

Oakland A's will open 2012 season in Japan with two games against the Seattle Mariners

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's and Seattle Mariners stumbled to the finish line Wednesday night, playing their season finale before a crowd that filled Safeco Field to less than half-capacity.

The atmosphere will be much different for their next regular-season meeting.

It was announced Wednesday that Oakland and Seattle will christen the 2012 campaign with a two-game series in the Tokyo Dome on March 28-29, the second time in five years the A's will cross the Pacific Ocean for their opener.

It potentially sets up a battle of Japanese baseball legends between Hideki Matsui and Mariners right fielder Ichiro Suzuki, but that's assuming Matsui re-signs with the A's as a free agent.

"I think there's going to be a lot of fans who would look forward to that kind of matchup -- Ichiro vs. Matsui," Matsui said through interpreter Roger Kahlon before the A's closed their season with a 2-0 win.

The A's have volunteered to go back to Japan ever since they split two games with Boston in Tokyo to begin the 2008 season.

"I believe in the expansion of baseball globally," said A's president Mike Crowley, a member of Major League Baseball's international committee. "In order to do that, you have to take the product there so people can see it, touch it, feel it."

The A's will play two exhibitions and the two games against Seattle. They will return home to play the Bay Bridge exhibition series against the Giants before resuming the regular season with two games in Oakland against the Mariners beginning April 6.

The A's will be the home team in Tokyo, so previously scheduled games against Seattle at O.co Coliseum on April 8 and July 5 now become days off.

The Tokyo games will mark the beginning of Bob Melvin's first full season as A's manager. The A's went 47-52 after Melvin replaced Bob Geren on June 9 and 74-88 overall, their fifth straight season with a non-winning record.

One area the A's need to improve is on defense, where their A.L.-high 124 errors were their most since 2001.

"It starts in the offseason, what your mental approach is going to be," Melvin said. "You saw when we'd make an error, we'd make another one and then another one. I really don't feel like we were as bad as the numbers would say defensively. They just seemed to come in bunches for us."

Another key is getting right-hander Trevor Cahill, 23, back on track.

After going 18-8 with a 2.97 ERA in 2010, Cahill was signed to a five-year \$30.5 million contract in April and slipped to 12-14 with a 4.16 ERA this season. He went 6-14 from May 15 on.

"A lot of it probably was mental," Melvin said. "When you take a little half-step back and don't have the (same) kind of success, it can be difficult. (He's got) some of the best stuff in the American League."

Melvin's lineup Wednesday included rookies in second baseman Jemile Weeks, first baseman Chris Carter and outfielder Michael Taylor. But that was a rare sighting, even as the A's fell from contention by midseason.

Melvin stuck with veterans such as right fielder David DeJesus, who hit .240, and designated hitter Matsui, who enjoyed a torrid stretch after the All-Star break but finished at .252 with just 12 homers.

It's understandable that Melvin stepped in on an interim basis and was simply trying to win games -- both to increase his team's confidence and to boost his chances of being hired full time.

But it leaves players such as Taylor -- who played in just 11 games after his Sept. 2 call-up -- as a somewhat unknown quantity entering next spring.

Oakland A's update: Gio Gonzalez puts exclamation point on fine 2011 season

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

SEATTLE -- Wednesday night meant little in the big picture of the A's season, but left-hander Gio Gonzalez made it a very productive night.

Gonzalez threw eight sterling innings and notched his career-high 16th victory in a 2-0 win over the Seattle Mariners that closed the A's season in front of 20,173 fans at Safeco Field.

He allowed just two hits and tied a career-high with 11 strikeouts.

The A's finished 74-88 and in third place in the American League West. But they went 14-12 in September, their first winning month since going 14-10 in July 2010.

Gonzalez, entering his first year of arbitration, finished 16-12 and made his first A.L. All-Star team. He won seven of his final eight starts. He also lowered his ERA from 3.23 in 2010 to 3.12.

"What can you say about the way Gio finished?" A's manager Bob Melvin said.

The A's collected all the offense they needed on Jai Miller's two-run home run in the second off Anthony Vasquez (1-6).

Left fielder Josh Willingham is certain to hit a lucrative payday as he enters his first offseason of free agency.

Willingham, 32, finished with 29 homers and 98 RBIs, the most RBIs by an A's player since Frank Thomas' 114 in 2006.

