

A's News Clips, Wednesday, March 9, 2011

A's outfielder recovering medically, but playing time could be an issue

By Carl Steward, Bay Area News Group

PHOENIX -- Ryan Sweeney has his knees back. Now it's time to see about his job.

The A's regular right fielder and arguably their best pure hitter for much of the past three years -- at least when healthy -- Sweeney's status as an everyday player is suddenly in limbo in the A's fortified outfield.

But he's not worried about that just yet. On Wednesday, Sweeney will simply be elated to play in his first live baseball game since July 11, when he went on the disabled list and subsequently had season-ending surgery on his right knee to correct long-standing issues with patella tendinitis.

Sweeney, 26, has had chronic tendinitis issues in both knees, but after having surgery performed by renowned Colorado orthopedist Dr. J. Richard Steadman on July 30, he believes his problems may be over. He rehabbed his left knee while undergoing therapy for his surgically repaired right knee, and said he is feeling no pain in either knee for the first time in two years.

"They both feel great, and hopefully it's past me now and I don't have to worry about it anymore," Sweeney said. "I can just go out there and play. I'm hoping that'll make me a better player, too."

Sweeney has been a consistently productive hitter -- albeit one lacking power -- ever since he came to the A's along with pitcher Gio Gonzalez in the January 2008 trade that sent Nick Swisher to the Chicago White Sox. He has a .291 average in 331 games with Oakland, including .301 in 906 at-bats against right-handed pitching.

Sweeney was hitting .294 last season, much of it while in consistent pain, when he came to a mutual decision with the club that it would be in his best interests to have the surgery so he could begin the 2011 season healthy. He doesn't regret the timing, even though it left the club in a lurch in right field.

"As far as running and cutting and stopping, it hurt more when I ran," he said. "But I think it affected me more when I was hitting because I was thinking about it and I wasn't thinking about what I was supposed to be doing. It was like, 'Oh God, am I going to hit one in the gap and have to run?'"

"I was playing pretty good and dealing with it, but it was one of those things the doctor said it was going to keep lingering on," Sweeney continued. "It just needed to be done because I didn't want to miss 4-5 months of (this) year."

Sweeney was cleared to start hitting in December and came to Arizona on Jan. 28 to get a head start on his running and conditioning programs. That phase of his rehab completed, now it's a matter of therapeutic maintenance and good luck.

Will healthy knees impact his power numbers? Sweeney said the pain in his right knee often limited his swing on the front side. As a result, he hit just one home run in 82 games. He hit six in 2009.

"Maybe now I'll pick certain counts where I might let it go a little bit and try to drive the ball a little bit more," he said. "But I'm not going to try to change the kind of player I am."

Even though Sweeney pronounced himself 100 percent, manager Bob Geren said the A's will be exceedingly careful with him. The outfielder will begin with a one-day-on/two-day-off playing schedule and progress from there, even if it means he might not be ready for Opening Day.

"I want to see how he responds from being on his feet in the outfield and on the bases," Geren said. "If it comes down to the end of spring training and he needs more at-bats, we could ramp up his at-bats in some minor league games."

But even when he's ready to play every day, will he? With the additions of David DeJesus and Josh Willingham, Sweeney's not an automatic anymore. His versatility will help -- Geren projects he'll be playing all three outfield spots over the course of the season -- but it remains to be seen how it will all unfold.

"As far as guys rotating and who's going to play against what, the season will kind of dictate that," Sweeney said. "Hopefully, everybody just gets as many at-bats as possible and it works out."

Oakland A's notebook: Trevor Cahill happy with progress

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- You had to know that Trevor Cahill's 20.80 spring training ERA wasn't going to last long.

Cahill, the American League's ERA leader much of last season before finishing fourth at 2.97, sliced his spring ERA by more than half Tuesday with four sterling shutout innings of one-hit work against San Diego in which he induced eight ground balls out of 14 batters and didn't walk anyone. For what it's worth, his ERA is now 8.10.

Midseason form? Not quite, but after two rough outings to start the spring, Cahill was pleased with the results even though he's still sorting out certain pitches. Outcomes do matter to him, even this early in camp.

"Even though you're working on things, you still want to do good," he said. "You want to get in that routine of having successful outings as soon as possible and carry that into the season."

Cahill worked mostly on fastball command in his latest stint, and his changeup is still a work in progress. But after throwing 49 pitches in the game and 15 more in the bullpen afterward, he's on a good course to start the season.

"He's right where he needs to be at this point in the spring," said manager Bob Geren.

Andy LaRoche, one of those once-upon-a-time top talents that A's general manager Billy Beane has coveted for several years, is so far living up to Beane's belief that he might rediscover some of the skills that once made him a highly regarded prospect.

LaRoche, a 27-year-old nonroster player who is trying to win a job as the A's primary utility infielder, had two more hits in the A's 6-2 victory, including his team-leading third home run. He's 6 for 18 this spring (.333).

LaRoche, brother of Washington Nationals first baseman Adam LaRoche, said he signed with the A's primarily because he was aware Beane had made attempts in the past to trade for him, which Beane subsequently confirmed. LaRoche has played primarily third and second base in pro ball. But his chances of making the team may hinge on how he plays at shortstop, a position he hasn't played since college.

"There was time in the minor leagues he was one of the top 10-15 prospects in the game," said Beane.

Medical updates: First baseman Daric Barton might return to game action today after missing two games with a calf contusion. Barton said he was feeling better.

Closer Andrew Bailey was cleared to make his first spring appearance Thursday, while setup man Craig Breslow, nursing a mild hamstring strain, is still up in the air. Fifth starter candidate Rich Harden had a successful long-toss session and may be close to returning to the mound.

