

Billy Beane sees promising future in the Oakland A's young infield

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

When A's officials sift through the wreckage of a disappointing 2011 season, inconsistent pitching and hot-and-cold hitting will stand out.

They can take heart, however, in an infield that shows promise for the future. And the cast delivering that optimism could not have been foreseen back in April.

Shortstop Cliff Pennington is the only holdover from the A's opening night starting infield.

Fleet-footed rookie Jemile Weeks has replaced veteran Mark Ellis at second base. Scott Sizemore has adjusted well to third base in place of Kevin Kouzmanoff, and Brandon Allen has shown enough since arriving in a July 31 trade from Arizona to suggest he could be the answer at first.

"I think the infield has some ways to go, but it's a good start," A's general manager Billy Beane said. "It's a young infield, and it has the ability to be very good."

Certainly, Beane and his staff will want to see tighter defense.

Weeks leads American League second basemen in errors despite not getting called up until June 7. Pennington's 21 errors are second-most among shortstops, and Sizemore has committed 13 since being recalled from Triple-A on June 6.

"We're going to work on our defense," said A's manager Bob Melvin, who talks hypothetically about 2012 because he's still the "interim" skipper. "If this group stays together going into next spring -- all of us -- it is something to build on because they have gotten better."

Pennington's offensive production in the second half has grabbed notice. He's hitting .309 with 35 RBIs since the All-Star break, and his season-long .351 average with runners in scoring position ranks fifth in the A.L.

He's third on the team with 58 RBIs.

The A's were unsure about Pennington, 27, heading into the 2010 season, as they took a run at then-free agent Marco Scutaro. But Melvin speaks glowingly of what he's seen from Pennington since taking over the ballclub June 9.

"He's gotten clutch hits," Melvin said. "I know he has some errors, but he's also made some key plays for us. He's really become the quarterback of the infield."

Pennington said the past three months have been crucial for him and Weeks, 24, to build chemistry, particularly turning the double play.

"It's getting better all the time," Pennington said. "Next spring training is going to be a really crucial time for us. But we've made a lot of strides already."

It's been no small adjustment for Pennington, who broke into the majors working with the fundamentally grounded Ellis. Weeks is the middle-infield equivalent of a flashy point guard, fond of backhand glove flips to start a double play.

"As long as (the ball) is put in the right place, it doesn't matter how it gets there," Pennington said.

The A's uncovered a nice find in Sizemore, 26, whom they converted from second to third base after acquiring him from Detroit on May 27. Despite the high error total, Sizemore has shown good range along with a strong arm.

He's hit just .246 since his promotion June 6 but has contributed 10 homers and 48 RBIs since then.

The A's could explore their options at third this winter -- they pursued Adrian Beltre each of the last two years -- but Beane said he would feel comfortable starting next season with Sizemore manning the position.

Allen, 25, has shined and struggled since taking over first base Aug. 13. He hit .354 over his first 13 games but has slipped to .141 over his past 21. But he's shown more power potential than the A's have seen from Daric Barton, who was sent to the minors in June and is out with a season-ending shoulder injury.

"What (Allen) has got is pretty hard to find, which is big power," Beane said.

Chris Carter is still in the first-base picture, but Allen is likely to stay ahead of him unless Carter improves defensively.

East Bay actor was born to play this role in 'Moneyball'

By Daniel Brown, San Jose Mercury News

David Justice was warming up for a game at Candlestick Park years ago when a young fan beckoned him over. It was Stephen Bishop, a Bay Area native and aspiring ballplayer, who wanted to share a personal connection with the Braves star. "My friends all say I look like you," Bishop told Justice.

To this day, Justice isn't so sure.

"Well, we're both light-skinned guys and we're tall," he said with a laugh. "Other than that . . ."

Hollywood, though, sides with the kid. Bishop -- now all grown up -- portrays Justice in the "Moneyball" movie that opens Friday. The graduate of Moraga's Campolindo High depicts the three-time All-Star in the final season of his career, when Billy Beane and the A's were trying to milk every last drop from the veteran's high on-base percentage.

In an early incarnation of the movie, to be directed by Steven Soderberg, Justice was going to play himself. But when director Bennett Miller took over the project, the production team called upon Bishop, a rising actor and uniquely qualified pinch hitter.

For one thing, there's the look: Sporting a goatee for the role, Bishop makes a convincing double for a player once listed among People magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People."

For another, there's the swing: Bishop recreates Justice's almost imperceptible mannerisms in the batter's box. "I knew that swing like the back of my hand," Bishop said. "The look on his face. The way he talks to himself. The way he takes his practice swing."

Bishop, 41, got a serious head start on the role not long after that Candlestick chat. A ballplayer before turning to acting, he signed with the Atlanta Braves as an undrafted free agent in 1992, while Justice was a premier player in the organization.

Bishop and Justice were never teammates, per se, but they crossed paths during spring training when established stars mingled with the newcomers.