The A's best chance at re-signing him might be in the five-day window after the World Series, when teams have exclusive negotiating rights to their own free agents.

He reiterated he'd enjoy staying with the A's.

"I'm sure we'll negotiate (during the five-day window)," he said. "As far as something getting done, I don't have a clue."

Willingham left Wednesday's game in the sixth inning with tightness in his back.

Coco Crisp tied the New York Yankees' Brett Gardner for the A.L. stolen base title with 49. He's the first Athletic to finish with a share of the title since Rickey Henderson led the major leagues with 66 in 1998.

Jemile Weeks' .303 batting average is the second-best rookie mark in Oakland history (based on a minimum of 400 plate appearances), trailing Mitchell Paige's .307 average in 1977.

Dallas Braden will again be a postseason commentator on the MLB Network.

Chin Music: Reaction to Japan trip, and an unusual A's lineup to finish season

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 9/28/2011 6:30pm

Bob Melvin had a surprise for his season-ending lineup, starting just four regulars and going outside-the-box with his batting order:

A's — Crisp CF, Taylor LF, Weeks 2B, Willingham DH, Sizemore 3B, Carter 1B, Miller RF, Powell C, Rosales SS; Gonzalez LHP.

Mariners — Ichiro RF, Robinson CF, Ackley 2B, Smoak 1B, Carp LF, Kennedy DH, Liddi 3B, Seager SS, Gimenez C; Vasquez LHP.

—Overall, there's plenty of excitement throughout the A's clubhouse about the season-opening trip to Tokyo next season to play the Mariners. It's a mixture of curiosity about experiencing a new culture (a great majority of the roster wasn't around for the 2008 trip to Japan) and offering a goodwill gesture for a country still recovering from the deadly earthquake and tsunami that hit in March.

The plan would have the A's and Mariners playing regular season games March 28-29 at the Tokyo Dome, with each team playing two exhibitions beforehand. The A's would spend nine days in Japan according to a tentative itinerary, valuable time for them to get used to the time change before playing games that count.

The big question, of course, is whether Hideki Matsui will be back with the A's, which would set up a showdown between him and Ichiro Suzuki in their native country. Matsui spoke with caution about the trip, acknowledging that he doesn't know if he'll be in an Oakland uniform in 2012. But he said: "There's a lot of major league baseball fans over there, and with what happened in March with the earthquake, it's even more encouraging (for people) to be able to watch games live in person." Matsui played there in 2004 with the Yankees, and while he enjoyed the experience, he joked: "It was a bit more challenging off-field as far as being a tour guide."

-Thanks for reading the blog all season long, and please continue to check back over the offseason. The A's always manage to make news and stay in the rumor mill, and I'll be updating here as the news and rumors develop.

Enjoy the winter! ...

A's Gio Gonzalez caps season with great outing

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Gio Gonzalez continued one of the A's nicest trends in the final few days of the season, strong outings by starters the team will rely on next season.

One night before, **Trevor Cahill** put together what manager **Bob Melvin** called the best outing he's seen from the 2010 All-Star. On Wednesday night at Safeco Field, Gonzalez, a 2011 All-Star, finished off the season in spectacular style, throwing eight scoreless innings in the A's 2-0 victory over the Mariners.

"It was nice for the whole team," Gonzalez said. "We are all left with a big smile."

Gonzalez, who won his final four starts of the season, allowed only two hits, walked three and struck out 11, tying his career high. He finished the season with 197 strikeouts in 202 innings, the fifth highest strikeout total in Oakland history.

He earned his 16th victory, the most on the team and a new career high.

The A's also ended on a bit of an up note overall, going 14-12 in September, the team's first winning month since July 2010. The A's avoided ending the season more than 14 games under .500, going 74-88; the last Oakland team to finish more than 14 games under .500 was the 1997 club, which went 65-97.

Coco Crisp finished in a tie with New York's **Brett Gardner** for the American League stolen-base lead. Neither snagged a bag on Wednesday night, and both collected 49 overall.

Josh Willingham didn't reach the 30-homer and 100-RBI mark, going 0-for-2 before being lifted with back tightness for pinch hitter **Hideki Matsui**. But with 29 homers and 98 RBIs, Willingham had the best overall offensive season by an Oakland player.

