

A's lefty Anderson has Tommy John surgery, will miss at least next 12 months

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

A's left-hander Brett Anderson underwent Tommy John surgery on his left elbow Thursday morning, a procedure that figures to sideline him anywhere from 12-18 months.

The A's announced in a press release that Anderson, 23, had reconstructive surgery on his ulnar collateral ligament, performed by Dr. James Andrews in Pensacola, Fla.

The news comes as a shock, as there was no indication from Anderson or the A's that a major surgery was on the horizon. He went on the disabled list June 7 with what the team described as "elbow soreness." Anderson was examined by Andrews on June 13, and the doctor recommended rest over surgery. Anderson had a platelet-rich plasma injection — meant to stimulate healing — and was told to rehab for six weeks.

According to the release, "following an evaluation period, it was determined that Anderson's injury required surgery." Anderson was with the A's for their series with Texas before the All-Star break and gave no indication of surgery.

"I just want to be healthy and have consistent stuff," he said. "It's tough going out there not knowing if you're going to throw 94 (mph) or 88." The A's have lost four starting pitchers to injury this season, including Anderson, but the revelation of his surgery is the biggest blow yet given the time he will miss and the future expectations for him.

He was signed to a four-year, \$12.5 million contract in April 2010. Along with Gio Gonzalez, Anderson is thought to have the best natural stuff of all the A's starters.

Dallas Braden had season-ending surgery in mid-May to repair a torn capsule in his left shoulder. The A's are hopeful he'll be ready by spring training. Tyson Ross, who replaced Braden in the rotation, is still on the DL from a strained oblique. The A's announced Wednesday that Ross also has had a bout of shoulder tightness.

Right-hander Brandon McCarthy missed 1 ½ months due to a stress reaction in his right shoulder.

Oakland A's not offering a lot of reason for hope

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

At various times they have pitched well, scored enough runs and played quality defense. But rarely have they done all three of those things, or even two, in the same game. Viewed as a division contender in spring training, the A's have fallen woefully short of expectations. They are 39-53 at the All-Star break, 12 games behind first-place Texas in the A.L. West.

New players such as outfielders Hideki Matsui and David DeJesus, both acquired in the offseason, have failed to make an impact. The same goes for returning players such as catcher Kurt Suzuki and first baseman Daric Barton, who has been sent to the minors.

Bob Geren was fired as manager June 9 after the A's had lost nine in a row. Interim manager Bob Melvin is 12-17 since taking over, and the A's have lost six of their past seven games, all against division foes Seattle and Texas.

The major league roster doesn't appear capable of contending, and looking toward 2012, the talent in the farm system hardly suggests better days ahead.

Here are the major story lines as the A's come out of the All-Star break:

Is this team a seller?

With the A's in the A.L. West cellar, the team is likely to deal away veterans for prospects.

"It would serve us better for the long term to hold on to our young players and acquire more young players," general manager Billy Beane said. "It would be foolish not to look at it that way."

The A's opening-night starting outfield -- Coco Crisp, DeJesus and Josh Willingham -- is headed for free agency after the season, and the A's probably will dangle all as trade bait.

Willingham, with a team-high 11 home runs and 44 RBIs, creates the most buzz in trade speculation. But he recently missed 17 games with a strained left Achilles. Crisp also might attract interest with his .267 batting average and 26 steals.

But DeJesus is hitting .220, and he hasn't homered since May 31. Subtract a pair of two-homer games, and he has homered only one other time this season.

Matsui has been a major disappointment with his .209 average.

Two players worth monitoring in the second half are Suzuki, who is hitting just .225 and has not been his sharpest defensively, and left-hander Brett Anderson, still several weeks away from returning from a left-elbow injury.

Both were signed to four-year contracts last season -- Suzuki for \$16.25 million and Anderson for \$12.5 million -- and the A's need good health and production from both.

One major league scout, who requested anonymity, said the A's most valuable commodity is their bullpen depth, mentioning Grant Balfour, Craig Breslow and Brad Ziegler as relievers who could be attractive.

"Sell early," the scout said. "Teams out there want what they have -- bullpen pieces. You can play teams against each other."

Let the kids play?

The A's have committed to rookie Jemile Weeks at second base, trading veteran Mark Ellis on June 30 and letting Weeks learn on the fly.

Will they give more prospects an extended look?

First baseman Chris Carter has hit .170 with three homers and 35 strikeouts in 110 big league plate appearances dating to last season. He's also shaky defensively.

Beane maintains he wants to see other prospects play their way to the majors through superior performance in the minors.

"It's an earned right," he said.

But the young hitters they have traded for as part of a rebuilding phase that began after the 2007 season have not blossomed as projected. Carter is 24 and in his seventh professional season.

Outfielder Michael Taylor, 25, whom the A's acquired from Philadelphia at the end of the 2009 season, is showing some signs of blossoming with a .273 average and nine homers in 47 games at Triple-A Sacramento. But in 2010, he homered just six times in 127 games for the River Cats, not quite the power numbers the A's were counting on from the 6-foot-5, 256-pound former Stanford star.

"We're fortunate to have very good young pitching, and that's much tougher to acquire on the market," Beane said. "(A turnaround) may not happen in a year or two years. But if it's going to happen, it's probably going to have to happen with young players."

Melvin's audition

No one in the clubhouse is giving any indication that they have thrown in the towel, and how hard the A's play in the second half could be a key to whether Melvin's interim tag is removed and he is made the permanent manager.

But to have a whisper of a chance of getting back into contention, the A's must generate more offense. They rank third-to-last in the majors with 3.42 runs per game.

"We're going to have to score runs if we want to get back in this thing," Melvin said. "The focus of the second half is to believe in ourselves offensively. It's my job, the coaches' job, to get a better mindset and have higher expectations."

Right-hander Tyson Ross (strained left oblique) was examined by a team doctor after experiencing shoulder tightness during a rehab start Sunday with Single-A Stockton, in which he pitched just one inning. An MRI exam showed no structural damage, and Ross is scheduled to resume throwing this weekend.

MLB Commissioner Bud Selig says he won't hurry on A's move decision

By Daniel Brown, San Jose Mercury News

PHOENIX -- With the A's future in Oakland hanging in the balance, Commissioner Bud Selig said Tuesday that he's willing to wait as long as it takes to get an informed decision.

Selig commissioned a blue-ribbon panel to investigate a proposed move to San Jose. That was 28 months ago -- with no end in sight -- as the committee sorts through the Giants' claims to territorial rights in the South Bay.

"It's a very complex situation," Selig said. "(The committee has) spent a lot of time -- an enormous amount of time.

"And as I've told both clubs: This is another situation where it's better to get it done right than to get it done any faster."

Speaking at the annual Baseball Writers Association of America luncheon a few hours before the All-Star Game, the commissioner acknowledged the long wait and growing impatience with his blue-ribbon committee.

But Selig said he has instructed the panel to announce its findings only after it has looked at "every conceivable option" involved with the A's stadium situation.

In other news at the BBWAA luncheon:

The A's play a doubleheader against the Angels on Saturday. Selig said the league had no interest in making doubleheaders commonplace again.

The Giants and A's before/after 2011 touchstones: Posey, Melvin, Beltran and Carter

Posted by Tim Kawakami, San Jose Mercury News

** Straight from tomorrow morning's paper (UNEDITED VERSION) with a bunch of toppers...*

-I looked up various things that I knew, even while looking 'em up, that I would not be able to fit into these 750 or so words.

But it's always better to have more stuff than not enough--believe me, I've been on the other side of that a few times--and it's perfect when I'm ready to fire up the blog once again.

Some extras:

-The A's are 39-53 and have 70 games left. Let's do the old trick, if they play .500 ball the rest of the way (which is doubtful), that would get them to 74-88.

Ugh. And that's a liberal estimate.

* The Giants are 52-40, also with 70 games left.

If they go 35-35, that would get them to 87-75. And it'd probably win the division by 3 or more games.

I think they could go 32-38 and still get into a one-game playoff. I really do.

* So far, Giants' pitching, as briefly mentioned in the column, is better than last year, and that is saying something.

They have a 3.20 team ERA and 1.23 WHIP.

Last year they had a 3.36 ERA and a 1.27 WHIP.

* The Giants have scored 332 runs, and are no longer last in baseball in that category. They're a proud fourth-to-last.

The A's have scored 315. They're third-to-last. San Diego has scored 304. The Mariners are last, having scored only 301 runs.

* The Giants scored 697 runs last year, and allowed 583.

This year, they're on pace to score 585... and allow only 567.

* Since losing Buster Posey, the Giants not only have a slightly better record, but they're scoring slightly more frequently (3.68 after Posey vs. 3.54 with him) and holding opponents down more severely (3.41 after Posey vs. 3.58 with Posey).

* *Added Giants moment: Ryan Vogelsong gets his first start of the season on April 28 and his first major-league start since 2004.*

The Giants were 11-12 after losing in Pittsburgh on April 27. The next day, subbing for an injured Barry Zito, Vogelsong gave up two runs over 5 2/3 innings, the Giants won 5-2, and Vogelsong got the victory.

Since then? The Giants have gone 41-28 overall since Vogelsong's re-arrival as a starter; yes, yes, Zeet fans, Barry Zito has chipped in three victories recently.

But Vogelsong's emergence, at 33, is the milestone I'm discussing. The Giants won 9 of his first 12 starts, but have lost the last two. But still 9-5 in his starts.

When you have your fourth or fifth starter firing darts, it sets up a lot of things for the whole team.

* *Added A's moment: Tyson Ross' last healthy start was on May 14, and then the doom.*

On May 14, Ross beat Chicago to lift the A's to a 20-19 record.

But he hurt his oblique, and that added to the injury to Dallas Braden in mid-April and Brandon McCarthy also in May, then Brett Anderson a few weeks later...

And the totality of it really began to take a toll in mid-May. The A's got to 22-20 a few days later, but overall are 19-34 since that Ross victory.

It's the All-Star Break, filled with the usual reflection, obsession, dejection and wild projection.

It's the mid-summer pause between the three-month build-up... and the 11-week steeplechase into October.

But for good or bad, the A's and Giants have been provided much sharper, truer lines of demarcation this year. Real-time baseball barometers.

Let's take a look at a few milestone moments, tally up what they meant and what they will mean in the last long stretch of the season...

* *Giants moment: Buster Posey's season-ending injury on May 25.*

Scott Cousins crashed into Posey almost seven weeks ago, eliciting rage and despair from all parts of Giants Universe.

Surprise: The Giants actually have a slightly better record since the Posey injury (25-19 from May 26 on, which is a .568 winning percentage) than they did through that Posey/Cousins game (27-21, .563).

It should be noted that the Giants had a heavily road-tilted schedule to that point—28 road games, 20 at home—and have played 24 at home and 20 on the road since then.

Posey is clearly missed immensely. But the Giants' continued success without him draws a bright circle around their pitching, which so far has been even better than last year.

And it nudges Giants management into a tricky situation. If they had fallen apart without Posey, they could have shrugged their shoulders and aimed for 2012.

The Giants haven't fallen apart. They're in first place and strong favorites to win the NL West.

But do they have the offensive weapons to win multiple playoff series?

The Giants can't count on this pitching forever. They've sold out every home game; TV ratings are sky-high. They're as flush with cash as they've ever been.

Is now the time to muscle up financially and make a move to rent Mets' outfielder Carlos Beltran to bolster the chance for a World Series repeat? And theoretically position themselves to sign Beltran long-term?

If it's not now, then when?

** A's moment: Replacing manager Bob Geren with interim skipper Bob Melvin on June 9.*

The mood is better in the clubhouse and the manager usually makes sense these days.

But the A's were 27-36 (.429 percentage) when Billy Beane fired his friend Geren; they're 12-17 since (.414).

