

A's News Clips, Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Oakland A's notebook: Team enjoys good health for change

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

With the exception of second baseman Mark Ellis, who rested, the A's started what likely will be Friday's opening night lineup in Tuesday's second Bay Bridge Series game against the Giants.

Perhaps more importantly, Oakland is just one more exhibition game away from getting its projected starting lineup to the season opener healthy, which has been half the battle for the team in recent years.

Last year, leadoff hitter and center fielder Coco Crisp started the season on the disabled list after fracturing a pinkie finger in a Bay Bridge Series game and ultimately missed much of the season's first half. Ellis soon followed with a hamstring pull that cost him a month, touching off an embattled season in which the A's used the DL 23 times, second most in club history, and set an Oakland record for actual player games missed with 1,397.

But for now, the lineup -- CF Crisp, 1B Daric Barton, RF David DeJesus, LF Josh Willingham, DH Hideki Matsui, C Kurt Suzuki, 3B Kevin Kouzmanoff, 2B Ellis and SS Cliff Pennington -- is intact and ready to go.

While that lineup may fluctuate day to day, manager Bob Geren doesn't see much variance in the top three spots. DeJesus might offer a little more speed batting higher than third, but Geren prefers to keep Barton in the second spot.

"I've thought about the lineup in different ways, but I really like what Barton did in the two-hole last year, so I don't really want to switch that," Geren said. "When you look at a game, there's usually 1-2-3 guys who get five at-bats and the other six get four. I just want the guy who has the best chance of getting on base the most batting five times."

Geren cited high on-base percentage and number of pitches per plate appearance as deciding factors in Barton remaining in the second spot. As for DeJesus, the manager said he could hit in any of the top three spots but prefers him hitting third even though his career-high home run total is just 13 (in 2009).

Rich Harden, sidelined with a lat muscle injury, threw a modified bullpen session off a mound for the first time in six weeks. Geren said Harden threw 25-30 pitches at 65-75 percent velocity and was "all smiles" afterward.

Closer Andrew Bailey, who will open the season on the DL as he rehabs from a forearm strain, made 30 light throws at 80 feet and his session also went well.

In a bit of miscommunication, Geren told the media that Ellis was a late scratch suffering from mild calf tightness, but Ellis himself said he was physically fine and was just taking the day off.

Matsui, A's president Mike Crowley and Japanese officials held a joint news conference regarding Sunday's game, which will feature several avenues by which to support the Japanese relief effort.

Matsui has personally donated \$620,000 to the Red Cross, while the A's already have generated more than \$50,000 in advance of the Japanese Heritage Day event. They hope to raise significantly more through ticket sales, a silent auction and sales of signed Matsui photographs during Sunday's game against Seattle. The club is donating \$1 from every ticket sold (the team expects a crowd of 20,000) to the Red Cross.

An attempt to unravel the mystery of Major League Baseball's A's riddle

By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News

Two years ago today, Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig lit a spark of hope for many South Bay baseball fans when he created a three-member committee to study stadium options for the Oakland A's.

But, 24 months later, the question, "Should the A's remain in Oakland or the East Bay, or should they be allowed to move to San Jose?" remains unanswered.

"We're in the same place today that we were in two years ago, waiting for Bud Selig to make up his mind," San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed said this week. "A snail could have made it from Oakland to San Jose in two years."

Here's an attempt to untangle the enigma.

Q Just why is this taking so darn long?

A "It's a complicated, complex situation, which the committee is still hard at work on," MLB spokesman Pat Courtney said.

The complication? MLB long ago granted the San Francisco Giants territorial rights to the South Bay, and the newly minted world champions don't want to relinquish them -- at least, not until they're properly rewarded, Stanford University sports economist Roger Noll said. "Either nothing is happening with the committee and the committee is nonexistent, or the committee is mediating."

Last we checked, the three members of the committee -- Corey Busch, Irwin Raji and Bob Starkey -- were all still breathing, so we'll consider his other theory: Noll, along with other academics, believes the committee is trying to hash out a financial deal between the two sides, headed by the bow-tied managing general partner of the Giants, Bill Neukom, and the windbreaker-wearing A's co-owner, Lew Wolff. "If two rich guys in the room come to an agreement that leaves both rich," Noll quipped, "then it should happen." Both men, by the way, declined to comment for this article.

Q What do MLB insiders say?

A Not much.

Selig, they say, still hasn't reached a conclusion. But if he does give the nod to San Jose, he'll try to broker a deal between the two teams before he takes it to a vote of the 30 MLB owners, three-quarters of whom must approve his decision.

MLB insiders say the decision, which has never had a deadline, is taking so long because it will have a lasting impact on baseball. It has to be something that works long-term for both teams, one insider said. If it doesn't, the source said, then it's not good for baseball. As Selig has reportedly said: "It's not a matter of doing it quickly, it's a matter of doing it right."

Q Sounds catchy. But isn't Selig known for dawdling?

A Affirmative. Still, some say if you look at what he's overseen since becoming MLB's interim commissioner in 1992, and permanent commissioner in 1998, the time he took to act on everything from labor peace to revenue sharing to changes in the playoff system was worthwhile. (Critics, however, called his reaction to the steroid scandal positively glacial.) "When his legacy is written," one MLB insider says, "people aren't going to write about how long it took him to make decisions, but were the decisions correct or not?"

Q Which side benefits from the delay?

A That's an easy one: The status quo favors the Giants because, at least for the time being, they don't have a deal with another team competing for South Bay baseball fans.

Also worth noting: The longer a decision takes, the more expensive the new stadium will be, because as the economy improves, the cost of labor and materials will rise. And at age 75, Wolff would like to see his dream become a reality sooner rather than later.

Q Whatever he decides, will the other owners go along with Selig?

A Pretty much. One critical element in the debate concerns revenue sharing among team owners. All ballclubs pay into a revenue pool, and that money is redistributed to the teams based on their individual total revenues. Teams with smaller revenues, such as the A's, don't have to pay into the pool as much as more successful teams. Insiders say moving to a new stadium -- either in the East Bay or San Jose -- would help the A's become more successful, ending the need for much -- perhaps all -- of its subsidy. That would benefit other baseball owners.

Q Didn't Selig say last summer that if San Jose agreed to delay its plans to place an A's ballpark measure on November's ballot that MLB would help San Jose foot the \$1 million-plus cost if a special election was required in the spring?

A Good memory. Spring started March 20 and ends June 20. But as Reed regretfully acknowledged this week, "I should have said, 'Spring of what year?' "

Q If the A's are allowed to move to San Jose, why does it need to go to the ballot?

A It's the law. The city's redevelopment agency has spent about \$24 million for a little more than half of the land for a downtown ballpark. Before a stadium can be built on that land, however, voters have to give their approval.

Q What about the rest of the land?

A Two privately owned parcels have yet to be purchased by the city, which is negotiating with the owners for an estimated price of about \$20 million. Ironically, one of the land owners is AT&T, the same company whose name graces the Giants' ballpark. Said Reed: "We don't have an agreement yet, but I'm optimistic about" both owners "being willing sellers."

Q How will the cash-starved city get the money to pay for those two parcels?