Chin Music: No major news good news for the A's

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune, 3/8/2011 10:47AM

Carl Steward here from Phoenix Muni Tuesday morning, filling in for Joe Stiglich for a few days.

Man, it's quiet and peaceful here. I have to fight taking a nap. Aside from the daily medical reports on guys with the usual spring aches and pains, it's pretty news-less. But that's a good thing for the A's, even if it isn't so good for the 20 or so media folks from Japan following Hideki Matsui's every twitch. No major dings, no major rows, it's just a seamless, business-like camp so far. That could change at any time, but for now, Oakland is functioning as a happy, mostly healthy unit.

Oakland has Trevor Cahill on the mound today against San Diego Padres, his third spring outing. He's still looking for his first sharp one. Here's the lineup supporting him.

CF Crisp, SS Pennington, 2B Ellis, LF Willingham, C Suzuki, DH Jackson, 1B LaRoche, RF Taylor, 3B Timmons

And here are the Padres, if you care ...

DH Venable, 2B Frandsen, 3B Cantu, 1B Guzman, RF Denorfia, CF Maybin, LF Baxter, C R. Johnson, SS Cabrera.

Medical updates:

* — Daric Barton: Still nursing a calf contusion but limping far less noticeably. As he noted, he still has some "crampage," but manager Bob Geren said there's a decent chance he'll back in the lineup tomorrow. It's not a serious injury.

* _ Andrew Bailey. Bounced back well from his simulated outing Monday and is currently penciled to pitch for the first time this spring on Thursday

* _ Craig Breslow. Day-to-day with a mild hamstring strain. Geren isn't ruling him out of his first spring outing Thursday, but he's probably more iffy than Bailey.

* _ Ryan Sweeney. Will make his first start Wednesday, the first game he's played in since July 11 of last year. Sweeney says his right knee, which was operated on to correct patella tendinitis, is feeling great, but the A's will bring him along slowly at first. After Wednesday, he'll rest for two days and then play again Saturday.

* _Rich Harden. Harden long-tossed up to 120 feet and reported no ill effects. The A's will repeat the cycle of two days throwing, then one day off, then try to get Harden back on the mound.

Other observations: Chris Carter and Michael Taylor, the two young phenoms, really aren't improving their stock much, particularly Taylor, who is 3-for-23 so far this spring. He'll get another chance today, but he had some big RBI situations Monday and made weak outs.

Even though he made two outfield errors on a windy day Monday — one catching, one throwing — David DeJesus really looks a player. As much as fans liked the departed Rajai Davis, DeJesus is an upgrade just for his hitting ability.

Kevin Kouzamanoff should save some for the season ... he's 6-for-12 so far and stinging the ball virtually every at-bat. Josh Donaldson, one of the A's stable of promising catchers, is having a nice spring so far (5-for-14, .357)

FYI, I'll be updating any key game developments at twitter.com/stewardsfolly

Andy LaRoche happy to get his shot with A's

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

General manager Billy Beane tried to trade for Andy LaRoche multiple times. Could never pull it off. Finally, after the Pirates dumped LaRoche in November, Beane signed him to a minor-league deal with an invitation to training camp.

"There was a time with the Dodgers, he was one of the top 10, 15 prospects in the game," said Beane, referring to LaRoche's time as a minor-leaguer, pre-2007. "Was a right-handed bat with great command of the strike zone and a good contact guy."

In the majors, LaRoche has been wildly inconsistent. Not just year to year - .206, four homers and 16 RBIs in 2010, down from .258, 12 and 64 in 2009 - but month to month. The A's are hoping for more steadiness as they search for someone to fill their utility needs, and LaRoche helped his cause Tuesday, collecting two hits, including his second home run in two days, in a 6-2 victory over San Diego.

He's mainly been a third baseman, but the A's want someone capable of handling all four infield spots. LaRoche hasn't played shortstop in pro ball but is working out at the position and played there once this month.

"Awesome," LaRoche said of the opportunity with the A's. "Whatever position they want me to play, shoot, the more the better. The more versatile I can be, the more chances I can get to play and help the team."

LaRoche is working with infield coach Mike Gallego and said he feels fine at short but added, "It's always a lot different come game time." Manager Bob Geren said LaRoche will play more short and second, a position at which he has started just six times in the majors.

Being able to play short is a factor because Cliff Pennington, coming off shoulder surgery, will need more breaks than usual in April.

Pennington made his second Cactus League appearance Tuesday and went 0-for-3, all left-handed. Swinging right-handed remains bothersome.

Other candidates for the utility role include Eric Sogard and Steve Tolleson. Beane said he's comforted with his in-house infielders.

Briefly: The A's haven't announced the order of their rotation, but Trevor Cahill remains an option to pitch the opener. After struggling his first two starts, Cahill yielded one hit in four scoreless innings against San Diego. Geren said he's still considering four pitchers for the opener, including Gio Gonzalez, who didn't yield a hit his first two outings. ... Craig Breslow, who was to debut Thursday, probably won't because of a hamstring strain. ... Rich Harden threw from 120 feet for a second straight day, and the next step is a bullpen session. ... Ex-A's Rollie Fingers, Campy Campaneris and Mudcat Grant participated in Fergie Jenkins' fundraising autograph session during the game. Gaylord Perry also was here. Including Rickey Henderson, the Hall of Fame count was four.

A's, Giants box scores B6

Cactus League recap

Score: A's 6, Padres 2

Notable: Trevor Cahill tossed four scoreless innings, and the A's hit three home runs: by Andy LaRoche in the second inning and Anthony Recker and Michael Taylor in the eighth. ... Brad Ziegler had a perfect inning, striking out all three batters, his fourth straight scoreless outing. ... Conor Jackson was 0-for-3 and is 1-for-20 in seven games. ... Minor-league camp opens today for pitchers and catchers at Papago Park.