"I wasn't that much older than him, but at the time it felt like I was a lot older because I had been in the big leagues," Justice recalled. "Like I do with a lot of young players, I took him under my wing and tried to show him the way."

Because of the resemblance, Justice would often introduce Bishop as his "little brother" whenever they were around town. Bishop said there were times when he walked around in his uniform and little kids would clamor for his autograph, thinking he was the 1990 Rookie of the Year.

Alas, there was little resemblance on the stat sheet. Over three minor league seasons, Bishop hit .261 with three home runs and 32 RBIs. And for you "Moneyball" disciples, he posted a respectable .336 on-base percentage. "I wish Billy Beane had been around a little sooner," Bishop joked.

He peaked in Class-A ball, playing for High Desert of the California League in 1995, before his career hit the end of the line.

"God was telling me to get off the baseball train and to get on the train that would take me to the ultimate destination," Bishop said.

Having had some dramatic training while at UC Riverside, he made the transition quickly and began popping up on such shows as "Friday Night Lights," "Brothers & Sisters," "Lost" and "CSI: Miami."

But no role was more physically demanding than playing Justice in "Moneyball," because for all their physical similarities, there is one important difference: Justice is left-handed.

Bishop, a right-hander, had to reinvent his stroke. He did so under the tutelage of former big league catcher Chad Kreuter, who served as the official baseball adviser for the "Moneyball" movie. For three weeks straight at USC, Kreuter ran actors through a baseball boot camp to get them to look like big leaguers.

Among the actors was Chris Pratt ("Parks & Recreation"), who plays the role of Scott Hatteberg. "Chris was getting really good toward the end there. He was able to pick things up pretty quickly," Bishop said. "I wouldn't say he would ever play professional baseball, but he made some plays. He was very impressive."

Bishop, meanwhile, managed to evoke Justice's sweet left-handed swing. There's a scene in the movie in which Justice and Beane talk while the hitter takes rips in a batting cage. He looks like a natural.

"Once I had that, all I had to do was worry about executing my craft as an actor," Bishop said. "You don't ever want to hold up production of a Brad Pitt movie because you don't know your lines."

Bishop always was coachable. He blossomed as a ballplayer in Lafayette while playing for American Legion Post 517 under the guidance of hard-charging coach Don Miller.

Miller says now that "I just had to toughen him up" -- and Bishop agreed.

"He turned me into a man," Bishop recalled. "He allowed me to see what I have. I was a late-bloomer. I wasn't as aggressive as I should have been. The thing (Miller) always said to me was, 'Put a tiger in the tank.'

"That stayed with me for the rest of my life."

Brad Pitt brings 'Moneyball' to Oakland

By Daniel Brown, San Jose Mercury News

For a day at least, the East Bay felt just like Hollywood. Brad Pitt worked his way down the red carpet at the Paramount Theatre while the hundreds of fans who had gathered for the "Moneyball" premiere shouted, "Let's go, Oakland!" -- just as they do at A's games.

"It's very cool," Pitt said, looking around at the scene. "This is a special screening for us. The people of Oakland gave us such a great response. They stayed up with us for hours on end to tape the baseball scenes (for the movie) and never lost energy."

Fans lined up for hours Monday as they waited for the stars of the movie that opens Friday. Based on the best-selling book by Michael Lewis, "Moneyball" tells the story of how general manager Billy Beane bucked baseball's conventions on his way to turning the small-payroll A's into a powerhouse in the early 2000s.

Lewis was on his way down the red carpet himself when he heard the fans roar at an arriving limousine. "I wonder who that is," Lewis cracked. (Pitt, by the way, was not accompanied by Angelina Jolie.)

Other cast members, including Philip Seymour Hoffman and Jonah Hill, also attended the Paramount premiere, as did Oscar-winning screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. One of the East Bay's own stars -- Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger -- was there, too, basking in the evening's glamour. "It's great that the premiere is in Oakland," Sullenberger said. "That's the best place for it, and I'm glad it happened." Hours earlier, Pitt plopped down in a chair in Section 244, high above center field at the O.co Coliseum and joked that acting was the only way he'd ever make it to the big leagues.

"My relationship with baseball was cantankerous at best," he said, "I had a crap arm. I couldn't hit. My career ended with 18 stitches under my eye after a pop fly at high noon.

"It was not my gift."

With that, Pitt flashed a wry smile at Beane. They sat next to each other throughout their press session and, as their easy jokes made clear, the two developed a rapport during the project. Pitt, 47, said he felt a "kinship" with Beane, 49, even while reading the book. He joked that the famously casual G.M. "has incredible fashion sense and is a hell of a dancer."

Beane admitted that it was surreal to see himself portrayed on screen by one of the biggest stars on the planet. "But it's Brad Pitt doing it," he said. "How am I going to complain?"

Pitt, who has producer credits, locked into the project after reading Lewis' book. "I couldn't let it go," he said. Only mildly interested in baseball before, Pitt said he became fascinated by the way Beane looked at the game through an economic lens and found unorthodox strategies for taking on lavish-spending teams like the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees.

