

A's News Clips, Saturday, March 26, 2011

Oakland A's notebook: Radio deal on shaky ground as season nears

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- With the season opener drawing near, there's uncertainty over whether flagship radio station KTRB 860-AM will be broadcasting the A's games during the regular season.

A source with knowledge of the situation told Bay Area News Group on Friday that negotiations for the A's to buy KTRB -- which is in receivership with Comerica Bank -- have hit a major snag. In the fallout, the source said, the agreement between the A's and the receiver to broadcast games during the regular season also is in jeopardy.

Ken Pries, the A's vice president for broadcasting and communications, did not return phone calls seeking comment, nor did A's spokesman Bob Rose.

The A's sent out a release Friday night saying that "due to technical issues beyond their control," the games Saturday and Sunday against the Colorado Rockies would not be broadcast on KTRB as originally planned. The games instead will air on mlb.com.

The same release also said broadcasts will resume Monday when the A's open the three-game Bay Bridge Series against the Giants at AT&T Park. But that doesn't necessarily guarantee broadcasts will continue once the A's begin their regular season Friday at home against the Seattle Mariners.

KTRB, a 50,000-watt station, went into receivership in September. The A's have been negotiating to purchase the station ever since and are thought to be the primary bidder.

According to the source, the receiver is looking for a higher bid than the A's are willing to offer, and might be threatening to pull games off the air as leverage.

But it's also very possible that one of the sides could budge and a compromise struck before Friday's opener to continue airing games.

The A's sent left• fielder Chris Carter to Triple-A Sacramento after Friday's 10-3 loss to the Los Angeles Angels.

Carter -- ranked the No. 2 prospect in the organization by Baseball America -- was considered a long shot to make the big league club out of spring training. But his progress is worth monitoring closely, as he's the A's best power-hitting prospect.

The timing of the demotion was surprising, given the A's break camp Sunday. Manager Bob Geren said earlier this week that every player left probably would head north with the team for the Bay Bridge Series.

"I was maybe a little surprised, but it was coming eventually," Carter, 24, said. "The numbers (in the outfield) weren't really there for me."

He hit .250 with two homers and nine RBIs in 19 games.

But Carter looked shaky in left field, leaving the question of whether the converted first baseman can stick in the outfield.

The A's are committed to Daric Barton at first, and they don't want to restrict Carter to designated hitter duty.

"Yeah, I think he runs well enough and I think he throws well enough," Geren said. "Those are the toughest components to teach. The other stuff can be taught."

Brandon McCarthy• could have put a vice grip on the fifth starter's spot with a good showing against the Angels. Instead, the right-hander was shelled for 10 hits and six earned runs in 51/3 innings.

Whether that affects his standing for the rotation spot is unknown. McCarthy and Tyson Ross are competing for the spot, with Bobby Cramer seemingly relegated to a possible bullpen role. McCarthy or Ross could also snag a bullpen spot if they're not named the No. 5 starter.

Chin Music: The finish line is in sight

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/25/2011 11:51AM

There are packed boxes sitting around everywhere in the A's clubhouse – no doubt that “getaway day” is approaching. The A's play their final Cactus League game Sunday afternoon against the Rockies, then fly back to the Bay Area that night. I'll be doing the same, and the chilly (at least by Phoenix standards) Bay Area weather will take some getting used to.

–As for the baseball news, we may get word later in the afternoon on the A's rotation – who the fifth starter is, and the order of guys. Manager Bob Geren did say the first four, in order, are likely to be Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden, assuming those pitchers come out of their upcoming throwing sessions feeling well. That would be three lefties in a row, but it's not like opponents would see three identical pitchers back to back to back. Braden's off-speed stuff sets him apart from Anderson and Gonzalez, and even Anderson and Gonzalez are slightly different. Both throw mid-90's fastballs, but Anderson uses a sharp slider, while Gonzalez has more of a traditional curve ball.

The lineups:

A's: Crisp CF, Sweeney RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Kouzmanoff 3B, Jackson 1B, LaRoche 2B, Powell C, Sogard SS; McCarthy RHP

Angels: Izturis DH, Kendrick 2B, Abreu RF, Callaspo 3B, Aybar SS, Mathis C, Bourjos CF, Trumbo 1B, Pettit LF; Palmer RHP

–A couple of Hideki Matsui's former teammates with the Yomiuri Giants – Koji Goto and Yukinaga Maeda – dropped by camp to visit. Matsui had dinner with both of them last night along with Angels pitcher Hisanori Takahashi. Goto talked admirably of Matsui's generosity and efforts to mobilize support for Japan's earthquake and tsunami victims. Goto also cautioned that Matsui gets off to a slow start every season. He's hitting .125 so far this spring. “In Japan, he was the same way,” Goto said. “The monster only appears after summer comes.” Great line ...

