

Opening Day 2011, Oakland A's News Clips

A's opening opponent provides cautionary tale about high expectations

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

As the A's open the 2011 regular season Friday night, seating room on their bandwagon is disappearing quickly.

Sports Illustrated baseball writer Tom Verducci predicted the A's will claim their first American League West championship in five seasons. ESPN analyst Barry Larkin identified them as his "team to watch" for 2011.

Not since A's manager Bob Geren took over the club before the 2007 season have expectations been so high.

"I feel like it's the deepest, most-talented team we've had," Geren said. "The talent level we've had in the past has been very good. But this year, if a few guys get hurt, we have some great options to fill in."

Yet if Geren wants to provide a cautionary tale on the dangers of preseason press clippings, he need only point to the team in the opposing dugout Friday night.

The Seattle Mariners were in Oakland's position a year ago as the trendy pick to win the AL West.

Coming off a promising 85-77 record in 2009, they traded for former Cy Young Award winner Cliff Lee. They signed highly-regarded free-agent infielder Chone Figgins. On paper they seemed primed to make a run at the 2010 division title.

Instead, they were out of the race by May. Lee was traded to Texas in July, manager Don Wakamatsu was fired in August, and the Mariners staggered to a 61-101 finish.

A's fans have no reason to believe a similar fate awaits their team. But it shows predictions don't count for much once the first pitch is thrown opening night.

The A's popularity with prognosticators this spring centered around their excellent starting rotation, a deep bullpen and an offense that should improve based on offseason additions such as Hideki Matsui, David DeJesus and Josh Willingham.

Combine that with the fact that the Rangers, the defending division champs, have taken significant injury hits to their pitching staff.

Texas starters Tommy Hunter and Brandon Webb, signed over the winter, will both start the season on the disabled list.

Verducci pointed to the A's pitching depth as a reason why he's choosing them over the Rangers.

Throughout the spring, Geren cited his overall depth as a reason he's optimistic. That depth will be tested early in the season.

Two-time All-Star closer Andrew Bailey will start the season on the DL with a forearm strain. He should return by the end of April, but the A's will turn to veteran Brian Fuentes in the ninth inning. He had some shaky moments during Cactus League play, posting a 5.19 ERA in 10 appearances.

Can Matsui, the new designated hitter who hit .169 with one homer and two RBIs in 65 spring at-bats, find a groove now that the regular season is here?

He's a key to any revival the A's will have offensively after they finished 11th out of 14 AL teams in runs (663) last season.

Answers will reveal themselves starting tonight, when the A's send ace Trevor Cahill to the mound to face the Mariners' reigning Cy Young winner, Felix Hernandez.

"It's never bad to have expectations," A's assistant general manager David Forst said. "We like this team, and we certainly expect to compete for the division."

Candid Cam: Nine things to watch as the A's open their season

By Cam Inman, Contra Costa Times

The A's finally are on the move. But not to San Jose, Fremont or Las Vegas. They've climbed back into the national consciousness with a pitching staff that makes them American League West contenders.

What will accompany the A's on that journey? In honor of Friday night's season-opening meet-and-greet with the Seattle Mariners, here is my "Starting 9: Things I Want to See from the A's:"

1. **Coco From The Get-Go:** Centerfielder Coco Crisp can be a dynamic catalyst atop the lineup, which is why it stunk to see him shelved at the start of last season because of a broken pinky from the Bay Bridge Series. His presence is needed to jump-start any upgrade in the A's offense. He needs to cross the plate 80-plus times for the A's to legitimately contend.
2. **Three Aces and A Joker:** Durability is a concern across the board, but the A's starting pitching is highly intriguing. Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Brett Anderson are the plucky youngsters on the verge of big-league dominance. Dallas Braden's humorous sideshow makes for light moments when he is not throwing a complete game, a perfect game or a wonderful fit against Alex Rodriguez. Those four pitchers could combine for 50 wins.
3. **Is Matsui Done?:** Hey look, the A's brought in a long-time veteran. Will Hideki Matsui come through like Frank Thomas in 2006, or will Oakland make for a sad exit door like it did for Mike Piazza in 2007 and Nomar Garciaparra in 2009? The A's can't wait for Matsui (age 36) to heat up for his typical late-summer surge. Of his 493 home runs in the majors and in Japan, none have come at the Oakland Coliseum, where he has 34 career at-bats.
4. **Make A Trade:** A's general manager Billy Beane used to swing deals like no other. He might have to this season to spur along a playoff push. Last year, Giants counterpart Brian Sabean made critical moves in their World Series run. Beane may need to find an infield gem in baseball's underworld.
5. **Bring Bailey Back:** Closer Andrew Bailey is out with a forearm strain, further defining the A's hardluck, injury woes of recent campaigns. The A's need him to come back strong, regardless of any bid for a third straight All-Star Game. At least Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour can mind the store until Bailey is back.
6. **Kouzmanoff Thrives:** I've got a sneaking suspicion Kevin Kouzmanoff will go big this season. The A's failed in their attempt to replace him with Adrian Beltre, and perhaps that pursuit inspires Kouzmanoff. It should. Hit a career-low .247 last season with 12 fielding errors. He'll have better support around him this season, at least in the lineup.
7. **Win For Willingham:** When I asked outfielder Josh Willingham this week about his expectations for his first season with the A's, he replied that he simply wants to be on a winner, having started his career with the Florida Marlins and Washington Nationals. If the A's win, it will be in large part to Willingham's production in the heart of the lineup. He'll need top his 2006 totals as a Marlin: 26 home runs, 74 RBI, .277 batting average.
8. **Suzuki Leads The Way:** Catcher Kurt Suzuki has established himself as a top-notch receiver entering his fourth full season. That defensive leadership will be more pivotal than ever if the A's are to parlay their promising pitching into a playoff spot. Offensively, he can do better than last year (13 home runs, 71 RBI, career-low .242 batting average).
9. **Overlook Ownership's Sideshow:** Whenever it comes to the A's, the talk usually gravitates toward their relocation wishes, causing an unhealthy environment in the clubhouse and around the Coliseum. The A's are afraid of commitment: To the community they represent and to the players they employ. They have three bobblehead giveaways this season to honor: Rickey Henderson, MC Hammer and Ray Fosse. That is a legendary trio but how many innings will they pitch this season and how many runs will they drive home?