The A's made the playoffs for four consecutive seasons starting in 2000 despite a payroll that ranked among the lowest in the game.

"Economics and (baseball stats) aren't necessarily edge-of-your-seat material," Pitt said. "But the story these guys laid out was."

In the movie, Pitt captures Beane's blend of arrogance and charm, as well as his swings from fiery to pensive. He chews tobacco and guzzles junk food. ("That part was pretty easy," Pitt said.)

Beane joked that the only parts of the movie he didn't like were the scenes that showed him as a lousy major league player.

"I had no idea how bad I was," Beane said.

"Artistic license," Pitt replied.

Scott Hatteberg, who hit a home run in 2002 to cap the A's record-breaking 20 game-winning streak, was on hand for the news conference and saluted the film's dedication to accuracy. Actor Chris Pratt, for example, studied Hatteberg's home run obsessively and re-created his precise celebration during the home run trot.

Pratt and Hatteberg even look so much alike that the former first baseman was mistaken for the actor a few times at Monday's event. Turning to Pratt, Hatteberg joked, "If you're in an action movie, maybe I can get some stunt work. I used to pop wheelies on my Huffy when I was younger."

Turning serious, Hatteberg added: "Really, it all comes down to the character of Billy Beane, and I think they nailed it. I really do."

Chin Music: Thumbs up for "Moneyball" — mostly

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 9/19/2011 8:56pm

The A's are the center of attention in baseball today — at least as far as Hollywood is concerned. The premiere of "Moneyball" took place in Oakland tonight, and a large number of us media types got to see an advance screening last night.

Overall thoughts? I give it a thumbs up. It was a very well-made movie and Brad Pitt, not surprisingly, gives a strong performance as Billy Beane. Thinking back, I'm astonished at how much camera time the guy logs. It seemed he was in nearly every scene. Pitt isn't a dead-ringer for Beane, but he pulled the role off nicely, combining Beane's charisma, humor and sometimes volatile temper. The movie does a slick job of taking viewers through the 2002 season while breaking it up with flashback scenes to Beane's own failed playing career. I'd rate the actual baseball scenes as top-notch compared to other baseball movies I've seen. Another authentic touch: While many scenes from the 20-game winning streak were re-created, they were accompanied by the real audio play-by-play of those games. It's really cool hearing the late Bill King (and others) taking you back to that time.

I was engrossed in this movie because I cover the team on a daily basis and grew up watching the A's. But I have my doubts how much "Moneyball" will grasp the non-baseball fan, or even the baseball fan who's not up to speed on A's history. It's a well-done movie, but you can't get around the fact that there's no fist-pumping finish to the story. The A's don't win the World Series — or even make it to the Series. So I'm not sure how much people will get swept up in the emotion of it all.

The portrayal of Art Howe (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) was an eyebrow-raiser. I can't imagine that Howe was quite as confrontational and aggressive with Beane as he's made out to be (it's almost a "bad guy" role). Jonah Hill? He's entertaining as Peter Brand (a.k.a Paul DePodesta, Beane's assistant GM back then). Solid job by him.

I plan to watch the movie again and see if my perspective changes. If you go see it, share your opinions on the blog. I'm curious ...

Oakland shines for 'Moneyball' premiere

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

-- Movie stars - in Oakland?

Believe it.

Brad Pitt, Academy Award winner Philip Seymour Hoffman and Oscar-winning screenwriter Aaron Sorkin were among those on the red carpet at the Paramount Theater in Oakland on Monday evening as "Moneyball," the movie based on A's general manager Billy Beane and the 2002 Oakland team, made its national premiere.

"It's very cool," Pitt said as he paused on the carpet to speak to two Bay Area papers. "We've been gearing up for this viewing for a long time. This is a special screening for us.

"The people of Oakland gave such a great response. They stayed up with us for hours on end to tape the baseball scenes and never lost energy. We see a lot of fans from the '02 season. It's just special."

A crowd of several hundred gathered across the street from the Paramount and cheered wildly, even before any celebrities arrived. "Let's go, Oakland!" was the most frequent chant.

"We love Brad Pitt, but this is all about the A's," said Rasheda Anthony, 36, of Oakland. "Something like this is way overdue for this city."

"Finally, something positive about Oakland," Adrienn Huffman, 36, of Castro Valley said.

Pitt and many of the Moneyball principals spent the day doing interviews at the Coliseum, and it became apparent during a session with Bay Area sports media that Pitt might have been attracted to "Moneyball" because the hero, Beane, didn't actually have much success playing baseball.

"My relationship with baseball was cantankerous at best," Pitt said, grinning. "I've got a crap arm. I thought I could hit, until these guys laughed at the way I was swinging. My career ended with 18 stitches under the eye on a pop fly at high noon.

"Not my gift, let me just say. Not my gift."

Having played Beane in a movie, Pitt disclosed that he now follows Oakland, and he said, "I feel a bit romantic about the A's."