–A note on yesterday's game: Right fielder David DeJesus made the best defensive play I've seen by an A's player this spring, extending flat-out for a diving catch in right-center. Just pretty ... I had heard lukewarm reviews on his range in the outfield, but he covered a lot of ground to get that ball ...

–Brian Fuentes is scheduled to throw today, his second of back-to-back outings. He's been knocked around pretty good in his last two games (5 ER in 1 1/3 IP) after he started his spring with six straight scoreless outings. Geren said he wasn't too concerned with that since Fuentes faced Arizona in each of the last two appearances, an unfamiliar opponent. It'll be interesting to see how he fares against the Angels, a team he'll be seeing plenty. ... Craig Breslow will also make his second appearance.

Carl Steward 'darting here and there': Barry Bonds talk aside, lets play ball

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune columnist

Darting here and there ...

| Welcome to the Barry Bonds trial-free zone, where there's just too much juicy baseball stuff going on to regurgitate hat sizes of a juiced past. It's just so yesterday.

| Bonds isn't going to jail or the Hall of Fame regardless of the outcome, so why belabor it? Justice? Please. Under that blindfold, the lady holding the scales is either weeping or sleeping. Maybe both.

| Since most NCAA brackets have crashed and burned -- thanks, all you Big East frauds -- it's time to consider what's going to happen in the 2011 baseball season, like when Brian Wilson might actually shave now that the Samson act has turned oblique.

| My NL division winners: Rockies, Reds and Braves, with the Phillies as the wild card. Bobby Cox left a year too early. Atlanta is going to be very, very good. Philly has major issues, but that rotation is simply too star-studded for a cataclysmic collapse.

| And in the AL: Rangers, Twins and Red Sox, with the Yankees as the wild card. Boston is just plain better than everybody else in either league, and it's not really close. New York, suddenly looking very, very old, may have one last gasp, but perhaps not.

| Why not the Giants? Never mind a World Series reprise, they've never even repeated as division champions in their San Francisco history, and the NL West is too tough for the wild card to come out of their division. Not totally sold on Colorado pitching, though, so the G-men definitely have a shot. But so do the Dodgers. Face it, it's going to be torture all year.

| Why not the A's? Simple. With closer Andrew Bailey's spring shut down, no one's yet convinced Oakland can avoid critical injuries. The components are there for a division run, but Texas will have to fall back, and even though Cliff Lee is gone, that Rangers lineup is still a monster.

| Three key things A's need to succeed: 1) An efficient bullpen protecting their superior rotation; 2) Coco Crisp playing 145-150 games; 3) David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui significantly improving the lineup. Iffy on all counts.

| Three key things Giants need to succeed: 1) Full pitching staff remaining the best in baseball; 2) Pablo Sandoval filling the Juan Uribe gap; 3) Miguel Tejada being at least adequate at shortstop. That last one seems to have close observers noticeably worried, but let's watch Miggy play a month first.

| A Sandoval call: .293, 17 homers, 78 RBIs. Not all the way back, but close enough. At least at the plate, it's more about gained confidence than lost weight.

| Tyson Ross or Brandon McCarthy as Oakland's fifth starter? Man, that's a tough one, but if you're Oakland, it never hurts to have that sixth or even seventh guy in waiting. I'd favor Ross (local guy, organization product, 0.59 spring ERA), so why do I believe the A's will select McCarthy?

| Worried that Matsui is hitting .115 this spring? C'mon, be honest.

| Why the Giants ultimately won't elevate Brandon Belt on opening day: Even though he may be ready, there's too much potential for mass unhappiness among players who would be headed to the bench as a result. Why risk it until change is necessary, even with Cody Ross out?

| How can nine NFL teams be bringing in Cam Newton for a visit and the 49ers not be one of them? Ludicrous.

| Can we start the NHL playoffs already? It's time to find out who the Sharks really are. Even after 75 regular-season games, I'm more confused than ever.

| And can we start the NBA playoffs already? It's time to not be bothered anymore by the Warriors playing out the string.

| Was I the only one not bowled over by the Jimmer Fredette hype? An ability to make shots from 30 feet just doesn't sell me, and against good teams, it won't win games. We saw what happened when BYU really needed him to make a few Thursday night ... clanked a 3 for 15 from beyond the arc.

| Nice to see Arizona brings some pride back to Pac-10 basketball. Even more impressive to see them dump Duke without Lute Olson at the controls.

| Randy Bennett to Utah? Goodness, let's hope not. But even though the Saint Mary's coach has somewhat doused the rumors, don't feel too comfortable until the Utes position is filled. This might be The One.