A's reach agreement to broadcast games on FM station

KBWF 95.7 will carry the A's for the next four seasons

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's announced a four-year agreement with KBWF 95.7 FM to be their new flagship radio station Thursday morning.

KBWF, known as 95.7 The Wolf, is a San Francisco-based country music station. The agreement takes effect for Friday's regular season opener against the Seattle Mariners, and the station will broadcast all 162 games.

All pregame and postgame programming, including Chris Townsend's call-in show, remains the same.

The announcement ends the uncertainty surrounding the A's radio situation and seemingly puts an end to the team's efforts to purchase KTRB 860 AM, its previous flagship station which is now in receivership.

Negotiations for a purchase went bad and the 2011 broadcasting agreement between the A's and KTRB dissolved, leaving the A's scrambling to find a replacement station just days before the regular season is to begin.

Their three Bay Bridge Series exhibitions against the Giants aired on KFRC 1550 AM.

"The Wolf offers the A's an established Bay Area station which will reach many areas that our previous station could not, particularly Berkeley and the Oakland hills," Ken Pries, the A's vice president of broadcasting and communications, said in a release. "It also has a repeater tower on Mt. Diablo that services the 680 corridor of Contra Costa County and Alameda County areas."

Chin Music: A's sign deal for KBWF 95.7 FM to be new flagship radio station

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/31/2011 1:09PM

I've got a story up on our Web site about [the A's new agreement for KBWF 95.7 FM to be their flagship radio station](#). The four-year deal kicks in immediately ...

Monte Poole: Opportunity arrives for the A's to make some noise

By Monte Poole, Oakland Tribune columnist

Thus begins the season of transparency for the 21st century A's, who for better or worse will expose themselves for who they are, what they really want and how determined they are to get it.

It will become apparent soon enough if most of the executive brainpower is devoted to seeking a new yard.

If will become refreshingly evident if the franchise is committed to winning.

And it will be overdue and exceedingly welcome if the 2011 A's are dedicated to fighting back, reminding the Bay Area that there is more than one local baseball team.

After a throwback winter during which general manager Billy Beane made several notable moves to improve a product drowsy from four years in competitive hibernation, the A's open the season Friday night at the Coliseum as a legitimate major league team.

With the starting rotation intact, a fortified bullpen and an enhanced offense, they have the goods to contend for the postseason.

Thank heaven, because the Giants should be in the thick of the NL race, which means the threat of another summer in which the local sky is orange and black.

"I don't really pay attention to it as much as one might think," Beane says of the pursuit of the local baseball dollar. "But when it's all said and done, it's a two-team market. So anything that you do here, not to say that it doesn't have any impact, but I've been doing this long enough that I don't grind my teeth or anything like that.

"The fact of the matter is the Giants won the World Series. They're world champions. It sort of is what it is."

Oh, but a good number of A's fans grind their teeth and roll their eyes over this turn of events. They've spent six months watching Giants fans sprout from floors and soil, multiplying, wearing Giants gear and yakking incessantly about the wonderfulness of their team and its ubiquitous trophy.

This is largely because, as Billy concedes, the Bay Area narrative usually orbits around San Francisco. The impressive feat in Oakland becomes outstanding if it happens on the other side of the bay.

Until now, though, the A's had never been in the position of responding to a San Francisco World Series championship. There actually was a time when they felt no urgency to respond to much of anything the Giants did, because Oakland had the nicer ballpark, usually had the better attendance figures and could display more individual MVP winners, more Cy Young Award winners and more Rookie of the Year trophies.

As if those didn't accurately measure superiority, the A's until last year were pitching a 42-year shutout in the championship-parade tally: Oakland 4, San Francisco 0, with the 1989 World Series -- a four-game A's sweep -- as a dramatic closing statement.

Given the history, then, the A's owe it to themselves and their fans to respond to the sights and slights and sounds of the offseason. Seeing their geographic rival win it all and dominate regional conversation to suddenly become God's chosen team should sound an alarm throughout the organization.

The A's can cut and run, or they can wipe the blood from their face and rise, eyes ablaze and fists cocked.

This is precisely the kind of challenging predicament a true competitor relishes. And it's left to the team's top executives -- managing partner Lew Wolff, team president Mike Crowley and Beane -- to outline and fill in the narrative of the 2011 season.

