

Inside the mind of Oakland A's manager Bob Melvin

By Mark Emmons, San Jose Mercury News

Superstitions might be part of baseball's cultural fabric, but A's interim manager Bob Melvin obsesses over more than his fair share.

He keeps careful track of everything from the route he drives to the ballpark and the pen he uses to write out the lineup card to even the number of stadium steps he runs each day. Melvin faithfully will repeat the routines when his team wins and alter them when they lose.

So he has done plenty of tinkering with those rituals during his brief tenure in Oakland. That's because the A's are 15-18 under Melvin since he replaced Bob Geren last month.

And that means his candy superstition remains a work in progress.

"I'll have a certain amount of candies in my pocket, and I'll eat one at a certain time of the game," Melvin said. "When we lose, maybe I'll take out a candy or add one. Obviously, it doesn't have anything to do with the outcome of the game, but somehow in my mind it does."

Melvin knows how crazy that must sound. But actually his grounded, cerebral mindset is the reason why general manager Billy Beane pegged Melvin as the man to steady the ballclub.

Even though the A's often can be infuriating, don't expect dugout tirades from the even-keel Melvin. His managerial style is all about maintaining a positive clubhouse vibe.

"Baseball is hard enough," said Melvin, a 49-year-old Menlo Park native. "It already can be a negative game. Players want to feel like the manager is behind them.

That's what I'm all about."

There have been a lot more negatives than positives in Oakland this season. The A's (42-54) began the year with high expectations but currently find themselves in the American League West cellar. They will have to catch fire just to post their first winning season since 2006.

The team's anemic hitting (.236 batting average) and erratic fielding (75 errors) rank among the worst in the majors. They have combined to spoil the efforts of a resilient pitching staff (3.10 ERA) that has overcome debilitating injuries.

On the surface, exchanging one Bob for another Bob has accomplished little. The team's inherent problems might be beyond any manager's ability to rectify.

But the players say there has been a difference under Melvin.

"He's the perfect manager for us right now," All-Star pitcher Gio Gonzalez said. "He brings life to the organization. He's one of those guys you play hard for every single minute of every single day. He's always giving you credit, working with you, and you know he's always on your side."

Conor Jackson, who played for Melvin in Arizona, said no manager ever will be loved by all 25 players. But Melvin comes close.

"He's extremely likable," Jackson said. "He's definitely a player's manager."

And, Jackson added, he also can be fun to watch as the A's catch on to his quirky rituals.

"He definitely likes the dugout clean," he said. "You'll see him walking up and down the dugout during games, picking up stuff. When a guy gets a hit, he'll make sure to keep standing in the same spot."

There's a method to the madness: Keeping his mind occupied. A Menlo-Atherton High graduate who played one season at Cal, Melvin said he has learned over the years about the importance of staying levelheaded throughout baseball's highs and lows.

A catcher for seven teams over 10 seasons in the majors, he won 93 games in his managerial debut with Seattle in 2003 but was fired the next year after the Mariners lost 99. Melvin got another crack in 2005 with an Arizona ballclub coming off a 51-111 season. He led the Diamondbacks to the National League West crown in 2007, earning him Manager of the Year honors.

But he got pink-slipped early in the 2009 season amid friction with then-G.M. Josh Byrnes -- a firing many observers believe set the franchise back years. The team basically acknowledged its mistake by rehiring Melvin this May as an adviser.

The A's, though, gave Melvin a chance to get back into the dugout. He has preached patience with the hitters, saying the bats will wake up. (They did in Sunday's 9-1 victory over Anaheim, their third win in four games.) He even claims to like playing at the dreary, underpopulated Oakland ballpark.

You can't get much more upbeat than that.

He and his wife now make their home in New York, where daughter Alexi is a budding actress. For the next couple of months, Melvin has his own audition for Oakland's permanent job.

"Whether you have a three-year contract or a three-month contract, you still have to prove yourself every day," he said. "There's always somebody knocking on the door wanting your job in baseball. The interim tag doesn't affect the way I go about my business."

Or how he goes about his superstitions.

The art of keeping baseball fans safe

By Daniel Brown, Oakland Tribune

Whenever Giants outfielder Aaron Rowand finishes his warm-up tosses between innings, he flings the ball into the stands.

It looks like an absent-minded goodwill gesture. In truth, it's as carefully executed as a throw to home plate.

"If you watch, I never throw it to the railing. I throw it to the middle of the crowd," Rowand explained as the Giants prepared for a six-game home stand. "You lob it. You don't fire it in there because you don't want to hurt anybody.

"And you make sure everybody in the area is looking at you when you throw, so nobody gets blindsided in the side of the head."

Like so many others in the baseball community, Rowand is heartbroken for Texas outfielder Josh Hamilton, whose act of kindness set off a tragedy at Rangers Stadium on July 7. Shannon Stone, a 39-year-old firefighter, fell over a railing while trying to catch a ball flipped to the stands by Hamilton, the All-Star outfielder.

In the wake of the accident, major league teams are reviewing stadium safety. Rangers spokesman John Blake told the Dallas Morning News that the team is meeting with contractors, architects and other industry experts to determine "whether to raise railings or do whatever might be appropriate for the safety of our fans."

Stadium officials for Bay Area teams have also reacted to the incident in Texas. Before the A's opened a series against the Angels last Friday, Dave Rinetti, the team's vice president for stadium operations gathered the guest services staff for a refresher course on monitoring fan activity near railings.

Similarly, Jorge Costa, the Giants' senior vice president of stadium operations, reviewed fan safety in the game-day memos distributed to about 800 employees.

Each major league team determines its own safety features based on local laws. Both the Giants and A's said their ballparks meet local codes and regulations. "But that doesn't mean we're completely extricated from worrying about things," Costa said. "This is something that consumes me and my staff every day. (The Texas) incident was supposed to be a goodwill gesture from player to fan -- a good, light moment. Obviously, what happened was the most horrible, worst-case scenario."