Beane's unspectacular pro career after being drafted in the first round is somewhat exaggerated in "Moneyball," but there was a reason for that. Pitt said of Beane's stalled baseball career, "It was that very thing that led to this other thing that we could label a success - and *that* I could understand more - a failure being an impetus for the next move."

Pitt said he was so taken with the book "Moneyball" that he was determined to bring it to the big screen, despite numerous obstacles, such as the original studio stopping production just as filming was to begin. Making a business book cinematic also presented issues.

"It was a difficult one to complete, due to the complex material," he said. "Economics and sabermetrics isn't necessarily nail-biting stuff, edge-of-your-seat kind of movie entertainment."

Another of the major actors, Chris Pratt, has a less than storied baseball background. Pratt, who plays first baseman Scott Hatteberg, said he has not hit a home run at any level, including T-ball, and in the movie, Pratt, a right-handed hitter, must bat lefty. Through the magic of cinema, his homer gives the A's their record 20th consecutive victory.

Pratt nails Hatteberg's preparations at the plate, and he accurately captures Hatteberg's joyous trip around the bases on the game-winning homer.

"None of it was spontaneous," Pratt said. "That was the one physicality that I really spent a ton of time trying to mimic exactly.

"It's a legendary moment, so it's caught in the ether. I watched it over and over, and it was pretty awesome. ... Except the time I tripped over at third base in front of 5,000 people. That was pretty embarrassing."

Hatteberg is a fan of Pratt's performance and he's thrilled to see his homer on the big screen. "I was beyond lucky to be involved in this whole situation," he said. "To be a part of such a great team and be put in that situation, and to have lightning strike and be the guy that ends up winning it is just a thrill. Having it put in a movie is too cool."

Another of the 2002 A's, David Justice, attended the premiere, as did most of the A's players, including Hideki Matsui. Matsui said his favorite baseball movie is "The Natural."

High-powered baseball agent Scott Boras walked the red carpet, and though he's called a bad name in "Moneyball," he described the movie as "great for baseball."

US Airways hero Captain Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberger, an East Bay resident, was on hand, and he echoed the general sentiment when he said, "It's great this premiere is in Oakland. It's the best place for it."

'Moneyball' news conference a dress-down affair

John Shea

What does a baseball writer wear to a Brad Pitt news conference? I guessed, and then I overdressed.

Luckily, Billy Beane, in a similar sport-coat look - undoubtedly pricier than mine - spotted me in the second row and said, "Looks like you and I were the only ones to get the dress memo. Well done."

Made me feel pretty good until Pitt said, "I got the khakis," which complemented his V-neck light brown sweater over his V-neck white T-shirt.

Oh well.

The news conference at the Coliseum wasn't even under way, and it was all about fashion, and isn't that how they roll in Hollywood? And did we say that Pitt had his flowing blond hair tucked behind his ears with some facial growth, including a touch of gray below the chin? Or that he was wearing sunglasses and a gold chain but no ring except on his right hand? Or that Angelina Jolie was a no-show at the news conference and at Monday night's premiere for "Moneyball" the movie?

Anyway, enough of Hollywood insider stuff.

We want ball talk.

"In this story, we have a terrible professional baseball player," said Pitt, referring to Beane, a first-round draftee who succeeded in the game only after he retired as a player. "I'm so kidding."

Even so, when Beane was asked what he didn't like about the movie, he cracked, "Well, I was never particularly a great player, but I didn't realize how bad I really was."

"Artistic license," Pitt said.

In directors' chairs, Pitt and Beane sat side by side, next to "Moneyball" author Michael Lewis and Jonah Hill, who plays Peter Brand, a rough representation of Paul DePodesta, Beane's numbers cruncher and the brains behind many of the off-kilter moves that helped the A's overcome the loss of Jason Giambi and Johnny Damon and reach the 2002 playoffs, thanks largely to a 20-game winning streak that's a focus of the script.

I had the second question, behind colleague Susan Slusser, and asked Pitt if he had studied other baseball dramas to prepare for his role, especially Kevin Costner in "Field of Dreams" or, more so, Robert Redford in "The Natural."

"Not really," he said. "I thought this was a contemporary story, and I thought there were bigger, universal themes that went far beyond the playing field that I was most interested in. In some ways, the film still holds the romance of the sport. On the other hand, it's anti-conventionality."

The streak's climax was Scott Hatteberg's game-ending home run, and Hatteberg and the actor who plays him, Chris Pratt, appeared later in the news conference, held way up in Section 244, above right-center field.

"Is this where my home run landed?" Pratt asked.

"Maybe about 180 feet short," Hatteberg said.

Pratt confessed he had not heard of Hatteberg before reading the script. But now, after spending time with (and playing) the catcher-turned-first baseman, Pratt said he kept his Hatteberg jersey and has a shrine in his office with two Hatteberg cards and two signed Hatteberg bats.

"Those will set you back," said Hatteberg, who volunteered to be Pratt's stunt man after people confused him for the actor Monday. "That would be cool, a superhero of some sort. I used to pop wheelies on my Huffy when I was younger."