Outfielder **Jai Miller**, making his second start for Oakland, provided all of the A's offense, with a two-run homer in the second inning, the second homer of his career and first with the A's.

Andrew Bailey earned his 24th save, No. 75 of his career to tie **Jason Isringhausen** for fifth most on Oakland's all-time list. He was 16 for 16 in save chances after the break, and he's 39 for 39 in his career after the break.

Leading off

Road woes: If the A's mean business next season, they must solve their issues away from home. They entered Wednesday with 50 road losses, Oakland's most since the 1997 team went 30-51, and they have the AL's lowest road batting average. The A's went 43-38 at home.

A's will open 2012 season in Tokyo against Seattle

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

For the second time in five years, the A's will open the regular season in Tokyo late next March, and that announcement Wednesday led to an immediate follow-up question: Will the A's bring back free-agent designated hitter Hideki Matsui, one of the two great Japanese position players to come to the big leagues? The Tokyo series already will feature the other, Seattle outfielder Ichiro Suzuki, and a matchup of the stars would be a significant event in Japan.

"Certainly, Major League Baseball would be very happy if we brought him back," A's team president Michael Crowley said with a bit of a chuckle Wednesday. "Ichiro and Matsui would be a good thing for everyone."

That doesn't necessarily mean that Matsui is guaranteed to return, especially given that the team's offseason spending will depend on getting a stadium decision from MLB. Still, one team official said Wednesday, "He's the one free agent we'd seriously consider, for a number of reasons."

Matsui told The Chronicle earlier this week that he definitely wants to play another year in the big leagues, and he likes Oakland and his teammates. He and manager Bob Melvin have hit it off, and when asked if he'd like to have Matsui with the team in Tokyo, Melvin responded, "That's a natural, obviously, with what he's accomplished and with Ichiro on the other side. You just never know. It's a two-way street. With him, too, he's going to get offers elsewhere."

Matsui couched his answers about the Japan trip by emphasizing "in the event I'm a part of that," but, he said through interpreter Roger Kahlon that he knows there would be major interest in a showdown with Ichiro.

"I think there would be a lot of fans who would look forward to seeing that meeting," said Matsui, whose home stadium in Japan was the Tokyo Dome. "But that's separate from my opinion. We'll see what happens."

The March 28-29 games will come off Oakland's home schedule, giving the A's off days on April 8 and July 5. Players will receive additional compensation for the trip based on a percentage of the revenue.

The A's also will play two exhibition games against Japanese teams, as they did when they opened the 2008 season there.

"I think it's perfect," Crowley said. "We had a terrific time last time, the people there were great. There wasn't one guy who wouldn't go back. It's a great thing for the ballclub."

Underachieving A's never put it all together

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Six months ago, the A's were considered to be legitimate contenders in the American League West, their pitching staff the envy of most and their offseason pickups sure to boost the offense.

By mid-May, it had all started to come apart. Starting pitchers were falling left and right, and the team went into a skid that took them from tied for first place to eight games back. Manager Bob Geren was out by the second week of June, and Bob Melvin was in, but the A's never could quite get all parts of their game going at any given time.

"It hasn't been great," Oakland starter Brandon McCarthy said of the A's year on Wednesday. "I don't think anyone would argue with that. It wasn't a terrible season, we weren't some sad-sack team, but we never caught fire and hit the next level. We never got out of second or third gear."

Oakland pitched extremely well in the first half, and barely hit at all. In the second half, the offense perked up at last, only to have the pitching go a bit squirrely at times, particularly the bullpen. And the defense was mostly awful all year, though it showed some improvement in the final weeks.

"We pitched early and we weren't hitting, and then hit for a while and didn't pitch," reliever Brian Fuentes said. "The bullpen scuffled for a while. But good teams are able to get through things like that."

The A's, picked by many to make the playoffs, finished in third place.

"It's obviously not where we envisioned ourselves," catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "We had all those injuries in the rotation, and we couldn't ever get on track. Nothing was ever clicking."

"When you look at the results, it was a bit disappointing," designated hitter Hideki Matsui said through interpreter Roger Kahlon. "On the other hand, with all the young players who came up, that showed a bit of promise with the young talent that may develop into high-caliber players."

The chief bright spot: the emergence of rookie second baseman Jemile Weeks. Weeks came up to fill in while Mark Ellis was out with a hamstring strain, and Weeks never came out of the lineup. He wound up leading the team in hitting, and Wednesday, Melvin said, "You knew he was going to be a hitter, regardless, but look at him defensively now. He looks like an all-around player."