Quotable: "He's obviously being considered. Gio (Gonzalez) has been lights out. (Dallas) Braden has made an Opening Day start before. (Brett) Anderson has great stuff, too. Anyone can do that." - Manager Bob Geren, when asked if Trevor Cahill (after throwing four scoreless innings) is the top candidate to start the season opener.

Today's game: A's (Braden) vs. Rangers (Derek Holland), 12:05 p.m.

Drumbeat: Progress, progress, progress (possible exception: Craig Breslow)

John Shea reporting from Phoenix Muni Stadium . . . 3/8/2011 10:40AM

Ryan Sweeney is slated to make his Cactus League debut tomorrow. Craig Breslow probably won't make his debut Thursday, thanks to what Bob Geren called a mild hamstring strain, but Andrew Bailey will. Geren said Sweeney will rest two days after his first game and follow a one-on, two-off patters for a while.

Geren was asked about Sweeney's role now that the A's have David DeJesus and Josh Willingham flanking Coco Crisp.

"We have a lot of depth in the outfield department," Geren said. "We'll mix and match to try to keep guys healthy. He can also play all three. We don't have a lot of the five guys (including Conor Jackson) who can play all three, so that helps."

The daily Rich Harden watch: He threw from 120 feet for a second straight day and will rest tomorrow. The next step is to climb a mound for a bullpen session.

Today's lineup vs. Padres: CF Crisp, SS Pennington, 2B Ellis, LF Willingham, C Suzuki, DH Jackson, 1B LaRoche, RF Taylor, 3B Timmons. Cahill pitching.

Cahill tosses four shutout innings in A's win

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- A two-out RBI single off the bat of A's infield prospect Grant Green in the bottom of the seventh frame, along with a pair of eighth-inning homers, lifted the A's to a 6-2 victory over the visiting Padres at Phoenix Municipal Stadium on Tuesday.

San Diego lefty Aaron Poreda, entering a 2-2 game, garnered two quick outs in the seventh before boarding Wes Timmons via a walk. He then offered up back-to-back singles to Michael Choice and Green, the latter which handed Oakland the lead.

The A's extended their lead to four in the eighth against George Kontos, who surrendered a solo homer to Anthony Recker and a two-run shot to Michael Taylor.

With righty Tim Stauffer on the hill, the A's jumped on the board early in the second inning thanks to a fielding error by Padres third baseman Jorge Cantu, who bobbled a ground ball from Kurt Suzuki. Stauffer proceeded to strike out Conor Jackson before offering up a two-run homer to Andy LaRoche. It marked the third homer of the spring for LaRoche, who is fighting for a utility spot on Oakland's roster.

The Padres, meanwhile, remained quiet against A's righty Trevor Cahill, who put together four clean innings in his third spring start. Cahill allowed just one hit on the day while relying heavily on his sinker.

San Diego put up a two-spot in the sixth frame against right-hander Willie Eyre, collecting a run-scoring double from Will Venable and a sacrifice fly from Cantu. The Padres also got a pair of hits from Cameron Maybin, who is hitting .364 this spring.

Up next for the A's: Lefty Dallas Braden gets the starting nod for the A's on Wednesday, when the team travels to Surprise, Ariz., for a meeting with the Rangers. All eyes figure to be on Ryan Sweeney, who is making his Cactus League debut in the outfield following six-plus months of rehab on his surgically repaired right knee. The game is slated to begin at 12:05 p.m. PT.

Up next for the Padres: San Diego will be busy Wednesday, as it will host the Reds in Peoria while a split-squad heads to Goodyear for a game against the Indians. Aaron Harang will face his former team, the Reds, in a 12:05 p.m. PT game. Harang, a San Diego native who signed a free-agent deal with the Padres in the offseason, spent parts of eight seasons in Cincinnati. This will be Harang's second appearance of the spring. In the game against the Indians, Cory Luebke, who has a 2.08 ERA in two outings, gets the start.

Choice turning heads in first spring camp

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Coco Crisp figured he would come out ahead, as he usually does.

But when taking part in the 20-yard dash in the early days of camp this year, the speedy A's outfielder was outdone by a broad 6-foot teammate by sixth-tenths of a second.

"I was like, 'Hey, who is this kid?'" Crisp recalled.

It's the same kid who could take Crisp's place in Oakland's center field as soon as next year -- the same kid who's also known as Michael Choice, the A's 2010 first-round Draft pick who is undertaking his first big league camp.

"I don't know if I can give him 100-percent credit," Crisp said, smiling. "I didn't try my best because I thought I was gonna breeze through it. I wanted to run it again."

"I could tell he was mad when he found out my time was faster," Choice said with a laugh.

Choice is turning all sorts of heads this spring after posting a .964 OPS with seven home runs and 26 RBIs in his first 30 professional games, 27 of which came at short-season Class A Vancouver. Just as impressive as his blazing speed, which only fully developed in his freshman year of college, are his power, work ethic and first-class character.

"Nothing fazes him," manager Bob Geren said. "I've never seen anyone that played at basically one of the lowest levels come up here and be so comfortable. You'd never know that he had never been here before. He gets good jumps on balls in the outfield, he's been aggressive at the plate, he's swung at strikes for the most part. He looks pretty advanced based on his experience level. What you see and then knowing what he's done, experience-wise, they don't match. He's way ahead of that."

In six Cactus League contests, Choice is 5-for-14 with an RBI. He is constantly drawing stares in the batting cage, but isn't quite aware of the attention surrounding his every move, as he goes about his business in a careful and quiet manner while at the same time keeping a close eye on the seasoned vets surrounding his locker.