In character with the actors who portrayed the media in the movie - no reporter in motion-picture history ever asked a good question or wasn't totally embarrassing to the profession, right? - I had to ask a stupid question. So I asked Pitt, now that he knows so much about running a baseball team, about the current A's and what he thinks needs to be done to turn them into a winner again.

"I just play it on TV," he said.

Maybe that's another movie.

Drumbeat: Brad Pitt says he's "a little bit romantic" about A's

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum 9/19/2011 2:53pm

The local sports media "Moneyball" interview sessions just ended and the highlight for A's fans might be the fact that Brad Pitt, the movie's star, now follows the team and, he said, "I feel a little bit romantic about the A's."

Pitt and A's general manager Billy Beane, on the same panel along with author Michael Lewis and actor Jonah Hill, have a nice, bantering relationship, and it's clear they are mutual fans. Having seen the movie at a screening last night, and having covered Beane for 13 years, I thought Pitt nailed Beane's gestures and mannerisms – it's a spot-on portrayal.

The chewing tobacco and the junk food that Pitt plows through in the film, though, "That came easily. I grew up with a little dip."

Beane, asked if there was anything he didn't like about the movie, laughed and said, "I was never a particularly great player, but I didn't realize how bad I was."

Scott Hatteberg and Chris Pratt, who plays him in the movie, formed their own interview panel, and they were highly entertaining. Pratt – shown in the movie blasting Hatteberg's game-winning homer in the A's 20th win in a row, the highlight of the film – said he never has hit a homer at any level in his life. He remains embarrassed about tripping over third on his home-run trot during filming. Let's hope there's a blooper reel for the DVD, because I remember the A's batboys, who were used in the movie, thought that Pratt Fall (rim shot) was hysterical.

He did spend a lot of time analyzing and mimicking Hatteberg's trip around the bases, Pratt said. He wanted to get that just right. Pratt grew up a big Mariners' fan, and while he still roots first for Seattle, he keeps an eye on the A's when he can and they now have a special place in his heart. "I had some surreal moments here in the Coliseum and I'll always remember that," he said.

Many thanks to Sony Pictures Publicity, which set up the interview panels for the sports media - sports media sessions for major motion pictures are unheard of, and publicity schedules are very tight and very selective. The fact that Sony arranged for a screening after an A's game so all the Oakland media could see it was unexpected, and I was very happy that all of the Japanese media that covers Matsui was invited, too. This entire event was handled beautifully and professionally, and it's much appreciated by all the Bay Area sports media.

Beane's story comes to life in 'Moneyball'

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The bantering -- a charming back-and-forth sequence of witty chatter between an actor and a baseball man -- begins within seconds.

Brad Pitt and Billy Beane have obviously taken a liking to each other, and they've just entered a makeshift press conference room -- otherwise known as the seats in Section 244 at the Oakland Coliseum -- on a pleasant, cloudless day in the Bay on Monday.

Beane, the A's general manager, is at home. And Pitt, who plays Beane in the film "Moneyball," looks at home despite being miles away from his assumed Hollywood life. They're at the ballpark to promote the aforementioned project, which shares the story of Beane's unconventional way of fielding a winning baseball team on a small budget -- visualized through a 2002 A's club that won 20 straight games.

The story, initially chronicled in Michael Lewis' bestselling book -- from which director Bennett Miller drew both the inspiration and title -- is set to hit theaters Friday. It will further exploit Beane's visionary beliefs in computer-driven statistical analysis that was long ignored -- and since, emulated -- by the baseball establishment, showcasing his knack for handpicking undervalued players.

The results of such a formula don't need to be retold, as they've been well-documented. Beane, helped by the aide of Yale-educated Paul DePodesta -- played by Jonah Hill as "Peter Brand" in the film -- fields a team built not just on the strength of aces Tim Hudson, Barry Zito and Mark Mulder, but via complementary players, such as the underappreciated Scott Hatteberg, who hit the walk-off homer to cap the winning streak in a 103-win season.

The A's didn't win a championship that year, demonstrating the flaws in Beane's groundbreaking system. There's no happy ending, and the film doesn't even attempt to create one. Rather, there is seemingly no concrete conclusion -- just an unspoken message surrounding values and perspectives Pitt hopes his audience explores long after the credits have rolled.

"What these guys did at the time, I have great respect for," he said. "I never looked at baseball or sports beyond the fan. I never looked at it in terms of economics, in terms that it's not a level playing field. My feeling is, the best team wins, so these guys had to start asking new questions, had to attack conventional wisdom.

"It's a tough wall to get over, but they had to by necessity in order to survive. They knew if they fought the other guys' fight, they were just not going to compete, and I think that takes incredible realism and incredible smarts to figure your way out of the box. It changes the way we look at things, and I think that's one of the big points of the story."

For Pitt, his baseball career admittedly ended with 18 stitches after he took a popup to his left eye at high noon. Beane's lasted slightly longer as a highly touted Mets prospect who turned down a joint football and baseball scholarship from Stanford, only to watch expectations get the best of him on a Major League field and instead direct him toward a scouting job.

