

A's News Clips, Friday, March 18, 2011

Oakland A's notebook: Closer Andrew Bailey lets out a sigh of relief, still shoots for opening day

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- A's closer Andrew Bailey didn't rule himself out Thursday for opening day, but he won't rush back from a right forearm strain that he feared was a more serious injury.

Bailey returned to spring training camp after being examined by Alabama-based specialist Dr. James Andrews on Tuesday.

Bailey said he felt a "ripping sensation" on the mound Monday that Andrews said was the tearing of scar tissue built up from Bailey's September elbow surgery.

"Dr. Andrews was very optimistic about me for this year and my future," Bailey said. "He said the MRI showed the UCL (ulnar collateral ligament) is completely healthy. It's just kind of day to day. And as soon as I have no more symptoms or tightness, I'll start throwing again."

If that doesn't happen soon, the two-time All-Star figures to start the season on the 15-day disabled list. The A's open against Seattle on April 1.

Manager Bob Geren has said only that Bailey will start throwing when he's pain-free.

Bailey places great trust in Andrews, but he's made more flights to Birmingham, Ala., than he'd prefer.

"I told him, 'I love ya Doc, but I don't want to see you anymore,' " Bailey said.

Gio Gonzalez continued a strong bid to be the A's opening night starter, allowing two runs and striking out six in six innings of the team's 6-5 victory over the Chicago Cubs.

Though Geren isn't tipping his hand on his starter for the opener, Gonzalez is lined up to pitch April 1 if the current rotation holds.

"Until I get word, we've got three other pitchers that could easily be the opening day starter," said Gonzalez, referring to Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden and Trevor Cahill.

To aid victims of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the A's will donate \$1 to the Red Cross for each ticket sold to their April 3 game against the Mariners. A silent auction also will be held that day, and fans also can donate by visiting www.oaklandathletics.com/japan.

Infielder Adam Rosales (stress fracture) still can't extend to his tiptoes on his right foot and can't run full speed. He said he'll be re-evaluated in four weeks, and it's unclear if Rosales will return by the May 1 date that Geren said was a target.

Conor Jackson delivered the walk-off hit -- an RBI double -- as the A's scored three times in the ninth to beat the Cubs.

Landon Powell battling to retain Oakland A's backup catcher's spot

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- Landon Powell is confident in his abilities.

He can't be quite as certain about his job security.

A's manager Bob Geren declared open competition for the backup catcher position early in spring training, leaving Powell -- who's held the spot for most of the past two seasons -- trying to fend off challenges from prospects Josh Donaldson and Anthony Recker.

Geren says he won't choose a winner until the end of camp. And while the battle to be Kurt Suzuki's backup might not sound like the juiciest story, it has ramifications for the pitching staff.

"I don't think I'm in any position to be comfortable," Powell said before the A's 6-5 win over the Chicago Cubs on Thursday. "But I feel like if I play up to my abilities every day and stay healthy, I'm a big league baseball player."

Powell, who turns 29 on Saturday, has proved serviceable behind Suzuki the past two seasons, though he's appeared in just 87 games. He's a .222 career hitter, but his .297 mark (19 for 64) with runners in scoring position is noteworthy on a team that's struggled in that area.

However, Powell committed six errors last season -- tied for sixth-most among American League catchers -- in just 38 games behind the plate.

The A's might believe it's time to give Donaldson, 25, a shot. He was highly thought of by scouts when the A's obtained him from the Cubs in 2008 as part of the Rich Harden trade.

Donaldson spent two brief stints with Oakland last season and looked raw defensively, but Geren says he's improved his defense.

Recker, 27, hasn't cracked the major leagues since being drafted in 2005, but he's shown glimpses of potential over the past few springs.

"You're looking at the total package (in judging all three)," said A's bench coach Joel Skinner, who doubles as the catching coach. "You look at what they're doing, whether it be receiving, throwing, controlling the ball in the dirt, their work with the pitchers. All of that goes into it."

Working in Powell's favor: He brought out the best in starting pitcher Dallas Braden last season. Braden made 10 starts with Powell catching and posted a 2.75 ERA with four of his team-high five complete games, including a May 9 perfect game against Tampa Bay.