The A's also got some nice work from some of their starters: Gio Gonzalez made his first All-Star team, and McCarthy, mostly healthy after years of repeat shoulder fractures, was more than solid, shattering the Oakland record for strikeouts/walks ratio; his 4.92 mark bested Dan Haren's 3.91 in 2006. Guillermo Moscoso, like Weeks an injury fill-in, wound up having a promising season that included, at times, some of the best performances the A's got all year. Gonzalez, McCarthy and Moscoso had the top three ERAs among A's starters.

From a hitting standpoint, Oakland's year was a poor one, even with the second-half bounce back. Among those who did not perform up to expectations much of the way: catcher Suzuki and offseason additions Matsui and David DeJesus.

"Personally, I would say it was a bit disappointing, as well, especially on the offensive side," Matsui said. "The hope was to contribute more, and I feel like that was expected of me. I didn't quite achieve that, especially the first two months of the season."

Matsui, like many of the A's players, responded well to Melvin, and news of his new three-year deal was greeted with enthusiasm last week.

"He'll make a huge impact for us," Gonzalez said. "He's not going to take it easy on us, and he's going to lead the pack."

"I really look forward to when Bob stamps his identity on us in spring training," McCarthy said.

Josh Willingham had an excellent season. Despite playing in a pitchers' park, he had hit 29 homers and driven in 98 runs entering the season finale. The only unfortunate ramification for the A's is that Willingham is now likely to be out of their price range, especially because the team wants to get a decision on the stadium question before planning any major spending.

The highs ...

Hollywood North: "Moneyball" brought international attention to Oakland, which hosted the movie's national premiere in fine fashion, and the film itself created interest in the club.

Health plan: After changing their training and medical staffs, the A's had a much lower injury total than in recent years, with only 14 DL uses until the second-to-last day of the season, when a procedural matter upped it to 15.

Now you're talking: Manager Bob Melvin was given a three-year contract one week before the end of the season, delighting the Oakland players, who have praised his communication skills and leadership.

Nice pickup: Josh Willingham, acquired in a trade last season, had a fine season, driving in the most runs by an A's player since Frank Thomas in 2006.

Permanent addition: Jemile Weeks came up as an injury replacement in June and never left, and the rookie finished with the team's highest batting average.

... and lows of 2011

Skipper switch: Bob Geren was fired on June 9, nine games into what would be a 10-game losing streak, with the A's going from a first-place tie May 17 to eight games out by the managerial change.

Three down: In one two-day stretch in May, the A's lost three starters to injuries: Dallas Braden had left shoulder surgery and Brandon McCarthy and Tyson Ross, Braden's replacement, went on the disabled list.

Enough is enough: Both of Oakland's corner infielders, Kevin Kouzmanoff and Daric Barton, were demoted in June for underperformance, and neither returned.

Swept away: The A's went to Texas for four games before the All-Star break and dropped all four to fall double-digits out in the AL West for the first time all season.

Eternal question: Oakland's stadium situation remains unclear; the team has waited for more than 2 1/2 years for clarification and the A's offseason spending will depend on a decision from Major League Baseball.

Drumbeat: Japan trip is a go; Matsui is even more likely to return to A's?

All signs have pointed toward the A's opening the 2012 season in Japan for nearly two weeks and today, it became official: Oakland will host the Mariners at the Tokyo Dome on March 28 and 29.

This makes it an even better bet that the team will bring back DH Hideki Matsui. That was already looking like a strong possibility; as I wrote in the above story, the A's had wanted to re-sign Matsui whether or not they get a decision on their stadium situation. I'm hearing today that the stadium situation actually might now impact Matsui, too, but still, the team likes Matsui a lot and chances are better than not that he'd come back.

I just spoke to team president Mike Crowley, who wouldn't come out and say the A's are re-signing Matsui – the team wouldn't do that until it's all official – but he did say, "Certainly Major League Baseball would be very happy if we brought him back. Ichiro and Matsui in Japan would be a good thing for everyone."

If it happens, here's the thinking: He's not going to be very expensive (\$2 million or thereabouts), it would be a one-year deal, and given the price tag, should Matsui dramatically underperform again in the first half, the team could let him go without taking an enormous hit.