Chris Carter sent to minors

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Chris Carter wasn't too shaken after getting cut Friday afternoon. He was well aware that the A's already have five outfielders and a starting first baseman.

"I knew coming in that the numbers weren't really there for me," Carter said.

Carter hit .250 with two homers, but it was his defense that was the issue. He made three errors in the outfield and had several other misplays, occasionally breaking the wrong way for balls hit at him.

Manager **Bob Geren** said Carter is getting sent out so he can continue to get in work in the outfield and at first base, and he said that Carter's defense needs to "get up to speed" with his offense. That's simply a matter of repetition, Geren said; he believes that Carter has the athletic ability to do it.

Many scouts feel that Carter, 24, is best suited for a designated hitter role, and the A's always need right-handed power. So it's possible that if **Hideki Matsui's** struggles continue well into the regular season, Carter might even get an opportunity this season.

Matsui is batting .115 after going 0-for-4 and hitting into a double play on Friday.

"Obviously, he's a veteran guy," Geren said. "He said he feels real close, and I believe what he says. He should be fine."

Two of Matsui's former Yomiuri Giants teammates, **Koji Goto** and **Yukinaga Maeda** visited camp Friday, and Goto said fans shouldn't be too worried about Matsui's average.

"He's a slow starter," Goto said through translator **Roger Kahlon**. "Please be patient with him. In Japan, he was the same way. ... The monster only appears when summer comes."

5th-starter picture: **Brandon McCarthy** was the front-runner for the fifth-starter spot going into the day, but it's unclear if his outing against the Angels might change things. McCarthy allowed 10 hits and seven runs, six earned, in 5 1/3 innings, and he said he felt as if he was just missing by an inch on some of his pitches.

Overall, Geren said, McCarthy "has been very good, outstanding," and he emphasized that it was really just one bad inning Friday, the four-run third, when he thought McCarthy became a tad predictable.

Tyson Ross, who is 1-0 with a 0.59 ERA, is also pushing for the spot, and whoever doesn't land in the rotation is likely to join the bullpen. Geren was unwilling to name his fifth starter Friday, but he might today or tomorrow.

Briefly: **Daric Barton** (leg soreness) will play tonight. ... **Dallas Braden** threw seven innings in a minor-league game and allowed five hits and two runs. He walked none and struck out eight and said he was pleased with how his slider was working. ... **Joey Devine** had a 1-2-3 inning in the same game. ... The memorial event for former A's outfielder **Mitchell Page** at Ricky's Sports Theatre and Grill in San Leandro runs from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Page died March 12 at age 59.

Cactus League recap

Friday's result: Angels 10, A's 3

Notable: In his second outing of the spring, Craig Breslow gave up four hits and three runs in one inning, and his ERA stands at 18.00. ... Brian Fuentes, who had allowed five runs in his previous 1 1/3 innings, retired both men he faced, striking out one. ... Kevin Kouzmanoff had two hits and a walk, and he's batting .412. ... Andy LaRoche hit his team-high fourth homer of the spring.

Quotable: "Just put a sad face." - outfielder Chris Carter's emoticon suggestion as he approached reporters after being sent down.

Today's game: Rockies (Jason Hammel) vs. A's (Trevor Cahill), 7:05 p.m. Audiocast: mlb.com.

Drumbeat: A's send out Chris Carter; is he Oakland's next DH?

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni 3/25/2011 3:25PM

Chris Carter was optioned to minor-league camp after today's game, and he said he wasn't surprised - he'd expected it even coming into camp, knowing the A's already had a full complement of outfielders and a firmly planted starting first baseman.

"I knew coming in that the numbers weren't really there for me," Carter said.

Carter, who didn't play today, hit .250 with two homers, and he had a poor spring in the outfield, making three errors and several other misplays. Manager Bob Geren stressed both before today's game and after Carter was sent out that Arizona is a tough play for any outfielder to play - bright sun, wind, etc. - but it's fairly obvious that Carter isn't quite ready to play the outfield every day in the major leagues.

Geren acknowledged that, saying that Carter's defense needs to "get up to speed" with his offense. The major reason he's going out now, rather than after the Bay Bridge series, is so he can get more innings in in the outfield right away. It's just a matter of repetition for Carter, Geren said.