Obviously, Geren had to go, especially on the tail end of that long losing streak. It wasn't just about re-directing "the focus," as Beane said.

But the continued struggles post-Geren illustrate the depth of the A's offensive woes. For instance: The A's have scored a paltry 3.17 runs per game under Melvin. They averaged 3.57 under Geren.

It wasn't just Geren's fault. It's not Melvin's fault. It's not all due to the pitching injuries. It's everything.

** Giants moment: Nate Schierholtz starts hitting on June 25, and keeps hitting.*

Schierholtz had a .248 average with a .692 OPS entering that game—since then he has hit .421 and lifted his average to .293 and his OPS to .807.

How important is that? The only other Giants' hitter with an OPS over .800 is Pablo Sandoval (at .844), and Sandoval needs help.

Last year the Giants certainly weren't an offensive juggernaut, but they closed the season with four hitters carrying an OPS over .800. (They were: Buster Posey, Aubrey Huff, Pat Burrell, Andres Torres and Cody Ross—if you just count Ross' time with the Giants.)

Now they at least have two.

** A's moments: Calling up Jemile Weeks on June 7 and Chris Carter on June 23.*

Two perfect examples for the eye-test theory: You either look like a major-leaguer right away or you don't, and Weeks, 24, immediately showed he belonged at second base for years to come.

Meanwhile Carter (also 24), in his second big-league stint as the A's great hope for a power bat, is showing that he might never get up to speed.

In 32 plate-appearances this year, Carter is hitting .133 with no extra-base hits and 14 strikeouts.

Adding in last year's effort, Carter is hitting .170 in 110 major-league plate-appearances, with four extra-base hits and 35 strikeouts.

Carter has to figure it out fast. So does prospect Michael Taylor, who is 25 and in his fifth minor-league season.

After years of waiting for those two, the attention might shift to 2010 first-round pick Michael Choice, currently dominating at high-A Stockton.

What does it mean? The wait for the A's to produce a power bat might skip to another generation. That's not a milestone the A's want. But at least, after this gasping season, the A's will know.

A's Gio Gonzalez combines smile, substance

By Mark Emmons, San Jose Mercury News

When A's pitcher Gio Gonzalez was growing up in the South Florida city of Hialeah, neighborhood kids congregated behind his townhouse to play baseball. It didn't matter that the strip of land between buildings was too narrow, too rocky and had power lines above it.

They loved their "field" so much that it even was given a name: The Sandlot.

"We used to get cuts and bruises, and there was stuff in the way, but we didn't care," Gonzalez said. "Those days, you never forget. I look back on them as my All-Star experience."

Tuesday night, Gonzalez will experience the real deal as Oakland's lone representative to the American League All Star team. And the cool part is it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

Gonzalez, 25, quietly has emerged as one of baseball's top left-handed starters by learning to harness emotional tendencies that used to get the best of him on the mound. But he remains the same gracious ballplayer who always has a smile on his face.

"He comes in every day and says hello to everyone," said A's closer Andrew Bailey. "Literally, he walks around the clubhouse and shakes everyone's hand. That's the kind of teammate he is and why we're so excited for him."

Before a game last week, Gonzalez was busy handing out hats and T-shirts from a sponsor to the Oakland clubhouse attendants. And that congratulatory bottle of Dom Perignon for making the All-Star team? He passed it on pitching coach Ron Romanick as a thank you gift.

When Gonzalez talks about everyone who helped make this moment possible, he includes boyhood friends with whom he once bloodied elbows and knees at The Sandlot. They helped grow his love of baseball. Gonzalez knows exactly who he is and where he came from -- right down to having "Hialeah" stenciled on the back of his game spikes.

"Verizon must love me because my cell phone is blowing up," he said. "I'm getting non-stop calls from kids I played with in Hialeah. I'm never going to think that I'm superior to anyone. It's important to stay humble and be low-key."

Gonzalez has been a rare bright spot in another dreary season for the A's. High expectations have disintegrated into a 39-53 record that already cost manager Bob Geren his job. But with an 8-6 record and 2.47 ERA that is fifth-best in the American League, he gives the usually sparse crowds in Oakland a reason to cheer.

Perhaps his mother Yolanda, who was born in Cuba and prefers to go by Yoly, sensed that her first-born was going to be special. She was insistent that the eldest of her two boys have a unique name.

Giovany Aramis Gonzalez showed an early aptitude for baseball. His devastating curveball, which acts like it's dropping off a table just as it reaches the plate, was first taught to him by his father, Max. That pitch is the primary reason he's averaging nearly a strikeout an inning this season.

"I would make Kool-Aid and lemonade for the kids," said Yoly, who came to the U.S. at age 5. "They would play kids from other buildings. Max sometimes would pitch to both teams. They would have Home Run Derbys. I even scraped up my knees playing out there. We broke so many windows that I found a guy who would replace them for 15 bucks apiece."

A 2004 first-round pick out of high school by the Chicago White Sox, Gonzalez pinballed around organizations. Traded to Philadelphia in December of 2005, he was dealt back to the White Sox 12 months later and then to the A's in January 2008. General manager Billy Beane was willing to part with fan-favorite Nick Swisher only if Gonzalez was in the deal. By that August, the left-hander was making his major-league debut.

It was clear that he had talent . . . and much to learn. Gonzalez had a tendency of allowing little mistakes to cascade into big innings.

"When I broke in I was just 22 and you could see that I had a lot of growing up to do," Gonzalez said. "But the guys in this clubhouse have molded me and made me the pitcher I am."

He especially credits fellow starter Dallas Braden, who has been on the disabled list most of the season. Gonzalez watched how Braden would study an opponent for days ahead of a start. He listened as Braden reminded him to stay composed when trouble struck.

"Braden was always telling me: 'You can't allow an inning where you let two guys on base spiral out of control,'" Gonzalez said. "So now I'm telling myself, 'Slow down. You can get out of this.'"

The result was a breakout season in 2010, when he went 15-9 with a 3.23 ERA. He's even better this year.

"You could always see that he had the stuff to be a No. 1 guy if he just relaxed a little," catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "He's such a perfectionist that he would get frustrated when he wasn't perfect. But now that he keeps his emotions in check, he's unbelievable."

Off the field, his mom lovingly describes him as the same "clown" he always has been. Gonzalez didn't like the high-rise apartment with a view of the Atlantic Ocean she furnished for him, so he spends off-seasons in the same townhouse where he grew up in working-class Hialeah.

"That's where he feels comfortable," Yoly said.

But Gonzalez has come a long way from his modest roots. The journey has taken him to the All-Star Game, where Yoly, Max and other family and friends will be in the stands for his coming-out party.

"You don't want to do this just once," Gonzalez said. "My goal is to achieve something like this every single year."

A's Brett Anderson out for a year after surgery

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Friday, July 15, 2011

-- Brett Anderson's left elbow didn't respond to rest, rehab and platelet-rich plasma injections so the A's No. 2 starter had Tommy John surgery, an elbow ligament reconstruction, in Pensacola, Fla., on Thursday morning.

"Today's surgery didn't come as a total surprise, given that Brett has been dealing with these issues the last two years," A's general manager Billy Beane said by phone. "The past month was the conservative approach with the rehab, but we always had it in the back of our mind that this was a possibility."

Anderson had feared as much when the elbow became a problem for the second season in a row in early May, telling teammates he believed he'd need Tommy John surgery, though MRI exams have not shown any conclusive tears. (That is not abnormal; ligament tears are not always apparent until surgeons actually go in and look.) Anderson was sidelined twice in 2010 with elbow inflammation.

"He knew it was going to come," A's starter Trevor Cahill said. "It's best to get it out of the way."

Oakland lost another starter, Dallas Braden, to left shoulder surgery in May, and the A's have used the disabled list 11 times this season. With the team 12 games back in the AL West, can it absorb the blow of losing Anderson for the season?

"If we'd got him back this year, great; he's a great pitcher," closer Andrew Bailey said. "But it wasn't like we were thinking, 'When we get Brett back, we'll start rolling.' Frankly, we have to start rolling yesterday."

Recovery time is 12 to 18 months, and Beane mentioned that Tim Hudson needed only 11 months. A's pitchers Joey Devine and Josh Outman, however, needed nearly two years to regain their previous form. Still, the procedure is so standard that almost everyone who undergoes it regains full ability. Five members of Oakland's current staff - Devine, Outman, Bailey, Grant Balfour and Fautino De Los Santos - have had the surgery, as has top pitching prospect Michael Ynoa.

"It's unfortunate that Brett needs it, but if he puts time and effort into the rehab, he'll be back here this time next year," Bailey said.

Bailey had the surgery in college and is a two-time All-Star closer. Dr. James Andrews operated on both Bailey and Anderson. Andrews used the gracilis tendon from Anderson's hamstring to replace the ulnar collateral ligament in Anderson's elbow, according to A's trainer Nick Paparesta.

Paparesta said that Anderson's age - he's 23 - will help, and the team wants to take an all-encompassing approach to his recovery, Paparesta said. The A's would like him to strengthen his core, shed some pounds and gain flexibility. Those things will help Anderson's overall health and will lessen the chances of setbacks or related injuries.

The A's are not the only club that has had a number of torn elbow ligaments, and Paparesta said that research by Andrews and Dr. Lewis Yocum has determined the upswing in cases is likely related to young players pitching year round rather than playing multiple sports. The injury is now common in teenage baseball players, which was not the case before early specialization.

A's set pitchers for Saturday's double-header

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Friday, July 15, 2011

-- The A's held a workout on Thursday evening at the Coliseum, and there were a few small tidbits of news:

-- **Trevor Cahill** will start the first game of Saturday's doubleheader with the Angels, and **Rich Harden** the second. Manager **Bob Melvin** said that he wanted Cahill to be able to follow his normal pregame routine.

There will be 35 minutes between games, and although Melvin did not mention it, Harden has experience working in the bullpen and pitching coach **Ron Romanick** has noted how quickly Harden can warm up.

-- Melvin, asked if he plans changes to ignite the struggling offense, said that sometimes just a small change can shake things up. He is flip-flopping **Josh Willingham** and **Hideki Matsui**, who will hit third and cleanup, respectively.

-- Melvin has not yet named a starter for Tuesday, but he acknowledged that the shoulder tightness that will keep **Tyson Ross** from throwing off the mound until next week makes it all the more likely that it will be **Guillermo Moscoso**.

Moscoso, demoted last week to create a roster spot, started at Triple-A Sacramento on Thursday night to stay sharp. He struck out nine Fresno Grizzlies in six innings but took the loss while allowing five hits, three walks and two earned runs in a 3-2 defeat.

Briefly: **Gio Gonzalez** returned from the All-Star Game with gifts for teammates; he gave outfielder **David DeJesus** a signed ball, and DeJesus ribbed Gonzalez for only getting 14 signatures. ... Gonzalez said he's happy he's not starting until Sunday. "I'm running on fumes," he said. ... **Jemile Weeks** enjoyed attending the game with his brother, All-Star **Rickie Weeks** of the Brewers. "Being around a group like that, that's where anyone would want to be," Weeks said.

A's leading off

Weekend fun: The Coliseum on Saturday features the first scheduled doubleheader in the big-leagues since 2003.

Saturday, former A's batboy MC Hammer will be honored on '80s Day, and Taylor Dayne will sing "Tell It To My Heart" and the National Anthem.

A's failure rooted in offense, but pitching shines

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

A little more than three months ago, the A's were the darlings of baseball columnists and analysts, many of whom picked Oakland to win the division, and some even the pennant.

Those projections were based on the team's pitching, which has met all expectations despite numerous injuries.

Assumptions that the lineup would be much improved, however, were way off: It's worse. Three quarters of the Opening Day infield are gone; third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and first baseman Daric Barton were demoted; and Mark Ellis, eclipsed by rookie second baseman Jemile Weeks, was traded.