Players, meanwhile, are also taking stock of their rituals. Colorado Rockies shortstop Troy Tulowitzki, the South Bay native, warmed up before a recent game and began to reflexively toss the ball into the stands. "But I thought twice about it. And I kept the ball in my glove," Tulowitzki told CBS Sportsline.

A's reliever Brad Ziegler understands the reaction but has no plans to alter his regular habit of throwing balls into the stands. Zeigler, 31, still has all the mementos he saved from going to Kansas City Royals games as a kid.

"(Fans) are the reason we play the game," he said. "We enjoy seeing fans smile, making kids happy. People take souvenirs home from the ballpark and that's something they remember."

A's pitcher Trevor Cahill also enjoys tossing a keepsake into the crowd. But in the immediate aftermath of the Hamilton incident, he, like Tulowitzki, has new reservations. "I mean, I probably won't do it for a while," Cahill said.

Before the All-Star Game in Phoenix last week, commissioner Bud Selig said MLB still embraces the practice of players throwing balls to fans. He called the Texas situation a "horrible accident. It's heartbreaking, it really is. It's almost beyond comprehension to believe something like that could happen."

Selig said each major league team was reviewing its ballpark, especially in areas where fans could be in pursuit of a souvenir.

Rinetti said that, even before the death in Texas, the A's are vigilant about safety at the Coliseum. In recent years, that has meant adding cyclone fencing to the bottom of some railings after worrying that a young child might be able to fall through.

Costa said safety changes at AT&T Park over the years include a drink railing installed along the arcade section atop the right-field wall. Originally designed as an amenity, Costa discovered that the drink railing provided the added benefit of "a lot more substance and structure."

Costa noted that fans have a responsibility as well. Too often, he said, fans forget their surroundings as they fixate on the incoming souvenir. "They're thinking about getting a ball for their son or their daughter or themselves," Costa said. "You hope that no one takes an unreasonable risk."

Rowand, meanwhile, will continue to throw his warm-up ball into crowd -- albeit as carefully as he can. He watched Angles outfielders Tim Salmon and Garret Anderson do it when he was a kid in the Anaheim stands and vowed he would do the same if he ever reached the majors.

But Rowand stressed that there's a science to it. He chided fellow outfielder Andres Torres for throwing balls toward the front row, saying "half the time it ends up back on the field. Someone bumps somebody, they're all going after it, and now you've got to go pick it up."

Cahill agreed that the Texas incident gives him pause. He knows that there's a risk involved even with the most well-intentioned toss.

"Fans are yelling for balls and you throw them up there and sometimes you don't get them there," he said. "It's always been one of those things -- especially because you want to throw it to kids and you don't know if they can catch it or not.

"You try to throw it soft. It's just a fine line. I think fans like to have that connection, but there are so many things that could happen."

Monte Poole: Homophobia is the sports world's new bigotry

By Monte Poole, Bay Area News Group

When idiots of yore tossed slurs and epithets at sporting events, they had the sorry excuse of living in an America where segregation not only was common but also legislated.

Impolite folks too ignorant to know better and too lazy to learn routinely wrapped themselves in bigotry, sparing no one, as was discovered by Jewish slugger Hank Greenberg and black pioneer Jackie Robinson.

That was the 1930s and '40s and '50s, when many were denied civil rights and voting rights and the system was contaminated with the poisons of prejudice.

What's the excuse now that we're supposed to be so much more evolved?

Hatred within the sports community isn't gone; it simply has a popular new target. Instead of ethnicity, it's sexuality. With the K-word extinct and the N-word rarely uttered with malice, the new undisputed champion of epithets is the F-word.

Not the four-letter bomb but the homophobic insult comprising six letters.

Pro athletes, many of them among our biggest stars, are in the midst of a staggering run of name-calling, dropping F-words as casually as if ordering a burger and fries. Less than three weeks into July, at least three jocks are vying for Sports Jackass of the Month.

Pittsburgh Steelers defensive end James Harrison, a hair-trigger shotgun of a man interviewed for a magazine article, included the F-word in his verbal evisceration of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell.

A's farmhand Ian Krol, pitching in Arizona while recovering from an arm injury, tweeted the F-word presumably describing some, but not all, male students at Arizona State University.

White Sox second baseman Gordon Beckham is a distant third in this race because he avoided the F-word. He merely scribbled in the infield dirt "Getz is gay! GB" and left it to be discovered by Royals second baseman Chris Getz.

Insofar as Beckham and Getz are friends, there is no reason to presume malicious intent. No, it was just a tasteless "joke." All three have since offered apologies. That, however, misses the point. Each evidently failed to understand -- or simply didn't care about -- the impact of his words and actions.

When Kobe Bryant slapped a referee with the F-word in April, the NBA slapped back, fining the Lakers star \$100,000. When Bulls center Joakim Noah slung the F-word at a heckling fan, the league tossed a \$50,000 fine into his lap.

And we didn't forget Philadelphia Eagles star DeSean Jackson, who spent two seasons at Cal. Ticked off by a tacky question from a caller into a radio show June 30, Jackson reacted with, yes, the F-word.

Jackson, too, apologized. How could he not regret the hypocrisy of his words? He is personally engaged in a national anti-bullying campaign, and no group is bullied more than young gay individuals.

Pejoratives have been around from the instant man noticed differences in the way people look, think, behave, walk and talk. It appears we have stumbled onto a trend, public displays of hatred expressed by casual usage of the F-word.

There also are differences, too, in the way people view sexuality. There are those who actually believe Gov. Jerry Brown, by signing Senate Bill 48 -- essentially prohibiting discrimination in education -- is promoting the teaching of "gay history." This ignores the fundamental truth, that gays, like everyone else, are intertwined with history because they, like everyone else, have been present throughout history.

But with public racism driven underground and the N-word reduced to a whisper or dialogue among bigots, homophobia has become the new racism. Contempt once reserved for ethnic minorities and Jews has descended on homosexuality, and the subject ignites overheated debate in the political arena, the church and the locker room.