A The redevelopment agency is selling some of its own real estate -- including the retail annex of San Jose's Fairmont Hotel -- to buy the rest of the land needed for the ballpark.

Q Who would pay for the stadium?

A The A's will pick up the roughly \$500 million tab to build the ballpark. But the city of San Jose has committed to paying millions to upgrade streets and other infrastructure around the park, in addition to the land purchase.

Q If the Legislature approves a proposal by Gov. Jerry Brown to shutter the state's redevelopment agencies, won't that affect the ballpark's finances?

A Not necessarily. To protect the land planned for a ballpark -- or, failing that, mixed-use development -- from being grabbed by the state, the City Council recently agreed to transfer those assets to a separate city "authority" that it believes is out of the state's reach. "San Jose's plan to build a ballpark does not depend on the survival of the redevelopment agency," Reed said. "I don't think it matters."

Hideki Matsui gets 3 hits off Barry Zito

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

With the season about to get going for real, Hideki Matsui is coming alive.

Bob Geren, the A's manager, thought the team's new designated hitter had enjoyed his best batting practice of the spring Monday night. One of the Japanese reporters who follows Matsui was particularly impressed with Matsui's hitting before Tuesday night's game at the Coliseum.

Matsui put all of that into practice with a three-hit night in the A's 4-1 loss to the Giants, Matsui's first three-hit game of the spring.

All of his hits came off Giants starter Barry Zito, a left-hander. Matsui had recorded only one hit off a lefty during Cactus League play.

"He was jumping on the heater today," Zito said. "I left a few up in the zone. He got them today."

Matsui said it helped that Geren gave him the green light on a 3-0 pitch during his second at-bat, and he ripped it into right.

"It's a count in which you can swing hard and there's not a lot of variety of pitches you can get," Matsui said through translator Roger Kahlon.

Geren said that getting a couple of hits off a lefty can get a left-handed hitter locked in. For his part, Matsui said, "I was able to put some good swings on some hittable pitches."

In his final start of the spring, Zito, the Giants' No. 4 starter, gave up four hits, four walks and one run in 5 2/3 innings. Oakland's opposing lefty, Gio Gonzalez, allowed two runs, three hits and three walks in 6 1/3 innings. The A's No. 3 starter finished the spring with a 2.30 ERA, the same as Zito.

Pat Burrell led off the second with a single, went to second and third on groundouts, and after Brandon Belt walked, Pablo Sandoval hit a double to right, scoring Burrell.

That was it for the Giants until the seventh. Mark DeRosa walked with one out, and Craig Breslow replaced Gonzalez. Belt singled and Sandoval hit into a fielder's choice, erasing Belt - but Sandoval was safe on Eric Sogard's wild throw from second, and DeRosa scored. After Andres Torres walked, Mike Fontenot's single sent in Sandoval.

Nate Schierholtz homered off Michael Wuertz with two outs in the eighth.

Oakland's run came in the sixth. Zito walked Daric Barton, David DeJesus hit into a forceout and, with two outs, Matsui singled to center. Ramon Ramirez replaced Zito and gave up an RBI single to catcher Landon Powell.

Mark Ellis was a lineup scratch. Geren mentioned calf tightness, but Ellis said he's fine. He might be available in the series finale today.

The A's expect to make their final cuts after today's game. Sogard is the strong front-runner for the backup infield spot, despite Andy LaRoche's .339 average, because Sogard is the better shortstop and the team doesn't want to run Cliff Pennington into the ground early in the season after offseason shoulder surgery.

In addition, Sogard is already on the 40-man roster, unlike LaRoche. LaRoche can opt out of his contract on June 1 if he has not been called up.

GIANTS-A'S BEAT

Suppan cut — insurance arm wasn't needed

By John Shea and Susan Slusser, CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

Jeff Suppan was a Giants insurance policy, available to start if someone in the rotation wasn't ready for the season or if the bullpen needed a body.

But all starters are healthy, and the bullpen is deep even without injured closer **Brian Wilson**.

That explains why Suppan was released Tuesday. General manager **Brian Sabean** called it a "mutual" parting, and the right-hander is seeking work elsewhere as a free agent.

If the Giants weren't so pitching-rich, Suppan probably would have earned a spot. He had a 5.50 ERA, but five of the 11 earned runs he surrendered came in one inning against the Brewers. He was ill at the time. In other appearances, his ERA was 3.18, proving he's serviceable as a fifth starter or long reliever.

Suppan was signed to a minor-league deal and would have made a \$1 million salary if he made the roster. In his absence, **Ryan Vogelsong** is insurance for the rotation.

Bailey, Harden throw: A's closer **Andrew Bailey** continued his return from a forearm strain with 30 throws of long toss from a distance of 80 feet, and manager **Bob Geren** said it went "extremely well. It was extremely positive."

Bailey remains likely to return in mid-April at the earliest, with **Brian Fuentes** set to be the primary closer until then.

Rich Harden threw off the mound for the first time in six weeks, and that could put the right-hander on a timetable to be available to pitch in relief sometime in April, though the team also might decide to get him stretched out to start.

Geren said Harden threw at about 65 to 70 percent velocity during the bullpen session.

Geren described Harden and Bailey as "all smiles."

Japanese relief: The A's will donate \$1 from every ticket sold to Sunday's game against the Mariners to Japanese relief

efforts, and they announced at an afternoon news conference that about 20,000 tickets have been sold.

Designated hitter **Hideki Matsui** and Japanese Consul General **Hiroshi Inomata** spoke at the news conference to encourage fans to make donations to recovery efforts in Japan.

"It has been a sad story so far," Matsui said through translator **Roger Kahlon**.

"There are a lot of victims, and all I can say is that I hope for their safety. We are working to help as many people as possible."

"Hopefully the message I can send is to hang in there, give it your best," he said.

Briefly: The A's have lost five in a row and 20 overall for the spring, setting an Oakland record. ... **Daric Barton** has reached base safely in 15 of his 16 games. ... For the Giants, **Barry Zito's** 52/

3 innings of one-run ball lowered his ERA to 2.30. ... Third baseman **Pablo Sandoval** made another slick defensive play, diving for a backhanded stop. His throw to first was scooped by **Mark DeRosa**, who at first didn't realize he had the ball in his glove. Once he saw it, he flashed a big smile.

Drumbeat: Good throwing sessions for A's pitchers Andrew Bailey, Rich Harden

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 3/29/2011 6:49PM

Sorry for the late post, I wound up at the Chronicle Live set outside for some time, but here's the brief news of the day: Andrew Bailey made 30 throws at 80 feet and "it went extremely well," manager Bob Geren said. As I've previously reported, Bailey's likely to be back in mid-April.

There seems to be some idea floating around that Geren is going to go bullpen-by-committee with Bailey out. He said pretty definitively the other day that it will be Fuentes closing, even appearing in the eighth sometimes if that's the inning that's the key inning (based on opposing hitters, game situation), etc. Geren said he might use Grant Balfour on occasion, depending on the situation, as I wrote the other day, but there wasn't any ambiguity about who will be closing. He specifically mentioned Fuentes' experience as one of the major reasons it will be the four-time All-Star.