Manager Bob Geren was fired on June 9, an indication that general manager Billy Beane felt as if his team could still climb back into the race. Geren's replacement, Bob Melvin, had the A's playing better for a short time, but they went into another funk before the break, and Oakland's 39-53 record at the break is its worst since 1997.

Odds are better than not that the A's will unload a few pieces before the trade deadline, perhaps one of their pending-free agent outfielders (Josh Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus) or one of their costlier set-up men (Grant Balfour or Brian Fuentes).

Despite sitting a dozen games out in the AL West at the break, the A's players aren't all doom-and-gloom. Most believe the team is far better than its record and that players who have underperformed - and there are many of those - will finish strong.

"I'm very optimistic about the second half," A's closer Andrew Bailey said. "It's like we haven't put it all together yet, but when we do, the tide will turn."

"There is still half a season left, and a decent amount of games," designated hitter Hideki Matsui said through translator Roger Kahlon. "We'll just have to focus on improving day-to-day rather than trying to focus on the whole."

Matsui is batting .209, more than 80 points below his career norm, but he's known for being a strong second half player. DeJesus is hitting .220, almost 70 points under his career average. Catcher Kurt Suzuki: .225, and his career average coming into the season was .264. Crisp is the only member of the Opening Day lineup batting above .241.

Oakland's 315 runs are second fewest in the league, and the team's .233 average is second worst, as is the .337 slugging percentage and .299 on-base percentage. The A's 50 homers are the fewest in the AL. All the numbers are well below the A's totals at the same time last year.

"I don't think anyone in this clubhouse would say we're happy with where we are offensively," said Conor Jackson, a first baseman and outfielder. "We have a lot of guys who have proven to be successful in the past. We need to get back to believing we're good. We need to win close games. That's what good teams do."

The A's are the flip side of the Bay Area's other team when it comes to one-run games. The Giants are 25-12 in games decided by one run, while the A's are a major-league worst 12-20. San Francisco is in first place. Oakland is in last.

In addition, the A's are an AL-worst 5-10 in extra innings. They're 9-21 in games decided in the seventh inning or later, including 7-17 in games won in the final at-bat.

The A's are playing opponents close. They're just not taking care of business.

"It's deflating," Jackson said. "We've lacked the big hits. We need to figure out what we need to do to go from being an average or mediocre team to be a playoff-contending team."

"We're competitive, we can hang in there with other teams, regardless of who they are - but we haven't been able to get over the hump," Matsui said. "We need to turn those games into wins."

Another area the team must improve: defense. That's strange, because the A's were expected to have one of the better fielding teams around. Instead, their 71 errors are second most in the league, and they've allowed 51 unearned runs, the most in the majors - a major failure, considering how excellent the pitching staff is. Oakland needs to take advantage of the great work on the mound, rather than sabotaging it.

"Offensively and defensively, we all feel like we could do better," Suzuki said. "We know we can be better. There's nearly three months left and our pitching is outstanding - we are confident we can make a run."

1st-half hits and misses

Hits

Fresh face: Jemile Weeks came up to fill in while Mark Ellis was out with a hamstring strain, and the exciting 24-year-old rookie made Ellis expendable.

More Moscoso: Obtained in a minor-league deal in the offseason, Guillermo Moscoso pitched as well or better than anyone in the rotation when several pitchers went on the DL.

Third answer: When Kevin Kouzmanoff and Andy LaRoche were ineffective at third base, Scott Sizemore, acquired from Detroit, provided offense.

Misses

New additions: Hideki Matsui, David DeJesus, above, and Josh Willingham were expected to improve the A's offense. Oakland's offense actually got worse in every category compared with last year at the same time.

See above: The fact that Weeks, Moscoso and Sizemore were the A's bright spots tells you that the first half was not a success for many regulars.

Silence: Major League Baseball's panel examining the possibility of a new A's stadium has yet to issue a report after more than two years.

- *Susan Slusser*

Injury update

Brett Anderson (elbow): No. 2 starter out until at least August with elbow injury similar to the one he had twice last year.

Dallas Braden (shoulder): Out for the season after surgery to repair torn capsule.

Andrew Bailey (forearm): The All-Star closer is back in form after surgery to clean up his elbow last fall. He missed two months with torn scar tissue and a forearm strain.

Rich Harden (muscle strain): The oft-injured right-hander has made two starts since missing three months on the DL.

Brandon McCarthy (shoulder): He's back, but repeat stress fractures and reactions in the same area are cause for concern.

Tyson Ross (oblique): Closing in on two months out with an oblique strain, and most recently bothered by shoulder stiffness.

- Susan Slusser

Unit review

Pitching: Superb. Remarkably so, considering that by May 20, the team had five starters and their closer on the DL. The team finished the first half with the best ERA in the league, at 3.14, and Gio Gonzalez was an All-Star. With a little run support, the A's would have some double-digit winners, but....

Hitting: There is just not enough. The A's were at or near the bottom of every major offensive category. Among the biggest disappointments: David DeJesus, Hideki Matsui, Kurt Suzuki, and, especially, two men who were demoted for lack of production, third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and first baseman Daric Barton.

Fielding: A head-scratcher. Oakland, which has the second most errors in the league at 71, was thought to have one of the best defensive clubs in the league. Two of the team's top fielders, Kouzmanoff and Barton, were among the AL leaders in errors before getting sent down. The 51 unearned runs allowed by the A's are the most in the majors.

Management: Bob Geren was replaced as Oakland's manager on June 9 during a 10-game losing streak. Initially, the team appeared to respond to new manager Bob Melvin, winning six in a row shortly after he took over, but the A's finished the first half meekly, losing 13 of 18. GM Billy Beane's rebuild, started after the 2007 season, has yielded excellent pitching but few position players with decent bats, and the team has not fared well in attempts to draw top free agents. After opening the season with high expectations, the A's appear headed toward a fifth consecutive losing season. The plan has not worked.

Drumbeat: A's starter Brett Anderson has Tommy John surgery

From Chronicle Staff writer Susan Slusser 7/14/2011 8:58am

Left-hander Brett Anderson was worried he'd need Tommy John surgery when his elbow first began to bother him again in May, and it turns out he was correct. Anderson underwent reconstructive elbow surgery in Pensacola, Fla., this morning, and he will be out for at least a year. Dr. James Andrews, one of the leading surgeons in the field, did the procedure.

Andrews gave Anderson a platelet-rich plasma injection last month, as he had last year, but this time there was not enough improvement. This is the third time Anderson has been on the DL with the same issue, an indication there was something more significant going on.

Recovery time is typically a year to two years. A's reliever Joey Devine needed about the full two years to get back to his old form, left-hander Josh Outman a few months less. Several A's pitchers have had the procedure, including closer Andrew Bailey, Grant Balfour and Fautino De Los Santos.

The good news is that this has been so well-perfected that pitchers almost always get back to their previous form - some even swear they're better than ever after Tommy John surgery. Plus, Anderson is only 23, which should help.

For the A's, the other positive is that they are better able to handle such news than most teams because of their pitching depth. Guillermo Moscoso has filled in ably, and the A's also have Tyson Ross and Outman as possibilities.

Anderson is the second A's starter to have season-ending surgery. Dallas Braden had a torn capsule in his left shoulder repaired in May.

Anderson was signed to a four-year, \$12.5 million deal at the start of last season.

Bobby Cramer released by A's

San Francisco Chronicle

The A's released left-handed pitcher Bobby Cramer on Monday, 10 days after designating him for assignment to remove him from the 40-player roster.

Cramer's progress had been slowed by a lower back strain this year. He was 0-1 with a 1.08 ERA in five relief appearances with the A's and 0-0 with a 4.03 ERA in six starts for Triple-A Sacramento, and had also spent time on the minor-league disabled list.

Last year, he made his major-league debut at age 30 after a seven-year climb that included three elbow surgeries and stints in independent baseball and the Mexican League. He went 2-1 with a 3.04 ERA in four September starts for the A's.

A-Rod's knee: The Yankees said Alex Rodriguez had surgery as planned in Miami to repair a torn meniscus in his right knee. Rodriguez was operated on by Dr. Lee Kaplan and is expected to be out four to six weeks. The knee had been bothering Rodriguez since he tweaked it at Wrigley Field on June 19.

Lidge's rehab: Phillies closer Brad Lidge pitched a perfect inning for Double-A Reading, striking out two, as he works his way back from shoulder and elbow problems. Lidge, who earlier made three rehabilitation appearances in Class A, hopes to rejoin the Phillies sometime after the break.

Bud Selig defends slow pace of A's ballpark panel

John Shea, Chronicle Staff Writer

Commissioner Bud Selig said Tuesday that he's "firm" about leaving office when his term expires after the 2012 season. A's fans can only wonder if his three-man committee will be done investigating their team's ballpark situation by then.

The committee has been on the job 28 months.

"I said this a year ago, it is a complex situation, very complex," Selig said in his annual talk to members of the Baseball Writers Association of America. "They have spent a lot of time on this, an enormous amount of time - and are still spending an enormous amount of time. And as I told both clubs, this is another situation where it's better to get something done right than get it done any faster."

Pressed for answers on the length of the probe, the future of the A's in Oakland or San Jose, and the Giants' territorial rights to the South Bay, Selig said, "We're working all that out. The committee has come back. There's a myriad of options. There's a lot of stuff we studied. The one thing I want to be sure about is to look at every conceivable option and analyze all of them."

Answering a question about realignment and how expansion is a thing of the past, Selig said, "At this point in time, except for the Bay Area situation, we don't really have very much reason to look around."

Selig said he wasn't suggesting the A's could be moved outside the Bay Area and also said contraction is not on the table.

So it's business as usual. The A's say they must wait for a decision from Major League Baseball, and the Giants say they won't yield their territorial rights. Meanwhile, the Giants pay heavily into a revenue-sharing program in which the A's heavily benefit.

While MLB is moving slowly on the A's, Selig is moving more quickly on expanded instant replay (for fair or foul calls), realignment (15 teams in each league, five in each division) and expanded playoffs (two extra teams as early as next season).

Selig defended his decision to allow Frank McCourt to buy the Dodgers and Derek Jeter's decision to snub the All-Star Game in the wake of his 3,000th hit. In fact, Selig said, if he were in Jeter's shoes, he'd miss it, too.

"Any suggestion that I, or anybody else, is unhappy with him about not being here is just false," Selig said.

Next year's All-Star Game is in Kansas City, and Selig strongly hinted the Mets will be 2013 hosts.

Anderson undergoes Tommy John surgery

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Following a disappointing first half, not even the All-Star break could pass smoothly for the A's, who on Thursday announced that left-hander Brett Anderson underwent season-ending Tommy John surgery.

The reconstructive elbow procedure, deemed a success, was orchestrated by Dr. James Andrews in Pensacola, Fla., in the morning.

Upon Anderson's third trip to the disabled list -- each time the result of elbow discomfort -- in June, the A's pitcher believed Tommy John surgery was imminent. Andrews, though, opted to give him a platelet-rich plasma injection, as he had last year, but there was not enough improvement to avoid an operation.

Anderson, 23, is facing a recovery time of at least a year, though up to two years is not uncommon, meaning a return to the mound might not come until 2013. That would mark the final year of a four-year, \$12.5 million deal -- which includes options for 2014 and 2015 -- he signed at the start of last season. He was 3-6 with a 4.00 ERA upon the onset of his injury and is 21-23 with a 3.66 ERA in his career.

Fellow A's hurler Joey Devine needed nearly two full years to return to old form following Tommy John, while lefty Josh Outman was out for almost the same amount of time. Oakland pitchers Andrew Bailey and Grant Balfour have also undergone the operation.