And we like to think of sports as an island of tolerance. Greenberg and Robinson eventually were accepted. The majority of our sports come in wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and colors.

That's why sports should, once again, take the lead in pulling society's foot-draggers toward greater tolerance.

The Giants last month took a leap, being the first American professional sports team to embrace the "It Gets Better" project, a national anti-homophobia campaign. Pitchers Barry Zito, Matt Cain and Sergio Romo, outfielder Andres Torres and hitting coach Hensley Meulens participated in a video presentation.

Pro Football Hall of Famer Michael Irvin took an even bolder step, appearing on the cover of "Out" magazine, designed for a gay audience. Irvin discusses his gay brother, who died of cancer in 2006, the gap that exists between straights and gays, and the belief that his former Dallas Cowboys teammates would have accepted a gay member.

Moreover, Irvin conceded he is a reformed homophobe now committed to fighting such behavior. My guess, and hope, is in the 21st century he'll have plenty of company.

Underachieving A's just not doing it on the road

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

When the 2011 A's are bad at something, they are very, very bad. They don't stop at mediocre. They head straight for the bottom.

They've shown signs of offensive life, however, as the second half got under way, particularly with Sunday's eight-run burst in the first inning. And the A's, with the majors' worst record in one-run games, also pocketed a one-run win in extra innings Saturday.

Now the team must address another of its deep-seated problems: road games. Oakland has won just 16 of 48 games away from the Coliseum this season - 16 games in 3 1/2 months. The A's 32 losses on the road are the most in the majors.

They have been particularly unsuccessful of late, dropping 23 of their past 28 away games, including all four at Texas before the break.

"We have to play better on the road," said A's manager Bob Melvin, whose team opens a series at Detroit tonight and then heads to New York. "There's a pretty big discrepancy between our road and home records. We have to find a way to win on the road."

Oakland is 26-22 at home, where the team averages 3.81 runs per game. The A's are scoring an average of 3.17 runs per game on the road, and they're batting .222 away from the Coliseum compared to .250 at home.

Even the newer members of the club have developed home-road-itis. Rookie second baseman Jemile Weeks is batting .382 at the Coliseum, .242 on the road.

The A's pitching, fantastic at home with a league-best 2.77 ERA, is not as good away from the spacious Coliseum, which is not surprising, but the pitching, as usual, is not the problem: On the road, the team ERA is 3.50, which is fourth best in the league.

This is nothing new: Oakland has losing road records in each of the past four seasons. But the team is on pace to lose 54 road games, which would be the A's highest total since dropping 58 in 1979. That was a club that lost 108 games and finished 34 games out.

The A's do not head toward friendly climes: the Tigers and Yankees are both among the best home teams in the league, and New York is a particularly tough spot for Oakland the past three years - the A's are 1-12 there since the start of 2008.

Taking three of four from the Angels right after the break, though, has Oakland feeling more confident.

"This was definitely important - we just started the second half and we're about to start a road trio," Oakland designated hitter Hideki Matsui said through translator Roger Kahlon. "This gives you anticipation that now you're going to continue it."

Matsui could get milestone homer at Yankee Stadium

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Hideki Matsui hit career home run No. 499, combined between Japan and the major leagues, on June 16, and he has not hit one since.

That has led to speculation that, like former Yankees teammate **Derek Jeter** - who recorded career hit No. 3,000 at Yankee Stadium - Matsui might hit his milestone blast at New York later this week. Matsui spent his first seven big-league seasons with the Yankees and had his best years there, including 2009, when he was the MVP of the World Series.

Matsui said through translator **Roger Kahlon** that he is not frustrated by the lack of homers the past month, but he can't say the same for his swing overall.

"I have not been able to get to the point where I'm satisfied with my hitting mechanics at the plate," Matsui said. "That's where the frustration is. If I can do that, I know the home runs will come eventually."

Asked to describe the mechanical issues, Matsui said, "To put it really simply, it's balance. When it's there, it translates to better at-bats. And that aspect right now is better than it had been."

Matsui drove in a season-high three runs Sunday, and he started Oakland's scoring in an eight-run first inning with a two-run single.

Briefly: Manager **Bob Melvin** plans to stick with 13 pitchers and a three-man bench for a while. Backup catcher **Landon Powell** is the top option at first base if **Conor Jackson** is unavailable. ... Melvin said that better at-bats from **David DeJesus** and **Kurt Suzuki** will be a key for the A's offense; Suzuki is hitting .296 over his past 12 games and DeJesus .294 over the past five games. ... DeJesus has struck out in 12 consecutive games, a career high, compiling 15 Ks in the process.

Power galore: Last year's top draft pick, Class-A Stockton center fielder Michael Choice, hit his California-League leading 26th homer Sunday. He isn't ticketed for the big leagues until late next year at the earliest.

Thirty years ago, Oakland A's pitchers generally finished what they started

Ben Bolch, LA Times, 7/18/2011

In 1980 and '81, Oakland starters, under the direction of hard-nosed manager Billy Martin, combined for an incredible 154 complete games in 271 starts. They paid a price, though, with injuries and shortened careers. And of course it would be unthinkable in today's era of pampered pitchers.

Slipping on an Oakland A's jersey as a starting pitcher 30 years ago meant being dressed for the nines.

Come hell or high-water pants with socks pulled to the knees, Manager Billy Martin expected his starters to throw a complete game — pitch counts be damned.

"If you didn't go nine innings," said Steve McCatty, one of the A's starters, "you didn't feel like you did your job."

More often than not, they got the job done.

Oakland's pitching staff in 1980 and '81 combined for 154 complete games in 271 starts — nearly 57%. (This season, through Sunday, there had been a total of 118 complete games in the major leagues, in 2,840 starts — 4%.)

Philadelphia's Roy Halladay, considered baseball's ironman pitcher these days with six complete games in 19 starts, would have been a laggard if he played for those A's teams.

In 1980, Rick Langford finished 28 of the 33 games he started. Mike Norris completed 24 of 33, Matt Keough 20 of 32, McCatty 11 of 31 and Brian Kingman 10 of 30.