In addition, Matsui responded well to manager Bob Melvin, and the belief is that perhaps, with Melvin there at the start of the season this time and Matsui not in a platoon, he'd get off to a better start. He hits better when he plays in the field, and Melvin has no trouble getting him a start in the outfield now and then. He is also seen as a consummate-pro type player who is a positive influence in the clubhouse and a great role model for young players.

The A's also do make some extra money having Matsui on the team – sponsorship from Japanese companies, some increased merchandise sales, greater exposure in a strong Japanese market through the many media members that follow Matsui.

So, while it's certainly not official, it wouldn't surprise anyone at this point if Matsui comes back. He told me the other day that he definitely wants to play another year, he has no thought of retirement, and my guess is that 2012 would be his final season, giving him 10 years in the major leagues to go along with his 10 in Japan. He'll want to go out on an up note, he is a proud man and he's had an excellent career. I'm not sure he'd even want to stick around if he has another awful start to the season.

I know A's fans hate to see home games come off their schedule, but Oakland draws less than Seattle, this will be a hot ticket in Japan with Matsui vs. Ichiro in Tokyo for the first time ever, and Major League Baseball also believes that this opener will be a strong gesture of support to Japan after that country's devastating earthquake and tsunami in March. The two top position players Japan has sent to the big leagues, opening the season there, it's really a good thing for MLB, the teams involved and Japan.

The A's are enthusiastic, always, about increasing their international connections. Everyone with the club, including the ownership, top officials and players, had a wonderful time in Japan in 2008, and the team sees this as yet another opportunity for international visibility – and to strengthen ties in an area where the A's wouldn't mind some inroads when it comes to personnel acquisitions down the road.

The 2008 series was a positive thing for the club, and this could be an even better one, with Matsui vs. Ichiro as a potential draw. The only fans who should be upset about losing home dates are those who attend every single home game, all 81. And while there are a few hardy, passionate souls who do so, there aren't many, and everyone else won't have trouble finding other games to attend on the home schedule.

Crowley pointed out to me that the team had 80 home dates this year because of a scheduled doubleheader, and that with an additional exhibition game,

And for anyone who has interest, time and resources to do it, I'd strongly recommend making the trip to Japan for the games. That 2008 series was about as much fun as anyone could have at an event. The Japanese were tremendous hosts, the atmosphere was fantastic – and next March could be an all-timer in terms of excitement.

Gio twirls beauty to win career-best 16th

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- A's manager Bob Melvin, though at the helm of a club that finished its fifth consecutive season without a winning record, at the very least wanted to create a winning atmosphere by year's end.

Mission accomplished.

Capped by Wednesday's 2-0 victory in Seattle, which concluded both clubs' seasons, the A's walked away from September owners of their first winning month (14-12) since July of 2010.

And Melvin, who entered the picture on June 9 following Bob Geren's dismissal, walked away carrying a 47-52 record since the time of his arrival, including a 35-35 mark after the All-Star break.

Whether it's enough to translate into more wins for the 2012 season has yet to be seen. But it nevertheless left the A's with a good dose of momentum heading into the offseason, following a 73-88 year that was seemingly decided in the first half following a bevy of underachieving offensive performances.

"It was great to come in here and get the attention of this group that was going through a tough time," Melvin said. "So personally, I probably had as much fun as anyone here. Certainly the results weren't what the team wanted coming out of Spring Training. The expectations were pretty high for this team and rightfully so, but credit the guys for playing hard all year long."

Lefty Gio Gonzalez stood at the forefront of Wednesday's victory, tossing eight scoreless innings while fanning 11 en route to picking up his career-high 16th victory. He concluded his 2011 All-Star campaign with a respectable 3.12 ERA, all the while riding a four-game winning streak.

Gonzalez won seven of his final eight outings and, in that time, posted a 2.47 ERA with 51 strikeouts.

"What can you say about the way Gio pitched?" Melvin said. "He was really on a mission. I remember him saying, 'I want to win each and every one of my last starts' when he was at .500. And to finish in the fashion that he did, pitching as well or better than he had all year, I think his last two starts might be his best two starts of the year."

"He knows he's taking it to another level. That was a career high in wins for him, and that was a goal of his. And I think he realizes now he has to set the bar a little higher for himself, and to take another step next year, try to win 20 games."

