

A's News Clips, Friday, March 11, 2011

Oakland A's second baseman Mark Ellis nears longevity milestone

By Carl Steward csteward@bayareanewsgroup.com

PHOENIX -- As long as there aren't any health hiccups this spring, A's second baseman Mark Ellis will achieve a significant milestone during the first week of the regular season -- 1,000 games played in an Oakland uniform.

He's at 994 and counting, and turning the odometer is a bigger deal than it might seem. Ellis will become just the 13th player to do that in Oakland and the first second baseman (Dick Green played in 1,158 games for the A's spanning Kansas City and Oakland, 721 for the latter).

The significance is not lost on Ellis, who in January 2001 was an extra player in an A's trade that netted Johnny Damon, who was gone the next year. Ellis originally was drafted by the Kansas City Royals, and getting traded after just a year and a half as a pro shocked him.

"I didn't know what to think when I got traded," he said. "All I know is I got on the computer and looked at the middle infield prospects Oakland had, and there were quite a few at the time. I thought, 'This isn't good.' "

But it has turned out to be very good. Ellis not only is on the verge of 1,000 games played for the A's but also should be in their longevity top 10 at some point this season, passing Joe Rudi (10th at 1,088), Jose Canseco (1,058) and Jason Giambi (1,036).

"It is special," said Ellis. "This organization has been good to me and my family, and I feel like I've been able to give something to the organization, too. So to reach 1,000 games is nice. I don't think too many guys can say they've been with one team as long as I have."

Only a dozen here, and it hasn't been easy getting there, either. Ellis missed the entire 2004 season with a torn labrum, and other injuries have limited him to just two seasons in which he played 150 or more games. He played in just 124 games last year, beset by a hamstring injury that put him on the disabled list in mid-April and troubled him much of the year. In 2009, he spent 55 games on the disabled list with a strained calf and played in just 105 games.

Hence, Ellis' ability to continue climbing the games played ladder beyond 2011 might much depend on a healthy season. He's a free agent at season's end, and while there is not an imminent heir apparent -- top prospect Jemile Weeks played at Double-A Midland last year, hitting .267 -- Ellis is 33 and probably needs to demonstrate some durability to have a chance at being re-signed.

Ellis wants to stay beyond 2011 but isn't sure what the future holds.

"It's not up to me ... well, it's kind of up to me, but it's not solely in my hands," he said. "You have to be wanted back, and I'm not sure where (the A's) stand on that right now. So we'll have to wait and see."

Even though his power numbers were down for a third straight year in 2010, Ellis led the A's with a .291 average among those who logged 100 or more games. Moreover, he had another phenomenal year in the field, committing just three errors. Even though he's never won a Gold Glove, he has the second-highest career fielding percentage at second in MLB history (.990).

"I've never been a real big numbers guy, but I figure if I can stay on the field and be healthy for a full season, that's the key," he said. "Every time I've been able to do that, I've been pretty productive."

He's been productive through two eras, the Big Three era of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito, and the one the A's have been trying to rebuild ever since their last playoff season of 2006. With the departure of Eric Chavez this offseason, Ellis not only is the A's senior member but also has more than double the continuous service time in Oakland of any other player in the organization.

"There's been a lot of turnover the last few years, and it's sad to see a lot of your friends go, but at the same time, you get to meet a lot of new, young guys with a lot of energy," he said. "In a perfect world, you'd stay together with the same guys for 10 years, but baseball in this day and age isn't that way anymore."

Whether or not this is Ellis' last year in Oakland, he wants it to be memorable.

"I want to get back to the playoffs and get to that level like it was when I first got called up to the big leagues (in 2002)," he said. "I want to get that energy and excitement back in the ballpark every day, and in the ballclub every day, too."

A's notebook: Closer Andrew Bailey impresses in first outing since September surgery

By Carl Steward csteward@bayareanewsgroup.com

PHOENIX -- It lasted a mere 12 pitches Thursday, but they were 12 of the biggest A's pitches of the spring.