The next season, which was shortened to 109 games by a strike, the staff had 60 complete games, nearly doubling the 33 complete games compiled by the next-closest team.

Langford finished 18 of 24 games, McCatty 16 of 22, Norris, lagging well behind his pace of the previous season, 12 of 23.

Over the last 13 years, only one major league pitcher has matched even Norris' 1981 complete-game total — Randy Johnson in 1999, and that was in a 162-game season.

The fallout from the A's heavy workload was severe. Five promising careers ended prematurely and other teams more strictly enforced pitch limits to protect their starters.

"You're not going to see that in today's game, mainly because of the mind-set," said Bert Blyleven, who will be inducted into

the Hall of Fame on Sunday after a 22-season career in which he amassed 242 complete games. "They have the pitch count and so-called quality starts of six innings today."

One reason Martin wanted his starters to pitch deep into games was that the late manager thought he had the best rotation ever assembled — Langford, McCatty, Norris, Keough and Kingman were dubbed "The Five Aces." But mostly, Martin just wanted to minimize a suspect bullpen.

"Let's face it, we didn't have any Dennis Eckersleys out there," Norris said.

So Martin would hand his starters the ball and rarely ask for it back. In 1981, the A's won their first 11 games, with the starters going the distance nine times. Reliever Tom Underwood, traded from the New York Yankees to Oakland in May, told McCatty he soon realized he wouldn't pitch most days he wasn't used as a spot starter.

Pitch counts were kept but never used to determine when a starter was done. Langford, the most economical of the bunch, would average about 110 pitches in nine innings, according to McCatty, who usually threw between 130 and 140 pitches in his complete games.

Sometimes they needed a lot more pitches than that. Langford, Keough, Norris and McCatty each threw a 14-inning complete game in 1980, when the A's set a major league record with 94 complete games. Norris needed 152 pitches to get through his extra-inning marathon.

McCatty? Two hundred and seven. When Martin came out to see how his pitcher was feeling in the 11th inning, the right-hander sent him marching back to the dugout.

Recalled McCatty: "I said, 'I'm staying out here one way or another. I'm getting a win or a loss.'"

It was a loss, on a 14th-inning homer by Seattle's Dan Meyer that gave the Mariners a 2-1 victory.

Martin routinely checked on his pitchers late in games even though they knew all too well he had no intention of taking them out.

"If you told him you were tired, he would look at you like you were less of a man," Norris said. "So I told him to get the hell out of there. Of course you're tired. But it's a gut-check. It's a matter of intestinal fortitude at that point."

Peer pressure also contributed. One day after being shelled and coming out of a game after only 12/3 innings, McCatty started again and lasted 81/3 innings in a victory over Seattle.

"What, you can't go nine?" Oakland center fielder Dwayne Murphy teased McCatty afterward.

The starters went the distance in leading the A's to the 1981 playoffs only two years removed from a 108-loss season. Langford's 18 complete games and McCatty's 14 victories were both major league bests.

Oakland swept Kansas City in the AL division series but fell victim to its shoddy offense — a season-long nemesis — during the league championship series against the Yankees. The A's batted .222 and scored a total of four runs while being swept in the best-of-five series.

And just like that, what had seemed like a budding pitching dynasty crumbled. The one-of-a-kind Martin had beat (down) five aces, all in their 20s.

Collectively, the A's starters accounted for 37 complete games in 1982, five in '83 and four in '84, their careers derailed by an assortment of shoulder and elbow injuries tied to their workload. Kingman was finished after the '83 season, at age 29. Keough never pitched past 31. Langford was released by Oakland after starting the 1985 season 1-10. He was 34.

"I kind of took it in stride that it's collateral damage for what we did," said McCatty, who threw his last pitch at 31 and is now pitching coach for the Washington Nationals. "Would we all have liked to have played longer and not get hurt? Sure. Can I say I would trade it? I can't say that. We wanted to play. If it ended up costing us our careers, so be it."

Norris had surgery after the 1983 season to repair nerve blockage in his shoulder and didn't throw another pitch in the major leagues until a brief comeback with the A's seven years later.

"I was pretty much half the pitcher I was before," said Norris, whose career also stalled because of drug problems.

Now 56, Norris is partially paralyzed below the waist as the result of a spinal cord defect he feels may be related to his overuse. His 13-year-old daughter has never seen him walk without the assistance of crutches.

"It was no one's fault," Norris said of his injuries. "You can't blame that on Billy. That's what we did. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it the same way."

Starters generally have been handled with greater care over the last 30 years, particularly with the expansion of bullpens and use of pitch limits to protect starters. Early in his career, Angels ace Jered Weaver said, he was rarely allowed to exceed 100 pitches in a start.

"Now I'm getting a little more leeway to throw the 120, 125 pitches and I've been able to get a couple of more complete games," said Weaver, who has four (in 20 starts), already tying a career high.

Angels Manager Mike Scioscia said pitch counts can be a tool to shield starters from injury but are not infallible.

"There's certainly a priority on protecting a pitcher's health and his stuff and his career," Scioscia said, "but sometimes limiting their work is not the best way to do it because a lot of guys have pitched a long time by really being workhorses who kept their arm where it needed to be."

In 1981, the A's starters could usually count on being on the mound when the game ended. Norris still marvels at the results.

"It's quite an accomplishment," he said, "because in this day and age it will never be accomplished again."

Athletics' Beane has been Beaned

By Bill Conlin , Philadelphia Daily News

IT HAS BEEN 8 years since "Moneyball" raised the morale of baseball's poor and huddled bottom feeders yearning to win on the cheap.

Their patron saint, Oakland general manager Billy Beane, used a little SABR math, some really good scouts and a lot of luck to prove you could make the postseason on a consistent basis without spending like the Yankees.

The A's bypassed seven-figure, iffy, high school phenoms in the draft. They looked for college players who made up for what they lacked in projectable talent with solid *now* results. The A's went for position players who put up good numbers in good programs, run scorers and high OBP guys. They also were big on BA with RISP, OPS, players who could get on base and score. Contact hitting was more sought after than longballing.