In his 20 other starts -- Suzuki caught 16 of them -- Braden's ERA was 3.95.

Braden says he and Powell have a rapport going back to their minor league days. Geren was vague when asked how much the Braden factor could work in Powell's favor.

"You just look at everything you can look at and make a decision," Geren said.

Powell said he entered last season thinking he was entrenched as the backup. When final cuts came, the A's kept Jake Fox -- who was out of minor league options -- and sent Powell to Triple-A Sacramento.

Fox was traded in June. Powell shuttled between the majors and Triple-A several times, but all told he was with Oakland for all but five weeks of the season.

Powell didn't reach the majors until he was 27, and he wants badly to help this year's team.

"I'm an older guy," he said. "Winning now is important to me, and it would be even more special to (win) on the team I was drafted by and with players I came up with."

Chin Music: Lineups for A's-Cubs

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/17/2011 10:06AM

Clubhouse access is limited this morning because of the A's annual Players Association meeting, but here's the lineup against the Cubs.

A's
Crisp CF
Barton 1B
DeJesus RF
Willingham LF
Matsui DH
Suzuki C
Ellis 2B
Kouzmanoff 3B
Pennington SS

Gonzalez LHP

Cubs
Baker 2B
Castro SS
Byrd CF
Ramirez 3B
Soto C
Pena 1B
Soriano LF
Fukudome RF
Dempster P

(Cubbies aren't using the DH).

A's Conor Jackson is healthy after 2 lost seasons

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Conor Jackson spent the offseason working on something else along with his swing and his conditioning. The A's outfielder tried to improve his positive energy.

"If someone dropped something, I'd follow them and pick it up for them," Jackson said. "There are lots of cyclists in Hermosa Beach, so I'd help them up when they crashed. Anything I could do to get my karma back, end this vicious cycle. This game puts you in your place real quick."

You might look at the numbers and think that Jackson's karma is still missing, because the onetime Cal standout had not been having a spring to remember until doubling in the winning run in the bottom of the ninth inning Thursday against the Cubs.

He's hit the ball hard a lot, but he's batting .114, and should the A's decide they'd prefer another right-handed hitting option on the bench for the outfield and first base, they could turn to one of their top prospects, Chris Carter.

But Jackson is happy just to be on the field and at full strength - those are good vibes at this point. He lost nearly the entire 2009 season to valley fever, a fungal infection that affects the lungs and made him so weary he slept into the afternoon.

Then, last season, he tried to play through a sports hernia until it finally shut him down. The A's, who acquired Jackson from the Diamondbacks in June, picked up two starting corner outfielders, David DeJesus and Josh Willingham, in deals over the winter. Jackson is realistic about his situation.

"I'm not stupid," Jackson said. "I've had some rough years. I haven't played, and when I have, I haven't played well. So my role has changed. I've accepted that."

A season of illness

In 2008, Jackson hit .300, scored 87 runs and drove in 75, but the following spring, he fell ill with what he thought was the flu. He felt run down, his joints ached, but he tried to play through it. He'd nap after batting practice.

Jackson rapidly began to lose weight, 35 pounds in all. After a month, he'd get home from games and immediately go to bed and he wouldn't wake up until 30 minutes before the team stretch the next afternoon. When he slept right through team stretch, he finally told the trainer, "I think I need to see a doctor."

Valley fever was confirmed via a blood test, and Jackson didn't play again that season. He tried to come back in July, but he would be so fatigued after playing an inning of minor-league ball, he could barely stand up again.

"People didn't recognize me," he said. "I was so pale. For two months, it was a struggle just to get up to go to the bathroom. "

A season of injuries

Jackson played in the Dominican Republic last winter. He put the weight back on. During spring training, however, he was coming up to throw, slipped and his knee slammed into his stomach.

Jackson had sustained a hernia, but he played with his stomach wrapped tight and that worked for awhile. Still, the injury never healed entirely, even while he missed all of July with a hamstring strain.

In August, four games after returning from the hamstring injury, Jackson took a strange swing on an inside pitch and felt it tear again.