Closer Andrew Bailey made his first official appearance since late September surgery to remove bone chips and spurs from his right elbow, and it couldn't have gone much better: a 1-2-3 inning with two strikeouts.

Bailey threw all fastballs, but the Kansas City Royals hitters he faced still looked overmatched.

"Next time, I'll go with some other things, but I was just trying to work both sides of the plate with the fastball first time out," he said.

He said he was nervous, but that might have been the case even if he hadn't had surgery.

"You love to play, and getting your feet wet, it's kind of like Christmas Day," he said. "You're anxious, and you can't sleep the night before."

Bailey said he should be ready to go if he can get six to eight appearances before the season opener April 1. For now, he'll rest for two days and expects to pitch Sunday.

The strangest adjustment Bailey said he's having to make is the extra extension he's getting now that his elbow is cleaned up. He's been pitching with elbow issues the past four years and now has significantly more flexibility.

"It's not going to change your release point, but there's a little different feel for pitches," he said. "It's not a learning experience, but it's pretty cool to walk around with a straight arm, or semi-straight. I can actually get the milk out of the refrigerator without having to put half my body in there."

Brett Anderson made his third spring start and reached the 60-pitch range in 31/3 innings. He allowed three hits, two runs, two walks and struck out four.

Manager Bob Geren was sufficiently impressed.

"It was a nice effort," Geren said. "He's right where he needs to be."

The A's tied the Royals 4-4 in a game called after nine innings. The A's scored all four runs in the first inning on a two-run homer by Kurt Suzuki, his first of the spring, and a two-run double by Matt Carson.

Medical report: Reliever Craig Breslow (hamstring strain) still hasn't pitched beyond a BP session and his return is indefinite. First baseman Daric Barton (calf contusion) was scratched before game time. He is expected to play today in one of the A's split-squad affairs.

Chin Music: Bailey set for long-awaited debut

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune, 3/10/2011 10:13AM

The A's have been exceedingly cautious with their key bullpen guys. Andrew Bailey, Michael Wuertz and Craig Breslow have yet to pitch in a game this spring, but that changes today when Bailey takes the mound for the first time against Kansas City. Bailey, who was shut down in September to have bone chips and spurs removed on his right elbow, has looked great in his side sessions but this will be the first real test. He's not on any real pitch limit, and manager Bob Geren says he'll go an inning.

Wuertz has had one side session throwing BP so far and will have another Saturday, with a tentative first game appearance next Tuesday. Breslow is the most worrisome case at the moment with a nagging hamstring issue that cropped

while he was conditioning after a BP mound stint Monday. It's unsure when he'll throw, and his situation is day-to-day. Not to the panic stage yet, though.

Elsewhere, Daric Barton is still feeling some calf stiffness after his Sunday collision, and even though he was originally in today's lineup, had to be scratched after testing it. Maybe Friday, says Geren. Rich Harden continues to progress with long-toss sessions and may be ready for a mound stint soon, probably BP at first before a game. Adam Rosales, who is not projected to be ready by Opening Day following offseason foot surgery, is doing some light work.

Here's today's A's lineup: CF Crisp, C Suzuki, LF Willingham, DH Matsui, 3B Kouzmanoff, 2B LaRoche, RF Carson, 1B Timmons, SS Pennington. Brett Anderson starts.

The Royals, if you're keeping score at home: CF Cain, 2B Getz, 1B Butler, 3B Betemit, RF Maier, LF Gordon, DH Myers, C Perez, SS Bianchi. Will Smith starts for KC. No, not that Will Smith.

Other stuff:

The A's will play a split-squad Friday, with Gio Gonzalez and Tyson Ross scheduled to start in the respective games, one in Phoenix and the other in Maryvale.

Joe Torre had some nice things to say about Hideki Matsui as he was making the rounds as MLB's new VP of baseball operations Wednesday. You can find his comments here: <http://tinyurl.com/4vybzay>

A's Beat: Bailey makes debut, looks to be in form

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Andrew Bailey was so excited to finally be back in game action Thursday, he compared it to Christmas Day.

"You can't sleep the night before," he said.