Billy put the team in the ring over the winter. Recognizing his team finished at .500 because it lost a lot of games in which it pitched well enough to win, the GM acquired a trio of solid if not spectacular bats: Hideki Matsui, David DeJesus and Josh Willingham.

Not because of anything the Giants achieved, Beane convincingly insists. I believe him when he says the timing is coincidental.

"We developed a young pitching staff and our payroll was down far enough where we had some flexibility," he says. "And the pitching staff was good enough to where it behooved us to take advantage of what we had."

In other words, this is an opportunity to challenge not only the Giants for local turf but AL pennant-winner Texas for the division flag.

Then, too, it's an opportunity to show that Wolff's ownership of the team and six consecutive years of declining attendance were coincidental, not deliberate failure.

Can it be so?

Truth is, baseball season in these parts is a exponentially more interesting and considerably more enjoyable when both teams offer quality, when there is even the slightest possibility of a Bay Bridge World Series.

And if the A's are sincere about going after a fifth trophy, we'll have that possibility.

A's preview: It's all about the pitching

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

The Oakland A's are poised for their best season in years, and that outlook revolves around a rotation that is developing into one of the major leagues' best.

How far along are Oakland's starters? How much improvement should be expected this season?

Those answers will drive whether the A's seriously challenge for their first division title since 2006.

The four core members of the young rotation — right-hander Trevor Cahill (23) and left-handers Brett Anderson (23), Gio Gonzalez (25) and Dallas Braden (27) — have pitched in parts or all of 11 seasons combined. But in 2010, they helped the A's post the best starters ERA (3.47) the American League has seen since 1990 when Boston, led by Roger Clemens and Mike Boddicker, posted a 3.32 mark.

Los Angeles Angels right fielder Torii Hunter ranks the A's rotation among the top five in the majors, and Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley said it is one of the two best in the American League.

"You've got the Red Sox and the A's — and the A's aren't as expensive as the Red Sox," said Eckersley, a television analyst for the Red Sox.

Such words make A's pitching coach Ron Romanick wince. Romanick is going to great lengths to keep his starters from resting on their laurels.

"I just try to say, 'You guys were really good, but you're not there,'" he said. "You never are there."

The A's starters would be wise to take a cue from Cahill's 2010 season.

As a rookie in 2009, Cahill posted a 4.63 ERA and allowed 21 homers to left-handed hitters, tied for most in the American League.

Last season, Cahill began spotting his sinker to both sides of the plate and jamming left-handers inside. He got a better feel for his changeup and replaced his slider with a curve that gave hitters a different look. Left-handers connected for just seven homers, and he went 18-8 with a 2.97 ERA and made the All-Star team. He also became more effective against right-handers.

"He got better, and that tells you he's learning how to pitch more and more," Angels infielder Howie Kendrick said. "He was working the changeup to righties. When you add another pitch to a right-hander like that, it's in the back of your mind, so it keeps you off all of his other stuff."

Eckersley said there is another thing that sets apart the A's rotation: "There's three left-handers. Who has three left-handers?"

One of them is Anderson, whom some scouts believe has the greatest upside of the bunch. Anderson had a 2.80 ERA last season but was limited to 19 starts because of elbow trouble. He is trying to work a changeup into his repertoire, partly to preserve the elbow that put him on the disabled list twice in 2010.

But something to note about these starters: They're not the most battle-tested bunch.

Gonzalez has been the most susceptible to meltdowns, but he toughened up last year, going 15-9 with a 3.23 ERA in a breakout season.

However, the walks continued piling up. He issued 92 last season and has walked 4.7 per nine innings for his career. Romanick stressed the need for Gonzalez to continue pounding his fastball for strikes, which sets up his outstanding curve.

"Gio probably has the best curveball from a lefty I've seen since back in the day when they had (Barry) Zito," said Hunter, the Angels outfielder entering his 15th season. "I think he might be their best guy with the nastiest stuff."

Braden gained the most fame of any A's starter last season by pitching a perfect game. He has the most pedestrian stuff on the staff, but Cahill cited Braden as an example to the others.

"He doesn't throw 95 and doesn't have a hammer," Cahill said, "but he changes speeds well and does his homework. He knows hitters. ... Just seeing how he prepares and how mentally focused he is helps out a lot."

Although Eckersley praised the A's starters, he sees red flags.

"You've got guys like Anderson, health issues," Eckersley said. "You've got control issues with Gonzalez. The sky's the limit. But you know how it is in today's game. A day later, a guy could be hurt."

Mark Mulder, one of the "Three Aces" — along with Zito and Tim Hudson — who pitched the A's to the playoffs four times from 2000-04, is following this group. Mulder, who retired in 2010 and lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., sees the promise and the pitfalls.

"You talk about fastball command, staying healthy," Mulder said. "There are so many things. But when you see guys putting it together, that's exciting."

Kevin Kouzmanoff enters season with a hot hand

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

The A's spent much of their offseason trying to improve their lineup. Going into Opening Night at the Coliseum, could one of the biggest improvements come from a returning hitter?

Kevin Kouzmanoff, a player the A's tried to replace with Adrian Beltre this winter, was among the spring leaders with a .413 average, and he drove in 12 runs, tied with Kurt Suzuki for second most on the team.

With the offseason acquisitions of David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui - the new heart of Oakland's order - Kouzmanoff is likely to be hitting eighth tonight when the A's take on the Mariners and reigning Cy Young winner Felix Hernandez.