"I didn't really know what to expect coming in, but now that I've been here for a while, I'm learning and picking up things from other guys," Choice said. "Guys here can be so relaxed and have a good time and still get better. They don't let the stresses of the game get to them."

The 21-year-old Choice, who A's director of player personnel Billy Owens believes boasts power reminiscent of Greg Vaughn, is carrying the maturity level of a player who's gone through the motions more than once.

"He seems to have a good head on his shoulders," Crisp said. "From the baseball standpoint, you'd think he's been here for a couple years. Inside the clubhouse, he's very quiet and humble."

"I never really get too high or too low, so I try to keep it that way," Choice said. "We've been playing this game for so long that we know failing is part of the game. As long as you know that, you'll be pretty successful."

The son of a former collegiate catcher, Choice will likely start the 2011 season at the Class A ranks, though he hasn't forgotten about the proclamation he made when he was drafted out of the University of Texas at Arlington last June.

"It might have been a little premature to say I'll be in the big leagues in two years, but it's still a goal," he said. "It's a good goal to have because that's extremely fast. If I can get there in that time, then great. If I can't, I'll keep working as hard as I can."

Those efforts have been aided by offseason mentor and Angels outfielder Torii Hunter, as well as Rickey Henderson, who tutored Choice in instructional league and has since become one of the prospect's biggest fans. Choice's speed, which he believes progressed from his days playing basketball, isn't the only thing that has the Hall of Famer talking.

"He's got all the tools, and he's just here at camp to develop and make all those things come out," Henderson said. "I'm very impressed with him, especially the power that comes out of him. He's a real nice player, goes about his business the right way. He's very smart, he observes a lot, and that's a good sign."

Crisp's chats with Choice have been brief, but he's witnessed enough from the new kid on the block to be a believer.

"He puts a lot into his swing," Crisp said, "but it doesn't look that way. It's hard but effortless. He's just a natural baseball player."

"From what I've seen, he definitely has the ability to be something special. I'm not sure how that's going to translate."

LaRoche making strong case for utility job

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Signed to a Minor League contract by the A's this winter, Andy LaRoche is looking to stick as a utility infielder.

So far, he's given the A's plenty reason to keep watching.

The 27-year-old former top Dodgers prospect belted his third home run of the spring and second in as many days on Tuesday against the Padres, going 2-for-3 while upping his Cactus League average to .333.

"We always knew he had the power potential," A's manager Bob Geren said. "He's got big-time power."

LaRoche also has a steady glove at third base, though that may not cut it for the utility job given Oakland's dire need for an infielder who can particularly play well at shortstop, where Cliff Pennington is returning from left shoulder surgery.

Geren said offensive output will only be one factor in the club's final decision, as he noted that defense becomes particularly important in that role when the player is only making appearances every few days. Still, the A's skipper can't ignore what LaRoche has done at the plate as he also continues to expand his versatility on defense.

"He's a right-handed hitter with not only power, but some good experience," Geren said.

LaRoche hit .206 with four home runs and 16 RBIs in 102 games with Pittsburgh last year. Fifty-two of his 58 starts were at third base. He also made appearances at second base and first base.

Geren pleased by Cahill's crisp outing

PHOENIX -- Trevor Cahill's third spring outing, fueled by an effective sinker, proved uneventful -- finally.

The A's righty, who surrendered six runs, nine hits and two walks in a combined 2 2/3 innings in his first two Cactus League starts, breezed through four frames against the Padres on Tuesday. Cahill walked away from the outing with just one hit attached to his name.

"I was able to kind of find a rhythm this time instead of getting knocked around," Cahill said. "I was able to get back on track and focus on my fastballs with some changeups mixed in."

Cahill threw 49 pitches -- 33 strikes -- and finished his work in the bullpen with an additional 15 pitches. The 2010 All-Star will likely amp it up to five innings in his next turn.

"He was outstanding," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Very solid and low pitch count, which is what we like to see. He had all of his pitches working, and he's right where he needs to be."

Breslow day-to-day with hamstring strain

PHOENIX -- Lefty Craig Breslow's spring debut could potentially be delayed, as the A's reliever has been deemed day-to-day with a mild hamstring strain.

Breslow first experienced soreness Monday when he threw in a simulated game. He was slated to throw in Thursday's home contest against the Royals, and manager Bob Geren is not ruling the southpaw out just yet.

Fellow reliever Andrew Bailey, meanwhile, is still on track to make his Cactus League debut on Thursday after slowly building up arm strength following minor elbow surgery in September.

Worth noting

Rich Harden threw pain-free from a distance of 120 feet on Tuesday morning. He'll take Wednesday off and resume his throwing schedule Thursday. If all continues to go well, he could potentially return to the mound as early as Sunday and undergo a couple of bullpen sessions before facing hitters. ... Daric Barton is still considered day-to-day with a right calf contusion, and there's no word on when he'll return to game action. ... Brad Ziegler struck out the side in his one inning of work on Tuesday and has not given up a run in a combined 4 1/3 frames this spring. ... Cliff Pennington made just his second start of the spring on Tuesday and went 0-for-3 with a strikeout.

Major League: Padres vs. A's: Pregame notes

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 3/8/2011 9:39AM

We're on the cusp of seeing a handful of players make their spring debuts. Ryan Sweeney is slated to start in the outfield tomorrow against the Rangers and, depending on how his knees respond to game action, he'll likely continue to play once

every three days. On Thursday, barring any setback between now and then, Andrew Bailey is scheduled to appear in his first game. Craig Breslow is also a possibility for that game, but he's been listed as day-to-day with a mild hamstring strain. Considering how careful the team is being with injuries, I wouldn't be surprised if Breslow is held out of action at least a couple days.