"Such a mental blow," he said. "Borderline depressing."

Jackson had surgery Sept. 1, and now he finds himself in a bench role, potentially pressed by Carter.

"I started my career as a platoon player," Jackson said. "Now I'm back there. It's a humbling experience. But I'm not worried about it ... I just want to be available to play all 162 games. I'll be ready for whatever comes."

Drumbeat: Bailey expects he'll start throwing in days, not weeks

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni 3/17/2011, 11:16AM

When Andrew Bailey grabbed his elbow on Monday, my first thought was, "Scar tissue tearing," which is what I tweeted at the time and have since mentioned on the Drumbeat - it's about the time after surgery, five-plus months, that it seems things like that crop up.

Bailey said that's exactly what happened: He felt a ripping sensation, which turns out to have been scar tissue - a frightening feeling for a pitcher ("It's your livelihood," Bailey said) but very common and actually it's the forearm strain that will sideline Bailey.

Perhaps not for long: Bailey said that he hopes to resume throwing again in a matter of days, not weeks. He needs to be pain-free with no tightness before he does throw, and he and the A's training staff are likely to always add an extra day or two to the process for caution's sake, as they have been doing all spring. An excellent policy in my opinion, as I've also mentioned before.

Even if Bailey resumes throwing, say, toward the middle or end of next week, he will be hard-pressed to be ready for Opening Night. That's OK, the A's have a superb bullpen, and just knowing that will help Bailey. He doesn't have to rush, he can take any extra days needed.

Bailey called the trip to see Dr. James Andrews "nerve-racking," but he got, he said, "The good news we all hoped for." Andrews, who did Bailey's Tommy John surgery six years ago and his cleanup surgery in September, told Bailey his elbow ligament is absolutely sound. "Dr. Andrews is very optimistic about me this year and my future," Bailey said.

Bailey has a great relationship with Andrews, and he told him, "I love you, Doc, but I don't want to see you anymore."

Other A's news today: Craig Breslow will throw another minor-league simulated game Saturday, and Rich Harden will resume throwing tomorrow, according to manager Bob Geren.

It's the Opening Night lineup again today (though not, perhaps, the exact batting order) and possible Opening Night starter Gio Gonzalez. Here's another potential Opening Night starter, if everyone gets another day of rest the next turn through: Brett Anderson could line up there with additional days off.

Crisp CF, Barton 1B, DeJesus RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Suzuki C, Ellis 2B, Kouzmanoff 3B, Pennington SS

Bailey relieved after meeting with Andrews

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- An upbeat Andrew Bailey sat on the top ledge of the A's dugout, a swarm of media members surrounding him while teammates underwent their normal morning workouts.

The A's closer, fresh off a visit with noted surgeon Dr. James Andrews, graciously fielded questions left and right about his strained right forearm, the next step forward and the friend he playfully now refers to as "Doc" while addressing reporters for the first time since exiting Monday's contest with discomfort in his elbow and forearm.

"Andrews is a great guy," Bailey said on Thursday. "I told him, 'I love you, Doc, but I don't want to see you anymore.'"

Oakland's two-time All-Star is unfortunately all too familiar with Andrews, who performed Bailey's 2005 Tommy John surgery and his September cleanup procedure. This time, though, the orthopedic surgeon assured Bailey that he suffered no structural damage and, thus, does not need another operation. Rather, Bailey believes he'll be throwing again in a matter of days.

"Dr. Andrews is very optimistic about me this year and my future," Bailey said. "He said the MRI showed that the ACL ligament is healthy. He reiterated the fact that the ligaments he puts in are stronger than ones you originally get. He said they looked normal, like you've been pitching for five years, so I'm very optimistic about that.

Monday merely marked Bailey's second spring outing, and the right-hander admittedly said he was experiencing the regular soreness and tenderness that comes with Spring Training as he entered the game. After throwing a pitch to Cleveland's Ezequiel Carrera with one out in the seventh inning, Bailey winced in pain while grabbing hold of his arm.