Rich Harden threw off the mound today for the first time in six weeks, and that puts him several weeks away from potentially being a bullpen option. (It would be longer if he's stretched out to start.) As Drumbeat regulars know, I'd love to see what Harden could do in a regular relief role, if he's healthy.

Geren said that Mark Ellis was scratched with calf tightness; Ellis said he's actually fine but just needed a night off. It sounds as if Ellis will be available tomorrow.

Geren mentioned that Hideki Matsui's batting practice last night was his best of the spring, and one of the longest serving Matsui reporters among the Japanese media raved about Matsui's batting practice today.

If you missed my [front page story on Matsui on Sunday](#), it's now available online. Along with that story, there was another on [Matsui chipping in with relief efforts](#) in Japan.

The A's held a press conference today with Matsui, team president Mike Crowley and the Japanese Consul General, Hiroshi Inomata, about Sunday's game, which will have numerous ways to help Japanese earthquake recovery. One major way: Ticket sales. Right now, the team is expecting 20,000 for the game, so if you'd like to help relief efforts in Japan and also see a baseball game at the same time, now is your chance, because \$1 from every ticket goes to the Red Cross. It would be nice to see this stadium packed for such a very worthy cause.

Here's the lineup: Crisp CF, Barton 1B, DeJesus RF, Willingham LF, Matsui DH, Suzuki C, Kouzmanoff 3B, LaRoche 2B, Pennington SS

The A's: Team holds blueprint for stringing together postseasons

By John Shea, CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The Giants know little about repeating. The A's know everything.

When the A's get on a roll, it's usually not one and done. It's sustained. It stands the test of time, and it's about getting back to the postseason year after year without a blip, constantly giving themselves an opportunity to do damage through

October.

The A's have repeated in all types of ways, as their three playoff reigns in Oakland illustrate:

2000-03: Four straight postseasons, but without advancing past the first round.

1988-90: Three consecutive World Series, albeit one championship.

1971-75: Five straight postseasons, including three straight World Series titles.

Conversely, the Giants have been in San Francisco 53 years, and only once have they followed one playoff season with another. That was 2003. They failed to return to the playoffs the year after each of their six previous postseason appearances.

Now they've got another chance, after their best postseason since they were the 1954 New York Giants. "It's a tough act to follow," said A's '70s left-hander Vida Blue. "As a champion, you've got a big bull's-eye on your back. Everybody's out to get you. Sometimes players can put more pressure on themselves than there really is because you want to do it so badly.

"In sports, once you get a taste of it, it can work both ways. Either you want more or you say, 'OK, that's it for me. I got it one time, that's enough.' That does happen sometimes."

Blue's first full season in the majors was the first of five playoff seasons in a row for the A's — and the first of Oakland's three prolonged playoff flings.

All unfolded differently, all with unique subplots. And all are worth revisiting as the Giants seek a return to October baseball.

The Finley years

Boy, was Charlie Finley cheap. Innovative but cheap.

The insurance salesman who moved the A's from Kansas City to Oakland in 1968 paid his players little, giving them every reason to despise him and win despite him, if only to earn more money by winning the World Series.

"A World Series check back then was 15, 16 thousand. I was making 27,000 bucks," Hall of Fame closer Rollie Fingers said. "A World Series check was half of your salary. Hey, after the World Series, I stocked shelves for Sears and Roebuck."

Blue added, "The motivation to win the World Series was to have extra cash. Seriously. It sure as hell was for me. We might've gotten \$22,000 in '74 (for a World Series share), and I thought that was a lot. You take that into consideration because guys nowadays aren't trying to get to the World Series for the money."

Full shares for the 2010 Giants were \$317,631, less than 10 percent of baseball's average annual salary.

Those '70s A's, who dominated just as free agency was about to change the game, had a similar nucleus when posting World Series victories over the Reds, Mets and Dodgers. The championship run ended in '75 after Catfish Hunter bolted for the Yankees.

"Sometimes if your top one or two players go to another team, that creates a big hole on your roster," Fingers said.

"When I was playing, we had the same lineup year after year. That doesn't happen anymore.

If you do repeat, hang a star on it."

The rally cry wasn't "Win it for Finley" as much as "Win it in spite of Finley."

"Exactly," Blue said. "We played right into his hands. He dangled that carrot in front of us, and we were still trying to prove ourselves to him every year or week or outing or atbat. Stuff just fell into place."

The La Russa years

Finley dismantled the A's and sold to Walter Haas before the 1981 season. Billy Martin, already in place as manager, got them to the '81 playoffs, but they didn't become a postseason fixture until Tony La Russa was hired in the summer of '86.

Then came four postseasons in five years, featuring three straight World Series appearances — a sweep of the Giants sandwiched between losses to the Dodgers and Reds — largely attributed to the leadership of La Russa, according to the 25th man on the roster.

"It wasn't about each of us," infielder Mike Gallego said. "If anybody thought it was about them, if anyone faltered off, they had five, six guys reminding them what we were here for, and it all stemmed from our leader, our manager, from Day 1.

"Tony was really good at wiping the slate clean. His attitude was, 'Yesterday was yesterday; we haven't done a thing today.' We had our offseason to enjoy the accomplishments as a team, but the first day of spring training, it was a new year."

Gallego, now Oakland's third-base coach, listed the players who kept the focus: Carney Lansford, Terry Steinbach, Dave Stewart, Dave Henderson, Dennis Eckersley and Walt Weiss.

And if, say, Jose Canseco wasn't hustling?

"Somebody would let Canseco know, 'Hey, bust your ass down to first base,' " Gallego said. "Next thing you knew, Jose was telling somebody, 'Hey, don't be afraid to run to first base.' It was contagious.

The winning attitude was learned from the beginning and stemmed from our manager."

The Beane years

By the mid-'90s, La Russa was in St. Louis and the A's were owned by Steve Schott and Ken Hofmann. General manager Sandy Alderson was grooming a successor named Billy Beane, who took over the job before the '98 season. By 2000, the A's were back in the playoffs, beginning a four-year run that was equal parts rewarding and annoying.

All four appearances were first-round knockouts, all in five games. Yankees, Yankees, Twins, Red Sox.

"We never got to the second round, and that's one reason we kept pushing it," said Miguel Tejada, who played his first seven seasons for the A's.

"We always played better in the second half. It always seemed we were coming back from 10 games down. We had good chemistry, and Billy Beane kept the (key) guys on the team. You struggle, and he kept you. We kept coming back."

Three big reasons: Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito. "We had young pitching, and they didn't get tired," Tejada said.

The era was the focus of Michael Lewis' "Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game," which illustrated through Beane's world how teams with low revenues and payrolls can succeed by being on the cutting edge of finding players undervalued by the competition.

More than that, Tejada said, "It was a good time. That was my best time in baseball."

Like so many other A's about to make big dollars, Tejada went elsewhere to resume his career. Once he exited, Oakland's playoff streak ended. He spent seven years in Baltimore, Houston and San Diego without returning to the playoffs, and now he's hoping for a flashback with the Giants, who hope to finally do what the A's did three times.

Make the postseason a habit.

A's making strides in Japan relief effort

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's on Tuesday announced that, with the help of corporate sponsors and team and fan donations, they have raised more than \$50,000 for Japanese earthquake and tsunami victims. They hope to bring in additional funds at Sunday's game against the Mariners.