I like Carter's attitude. He took his demotion to minor-league camp so well that he joked as he walked up to the media, "Just put sad face." To comply :(

Many believe that Carter is an eventual DH, and much as I hate to say it, perhaps that might be sooner rather than later if Hideki Matsui doesn't get it going the first couple months of the season. Everyone says he's a slow starter, and boy, that is certainly true, but he seems as if he grounds into a double play a day. That's not what the A's want to see during the regular season from their big offseason acquisition.

Matsui's track record shows that he warms up as the season goes along, though, and that could keep Carter in the minors another year, barring injuries in the outfield or at first. I know many of the Japanese reporters are interested in the A's plans for Carter - it's that evident that he's probably the team's next DH, whenever Matsui's term is done.

Other postgame news: Dallas Braden threw seven innings in a minor-league game, allowing five hits and two runs. He didn't walk a man and he struck out eight, and he was happy that his slider, which he is refining, was working well.

Joey Devine had a 1-2-3 inning in that same game; he told me the other day that something has clicked with him and he feels back to his old form. I don't know if that's happened in time for him to make the Opening Night roster, but if he does have that old feeling again, it won't be long before he's back in Oakland's bullpen.

Drumbeat: Two of Hideki Matsui's Japanese teammates visit A's camp, and more

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni 3/25/2011 10:25AM

Two of Hideki Matsui's former Yomiuri Giants teammates, infielder Koji Goto and left-hander Yukinaga Maeda, visited this morning and they had dinner with Matsui last night - and as Roger Kahlon translated, Maeda said with a laugh that they'd discussed a homer Matsui had hit off Maeda one year that went "150 meters" (492 feet).

Goto emphasized what a good teammate Matsui was, always putting the club first before anything, and then, after answering questions, Goto had a comment of his own to make: "Please be patient with Matsui," he said. "He's a slow starter. In Japan, he was the same way."

Then Goto added, "The monster only appears when summer comes."

I don't think anyone with the A's is too concerned with Matsui's sluggish spring (he's hitting .125), because some veterans just don't hit much until the games mean something. But apparently his nickname in Japan was "Mr. May," because that's when Matsui's bat started to come alive.

Manager Bob Geren said that if all continues to go well with side sessions and health, that Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden will follow Trevor Cahill in the rotation. The two real remaining fifth-starter candidates are both right-handed, Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross, and Geren doesn't have a problem starting the season with two right-handers going in a row (with the fifth guy and Cahill). It's likely it would change at some point with offdays or rainouts or someone needing an extra day of rest somewhere.

Here's the lineup vs. the Angels, with McCarthy on the mound: Crisp CF, Sweeney RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Kouz 3B, Jackson 1B, LaRoche 2B, Powell C, Sogard SS.

Daric Barton remains out with leg soreness (abductor muscle) but he's doing a full workout today and is likely to play tomorrow evening.

Carter optioned out of A's crowded outfield mix

Prospect sent down to hone his skills at Triple-A Sacramento

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Just two days away from returning to the Bay Area, the A's on Friday decided to trim their roster by one and option prospect Chris Carter to Triple-A Sacramento.

Manager Bob Geren hopes the outfielder can match his offensive potential with an improved defensive showing in the Minors.

"Obviously his bat is his strongest part of his game, but he has to get his defense up to speed with his offense, and I'm sure he'll continue his hard work," the A's skipper said. "He's a talented guy, a good athlete."

Upon entering camp next to a healthy dose of experienced outfielders, including Coco Crisp, David DeJesus, Josh Willingham, Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson, the 24-year-old Carter figured to be the odd man out. He didn't exactly find Friday's news a surprise.

"I knew it was coming," Carter said. "The [outfield] numbers weren't really there for me."

He collected 11 hits in 44 at-bats (.250) and walked 12 times while tallying 10 strikeouts through 19 Cactus League games. Carter's spring performance followed a 2010 season that saw him end the year in Oakland, where he set a team record for consecutive hitless at-bats to start a career (33) before going 13-for-38 with three home runs and seven RBIs over his final 13 games.

Carter was groomed as a first baseman for the majority of his Minor League career, but Daric Barton's steady presence at that position influenced the club to move its top prospect out to the grass. Carter made two errors with Oakland last year and three this spring in left field, but he believes he's garnered better jumps on balls and said he feels "better out there."

"He had a few struggles in the outfield, but he worked as hard as anyone else," Geren said. "I told him that this is one of the toughest places to play -- Spring Training in Arizona, a lot of sun and wind in your eyes. A lot of other guys have missed balls, so I don't want him to get discouraged and just to work."