"If Kevin's hitting eighth, that speaks volumes about what this lineup is capable of," Oakland starter Dallas Braden said. "He's been feasting all spring."

Despite their unsuccessful pursuit of Beltre, the A's do have faith in Kouzmanoff, believing that he'll rebound from a year in which he hit .247 with 16 homers. This is his second year back in the American League, which should help, and he might be playing with a little extra edge after the team's flirtations with Beltre.

Kouzmanoff said he is trying to change his offensive approach a bit. He's narrowing down his idea of the strike zone to make sure he gets a good pitch to hit, not just an OK pitch. But, he said, "Sometimes I deviate from that because I want to get the bat head out and swing hard - and it's a bad pitch. I don't want to get cheated, but sometimes that's the wrong approach."

As for hitting eighth, Kouzmanoff is OK with that.

"Whatever it takes to win a baseball game," he said. "I want to contribute wherever I am in the lineup. But I do see myself as a power-hitting third baseman, and I feel capable of driving in runs."

He also seems to have greater speed this season, although perhaps that's just the result of working on his running form this winter. Kouzmanoff's usual running style is so awkward, it looks painful, as if he'd just pulled a hamstring, but he focused on smoothing it out, and he looks as if he's gained a step or two as a result.

Kouzmanoff has become one of the A's most fan-friendly players, with a Facebook page and a Twitter account, @Kouzmanoff, both geared toward fans. And sometimes before games, Kouzmanoff picks out a youngster in the stands to play catch with.

"You have to make sure they can catch, and I throw light," he said with a smile. "If it makes a kid's day, that's cool. I like interacting with fans - they're spending their money to come see us during hard times."

Briefly: A's All-Star Trevor Cahill is on the mound for his first Opening Night start. At 23 years and 31 days, he's the youngest pitcher to start an A's opener since Vida Blue (21 years, 251 days) in 1971. ... The A's are expecting a sellout tonight.

A's to be on KBWF (95.7 FM), the Wolf

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

The A's ended their pursuit of a team-owned radio station Thursday and moved on to something entirely new: a country station on the FM dial.

The day before their first regular-season game, the A's signed a four-year agreement with KBWF (95.7 FM), known as the Wolf, to carry all of the team's radio broadcasts, including pre- and postgame shows. The station, located in San Francisco with a transmitter on San Bruno Mountain, has some advantages over previous flagship KTRB (860 AM), including the fact that its signal reaches Berkeley and all areas of the Oakland hills clearly.

"This is fantastic. I'm thrilled," longtime A's play-by-play man Ken Korach said. "This is the absolute best possible scenario."

The A's have shuffled flagships often, and a desire for stability prompted the bid for ownership of KTRB, which is in receivership. According to Ken Pries, the team's vice president of broadcasting, the A's signed a letter of intent to buy the station at an agreed-upon price more than a month ago. Multiple sources said that the offer was more than double KTRB's likely worth, based on the team's due diligence.

It's believed that the A's bid in the range of \$7 million. In addition, the team was preparing to spend an additional \$2 million to upgrade the nighttime transmitter.

A week and a half before Opening Night, the A's got a letter from the station's receiver, Susan Uecker, informing them that the games would not be aired if the team did not sign a new broadcasting rights agreement by March 25. There was already an existing agreement for 2011.

Asked potential reasons for such a demand, Pries said, "You can speculate. Leverage? Up the offer? Hardball?"

Uecker did not respond to requests from The Chronicle seeking comment.

Needing to ensure a home for their broadcasts and unsettled by the receiver's last-second demands, the A's began to look elsewhere.

"In one sense, it's too bad we're not in control of our own radio station, which we would have preferred," Pries said, "but there's also a sense of relief that we don't have to take on the obligations and problems of the station as a whole."

The Wolf's FM signal is strong in all nine Bay Area counties, but the A's are seeking affiliates in Monterey and Merced, areas that will not be covered by the flagship or existing affiliates.

The Rangers, Senators, Pirates and Braves have FM flagships, and the Wolf's parent company, Entercom, is a partner with the Red Sox and Royals, along with the Celtics, Saints, Sabres and the Sharks.

There are not believed to be other current bidders for KTRB, and the station's future is unclear.

Mixed signals

Oakland A's radio broadcasters:

1968-70 - KNBR 680

1971-75 - KEEN 1370

1976-77 - KNBR 680

1978 - KNEW 910

1979 - KKIS 990

1980 - KDIA 1310

1981-92 - KSFO 560

1993 - KNEW 910

1994-98 - KFRC 610

1999-01 - KABL 960

2002-05 - KFRC 610

2006 - KYCY 1550

2007-08 - KYCY/KFRC 1550/106.9

2009-10 - KTRB 860

2011 - KBWF 95.7

By contrast, the San Francisco Giants have been broadcast on KSFO (1958-78) and KNBR (1978-present).

Giants seem good, but look across the bay

Ron Kroichick, San Francisco Chronicle, 4/1/2011

Just think: If the Giants keep winning World Series titles at this rate, once every 53 years in San Francisco, they will match the A's at four in the year 2169.

Then again, this assumes the A's do not win another championship in the next 159 seasons.

Oh, we're just joking here. It is April Fool's Day, after all.