And it worked. For a while.

There is a long list of successful players who fit the Moneyball mold shaped by judicious use of Sabermetrics as opposed to the traditional BA, RBI-driven yardsticks used for more than 100 years. (I've got no problem with a lot of the Sabermetric stuff, as long as it does not ignore that the object of the game is to score one more run than the other guy. I regard OPS as the most useful way to measure a player's offensive contribution.)

But Moneyball has hit the wall for Beane. The reason the A's have not been back to the postseason since 2006 and are 45 games under .500 since then is that the system is so attractive economically, all the bottom feeders are into it. A number of top feeders, as well.

Bottom line: No pennant, despite two 100-plus-win seasons since 2000, six 90-plus-win seasons and five postseason appearances. Attendance in the Oakland Mausoleum has ranged from an American League eight best 2.170 million in 2002 to a dead-last 1.41 million in 2009. They are No. 14 again this year.

Across the bay, the Giants are the world champs and they did it because Brian Sabean out-Beaned Beane. Sabean did last year what the salary-maxed Phils are doing this year, using overwhelming pitching depth to overcome puny offense. But Sabean did it for \$96.28 million in 2010 and is doing it so far this season for \$118.2 million.

The contending Pirates are the feel-good story of the season on a \$42.05 million payroll.

But this news just in: The Bucs have bought into the Giants' business model and are going all-in on high-ceiling pitching. They have outspent everybody on bonus money the past two seasons and most of it has gone to young pitchers - 17-year-old Luis Heredia, No. 2 overall 2010 selection Jameson Taillon, second-rounder Stetson Allie, and this year's No. 1 overall pick, Gerrit Cole. They represent a huge investment in high school-age phenoms.

The 6-6 Heredia has walked 12 in 10 innings for the Gulf Coast League Pirates. But the kid has struck out 10 and allowed just four hits.

Meanwhile, the Phils are acquiring a reputation for significantly small annual draft budgets since 2005 with a Moneyball approach in later rounds and a penchant for going all-in on high-ceiling, speedy, light-hitting high school outfielders.

OK, time is on their side. With the big club getting long of tooth, but hardly doddering, there is no urgency to move this speculative crop rapidly up the chain. There is a danger there, of course. At some point in the process, it would seem advisable to expose some of their Sistine Chapels and Westminster Abbey ceiling futures to a higher level of pitching.

The Phils had a \$6.7 million budget for the 2008 draft. First-rounder Anthony Hewitt and 34th overall Zach Collier got \$2.4 million of that budget. Now in their fourth seasons, both are repeating Low Class A Lakewood. Collier has an excuse: He missed all of 2010 following hamate surgery. Big speed, solid centerfielder, but lacks power. Zach needs the Florida State League challenge. He is a raw, low-percentage base-stealer who was caught for the 11th time yesterday.

Hewitt was a 2011 Sally League All-Star, despite low average and high strikeouts. A triple and double Saturday night left the athletic but baseball-challenged rightfielder/designated hitter with just four hits in his previous 34 at-bats. Four years in, repeating Lakewood, it's time to see if the kid can hit better pitching. If they let him establish a comfort level in the Sally, he'll be rudely shocked higher in the food chain.

But the underbelly of that draft has done swimmingly, thanks. Third-rounder in 2008 was Vance Worley, the Phillies' No. 4 starter, last I looked.

Two of five Clearwater Threshers Baby Aces, Trevor May (fourth round, \$375,000) and Jarred Cosart (38th round, way-over-slot \$550,000 bonus) were in that draft.

The Phillies only spent a shockingly small \$3.2 million on the 2009 draft. More than one draft-tracking outfit thought Kelly Dugan, outfielder, first baseman (\$485,000), and outfielder Kyrell Hudson (\$475,000) were reaches. Phils had no first-round pick, so they were No. 75 and 106 and went high-ceiling.

They projected Dugan as a corner outfielder who will develop power. He has two homers in two short-season leagues. Hudson is repeating the New York Penn, where he batted .173 last season. Ky has nine doubles, two triples and one homer in 304 short-season ABs. His average is up to .252 and his OPS is up to .647. But his OPS in 2010 should have read Oops . . .

Guess who hit paydirt in that strangely skewed draft? The Phils lavished a slot-busting \$900,000 on righthander Brody Colvin, a seventh-rounder and another of the Thresher Baby Aces. They also got top-rated first baseman Jonathan Singleton in the eight round for a \$200,000 pittance.

Pratt: A's and Hammer are 'Too Legit to Quit'

Casey Pratt, CSNCalifornia.com

It's '80s day at the Oakland Coliseum featuring an M.C. Hammer Bobblehead. You can't touch this promotion. (Yeah I went there.) No word on if Hammer will return to his role of A's batboy / Executive Vice President for the game. Or if the club will knock down Mt. Davis to provide an authentic '80s Coliseum feel.

On the level, I can't possibly think of a better giveaway than an M.C. Hammer Bobblehead. For starters, A's players come and go way too soon. Secondly, the A's and M.C. Hammer's legacies are intertwined. Both Hammer and the A's enjoyed meteoric rises and lucrative pay in the late '80s, and lost their fortunes in the '90s. Back then the A's had one of the highest payrolls in baseball / Hammer was filthy-rich selling 50 million albums. The A's went to 3-straight World Series / Hammer won 3 Grammys. And we are now just beginning to scratch the surface of the A's / Hammer linkage.

Let's Get It Started

Well before Hammer's first multi-platinum album -- Let's Get It Started -- an 11-year-old named Stanley Burrell was discovered by A's owner Charlie O. Finley dancing in the Coliseum parking lot. Clearly in awe of Burrell's epic dance moves, the eccentric owner offered him a job. He became the A's batboy and stayed with the A's from 1973-1980. Burrell became Hammer one day when Reggie Jackson (or so the story goes) said he looked like a little Hammering Hank Aaron.