"I think he runs well enough, and I think he throws well enough. Those are the two components that are hard to teach -- running speed and arm strength. The other stuff can be taught."

Carter's power numbers -- he's hit 149 home runs with 507 RBIs in 673 Minor League seasons -- have prompted the idea of placing him in the designated hitter's role, but the A's are trying to avoid that option for now because of his youth. Thus, Geren said he'd like to see Carter continue to see work primarily in left field for the River Cats, though he noted he'll also get time at first base.

"Having a guy that can play two different spots gives us a better opportunity to use him, gives him better chances to create a spot for himself," Geren said.

With the move, the A's have 34 players in camp, almost all of whom are expected to make Sunday's trip back to Oakland for a three-game exhibition series with the cross-bay rival Giants beginning on Monday.

LaRoche goes deep, but A's fall to Angels

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Jeff Mathis homered in a four-run third inning that propelled the Angels to a 10-3 victory over the A's in Cactus League action at Phoenix Municipal Stadium on Friday afternoon.

The Angels jumped out to an early lead against A's starter Brandon McCarthy, who offered up a leadoff double to Maicer Izturis. The Halos' designated hitter advanced to third on a Howie Kendrick single and scored the club's first run on a sacrifice fly by Alberto Callaspo.

Izturis again began a rally in the third with another double and found his way home on Kendrick's second hit of the game, a single to center. An RBI single from Bobby Abreu followed, and Mathis broke the contest open with a two-run homer to make it 5-0. Mathis was also responsible for the Angels' sixth run in the fifth with an RBI single.

Angels left fielder Chris Pettit in the sixth frame reached second base on a fielding error by Josh Willingham and scored on Kendrick's double to extend the club's lead to 7-1.

The Halos tacked on three more runs on four hits in the eighth off Oakland reliever Craig Breslow. Kole Calhoun and Jean Segura both had RBI doubles and Andrew Heid capped the scoring with an RBI single.

McCarthy, making his final push for a rotation spot, went 5 1/3 innings, surrendering seven runs -- six earned -- on 10 hits with one walk and six strikeouts. It was his first walk allowed this spring.

Oakland's first run came in the fifth when Andy LaRoche homered to right field off Angels starter Matt Palmer, who allowed just four hits through six innings of work. The A's also scored twice in the eighth on an RBI double from Ryan Sweeney and an RBI single by Kevin Kouzmanoff.

"He needs to get in good zones, and he did today," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said of Palmer. "He had better command of both his four-seamer and two-seamer early and opened up the zone. He threw strikes. Matty's stuff is legit."

A's up next: Right-hander Trevor Cahill, who was recently named the A's Opening Day starter, makes his final Cactus League start on Saturday when the A's host the Rockies in an evening affair at Phoenix Municipal Stadium at 7:05 p.m. PT. First baseman Daric Barton, who has been sidelined by leg soreness, is expected to return to the lineup.

Angels up next: The Angels wrap up their Arizona phase of Spring Training on Saturday when they travel to Camelback Ranch in Glendale to face the White Sox at 1:05 p.m. PT. Jered Weaver, the team's expected Opening Day starter on March 31 in Kansas City, will make his final spring tuneup in his fifth Cactus League start and sixth overall, including a camp game. He's 1-0 with a 4.73 ERA, but has not walked a batter while striking out 17 in 13 1/3 innings. He also struck out 11 without a walk in 7 1/3 innings of a camp game. Outfielders Torii Hunter (right quadriceps tightness) and Vernon Wells (left hamstring tightness) are expected to be back in the lineup on Monday against the Dodgers at Dodger Stadium.

Bad timing for McCarthy's latest outing

Right-hander roughed up in latest bid for fifth-starter spot

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Given that manager Bob Geren is expected to make a decision on his fifth starter any day now, rightly Brandon McCarthy's shaky performance on Friday didn't exactly make for good timing.

But neither Geren nor McCarthy, who gave up six earned runs on seven hits in 5 1/3 innings against the Angels, appeared worried about the rather forgettable day affecting the hurler's chances in the A's rotation competition.

"I certainly won't let some hits today kinda sully everything," McCarthy said.

"We'll look at everything, the whole body of work," Geren said. "He's had a great spring."

McCarthy allowed his first walk of the spring after entering the contest having not allowed any free passes in 20 2/3 frames. He limited the damage in the first to one run before unraveling in a four-run third.

"He had a rough third inning, but he adjusted his pitch mix after that, and he was a lot better after that," Geren said. "He's been very good all spring. It was just one bad inning."