Anderson is the second A's starter to endure season-ending surgery. Left-hander Dallas Braden had a torn capsule in his left shoulder repaired in May. Moreover, the injury bug circulating around the club's staff has hit Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross, the latter who has yet to return.

However, a positive has been found in Oakland's pitching depth. Guillermo Moscoso has been a pleasant surprise for the A's, going 3-4 with a 2.16 ERA in 10 games, eight of them starts. The A's also have options in Josh Outman and Graham Godfrey.

Oakland, which entered the break 12 games behind division-leading Texas and 14 below the .500 mark as a result of not only the aforementioned injuries but more so an underachieving offense, is set to begin the second half of the season on Friday against the visiting Angels.

A's weighing options as Trade Deadline nears

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A handful of big-name offseason additions created a hefty dose of expectations for the 2011 A's.

More than three months of subpar play have passed, and some of those same names could be ticketed elsewhere by the July 31 Trade Deadline if such results continue.

It was just around this time last year when general manager Billy Beane insisted he would stay the course with his young talent well through the cutoff date. He wasn't willing to take talent away from a roster full of kids in exchange for the chance of temporary success.

Beane followed through with that plan, standing pat while his team was on the fringes of playoff contention. The inactivity was also a result of injuries to two potential trade targets -- right-hander Ben Sheets and outfielder Coco Crisp.

This time around, the A's aren't close to the .500 mark and have plenty of trade chips, including a healthy Crisp, outfielder Josh Willingham and several relievers -- righties Grant Balfour, Brad Ziegler and Michael Wuertz, and lefties Brian Fuentes and Craig Breslow.

Despite the A's recent struggles, Beane is intent on seeing what his club can do following the break before he makes any big trade decisions.

"We have to take care of ourselves first," Beane said. "You can't really look at the gap and being a playoff contender when you're under .500. We've got to get closer to that mark and take a look at ourselves as we get closer to the deadline."

"We've been fortunate that no team has run away with the division. But we can't look at any of that yet until we start winning on a consistent basis. A lot of what we do or don't do will depend on where we are at the deadline."

Beane traded Mark Ellis on the last day of June, kicking in \$2 million to complete a deal with the Rockies for Minor League right-handeder Bruce Billings and a player to be named. The second baseman might not be the last player to be dealt, but there are some young names that won't be considered in deals.

"Our pitching, that's the strength of our club," Beane said. "And our staff is relatively young and relatively inexpensive. We don't expect to move most of those guys."

Another factor in any deal will be salary concerns.

"Anything we do, we have payroll restrictions," Beane said. "If we did anything, it would have to entail exchanging salaries. It's too early to tell, though. A lot can happen before the deadline. But we're not in a position to add any payroll, given the position we're in and where we started the season."

That means Beane is unlikely to make any significant additions. Any improvements to the offense will need to come from within.

"We don't have any choice," Beane said. "The guys we have, they're capable of hitting. We'll see what they do here in the next few weeks."

Pitching-rich A's seek offensive complement

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's aren't interested in sugarcoating any part of their inconsistent play in the first half.

Characterized by Conor Jackson as "a roller coaster" and described by Craig Breslow as "temperamental," it marked a time of one-too-many disappointing losses that were not so much the result of one-too-many injuries but rather one-too-many missed offensive opportunities.

The loss of starters Dallas Braden, Brett Anderson, Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross -- all in the span of a month, no less -- obviously proved disheartening for a club that heavily relies on pitching. But in return the A's found a handful of hurlers who offered almost equally impressive performances, leaving the injury bug as one less excuse for defeats.

And so, the A's haven't so much used it as such. Nor have they complained about a flurry of personnel moves, the biggest coming from above in a managerial switch on June 9 that saw Bob Melvin take over for Bob Geren.

All the while, Oakland's infield watched the departure of Mark Ellis via trade and the demotions of Daric Barton and Kevin Kouzmanoff, leaving Cliff Pennington as the lone Opening Day infield starter. But the lack of roster continuity is not to be blamed for a poor first-half showing.

"At some point you have to hit," general manager Billy Beane said. "Everybody has been given plenty of opportunities, and any juggling of the lineup is the result of trying to find someone to maintain some consistency."

But there's been no sign of stability from the anemic offense, whose lack of production has equated to little support for the pitching, which as a unit compiled the American League's best ERA in the first half.

AT THE BREAK

First-half awards

1. **MVP: Gio Gonzalez** -- The 25-year-old lefty was one of the club's few consistent performers in the first half.
2. **Cy Young: Gonzalez** -- Gonzalez ranked near the top among American League ERA leaders and earned his first All-Star nod.
3. **Rookie: Jemile Weeks** -- The youngster's unmatched presence provided an immediate spark for the A's, who were subsequently forced to trade their longest-tenured player in Mark Ellis.
4. **Top reliever: Grant Balfour** -- Though sidelined more than two weeks before the break, Balfour's stalwart arm was a big reason for Oakland's bullpen success.

Players to watch in the second half

1. **Weeks:** Weeks could garner Rookie of the Year talk should he keep up the pace both offensively and defensively.
2. **Chris Carter:** The time is now for the organization's top power prospect to show his worth at the big league level.
3. **Scott Sizemore:** He could be the A's long-term answer at third base, so long as his productivity at the plate continues.

"I think I speak for everyone in here when I feel like we're all underachieving as a team," Jackson said.

"Definitely," outfielder David DeJesus said. "Just look at the numbers. Go solely off the numbers, and you see a lot of guys aren't hitting what they normally hit."

DeJesus represented one of three notable offseason additions to a lineup that in 2010 scored fewer than 700 runs for just the second time in the club's previous 28 non-strike seasons. But even his presence, along with Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui, hasn't stopped the struggling trend. In fact, the A's are on pace to score fewer than 600 runs this year.

"If we're going to get back in this thing at all, we're going to have to kick it up offensively," Beane said. "You'd like to think that, based on the fact everyone is hitting below their career numbers, that they can only get better. But here we are in July, so it's probably as good as time as ever to pick it up."

Perhaps the only form of solace found in the A's underachieving ways is in the performance of their AL West counterparts, who haven't exactly taken advantage of Oakland's struggles, including a 9-17 June that included 10 straight losses -- the longest stretch in three years. The Rangers, Angels and Mariners, though, have not soared far above the .500 mark.

"I think it's been pretty clear that no one's been running away with the division, and especially considering the last month that we had, how miserable it's been, the fact that -- I wouldn't exactly say we're in the thick of things, but we're on the cusp of it," Breslow said.

Melvin, for one, believes the looming returns of the injured Willingham (Achilles tendon strain), Ross (oblique) and righty Grant Balfour (oblique), along with the continued steady play from newcomers Jemile Weeks and Scott Sizemore, have the

potential to give the A's some sort of identity, at least. And that, he says, should be the focus before peering over into the standings.

"I'm still trying to figure out who we are, and once we have everyone back I think we'll have a better idea of what our direction will be," he said. "I came in the middle of a losing streak, and the priority there was to settle things and get away from that and where the season looked to be going at that point. We went on a pretty good stretch and then we lost a few games, and it's kind of been back and forth. But the effort's been there."

The A's need it from every facet of their game, extending to the club's defense, which racked up 71 errors in the first half -- leading to numerous unearned runs that weren't always made up for at the plate.

"There are times where I feel like we successfully exhibited what we were supposed to be advertised as -- good pitching, good defense and timely hitting," Breslow said. "But there have been other times where we've had lapses in every part of that game."

"Hopefully the second half will be a little more consistent. I don't think it's a secret that we're not going to go out there and outslug somebody, but we do feel like we can pitch with anyone. I think to win consistently, to really make a run at the division, we need to do all three of those things well."

The A's will then look toward the possibilities that stem from their own roster before evaluating those of the Rangers or any other AL West foe. Contention, they maintain, is not out of reach just yet.

"If we get our hitting right, I think we're right there," DeJesus said. "We can gain ground quickly if we play good ball."

"We're not where we should be, and I think everyone agrees with that," Jackson said. "I don't think one guy in here feels otherwise. But we can't look at the standings just yet. It's too early. We have to start playing well consistently as a team first, and everybody has to start clicking. We have to start hitting consistently, not just two games out of five."

"There are a lot of things we need to put together, but it's there. I think we're close."

Gio's All-Star outing a dream come true

A's left-hander fans Bruce for final out recorded by AL in defeat

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The All-Star Game seemingly takes on a life of its own every year, the list of invitees continually increasing and the game's significance all the more great, considering the World Series home-field advantage that comes along with winning it.

But for some, like A's lefty Gio Gonzalez, it still equates to a much simpler meaning.

"This is everything I absolutely expected, everything you could possibly dream of," Gonzalez said after the National League defeated the American League on Tuesday, 5-1. "It's about great friends, great teammates, great guys. This is what being an American League All-Star is all about."

Named to the AL team as the A's lone representative on the strength of an 8-6 record and 2.47 ERA -- fifth best in the league -- Gonzalez has represented a rare positive in an otherwise dreary season for the A's, who entered the break 12 games behind Texas in the AL West and 14 below the .500 mark.

Playing with a different team on Tuesday, Gonzalez took in every ounce of the experience, which included a brief in-game stint that saw him face just one batter. Brought in to close out the eighth inning, with the task of facing the Reds' Jay Bruce, Gonzalez had more than a few thoughts racing through his mind as he approached the mound.

"I was playing with my mechanics in the bullpen, but then I realized who I was facing and I thought, 'Oh, God, I hope he bunts or something,'" Gonzalez said. "I just didn't want him to hit a home run. He's a well-respected hitter, but at the same time I was just trying to have fun and do my best to represent the A's."

Bruce is something of a familiar face, as Gonzalez squared off against the tough left-handed hitter while still with the White Sox organization at the Double-A level. The southpaw doesn't quite remember the result of that at-bat, but Tuesday's will likely remain attached to him for a while.

Gonzalez's first pitch was a called strike, and he then turned to his devastating curveball for back-to-back balls, one of which bounced off the dirt and forced him to regroup while the game was delayed for a split-second because a beach ball had reached the field.

"I needed that," Gonzalez said, smiling. "I was overthrowing, trying to do too much. I was that amped up. I collected my thoughts, slowed down."

And he got a swinging strike before throwing another ball to bring the count full against Bruce, who was left frozen on the sixth pitch -- another fastball -- for a called third strike to end the inning. Had the AL staged a ninth-inning comeback, Gonzalez would have been the go-to guy for the bottom half of the frame.

"[Pitching coach] Mike Maddux said to me, 'You'd better sit down and relax, because if we come back, you're going out there and throwing again,'" Gonzalez recalled. "And I said, 'That's all I had left in the tank!'"

"Everything, it's a great moment I'll treasure forever. This is just a great situation, a great environment. Everyone's smiling and having a good time. When an opportunity like this presents itself, you just take full advantage of it. It doesn't get much better than this."

Gonzalez's brother, Max Jr., would likely agree.

The younger Gonzalez joined the on-field festivities for Monday's Home Run Derby, which culminated with an exciting walk-off finish by the Yankees' Robinson Cano, who signed a gold ball for Max Jr.

"The most important experience for me was watching my brother just go nuts, sitting around Cano and watching him win," Gonzalez said. "He's gotten non-stop phone calls saying they saw him on TV with Cano. To see my brother on cloud nine is an honor for me."

"Sharing this with my family, that's been the best part."

Gonzalez will soon share the experience with his teammates in Oakland, where the A's are scheduled to resume play on Friday against the Angels -- marking the start to a fresh second half that follows a disappointing 39-53 beginning.

"It's been non-stop here," the lefty said. "I'm hoping when Wednesday comes along, I can just relax and reflect on what a cool experience this was before we get back out to play as a team again. I've had a great time. Being around all of these guys, it was a lot of fun. It just shows that these are a bunch of great guys."