That was an exaggeration - he slept just fine, Bailey admitted. He still had some anxiety before throwing his first pitch in a game this spring, coming back from elbow surgery.

Once he'd thrown that first pitch - which registered 94 mph - he was fine. Or maybe even better: Bailey pitched a 1-2-3 inning with two strikeouts, and he needed only 12 pitches.

The A's closer had planned to throw all fastballs, simply to establish that he could use it on both sides, but he wound up uncorking his cutter and got both strikeouts with it.

Bailey is likely to get two days off, then work in Sunday's game. He said he would like to get into five or six games before the team heads back to the Bay Area, and manager **Bob Geren** said Bailey might work in back-to-back games in Arizona.

More relief: Craig Breslow, on the same throwing schedule as Bailey, did not pitch Thursday because of hamstring discomfort, but the A's had planned to cut back on his workload this spring. Breslow pitched all of six innings last spring and then appeared in 75 games.

Michael Wuertz will throw one more bullpen session before appearing in his first spring game next week.

Chulk iffy: Nonroster reliever **Vinnie Chulk** has missed a week with a sore left oblique muscle, he said. He made 60 long-toss throws Thursday and hopes to be back in a game in four days or so.

Chulk, the onetime Giants right-hander, is a longshot this spring, especially with a 16.20 ERA. But a few good outings for a reliever in this small sample-size period can shrink an ERA markedly, and what Chulk really wants is for the A's to get a good look at him.

"This is not good timing, being here on an invite," Chulk said, "but I feel good about this time, regardless of whether I make it or not out of the spring. They treat everyone the same, and it's relaxed, but they want to get after it - it's the same atmosphere as the Giants. And it's just nice to be with a team with a chance to win."

Briefly: First cuts are likely to come Monday, which is when position players report to minor-league camp. Minor-league pitchers and catchers reported this week. ... **Daric Barton** was a scratch from Thursday's lineup because of continued calf soreness. **Wes Timmons** played first base. ... **Rich Harden** (lat stiffness) is likely to throw off the mound Sunday or Monday for the first time since Feb. 15.

Cactus League recap

Score: A's 4, Royals 4

Notable: Coco Crisp had a double, a walk and a run scored. He's 8-for-19. ... Andy LaRoche continues to make a strong push for the backup infield spot with two hits, including a double. He's 9-for-22. ... Cliff Pennington played seven innings at shortstop and said he's close to being ready to hit right-handed in a game. ... Kurt Suzuki hit his first homer of the spring, a two-run shot in the first. ... Brian Fuentes hasn't allowed a run in four appearances. ... Yadel Marti worked two scoreless innings and struck out three. Opponents are 2-for-17 against him.

Quotable: "It's weird to walk around with a semi-straight arm. I can get the milk out of the fridge without putting half my body in there." - *Reliever Andrew Bailey on his improved arm extension after surgery to clean up his right elbow.*

Today's games: Dodgers (Chad Billingsley) at A's (Gio Gonzalez), and A's (Tyson Ross) at Brewers (Yovani Gallardo), 12:05 p.m.

Drumbeat: Barton scratched, Bailey scheduled to pitch

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni 3/10/2011 10:23AM

Daric Barton was scratched from the original lineup because of continued calf soreness; it's just a contusion and he's considered day-to-day. If he's not in the lineup by the weekend, it will be a real surprise.

Wes Timmons takes over at first base, and he's quietly having a nice spring, hitting .300 with six walks and one strikeout in 27 plate appearances. That'll get you noticed in Oakland's camp.

The A's are in need of a backup infielder, and Timmons plays every infield spot, although he might be best suited to the corners. With Cliff Pennington coming off of left shoulder surgery, there is little doubt that shortstop skills will factor quite a bit when the A's make this decision, and that might leave Timmons at a disadvantage.

The good thing is that he's come to a new organization after nine years in the Braves' system, and he's making an impression. So even if he doesn't win a roster spot out of camp, the A's know what they have in the event they need more of a backup corner guy. He's 31 years old - he'd love a shot whenever he can get one.