In other injury news, Rich Harden threw pain-free from a distance of 120 feet this morning. He'll take tomorrow off and resume his throwing schedule Thursday. If all continues to go well, he could potentially return to the mound as early as Sunday and undergo a couple of bullpen sessions before facing hitters.

Cliff Pennington is making his second spring start today. The Padres have a righty on the mound, so Pennington will be able to bat from the left side. He took some right-handed swings in a simulated game against Breslow yesterday and said all went well, but he's not fully letting go yet and Geren said he'd prefer him to bat left-handed in game action for the time being.

Here are your lineups:

OAKLAND: Crisp CF, Pennington SS, Ellis 2B, Willingham LF, Suzuki C, Jackson DH, LaRoche 1B, Taylor RF, Timmons 3B, Cahill P

Also scheduled to pitch: Joe Bateman, Fernando Cabrera, Willie Eyre, Danny Farquhar, Brad Ziegler

SAN DIEGO: Venable DH, Frandsen 2B, Cantu 3B, Guzman 1B, Denorfia RF, Maybin CF, Baxter LF, Johnson C, Cabrera SS, Stauffer P

Ratto: Newsflash -- State won't pay for stadiums

[Ray Ratto](#), CSNBayArea.com

Not that anyone in the why-don't-you-pay-for-my-stadium game was pinning any hopes on Governor Jerry Brown, but when he gave the [49ers](#) and [Raiders](#) the old "Let 'em eat Cal and Stanford" backhand, that told us everything to know not just about Brown's position, but about the state's position on stadium construction.

Specifically, "Let 'em eat Cal and Stanford."

Through the courtesy of the comedy stylings of Phil Matier and Andy Ross in today's Chronicle, Brown upchucked all over the notion of government or taxpayer help for a [Raiders/49ers](#) stadium, let alone an [A's](#) park.

"Oakland and Alameda County are spending \$25 million a year, over a 20-year period, to repay a bond on a stadium that the owners now say may not be usable. That troubles me," Phil the Pill and Dandy Andy quoted Brown as saying. "My general view is we have to put education first and entertainment second."

Boy, you hate to hear that kind of social thought. How can anyone legitimately decide between a nuclear powered weight room with platinum elliptical machines and a functioning school?

But when he said the redevelopment money earmarked for the [49ers'](#) stadium is likely to disappear as part of California's fiscal disaster, he said, "Use the ones over at Berkeley and Stanford. They are good stadiums," Brown said.

Then he said something stupid about AT&T Park.

"Private enterprise should be able to survive on its own, as witnessed at Pac Bell (AT&T) Park," he said, ignoring that the

ballpark has changed names about six or seven times, and in either event has cost the City and County of San Francisco in the neighborhood of \$150 million in infrastructure and security costs in its 11-plus years."

But the point is made nonetheless. Brown is not the go-to guy on this stadium stuff, and may offer significant political roadblocks to any end runs. That makes it harder for Jed York, or when the A's drop the public component on their stadium plan in San Jose, to turn dirt into diamonds.

In other words, just one more brick in the wall that keeps the status quo in these parts. And why York and John Fisher have to make a hard determination on how much of their personal fortunes they want to throw into what is for each of them a grandiose hobby.

In the meantime, San Jose State is angry with the governor because they wanted Spartan Stadium included in his "they're good stadiums" master plan. Nobody's ever happy.

New 'Raising Arizona' stars Huff, Gonzalez

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

Programming Alert: 'SportsNet Central: Raising Arizona' airs Tuesday at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.

Spring training is kicking into high gear out in the Valley of the Sun, where starting pitchers are working deeper into games and position players are sticking around for an extra at-bat or two before ceding the stage to prospects wearing uniform numbers more frequently seen on tight ends and linemen.

We're ramping up our own efforts here at Comcast SportsNet, too. As Opening Day approaches, our focus shifts every so slightly toward the men projected to make the biggest impact on the Bay Area's big-league landscape.

To wit: Tuesday's "SportsNet Central: Raising Arizona," airing at 8:30 p.m. and re-airing at 10 p.m., will feature the Giants' top 2010 MVP candidate and the A's pitcher quietly generating some 2011 Cy Young buzz.

From the moment Aubrey Huff showed up in orange and black, he was a hit both on the field and off. After shaking off a slow start, he led the Giants in several significant offensive categories while providing clubhouse leadership and frivolity that's impossible to quantify. His reward for helping guide the club to its first World Series championship since moving to the West Coast? A two-year, \$22 million contract.

Not bad for a guy who didn't get a single offer outside of San Francisco during the 2009-2010 offseason, and who called last season the most fun he's ever had in a uniform.

Now that he's back, the fun continues. Always entertaining, Huff on Tuesday offers his insight on top prospect Brandon Belt, who might eventually bump Huff from first base into the outfield, what that might do to his shot at winning an elusive (cough, cough) Gold Glove, and what it feels like to be at the center of the baseball world.

Going into the 2010 season, A's left-hander Gio Gonzalez had a lot to prove -- to himself and Oakland's brass. Blessed with a world of talent, Gonzalez had yet to fully tap into it, held back by what even he admitted was a lack of "poise, maturity, command, everything."

After a winter of soul-searching, though, Gonzalez got his act together and enjoyed a breakout season, winning 15 games while establishing himself as a cornerstone of one of the top young starting staffs in the game.

Finally afforded the luxury of not having to worry about spring training results this year, Gonzalez is getting them anyway. He's been lights-out in his first two Cactus League outings, striking out 10 over five innings of no-hit work.

Far from satisfied with mowing 'em down in the desert, Gonzalez joins us Tuesday to talk about his radical transformation, the impact of Dallas Braden on his development, and how the team is handling the heightened expectations -- as well at "MatsuiMania."