Gio's gratitude on display in Phoenix

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Much has been made of Gio Gonzalez's maturation over the last couple of years, a gradual process that turned the left-hander into a first-time All-Star this season.

But Gonzalez is still very much a kid at heart, not to mention a true fan of a game that has awarded him so much.

Both personae, which combine for one of the more likeable personalities in Oakland, were on full display at a hotel ballroom on Monday, when Gonzalez couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

The southpaw, the club's lone All-Star representative and a bright spot in an otherwise disappointing season, insisted that he wouldn't draw much attention, that most media members would be drawn to other areas in the room, to David Ortiz, Josh Hamilton and the like.

Gonzalez proved correct, drawing a fairly small crowd, but those who walked up to chat with the fast-talking 25-year-old were greeted with a familiar tune. As he's done throughout his career, Gonzalez took the majority of his time to thank those who helped him reach the national stage.

He praised pitching coach Ron Romanick and batterymate Kurt Suzuki, acknowledged the opportunity handed to him by Oakland and, every few minutes, returned to talking about the great support system that is his family.

"They're almost like luggage, always with me," Gonzalez said.

As usual, Gonzalez left little time to talk about himself, the only such moments coming when he was asked about his latest trip to the barbershop. Ever since the sixth grade, Gonzalez has gone for a trim nearly every week, a tradition that wasn't about to be interrupted by All-Star festivities.

"I got one last night after I landed," he said. "That's how I relax."

And as if on cue, he followed with a sincere "thank you," this time to the barber in Phoenix.

Dressed in his typical attire -- jeans and a plaid shirt -- the young hurler talked about picking his American League teammates' brains, following the "soak it all in" advice bestowed upon him by former All-Stars and teammates Andrew Bailey and Trevor Cahill, and his excitement surrounding Monday's State Farm Home Run Derby.

AL STARTING NINE

No.	Player	Position	Team
1.	Curtis Granderson	CF	NYN
2.	Asdrubal Cabrera	SS	CLE
3.	Adrian Gonzalez	1B	BOS
4.	Jose Bautista	RF	TOR
5.	Josh Hamilton	LF	TEX
6.	Adrian Beltre	3B	TEX
7.	David Ortiz	DH	BOS
8.	Robinson Cano	2B	NYN
9.	Alex Avila	C	DET

"That was always my favorite event to watch growing up," he said. "I'm so amped up for everything. Give me a bat, and I'll play."

Though Gonzalez won't be swinging for the fences, he won't mind his role as a spectator cheering on buddy Ortiz, the captain of the AL Derby squad. The pair met in 2006, and Ortiz has taken Gonzalez under his wing.

"It's great to see him here," Ortiz said. "He makes me feel old, 'cause I feel like I met him when he was a baby. Next thing you know, he's here at an All-Star Game. I'm really proud of him.

"I came to be better by listening to the good things people had to say, and I think that's a big advantage in baseball. Gio, whenever I always get the opportunity to let him know things, I do, because he's a great kid. He has unbelievable ability to play the game. He's a great human being."

Gonzalez's flair for connecting with Ortiz and people like him is matched by the talent that comes from his curveball, which was developed with the help of his father, Max, who, like many of his family members, are in town.

"I'm glad I'm not facing him here," Ortiz said. "That curve, it's nasty. It's filthy. He's got great stuff."

Gonzalez, the 38th overall pick by the White Sox in the 2004 First-Year Player Draft, is in just his second full big league season and fourth overall. His road to the big leagues and the All-Star Game, though, was anything but a smooth ride, evidenced by three trades in a span of three years.

The White Sox sent him to the Phillies as part of a deal for Jim Thome in 2005, a year that was followed by a return to Chicago, regained as part of a package for Freddy Garcia. Then, in 2008, the White Sox sent him away again, this time with Ryan Sweeney and Fautino De Los Santos to Oakland in exchange for Nick Swisher.

"I really don't think about all that," Gonzalez said. "I'm just thankful for the opportunity that Oakland has given me. Being here, representing them, it's a great feeling."

But even in the early stages of his tenure with the A's, Gonzalez endured more than a couple of rough stretches. After starting the 2008 season with Triple-A Sacramento and going 8-7, the A's called him up on Aug. 6 and inserted him in the rotation. He responded with a 1-4 mark and 9.32 ERA over seven starts, numbers that sent him to the bullpen for the rest of the season.

Not even a relief job at the big league level was his at the beginning of 2009, when he again started the year with the River Cats. He had two brief callups before receiving a permanent promotion at the end of June. By year's end he had compiled a 6-7 record and 5.75 ERA in Oakland, all the while battling emotions that often led to disastrous innings.

Those mental troubles left him on the roster bubble in 2010. Not only did he make it, he earned the fifth spot in the rotation. Since then he has become a rotation mainstay and, in the first half of 2011, posted an 8-6 record and 2.47 ERA (good for fifth best in the AL), averaging 8.8 strikeouts per nine innings.

"I feel like I've matured a lot throughout the years," he said. "When I was hopping from team to team, I really didn't have a solid foundation until Oakland came along and gave me an opportunity to pitch. I tried to do my best to represent them the best I could and mold myself into a good pitcher. I want to be the guy to constantly work and get better."

For now he will simply enjoy the present and take in the unforgettable moments that await him this week. It's likely he'll see at least an inning of work during the All-Star Game, but no matter the result, he'll be ready to do what he does best: Show appreciation to those around him, including AL manager Ron Washington.

"I've already thanked him so much for allowing me to be here," he said. "I almost went down and kissed him on the feet."

Selig touches variety of topics in annual chat

Commissioner discusses replay, playoffs and more with fans

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- In one of his most engaging FanFest chats to date, Commissioner Bud Selig expanded upon some points of interest regarding Major League Baseball on Monday.

Answering questions live, during a session that was carried worldwide on the Internet via MLB.com, Selig said that Major League Baseball is examining further use of instant replay to aid umpires in their on-field decisions and is committed to expanding the playoff field to 10 teams.

The Commissioner added that he would entertain the idea of using the designated hitter in National League ballparks during Interleague Play, and that there was no chance a salary cap would be part of the next Basic Agreement, currently under negotiations with the MLB Players Association.

"I must tell you that within baseball there's not a great appetite, frankly, for instant replay," Selig said. "However, there are some things that we're talking about, and we may make two more rather significant changes to the instant replay rule. But we're still discussing it."

Selig said that extending the netting that protects fans behind home plate past the dugouts would not happen in the foreseeable future. He said there would be no rule changes to protect catchers in the wake of an incident earlier this season in which Giants catcher Buster Posey broke his leg in a collision at the plate. And that possible division realignment, a much-talked-about subject recently, is not imminent.

"I know there have been stories about it lately that I found to be somewhat premature," Selig said about realignment. "I've always had it on my mind, and I've talked to people about it from time to time, but is there anything imminent? No."

Selig was not specific about the changes that are being contemplated in instant replay. At present, it is only used to determine home run calls -- fair or foul, in and out of the ballpark. Baseball officials have since called for the video technology to also be used in determining balls hit on the field down the foul lines and bang-bang plays at home plate, among others.

This was Selig's 11th Internet chat session. Out of the thousands of questions filed by fans via MLB.com, the Commissioner fielded 17 and then took three questions from fans among the hundreds in attendance at the MLB.com area, which is located at FanFest in the Phoenix Convention Center.

A question about the Dodgers' ownership situation came fairly early.

"At least we waited for the fifth or sixth question before we got to the Dodgers," Selig said. "As everybody knows, Mr. [Frank] McCourt has filed for bankruptcy. We are in bankruptcy court and in a tough relationship with him, but time will tell."

Baseball last expanded the playoffs from four to eight teams in time for the 1994 season. At that time, the four divisions were split to six and the two Wild Card teams were added, but because of the strike that canceled that postseason, the new playoff format was not fully implemented until 1995. Selig is fond of pointing out how much opposition there was to those changes back then, and he's facing similar opposition to expanding the postseason again.

Selig has had a 14-man committee reviewing significant changes to the way baseball is played for the past year, including alterations in the playoff format. The committee includes Hall of Famer Frank Robinson, Joe Torre -- now MLB's executive vice president of baseball operations -- and managers Jim Leyland of the Tigers, Tony La Russa of the Cardinals and Mike Scioscia of the Angels.

"We only have eight of 30 teams," Selig said. "If we go to 10, that's 10 out of 30. Twenty go home. That's not too many. I can make a case for 10 -- no more than 10. Now, the question is how many games to you play to determine [a first-round winner], and we haven't decided that yet."

About the age-old DH argument, Selig said that he didn't see any changes in the current format.

"What I would say to you is that it would take some catalytic event -- some huge realignment or something like that -- to deal with this issue," Selig said. "At the moment, the National League clubs love the way game is being played, the American League clubs love the DH. We've been trying to make the necessary adjustments in between. It's hard to believe that we've been doing this for 39 years now."

But Selig said he wasn't averse to making a change in Interleague Play so the DH is utilized in NL ballparks and the pitcher hits in AL yards.

"That's a good question; we've talked about that," Selig said. "I think that's something we ought to consider. The NL fans could see the DH and the AL fans will see the game they remembered before 1972. So I like that suggestion."

All of these changes are being contemplated as baseball owners and the MLBPA are quietly undergoing collective bargaining sessions, with the current Basic Agreement expiring on Dec. 11. Selig, who called those talks "constructive," was asked two questions about the ongoing negotiations:

With the National Football League and National Basketball Association currently in the middle of lockouts, how does baseball avoid that same situation?

"We were there back in the '90s," Selig said. "In my baseball career that started in 1970, we had eight work stoppages, and one became more painful than the other. So I'm very sensitive to what's going on in the other sports. I think what I'm most proud of in my Commissionership is that we've had 16 years of labor peace -- unprecedented in baseball history. We've started our negotiations, and they've been constructive, but it's early. I hope that continues and that we have many more years of labor peace without interruption."

And is a cap on salaries part of the current negotiations?

"No," Selig said. "We've done a lot of economic things that have really moved the game forward. It's been really helpful. The fact that you're seeing the competitive balance today that you're seeing, think about it. Pittsburgh has made a remarkable comeback. The Cleveland Indians have made a remarkable comeback. Every division has races. The economic system has changed. It is completely restructured. It's working."

Athletics look for offensive resurgence after All-Star break after worst 1st half in 14 years

By Josh Dubow, Associated Press, Updated: Thursday, July 14, 3:48 PM

OAKLAND, Calif. — Injuries to the pitching staff, an offense that struggles to generate any runs and a team that always seems to end up on the short side of close games.

The problems that marred the end of manager Bob Geren's tenure in Oakland and ultimately contributed to his firing are just as evident under replacement Bob Melvin.

The Athletics come out of the All-Star break with the third-worst record in the American League at 39-53 and are 12 games behind Texas in the AL West after being swept by the Rangers in a four-game series.

"Luckily we have four days to relax and put our mind off baseball and come and pretend like it's a different half," starter Trevor Cahill said. "It'll be good for us. Some guys are banged up, some guys need a mental break. I don't think anybody thinks we're out of it, If we keep battling, anything's possible."

The Athletics were off Thursday, but the news didn't get any better. Left-handed pitcher Brett Anderson had reconstructive surgery on his elbow and will miss the rest of the season. The A's originally had hoped rehabilitation would be enough to help him.

Oakland resumes Friday night when it hosts the Angels. And right now, the A's just need to figure out how to score some runs.

A franchise that was once known for its big bashers at the plate such as Reggie Jackson, Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, Jason Giambi and Miguel Tejada is on pace for one of its worst offensive seasons in history.