Andrew Bailey will be in his first spring game today, working one inning, so 20-25 pitches. Craig Breslow is looking at another few days before his first spring appearance, and Michael Wuertz will throw one more bullpen session before his spring debut.

I was back home for several days, so took a quick look at the team stats when I got back here this morning to see if there were any surprises. I'm not going to consider Coco Crisp's .412 average a surprise in general - we know the guy can hit, and he tends to get hot and do this every once in while. But coming as much of it has after an arrest for suspicion of drunk driving, perhaps it's an indication that Crisp isn't allowing that issue to distract him any.

It's on the pitching side that there are some nice numbers really starting to add up. Tyson Ross hasn't allowed a run in 6 2/3 innings and has struck out six and not walked a man. Batters are 3-for-16 against Brad Ziegler. And non-roster right-hander Fernando Cabrera has retired 12 of 13 batters. Gabe DeHoyos, also not on the roster, four appearances, no runs.

The latter two typically get into games in the later stages, usually against minor-leaguers. Still, that was Andrew Bailey two years ago, putting up lots of zeroes against minor leaguers for weeks, and eventually making the team. Now, this bullpen is too stacked for that to happen, barring multiple injuries, but as with Timmons, a nice camp now can translate into good things down the road, either in Oakland or perhaps with another team. Scouts are everywhere this time of year, and they're all looking to find that one spring gem who might get run through waivers or who might get an out from a contract.

One scout quizzed me last week about Anthony Recker and the A's plans for him - everyone needs catching, and he can hit a little (during the spring, he hits a ton), he's sharp, and he's paid his dues. Good backup material, and this is his last season under A's control if he doesn't make the roster; he'll be a six-year minor-league free agent next winter.

Health treating A's well so far in spring

Gonzalez showing glimpses of bright future in early going

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Nearly a month's worth of days at A's camp have passed in an uncharacteristically quiet and seamless fashion.

The laundry list of injuries, occasionally expansive, is rather short. And any anticipation surrounding open roster spots -- aside from the fifth starter slot -- has been kept to a minimum. It's quite the change for manager Bob Geren, but he doesn't mind.

"No news is always good news," the A's skipper said.

That, of course, could change at any moment. But, for the time being, Oakland is functioning as a healthy and happy unit. Losses, which have stacked higher than wins for the A's in Cactus League play, are of no worry, as spring statistics don't mean much to this ballclub.

What We've Learned

Coco Crisp is intent on not making a distraction of last week's arrest for suspicion of drunk driving. The A's outfielder, who offered a sincere apology following the incident, has reached base safely in each of his seven games and is 8-for-19 (.421) with seven RBIs, which ties him for seventh in the Cactus League.

Crisp isn't the only center fielder making noise this spring. Oakland's first-round in the 2010 Draft, Michael Choice, is garnering plenty attention with his strong bat, blazing speed and impressive defense. The 21-year-old prospect is likely ticketed for Class A Stockton to start the season, but he has already left a lasting impression on many.

On the mound, Gio Gonzalez is proving that last year's breakout season was no fluke. The lefty, looking to build on a 2010 season in which he pitched 200 2/3 innings, has struck out 10 in five no-hit spring frames.

"It's been about trying to find a groove, build confidence," Gonzalez said. "Every outing, I'm trying to go out there, do my best and take advantage of the fact I have this time to work."

What To Watch For

Cliff Pennington, who had mid-October left shoulder surgery, appears on track for Opening Day, while Adam Rosales' right foot injury will keep him off the active roster until May. Thus, the fight for the infield utility spot is on full display. The A's are in no rush to make a decision, and they're set on lending strong looks to the likes of Steve Tolleson, Eric Sogard and Andy LaRoche, who has offered a spark of power, hitting three home runs this spring.

The competition doesn't stop there. All eyes are on the No. 5 starter spot, which appears to be up for grabs between Josh Outman, Tyson Ross, Brandon McCarthy and Bobby Cramer. Righty Rich Harden was an early possibility and strong favorite, but he's been sidelined with a sore lat muscle since the start of camp and likely won't be ready by Opening Day.

