hernandez P

Ten Questions with Grant Green

By Robert Emrich / Special to MLB.com

In Grant Green's case, you can always go home again.

Green was drafted 13th overall by Oakland in 2009 out of the University of Southern California, 30 miles from where he played high school ball. And the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum won't require cross-country flights from the West Coast for friends and family to see him play.

Green's first full professional season was an unqualified success. Playing for Class A Advanced Stockton, the 6-foot-3 shortstop batted .318 with 20 homers and 87 RBIs, finishing third in the California League with 39 doubles. After the Ports were eliminated from the playoffs, Green was promoted to Double-A Midland, where he homered in his first postseason at-bat and went deep again in the Texas League Championship Series.

The 23-year-old is slated to begin 2011 back with Midland but was invited to big league camp. There, he's gotten to meet veterans like 2009 World Series MVP Hideki Matsui as well as Rich Harden. Green recently chatted with MiLB.com.

MiLB.com: How happy were you with your 2010 season? Was there anything you were worried about heading into the year?

Grant Green: It was something that I was stoked about. You can't complain about what ended up happening. It was good being in the California League because I got to see my family a lot. I had a blast with the guys, so I can't really complain that much. I was just trying to prove that the A's made the right decision picking me and just doing my best.

MiLB.com: What are your goals for 2011?

Green: Pretty much the same as last season -- just go out there and learn as much as I can. It depends on what the organization wants to do with me.

MiLB.com: If you weren't a baseball player, what would you be doing?

Green: I have a couple of buddies that are going through fire school right now and I think that would be cool to do. Either that or do what my dad does and be a physical education teacher, teaching kids how to be more athletic.

MiLB.com: What is your favorite off-day activity?

Green: Definitely just vegging around the house. I'm a huge gamer and I love to play video games. I play the PS3, any type of *Call of Duty* or *MLB The Show* -- any type of game where I can play for a couple of hours and lose track of time. I do the "Road to the Show" mode, and I always try to become a pitcher because I think it's very interesting.

MiLB.com: How did you get the nickname "Cage Killer?" Do people still call you that?

Green: It's something that one of our pitching coaches called me, and the guys on the team saw that and they started calling me that the rest of the year. Thankfully, it hasn't followed me this spring. It's something that didn't stick, so I'm kind of happy for it.

MiLB.com: What team did you grow up rooting for? What player did you idolize?

Green: I was a huge Giants fan my whole life. My dad was born in the Bay Area and I always grew up rooting for them because it's what he instilled in me. One of my favorite players growing up was J.T. Snow -- I just loved watching him play. Also, Pete Rose. I didn't get to see him play, but I saw the tapes and I tried to emulate him, though it's tough to emulate him.

MiLB.com: Was your family excited to see you drafted by a California team?

Green: They were extremely happy. They were happy just to see me get drafted, but a California team made it better. Hopefully, when I get to Oakland they will get to see me play a lot, especially when we play the Angels; they are five minutes from there.

MiLB.com: What's been the proudest moment of your career so far?

Green: Probably setting the triples record back in college at USC. The day I did it was the day after my great-grandmother had passed away, and it was really emotional. She was a huge part of my life, and I saw it as she was up there trying to help me with it.

MiLB.com: What was it like getting invited to Spring Training and meeting veterans like Hideki Matsui and Rich Harden?

Green: It's been a pleasure seeing them. I've never seen so many people follow Matsui like they have. They don't big league anyone, they still come up to me and say hi. They are real cool guys. You can go up to them and talk to them. If you have a question, you can go up to them and ask them. They are real down-to-earth guys.

MiLB.com: What was it like to get promoted to Midland during the Texas League playoffs and then homer in your first game?

Green: It was unbelievable. It was something you always think about, "If I get promoted, what am I going to do that first at-bat?" Though I had only been with the team one day, I felt pretty good about. Any type of championship series experience, it's always something you can look back on, and the jitters are a little less the next time.

Urban: Spring buzz centers on Belt, Gio

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

Three weeks in the desert, bouncing back and forth between Papago Park, Scottsdale Stadium and Phoenix Municipal Stadium in search of all that truly matters when it comes to the Giants and A's. Your MLB Insider is back in the Bay Area until Friday, preparing for another two-week stint in the Valley of the Sun, and here's what remains top of mind as spring training kicks into let's-get-serious mode ...