A's president Mike Crowley, along with Japanese slugger Hideki Matsui and San Francisco Japanese Consulate-General Hiroshi Inomata, relayed the organization's ongoing efforts and asking for continual help before the A's faced the Giants at the Coliseum.

"It's been three years since the A's opened the 2008 season in Japan," Crowley said. "We're not here to talk about baseball. We're here to encourage Bay Area residents and A's fans to support the efforts to raise and donate money for our friends across the Pacific who are suffering during the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami."

The A's declared last week that the team will donate \$1 for every ticket sold to Sunday's contest 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 Matsui and Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki -- Japan's most celebrated current players -- will take the field.

Matsui, who made a donation of 50 million yen (\$620,000) to the Japanese Red Cross, said his thoughts are with all those affected by the natural disaster and that he hopes his bat can offer them a smile.

"This is my first year with the A's, and hopefully I can play well," Matsui said. "Through my performance, this can provide for good news for the people in Japan."

Matsui then collected three hits against the Giants after entering the contest with an .083 average over his last seven games. One came on a 3-0 pitch from Barry Zito after manager Bob Geren, who noted Matsui's impressive afternoon batting practice, gave him the green light.

"Physically, I feel pretty good," Matsui said. "Hitting-wise, I feel pretty close. Overall, I feel ready."

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 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, and the website will remain open throughout the season.

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

Also on Tuesday, the A's announced a partnership with Kura Corporation Ltd., which operates the Kura Sushi Restaurant chain, in launching the "Gambaro! Nippon" project -- translated to "We can do it, Japan!" -- to support Japanese victims.

Kura Sushi will be supporting the project through monetary donations of approximately \$1.22 million by Kura Corporation and approximately \$122,000 by Kura Corporation President Kunihiko Tanaka.

Bailey, Harden make strides

OAKLAND -- A's manager Bob Geren said he saw all smiles from rehabbing hurlers Andrew Bailey and Rich Harden on Tuesday, when the pair of pitchers made progress in their returns to the mound.

Bailey, nursing a right forearm strain, made 30 throws from 80 feet, and Geren said it went extremely well. Sunday marked the first day the A's closer picked up a ball since tearing scar tissue in his surgically repaired elbow two weeks ago, and he'll continue to extend distance and exertion while building arm strength.

The two-time All-Star closer recently said it's likely he'll begin the season on the disabled list, but he doesn't expect to miss much time thereafter.

Harden, meanwhile, will also be sidelined come Opening Night, but Tuesday marked a big day for the right-hander, who threw off the mound for the first time in nearly six weeks.

"It went well," Geren said. "He was throwing at 65 to 75 percent velocity. The ball was coming out of his hand well."

Harden threw between 25 and 30 pitches and will likely take a day or two off before undergoing another bullpen session. Once healthy, it hasn't been decided whether he'll resume starting duties or slide into a relief role.

Worth noting

Mark Ellis was scratched from Tuesday's lineup against the Giants because of a tight calf, but the A's second baseman said he's fine and it's nothing serious. ... The A's announced on Tuesday that they have already generated more than \$50,000 for Japanese earthquake and tsunami victims.

Gonzalez keeps Giants at bay in final tuneup

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Thanks to a couple of timely hits and a strong pitching performance, the Giants claimed their second straight exhibition win over the A's on Tuesday in the form of a 4-1 victory.

Pablo Sandoval put San Francisco on the board in the second with a double off A's starter Gio Gonzalez that plated Pat Burrell, who led off the frame with a single.

The A's tied the game in the sixth on an RBI base hit off the bat of Landon Powell, but the Giants regained the lead in the seventh. Mark DeRosa garnered a walk with one out from Gonzalez, who was subsequently replaced by Craig Breslow. The A's reliever allowed a Brandon Belt single, and Sandoval followed with a ground-ball forceout that resulted in a run thanks to a throwing error by second baseman Eric Sogard.

Breslow proceeded to walk Andres Torres and surrender an RBI single to Mike Fontenot that extended San Francisco's lead to two.

Nate Schierholtz' eighth-inning homer off Oakland righty Michael Wuertz made it 4-1.

Giants starter Barry Zito went 5 2/3 innings, giving up one run on four hits with four walks and four strikeouts. Relievers Ramon Ramirez and Dan Runzler combined to limit the A's to two hits the rest of the way.

Up next: San Francisco will send young lefty Madison Bumgarner to the mound for the team's final spring exhibition on Wednesday, a 12:45 p.m. PT start against the A's at AT&T Park. The Giants are expected to set their roster following the contest and, in doing so, make a decision on top prospect Belt's fate.

Southpaw Dallas Braden will get the starting nod for Oakland. After the game, manager Bob Geren is set to announce several roster decisions, including the final bullpen spot, as well as the backup infielder and backup catcher.

Sandoval, Zito lead Giants past A's again

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Baseball Writer

OAKLAND, Calif.—Pablo Sandoval has made strides nearly as big as his nickname: Kung Fu Panda.

Sandoval, San Francisco's slimmed-down, free-swinging slugger, hit an RBI double in the second inning of the Giants' 4-1 victory over the Oakland Athletics on Tuesday night and yet again showed off his improved range at third base from an offseason of rigorous workouts.

He also staked Barry Zito to an early lead. These two are the players on the World Series champions with the most to prove in 2011. Zito was left off the playoff roster for all three postseason rounds last fall during the club's surprising run to the city's first championship since moving West in 1958.

"Both of them came into camp in great shape and both performed well," manager Bruce Bochy said. "Both look very determined to bounce back and have great years."

Zito went 5 2-3 allowing four hits, four walks and a run with four strikeouts.

The left-hander with the big curveball is beginning year 5 of his \$126 million, seven-year contract and would like nothing more than to return to the dominating form of his 2002 AL Cy Young Award season while with the A's.

Zito, the team's No. 4 starter, went 9-14 last year and failed to reach 10 wins for the first time since his rookie season in 2000. His 4.15 ERA was the fourth-highest of his career. He went 1-8 with a 6.72 ERA over his last 11 outings and 10 starts and only had one victory in his last 15 appearances.

"Just another one to get the rhythm going heading to L.A.," Zito said. "I just want to be quiet out there, in a good rhythm and comfortable. Keep the game slow."

Nate Schierholtz added a solo home run for the Giants in the eighth. Ramon Ramirez (1-0) pitched one inning of relief for the win.

Oakland designated hitter Hideki Matsui singled off Zito to start the second in his first game at the Coliseum since joining the A's this offseason on a \$4.25 million, one-year deal. Matsui also added a fourth-inning single and a base hit in the sixth that chased Zito—Matsui's first three-hit game this spring.

"Physically I feel pretty good. Hitting wise, I'm pretty close. I feel pretty ready," Matsui said. "I was able to hit the ball pretty well, pretty hard today."

The Giants went ahead in the seventh when Mark DeRosa walked and later scored on an error. Mike Fontenot added an RBI single that scored Sandoval.

A's lefty Gio Gonzalez (1-2) allowed two runs and three hits in 6 1-3 innings, struck out four and walked three in his final tuneup for the regular season.