The humbling narrative provides a second storyline in the film, not to mention yet another reason for Pitt to jest with Beane.

"In this story, we have a terrible professional baseball player," he jokes.

"Well," Beane later said, "I was never particularly a great player, but I didn't realize how bad I really was."

The duo's relationship is special, one largely built on Pitt's instant taking to the persona of Beane, who is portrayed as volatile, innovative and not in the least bit intimidated by the big spenders around him. He keeps junk food close by, chewing tobacco even closer and his daughter, Casey, the closest.

"I just felt a kinship to the Billy I read and the Billy I met, and I felt a great fire to achieve that," said Pitt, who carried on with the project even after the original studio halted production.

In doing so, the actor learned a few other things along the way -- "I think he has incredible fashion sense. I enjoy that the most. And hell of a dancer," Pitt said of Beane -- and also garnered a permanent interest in the team he fictionally manages.

"I feel a bit romantic about the A's," he said.

Hill's presence was largely overshadowed by that of his mega co-star, but words weren't necessarily needed, as his genuine excitement for the film and what it stands for was largely apparent on Monday as he sat beside Pitt.

The same could be said of Chris Pratt, who entertains the crowd as Hatteberg. A longtime Mariners fan who spent six weeks to learn how to hit left-handed for the film, Pratt was once unaware of the historic happenings in Oakland. Luckily the "Parks and Recreation" star caught the "Moneyball" bug from his director -- a baseball enthusiast -- and soon felt tears streaming down his face after reading the script.

"I remember coming in thinking this was going to be a baseball movie," Pratt said, "and then walked away so moved, I teared up. I thought, 'This is such a beautiful human story, I have to help tell this story.'"

"I think this was a really peculiar moment in sports history, where there was actually an intellectual moment to be had, and they seized it," Lewis said. "I don't think it happens all that often in such a big way."

Beane remains humble about his feats and has essentially become desensitized to the fact they're being immortalized on the big screen. But the A's executive, who is in the midst of his 14th year at the helm in Oakland, has become quite at ease with his newly gained public face.

"I'll answer that," Pitt said, interrupting with a smile. "He loved it, and he was thrilled to have me."

"How comfortable was I?" Beane said. "Listen, it's Brad doing it. Who's going to complain?"

Both Beane and Pitt took to the red carpet -- turned into a green carpet -- hours later for the film's national premiere at the renowned Paramount Theater in Oakland, where they were joined by a multitude of co-stars, including Academy Award winner Philip Seymour Hoffman (who plays manager Art Howe) and Oscar-winning screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. Moreover, there was a strong showing from the current A's squad and a grab bag of guests that included former Oakland infield coach and Rangers manager Ron Washington and agent Scott Boras.

A crowd of several hundred gathered across the street from the theater, combining for loud chants of "Let's go, Oakland!" as celebrities arrived. It marked a triumphant scene for the city and for the team, one Pitt will forever cheer on.

"These guys who were in pursuit of something and would not let it go at any cost," he said. "And they were the same animal at the end of the film as they were at the beginning of the film, but the world around them changed, just shifted a degree or two."

Ailene Voisin: Actor Pitt gives A's star power

Ailene Voisin, Sacramento Bee

OAKLAND – Brad Pitt as Billy Beane.

Hmmmmmm.

Hmmmmmmmmmm.

Then again, why not? Who cares that they physically resemble each other about as closely as Bogey and Bacall? We are a nation of excess and exaggeration, with sports and movies somewhere in the mix. It works.

And if one of Hollywood's leading men wants to dive into sabermetrics, revisit the A's modest success of the previous decade and transform the bestseller on the business of baseball into a film that appeals to a broader audience, there will be few complaints coming out of the general manager's office.

"It's a little surreal," Beane acknowledged Monday when asked about his portrayal in the film "Moneyball," which opens nationally this week, "but listen, it's Brad."

Besides, the A's could use some love these days. The O.co Coliseum is a dump. The team hasn't made the playoffs since 2006. Beane's innovative use of statistical analysis – a theme of the book and the film – has become common within professional sports. Even his career with the organization appears uncertain; he has been mentioned as a GM candidate with the Chicago Cubs.

But his immediate concern is getting past the flurry of interviews and promotional events, which included Monday night's red carpet premiere at the Paramount Theatre. The film, which chronicles the 2002 season and is based on the book by acclaimed author Michael Lewis, has some serious dramatic chops.

The cast includes Jonah Hill and Philip Seymour Hoffman, and the screenplay was written by Oscar winners Aaron Sorkin and Steve Zaillian. In an attempt to be as authentic as possible, many of the actors are former minor or major league players. Stephen Bishop, for instance, is dead-on as David Justice. Chris Pratt could be Scott Hatteberg's double.

But in the movies, as in sports, it's all about the stars. People will buy tickets because Pitt has the starring role, not because they're captivated by a small-market franchise and a clever GM who *almost* developed a formula for toppling the rich and powerful New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox, etc.