Hammer also earned a much less endearing nickname in his time with the club. "Pipeline." Because he was the eyes and ears of the comically crazy A's owner. Hammer would tell Finley what the players were talking about behind his back, and Finley would make sure Hammer was rewarded.

V. Inside Out

1995 represented the end of the A's and Hammer's glory. After 15-years of ownership Walter A. Haas who was stricken with cancer had to sell the A's. Around the same time Hammer released V. Inside Out. The album was trashed by critics and flopped.

Presently

Now Hammer is an entrepreneur, and the A's are being run like a business. Hammer has almost two million followers on Twitter, runs his own Mixed Martial Arts group called Alchemist Management, and dabbles in many internet projects. The A's have several successful projects of their own. Their young starting pitchers lead all of baseball with a 3.47 ERA, while averaging 23 years of age.

Which brings us back to the announcement of '80s day, and the M.C. Hammer Bobblehead. An event that should conjure up memories of greatness in the hearts and minds of A's fans and Stanley Burrell.

Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em.

The A's have enough DL issues. After all they used the Disabled List 87 times since the start of the 2007 season.

Oakland takes series from Los Angeles, now heads east for five games

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

Sometimes, the Oakland Athletics look pretty good.

Most times, however, they play pretty poorly.

Lucky for A's fans, the A's chose to be the former this past weekend at the Overstock.com Coliseum, taking three of four games against their American League West division rival Los Angeles Angels.

Friday night's [5-3 win over the Angels](#) was just the start for Oakland, as the A's split Saturday's doubleheader before winning the finale on Sunday.

Overall, Oakland outscored Los Angeles 20-11 in the four games and damaged the Angels' standing in the AL West division race. While division-leading Texas has won 11 straight games to bury the A's 13 games behind, Los Angeles is only four games behind the Rangers right now.

The Angels and Jered Weaver [beat the A's](#) and Trevor Cahill in the first game on Saturday, 4-2. Oakland fell behind 3-0 in the seventh before rallying for two runs of their own, but in the end, the A's couldn't get over the hump. Cahill struck out eight batters in seven innings, but he also walked five to take his eighth loss of the season.

Oakland [won the second game](#) of the rare scheduled doubleheader in extra innings, 4-3. Rich Harden started the game and struck out nine Angels in seven innings before Scott Sizemore drove in the winning run with two outs in the bottom of the tenth inning. The A's are now 6-10 in "overtime" games this year.

Sunday's series finale gave Gio Gonzalez a chance to let the hometown fans praise their All-Star pitcher, but it was the offense that jumped all over Los Angeles starter Joel Pineiro -- the A's scored eight runs in the first inning, including Conor Jackson's grand slam.

Gio cruised through seven innings of shutout baseball, striking out eight, as [Oakland won the game](#), 9-1.

The A's are now 42-54 as they head off for two games in Detroit and three in New York. They will return to the Coliseum on July 25 for a four-game series against Tampa Bay.

Athletics Midseason Report

By Casey Tefertiller, Baseball America, 7/12/2011

Best Player: Leg and hip ailments kept Jemile Weeks out of nearly as many games as he could play during the past two seasons. But the 24-year-old second baseman managed to stay mostly healthy this season, a change in fortune that earned him a callup to Oakland on June 7 when Mark Ellis pulled a hamstring.

He batted .321/ .417/.446 with 10 stolen bases in 45 games for Triple-A Sacramento before helping to ignite the dormant Athletics, who went from a 10-game losing string to a six-game winning streak following Weeks' promotion. Elevated to the leadoff spot, the 2008 first-rounder hit .306 and used his speed to become an instant force with six steals, 12 runs scored and three triples through 19 games.

Biggest Leap Forward: Righthander Graham Godfrey ended last season as a 26-year-old buried in the minors, so pitching coaches Gil Patterson and Scott Emerson helped the side-armer raise his arm slot. The alteration afforded Godfrey more velocity and more depth on his breaking ball, and the difference was striking.

He went 7-1, 2.50 in nine starts for Sacramento, prompting the A's to call him up when injuries struck. In his second big league start, Godfrey outdueled Tim Lincecum for his first victory. He held a 4.24 ERA through three starts.

Biggest Disappointment: The A's had planned to move Chris Carter to left field, which would allow Daric Barton to remain at first base. But Carter injured his thumb last season with Sacramento and missed time, including a planned stint in the Mexican Pacific League. He then missed nearly eight weeks of the 2011 season with a sprained left wrist.

The 24-year-old Carter returned to the River Cats in mid-June and went 11-for-33 with three homers in nine games to earn a callup to Oakland, where he supplanted Barton, who had hit .212 with little power.

A's ACORNS

- On the heels of missing the 2010 season, righthander James Simmons spent the first half of this year rehabbing a sore arm. The A's expected him to return to full-season ball in July.
- Sacramento shortstop Josh Horton went down with a torn hamstring and may miss the remainder of the year.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

First-place River Cats squash the Bees

By Zeke Fine / Sacramento River Cats

In the first of a four-game series at Salt Lake, the River Cats demolished the Bees, 14-3. This gives the River Cats a record of 11-2 on the season against Salt Lake, including 5-0 on the road.

The River Cats scored first in the third inning. Adrian Cardenas hit an RBI double to drive in Andy Laroche, who had led off the inning with a double of his own.

The game was delayed for a short time after Chris Carter was robbed of a home run by Salt Lake right fielder Tyson Auer, who injured his left arm in his miraculous effort. Auer was then taken out of the game, leading to a defensive realignment for the Bees.

The River Cats struck back in the fifth inning, tacking another four runs on the scoreboard. Josh Donaldson walked and advanced to second base on a wild pitch. Donaldson advanced to third after Andy Laroche grounded out. Michael Taylor then came to bat and hit an RBI-single to left field putting the score at 2-0. Adrian Cardenas followed and hit his second double of the game, driving in Taylor and increasing the River Cat lead to 3-0. Matt Carson and Kevin Kouzmanoff then hit back-to-back singles, driving in Cardenas to score the fourth and final run of the inning.