"I felt a ripping sensation," Bailey said. "That really scared me. As a pitcher, that's your livelihood. ... It all happened so fast, whereas in 2005, I kind of felt it coming a little bit. This one, everyone saw it was right then and there."

The feeling, Andrews explained, was the result of scar tissue tearing -- a common occurrence for pitchers a few months after they've had surgery. That dose of news lent Bailey, who deemed his trip "a nerve-racking experience," great peace of mind.

"You have to go through that to get to where you want to be," Bailey said. "It's just kind of bad timing to have it happen now, [rather] than when I'm throwing in the offseason."

Bailey's well aware, though, of the surrounding company he has in the bullpen. His absence, an undetermined amount of time that could potentially creep slightly past the Opening Day mark, means the A's will be turning to a handful of other bullpen arms, including offseason acquisitions Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour, along with Craig Breslow, Michael Wuertz and Brad Ziegler.

"It's really important to tackle this early on," Bailey said. "We're going to do big things with or without me, and I just hope to be a part of it.

"I'd love to be a part of that group, but these guys are more than capable of handling the workload without me in there. Hopefully I can join them and get the troops going."

Bailey, who has put together a 1.70 ERA with 51 saves over the past two seasons, needs to be pain-free with no tightness before he picks up a ball again. He believes he'll likely throw in an extra day of rest thereafter to play it safe. In the meantime, he'll keep up with his normal elbow and shoulder exercises to maintain his arm strength

"Dr. Andrews said to make sure you take the time now," Bailey said. "It's one of those situations [where] you don't want to miss time down the road. For me, it's important we give it the time."

Even if that means starting the season on the disabled list, where Bailey was stationed for more than a month last year, the 26-year-old righty couldn't be more pleased with the diagnosis he received from the surgeon "who knows me better than any other doctor out there."

"Usually it's not good news for me there, either, but this time it was awesome," he said. "It was very welcome news."

Jackson caps A's comeback win over Cubs

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Conor Jackson's walk-off double with one out in the ninth inning gave the A's a 6-5 comeback victory over the Cubs on Thursday at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Oakland scored three times in the ninth against Chicago left-hander Sean Marshall to pull out the victory. Wes Timmons singled home the inning's first run, and Andy LaRoche tied the game with a one-out RBI single.

The Cubs had led since a two-run homer off the bat of Alfonso Soriano in the seventh inning. The first-pitch shot to center field came off A's righty Brad Ziegler, who had just entered the game with a runner on base. Gio Gonzalez exited the game with no outs in the frame after offering up a solo homer to Geovany Soto and walking Carlos Pena.

It marked the first sign of trouble all day for Gonzalez, who breezed through the first six frames in his fourth start of the spring. The A's lefty ultimately walked away having allowed two runs on five hits with two walks and six strikeouts, and he has now fanned 19 in 15 1/3 innings of Cactus League action.

His A's teammates managed just four hits while he was in the game -- one of them a two-run homer from Kurt Suzuki in the second off Cubs starter Ryan Dempster. The Chicago righty proceeded to throw four shutout innings, lasting a total of six while surrendering two runs and four hits, walking none and striking out three.

Reed Johnson completed the scoring for the Cubs with a two-run homer in the eighth inning. The drive against A's right-hander Grant Balfour followed a walk by Darwin Barney.

The A's inched closer in the bottom of the eighth inning when Matt Carson delivered an RBI single against Cubs righty Kerry Wood.

Up next for A's: Lefty Bobby Cramer, still seen as a potential fifth starter, gets the nod against the host White Sox on Friday when the A's travel to Camelback Ranch in Glendale, Ariz., for a 4:05 p.m. PT meeting. Cramer, keeping his head afloat in the rotation race alongside Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross, will be making his fifth spring start. He has allowed three runs and six hits with three walks and three strikeouts in nine spring innings.

Up next for Cubs: Carlos Zambrano will start Friday at 3:05 p.m. CT when the Cubs play host to the Reds at HoHoKam Park in Mesa. Also scheduled to pitch is Carlos Silva, who may be added to the bullpen if the Cubs decide Andrew Cashner and Randy Wells are their final two starters. Big Z will be making his fifth start. He's given up two earned runs over 13 innings so far this spring for a 1.38 ERA, which ranks second to Wells' 1.29 ERA in the Cactus League.