No, this is about Pitt, who not so coincidentally is the cover boy for the Sept. 26 issue of Sports Illustrated.

Before appearing later in the day at the Paramount, Pitt joined Beane at an outdoor news conference at the Coliseum. The physical contrast between the two men, perched on director's chairs in Section 244, was notable, especially since Pitt captured so many of his character's mannerisms in the film.

Beane, who seems to be enjoying the star treatment after distancing himself from the hoopla during production, was typically understated in a white dress shirt, tan slacks and a jacket.

Pitt was the typical megastar: black-rimmed tinted shades. Week's worth of facial growth. A brown V-neck sweater over a white T-shirt despite the unseasonably warm temperature.

But he appeared much smaller than the weight-pumping figure in the movie, and with a grin, he admitted that baseball was "Not my gift, not my gift."

Instead, he was attracted to the script because of Beane and his organizations's unique approach to overcoming small-market limitations.

"In some ways," said Pitt, "the film still holds the romance of the sport. What these guys did at that time, I had great respect for. I had never looked at baseball, at sports, in terms of economics, that it is not a level playing field. So these guys had to start asking the questions, had to attack conventional wisdom."

But does that approach still work? Beane has long had his critics, some of them scouts who feel undervalued. Others within baseball continue to point out that Beane's A's never have won an American League championship.

"Baseball was moving toward (uses of sabermetrics), and Michael's book has accelerated that," said Beane, "and in other sports as well. That's a credit to Michael, not so much us."

So for Beane's next act? He is particularly concerned about his team's chronic injuries. Even small-market teams have a chance to win if they stay healthy. Even for non-stats geeks, that adds up.

An interview with Brandon McCarthy

Jason Leary, Swingin' A's

Brandon McCarthy has gone 9-8 this season with a 3.35 ERA and 116 strikeouts to go along with just 25 walks in his first year with the A's. (Photo credit Associated Press)

A day after helping the A's snap the Detroit Tigers' 12-game winning by holding baseball's hottest team to 1 run in 7 innings on Thursday, starting pitcher Brandon McCarthy took some time to sit down with Swingin' A's to talk baseball.

McCarthy has had a career year after struggling with a reoccurring shoulder injury for the past few seasons and has arguably been one of the best pitchers in the American League since the All-Star Break, with an 8-3 record, 3.18 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, .242 BAA, 70 strikeouts and just 13 walks in 79.1 innings.

And he's proven to be as entertaining on Twitter as he is effective on the mound. If you're not following McCarthy on Twitter you're missing out on a sharp wit and a great personality.

Talent has never been a question for McCarthy, who came up as a top-rated prospect for the White Sox in 2005. The only thing holding him back was his health and it looks like he's on track after reinventing himself through countless hours of hard work.

Swingin's A's: You told The San Francisco Chronicle in March in spring training while you were making a strong bid for the No. 5 spot in the rotation that, "If I feel like this in 6 months, I'll be happy." Here we are near the end of the season, how do you feel about how things have gone? Are you pretty happy with the season?

Brandon McCarthy: "Yeah, most of the things that I came into the spring wanting to do and left spring training wanting to accomplish I think I've been able to do pretty well. Throwing a high percentage of strikes, limiting walks, limiting home runs, getting more ground balls, advancing as a pitcher.

"There were some different things I wanted to work on as the year went on and some things have come along the way I wanted to, some haven't but for the most part I feel like I've been able to keep advancing and been happy with it."

SA: It seems like a lot of the results that you've had have been credited to the retooled mechanics. From what I've read it sounds like it was around the 2009 offseason that you started to do that. Was that something that originated solely with you or did that come from a doctor or coach saying, "Do you want to try something different?" How did that start?

McCarthy: "I guess me. The way I wanted to take it was me. I just kind of went alone on that one. I knew my time with the Rangers was just getting to the point where I wasn't effective even when I was healthy or as effective as I'd like to be.

"Health was my driving factor there trying to find something different that would prevent me from having my injury every year. There were a lot of different factors and most of it was just that I wanted to become Roy Halladay as ridiculous as that sounded.

"In that same beat it was like, look let's just do this or try and get as close as I can to that. So I sort of headed down that road and it's worked out pretty well. It was just sort of a mental thing that I just wanted to do.

"I just got to that point where I knew that just going down that same cycle was a quick way to end up being a career Triple A pitcher or working my way out of the game, just being an often-injured guy who comes back and has a mid-4 to a high-4 ERA and doesn't give up many quality innings you're pretty quick to get moved out of a job."

SA: I read that you said you're a visual learner and that you tried to look to other pitchers for some cues to work off of mechanically, was Halladay one of those guys you looked at as, "Here are some mechanics I can really pick something up from and learn from?"

McCarthy: "Yeah, I tried for a long time — I'm good at mimicking so I tried to do that as much as I could. I couldn't completely get the rhythm that he works with. You look at someone like [Charlie Morton](#) and what he's done — I actually played with Morton this winter — and he was much more similar to Roy than I was.