We'll also be talking about the news of the day, the big-picture story lines, and plenty more. I'm back in the Bay Area for the week, so I'll be reclaiming the host chair, and next to me to help break it all down will be one of our own cornerstones, longtime local radio personality Chris Townsend of 860-AM.

Like the Giants and A's these days, "Raising Arizona" is raising its game. Tonight at 8:30 p.m. on CSN Bay Area. Join us.

Ratto: LaRoche finding new home in Oakland

Ray Ratto, CSNBayArea.com

As spring training conundra go, backup shortstop ranks right up there with sixth-inning reliever, bullpen catcher, and weekend color analyst.

But both the Giants and A's are looking for someone to break up the every-day monotony of being the most important infielder, and the A's need is even more acute.

Enter Andy LaRoche, driving his third home run of the spring well over the left field wall against Tim Stauffer in Oakland's 6-3 win over San Diego.

LaRoche signed with A's after struggling to find a place in Los Angeles and Pittsburgh, and understood immediately that he would be responsible for learning whatever tasks he was put to if he wanted to hold a place on the 25-man roster.

"I'm just here to do whatever they want me to do," he said. "I've played more third base than anywhere else in the past, but I have to go where the opening is."

The opening here is at shortstop, where incumbent Cliff Pennington is coming back from shoulder surgery, and backup Adam Rosales isn't due back from his injury until May. LaRoche, who isn't a shortstop by nature, is about to play one on TV.

"We obviously have a need for that job," manager Bob Geren said of the backup infielder role, "and I want to give everyone a chance to win that job."

But LaRoche has the most imposing bat of the candidates, who also include Eric Sogard and Steve Tolleson. Also the greatest urgency, as he has been stuck behind circumstances in his prior stops, never breaking through in L.A. and getting stuck behind Pedro Alvarez in Pittsburgh after being shipped there.

"I came here because Billy (Beane) had been after me for awhile," he said, "and because this looked like a good place for a job." He also said he talked with Daric Barton and Kurt Suzuki for their imprimaturs, though the need probably superseded the selling.

That said, LaRoche isn't just going to be a shortstop if he survives the cuts. He does daily work at all four infield positions, because the art of kicking obstacles out of the way starts with getting your foot in the door.

Shortstop, though, is probably the way he will be graded here. As Beane said, "I'm not big on speculating on anything this early in the spring, but I will say the ability to play shortstop will enhance his opportunity."

Also hitting 415-foot homers, he might have added.

Early-season schedule will test A's resolve right away in 2011

Sam McPherson, examiner.com, March 9th, 2011 9:08 am PT

The Oakland Athletics open the 2011 season at home with three games against the Seattle Mariners, but after that, they're going to be tested significantly.

Based on 2010 results and expectations for 2011, opening at home against the Mariners could be a good thing for the A's: Seattle finished with the worst record in the American League, while Oakland was second in the AL West.

But immediately after that opening, three-game set, the A's hit the road for nine games against some of the better teams in the AL, and that road trip could set an early tone for Oakland's chances in 2011.

After a travel day on April 4, the A's face Toronto for three games. Last year, the Blue Jays won 85 games and led the major leagues with 257 home runs -- 46 more home runs than any other team. And Oakland gave up 25 runs in three losses to Toronto on the road in 2010 as well.

Next up will be three games against the two-time defending AL Central champion Minnesota Twins. Oakland lost six of nine against the Twinkies last year, and playing them on the road is never easy -- although it's certainly much nicer now that Minnesota doesn't play its games at the Metrodome any more.

Finally, to wrap up the nine-game road trip, the A's face the White Sox in Chicago. The ChiSox won 88 games last season, and they're ready to challenge Minnesota for the AL Central crown they last won in 2008. Oakland won five of nine against the White Sox in 2010, but only one of three on the South Side.

And if you're paying attention here, that's nine road games in nine days -- without a break.

Facing teams that averaged 89 wins last year -- eight more wins than the A's earned -- in nine straight road games without a rest day is definitely going to show Oakland and its fans where the team stands early in the season. While slow starts to any season can be overcome, it's still better to get out to a good start.

Every win in April means that September may be a little less taxing on the psyche, after all.

A's Top Prospects: Beyond The Top-50, Part 1

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 8, 2011

Every year, our most difficult task is choosing only 50 prospects to include in our Oakland A's top prospect list. There are many more players than those 50 to keep an eye on, some of whom will develop into household names in a few years. In a two-part article, we look at 35 players that we considered for our list but didn't make the cut for one reason or another...

Note: These names are in alphabetical order and not in rank order. Below are players A-L.

Anthony Aliotti: The A's 15th round pick in 2009 has distinguished himself as one of the top fielding first basemen in the A's system. Aliotti also did a decent job at the plate in 2010 for Low-A Kane County, batting .278 with a .397 OBP and 77 RBIs. The St. Mary's College alum's biggest weakness is that he doesn't yet hit for the power expected of a first baseman. He had only five homeruns and a .379 SLG in 2010. The southpaw hit left-handers just as well as he hit right-handers and his post All-Star OPS with Kane County was 826. If he can increase his overall power numbers without sacrificing his plate discipline, the 23-year-old could see his stock rise quickly.