The Giants deserve to savor their long-sought title, no question. But the lingering giddiness seems a bit hazardous as the 2011 season begins, especially with the cult-hero closer (Brian Wilson) and postseason-hero hitter (Cody Ross) both on the disabled list.

Several other developments suggest the Giants are vulnerable. Miguel Tejada doesn't cover ground the way he once did at shortstop. Barry Zito seemed shaky even before the minor car accident. Who really knows if Brandon Belt is ready, Freddy Sanchez can stay healthy or Aubrey Huff can hit the way he did last season?

The Giants still count as the logical choice to win the National League West, but there's also a realistic possibility they float back to Earth, win 87 games and finish second behind Colorado.

Here's another distinct possibility: The A's become the Bay Area's best team.

Their reshaped lineup actually might be better than the Giants' lineup. Oakland added a .289 career hitter (David DeJesus), a guy who has averaged 20 homers over the past five seasons (Josh Willingham) and the 2009 World Series MVP (Hideki Matsui).

The Giants have the stronger starting rotation, yes, but the A's starters are no slouches — and the bullpen, fortified by the offseason acquisitions of Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes, looks deeper than San Francisco's.

It all makes for a fascinating season on the horizon, potentially the best around here in eight years. Just don't forget this includes the under-the-radar club in the East Bay — you know, the one with four World Series trophies.

A's end pursuit of 860 AM; head to The Wolf, 95.7 FM

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser 3/31/2011 11:38AM

The A's new flagship station can be found on the FM dial rather than the AM side: It's country music station 95.7 FM The Wolf, which today signed a four-year deal to air the team's game. (And yes, the Lew Wolff jokes are already flying.)

Among the most significant aspects of the deal: The new station comes in perfectly in Berkeley and the Oakland hills, areas that the A's former station, 860 AM, did not reach well at all.

The A's had tried to purchase 860 AM this offseason and offered more than double what the station, KTRB, was deemed to be worth after due diligence. The club also had signed a letter of intent to purchase the station at an agreed-upon price, with no other bidders on the scene.

The legal process was then ongoing and everything pointed to the A's acquiring the station, but a week and a half ago, the receiver sent the team a letter advising them that the A's broadcasts would be terminated that Friday.

I asked Ken Pries, the A's VP of broadcasting, what prompted such a thing, especially with Opening Day a week away at that point, and he said, "You can speculate.....leverage? Up the offer? Hardball?"

It's no secret that KTRB's previous owners left an enormous debt, and even by overpaying with the offer they had on the table, the A's purchase price wouldn't have covered even half that debt. So perhaps the receiver was trying to jack up the team's offer. But the A's already had sunk lots of money into their due diligence, into legal costs and into a generator for the nighttime transmitter, and they knew there would be significant additional costs to really get the transmitter working right.

Knowing their offer was already more than the station's value, and not wanting to sink more money into a potentially losing effort - and, I'd assume, disliking a fairly obvious attempt to hold the broadcasts hostage to increase a price that already had been agreed upon - the A's looked elsewhere and found a nice fit. Country music, a young demographic, a station that covers the nine-county Bay Area with a strong FM signal - and the end of all the headache with 860 AM, its feeble transmitter and its apparently difficult receiver. ("Challenging" was the nicest description I heard.)

The receiver, Susan Uecker, did not respond to an e-mail from the Chronicle seeking comment when the broadcasts were halted last week. All my information is coming from A's and station sources, so I cannot verify what, in fact, she might have been thinking when she took 860 AM's most prestigious programming off the air, but the timing does certainly make it appear a tactic to squeeze more out of the A's.

I know fans get frustrated by the A's many station moves and by the fact that they don't have a flagship station with a powerful AM signal, but in this case, they appear to have done everything reasonable to get the job done. And remember, there are only a handful of powerful AM signals in the Bay Area, and none have formats that would allow for the kind of airtime commitment that the A's would entail... or they have the Giants already, including ownership ties.

As I've stressed before, the A's would love to be on a big, dominant radio station, but you cannot make a station take 162 regular-season games and accompanying programming. Many stations don't have interest, and some can't provide that kind of airtime.

The Wolf sounds like a good fit for the next four years, and the A's are working on finding affiliates to plug in some gaps, particularly in the Monterey and Merced areas.

Pries said it's not out of the realm of possibility that the team will look at purchasing a station down the road, but not during the life of this deal.

A few more tidbits: The A's join the Rangers, Braves, Nationals and Pirates as teams with FM flagships; Pries says that FM listenership is strong, while AM radio is losing listeners.

Entercom, which owns The Wolf, also partners with the Red Sox and Royals, as well as the Celtics, Saints, Sabres and the Sharks. This is a company with plenty of sports broadcasting know-how, and another pro team partner right in the area the A's hope to move. How convenient!

Mariners-A's bring out star power for opener

By John Schlegel / MLB.com | Thursday, Mar 31, 2011

From the first inning, and from the very first pitch, the Opening Day matchup between the A's and the Mariners will put some very special talent on display.

Trevor Cahill, a 23-year-old right-hander who burst out to a stellar season in 2010, will throw the first pitch of the 2011 season to Ichiro Suzuki, coming off his record 10th consecutive 200-hit season. And if that's not enough star power, the A's will be facing the defending American League Cy Young Award winner, Felix Hernandez, in the bottom of the first.