"They're all very strong candidates," Geren said. "It makes for a tough decision, but that's a good thing. We hope it's tough until the end."

Not to be ignored is the backup catcher's gig. Incumbent Landon Powell appears to be the front-runner because of his experience and relationship with the team's staff, but Josh Donaldson and Anthony Recker give Geren plenty of options.

Anderson has K's working in A's tie

In Cactus League debut, Bailey tosses scoreless inning

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The A's moved the winning run to third base with two outs in the ninth inning of their Cactus League exhibition against a Royals split squad on Thursday, but a Grant Green groundout wrapped up the game with a 4-4 final score.

Royals left-hander Will Smith struggled in the opening frame, walking Coco Crisp before serving up a two-run homer to Kurt Suzuki, the catcher's first long ball this spring. Matt Carson also added a two-run double following a walk by Kevin Kouzmanoff and a double from Andy LaRoche.

Right-hander Aaron Crow, one of the Royals' many highly regarded prospects, pitched the third and fourth innings without allowing a hit, although he did issue one walk.

Meanwhile, for the first three innings, A's starter Brett Anderson looked like the dominant pitcher who posted a 2.80 ERA last season. Anderson hit trouble in the fourth, though, allowing a ground-rule double to Mitch Maier after Wilson Betemit singled, then letting a run score on a wild pitch. Another run came across on a fielding error by Kouzmanoff at third base. In all, Anderson struck out four and walked two across 3 2/3 innings.

"This outing statistically wasn't as good as my last outing, but I pitched more like it was the regular season," Anderson said. "I threw a couple breaking balls and just wanted to make sure I could get people out. I went back to work on some stuff and worked on stuff I usually don't throw."

The Royals scored another run in the fifth inning against reliever Grant Balfour when Chris Getz tripled and scored on a groundout by Billy Butler. Kansas City tied it up in the seventh when a sacrifice fly by Kurt Mertins scored Lucas May.

Royals right-hander Louis Coleman, who pitched two perfect innings and struck out the side in the fifth, used a slider to great effect.

"It wasn't the case in the 'pen going into the game, but when we got out there, I threw one in warmups that I got on top of and it felt good," Coleman said. "So I thought I was going to be able to use it as another pitch today, and it helped me get through that [fourth] inning, because I got behind the first two batters. If I didn't have it, it could've turned out a lot different."

In the fifth, Coleman struck out Suzuki, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui. A bullpen candidate, Coleman has given up just one run in six Cactus League innings so far, recording eight strikeouts.

A's closer Andrew Bailey, coming off minor right elbow surgery, also made his spring debut and tossed a scoreless sixth inning, striking out two of three batters he faced. Royals closer Joakim Soria also pitched a scoreless sixth inning but allowed two singles before inducing a double play and a groundout to end the inning.

Up next for the A's: The A's have split-squad action on Friday, with left-hander Gio Gonzalez getting the start against the Dodgers in Phoenix at 12:05 p.m. PT and right-hander Tyson Ross taking the hill against the Brewers in Maryvale, also at 12:05 p.m. First baseman Daric Barton, who has been battling a left calf contusion, could make his return on Thursday.

Up next for Royals: Kansas City will get its first look at the much-acclaimed Salt River Field at Talking Stick when meeting the Rockies on Friday at 2:05 p.m. CT. Right-hander Luke Hochevar, the leading candidate to be the Royals' Opening Day starter, will start. He'll probably bat for the Royals as well because, for the first time all spring, their pitchers will be in the lineup as hitters against the National League club. In previous visits to NL teams, that rule was either waived or the NL club agreed to use the designated hitter. The Rockies, though, wanted to play the game strictly under NL rules. Other possible batters among pitchers are Mike Montgomery and Tim Collins.

Bailey shows no ill effects in strong debut

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- A's closer Andrew Bailey made his Cactus League debut on Thursday against the Royals, and it couldn't have been more of a success.

Bailey struck out two of the three batters he faced in the sixth inning and set the Royals down in order on just 12 pitches. His performance certainly impressed A's left-hander Brett Anderson, who started the game and allowed two runs over 3 1/3 innings.