A's announce more earthquake relief efforts

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Oakland's weekend celebration of the start of the regular season is slated to coincide with the organization's ongoing efforts to support Japanese earthquake victims.

The A's announced on Thursday that they will donate \$1 for every ticket sold to their April 3 contest against the visiting Seattle Mariners at the Oakland Coliseum to the Red Cross for relief efforts in Japan. The game will be a part of Japanese Heritage Day, when Oakland's Hideki Matsui and Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki -- Japan's two most-celebrated current players -- will take the field.

The benefit game will feature pregame ceremonies and entertainment, including Taiko drummers, along with several fundraising components to aid in the relief efforts. A handful of corporate sponsors will also contribute thousands of dollars to the cause.

In addition, the A's have created a new website as a way to expand their efforts. Fans can visit www.oaklandathletics.com/japan for an opportunity to make tax-deductible donations to the A's Community Fund. All proceeds will be given to the Red Cross.

Japanese Heritage Day also affords fans the chance to take part in a silent auction, which will include signed and game-used baseball equipment from A's players, including signed game jerseys worn by Matsui and Suzuki on April 2. A limited supply of signed color photos of Matsui will also be sold for \$50.

Geren marvels at Gio's stellar Spring Training

PHOENIX -- Manager Bob Geren is running out of words to describe the consistently exceptional performances that have come from lefty Gio Gonzalez this spring.

On Thursday, following Gonzalez's successful outing against the Cubs, Geren pulled out an "unbelievable."

"He hasn't missed a beat with anything," the A's skipper added. "Perfect."

Not quite, given the two runs Gonzalez allowed in the seventh inning. The previous six, though, were seemingly just that, give or take a hit or two. It's become all too customary for the A's lefty, who has surrendered just three earned runs and struck out 19 in 15 1/3 innings for a 1.76 Cactus League ERA.

Gonzalez, 25, offered up five hits and walked two while fanning six in his six-plus innings Thursday, breezing through his fourth spring start before offering up a leadoff homer and a walk that led to his departure in the seventh.

"I just got into a good groove with [catcher] Kurt Suzuki," Gonzalez said. "I'm attacking the zone, throwing first-pitch strikes, putting the ball in play and letting my defense do the work. If I can work quick, that sets the tone for the rest of the game."

Gonzalez is scheduled to make two more spring starts and is in line to get the nod for Opening Day, though manager Bob Geren reiterated Thursday that he's not ready to announce his season-opening starter, noting that he has plenty of options and plenty of time to make that decision.

Injured relievers Breslow, Devine make progress

PHOENIX -- Good news from the trainer's room often comes at a premium in Oakland, but the A's have plenty to be pleased about right now thanks to the encouraging progress of relievers Craig Breslow and Joey Devine.

Breslow, who threw 28 pitches without a glitch in a Minor League game on Wednesday, is scheduled to throw again in a similar setting on Saturday, putting him in line to make his Cactus League debut early next week if all continues to go well.

The A's lefty has been nursing a strained hamstring for more than a week, though he's remained on track with his pitching schedule during a spring in which the A's have brought him along slowly following a 2010 campaign that saw him rack up 74 2/3 innings in relief.

Devine, meanwhile, felt good Thursday while throwing 10 pitches from flat ground and 20 from the top of the mound. Pitching coach Ron Romanick said he liked what he saw from the righty, who has been set back with biceps tightness, and mentioned Devine will likely undertake a bullpen session before returning to game action.

Devine's stiff arm greatly affected his mechanics during his last two spring outings, and his command was subsequently missing entirely, as evidenced by the eight walks he's offered up in just 4 1/3 innings. He's looking to join the bullpen ranks after missing two seasons following Tommy John surgery, though it's unclear whether he'll be available on Opening Day.

"We're trying to be patient with him and do things right," Romanick said. "Everyone's schedule is different, but I can tell you it was great to see what he did today. He's on the right track again."