The A's, coming off a second-place finish in the AL West a year ago, go in hoping to challenge the defending champion Rangers and the Angels for this year's division title. Oakland's offense was bolstered by the arrivals of Hideki Matsui, David DeJesus and Josh Willingham and the return of much of the staff that ranked second in the Majors last year behind its Bay Area neighbors, the Giants.

The Mariners, meanwhile, might be more challenged to hope for the same, with Ichiro's supporting cast on offense among the issues facing them coming off a 101-loss season.

What the Mariners definitely do have is an ace among aces in Hernandez, who at age 24 was dominant enough to win the Cy Young in a runaway despite a 13-12 record, thanks to a Majors-low 2.27 ERA, an AL-high 249 2/3 innings and 232 strikeouts, one off the Majors high by the Angels' Jered Weaver.

In his final spring tuneup, Hernandez pitched seven innings against Mariners Minor Leaguers for a second time. In his three official Cactus League starts, he went 1-1 with a 4.63 ERA, giving up 17 hits in 11 2/3 innings. But Hernandez said he got his work in just fine.

"All of my pitches were there, right on the corners," he said. "Everything is good. Now I have to prepare for Opening Day. It'll be good."

Cahill, who posted a 2.97 ERA and 18-8 record in 30 starts last year, will be making his first Opening Day start, becoming the sixth different starter to get the assignment in the last six years. He follows, in reverse order, Ben Sheets, Dallas Braden, Joe Blanton, Dan Haren and Barry Zito.

At 23 years, 31 days, he is the seventh-youngest pitcher to start Opening Day for the A's, the youngest since Vida Blue in 1971 (21 years, 151 days). But at any age, he was a no-brainer for this assignment, even within a deep and talented rotation.

"Trevor was, in my mind, going to start Opening Day -- if everything went well physically -- for the entire offseason," A's manager Bob Geren said. "I liked what he did last year. I liked his demeanor on the mound -- the mental side of the game that he takes out there each time makes him ideal to start any game of the year. If there's a little extra hoopla and flyovers and fireworks on Opening Night, he's the perfect guy to handle that."

Said Cahill: "There are a bunch of guys to choose from. Everyone had a good year, so I think it's about lining things up. I know [Geren] feels confident in winning with whoever he puts out there, so I don't think it's a huge deal -- just an honor, more than anything."

Mariners: Ichiro begins quest for 11

Heading into 2011, Ichiro has another all-time record in his sights, as an 11th consecutive 200-hit season would break a tie with Pete Rose for the most such seasons in a career. Ichiro also has the most hits in Major League Baseball since his arrival, with 2,244. He'll turn 38 in October, but Ichiro doesn't plan on slowing down soon. "It doesn't feel like I've played too long," Ichiro said. "Maybe I can say I'm halfway there." ... Franklin Gutierrez, the Mariners' Gold Glove center fielder, will open the season on the 15-day disabled list. Gutierrez has been plagued by stomach problems from a digestive tract issue throughout spring, but still has received no answers from a battery of medical tests. His return remains uncertain. Milton Bradley is expected to man left field in Gutierrez's absence. He's eligible to come off the DL on Wednesday. He had only 24 at-bats this spring and might need to get in some hitting in the Minors or extended spring camp.

A's: Closer Bailey starts on DL

Although Andrew Bailey continues to make progress in his recovery from a strained right forearm, he'll start the season on the disabled list. "It's safe to say I'll miss a little time," Bailey said. "But better now than a month or two or three down the road." Bailey played catch Sunday for the first time since tearing scar tissue in his surgically-repaired right elbow two weeks ago and had another good throwing session Tuesday. Bailey pitched just 1 1/3 Cactus League innings this spring. In Bailey's absence, Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour will be the main options in save situations. ... Ryan Sweeney took things a little slow early in the spring to ensure he'd recovered from right knee surgery, but he finished strong and figures to see time at all three outfield positions when the season begins. Coco Crisp is expected to be surrounded by newcomers Josh Willingham in left and David DeJesus in right on a regular basis. ... Willingham will be the 12th Opening Day starter in left field over the last 12 years.

Worth noting

The A's and Mariners have met seven times previously on Opening Day, with Seattle winning four of those games. That includes last year's 5-3 win for the Mariners. ... The A's have lost their past six Opening Day games, the longest such streak in franchise history. They have lost 13 of their past 17 openers. ... The Mariners are 19-15 overall in season openers, and have won four consecutive and five of the last six.

Cohn: Oakland oozing optimism, with good reasons

By LOWELL COHN, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The next sentence will surprise you. The A's are looking good. Try another surprising sentence. If you are a baseball fan, you've got to like the A's in 2011.

It's been a while since any normal-in-the-head baseball observer could make assertions like those. And if you want to be wildly optimistic, you would pick the A's to win the American League West.

Where does all this optimism come from? The A's, bless their hearts, have dumped Money Ball and copied the template of the World Champion Giants, which amounts to pitching, pitching, pitching. The A's really do have pitching — good, young, hungry pitching, which can get better.

You could make a case Trevor Cahill, who will work the opener tonight, is the equal of the Giants' Tim Lincecum and Matt Cain. And the A's starting pitchers are downright scary. These are Dallas Braden, Gio Gonzalez and Brett Anderson. The fifth spot is no big deal — Brandon McCarthy. But the fifth spot often is no big deal. And remember, the Giants still have Barry Zito pitching for them — technically the fourth starter.