Though it seemed like the fifth inning could not be topped, the River Cats came back in the sixth to score seven runs during an inning in which the River Cats batted around. They scored their first two runs of the inning on back-to-back bases-loaded walks of Matt Carson and Kevin Kouzmanoff to put the score at 7-0. Chris Carter, in his second at-bat of the inning, then hit a ground-rule double to drive in Cardenas and Carson, making the River Cat lead 9-0. After a pitching change, Jai Miller came to the plate for the second time and hit a three-run blast to right field, giving the Cats a 12-0 lead.

The River Cats scored their final two runs of the game on a two-run home run by Josh Donaldson in the ninth inning, making the score 14-0.

Carlos Hernandez (5-3, 4.89) turned in his best outing of the year, throwing six shutout innings and allowing six hits and one walk while striking out four.

He was relieved by Neil Wagner, who threw a scoreless seventh inning, allowing one hit while collecting two strikeouts. Willie Eyre came in for the final two innings of the game, allowing three runs (two earned) on four hits and two walks.

Ryan Ketchner (4-6, 5.51) took the loss for the Bees, throwing five innings and allowing five runs (all earned) on seven hits and two walks while striking out five.

The River Cats and Bees will continue the series again tomorrow at Spring Mobile Ballpark at 6:05 P.M.

Timmons Thrives In Lead Off Spot

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

Apparently, the RockHounds are becoming immune to long bus rides. After an all-night ride from Citibank Ballpark to Corpus Christi, the 'Hounds put up 15 runs ... eight of them in the fifth inning ... defeat the Corpus Christi Hooks, 15-8, in the opener of a 4-game series "at the beach" (Whataburger Field in Corpus).

Wes Timmons led a 19-hit attack, going 4-for-5 with a walk, a steal, a run scored and four RBI. In his last three games, the 'Hounds second baseman is 10-for-14 with three doubles and six RBI.

The Hooks had each of the game's four home runs (see above), and had taken a 3-2 lead after four innings. The RockHounds then sent 13 batters to the plate in the fifth, scoring eight times, taking a 10-3 lead.

The Hooks hit the third and fourth of their homers to draw within 10-8 before the 'Hounds got one insurance run in the seventh and batted around once more for four more in the eighth.

The RockHounds won their third straight, including the last two games of the series at Citibank Ballpark in which they took 3-of-4 from division-leading San Antonio.

- Mitch Canham had a 3-hit game ... with two triples ... and drove in three runs. Shane Peterson also had three hits (two runs, double, RBI) and has now hit in five straight games (11-23). Michael Spina had a pair of doubles, extending his hit streak to eight games (14-38) and drove in his team-leading 57th and 58th runs. Stephen Parker went 3-for-6 with two doubles and two RBI and has now hit in five straight games (11-24).

- While it was a tough night for pitching all around, Shawn Haviland battled through 5.0 innings for his third win. Although he surrendered five runs on seven hits, the right-hander also struck out 10 batters. He also added some drama. In the fifth, with two on and two out, he had thrown 107 pitches, and would be able to face just one more hitter. Haviland struck out Chris Wallace on a 7-pitch whiff. If he hadn't gotten Wallace, Shawn would likely have left the game, and would not have been eligible for the win.

ROCKY TOWN - The RockHounds stay at "the beach" through Thursday, taking on Corpus Christi, then head right back to West Texas for a return bout with San Antonio, a 4-game series beginning next Friday at Citibank Ballpark. Check out all the details at www.midlandrockhounds.org.

Ports Take Rubber Match 13-3

Stockton Ports

The Stockton Ports come out ahead in the finale of a three-game series against the Visalia Rawhide, getting the victory with a final score of 13-3. The Ports' 13 runs came on 12 hits, their strong offense ultimately putting them ahead in tonight's game and helping them complete their 10th series without a series loss.

The Rawhide took a very early lead when Ports starter Jacob Brown gave up a home run to his first batter of the game, second baseman David Nick.

But the Ports would retaliate in the bottom half, and Visalia starter David Holmberg would face the entire Stockton lineup once through. Left fielder Myrio Richard led off with a double to left-center field. Shortstop Dusty Coleman and designated hitter Michael Choice would each walk before Holmberg struck out right fielder Rashun Dixon for the innings first out. First baseman Anthony Aliotti would then draw another walk to bring in the Ports' first run. With the bases still loaded, third baseman Leonardo Gil would reach on a fielding error by first baseman Bobby Borchering, allowing Coleman to score. Center fielder Conner Crumbliss came to the plate and grounded to Borchering, who would make a throwing error trying for the play at second, and a third Ports run would score.

Stockton's lead didn't last long, however. Center fielder Keon Broxton led off with a ground rule double that bounced over the wall in right-center field. He would be brought around on a home run by catcher Mark Reed, knotting the teams at three runs apiece.

In the home half, Richard and Coleman both singled to center field. Richard would steal third before Choice came to the plate and grounded into a double play. Richard would score on the play, the Ports pulling ahead by a run.

The Ports picked up a fifth run in the fourth. Second baseman Michael Gilmartin singled up the middle, and was joined on the bases by Richard, who was hit by a pitch. Coleman grounded into what would have been a double play, but David Nick lost the ball on the transfer, getting just the out at second. Choice would then ground out, but brought Gilmartin in to score.

Dan Taylor would replace Holmberg on the mound for Visalia in the fifth, Holmberg giving up five runs on five hits. The Ports would get one run on one hit in Taylor's single inning of work, an RBI single by catcher Ryan Lipkin.

Visalia would begin the sixth with Kevin Munson on the hill and the Ports would rally at the plate. Richard walked and Coleman struck out, bringing Choice to the plate. Choice would extend his hitting streak to 17 games with an RBI double. Dixon followed with a single, Aliotti with a walk, and Gil would drive two runs in with a single to left field. Munson would walk Crumbliss and Lipkin before Adam Worthington would pick up the pitching duties for Visalia. Worthington would give up a single to Richard, bringing in two more runs, before ending the inning.