... Last spring it was Buster Posey. He was ready for the big leagues, no doubt about it. His presence would have made the Giants better from Day One of the regular season. Instead he was sent to Triple-A Fresno for more "seasoning," and Bengie Molina's ineffectiveness at the plate while Posey was tearing up the minors contributed to the Giants needing every bit of their starting rotation's incredible stretch run to make it into the playoffs. Is it really necessary to go down that same road with Brandon Belt? The kid is ready. Right now.

... Curt Young never quite got the credit he deserved when he was the pitching coach in Oakland, but he oversaw a seamless transition from the glory days of Mark Mulder, Tim Hudson and Barry Zito to the current excitement regarding Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden. Young moved on this winter, taking the same gig with the Red Sox, and now there's another seamless transition afoot. Ron Romanick, a loyal longtime A's pitching guru elevated to the top job when Young left. The current staff couldn't possibly be in better hands.

... Brian Wilson's triumphant return to the mound on Sunday marked the official end of his offseason True Hollywood Story. The beard remains in it's ridiculous splendor, but conversations with the man suggest that from here on out, you'll be hearing a lot less about anything that doesn't involve gas at the knees and strike three swinging, and that will be a welcome development in all corners of consequence.

... Gio Gonzalez, who'll be one of our guests this week on "Raising Arizona," needn't worry about peaking too soon. He's been dominant his first couple of times out, and that's just fine. He had a breakout season in 2010, but he's not quite yet "established" as a front-line starter, and nowhere in the handbook does it say you have to struggle during spring training. There's something to be said for showing the world that you take your elevated status very seriously and intend to kill people every single time you toe the rubber, and to talk with Gonzalez these days is to understand that he knows exactly how close he is -- and how excited he is about it -- to be on the cusp of the sustained greatness for which he's long been pegged.

... It's definitely too early to panic, but there's nothing "minor" about Matt Cain being sidelined for a week with elbow issues. It might very well end up being a blip on the radar screen, but this is a genuine ace we're talking about, and the considerable effort being put into downplaying the situation falls on deaf ears belonging to fans who've been pounded with suggestions that last fall's workload will exact some sort of toll. The Giants need Cain in top form if they're going to repeat, period.

... Michael Choice, Oakland's top draft pick last spring, turns heads everywhere he goes. A switch hitter with blazing speeds, a high baseball IQ, off-the-charts character and a tool belt bursting with skills you simply can't teach, he's the best prospect in Bay Area baseball not named Brandon. Based on what's been seen thus far, it's not outrageous to predict that Choice will be in the big leagues by next season.

... Nice to see [Miguel Tejada](#) making an impact on both sides of the ball against the A's on Sunday. His slow start to the spring has been among the quiet concerns at Giants camp, and it's going to take more than a leaping grab here and a run-scoring triple there to make people forget all about Juan Uribe. Cut Tejada a little slack for the time being, though. Time slows for nobody in the big leagues, but it does slow most people down this time of year.

... Michael Taylor, another fine outfield prospect for the A's, appears to have rediscovered some of the swagger he lost with a disappointing season in the minors last season. While Chris Carter has at times resembled someone looking for a light switch while banging his shins on furniture that was rearranged while he was out for the evening, Taylor found the switch right away and seems to be seeing everything very clearly in camp.

... Taylor's counterpart with the Giants is Thomas Neal, another prodigious outfield talent who fell short of expectations in 2010. Neal, too, is looking like a man with renewed confidence, and it's easy to see why the club has had him penciled into the starting outfield for 2012 or 2013. He's a strong, hard-nosed player with a high ceiling, and there's power in his swing that should develop over time and might just turn him into a classic corner slugger.

... A's manager Bob Geren has a right-hand man born for the role in new bench coach Joel Skinner. With nine years of playing in the big leagues, six years as a minor-league manager and a partial season as the Indians' interim skipper on his resume, Skinner is exactly the type of experienced, level-headed confidant Geren will need in trying to navigate his first season as the head man for a legitimate contender. Skinner is organized, liked and respected by the players, and an excellent judge of talent and character. A rock-solid hire by the A's.