Yusuf Carter: Carter is an unusual prospect in that he has been old for his level the last two seasons, but that has been, in large part, because he is making the transition to a difficult new defensive position. Carter was picked up by the A's in the minor league Rule 5 draft before the 2009 season. An outfielder in the Chicago Cubs' chain, Carter was moved behind the plate by Oakland. Carter had played some catcher as an amateur, but he was learning on the fly in 2009 with Stockton when he appeared in 91 games. He struggled defensively, but showed improvement as the season went on. Offensively, he posted an 867 OPS and hit 14 homers. In 2010, Carter began the year with Double-A Midland and struggled offensively before landing on the disabled list. He returned to Stockton after recovering from his injury and hit 13 homers in only 48 games while posting an 897 OPS. Carter turned 26 last month, but he is young to catching. He has good hands and a strong arm and his power separates him from most other minor league catchers. The A's are deep in minor league catching talent, however, so he'll need to stay healthy in 2011 and continue to improve defensively to remain on the depth chart.

Jason Christian: A shoulder injury has severely impacted the past two seasons for Christian, who put together an impressive pro debut season in 2008. The infielder was the A's fifth-round pick in 2008. He posted an 821 OPS in 2008 and stole 28 bases in 31 chances in 86 games for Low-A Kane County in 2009 before a shoulder injury ended his season early. Christian began the 2010 season on the High-A Stockton roster, but he was ineffective in the early going, batting only .162 in 12 games before landing on the DL again. After completing his rehab, he spent the remainder of the 2010 season with Kane County, for whom he got off to a slow start initially but hit well down the stretch. Christian can play all over the infield and has the patience and speed to be a top-of-the-order hitter. He will need to show that the shoulder injury is behind him in 2011 to move back up the prospect rankings.

Dusty Coleman: Like Christian, Coleman saw his 2009 and 2010 seasons severely impacted by injury. In 2009, Coleman played the entire season, but he probably shouldn't have, as it was revealed after the season that he was playing with a broken wrist for much of the year. He had surgery after the 2009 season, but the first surgery left him with some pain and mobility issues, so he had to go under the knife a second time. He missed the entire 2010 campaign. The A's went over-slot to sign Coleman -- their 28th round pick in 2008 -- and they like the athleticism and power that he brings to the shortstop position. Before the injury, Coleman was among the league leaders in most hitting categories in the Midwest League and the A's feel that wasn't a fluke. Wrist injuries can be tricky for hitters, but if Coleman can regain his pre-injury form, he will be a player on the rise in 2011.

Bobby Cramer: A major league rookie at age 30, Cramer doesn't fit the profile of a typical prospect, which is why we left him off of our top-50 prospects list. Nonetheless he is likely to have the biggest impact on the A's in 2011 of any player on this list. Cramer had a long and unusual odyssey to the major leagues, a journey that included being released by the Tampa Bay Rays while he battled a shoulder injury, retiring from baseball first to work on an oil rig and then teach high school math,

signing with Oakland and rising from A-ball to Triple-A in one season only to be let go the following off-season, playing independent baseball, re-signing with the A's only to be loaned out to a Mexican Summer League team in his second season with the team, winning the Mexican League's Pitcher of the Year award, starring for Triple-A Sacramento during their push for the playoffs and, finally, making his major league debut as a starter for one of the top rotations in baseball. Cramer distinguished himself with the A's last season (3.04 ERA in four starts) and is pitching well in big league camp as he pushes to be the A's fifth starter on Opening Day. He is a crafty left-hander whose fastball sits in the mid- to high-80s, but he has an excellent feel for his secondary pitches and good location. If he can stay healthy, he could carve out a nice career as a fifth starter, even though he is already 31.

Vicmal De La Cruz: De La Cruz was one of the A's two high-profile international amateur signings in 2010. The 17-year-old Dominican outfielder was considered one of the top talents in this year's "July 2nd signing class," although he actually didn't sign with the A's until mid-November. De La Cruz reportedly signed for an \$800,000 bonus. He is a left-handed hitter with outstanding raw tools. He has above-average speed, a strong throwing arm and a powerful, if sometimes wild, swing that scouts anticipate will allow De La Cruz to develop into a power hitter as he grows into his body. De La Cruz and fellow 2010 "July 2nd signing" Renato Nunez were not included on our 2011 top prospects list because they hadn't yet played at least one professional inning. De La Cruz is a likely addition to the 2012 list, and he is set to make his pro debut with the A's Dominican League club in 2011.

Jose Guzman: Guzman made our "Beyond the top-50" list last year and, although he had a strong season for Low-A Kane County in 2010, he just missed the top-50 again this year. The Dominican right-hander saved 18 games for the Cougars while posting a 3.40 ERA and striking-out 49 in 50.1 innings. Although Guzman has been in the organization for six years and has pitched at least one inning for a full-season affiliate the past five seasons, Guzman's 2010 campaign was his first full year with a full-season affiliate. The 23-year-old doesn't have plus velocity, but when he is pitching within himself, he locates well in the lower-half of the strike-zone and he has a good change-up. Guzman was a starter early in his career, but he has been exclusively a reliever the past three seasons and the role suits him well. He should go to Stockton in 2011.

Michael Hart: Hart was selected in the 19th round by the A's in 2008. He pitched well in his pro debut season with Vancouver and had a 2.96 ERA in 24 relief innings with Low-A Kane County in 2009 when he landed on the DL with a shoulder injury that required surgery. Hart began the 2010 season at extended spring training and was on the short-season Vancouver Canadians' Opening Day roster. Hart dominated the Northwest League, posting a 1.06 ERA and striking out 27 while walking only five in 17 innings. He joined the High-A Stockton roster for the final six weeks of the season and had a 2.77 ERA with a 12:7 K:BB ratio in 13 innings with the Ports. Because he missed time with injury, Hart has only 90 professional innings under his belt and he is already 24, but the right-hander has good stuff. As a reliever, he could move quickly through the system if he is healthy.