Brown pitched spectacularly through six innings, giving up just the three runs in the first two innings and a total of six hits, facing the minimum in innings three, four and five. He would make way for Josh Lansford on the hill in the seventh. Lansford pitched a perfect seventh inning, but started to struggle in the eighth. Along with two strike outs, he gave up two walks, a rare occurrence for Lansford. A.J. Huttenlocker would come in to pitch, getting the inning ending strike out.

The Ports did score a 13th run in the bottom half of the seventh. Choice doubled for the second time and would score on a two-out single by Gil.

Yonata Ortega would take over on the mound for the Rawhide in the eighth. For just the second time in the game, the Ports went down in order, bringing up Visalia for their final at-bats. Despite a single by Reed, Huttenlocker would wrap up the ninth without anymore Visalia runs. Jacob Brown would be the winning pitcher, Holmberg taking the loss.

The Ports have an off day on Tuesday before hitting the road for a three-game road trip to Modesto. Right hander Dan Straily will be the starter for the Ports in game one of the series on Wednesday.

Bees Drop Marathon

By Matthew Wheaton, Burlington Bees

BURLINGTON, IA- The Burlington Bees (9-15) found themselves down 9-0 after three innings of action and fought their way back to tie the game at 9-9 after eight innings, but lost to the Lake County Captains (9-15) by a score of 10-9 in 12 innings at Community Field Monday night.

Lake County started the scoring in the top of the first inning after CF Carlos Moncrief (2-7) hit a lead-off single to left field. A single to center field from LF Brian Heere (5-7) moved Moncrief to third base. Captains 3B Giovanny Urshela (0-2) was hit by a pitch from Burlington RHP Jose Macias. Moncrief scored on an RBI single to left field from 1B Jesus Aguilar (1-4), which moved Heere to third base and Urshela to second base. SS Ronny Rodriguez (3-5) knocked in Heere with a RBI single to left field. DH Aaron Fields (2-6) reached first base on a fielders choice, plating Urshela. Aguilar and Fields scored on two-run double to left field by 2B Kevin Fontanez (1-6). Fields scored on a RBI ground out from RF Nick Bartolone (1-6), and the Captains held a 5-0 lead.

In the top of the second inning, Rodriguez hit a two-run triple off the right field wall. A RBI single to left field by Fields gave Lake County an 8-0 advantage.

In the top of the third inning, a RBI single to center field from Heere scored Bartolone and the Captains held a 9-0 lead.

Burlington DH Josh Whitaker (2-6) smacked a two-run home run over the left field wall in the bottom of the fourth inning, plating 3B Tony Thompson (1-3) to make the score 9-2.

In the bottom of the fifth inning, Lake County RHP Mike Goodnight issued back-to-back one-out walks, putting C Beau Taylor (0-2) and LF Royce Consigli (2-5) on base. A RBI double to left field from IF Ryan Pineda (3-6) plated Taylor and Consigli advanced to third base. He scored on a ground out from Thompson. A RBI single off the glove of Urshela from Whitaker plated Pineda to get Burlington within four runs at 9-5.

Consigli led off the bottom of the seventh inning with a single to center field. Pineda hit a triple to right field, scoring Consigli. A RBI single from Thompson knocked in Pineda to make the score 9-7. Pineda finished a home run short of the cycle.

After Bees SS Wade Kirkland (0-5) drew a one-out walk in the bottom of the eighth inning, CF Jose Crisotomo (1-5) hit a ground-rule double to right field. With pinch-hitter John Nester (0-1) at the plate, Lake County LHP Kyle Petter balked. Kirkland scored and Crisotomo advanced to third base on the balk. With Nester at the dish, Crisotomo scored on a wild pitch from Petter to tie the game at 9-9.

In the top of the 12th inning, Moncrief hit a two-out double and then scored on a single to right field by Heere to put the Captains up 10-9.

The Bees have Tuesday off while they travel to Bowling Green, Kentucky for their three game series with the Bowling Green Hot Rods on Wednesday at 7:05 p.m. RHP Blake Hassebrock (5-5, 2.03) gets the start for the Bees against Bowling Green RHP George Jensen (8-4, 5.64) for the Hot Rods. Pre-game coverage begins at 6:45 p.m. on Newsradio 1490 KBUR and online at www.gobees.com.

Vermont Falls 10-5 To Aberdeen Monday

By Paul Stanfield / Vermont Lake Monsters

BURLINGTON, VT --- Joe Velleggia went 4-for-5 with two runs, a homer and two RBI to lead the Aberdeen Ironbirds to a 10-5 New York-Penn League victory over the Vermont Lake Monsters at historic Centennial Field Monday night.

The win was the fourth in the last six games for the Ironbirds against the Lake Monsters with Aberdeen winning two of three at Aberdeen before taking two of three at Vermont. Velleggia hit .519 (14-for-27) with seven runs, three homers and seven RBI in the six games against the Lake Monsters.

Velleggia gave Aberdeen a 2-0 lead with a two-run homer in the first before the Ironbirds added four more runs in the top of the fourth off Lake Monster starter Kurt Wunderlich before the game was delayed an hour and a half by rain.

When the game resumed, the Lake Monsters scored single runs in the fifth and sixth before a Sean Jamieson two-run single in the seventh cut the lead to 7-4. But Aberdeen got three insurance runs in the ninth inning off reliever Ryan Hughes before Jamieson added an RBI single in the bottom of the ninth.

Mychal Givens and Martin Serrata both three of the Ironbirds season-high 16 hits, while Devin Jones (1-0) allowed two runs (one earned) over three innings of relief for his first win of the year for Aberdeen (9-22). Jamieson was 2-for-4 with three RBI for Vermont (16-12), which has lost six of its last nine games.

The Lake Monsters head to Lowell for single games against the Spinners on Tuesday and Wednesday before the series switches to Vermont for a doubleheader on Thursday beginning at 6:05 pm at Centennial Field.