... And finally, a quick comparison for those asking whether the Giants or A's have a better starting rotation: In terms of pure talent, it's probably a wash no matter who wins the No. 5 spot for Oakland. The difference is that with the exception of Madison Bumgarner, the Giants' starters have fairly long track records of considerable accomplishment, and they've all pitched in enormously big games. Cahill, Anderson, Gonzalez and Braden just aren't quite there yet; their careers thus far amount to, almost to a man, one really good full season each. It's probably a mere matter of time and good health before the comparison gets truly heated, but for now you have to give the Giants the edge.

That's all for now, folks. Don't forget to check out "Raising Arizona" on Tuesday night, when Gonzalez's interview will be balanced in a Bay Ball sense by a chat with always-entertaining Giants first baseman/outfielder [Aubrey Huff](#). Until then, peace, lingua and over-easy eggs, and Wu-Tang Clan's "Triumph" to all.

A's owner Lew Wolff waits for commissioner's call

By JANIE McCAULEY, AP Baseball Writer

Oakland Athletics owner Lew Wolff has the spot for a new ballpark all picked out. Funding is in place and the San Jose mayor is on board with Wolff's plan to relocate his club some 40 miles south.

Wolff has been waiting two years for his old fraternity brother, commissioner Bud Selig, to tell him whether he can go ahead with his proposal to move the A's from Oakland into Santa Clara County even though the [San Francisco Giants](#) hold the territorial rights in technology-rich Silicon Valley.

Selig appointed a committee in March 2009 to evaluate the issue facing the Bay Area teams, yet he has provided no timetable for when he might announce a decision. Thus far it appears Selig doesn't want to make a decision that would anger the A's or Giants.

"I think the Giants have a position they believe in and we have a position we think would be great for us," Wolff said. "Those positions are well known to the commissioner, and he has to decide."

Understandably, Wolff is getting anxious. He is determined to move the small-market A's as soon as possible and begin breaking ground on an intimate, privately funded new ballpark, but San Francisco's ownership has no plans to hand over Santa Clara County — which includes many of the club's big sponsors. The Giants are coming off the franchise's first World Series title since moving West in 1958 and first overall since '54 in New York.

"The South Bay is the single-most compelling part of our fan base," Giants President Larry Baer said. "It's densely populated with the strongest representation of our sponsors, the strongest representation of our ticket buyers and the strongest representation of our television viewership and radio listeners."

Selig — who has repeatedly said the A's can't survive financially playing in the run-down Oakland Coliseum they share with the NFL's Raiders — has indicated in the past he considers territorial rights to be sacred. The A's and Giants play about 17 miles apart, separated by picturesque San Francisco Bay.

Selig formed the task force to analyze the situation and report back to him, and Wolff believes that process is done.

"The committee is working and I do not know when their work will be complete," said Pat Courtney, Selig's spokesman.

In the A's view, how could the Giants be upset about them moving 40 miles farther away?

The Giants don't consider it that simple when their South Bay fan base is taken into account. They declined to provide exact numbers of their ticket sales in the South Bay, but acknowledge having contributed financially to the group "Stand for San Jose" — which is supported by San Francisco's Class-A San Jose club and opposes the A's moving to town.

"We solidified a fan base and the core is the city of San Francisco and straight directly south those 50 miles," Baer said.

"This is our focus."

Selig has asked the two clubs not to publicly debate the issue. Many San Jose city officials are on board, with Mayor Chuck Reed a big proponent of professional baseball in the South Bay — and he is on record saying he would welcome the A's. But if this process takes too long, the A's risk that he might no longer be in office.

"I'm patiently waiting for the commissioner to rule," Wolff said. "The committee hopefully has finished its work and Bud is contemplating his decision. That's all I know. I think it will be sooner rather than later. I don't think it's another year off."

A's majority owner John Fisher doesn't speak out about the situation, though Wolff has expressed his frustrations at times.

Wolff, the savvy Los Angeles real estate developer and a fraternity pal with Selig back in their days at Wisconsin, is ready to break ground on a ballpark projected to cost between \$400 million and \$450 million — if and when he gets the OK to relocate. There are working drawings of the venue and an architect has been chosen. Wolff expects getting building permits to take about nine months, then the actual ballpark would require another two years to complete.

Wolff would like to hear from Selig either way, though the A's "don't have a Plan B," Wolff said.