Gonzalez said the Giants' surprising run last fall motivated him to upgrade his offseason fitness routine.

"I'd have to say what the Giants did, it's pretty inspiring," Gonzalez said.

Landon Powell hit an RBI single in the sixth for Oakland's lone run.

It's two more lefties for the preseason Bay Bridge Series finale Wednesday at AT&T Park, with Madison Bumgarner going for the Giants and Dallas Braden for the A's.

Top Giants prospect Brandon Belt earned a start at DH and has done all in his power to make the club as a first baseman, Bochy said. The Giants' brass had a tough decision to make on whether to keep him in the big leagues or start him at Triple-A Fresno. Bochy said an announcement should come after Wednesday afternoon's game before the team flies to Los Angeles, where the Giants open the season Thursday at Dodger Stadium.

"It's up to us to decide if it's his time or not," Bochy said. "He's had a good spring and done very well for himself."

The A's lost their fifth straight exhibition game and sixth in seven.

Notes: Guillermo Mota earned the save. ... The Giants granted RHP Jeff Suppan his release from a minor league contract. Suppan wasn't going to make the roster by the March 30 deadline in his deal and had an opt-out clause in the contract that allowed him to be released and become a free agent. ... Injured San Francisco closer Brian Wilson threw 25 pitches in a bullpen session back in Scottsdale, Ariz., to test his strained left side muscle. He is likely headed to the disabled list to start the season, and would be eligible to come off April 6. "Willie felt great," Bochy said. "We're very encouraged with his progress. We'll decide tomorrow our next move. I don't think he'll start the season with us." ... A's 2B Mark Ellis was scratched with tightness in his calf. ... A's closer Andrew Bailey (strained forearm) made 30 throws playing catch from 80 feet. "He said it went extremely well. He was very positive of his throwing session," manager Bob Geren said. ... Oakland RHP Rich Harden threw his first bullpen session in six weeks, making 30 pitches. He is nursing a strained lat muscle below his pitching shoulder.

'Bout time for national pastime to get offensive

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP National Writer

As Barry Bonds sits at a defendant's table in San Francisco—his reputation already in tatters, his sole purpose now just staying out of jail—we can't help but be reminded of a downright offensive time in baseball's history.

Sure was fun, wasn't it?

No, we're not glorifying sluggers with ever-growing heads and enough acne to watch "Hannah Montana" turning the national pastime into something akin to a video game. Pumped-up players whacking balls over the fence with such numbing regularity and fearsome power that those stats should be accompanied by an asterisk, or at least a "Wii."

But chicks still dig the long ball—and so do the guys.

The grand ol' game has been putting up way too many scores that resemble a World Cup or the NHL. 1-0. 2-1. 3-2. And unlike soccer and hockey, which at least provide a lot of running and skating in between all that lack of scoring, baseball isn't exactly brimming with excitement when a contest turns into nothing but a series of flailing swings, weak grounders and soft pop-ups.

Yep, as opening day approaches, there's clearly a need to juice up baseball—only this time, let's do it legally.

"The Year of the Pitcher will continue," Oakland A's manager Bob Geren said during spring training. "The pitching seems to keep getting better, not worse."

Indeed, the arms race has reached epic proportions, producing an arsenal of elastic arms capable of throwing all sorts of nasty pitches (Mr. Slider, meet the Spike Curve). It seems every team has one or two dominating starters—heck, the Phillies have four of 'em.

Those guys are usually followed in quick succession by specialized relievers who might throw to only one or two hitters, never burdened by the idea of actually having to pace themselves.

A year ago, the average of 1.9 homers per game was the lowest since 1993. Runs, hits, batting average and ERA dropped to their lowest levels since '92. Considering many of the top hurlers have yet to reach their prime, this trend seems unlikely to change anytime soon.

"The game's kind of gone back to the way it was in the '80s—pitching and defense," Arizona general manager Kevin Towers said. "Teams now are focusing more on their bullpen and the importance of a bullpen in having a successful franchise. To me, you can't win without (pitching). It's paramount."

Nothing wrong with that.

But let's not let pitching become such an overwhelming factor in the delicate balance between scoring runs and keeping the other team from doing the same that it becomes a drag at the turnstiles. We're not suggesting there's any danger of returning to the dead-ball era, but the game is trending a bit too uncomfortably toward the 1960s.

That was a decade when Hall of Famers such as Sandy Koufax and Bob Gibson put up the sort of ludicrous pitching numbers that were, in essence, the equivalent of what we saw from an offensive standpoint three decades later when so many hitters were 'roided up.

In the last four years of his much-too-brief career, Koufax never had an ERA higher than 2.04. In 1968, Gibson pitched 304 2-3 innings and allowed a grand total of 38 earned runs, a microscopic 1.12 ERA. That same year, Carl Yastrzemski won the AL batting title with a puny .301 average, while the entire league hit a cumulative .231.

Ugh.

After that, baseball decided to level the offensive playing field.

Before the '69 season, baseball tightened up the strike zone and lowered the pitching mound from 15 to 10 inches. Might be time for a similar step. Lower the mound to 8 inches and see what happens.

Let's not stop there:

— Shrink pitching staffs. Ten used to be the traditional size of a pitching staff, and some teams carried as few as nine. Now, virtually every team has a dozen pitchers on its 25-man roster. Starters need last no more than six innings before they turn things over to the bullpen. With some teams, the game is essentially over at that point if they have a lead. Even if they're not tired, the starter hands off to three guys with closer-like stuff, each of whom is required to get three measly outs. So let's limit teams to no more than 11 pitchers on a roster, removing a bit of a manager's flexibility.

— Have a two-batter minimum. These bloated staffs also include specialists who often face no more than one hitter. Perhaps it's a lefty who's tough on left-handed hitters. Or a sinkerballer who's called in with runners aboard because he's good at keeping the ball on the ground, thus making it more likely he'll set up a double play. Smaller staffs will make it harder to carry those sort of pitchers, but let's go an additional step to guard against such gerrymandering: Require relievers to face at least two hitters when they come into the game.

— Develop a livelier ball. There's always been speculation the balls were jacked up during the homer-happy '90s, put into play to help the game regain its popularity after a devastating strike wiped out the 1994 World Series. We have no idea if that's true, but they've clearly developed golf balls that travel farther than they used to. Maybe they can do the same with a baseball.

Those simple steps would juice up the game—without aluminum bats or having to fret about an embarrassing trial somewhere down the road.

Now, let's play ball!

Oakland A's pitcher Andrew Bailey visits St. Mary of the Lakes school

by Dubravka Kolumbic, The Central Record staff 3/29/2011

MEDFORD — Students at St. Mary of the Lakes School received a special treat when Andrew Bailey, relief pitcher for Major League Baseball's Oakland Athletics, came to speak to them about making positive choices and the influence his Catholic school education had on his life. It was all part of national Catholic Schools Week celebrated the end of January. Bailey, a graduate of St. Rose of Lima School in Haddon Heights and Pope Paul VI Catholic High School in Haddon Township, was invited to speak at the school by his aunt, Chris Quinn, the school librarian.