McCarthy appears to be the front runner for the final rotation spot, though Tyson Ross and Bobby Cramer are still very much considered in the mix. Of the two odd men out, at least one is expected to notch a long-relief role in the bullpen, and McCarthy noted he has no preference where he lands, so long as it's in the big leagues.

"At this point, it's just pitching," he said. "Any role, anything, I'm going to do the same thing, whether it's here or the Mexican League or the bullpen, I'm just going to focus on pitching.

"I feel like I've done everything I can do. I don't get caught up in results. If I throw well and the results aren't there and if I throw poorly and the results are there, I don't really care. I'm very happy with the way spring has worked out, and where things fall, that's something that's out of my hands and I try not to think about, as cliché as that sounds."

Shoulder problems have limited the 6-foot-7 McCarthy, once considered a top prospect in the White Sox system, to 22 Major League starts over the last three seasons. He was 4-2 with a 3.36 ERA in 11 appearances for Triple-A Oklahoma City in the Rangers organization last year before signing with the A's as a free agent.

On Friday, for the second straight outing, he narrowed in on 100 pitches and came out feeling good physically. He said he was throwing his usual allotment of strikes but they simply weren't as effective as they've been.

"It was just one of those days where I wanted the ball an inch farther in or an inch farther out or down, and it just wasn't quite there," he said. "Focus-wise, everything was there. I felt like I've held on to that pretty well during camp and I've accomplished most of the things I wanted to. ... Everything today was what I have been doing, it just wasn't quite as sharp."

Matsui hoping to warm up quickly

PHOENIX -- A pair of Hideki Matsui's former Yomiuri Giants teammates made a visit to A's camp on Friday morning, passing along stories about the Japanese slugger and offering an important note to all those worried about Matsui's spring struggles at the plate.

"He is a slow starter, so please be patient," said Koji Goto through translator Roger Kahlon. "He was the same way in Japan. The monster only appears after summer comes."

Goto, a former Yomiuri infielder who also coached in the Yankees' farm system, said that Matsui's nickname in Japan was "Mr. May," because that's when his bat would typically come alive.

The A's are hoping that time comes sooner this year for Matsui, who went 0-for-4 against his former Angels team on Friday en route to watching his average dip to .115. The 34-year-old designated hitter has collected just six hits while striking out nine times in 48 at-bats.

"He says he feels real close," manager Bob Geren said, "and I believe him."

Goto, along with former Yomiuri lefty Yukinaga Maeda, who most recently played with Texas' Triple-A team, were in town to study how Major League players practice in the confines of a Spring Training atmosphere. They had dinner with Matsui on Thursday night and enjoyed reminiscing about their friend with reporters on Friday.

Maeda smiled while recalling a homer Matsui hit off him in 2000 that went "150 meters" (492 feet) and landed on the fourth floor of the stadium.

Both also emphasized Matsui's role as a good teammate and his constant desire to put his team ahead of anything else.

"For him," Goto said, "the best nutrition is a team's win."

Worth noting

Manager Bob Geren said that, barring any setbacks, Opening Day starter Trevor Cahill will be followed in the rotation by Brett Anderson, Gio Gonzalez and Dallas Braden. ... Braden pitched seven innings in a Minor League game on Friday, giving up two runs while striking out eight. The southpaw mentioned he worked to refine his breaking ball and slider and noted he was happy with those efforts. ... Right-hander Joey Devine pitched in the same game, recording a 12-pitch scoreless inning. His next outing could come in a Cactus League game, Geren said, though nothing has been decided. ... Daric Barton, nursing leg soreness, is expected to return to the lineup on Saturday for Oakland's night game against the visiting Rockies, Geren said. ... Lefty Craig Breslow, working in his second exhibition game on Friday, gave up three runs on four hits in one inning of work. "He feels good, he just needs to get sharper," Geren said. "We'll get him as many innings as he can get."

Ross strong again as A's beat Diamondbacks 15-7

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

SCOTTSDALE — Tyson Ross is making it hard on his manager.

Bob Geren needs to pick a fifth starter, and Ross hasn't done anything to eliminate himself from consideration.

Well, almost anything. He did finally give up a run on Thursday, in another stellar outing in Oakland's 15-7 win over Arizona.

"He's throwing the ball well," Geren said. "He was so efficient today."

Ross gave up one run on four hits in 5 2-3 innings. It was the first run the 6-foot-6 right-hander has allowed in 15 1-3 innings this spring.

"I liked the command of his fastball," Geren said. "That's the key to his success. The velocity and movement is always there."