"I'm in baseball because of Bud, and I believe he's the best commissioner in baseball by far, even though he's my friend," Wolff said. "Baseball wouldn't be where it is without Bud. I respect his reasoning."

The city of Oakland in December 2009 unveiled three waterfront sites as potential spots to build a new ballpark for the A's and ultimately keep the team from leaving town.

Yet Wolff and the ownership group, committed to keeping the team in the Bay Area, feel they have exhausted their options in Oakland after years of effort.

In the past they haven't been able to find a suitable spot to build and were set to leave blue-collar Oakland and move to nearby Fremont until that plan fell through. Wolff said it cost his group \$30 million.

"It takes me an hour and 45 minutes exactly to go through (the paperwork) of what we did in Oakland," Wolff said of his efforts in the diverse East Bay city.

This isn't the first time baseball has dealt with territorial rights. The Baltimore Orioles were compensated in a complicated transaction when Major League Baseball bought the Montreal Expos and moved them to Washington, D.C.

Baseball's other 29 teams purchased the poor-drawing Expos for \$120 million in 2002, and the commissioner's office initially operated the team before it sold. The franchise was moved to Washington for the 2005 season and renamed the Nationals.

In the Bay Area, former A's owner and well-known businessman Walter Haas — a third-generation San Franciscan who ran the Oakland franchise from 1979-95 — gave the Giants the OK to assume rights to San Jose in a favor of sorts to former San Francisco owner Bob Lurie when his team was considering moving to Florida. The deal basically happened with a handshake and then was approved by baseball's owners.

Haas' son, Wally, sold the A's to the group that preceded Fisher and Wolff: Steve Schott and Ken Hofmann.

The territorial rights have been defined several different times, beginning when former Giants managing partner Peter Magowan bought the team before the 1993 season.

Magowan and his group, which included Baer, quickly made the decision to bring in slugger Barry Bonds — who broke Hank Aaron's home run record in August 2007 and played a huge role in revitalizing baseball in San Francisco. Bonds' presence helped the club build a privately funded downtown ballpark.

The Giants are paying for that privately built waterfront ballpark, which opened in 2000 in what has become a bustling area at China Basin. San Francisco drew 3 million fans every year until reaching only 2.8 million in the 2008 and '09 seasons, then got back to 3 million in its championship 2010 year.

"We felt it (those two years at 2.8 million)," Baer said. "We've got to be at 3 million to break even."

It's not that the Giants don't feel for their cross-bay rivals. They had their share of lean years, losing \$115 million from 1993-99 at Candlestick Park after Magowan's group bought the team for \$100 million and took over before moving into AT&T Park — and drawing Oakland-like crowds of about 9,000 fans a night when things were especially dire.

"We were there before, in this situation," Baer said. "We know the need to have a modern and fan-friendly ballpark. We were there. It reminds us when we came into the Giants in 1993. The reality is that we have many case studies, including the San Francisco Giants, where a new ballpark was built very close to an old ballpark and became a success story — San Francisco and Seattle to name two in the last decade."

Now, it's up to Selig to make his call.

Balfour's \$8m deal will ease pain

Reid Jermyn, The Blacktown Advocate, 3/8/2011

GRANT Balfour is the latest local sporting export to make it big on the international stage.

Balfour, of Blacktown, has signed a two-year deal worth \$8 million with US Major League Baseball club the Oakland A's. The pitcher, 33, who helped guide Tampa Bay to the World Series baseball finals in 2008, will earn the equivalent of a 25-man NRL club team and rake in \$8.1 million over 2011/12 with the option of a third-year \$4.5 million deal.

It is the biggest baseball signing earned by an Australian player.

Balfour said this week he hoped the deal with Oakland would turn around the heartbreak of his family over the past 12 months.

Balfour was shattered by the death of his father Dave's wife Carmen last March, then, not long after, learned his father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Dave Balfour, 58, said he could not be happier with his son's latest accomplishment.

"I was more excited about Grant signing than I was when the doctors told me they could operate on my cancer," Mr Balfour said.

"I've gone through a lot of difficult times, but getting the chance to watch Grant play baseball gives me something to look forward to and it helps.

"When your kids live in another country and you get sick, it's tough, but watching him play baseball has been unbelievable."

Mr Balfour underwent extensive chemotherapy and had more than 1000 stitches during an operation.