The 26-year-old Bailey was named American League "Rookie of the Year" in 2009 and was named to the All Star Team in 2009 and 2010. He is a board member of the Strike 3 Foundation started by Oakland teammate and pitcher Craig Breslow in 2008 to raise awareness and funding for childhood cancer research. Breslow's sister was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at 14 and is now a cancer survivor. St. Mary's students, normally in school uniforms, were allowed to dress down the day of Bailey's visit and in return they donated one dollar each to Strike 3.

In addition to raising funds for Strike 3, Bailey hoped to inspire the students with his life story. "I want to get across to them the idea of commitment and dedication to whatever you want to do in life.

"I wasn't the best student, but I always found a way to make it work. Just because you're not the brightest doesn't mean you can't succeed."

As far as athletic ability goes, Bailey, who started playing baseball at age 5, said, "If you're good enough, they'll find you." He encourages kids to be athletic, but to also be a part of the church community and do other things that interest them. He credited his Catholic education with instilling in him "lifelong values that you understand when you become an adult." He recalled playing basketball at St. Rose and never being a starter yet always having fun. "You don't have to be the best. If you have fun doing what you do, keep doing it."

Bailey's aunt Quinn was thrilled her nephew could come speak to the students. "Having a strong role model in today's world is such a wonderful thing. There's so much negativity out there. It's great for them to see someone be so successful and still be such a great role model."

"It's very exciting," Bailey's mother said. "When he does something like this we are especially proud."

Principal Nina Hoover said she wanted her students to hear from Bailey how his Catholic education guided him in his life choices and the level of commitment and dedication that led him to where he is today. "You can have all the training and special coaches, but unless you really want to do it, you're not going to be successful."

The students were allowed to bring in sports memorabilia that Bailey autographed for them before the assembly. The students were then divided into two sections by grades and Bailey spoke to each group separately about his career path and the importance of education.

He was drafted by the Milwaukee Brewers before he finished college, but decided instead to complete his finance degree at Wagner College in New York before moving on to the big league. He recalled the opening day of his first season with the A's. "At that time, all the dreams and hard work paid off," he said.

"You always have to be a good teammate," he instructed the students. "It's about good sportsmanship and respecting your opponent." Then he spoke at the audience's level when he told them, "You have to respect your classmates and get along with each other. The values your teachers, coaches, principals, parents are trying to teach you now are things that you all understand about being good teammates and being a good person."

Bailey then answered some previously selected questions from the students, such as: "Was it hard to balance school and college baseball?" Bailey answered: "When you're in school, you're a student-athlete, not an athlete-student. School comes first."

Bailey said he hopes to play ball as long as he can, but is grateful to have a college degree to fall back on. "I never liked homework," he joked, "but I felt good the next day when I handed it in."

He reminded the students that "Coaches, teachers and parents have your best interest in mind." And he encouraged them that whatever they do, "Keep practicing. You can only get better." "Don't let failure stop you," he added. "Failure is just a speed bump that you need to push through to get to the other side."

Oakland's rotation has great potential

By Jerry Crasnick, ESPN.com

PHOENIX -- [Oakland A's](#) pitcher [Dallas Braden](#) is a master of the offseason getaway. Last year he traveled to Amsterdam, where he made snow angels in Dam Square and toured the Medieval Torture Museum. This winter he spent three weeks roaming Japan and Thailand, where he experienced the thrill of feeding a baby tiger and riding around the jungle on the back of an elephant.

Braden was accompanied by his close friend and fellow free spirit, [San Francisco Giants](#) closer [Brian Wilson](#), the man who struck out [Nelson Cruz](#) for the final out of the 2010 World Series. On several mornings Braden rose to the sound of "The Beard" cackling gleefully. As recurrent wakeup themes go, it was a lot more enjoyable than Bill Murray being roused by Sonny and Cher at 6 o'clock in "Groundhog Day."

"There were days when we'd wake up and he just started laughing," Braden said. "I was like, 'What?' And he would say, 'You threw a perfect game and I won the World Series. That's not funny to you?'"

During their conversations, Wilson recounted the Giants' entire championship odyssey -- from the team's late-season National League West title push to the magical October run all the way through the ticker-tape parade. The more Wilson reflected on his experience, the more life-altering and vivid it appeared in Braden's imagination.

"You could hear it in his voice," Braden said. "It's something that can never be taken away from you. Never, never, ever, ever. Was I jealous? Yeah, I was 100 percent jealous. I was 4 million percent jealous."

Is the Giants' magic formula powerful enough to span the Bay Bridge? Braden and his teammates will embark on their own voyage of discovery Friday, when they begin the regular season against Seattle at Oakland Coliseum.

As the Giants prepare to defend their title, a similar sense of purpose is evident in Oakland's camp, where the Athletics will try to make the playoffs for only the second time in eight seasons. In Oakland, expectations spring from dominant young starting pitching, a deep and potentially airtight bullpen, solid defense and (they hope) enough offense that the bats don't get in the way.

The A's laid some solid groundwork last year while posting an 81-81 record, the team's first .500 finish since 2006. A rotation led by right-hander [Trevor Cahill](#) and lefties Braden, [Brett Anderson](#) and [Gio Gonzalez](#) finished with an ERA of 3.47, marking only the second time in 18 years that an American League starting contingent logged an ERA below 3.62. Oakland's rotation also led the majors with 103 quality starts and held opponents to a league low .243 batting average and .373 slugging percentage.

This year Oakland's young starters -- and new No. 5 man [Brandon McCarthy](#) -- will have to produce without the luxury of sneaking up on people. The Big Four adorn the cover of the team media guide, and Oakland is a trendy pick to unseat Texas as AL West champion and make some noise in October.

Longtime fans in Oakland have seen some terrific staffs through the years. Catfish Hunter, Ken Holtzman and Vida Blue helped make the A's a perennial threat in the early 1970s. Mike Norris, Rick Langford & Co. showed serious promise before Billy Martin pitched them until their elbows and shoulders cried out for mercy in 1980. Dave Stewart and Bob Welch led the charge for three straight pennant winners from 1988 through 1990. And, of course, [Barry Zito](#), [Mark Mulder](#) and [Tim Hudson](#) paved the way for an extended run of success in the early 2000s.

Time will tell if the group assembled by general manager Billy Beane has staying power. But it'll be fun to watch these guys try.

"I hear everybody talking about our ERA and this and that," said A's catcher [Kurt Suzuki](#), "but you didn't have to look at the numbers. You just watch them pitch. These guys are good. They're really good."

For the uninitiated (i.e., East Coasters and ball fans without the MLB TV package) here's a handy primer on Oakland's top four:

Trevor Cahill

"He's the most left-handed of all of us," Braden said of the staff's only returning right-hander and Opening Day starter. Cahill, 23, exudes a certain adolescent goofiness, but it conceals a major league intellect. At Vista High School near San Diego, Cahill ranked fifth in a class of about 650 students and scored 1,950 out of 2,400 on his SATs. He was on his way to Dartmouth to play baseball when the A's chose him in the second round of the draft and signed him for a \$560,000 bonus.

Cahill, who is partial to classic rock, ranks Led Zeppelin among his favorite bands and warms up during games to the accompaniment of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." His nickname is "Pterodactyl," or "Dactyl" for short.