Andrew Bailey is a top-notch closer when he's top-notch — he's not top-notch right now and will begin the season on the disabled list. That's a problem because closer-in-waiting Brian Fuentes has been two different pitchers. In 2009 he had 48 saves with the Angels, but last year he was not as good and the Angels traded him to the Minnesota, where he did better. The A's hope they've acquired the 2009 Fuentes. With the addition of reliever Grant Balfour, who also can close, the A's have the deepest bullpen in the division.

The A's have quality players at most positions — something you could not say last season. Hideki Matsui, they hope, will anchor the batting order with power. He is a significant upgrade from Jack (Swing and Miss) Cust at DH. Matsui hit pitifully in the spring but don't let that daunt you. Good hitters hit when the real season starts and Matsui is likely to hit. Josh Willingham is a significant upgrade in the outfield along with David DeJesus.

Matsui, Willingham and DeJesus are better than any hitters the A's had last season. That means the A's also have more depth — Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson can pinch hit in late innings.

The addition of Willingham, DeJesus and Matsui takes the focus off catcher Kurt Suzuki. The focus never should have been on him in the first place. He is a very good catcher, but not someone who carries a team — he's a reliable contributor. With these new players, Suzuki finds his rightful place lower in the batting order, further proof the A's are improved.

Their infield is not great offensively and there certainly is no hitting star. But it's an excellent defensive infield. And that is part of the equation with pitching — the A's will pitch and field.

The AL West should be a three-team race — the A's, Angels and Rangers battling it out. The A's are a worthy outfit, and you praise GM Billy Beane for having the foresight and guts to put it together.

Opening Day for the A's: Still no playoff spot in 2011 unless the offense surges

By [Sam McPherson](#), Oakland A's Examiner

Despite their offseason attempts at improving an anemic offense, the Oakland Athletics will miss the playoffs again in 2011.

No, this isn't an April Fool's joke, either.

It's just the truth. The offense still won't generate enough runs to win enough games to surpass the Texas Rangers, unless the A's organization makes big midseason trades for some serious bats (Prince Fielder, anyone?). Spare parts like David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui aren't going to carry this offense to the postseason.

Sure, many people would have said the same thing last year about the San Francisco Giants with Aubrey Huff, Pat Burrell and Cody Ross.

Heck, people did say that same thing, and look what happened.

But that isn't the norm: the Giants winning the World Series was an anomaly, like the Florida Marlins winning the Series (twice).

So without further posturing, here's the deal for 2011:

- The Boston Red Sox will win the American League East, and the Tampa Bay Rays will surprise everyone to claim the wild card in the AL. The New York Yankees will not make the playoffs, because their starting pitching is mediocre -- and the offense is old;
- The Chicago White Sox will win the AL Central, followed closely by the Detroit Tigers and the Minnesota Twins. But Chicago's depth will carry the division, and manager Ozzie Guillen will win the AL Manager of the Year award;
- The Texas Rangers will repeat in the AL West, almost by default. The A's have no offense, the Anaheim Angels have a lot of problems, and the Seattle Mariners just aren't very good;
- The Philadelphia Phillies will ride their rotation to the National League East title again, while the Atlanta Braves will claim the wild-card spot behind NL Manager of the Year Fredi Gonzalez. The Marlins will be in the hunt, too, but they'll fall short in the end;
- The Cincinnati Red will win the NL Central again in spite of Dusty Baker, while the St. Louis Cardinals implode and lose Albert Pujols to free agency (he's headed to the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2012 -- watch);
- Since the Giants have never won their division in consecutive seasons, there's no reason to pick them to repeat the miracle in 2011. It's going to be either the rejuvenated Dodgers or the Colorado Rockies -- they'll fight until the last week of the season to figure out who goes to the postseason.

The playoffs will once again be a scramble, as they always are. There's a reason the team with the best regular-season record rarely wins the Series, right? And, in the end, only one team can finishing standing up:

- In the AL, it'll be the Red Sox returning to the Series after beating the Rangers first and then the White Sox in the LCS;
- It's hard to pick against the Phillies in the NL, of course, but the Braves will pull it off after beating the Reds in the LDS;
- In the end, it'll be the Red Sox winning it all again in October, in six games over Atlanta.

Predicting the individual-player awards is always fun, but this year will be extra special because one of the A's will win an award. And that's no April Fool's joke, either:

- Carl Crawford will win the AL MVP, followed by teammate Adrian Gonzalez. Dan Uggla will win the NL MVP, also for a new team;
- Jon Lester will win the AL Cy Young, while Clayton Kershaw will win the NL award;
- Jeremy Hellickson helps Tampa to the playoffs to win the AL Rookie award, while Freddie Freeman comes through for the award in the NL.

Okay, so it *was* an April Fool's joke that an A's player will win an award, although Brett Anderson could challenge Lester for that AL Cy.

So that's that.

Check back in seven months and mock these picks as much as you want.

Please.

A's are Top 8 MLB winners this century, but it hasn't been enough to win it all

By [Sam McPherson](#), Oakland A's Examiner 3/31/2011

On page 403 of the *Baseball Prospectus 2011* yearbook, there's an interesting chart that shows the winningest teams in major-league baseball since 2001.

Despite the non-winning seasons in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010, the Oakland Athletics are still the 8th-most winningest franchise in the past 10 years -- which is a testament to Billy Beane and the multiple ownership entities that have guided the teams through this time period.