The A's have managed just 3.4 runs per game — the second-lowest mark in the league. They are also second worst in batting average (.233) on-base percentage (.299) and slugging percentage (.337). Oakland has an AL-worst 50 home runs, having hit more than two in a game just once all season.

The A's are on pace for the lowest marks in average, on-base percentage and home runs since moving to Oakland in 1968 and the second-lowest runs per game in the Oakland era.

That all adds up to the team's worst record at the All-Star break since they were 37-52 in 1997.

Few hitters have stepped up, including key offseason acquisitions Josh Willingham, David DeJesus and Hideki Matsui, who have failed to provide the upgrade on offense that Oakland sorely needs.

"Ultimately we're going to have to score more runs if we're going to get back in this thing," Melvin said. "That's going to be the focus in the second half, to really believe in ourselves offensively. You can get into a rut. Your expectations come down some where you go through a half and underachieved offensively. It's my job, the coaches' job, the players' job, to get a better mindset and get higher expectations. We have quite a few guys here who can do better offensively."

The A's hoped that their first midseason manager change in a quarter century would help wake up the struggling bats. Geren was fired on June 9 after four-plus seasons, losing his final nine games as manager to end this season with a 27-36 record.

Melvin came in and steadied the team quickly and the A's even showed some life in a six-game winning streak that included a sweep against the World Series champion Giants that raised hope that Oakland could make a second-half run.

But the A's lost 13 of their next 18 games, including six of seven to division rivals Seattle and Texas in the final week before the break. The A's scored two or fewer runs in five of those seven games.

Making the offensive struggles even more frustrating is that the pitching has been outstanding for much of the first half. Behind All-Star Gio Gonzalez and Cahill, the A's have posted an AL-best 3.14 ERA despite having five starters and former All-Star closer Andrew Bailey spend time on the disabled list during the first half.

"This pitching staff we have is pretty unbelievable," infielder Scott Sizemore said. "They keep us in the game every time. If we can manage to put up some runs for them, we can make a run in the second half."

The question now is if it's too late to make that kind of run to get back into contention. The A's are more likely to trade some of their key players to a contender in the coming weeks than they are to add a needed piece.

But the players aren't quite ready to give up on this season yet, pointing to a major league-worst record of 12-20 in one-run games as a sign that the team is close to turning the corner.

"We just need to be a little bit more consistent," rookie second baseman Jemile Weeks said.

"Right now we're in every game that we've lost. That's the frustrating part about it, we're losing by one run, two runs. That's every game. We just need better at-bats and a few more two-out hits. We're playing great. It's just a few little things that gives the other team the edge."

Weeks has been one of the few bright spots in the first half, batting .288 with 11 extra-base hits and seven stolen bases in 30 games. His emergence led to the trade of the team's longest tenured player, Mark Ellis, to Colorado on June 30.

"Sometimes all it takes is two or three guys or a series where you start to hit on all cylinders," Melvin said. "It can be contagious just like it can be when you're struggling."

Cohn: Weeks is reason alone to watch A's

[Grant Cohn, CSNBayArea.com](http://GrantCohn.CSNBayArea.com)

The A's are in last place and star pitcher Brett Anderson will have Tommy John surgery and miss the rest of this season and maybe the next one as well and you're wondering whether you should even watch this team anymore this year, right?

Well, I can think of one reason to keep watching the A's in 2011 -- Jemile Weeks. With all due respect to Mark Ellis, what took the A's so long to call him up?

The rookie second baseman can hit (he's batting .287), he steals bases (he's stolen seven so far), and he's exciting to

watch. Who was the last A's player to fit that description? Rickey Henderson?

For the last several seasons the A's have been a team of Todds, Conors, Cliffs, and Scotts, managed by Bobs, and put together by a Billy. These Todds and Scotts usually hit around .270 and take walks but have no power or speed. It's a passive and boring style, and it's slowly driven Oaklanders away from the Coliseum.

When people think of Oakland baseball they think of Henderson and Jimmy Rollins and stealing bases and Babe Ruth Little League and aggressive, athletic baseball.

Weeks is that type of player.

One major league scout I spoke to listed three things he likes most about Jemile: "Athleticism, ability and makeup."

"He's been the most positive thing for the A's other than the pitchers," the scout explained.

I asked him if he thinks Weeks can become the face of the franchise.

"No, I'd don't know if he'd embrace that. There would need to be more African Americans on the team and in attendance," the scout said.

I disagree with the scout. Weeks is already the face of the Oakland A's, whether he wants to be or not.

He's their Buster Posey -- the rookie who becomes the team's best and most exciting player the minute he cracks the starting lineup.

But can he save Oakland baseball? We'll have to watch to find out.

Urban: A's Gonzalez all smiles at first All-Star Game

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com

PHOENIX -- A supremely gifted young lefty is baseball's version of a bar of gold, yet A's southpaw [Gio Gonzalez](#), a first-round draft pick of the [White Sox](#) in 2004, was passed around like a bar of soap in the clubhouse showers for the first few years of his professional career.

Chicago traded him to the [Phillies](#) in 2005. The Phillies traded him back in 2006. And in 2008, despite Gonzalez having led all of minor-league baseball with 185 strikeouts in 150 innings in 2007, the White Sox included him in a package sent to [Oakland](#) for [Nick Swisher](#).

Chicago's No. 1 prospect at the time of the trade, Gonzalez, then 22 an even more emotional and excitable as he still readily admits he is today, was left reeling and a tad confused.

Today, however, he's an All-Star -- and most appreciative that his travels, while trying, led him to the East Bay.

That much was obvious Monday as Gonzalez wore a permanent grin during the Media Day cattle call in a massive ballroom at a swank local resort.

Unprompted, he thanked so many people that you half expected a Hollywood starlet to appear and hand him a gold statuette.

In a sense, that's what [Rangers](#)/American League All-Star manager Ron Washington did when he named Gonzalez to his pitching staff for Tuesday's Midsummer Classic at Chase Field.

"Oh my god, of course I have to thank 'Wash,'" Gonzalez gushed to the relatively small crowd gathered in front of his own personal podium. "I have to thank everybody. I mean *everybody*."

Gonzalez deserves plenty of credit of his own, of course. One of the reasons he was bounced around a bit as a prospect, a scout confirmed, was that teams weren't sure if he'd ever mature enough to where he could harness his fantastic talent. That he's done that and more is on him; he recognized the problem and took steps to fix it.

Fellow A's southpaw [Dallas Braden](#) gets much love in the Gonzalez story, too. He's mentored Gonzalez well, teaching him mostly about the power of poise and controlled confidence.

But let's not overlook the real key to Gonzalez's development. He certainly doesn't. He's well aware that there are few places in baseball a young pitcher can land and have a better shot at making the transition from promising to prominent.

The A's have a long and recent history of pumping out All-Star pitchers at an enviable rate. The last stretch of glory in Oakland, in the early 2000s, was fueled by three homegrown hurlers in Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito. Now the A's boast another crop of young studs, including Gonzalez, 2010 All-Star Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson.

"The organization does an incredible job," Gonzalez said. "When I was traded here, I had a feeling that maybe it was meant to be, that this was the right place for me to become who I wanted to be as a pitcher and a person."

Now he's both, and you'd have been hard-pressed to find a happier man in Phoenix on Monday.

Marveling at the sight of his All-Star batting practice jersey, at the non-stop schedule of events he's being shuttled to left and right, and at the opportunity to meet and pick the brains of the rest of the AL's elite pitchers, he sat back in his chair, eyes wide.

"This is unbelievable," he said.

Golden, once again.

A's Midseason Report Card: Fans should flunk team management and ownership

By Sam McPherson, Oakland A's Examiner

The Oakland Athletics fan base deserves better than this.

For almost five years now, the Lew Wolff ownership era has been an outright failure: no playoff spots, no winning teams, and no firm plans for a new stadium.

And the 2011 season just reiterates the team is becoming extremely irrelevant, both locally and nationally. Attendance is down, and there is little hope things can turn around any time soon as the A's continue to struggle to land quality players whether by the draft, trade or free agency.

That being said, here's a brief evaluation of the current season's first half (92 games):

- **Offense:** the team ranks 28th in the major leagues, out of 30 teams, in scoring runs (315). In the American League, only the Seattle Mariners are worse crossing the plate (301). The team's batting average (.233) is also 28th in the majors, as is the team OPS (.636). Their on-base percentage is 29th (.299). In fact, the only significant offense category where the A's rank in the top half of the rankings is stolen bases (64, good enough for 14th). However, their SB success rate is only 21st (69%), which somewhat negates the positive. In general, the team is downright terrible swinging the bat this year, and it's cost them several winnable games on their way to a 39-53 start to the season. **GRADE: F**
- **Defense:** the A's fielders are also 28th in errors committed with 71 so far. Their fielding percentage is also 28th (.980), and Oakland easily leads the majors with 51 unearned runs given up in 2011. Considering their offense is so bad, the team really can't afford to be giving away runs -- but they've been doing it regularly, and it's been costly as they find themselves 12 games out of first place already. **GRADE: F**
- **Pitching:** This has obviously been the lone bright spot for the team in 2011, as the A's are third in the majors in ERA (3.14) and seventh in quality starts (56). The starters' ERA is also third (3.19), but because of the unearned runs caused by the defensive shortcomings, Oakland is only eighth in runs allowed -- which, in the end, is a lot more important than the ERA. Unearned runs count on the scoreboard still, obviously. **GRADE: A-**
- **Manager:** Bob Geren posted a 27-36 record, and Bob Melvin has put up a 12-17 record so far. Both worked with somewhat the same mediocre materials, although Melvin's roster has seen a lot of changes in the last month-plus. Basically, it's hard to criticize either too much, since they have so little to work with (see above). Regardless, Geren's underperformance was clear, and Melvin is doing the same at this point. **GRADE: Incomplete**

Using the formula established last year in this column for "grading" the team effort, the team is looking at a C- grade overall right now, with the managerial grade in flux for now.

Considering the team has the fifth-worst record in the majors, maybe that's generous. But it's a continued commentary on the facts stated in the opening ideas above: this ownership era for the A's historically-great franchise has been an outright failure on the field.

And the team's fans deserve a lot better.

Oakland finishes first half with a thud as Texas sweeps four-game series

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

Ho hum.

The Oakland Athletics finished the first half of the 2011 season on a low note, losing six of their last seven games -- all to division rivals -- on their way to a 12-game deficit in the American League West division.

Everyone knew these seven games would be a key moment in the season for the A's: win six or seven of them, and they could have been only three games or so out of first place heading into the All-Star break.

But to lose six of seven -- while also dropping six games in the standings as a result -- buries Oakland in the AL West basement and consigns them to the division basement with little hope of rescue.

So as the Texas Rangers beat the A's 7-6 on Saturday and 2-0 on Sunday, the Oakland organization knows now what it has to do with the remaining 70 games on their schedule: get ready to make sure 2012 doesn't end up the same way.

Saturday's loss was particularly ridiculous, as Oakland coughed up an early 4-0 lead as well as a 6-5 lead in the ninth inning. Good teams don't lose those kinds of games, and as we all know, the A's are not a good team. Surely, there's no shame in letting the reigning AL MVP beat you with a walk-off home run, but Oakland really needed that win -- and they let it get away from them.

Sunday's whitewashing -- the 11th time this year the team has been blanked on offense -- came at the hands of a pitcher with a career 4.65 ERA, which is not surprising considering this team's inability to hit the baseball with average ability.

After all, if the A's offense was *just* average, they might be leading the division, actually.

So thus Oakland goes forth with basically no chance at the playoffs in 2011, and they have a lot of choices and options now to start dumping players off this team to reap whatever benefits they can find in the basement of the AL West.