During an interview in spring training, Braden observed that Cahill is "23 going on 12" and resides "on another planet." As if on cue, Cahill walked into the clubhouse and accused a clubhouse attendant of "sniffing" his sliding pants.

"He's a different bird," Braden said. "He's without a doubt the smartest dumb kid you'll ever meet in your life."

Cahill began last season on the disabled list, lost his debut 10-2 to Toronto on April 30 and still managed to go 18-8 and make the All-Star team. With his bowling ball sinker, he produced the fifth highest ratio of ground balls to fly balls in the game. He's right up there with such old reliables as Hudson, [Derek Lowe](#) and [Jake Westbrook](#) in his ability to keep his infielders engaged.

"His first two years with the organization, we probably didn't get three words out of him," said Keith Lieppman, Oakland's player development director. "But there's this transformation when he takes the mound. When he's out there with his good stuff, he just attacks. You can see his confidence build as the game goes on."

Brett Anderson

The son of Oklahoma State baseball coach Frank Anderson, he's polished beyond his 23 years. Anderson throws a hard slider that bores in on right-handed hitters and makes life a miserable, bat-jamming ordeal. In his two big league seasons, righties are hitting .246 with a .296 OBP against him. Anderson is also adept at throwing his fastball for strikes. But like former A's pitcher [Ben Sheets](#), he has a love-hate relationship with the changeup.

It's an understatement to say that Anderson is a stickler for detail. He reportedly arranges his lip balms in meticulous order in his locker stall, and clings to multiple routines during games that dictate how and when he'll grab a cup of drinking water. Anderson claims to have a "full-fledged" case of obsessive compulsive disorder.

"Dallas is more of a perfectionist, where his shoes have to be here, or if he throws a pitch he has to work on it 10 times," Anderson said. "Mine is on a whole different level. You'd have to film me during the game to really understand it. I sound like a weirdo explaining it. But if you think it helps get you outs, it probably does."

McCarthy, who broke in with the [Chicago White Sox](#) organization, sees Anderson at work and thinks of another lefty with a much craftier repertoire.

"He reminds me of [Mark Buehrle](#)," McCarthy said. "He looks like he doesn't care, but you know that underneath there's a lot of stuff churning. He really gets after it."

Gio Gonzalez

Outfielder [Carlos Gonzalez](#) was traded twice before finding his niche as an MVP candidate in Colorado. Giovany Aramis Gonzalez did his namesake one better. He broke into pro ball with the White Sox in 2004 before hop-scotching to

Philadelphia and back to the White Sox in trades. He finally landed with Oakland as part of a deal that sent Nick Swisher to Chicago in 2008.

Gonzalez quietly made 33 starts, won 15 games and logged 200 innings last year while relying on a low-to-mid 90s fastball and a curveball from hell. His teammates pay it the ultimate compliment: Even when opposing hitters know the Gio bender is coming, they still can't hit it.

"He'll be an obvious Cy Young candidate when it all comes together," McCarthy said. "He's right up there with the [David] Prices and [Jon] Lesters. His stuff is an absolute joke."

Gonzalez, 25, is gregarious, extroverted and still figuring out how to harness his energy on the mound. With help from Braden, he's learned the value of pitch efficiency, averaging a manageable 16.8 pitches per inning last year compared to 18.5 in 2009. He has also come to grips with the notion that a few changes of scenery aren't a comment on his ability or his future.

"I think it's a confidence thing for him," says longtime A's broadcaster Ray Fosse, the catcher on those dominant Oakland teams in the early 1970s. "In his own mind he was probably saying, 'Wait a minute. If I'm this good, why am I going so many different places?' But he's settled in here now, and his stuff is unbelievable. He could be a No. 1 -- easily."

Dallas Braden

You might remember him throwing a perfect game against Tampa Bay in May, hugging his grandmother in a moving postscript, and inadvertently inspiring a T-shirt craze by cautioning Alex Rodriguez to stay off his mound. Opponents aren't always thrilled with Braden's act, but he regards brashness as a survival skill: Don't judge me, he seems to be saying, until you've faced the heart of the Boston Red Sox's and New York Yankees' batting orders with a fastball that averages 86-87 mph.

Braden is OK with those 5.28 strikeouts per nine innings, even if he might not set a Sabermetrician's heart ablaze.

"I understand the value of just missing a barrel," Braden said. "I don't need to miss your bat. I want you to hit it. I want you to hit it weakly to one of my stud defenders behind me, and we're just going to keep getting outs. If I waste time trying to swing-and-miss-pitch guys, pretty soon I'm walking hitters, my pitch count is up and I'm out of there by the fifth inning and I've done nobody any good."

A seasoned veteran at age 27, Braden went 11-14 with a 3.50 ERA last year while ranking 86th out of 92 qualifying starters in run support. That could be a recurrent theme for Oakland's staff this season, unless Josh Willingham, David DeJesus and Hideki Matsui can significantly upgrade a lineup that ranked 11th in the league with 663 runs scored in 2010.

As the questions play out, Oakland's starters continue to focus on the things they can control. Like inventing new pitches to augment their repertoires. Or honing their pickoff moves. Or fielding their positions. Or finding new and innovative ways to bust each other's chops. Baseball's truly great staffs have a synergy forged through internal competition that brings everybody's performance up a notch.

"Obviously we've set the bar fairly high for ourselves," Braden said, "but that's what the game is all about. It's about getting better, evolving and trying to best yourself and make tomorrow way better than yesterday. We do have pressure, but it's welcome pressure."

Now that they've learned to walk in the major leagues, Oakland's starters are out to prove how fast they can run. Yesterday was pretty darned good. There's no telling what fun new storylines tomorrow might bring.

A's behind the curve on draft day

Rich Walcoff, San Francisco Examiner

In many ways, the A's offseason makeover is eerily similar to the Giants' 2010 transformation. San Francisco jump-started a sagging offense last year with the additions of veterans Aubrey Huff, Cody Ross and Pat Burrell.

Oakland countered by adding accomplished veterans Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and David DeJesus. A year after Andres Torres earned the starting center field job and sparked the Giants' attack at the top of the order, Coco Crisp, now fully recovered from an injury-plagued 2010, gives the A's a talented switch-hitting leadoff man of their own.

After Hensley "Bam Bam" Meulens celebrated his first year as Giants' hitting coach by winning a World Series, the A's brought back Gerald Perry, who was their hitting coach in 2006, the last time Oakland made the playoffs.

Last July, the Giants boosted their bullpen by trading for crafty sidewinder Javier Lopez. In January, the A's also added a nasty lefty reliever in former All-Star Brian Fuentes.

Of course, both teams also feature three southpaws in strong five-man pitching rotations. But the biggest reason Oakland has been mired in mediocrity while S.F. has boomed beyond expectation is their contrasting fortunes in the draft.

With successive first-round selections, the Giants grabbed Tim Lincecum, Madison Bumgarner and Buster Posey, and now 2009 fifth-round pick Brandon Belt is getting strong consideration to join the parade of young S.F. stars. As to Belt's prospects of making the Opening Day roster, general manager Brian Sabean told me earlier this week, "Conventional wisdom says he's not ready, but he's held his own against tough pitching and plays a real good first base. There would be no

spot duty about it, aside from especially tough lefties, he would be the regular first baseman and would hit seventh, which would make it easier on him."