"But there were certain points that Roy hits in his delivery that I wanted to make sure I was getting to even if everything didn't look the same and it's not the same visually but there are certain points that I felt like I could get to and one of those is arm slot and finish that was similar.

"If I could get those and try and throw the pitches he throws and work on those sequences then I come away OK."

SA: Were there any other pitchers who you tried to take some cues from mechanically or was Halladay really the guy you spotlighted?

McCarthy: "He was the guy and now as I look at it more I realize that my mechanics are mine. They don't look too much like anybody else's. It just got to the point where I was comfortable and then at that point it became less mimicking and just refining what I had and what I could do and sharpening them up and now I just look at other pitchers in terms of sequences and stuff and pitches they're throwing.

"In terms of mechanics it's just what I've got now and let's go with it."

SA: You're still pretty early in your Major League career and you mentioned that you're a visual learner, how much has the change in technology and the advances up to iPads helped you in your preparation? Has the iPad and being able to visualize those things helped with your preparation, your confidence going into a game?

McCarthy: "Yeah, and it's something that just in the last few months I've taken more advantage of it.

"Early in the season I felt like a rookie, I was just trying to kind of get my way again, figure out what I was able to do with myself. I hadn't thrown with these pitches in the big leagues before so I was just trying to see what it was and now I have more of a game plan with it.

"In Texas and Chicago I was just throwing. I felt my command wasn't good enough to really attack guys and have a game plan. Now I use an iPad app to break down hitters and then use the scouting reports we have and look at it visually to use it to understand numbers in certain situations.

"I feel like I've been able to take it to the next level a little bit just because of that. Because now I feel confident in my ability to throw strikes with any pitch and actually take advantage of some of those things."

SA: I read a quote from [Derek Lowe](#) of the Atlanta Braves saying that in some situations you feel a greater confidence in throwing a pitch because you've seen it work so many times (on an iPad). Does that visualization help give you a little more conviction in a certain pitch?

McCarthy: "Yeah, I'm looking forward to watching [Doug Fister](#) throw tonight. For some reason it's been set up all year where we're pretty similar in the way we throw and all year long he seems to have faced a team right before I'm about to face them so I've just watched almost every start he's had and seen what he's done.

"And you can see that a sinker away to this guy usually gets this result and there are different pitchers I can look at to see what they've done and you can see that there's a result on that pitch if you make it and it's just up to execution."

SA: In an interview with [Rob Neyer](#) you mentioned how a lot of your success this season has been about getting a feel for your stress fracture and noticing the cues earlier. I assume there's a certain amount of fatigue and soreness that goes into pitching no matter what, is there a distinct difference between that and what you feel might be a recurrence of the scapular stress fracture?

McCarthy: "It's very localized, I know the spot now and it feels like someone's putting a pen in it and it's just like a gentle ... like you're being poked by it and eventually it goes and it feels like someone's stabbing you with a pen.

"Now I realize that's the onset of it. I can feel it and when it's there it's there, stop."

SA: In terms of the mechanics that you have and the routine you've found success with, is what you're working with now pretty much what you had when you signed with A's or has there been a real relationship between you and the coaching staff to fine tune that? Was there anything done to hone your mechanics a little more or to maybe change your preparation and workout to keep you on track and keep you healthy?

McCarthy: "In terms of mechanics there were little tweaks, a lot of it just pace.

"Making sure I didn't rush too much, nothing that broke down anything that I'm actually doing. It's just little fixes. We changed the side of the rubber I pitch from early in spring just to take advantage of natural movement.

"(Regarding) routine, coming back from my injury Ronnie (pitching coach Ron Romanick) was big on me saving bullets. Play catch light, just get it done. Enough to get your arm a little workout and then get off.

"I'm very meticulous in the way I go about things and I want everything to feel right all the time and early on even when your arm's hurting if I wasn't happy with the way I threw a cutter right then I'd throw another one and if that wasn't right I'd throw another one and if that wasn't right I'd throw another one and it just ended up being 20 to 30 extra throws a day for really no reason, just for kind of mental satisfaction.

"Once I learned to get rid of that and just throw short, quick, easy bullpens and play light, quick, easy catch and just get it done and get out no matter how it felt or where I was at then it wasn't going to affect me on game day and that was one of the biggest changes I've made this year.

"Especially late in the year, I rejuvenate faster, I just don't feel mentally tired. I've been able to get deep into games but now I recover a little faster, I don't feel broken down."

In just 6 months McCarthy has gone from being a candidate vying for the No. 5 spot in the rotation in spring training to being one of Oakland's best pitchers as the 2011 season winds down.

As an arbitration eligible player it's hard to imagine the A's passing on the opportunity to easily retain McCarthy's services for at least one more season. In a largely frustrating year for A's fans, McCarthy has emerged as a bright spot and a reason to look forward to 2012 to see how he can build on his success.

A big thanks to the A's and McCarthy for taking the time to sit down and talk with Swingin' A's.