Kurt Suzuki and David DeJesus each had three RBIs and Kevin Kouzmanoff hit a solo home run and added an RBI single for Oakland.

Ross is in contention with Brandon McCarthy and Bobby Cramer. McCarthy has a 3.05 ERA, 14 strikeouts and zero walks in 20 2-3 innings this spring. Cramer has an 8.25 ERA with five strikeouts and four walks in 12 innings.

"My sinker was pretty good when (catcher Suzuki) called it, and I threw some changeups in there to get them off balance and my slider had some bite to it," Ross said.

Geren said he's not ready to announce a role for Ross yet.

"We're just running everybody out there and letting them have success and will sort it out at the end," he said.

Arizona's Joe Saunders had another tough start, allowing five runs on six hits in five innings. He struck out four but also walked four. Saunders has given up 19 runs in 13 2-3 innings. David Winfree led the Diamondbacks with two RBIs.

"I felt good. The first two innings went pretty smooth," said Saunders, who retired the first six batters he faced. "The third inning, I had some tough things — a couple broken-bat hits, a couple walks. There was only one hard-hit ball in that inning. Got through that then made on bad pitch to Kouzmanoff (to lead off the fourth). Other than that, I threw the ball pretty well."

Saunders has given up 19 runs in 13 2-3 innings this spring.

NOTES: The Athletics announced RHP Trevor Cahill will be their opening day starter. ... The Diamondbacks signed RHP Kip Wells to a minor league contract. The 33-year-old has not played in the majors since 2009. ... Arizona LHP Mike Hampton was not with the team due to personal matter.

Josh Willingham hopes to hit winning notes in Oakland

By Dave Sheinin, Washington Post, 3/25/2011

PHOENIX — There was this stretch of baseball in the summer of 2009 when Josh Willingham may have been the best hitter in baseball, when the home runs were leaving the park in bunches, when every day brought the possibility of his doing something that had never or rarely been done. And sometimes, like that July day he hit two grand slams in Milwaukee, it was more than a possibility

During his two seasons in Washington, Willingham could be streaky like that. And the Oakland Athletics, his new team following a December trade, will enjoy his hot streaks, particularly if they occur in the heat of the sort of pennant race the A's envision for themselves this season in the American League West.

But there was something curious about Willingham's blistering summer of 2009, something he rarely if ever has talked about. That stretch came in the immediate aftermath of one of the most traumatic events of his life: the loss of his brother, Jon, who died at the age of 27 in an automobile accident on June 13, 2009, in their hometown of Florence, Ala.

"I don't know why it happened like that," Willingham, 32, said Friday. "It's as if baseball has been your number one priority for awhile, and then that happens and everything was [prioritized] the way it needed to be: God, family, then career. I don't know why that was when I played my best, but it was."

Willingham has never spoken publicly in any depth about his brother's death, and he would only go so far this time, declining to answer a question about his relationship with Jon. "That stuff I just share with those I'm close with," he said. And he struggled to convey the emotions he dealt with when he returned to baseball following a week on the bereavement list.

"I guess it just starts you back to square one with what's important in your life. And it definitely wasn't baseball," he said. "It wasn't that I didn't care about baseball. It just wasn't tops on the priority list anymore. I came out and still worked just as hard and played just as hard and wanted to win everyday. But it was just different."

Willingham's time in D.C., following a Nov. 2008 trade from the [Florida Marlins](#), began with him riding the bench in April 2009 while [Lastings Milledge](#) and [Austin Kearns](#) held starting outfield jobs, and ended in August 2010 with surgery to repair a torn meniscus in his knee, an injury that had hampered him practically the entire season. In December, the [Nationals](#) traded him to Oakland for pitcher [Henry Rodriguez](#) and outfielder Corey Brown.

"It was tough from a physical perspective," Willingham said of the knee injury that defined his 2010 season, "but more so from a mental perspective, just knowing you're not 100 percent. It just wears on you when you're playing with something that's bothering you every single day. Then it finally got to where I couldn't do it anymore."

In between the disappointing bookends, Willingham was a stalwart of the Nationals' lineup, hitting 40 homers combined over those two seasons. If he never became the fan favorite that slugger [Adam Dunn](#) was during those same years, and if his departure was not with the same angst as Dunn's, Willingham was equally popular in the Nationals' clubhouse, where he was regarded as a "true professional" — a phrase that has already followed him west.

"He fits in like he's been here five years already," said veteran A's second baseman [Mark Ellis](#). "He has that easygoing personality, and he's a real professional. He also knows everyone's excited he's here, to give us what we needed — that force in the middle of the lineup. I think he senses that — how everyone's happy he's here."