Worth noting

Rich Harden is scheduled to begin throwing again on Friday. He'll take part in long toss in an effort to return to the mound for the first time in more than a month at a date to be determined, and it's unlikely he'll be completely healthy in time to see Cactus League action. ... Ryan Sweeney went 2-for-2 on Thursday and is 6-for-11 (.545) since making his spring debut last week.

Inside the MLB | Oakland ready to bring its 'A' game

By Daniel Rathman , Tufts Daily, 3/18/2011

In the minutes after the San Francisco Giants won the 2010 World Series, Tony Siegle, one of the team's front-office advisers, told the media, "We've just shown 'Moneyball' is a bunch of garbage."

If there wasn't already a front-office rivalry between general manager Brian Sabean's Giants and Billy Beane's Oakland Athletics, that quote certainly started one. And whether you agree with Siegle or not, he's given the A's executives some bulletin-board material.

Oakland quietly finished the last regular season second in the American League West division with an even 81-81 record, nine games behind the eventual pennant-winning Texas Rangers. After a busy offseason — during which three solid hitters, a pair of reliable relievers and an under-the-radar starter joined the green and gold — the A's are primed for their first division title and playoff appearance since 2006.

Manager Bob Geren struggled to put together a lineup that could score runs consistently last season, and Oakland ranked in the bottom half of the league in virtually every offensive category. Although Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and David DeJesus aren't exactly superstars, they all bring a polished approach that was missing from the A's order in 2010.

Because they play half of their games in the most pitcher-friendly ballpark in the American League, the Athletics place a premium on hitters who get on base. Matsui, Willingham and DeJesus are all likely to see their home run totals decline as a result of the Coliseum's gigantic outfield but each had an on-base percentage over .360 last season. Those contributions should be unaffected and will make the middle of Oakland's lineup much harder for opposing pitchers to contend with.

As much as the Coliseum's generous dimensions hurt hitters, they help the A's pitchers — a significant benefit given the youth of Geren's pitching staff. Brett Anderson and Trevor Cahill, both just 23 years old, lead the starting rotation, which also features lefties Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden. Despite injuries to Anderson and No. 5 starter Ben Sheets, this group had the best rotation ERA (3.47) in the majors last season.

The addition of Brandon McCarthy brings even more depth to the impressive young quartet. Once a top prospect, the 27-year-old McCarthy flamed out after he was traded from the Chicago White Sox to the Rangers but appears to have resurrected his career. Armed with a new sinker, McCarthy has surged ahead of his competitors for the job at the back of Oakland's rotation, posting a 3.29 ERA over 13.2 innings in spring training while striking out nine batters and walking none. Geren will also have the pleasure of managing one of the deepest bullpens in the majors, which already starred closer Andrew Bailey and now has lefty Brian Fuentes and righty Grant Balfour to handle setup duties. The relief corps also boasts elite specialists in Craig Breslow and Brad Ziegler, both of whom hold like-handed batters barely above the Mendoza line. And, if their own talents aren't enough, the A's pitchers will also benefit from having the best group of fielders in the league. Oakland ranked atop the majors in defensive efficiency — the ratio of balls in play that are converted into outs — last season, and this year's team once again boasts an above average defender at every position except left field.

The Athletics may not have the flashiest roster in the AL West, but they have more quality pieces than any other team in the division.

Oakland doesn't have Felix Hernandez at the front of its rotation, but the Seattle Mariners lack any semblance of offense. The A's can't keep up with the speedy Los Angeles Angels on the base paths, but the Halos' attempts to bring a slugger to Disneyland yielded only Vernon Wells and the four years, \$86 million remaining on his contract. And while the Rangers'

heart of the order of Josh Hamilton, Nelson Cruz and Adrian Beltre may be the envy of the division, Texas lost No.1 starter Cliff Lee in free agency and has question marks throughout its pitching staff.

That gives the Athletics a golden opportunity to bring postseason baseball back to the Coliseum. After years of struggling with decreased attendance at a ballpark that could reasonably be described as a dump, the A's are on the verge of landing a new stadium. And on the field, Oakland has all the pieces in place to ensure the "garbage" label won't stick for long.