Carlos Hernandez: Although the win is an overrated stat for pitchers, there is still something to be said for a pitcher who consistently puts his team in a position for the W. Hernandez has been that guy throughout his minor league career. The left-hander went 7-0 in 2008, 15-8 in 2009 and 9-3 in 2010. A workhorse, Hernandez doesn't have overpowering stuff, but he gets results with a solid array of off-speed pitches and the ability to induce groundballs. After finishing the 2009 season with Double-A Midland, Hernandez spent all of 2010 with the Rockhounds, as well. He posted a 4.37 ERA in 129.2 innings. He struck-out 96, but saw his walk total jump to 48. Hernandez did do a good job keeping the ball in the park, however, allowing only six homeruns. Hernandez had a rough stretch in June and July, when his ERA was in the sevens, but he had an ERA under 3.00 for April, May, August and September. He pitched for the Phoenix Desert Dogs in the Arizona Fall League and struggled with some arm fatigue that limited him to only five outings. He pitched well in three of the outings but struggled in two. Hernandez has Dallas Braden-like intensity on the mound and profiles as a similar pitcher to Braden, but Hernandez doesn't have Braden's plus change-up. Hernandez will compete this spring for a spot in the Triple-A Sacramento rotation.

Ryan Hughes: Hughes doesn't have numbers that jump off the page, but he has intriguing potential. The son of former NFL guard Ernie Hughes, the younger Hughes didn't take up baseball with any seriousness until he was at Chabot Community College. He was an all-state discus thrower in high school and that arm strength has carried over onto the mound. The A's 2010 16th round pick was previously a 2008 16th round pick of the Arizona Diamondbacks. He only threw 10 innings for Nebraska in 2010 and didn't put up good numbers, but the A's see a lot of potential in the 6'6", 230 pound left-hander. The East Bay native has a solid fastball that is clocked at 90 MPH, but is firm. He also has a good split-finger and slider. Although he is already 22, Hughes has put very little mileage on his arm due to his lack of high school pitching experience, so his timeframe is a little different than most prospects.

Brett Hunter: Things haven't gone according to script for Hunter since he signed a record-breaking above-slot deal with the A's after being selected in the seventh round in 2008. Hunter was considered a first-round prospect before the draft, but slid thanks to an arm injury. He has struggled with arm problems off and on since then, and has also found trouble keeping a consistent throwing motion and arm slot. The results haven't been pretty. In 87 minor league innings over the past two-plus seasons, Hunter has a 6.39 ERA and he has walked 90 batters. On the plus side, his pure stuff is still good enough that he has struck-out 111 batters and has allowed only six homeruns. Hunter spent the last six weeks of the 2010 season on the DL and missed Instructs while he was rehabbing an arm injury. He was cleared for spring training, but it isn't yet known whether he will be ready at the start of the 2011 season. A starter in college, Hunter spent last season in the bullpen and he is likely to remain there. If he can get his delivery worked out, he could be a dangerous relief prospect with his mid-90s

fastball and sharp breaking ball.

Ben Hornbeck: The 2009 season was a breakthrough campaign for Hornbeck, who struck-out 159 batters in only 116.1 innings while posting a 3.17 ERA for Kane County, Stockton and Midland. Unfortunately, the 2010 season wasn't as kind to Hornbeck, who struggled badly with Midland and then was unable to recapture his 2009 form with Stockton. In 131.2 innings, he struck-out 138, but he allowed 156 hits and 21 homers, resulting in a 4.85 ERA. Hornbeck has a plus change-up, but his fastball and breaking ball are only average, making him very hittable if his command isn't perfect. Hornbeck has always been very difficult for lefties to hit and he may be an ideal candidate to move to the bullpen as a left-handed specialist.

Deyvi Jimenez: Jimenez, a big, strong right-hander from the Dominican Republic, put together a solid season with the Vancouver Canadians in 2010 and looks ready to make the jump to full-season ball. In 61 innings, Jimenez posted a 3.54 ERA. He struck-out 48 and walked only 13. His strike-out totals were lower than one would like to see, but he induced a ton of groundballs and showed good command. Unfortunately, Jimenez finished the season on the shelf with a sore right elbow. Assuming he is healthy at the start of 2011, he will likely make his full season debut with Low-A Burlington.

Jonathan Joseph: His progress has been gradual, but Joseph finally made his mark in professional baseball in 2010. In a career-high 94.1 innings split between short-season Vancouver and Low-A Kane County, the Dominican right-hander posted a 3.05 ERA and struck-out 90 while allowing only two homeruns. The soon-to-be 23-year-old Joseph is a hard-thrower, regularly hitting 94 MPH on the radar gun. His secondary pitches have taken longer to develop, but they are getting better. Joseph will likely get a chance to start with High-A Stockton in 2011.

Jared Lansford: Lansford put together another puzzling season in 2010. As he did in 2009, Lansford, 24, pitched well for Double-A Midland, but struggled badly with Triple-A Sacramento. In 37 innings with the Rockhounds, Lansford had a 2.43 ERA and 12 saves. He struck-out 29, but walked 19. The Pacific Coast League did not treat him kindly, as Lansford had a 7.94 ERA in 17 innings. Although his sinker has continued to be a very effective pitch, Lansford's command has caused him a number of problems. He walked 27 in 54 innings last season, a number that will have to improve if he is going to take the next step in his career.

Ryan Lipkin: Lipkin was a repeat draftee by the A's, who took him in the 24th round in 2010 after using their 43rd round pick on him in 2009. Oakland was able to sign him this time around and the USF alum is making a strong initial impression on the A's. Although his .272/.328/.353 line in 184 at-bats with Vancouver last season was mediocre, he had a strong finish to his 2010 campaign, batting .338/.423/.397 in August, and he played well during the A's fall Instructional League. He is advanced defensively and has a good eye at the plate. The A's are deep at the catcher position, but a team can never have too many talented back-stops.