Surely the A's will trade Coco Crisp (.267, 4 HR, 30 RBI, 26 SB) and Josh Willingham (241, 11, 44, 4), players who will be free agents at the end of this season. Getting some prospects in return -- as well as perhaps some compensatory picks in next year's draft -- makes sense for the organization.

David DeJesus is also hitting the free agent market, and even in a down year (.220, 5, 24, 3), there may be a team that wants a veteran off the bench for their playoff run. Even Hideki Matsui (.209, 6, 34, 1) could be moved, as his bat has shown some life of late even if his overall season numbers are mediocre.

On the pitching side, relievers Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes have some value to a team trying to bolster its relief corps, although each has another year on his contract, respectively.

Therefore, the A's are sitting pretty in terms of having a lot of pieces to trade as they try to rebuild an offense and defense that have gone horribly wrong in 2011 and betrayed the excellent pitching -- and the hopes and dreams of Oakland fans everywhere.

Not exactly what everyone had in mind for this season, that's for sure.

Carroll grad Cliff Pennington looking forward to second half

Pennington is Oakland's everyday shortstop

By Steve Hunt Special to the Caller-Times

ARLINGTON — The first half of the 2011 season is officially in the books and Cliff Pennington is happy he got some time off before play resumes Thursday after the Major League All-Star break.

With four straight days off, he headed to his home in Houston before returning to Oakland as the Athletics begin the second half on Friday night against the Angels.

"Just go home and rest," is how Pennington described his plans for the break.

Through 88 games, the Carroll High School product is hitting .235 with 3 HR, 23 RBI and 6 stolen bases. In the field, the 27-year-old everyday shortstop has committed 11 errors in 350 total chances.

Those numbers aren't great, but he remains optimistic heading into the second half.

"It's been an up and down year just like most years are," said Pennington, whose Oakland team is in last place in the American League West. "[We've] still got a long way to go, so there's a lot of room for improvement. The team's not playing as good as we wanted to. But we're going to keep battling and see where it goes."

But to merely look at his numbers is a grave injustice, at least according to Oakland manager Bob Melvin.

"He's a steady shortstop. He can steal a base. He's a good little player," Melvin said. "He's gone through a little bit of a slump a couple of times this year. But he's a steady player, a good player for the team."

A closer look at his hitting numbers reveals that his .278 average from the right side of the plate is 56 points higher than how he's been hitting from the left side.

"Most years, I'm better from the left. This year, I'm better from the right," Pennington said. "It's just the way things have worked out."

One thing that hasn't been an issue is the shoulder injury that plagued him in the spring.

"The shoulder is perfect," Pennington said.

Before the All-Star break, Oakland finished up the first half with a four-game series against the Texas Rangers in Arlington. Pennington had between 25 and 30 supporters in the stands throughout the weekend.

"It's cool when I get to come to Texas. I've never played in Houston, so when we come to Dallas, this is the closest we get. It's cool," Pennington said. "A lot of family, friends and a lot of buddies make the games. It's good to get to see everybody and just catch up a little bit."

Currently, he is one of three former Coastal Bend standouts on a big-league roster. Mike Gonzalez — a Robstown product, who is in Orioles' bullpen — and Mike Adams — a former Sinton star in the Padres bullpen — are the others. Being a part of that group is something Pennington takes pride in.

"Yeah, it's awesome. There's a lot of pride in high school baseball in south Texas. The rivalries down there [are great]," Pennington said. "The one we have with King and Moody and Carroll are as fun a time as you can have playing baseball. I definitely think back to those times and still keep up."

And as a Carroll graduate, he still smiles when thinking about his alma mater winning the Class 5A state title in 2010.

"That was awesome to see. It's definitely cool," he said.

No matter if he and the A's are playing well or struggling, he never forgets how fortunate he is to be playing baseball for a living.

"That is the greatest part, you get to go out and play baseball every day, 162 games is a long season," Pennington said. "That's the beauty of the game — you're only as good as your last day."

Farm Focus: Carson's power may earn return trip

Rael Enteen, CSNBayArea.com

With the A's at 39-53, 12 games back of the first-place Texas Rangers in the A.L. West at the All-Star Break, it's becoming increasingly obvious that this is not the season that Billy Beane's rebuilding strategy pays off with a playoff appearance.

Oakland has not made the playoffs or had a winning record since 2006, a long drought for a perennial contender in the early part of the millennium.

Multiple losing seasons usually leads to high draft picks, which are often turned into can't-miss prospects, the likes of which we're seeing in other moribund baseball towns like Pittsburgh and Kansas City.

The difference between the A's and teams like the Pirates and Royals is that Oakland lost in mediocre fashion. While other rebuilding teams would lose 90-100 games and end up with a top ten draft pick, the A's never lost more than 87 (2009), leading to draft picks in the teens, where history has shown there is far less talent to be mined.

It's common for fans of struggling franchises to find renewed inspiration from the organization's minor league system. But after a half-decade of rebuilding efforts, it's debatable whether the A's are any better off than they were when they started the dreaded process.

While Jemile Weeks making an immediate impact in the big leagues and Grant Green impressing in the recent Futures Game provides a glimmer of hope, there are also giant question marks in big-name prospects like Chris Carter and Michael Taylor, who have both demonstrated fantastic tools and maddening inconsistency.

Such is the reality with prospects, save for the rare exceptions that fly through the minor league ranks on their way to Hall of Fame careers, and in this edition of A's Farm Focus, we take a look at some of the players that are working their way to Oakland and hoping to be a part of a contending, not rebuilding, team.

Line of the Month: Matt Carson in Triple-A since June 14: .281 AVG, 16 R, 4 HR, 16 RBI, 10 2B, 3 SB, 26/6 K/BB

If the name sounds familiar, it should. Carson has played in 46 games with the A's over the last two years (36 in 2010, 10 in 2009) and is now back down in Triple-A, where he is making an attempt to hit his way back to the big leagues.

In his 100 career big-league at bats, Carson hit five home runs and stole four bases without being caught, but he hit .200 and struck out 30 times compared to just two walks.

With the River Cats, Carson has brought his average back up and is displaying the power that got him to the majors in the first place.

Carson has four bombs in the last month and 17 on the season, yet he's not exactly close to a call-up, according to A's Director of Player Development Keith Lieppman.

"Unfortunately for [Carson], the off-season acquisitions and depth in the outfield positions have left Matt in a difficult place as far as opportunities to get at bats in Oakland," Lieppman said. "He is a great insurance policy for us right now and provides experience and a skill set that would provide immediate help in the Major Leagues should there be a need. Right now it looks like injuries or the need for a right-handed bat off of the bench are the determining factors for a potential recall to the major leagues."

After turning 30 this month, Carson is hardly at the age you want a player to be adjusting to big-league pitching. But while success stories for players over 30 are hard to find in baseball history, they do exist (Andres Torres and Ryan Vogelsong across the Bay can attest).

"I think Carson has put himself in position to be a 4th or 5th outfielder in the Major Leagues," Lieppman said. "I think it is all about opportunity right now and being in the right spot at the right time."

With the A's falling further and further out of contention, the second half of a lost season might be the perfect time to give a 30-year-old outfielder with power another shot.

In the Spotlight: Michael Taylor is one of the big names the A's have in their farm system. He got a late start to his 2011 season because of a wrist injury, but in 47 games with Sacramento since returning from the injury, Choice has hit nine home runs.

"Michael has made some good adjustments at the plate and swinging more aggressively was one area he focused on," Lieppman said. "He has developed into a dangerous hitter and a threat at every at bat."

The downside to Choice's emerging power is an increase in strikeouts. Taylor has 40 strikeouts in 183 at bats, but has also taken 20 walks so far in Triple-A. Lieppman said that these numbers make sense considering his approach at the plate.

"Before, he was more geared on making good contact and making sure he put the ball in play," Lieppman said. "With the new approach have come higher power numbers and results, but as is expected will come some swing and miss and less selectivity. He is learning to balance the two sides and is right on track."

In 2009, as a member of the Philadelphia Phillies organization, Taylor was promoted to Triple-A and has played in Sacramento since his trade to the A's. At 25 years old and a member of an offensively-starved organization, it looks like Taylor's chance to contribute at the big-league level may come sooner rather than later.

"Finding room to break through in Oakland is the major key for him," Lieppman said. "He continues to play well and is in position to be considered for a call-up should the right circumstances present themselves. We are glad to see the improvements he has made."

Under the Radar: Jermaine Mitchell was drafted by the A's in the 5th round of the 2006 MLB Draft and is putting it all together at the age of 26, recently earning a promotion to Triple-A Sacramento after batting .355 with the Double-A Midland RockHounds. Mitchell also had 10 home runs, 50 RBIs, 14 steals and a 65/54 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 74 games with Midland.

While his power and high average have yet to translate to the Pacific Coast League (in eight games, Mitchell is hitting .270 with no home runs), his speed and plate discipline haven't been affected (six steals, five walks compared to just seven strikeouts).

"Jermaine has been recalled to Sacramento and is off to a hot start there and continues to play like he has been doing all year," Lieppman said. "A tremendous breakthrough year for him in all aspects."

While Mitchell has only been a designated hitter with Sacramento, he has played all three outfield positions throughout his minor league career. But it's Mitchell's speed, not his defense, that has Lieppman calling him "an exciting player to watch."

And with A's legend Rickey Henderson working with him, Mitchell may develop into an even more dangerous baserunner.

"He is on the radar and being watched closely for potential moves later in the season," Lieppman said. "He continues to work on his ability to steal bases and Ricky Henderson has taken him under his wing with plenty of one-on-one work and information. That is the one area he continues to improve on. He is the fastest player in our minor league system."

If Mitchell keeps this up, he may be taking on Jemile Weeks and Coco Crisp for the title of fastest player in Oakland.

Minor league news

Grizzlies edge Cats in Highway 99 Showdown

By Mike Morris / Sacramento River Cats

Fresno continued what it started a week ago, winning their fourth game in a row against Sacramento.

Guillermo Moscoso continued what he has done all season, pitching well for Sacramento and Oakland. However, it wouldn't be enough as Fresno came away with the 3-2 victory before 10,511 fans at Raley Field.

The right-hander struck out nine while allowing five hits and three runs (two earned) on Thursday night. Moscoso started the season in Sacramento, going 3-2 with a 4.02 ERA before making the jump to the Majors on May 24. In Oakland, he had a 3-4 record with an outstanding 2.16 ERA. Thursday night was Moscoso's second start against Fresno, as he pitched against the Grizzlies last August, allowing one run and striking out three in 6.1 innings.

Both teams seemed rusty coming off the All-Star break, as each team committed three errors on the night. Sacramento committed two errors on the same play in the first inning, allowing Fresno shortstop Edgar Gonzalez to score from first on an infield single. Fresno committed three errors, as well, but the two they had in the third inning cost them.

Matt Carson walked early in the inning and reached third on a throwing error, following a single by Jermaine Mitchell. In the ensuing at-bat, Eric Sogard reached on a force attempt but a fielding error by Fresno's Brandon Belt allowed Carson to score. It wouldn't be the River Cats' last run, as Daric Barton drove in Mitchell with a single to put Sacramento ahead, 2-1.

Despite a strong performance from Moscoso, two of the five hits he allowed were sent out of the park, one in the fourth and one in the sixth. Gonzalez hitting the game-tying home run before Belt sent one to the River Cats' bullpen for a 3-2 lead in the sixth.

Belt's home run would have cued a pitching move or at least a visit to the mound for most other pitchers, but Moscoso stayed in and struck out two of the next three batters.

Vinnie Chulk, Jerry Blevins and Fernando Cabrera pitched a combined three shutout innings, but Sacramento was unable to put another run on the board.

Adrian Cardenas and Sogard are still very confident despite losing four in a row against Fresno.