"It's good to get Bailey back in the swing of things," Anderson said. "He's obviously a big part of our bullpen, and we'll need him throughout the course of the season."

Now, manager Bob Geren is looking to get more work in for Bailey, considering the right-hander's late start in Spring Training after he underwent minor surgery on his right elbow in the offseason.

"We looked at two days off and one on, and he'd get enough appearances that way," Geren said. "But we also looked at one off and one on, and potentially back-to-back later. But we'll take it one step at a time."

Anderson feels strong after latest start

PHOENIX -- A's left-hander Brett Anderson was effective against the Royals during Thursday's 4-4 tie, allowing two runs over 3 1/3 innings while striking out four, but he couldn't help but call it a "blah outing."

Anderson didn't like that he walked two hitters and allowed a run to score on a wild pitch, but the lefty said it was a step in the right direction because he's feeling good on the mound.

"I like where I'm at physically," Anderson said. "I'm still working on changeups and fastballs in and away, but when it comes to it and I make my first start, I'll just go with whatever's working, just to get people out no matter what pitch it is."

And while Anderson wasn't fully happy with his performance, his manager came away impressed by the way he looked.

"He did a nice job," manager Bob Geren said. "He threw some good changeups and just did a real nice job. We're hoping to stretch him into the 80-pitch range next time. And hopefully, more like 100 after that, so he's right where we want him to be."

Barton not quite ready to return

PHOENIX -- A's first baseman Daric Barton, who has been limited by a right calf contusion, was slated to return from his injury on Thursday against the Royals but was a late scratch in favor of non-roster invitee Wes Timmons.

A's manager Bob Geren said that Barton didn't suffer a setback but is still day-to-day after colliding 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, Ariz.

"Barton's not ready to play," Geren said. "I had to make a last-minute change."

Barton, 25, led the A's in games played last season with 159. He also batted .273 with a .393 on-base percentage along with 10 home runs, 79 runs scored and 57 RBIs.

Injured A's pitchers progressing

PHOENIX -- A's manager Bob Geren had a few updates regarding three of his injured pitchers on Thursday.

Reliever Michael Wuertz (right shoulder) is scheduled to throw again on Saturday and could make his Cactus League debut on Tuesday, while fellow right-handed reliever Craig Breslow is still day-to-day with a left hamstring strain.

Right-hander Rich Harden (lat muscle) is also getting close to throwing off a mound, as he began his final session of throwing for two days and taking one day off. Harden, though, is still not likely to be ready for the start of the regular season.

Suzuki homers as A's tie Royals

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Kurt Suzuki hit a two-run homer and Matt Carson doubled home two runs for the A's in a 4-4 tie Thursday against a Kansas City Royals split squad.

The game was called after nine innings.

A's starter Brett Anderson lasted 3½ innings, allowing two runs and three hits.

"It was hot, I can say that," Anderson said. "It felt like 100 today after being 70 the past couple games. You never get used to a 15-20 degree difference."

It was actually 83, the warmest it's been for a game at Oakland's home this spring.

A's closer Andrew Bailey made his spring debut with a perfect inning, including a pair of strikeouts.

"It's good to see guys coming back," Anderson said. "It's good to see him back in the swing of things. He's going to be an integral part of our bullpen."

Andy LaRoche added two hits for the A's and is 6 for 9 over his last four games.

A'S NOTES

Outfielder Coco Crisp has reached base in each of his seven games.

Pitcher Michael Wuertz (shoulder) will throw a bullpen session Saturday and could see game action as early as Tuesday.

First baseman Daric Barton (bruised right calf) was scratched from the lineup.

Pitcher Rich Harden (lat muscle) began his final cycle of throwing two days and taking a day off.

Pitcher Craig Breslow (mild hamstring strain) is still a few days away.

Harrell Miller: Looking for an Oakland locker

Harrell Miller, Napa Valley Register, 3/10/2011

PHOENIX — The spring trainings of my pre-television youth were always creations of my imagination. I had no trouble envisioning the members of my beloved St. Louis Cardinals sweating it out under the palm trees of St. Petersburg; huffing and puffing as they worked off the pounds they had gained on the winter rubber chicken circuit.