Gonzalez remembers that conversation with Melvin, whose calming presence often overshadows his competitive nature.

"With Bob, I try to be as cocky as I can," Gonzalez said, smiling. "He's that type of manager, loves that type of stuff and wants to see the competitor out of you."

The A's southpaw allowed just two hits on the night, and the A's needed just one to win. Rookie Jai Miller, who drew a start in right field, collected his first homer of the season -- a two-run shot to center field -- in the second inning against Seattle's Anthony Vasquez to give Oakland what became a permanent lead.

Miller, brought aboard as a September callup, was playing in just his seventh game with the A's and will give Oakland outfield depth heading into Spring Training.

"You always want to end the season on a high note," he said. "It's always good to put a good taste in their mouth, the people that are making decisions, and just let them know that I can come up here and help the team."

The A's won five of their final seven games after dropping six of their previous eight.

"It's nice for the whole team," Gonzalez said. "We left with a big smile. This was definitely a good way to end it. This is a team win. We finished strong, and I was just grateful to go out and compete and give them what they wanted. The team wanted this and needed this, and to go home now and prepare for the offseason, it's great for all of us."

Particularly Gonzalez, who thrives off confidence.

"He is unbelievable," Seattle's Chris Gimenez said. "He's definitely known for having one of the best breaking balls in the league and he threw a great game today. In the last game, you want to go out and finish strong, and you've got a guy out there that's a Cy Young-caliber pitcher. A lot of people might not think that, but I'm telling you, he's got that kind of stuff."

A's, Mariners to start 2012 season in Japan

Pair of regular-season games scheduled for March 28-29

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SEATTLE -- Passport in tow and bags already packed, left-hander Craig Breslow was all set to join the Red Sox for a season-opening set in Japan against the A's in 2008 -- until the reliever was designated for assignment by Boston the morning of the departure date.

Now a member of the A's bullpen, Breslow is ready to pack his bags for Tokyo again, and this time he expects to make it on the plane.

Major League Baseball announced on Wednesday that the A's will play host to the Mariners on March 28 and 29 in a two-game Opening Series in Japan, marking the second overseas journey to Northeast Asia for Oakland in five years.

"I hadn't spoken to anybody who was hesitant or reluctant about it," said Breslow, the club's player representative. "Everybody's pretty excited about the opportunity to go to Japan and represent the A's. It's such a unique experience."

The A's and Mariners, who at the time were managed by current Oakland skipper Bob Melvin -- were scheduled to play in Japan in March 2003, but the threat of war in Iraq scrapped those plans just 12 hours before flights were set to leave from Phoenix.

"Very excited," Melvin said on Wednesday, prior to his team's final game of the season. "I was looking forward to it in 2003, and I feel really good about the opportunity to go and experience that.

"You don't often get to do something like that. I hope some of the baseball -- the way it's played in Japan -- rubs off on our guys, because I know that Japanese players take it very seriously and the baseball field is sacred ground there. They respect the game very much, and I'd like our guys to be a part of that, feel it firsthand."

The series could feature a matchup between Japanese superstars Hideki Matsui and Ichiro Suzuki. Matsui is a free agent at season's end, but there's strong speculation that the veteran slugger could come back with the A's for one more year before entering retirement.

"With what he brings, where he's been and what he's done and accomplished in Japan and here -- and it's similar with Ichiro on the other side -- it would be great," Melvin said. "But you never know where these things go. It's a two-way street. We'll just see where it goes."

"I'd love to have him back," Breslow said. "I think he's a consummate professional, and a lot of young guys can learn a lot just from watching him play. The language barrier obviously makes communication a little bit difficult, but you can just watch the way he prepares every day and understand how hard he works, and what it takes to have a lasting career in baseball."

Matsui didn't address his future on Wednesday, only noting that "there are a lot of fans who would be looking forward to that kind of matchup, of Ichiro and Matsui," should it take place.

"I think the fans in Japan are really looking forward to it, now that it's official," Matsui said through translator Roger Kahlon. "There are a lot of Major League fans there, as well. With what happened in March, in Japan, I think that's even more encouraging, for them to be able to watch the games live in person."

The two-game series in Japan, which takes the place of the A's home dates of April 8 and July 5, will be dedicated to assisting in the rebuilding efforts across the nation, as Japan continues a long recovery from the 9.0-magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami last March.