Grant Balfour said this week it was nice to have some good news after a harrowing 12 months.

"I know Dad has had a rough year you don't wish for things like this to happen to anyone, but it's nice to have something good to talk about," he said.

Inside and Outside the Lines, Part XV (1973-1977)

Ace Parker, Napa Valley Register, 3/8/2011

No five-year slice of baseball history made inside and outside the lines of a Major League baseball diamond ever topped the years between 1973 and 1977.

By 1973, Major League Baseball's lords of the game agreed to permit the American League to install a 10th man into their lineups — a "Designated Hitter" who'd sit on the bench until it was time to take his swings for notoriously weak-hitting pitchers.

The "Senior Circuit," the National League, scoffed at the idea, but the "Junior Circuit" got its DH, and since the 1973 season has topped the National League in batting averages each year.

The terrible Vietnam War was winding down, and our boys outside the foul lines were coming home to read in their local newspapers that a man named George Steinbrenner had bought the once-powerful New York Yankees franchise for \$10 million in a deal with CBS News.

"Boss George," coming from a wealthy Cleveland, Ohio ship-building family, further vowed that he'd do whatever it took to return the "Pinstripers" to their once-proud title of perennial champions of baseball.

But, worst of all, in terms of the lords of the game, their cherished Reserve Clause finally bit the dust in 1975.

For a century, the lords paid their employees — players — whatever they cared to pay them.

If the kids inside the lines didn't like it, they could quit — and go back to the farms, factories, coal mines and hick towns from whence they came.

But as far as playing the game those kids loved on any organized baseball diamond — from the majors to Class D ball — those kids were banished forever.

In 1975, a Federal Court set the players free from the chains of the Reserve Clause, and the century-long joy ride the lords enjoyed became a thing of the past at last.

The lords' darkest nightmare had finally arrived.

1973

In 1973, in the minor leagues, a used-up one-time major league great, Minnie Minoso — at the age of 50 (or so he said) — struggled through his last season, batting .265 in the Class A Mexican League. He finally said “No Mas,” as he stepped outside of the lines of a baseball diamond forever.

Meanwhile, minor league kids like George Brett (Omaha Royals), Bucky Dent (Iowa Oaks) and Jim Dwyer (Tulsa Oilers) of the Triple-A American Association were ready and willing to step inside the lines of a major league diamond and show big league fans what they could do.

In the majors, both the National and American Leagues fielded 12 teams each, split into East and West Divisions. Average salaries of Major Leaguers had risen to \$52,000 — not bad when you consider that fans outside the lines were averaging about \$9,000 for 52 weeks of work, less two-week vacations.

To everyone’s surprise, the lowly-rated New York Mets won the National League crown and faced the defending world champion Oakland Athletics in the 1973 World Series.

America’s penchant of rooting for underdogs — especially a team featuring the “Say Hey Kid,” a 42-year-old Willie Mays laboring for the Mets — made the Mets “America’s Sweethearts” as we showered Willie with our “Last Hurrahs!”

But the A’s, led by Reggie Jackson and the rest of the A’s, in their gold and green-trimmed uniforms, proved once again that inside the lines, age and strong young arms and legs do matter.

Oakland won that series in seven hard-fought games and won their second World Series in a row.

But on a personal note, I never forgot or forgave Mets manager Yogi Berra for the move he made in Game 7 of that once-in-a-lifetime World Series.

In the ninth inning, the Mets trailed by one and had runners in scoring position when manager Berra had to select a pinch hitter to get those runners home and win that game and World Series.

All he had left was a kid catcher and light hitter named Ron Hodges, and a 42-year-old hero named Willie Mays — who both in the field and at bat during that series, seemed to be shaky and showing his age.

But, in my mind, Yogi had owed it to millions of Willie Mays fans from coast to coast to permit Willie to swing a bat just one more time.

But Yogi chose Hodges, who struck out and the season was over — but not in the minds of millions of Willie Mays fans. His talent will live on.

They say, “Nobody don’t like Yogi.” Forgive me if I disagree!

1974

In the minor leagues, funded by “Big Brother” — the lords of the game — future stars were ready to cross the lines and enter the big leagues.

Triple-A players like Keith Hernandez of the American Association’s Tulsa Oilers, Gary Carter of the International League’s Memphis Blues and Willie Randolph of the Double-A Eastern League’s Thetford Miners were ready and about to enter a profession that would soon lose the dreaded “Reserve Clause.”