I was convinced that from the last game in the fall to the first game in the spring, they had done little else but play golf, make speeches and eat banquet chicken and mashed potatoes. Stan "The Man" Musial, Enos "Country" Slaughter, Marty "Slats" Marion, Al "Red" Schoendienst, all the boys who occupied my radio summers from 1948 until I moved to California in 1960, needed spring training if they were going to give Harry Caray something to talk about from April through September.

My guess is that it's still pretty common to think of spring training as being for the 25 fellows who will leave camp at the end of the month and go to the big parks where they will entertain the summer sellouts and the high definition folks at home. Of course, that's true. Our heroes are all here — getting in shape, sharpening their considerable skills and bringing the game that will occupy them for the next several months back into focus.

However, now that I've become something of a spring training regular — I think this is my 15th — I've become especially aware of the fact that a lot more is going on here with players that will not make it to the big league parks, at least for now.

Consider the Oakland Athletics. Certainly, the 25 guys who will open the season in the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum on April 1 are all present and soon to be accounted for. But there are dozens of other players who will never see the Coliseum. Instead, they'll be entertaining folks in Sacramento and Midland (Texas) and Stockton, playing for the River Cats, the Rock Hounds and the Ports.

You can be sure that every one of these "other" guys goes to bed at night thinking about what might happen to get him a locker in Oakland. But no matter, they'll settle for whatever. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, they're still going to get paid (considerably less to be sure) to play the game most of them have been playing since T-Ball.

I spent some time last week with one of the currently "other" guys before the A's and the Reds squared off in both teams' third game of this year's spring set. Michael Taylor has yet to play in a regular season major league game. Make no mistake, however, there are lots of folks saying it is only a matter of time. But that "time" has not yet arrived.

Like everyone else, Michael has been playing baseball since he was a little boy in Apopka, Fla. In high school, he got his first big baseball trophy when, in 2004, he was named to USA Today's High School All-American First Team.

His performance in high school earned him a scholarship to Stanford University.

"Going to Stanford was one of the best decisions I ever made in my life," he shared with considerable enthusiasm. "It's just a special place when you walk on the campus. It's good to be a part of that environment. It's kind of what I'm all about."

Like most college players, Michael left after three years so he still has a bit more to do to earn his degree. That's definitely on his agenda.

Stanford baseball was great.

"I started all but two games during the three years I was there. In my freshman year, I didn't start the second game but came in the third inning. In my junior year I got a post-game ejection and had to sit out the next game."

Michael was All-Pac-10 during that junior year in 2007. He hit .316 with 21 homers. He was signed later that year in the fifth round of the First-Year Player Draft by the Philadelphia Phillies.

The Phillies' minor league teams were good for Michael, and Michael was good for them. In 2008, his .346 batting average was the best in the Philadelphia system. He was best again in 2009, this time with a .320 average. He had a couple of five-hit games that year and on Aug. 12 he hit for the cycle.

Things got a little strange and unsettled, however, after the 2009 season. The Phillies traded him to Toronto in a three-team deal with Seattle involving a couple of big name players, Roy Halladay and Cliff Lee. The dust had barely settled when he was on the move again, this time to Oakland.

Certainly, Michael is well known to fans of Oakland's Triple-A affiliate, Sacramento, where he appeared in 127 games for the River Cats last year.

"I like Sacramento," he told me. "It's a good town. We sell out nine out of 10 games. It's a great atmosphere. A good place to play a ball game. Anytime you get great fan support, it's a great place to play."

Of course, like everyone else at spring training, he's hoping to make it to "the show," but he's also realistic enough to see himself back in the Sacramento outfield.

Actually, he had a big three-run homer in his first spring training game the day before. I asked him if he didn't think that made a good impression on the folks he needed to impress.

"Yeah," he laughed "but I need to make 40 or 50 more impressions like that."

There's time, of course, maybe not for 40 or 50 big ones, but for enough good days to slip into one of those slots that comes with a locker in Oakland. Time will tell.