Matsui was with the Yankees in 2004 when they opened the season in Japan against the Rays.

"I have good memories about the trip, but on the other hand it was more challenging off the field, in terms of being the tour guide off the field," he said, laughing.

A's end season with 2-0 win

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — Toward the end of August, when he was hovering around .500 with his record for the season, Gio Gonzalez told Oakland manager Bob Melvin he was going to win the rest of his starts.

He didn't quite accomplish that goal, but he came awfully close and put an impressive exclamation point on 2011.

Gonzalez closed the season with flourish as the left-hander allowed just two hits in eight innings to help the Athletics beat the Seattle Mariners 2-0 on Wednesday night.

Gonzalez finished the season with seven wins in his final eight starts. He went from having a 9-11 record after losing on Aug. 15 against Baltimore, to ending the season with a 16-12 mark, setting a career-high for wins.

"With Bob I always try and be as cocky as I can with him, but he's that type of manager," Gonzalez said. "He loves that kind of stuff, where he wants to see the competitor out of you."

Gonzalez gave up one hit through six innings, a liner into right field by Chris Gimenez leading off the third. After following Gimenez's single with a walk to Ichiro Suzuki, Gonzalez retired 11 of the next 12 batters. He struck out the side in the sixth and finished with a career-high tying 11 strikeouts.

Seattle's other hit was Alex Liddi's two-out double in the seventh that center fielder Coco Crisp nearly snagged with a diving backhand attempt.

Gonzalez tied a career-high in strikeouts set last year against the Chicago White Sox and walked three batters. He had at least one strikeout in six of his eight innings and finished the season with a 3.12 ERA in 32 starts.

"To finish in the fashion that he did and pitch as well or better than he had all year, I think the last two starts might have been his best two starts of the year," Melvin said.

"I think he realizes now he has to set the bar a little bit higher for himself and take another step next year and try to win 20 games or raise the bar every year. The command gets better, the stuff gets better and as you can see his confidence gets better."

Andrew Bailey pitched the ninth for his 24th save in 26 chances.

The Mariners and A's will see each other again on March 28 and 29 in Tokyo as they will become the latest teams to open a season playing in Japan. The announcement of the two-game series was made Wednesday.

Gonzalez could be starting one of those games for the A's after finishing 2011 on a roll. He won his final four starts to top the 15 wins he had in his rookie season of 2010.

Jai Miller homered to right-center field in the second inning off Seattle starter Anthony Vasquez (1-6) who lasted just two innings.

Miller came up from Triple-A Sacramento on Sept. 11, but displayed his power throughout the Pacific Coast League this season. Miller finished second in the PCL with 32 homers and was fourth in slugging percentage at .558. But he also led the PCL with 179 strikeouts, a feature he showed when he struck out in the fourth. Miller was robbed of extra bases in the seventh inning when Suzuki made a leaping catch on the warning track in right field.

"It's always good to leave a good taste with the people making the decisions ... and let them know I can come up here and help the team," Miller said.

Seattle finished the season with a franchise record shutouts. They went scoreless in their final 20 innings, getting shut out in the final two games.

It fit with Seattle's season-long struggles at the plate. Suzuki ended his year with 184 hits after going hitless in the finale. It's the first time in his 11-year career Suzuki failed to reach 200 hits and he ended the season with a career-low .272 batting average.

Suzuki was evasive when asked about his season.

"I'll leave it to you guys," he said through his interpreter. "You are the professionals at evaluating."

Vasquez was one of six Seattle pitchers in the finale. After Vasquez, Seattle's bullpen combined to give up three hits and no runs over the final seven innings.

NOTES: Seattle finished the season with a crowd of 20,173. The Mariners unofficial season total was 1,896,929 in 81 home games. It's the first time since moving into Safeco Field the Mariners have failed to draw 2 million fans. The last time Seattle was under 2 million in a full 81-game home schedule was 1989. ... Gonzalez became the first A's pitcher to win five games in a month since July 2005 when Barry Zito won six and Rich Harden won five. Gonzalez was 5-1 in September. ... Seattle's previous record of 15 shutouts was set in 1978, 1983, 1990 and 2010. ... In one of the stranger pitching lines, Vasquez finished the season with 13 home runs allowed and 13 strikeouts in 29 1-3 innings.