How lucky they were!

In the major leagues, the Oakland Athletics beat the National League’s Los Angeles Dodgers in an all-California World Series in five games for Oakland’s third world championship in a row.

A rare happening, until you realize that a team with a pitching staff of Vida Blue, Rollie Fingers, Ken Holtzman and Catfish Hunter make good things happen.

So three cheers to the Green and Gold!

1975

This year, unlike all others, saw the lords of the game — just a season before free agency would become a reality — began sweetening the pot for the stars of the game in an effort to keep those stars on their teams.

Baseball heroes like Dick Allen (Phillies), Henry Aaron (Braves), Johnny Bench (Reds) and Lou Brock (Cardinals) were being offered contracts in the \$250,000 range, because after the season — with free agency running wild in 1976 — the lords, dealing with players' agents, would have to be digging deeper (much deeper) to keep a player from signing with any high roller in the game.

The World Series was a classic, a match between the National League's Cincinnati Reds and the American League's Boston Red Sox.

The "Big Red Machine" — led by Johnny Bench, George Foster, Ken Griffey, Joe Morgan (and Rawley Eastwick winning two games) — brought the winner's trophy back to Cincinnati after a pause of 35 years.

1976

Following the 1975 season, free agency was the name of the game.

Duke Snider — once the "Duke of Flatbush" as a Brooklyn Dodger and later a Los Angeles Dodger, who played his last season in 1964 — summed it up best for the old guys who once played the game.

The Duke said:

"Man, if I made \$1 million a season, I would come in at six in the morning, sweep up the stands, wash the uniforms, clean out the offices, manage the team and play every game."

He said it all for the guys who were born too soon.

Minor league kids like Dennis Martinez, Jack Clark, Eddie Murray and Lou Whitaker were waiting their turn to enter the "Wonderland" called Major League Baseball.

And in the "bigs," a fellow named Reggie Jackson would lead all the rest in terms of free agency negotiations, through his agent of course.

Any player worth his salt had agents by now.

But back to the business of baseball played inside the lines.

In the 1976 World Series, between the champion Cincinnati Reds and at last the rejuvenated New York Yankees — thanks to George "Duh Boss" Steinbrenner's money — the Yankees, as they say in the Bronx, New York, "shudda stood in bed!"

The boys from Cincinnati won the series in a four-game sweep — thanks to Johnny Bench, who batted .533, plus Don Gullett's fine pitching.

Even free agents like pinstripers Catfish Hunter, Mickey Rivers, Lou Piniella and Willie Randolph couldn't save the Yankees — but better times were coming, as "Boss George" vowed they would!

1977

In 1977, minor league kids like Dale Murphy, Lance Parrish, Carney Lansford, Earl Battey, Wade Boggs, Tommy Herr, Ozzie Smith, Paul Molitor and Dave Stewart knew that they were born at a very fortunate time — a time when there was fame and fortune waiting for them just around the corner, once they stepped inside the lines of a major league diamond, most of them with an agent at their sides.

Reggie Jackson led the major leagues in terms of free agent signings, and he cut a deal for \$4.293 million for five years to join "Boss George" Steinbrenner and his team. In a short period of time, he earned his keep.

Gone were the days when fans outside the lines could show empathy for the boys who played the game on baseball diamonds for big bucks — not when the average fan who paid increased prices for his admission ticket was earning, on average, \$12,738 a year — which in New York was called “Chump Change!”

All moms and dads could and did do was go out and buy their sons baseball bats and gloves.

In the 1977 World Series, Reggie Jackson, who had led the Yankees to the American League pennant, led the club to a World Series win in six games over the National League champion Los Angeles Dodgers.

This was the first Yankees championship season since the days of Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra in 1962 — 15 long years ago.

Finally, this was the World Series in which Reggie Jackson earned the title of “Mr. October.”

He batted .450 in the series, banging out five home runs — including three in succession in the final game of that classic.

And if his rather large ego and salary wasn't enough, Reggie, like all those winning Yankees, pocketed World Series winning shares of \$27,758.03 per man.

So ends an historic five-year slice of Baseball Americana, in which the inmates took over the asylum.

And you wonder if the good guys won?