The A's have 880 wins in those 10 years, trailing only the New York Yankees (973), the Boston Red Sox (924), the St. Louis Cardinals (904), the Los Angeles Angels (898), the Minnesota Twins (888), the Atlanta Braves (888), and the Philadelphia Phillies (882).

Of course, five of those seven teams also have World Series wins in this time span. The tenth team on that list also has a World Series championship now (San Francisco Giants, 850 wins).

And that's something the A's lack, despite playoff trips in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2006.

The *BP* chart noted above also shows attendance and payroll totals for the same time period: the top two winningest teams in payroll/win efficiency are Oakland (\$0.62M per win) and Minnesota (\$0.66M). For comparison, the Yankees have paid \$1.83M per win, the Red Sox \$1.35M and the Giants \$0.98M.

So the A's are very efficient and effective with their resources, as that \$0.62M figure also represents the third-best in the entire majors over the time period in question -- and it's the best of those winningest teams, of course.

But it's not enough without a World Series title: Oakland has four of those, but none since 1989.

How can they change that?

They're already efficient, and they're not spending that much money to be so. By continuing to remain efficient, they need to increase payroll and truly convince some free-agent players to come to Oakland -- which in this day and age is hard to do considering the perceptions around the majors.

Oakland is the place with the "old" stadium, the closed upper third deck and the cheap ownership that can't figure out a new stadium plan.

Since most of the MLB teams have moved into new ballparks in the last 20 years, that leaves the A's -- the majors' predominant franchise 20 years ago, with three straight AL pennants -- scrambling on the outside looking in.

San Jose awaits if some hurdles can be cleared, but even then, moving is a few years down the line. The team can only continue hanging by a thread for so long, especially if their playoff absences continues.

With only one postseason appearance since 2003, the A's have become an afterthought on the major-league scene. And with the Giants miraculous World Series win last year, the franchise is currently playing second fiddle on the baseball field for the first time ever in its Bay Area history.

If the current ownership group wants to make its mark, they'll need to get into a new, state-of-the-art facility and win a World Series -- a long cycle the Giants just completed themselves after 15 years of hard work.

Bolstered lineup, pitching depth make A's contenders

Art Spander, San Francisco Examiner

So the Giants finally have their World Series win. As A's loyalists like to point out, that leaves San Francisco three behind the team from Oakland — a team suddenly more relevant than Lew Wolff's desperate attempts to move to San Jose or the whispered hints of Major League Baseball to contract the franchise into oblivion.

One remembers that slogan on the billboard at the eastern section of the Bay Bridge put up by the A's: "While they were building a ballpark, we were building a team." Also that other little zinger, "No splash hits, four world championships."

The Giants eventually built their team, along with their park, splashing their way to a championship.

For 2011, although still in the Coliseum, the A's have rebuilt their team, or at least they added pieces they lacked last season when Oakland, almost unnoticed because of what was going on at AT&T Park, finished with an 81-81 record.

With virtually no hitting.

Oakland signed Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham and David DeJesus in the offseason, players intended to bring offense to a franchise that — because of a pitching staff many believe is the best in the American League — already had defense.

It's a formula that worked across the Bay.

If the other team doesn't score, you can't lose. Then again, if you don't score, you can't win.

Thus Billy Beane, Mr. Moneyball himself, got DeJesus, a career .289 hitter who — as the baseball maven Joe Sheehan pointed out — "usually is good for 45 extra-base hits a season."

Beane (who is comfortable with manager Bob Geren, and that is where the building process begins) acquired Willingham, who has a career .475 slugging percentage. Beane lured Matsui, who has a .479 slugging percentage and, much like Willingham, usually delivers no fewer than 20 homers. When he's not hurt.

Oh, the dreaded disabled list, the A's personal Hades, the place you could find such former stars as Bobby Crosby and Eric Chavez, along with numerous pitchers.

Indeed, when All-Star closer Andrew Bailey was forced to see a doctor in mid-March because of tightness in his elbow, the thought was, "Oh no, there they go again."

The prognosis for Bailey was encouraging. Still, his problem was a reminder the A's for once must avoid sore arms, stiff backs and other diverse and Sunday ailments if they are to win.

Yes, win — a word permissible in conversations about the '11 A's.

Oakland finished nine games back of the Texas Rangers, who of course made it to the World Series, to be beaten by the Giants. But Cliff Lee is gone from the Rangers, and pitchers Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour have come to the A's.

"I feel this is a team that could be really near the front from the beginning," A's reliever Brad Ziegler said. "We're sick of being the pushover in the division."

The pushover was the Seattle Mariners. The A's were merely break-even, at worst mediocre. The question is, will they be able to break out? And can they do it quickly enough to bring enough fans to their stadium so Wolff's follies are ignored?

There's nothing like having a team in the race to keep people attentive.

So the Coliseum is a stadium, not a ballpark. So A's management irritatingly puts tarps on seats in the upper deck, sort of an ostrich-in-the-sand philosophy that what isn't seen is out of sight.

Those issues become trivial if Dallas Braden throws strikes and Matsui drives a few into the bleachers.

"The front office went out and made some moves to hopefully make us better," was the statement to MLB.com from Ziegler, who then offered the eternal A's caveat.

"If we can stay healthy," he said, "we should definitely be better."

Cross your fingers, but not to the point where you can injure them.