Meanwhile, the A's top selections the past three years are still nowhere near ready to help: Switch-hitting second baseman Jemile Weeks was injured much of 2010 playing for Double-A Midland, Texas; shortstop Grant Green hit .318 in Stockton, but led the Class-A California League with 37 errors and 2010 top pick Michael Choice, a 21-year-old power-hitting outfielder, is only now starting his first full season of pro ball.

General manager Billy Beane didn't exactly "wow" the baseball world with his three No. 1 selections in 2007, either: Right-hander James Simmons was out all last season with injuries, while first baseman Sean Doolittle missed most of the last two years with knee problems and outfielder Corey Brown was sent to the Washington Nationals in the Willingham trade.

The A's recent draft drought may not be as bad as other legendary Oakland first-round busts such as the Raiders' JaMarcus Russell and Darrius Heyward-Bey or the Warriors' Brandan Wright and Patrick O'Bryant, but it's getting perilously close.

Throw in Lew Wolff's constant bad-mouthing of the Oakland Coliseum and the club's declining attendance for six straight seasons and you see why the A's are in such a desperation mode.

Playing in the growing shadow of the Giants who have a waiting list for season tickets, the A's are giving out vouchers for free hot dogs to the first 10,000 fans who show up for every Thursday home game this season. Chew on that.

Gonzalez sharp in preseason home-game finale for A's

By Sam McPherson, Oakland A's Examiner

(OAKLAND) -- In his final tune-up before the regular season begins this Friday, Oakland Athletics starter Gio Gonzalez looked pretty good against the defending World Series champs.

Meanwhile, the A's offense still struggled -- scoring only one run against some mediocre pitching from the San Francisco Giants, thanks to an inability to score despite getting the leadoff batter on board in four of the first six innings.

If this game -- which eventually turned into a 4-1 loss in the late innings -- is any indication of what's to come, the "new-look" A's will be very similar to their 2010 squad.

Gonzalez gave up only three hits and three walks in 6.1 innings of work, while striking out four batters. The Giants scored off Gonzalez in the second inning with an infield single by speedster Pat Burrell and a dying-quail double down the right field line by a trimmed-down Pablo Sandoval.

No one really hit the ball hard off Gonzalez all night, although that's often par for the course when it comes to the Giants offense.

Meanwhile, outside of designated hitter Hideki Matsui's three hits off San Francisco lefty Barry Zito, the Oakland offense pulled its usual disappearing act despite being given plenty of opportunities:

- A leadoff walk in the first by Coco Crisp went to waste when Daric Barton popped up foul, and new acquisitions David DeJesus and Josh Willingham each hit hard liners that happened to find Giants gloves;
- Matsui's leadoff single in the second was erased when Godzilla himself was thrown out trying to advance to second. After Kurt Suzuki walked, Kevin Kouzmanoff picked right up where he left off in 2010 by flying out. Utility infielder and former prospect Andy LaRoche struck out to end the inning;
- LaRoche led off the fifth with a single, and like Matsui in the second, he was promptly thrown out on a misguided steal attempt after basically being picked off first base.

Oakland finally broke through in the sixth, when Barton's leadoff walk led to a run. Eric Sogard ran for Barton and was forced at second by a DeJesus grounder. Willingham then struck out, before Matsui connected on his third single of the night to send DeJesus to third.

Landon Powell, who replaced Suzuki in the top of the sixth, then laced a single to left off Giants reliever Ramon Ramirez to tie the game at 1-1.

At that point, Oakland continued to empty its bench, replacing five more players in the lineup (Jai Miller in left field, for example), but when San Francisco scored a few runs late, it also revealed the weakness of the A's allegedly-improved bullpen: Craig Breslow and Michael Wuertz each gave up runs, and Breslow was on the mound when the Giants went ahead for good.

In the end, Oakland lost another meaningless game, albeit in a familiar fashion. And with a 12-20 record this spring, the A's can only hope the regular season brings out better results than what they saw tonight at the Coliseum.

Oakland A's and Hideki Matsui aiding in Japanese relief efforts

By [Ramon Aranda](#), Oakland Sports Examiner

Earlier Tuesday afternoon, the Oakland A's held a press conference along with offseason acquisition Hideki Matsui to announce their commitment to aiding in the Japanese relief efforts due to the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that rocked the country earlier this month.

The team is holding a Japanese Heritage Day event on Sunday for the A's home game against the Seattle Mariners, in which \$1 from every ticket sold, will be donated to the Red Cross. Team president Mike Crowley says he expects upwards of about 20,000 fans for Sunday's game.

The A's plan on holding a silent auction before the game, which will include signed and game-used equipment by the players, with 100% of the proceeds being donated, while a limited supply of Matsui autographed photos will be available for \$50 each. With Ichiro Suzuki, another Japanese player, also being on hand, personally signed game jerseys from both Matsui and Suzuki will also be a part of the silent auction.

As part of the festivities, 10,000 fans will be given free Matsui t-shirts, in association with Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition -- the latest game from Capcom, who is also sponsoring for the fundraiser.

Matsui, who was born in Neagari, Ishikawa, Japan, has also made a \$620,000 donation to the Japanese Red Cross.

"Unfortunately due to the earthquake in Japan, there have been a lot of victims and I hope for their safety," said Matsui.

"With the ongoing efforts to help the earthquake victims with the A's, we've all worked together to help as many as possible."

Additionally, the A's have put together [a website where fans can make tax-deductible donations](#) to the A's Community Fund, which will also be donated to the Red Cross. The team is planning to make use of the website until Sunday but may remain functional for some time after the game.

Oakland A's and Hideki Matsui help to rebuild Japan with donations

By [Al Schnoor](#), [examiner.com](#), 3/29/2011

The Oakland A's held a press conference Tuesday to announce, with help of corporate sponsors, that they have already raised more than \$50,000 and plan to have more contributions in conjunction with their Japanese Heritage Day event scheduled for Sunday, April 3 against the Seattle Mariners (1:00 p.m. at Oakland-Alameda Coliseum).

Attending the afternoon press conference were SF Japanese Consul-General Hiroshi Inomata, A's President Mike Crowley, and [Hideki Matsui](#).

From April 3r ticket sales, \$1 for every ticket sold will go to the Red Cross for their relief efforts in Japan. Additionally, tax deductible donations can be made to the A's Community Fund with 100% of the donations going to the Red Cross.

The website for these donations is www.oaklandathletics.com/japan.

Hideki Matsui has personally donated \$620,000 to the Japanese Red Cross for disaster relief in his homeland.

Sunday's Japanese Heritage Day on Sunday will also include a Matsui jersey T-Shirt giveaway to the first 10,000 fans presented by Super Street fighter IV 3D edition.

Other ways to help besides attending Sunday's game or contributing on-line include; participating in a silent auction before Sunday's game, buy one of a limited supply of signed Matsui 8x10 photos especially for this cause, or purchase signed game jerseys of Ichiro and Matsui signed on Opening night 2011 to be auctioned off on Sunday as the highlight of Sunday's silent auction.