The A's, distant runners-up to the [Texas Rangers](#) in the AL West last year, are counting on Willingham to be a major part of a 2011 winner. Already blessed with one of the best young pitching staffs in the game, the A's focused largely on offense this winter, importing not only Willingham, but outfielder [David DeJesus](#) and designated hitter [Hideki Matsui](#) as well. Willingham will bat cleanup most days, between DeJesus and Matsui.

"Pitching obviously is the backbone of our team," Ellis said, "which is how you want it to be. Look at the Giants and Rangers: They got to the World Series because they could pitch. That's where you have to start. But I like what we did this winter, and I really like our team."

Willingham doesn't need to be reminded that the Nationals lost a combined 196 games during his two years there. The December trade that send him to Oakland was neither a great shock nor a great disappointment. With his knee healthy again, and his priorities straight, he was ready to try winning.

"I had a great time in Washington," he said. "I met people and developed relationships there that I'll have the rest of my life. The only bad part about those two years was we lost. I'm not 26 anymore, so I definitely want to see if I can win before my career's over."

Pitchers poised for 'friendly competition'

BY CRAIG SLATER, LEADER-POST, 3/26/2011

Oakland A's catcher Kurt Suzuki admits he might have the best job in baseball.

"I put a finger down and hold up the glove. It's that easy most of the time," he said Friday inside the A's spring training clubhouse at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Suzuki is referring to the stable of young and talented starting pitchers the A's will again possess this summer.

Coming off an all-star season, in which he won 18 games and posted a 2.97 earned-run average, right-hander Trevor Cahill has earned the start on opening day for the A's.

But the 23-year-old said manager Bob Geren could have picked any one of Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, Brett Anderson or Dallas Braden for the job. "It's an honour to get that start, but they could have went with any one of those guys and it would have been the right pick," Cahill said.

Each of the four could state a legitimate case for the staff's top spot.

Braden hurled a perfect game last season (May 9) in a 4-0 win over the Tampa Bay Rays. He won 11 games and had a 3.50 ERA.

Gonzalez enjoyed a breakout season in 2010 and registered 15 wins and a 3.23 ERA. The left-hander also led the rotation with 171 strikeouts.

Anderson, meanwhile, battled through an injury-plagued 2010 campaign, but managed to start 19 games and posted a solid 2.80 ERA and picked up seven wins. He is picked by many scouts to be the eventual ace of the staff.

But Suzuki feels all four could be aces on most staffs around baseball.

"Every day I'm catching someone who could be a No. 1 guy on any team," he said. "It's exciting to see how good they are now, but also to see how good they're going to be a few years from now. They'll be fun to watch."

Braden is the elder statesman of the group at 27. Gonzalez is 25, while Anderson and Cahill are only 23. The foursome owned a Major League Baseball-low 3.58 combined ERA in 2010. They're a close group that pushes one another to be better.

"It's a friendly competition where you only want the best for the next guy in line," Gonzalez said. "If Dallas puts up nine solid innings with seven or eight strikeouts, that's pretty tough to beat.

"But what the next guy wants to do is match that. That's what we did last year, and we want to keep that streak going."

Cahill believes it's possible for the group to be better this season.

"We're still young and we can definitely still improve," he said. "We have a lot more confidence in ourselves this year after what we did last year. I think we're shooting pretty high again."

The A's lineup doesn't boast a superstar hitter, with 36-year-old designated hitter Hideki Matsui projected to be the team's top power producer. The A's added depth to their bullpen this season with the acquisitions of lefty Brian Fuentes and righty Grant Balfour, who will set it up for closer Andrew Bailey in the ninth inning.

Young pitching and a steady-hitting roster draws comparisons to the other big-league team from the Bay area, the 2010 World Series champion San Francisco Giants.

"The Giants were more of a pitching and defence type of team last year and they won it all. We're kind of the same team in a lot of ways," Cahill said. "If anything, it goes to show us that we can do that too with the guys we have here."

Gonzalez added: "The Giants were so impressive and fun to watch last year. We learned from what they did and picked up bits and pieces from what it takes to pitch in the prime time of the season.

"We won't compare ourselves to them, but we'll definitely try to do what they did last year ... keep that October baseball in the Bay. That would be pretty cool."

EXTRAS: Victoria native Rich Harden is in the mix with Tyson Ross, Brandon McCarthy and Bobby Cramer and for the team's fifth-starter spot. The 29-year-old Harden has been battling a sore lat muscle through spring training and is yet to pitch in a Cactus League game.