"From a team standpoint I think our record speaks for itself," Cardenas said. "We've been a really good team from Day 1 and we've had so many ups and downs with (play movement), yet we still lead the division."

Las Vegas' win Thursday trimmed Sacramento's division lead from 8.0 to 7.0 games.

"As a team we're having a great season," Cardenas said. "We went through a little cold streak there but we swept Las Vegas before the break putting us back where we were before. Our pitching had been outstanding and we continue to have guys coming down from the Big Leagues with (Josh) Outman, Moscoso, and Graham (Godfrey) so that's always going to be helpful."

The River Cats must win three in a row this weekend in order to win their first series against Fresno this season. If not, Sacramento will wait until the August 24-28 when they face Fresno the last time this season.

The River Cats look to get on track with right-hander Graham Godfrey (8-1, 2.32) and left-hander Josh Outman (5-1, 4.64) going Friday and Saturday for Sacramento.

RockHounds trounce Missions 10-1

Oscar LeRoy, Midland Reporter-Telegram

One could sense that it was going to be a very good night for the Midland RockHounds against South Division-leading San Antonio in the first inning when right fielder Jeremy Barfield made a great defensive play.

Barfield made an over-the shoulder Willie Mays-like catch before bouncing into the right field wall and robbing Andy Parrino of a hit.

"I know with the wind here, it keeps a lot of balls in the park, and I'm not afraid to run through a fence at all," Barfield said. "We work on it early, get good reads. I expected to make that catch. It gave us the momentum, and we just went with it."

The RockHounds not only played solid defense but had a strong start by A.J. Griffin and had 12 hits in a 10-1 victory over the Missions in front of 5,216 fans Thursday night at Citibank Ballpark.

After Barfield aided Griffin's perfect inning, the RockHounds' offense went to work against Missions starter Simon Castro, the No. 3-rated prospect in the San Diego Padres organization. The first six RockHounds reached -- five on base hits-- against Castro. As a result, Castro (2-3) didn't last long as he was pulled after only 1/3 of an inning and after giving up five earned runs on five hits.

"We've seen Castro before, and he's got good stuff," said Barfield, who was 2 for 4 with a double and three RBI. "We just waited for good pitches. When we got them, we didn't miss them."

The RockHounds made it 8-0 in the second inning thanks in part to a two-run single by Barfield and three walks issued by Aaron Breit. The Missions' pitching staff combined to walk 11 'Hounds in the game.

That lead was more than enough for Griffin (2-1), who was brilliant in his third start for the RockHounds. Griffin retired the first five batters he faced and allowed just two hits, walked two and struck out seven through six innings against the best hitting team in the Texas League.

"It all started with our pitching," Barfield said. "Even if we didn't score those runs, I think (Griffin) would have kept us in it. It starts with that, and then everybody contributed at the plate."

Midland manager Steve Scarsone said Griffin set the tone for his team.

"He went out there and gave us some quick innings and then the bats were hot early. We got back up there as quick as possible and did some damage early," Scarsone said. "For the most part, we haven't had that kind of explosion in a while. It was good for everybody at the start of a series, especially against San Antonio. Hopefully, it will give us some momentum going for the rest of the series."

Griffin said his goal for the evening was to just pound the strike zone, and that's what he did as 57 of his 90 pitches went for strikes.

"I made an adjustment from my last time out (a 5-0 loss at Arkansas on July 8). I was a little bit up (in the zone)," Griffin said. "I tried to mixed some of my pitches and tried to keep them off balance and it worked out.

"I feel I threw a lot more fastballs than I normally would today because we had a good lead today."

Ethan Hollingsworth, in his first action since coming off the disabled list, relieved Griffin in the seventh inning and pitched three innings of one-hit ball to earn his first save of the season.

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'HOUND BITES: The RockHounds announced a few roster moves on Thursday. Pitchers Polin Trinidad and Jonathan Ortiz were placed on the seven-day disabled list. Pitcher Fabian Williamson was assigned to Single-A Stockton. Pitchers Ethan Hollingsworth and Paul Smyth were activated from the DL. And RHP Yadiel Marti has joined the RockHounds from Single-A Stockton. ...RockHounds 1B Michael Spina and starter A.J. Griffin combined for a nice play in the second inning when Spina made a nice stop to his right on a grounder hit by Sawyer Carroll and then made a backhanded flip to Griffin for the out at first base. ...RockHounds 3B Stephen Parker made another great play in the fifth inning when he made a diving stop on a ball hit by Daniel Robertson and then got up and threw to first for the out. ...Matt Sulentic did a good job for the RockHounds as their leadoff hitter as he was 1-for-1 and had a single-game career-high four walks to reach base all five times.

TODAY'S PROBABLES: The RockHounds host the San Antonio Missions in the second game of a four-game series at 7 p.m. today as right-hander Gary Daley (4-1, 3.20) goes to the mound for Midland, while the Missions send out top right-handed prospect Casey Kelly (8-2, 4.21).

Straily Sizzles As Ports Beat Blaze 6-1

Stockton Ports

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. - For his second straight outing, Stockton Ports starting pitcher Dan Straily (9-5) matched a season-high by going eight full innings. For his sixth straight outing, Straily wound up the winning pitcher as he allowed just a run on four hits helping the Ports past the Bakersfield Blaze by a final of 6-1.

The Ports got on the board in the top of the 2nd with the first of two home runs on the night. Petey Paramore launched a two-out homer to left to put the Ports in front 1-0. It was Paramore's third home run in his fourth game back with Stockton.

Stockton made it a 3-0 lead in the 3rd. With one on and one out, Myrio Richard doubled to left off Blaze starter Mark Serrano (2-5) to make it a 2-0 lead. Michael Gilmartin followed with a single to left to drive in Richard to give the Ports a 3-0 advantage.

Bakersfield's lone run of the night came in the 4th on a leadoff home run from Brodie Greene to make it a 3-1 score.

Greene's home run was just one of four hits the Blaze had off Straily. Greene had two of the four hits. Straily would go eight spectacular innings, allowing just the lone run on four hits while striking out three and not walking a batter.

The Ports tacked on a pair of runs in the 6th on one swing of the bat. After a leadoff single from Gilmartin, Anthony Aliotti hit his 10th home run of the year-a two-run shot to left-center to make it a 5-1 lead.

Stockton added a run in the 7th on a two-out wild pitch thrown by Blaze reliever Jason Braun. All six runs were charged to the starter Serrano who took the loss after going 6.1 innings, allowing six hits while striking out five.

Braun would go 1.2 scoreless innings for the Blaze and Drew Bowman would pitch a scoreless 9th.

A.J. Huttenlocker came into the game in the 9th and set the side down in order to close out the ballgame.

Straily's ERA is now at 3.56, which ranks 4th in the California League among active starting pitchers.

The Ports and the Blaze will wrap up their four-game set on Friday night at Sam Lynn Ballpark. Murphy Smith (3-7, 4.72 ERA) will toe the rubber for Stockton, opposed by Bakersfield right-hander Curtis Partch (4-10, 5.58 ERA). First pitch is set for 7:45 p.m. PDT.

Bees Snap Six-Game Losing Streak

By Matthew Wheaton

BURLINGTON, IA- RHP Blake Hassebrock (5-5) pitched seven scoreless innings, allowing three hits and striking out seven to lead the Burlington Bees (7-13) to a 3-1 victory over the Fort Wayne TinCaps (8-12) in front of 794 fans at Community Field Thursday night.

The Bees started the scoring in the bottom of the fourth inning after RF Douglas Landaeta (1-4) hit a two-out double to left field. A single from SS Yordy Cabrera (1-3) off the glove of Fort Wayne SS B.J. Guinn, who leaped into the air in an attempt to catch the ball, plated Landaeta to put the Bees up 1-0.

In the bottom of the seventh inning, Burlington CF Jose Crisotomo (2-3) hit a two-out single and 3B Wade Kirkland (1-3) smacked a two-run home run over the left field wall to make the score 3-0 Bees.

TinCaps 3B Chris Bisson (0-1) drew a lead-off walk in the top of the ninth inning and scored on a RBI double to left field from CF Rico Noel (1-4) to bring Fort Wayne within two runs at 3-1.

Bees RHP Zack Thornton allowed one earned run on one hit over the final two innings to earn his fourth save of the year.

The Bees and the TinCaps wrap up their three-game series Friday night at 6:30 p.m. Former Texas Tech and Iowa Wesleyan football coach Mike Leach will be at Community Field and will pre-release his first book, "Swing Your Sword." He will be in the area to instruct at the first annual IWC Football Alumni and Friends football camp. It's "Western Illinois Area Community Weekend" at Community Field and all fans who show their Illinois I.D. will receive discounted general admission tickets. It's also "Big Fun Friday" where fans can enjoy 16 oz. cans of Bud Light and Busch Light for just \$3.25 sponsored by Budweiser, Today's Hit Music Hot 97.3, and Your Hometown Station, Big Country 103.1. It's "Jimmy Buffett Night" as well. "The Hive" will be turned into a paradise with Buffet music, parrots, and even a cheeseburger-eating contest.

RHP Zach Cates (3-5, 4.81) gets the start for Fort Wayne against RHP Sean Murphy (0-3, 7.48) for Burlington. Pre-game coverage begins at 6:10 p.m. on Newsradio 1490 KBUR and online at www.gobees.com.

2011 Bees tickets are on sale now! To purchase season tickets, bonus books or single game tickets, please give the Bees a call at (319) 754-5705 (319) 754-5705, go online to www.gobees.com, or stop by the box office at Community Field during normal business hours.

6-run 14th Inning Keys Win Thursday

By Paul Stanfield / Vermont Lake Monsters

ABERDEEN, MD --- Chad Lewis snapped a 2-2 tie with a two-run single as the Vermont Lake Monsters scored six runs in the top of the 14th inning for an 8-2 victory over the Aberdeen Ironbirds in New York-Penn League action Thursday night at Ripken Stadium.

Vermont trailed 2-1 in the ninth inning when they got three straight singles from Diomedes Lopez, pinch hitter Xavier Macklin and Aaron Shipman (bunt single) to load the bases with no outs. A walk to Sean Jamieson forced home pinch runner Michael Fabiaschi with the tying run, but the Lake Monsters were unable to plate the go ahead run as Chih-Fang Pan flew out to shallow left, Jordan Tripp popped out to short and Lewis flied out to right.

The Lake Monsters had just one hit over the next four innings and Aberdeen had a chance to win the game in the 12th as Glynn Davis leadoff with a double and advanced to third on a one-out wild pitch. But reliever Nathan Kilcrease got Mychal Givens to groundout with the infield in and struckout Wynston Sawyer to end the threat.

Shipman lead off the 14th with a single to left, stole second and advanced to third on a throwing error by catcher Sawyer. A walk, wild pitch and intentional walk again loaded the bases with no outs for Vermont and Orlando Alfonso was able to strikeout Tripp looking for the first out, but Lewis then lined a single to left scoring Shipman and Jamieson for a 4-2 lead.

Chad Oberacker followed with a RBI bunt single and Chris Affinito an RBI single to center for a 6-2 advantage. After a double steal, Fabiaschi singled home Oberacker and Nick Rickles' sacrifice fly scored Affinito with the sixth run of the inning as the Lake Monsters won their first extra-inning game played this season.

Shipman was 4-for-6 with a run and RBI for Vermont (15-9), while Oberacker had three hits and Fabiaschi two hits after coming into the game in the ninth as a pinch runner. Kilcrease struckout four in three scoreless innings, while Jeff Urlaub (1-0) struckout two in one scoreless inning to earn the victory.

The Lake Monsters and Ironbirds play at Aberdeen again on Friday night before the series moves to historic Centennial Field for a three-game Vermont homestand Saturday at 6:05, Sunday 1:05 and Monday at 7:05 pm.