

A's News Clips, Friday, September 30, 2011

A's general manager Billy Beane says he expects to remain in Oakland

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

A's general manager Billy Beane has no idea what the future holds for his team or where that future might take place. But he plans to stick around for it.

In response to recent reports linking him to the Chicago Cubs' vacant G.M. position, Beane said Thursday that he expects to stay with the A's.

"I've got a little trip planned next week, but other than that, yes, I plan on being here," a smiling Beane said during his year-end media session.

That was the meatiest news coming out of a 29-minute state-of-the-team address, though Beane's declaration does not mean the Cubs -- or another team with a G.M. opening -- couldn't blow him away with an offer.

But Thursday's comments were his most definitive about his status since speculation began regarding the Cubs, who need to replace ousted G.M. Jim Hendry.

Beane also rekindled hopes that the A's soon will get Major League Baseball's decision on whether they can move to San Jose. It's been more than 21/2 years since commissioner Bud Selig assigned a committee to research the A's stadium options in the Bay Area.

"From my understanding, the committee has been done with its study for quite a bit of time, and we've been told we're going to get an answer very soon," Beane said.

Sound familiar?

Beane expressed the exact same sentiment during last year's season-ending news conference, and the A's remain in limbo 12 months later.

He admitted Thursday that there's no recent information on which to base his belief a decision is looming.

The A's plans to build a stadium in San Jose face a major roadblock because of the Giants' refusal to give up territorial rights to Santa Clara County.

And while this storyline may sound stale, it apparently will have huge ramifications for the A's 2012 roster. Beane confirmed the team is delaying its pursuit of free agents -- including its own -- until getting more clarity on the stadium issue.

In doing so, the A's run the risk of losing left fielder Josh Willingham -- their leading homer and RBI man and a player whose power would be tough to replace.

"Even if we want to bring him back, it might be outside what we're in position to be able to pay him, so that's a factor," Beane said.

Willingham's agent, Matt Sosnick, suggested to this newspaper in August that Willingham was willing to re-sign then. Now the A's best chance to retain Willingham, 32, would seem to be the five-day window after the World Series when teams hold exclusive negotiating rights with their own free agents.

But that window will expire sometime around the end of October. And given the A's stance, unless MLB provides an answer on the stadium issue by then, Willingham will hit the open market and be much tougher to sign.

In the event the A's were approved for a new stadium -- which would take three to four years to build -- Beane suggested the team would immediately begin pouring money into scouting, player development and draft picks in order to build a young team that's ready to blossom in the new digs.

Such a plan would hardly be music to the ears of A's fans, who have watched the team fail to post a winning record for five straight seasons.

As things stand, the A's might lose their entire starting outfield, with Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus eligible for free agency, along with designated hitter Hideki Matsui.

Beane said he'll strongly look at re-signing Crisp.

Judging by the complimentary words Beane and manager Bob Melvin had for Matsui, it seems a strong bet he returns on a contract in the one-year, \$2 million neighborhood. But at age 37, can Matsui be counted on for run production after hitting .251 with 12 homers and 72 RBIs this season?

"Hopefully his second half is more indicative of what he's capable of doing moving forward than his struggles in the first half," Beane said.

Matsui hit .209 in the first half, and though he went on a .432 tear for a month after the All-Star break, he slipped to .213 with just eight RBIs in September.

Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill aren't a bad nucleus to build the rotation around (provided Cahill rebounds from a below par year).

But Brett Anderson will miss the first half of the season recovering from elbow surgery, and Dallas Braden might be sidelined for the start of the season after shoulder surgery, so the A's could look to add starting pitching depth.

Melvin, who replaced Bob Geren in June and was signed to a three-year deal last week, praised the coaching staff he inherited but said to expect changes.

It's widely speculated that Phil Garner, a Melvin mentor who joined the A's as a special adviser in August, will move into a coaching role.

"You want some guys around that you feel close to, that can get your message across and know what you're all about," Melvin said.

Oakland A's payroll situation for 2012

Bay Area News Group

A'S PAYROLL SITUATION

UNDER CONTRACT FOR 2012

Brian Fuentes, \$5 million

Kurt Suzuki, \$5 million

Grant Balfour, \$4 million

Trevor Cahill \$3.7 million

Brett Anderson, \$3.25 million

CLUB OPTION

Michael Wuertz, \$3.25 million (with \$250,000 buyout)

ARBITRATION ELIGIBLE (with estimated salaries, if tendered)

Gio Gonzalez (\$3.7 million)

Andrew Bailey (\$3.5 million)

Dallas Braden (\$3.4 million)

Brandon McCarthy (\$2.6 million)

Craig Breslow (\$1.6 million)

Ryan Sweeney (\$1.6 million)

Daric Barton (\$1.4 million)

Joey Devine (\$800,000)

Adam Rosales (\$600,000)

Landon Powell (\$600,000)

FREE AGENTS

Coco Crisp

David DeJesus

Rich Harden

Hideki Matsui

Josh Willingham

Note: Unlisted players have fewer than three years of service time, and their salaries can be unilaterally imposed by the club at no less than the minimum salary, which was \$414,500 in 2011.

Reshaping A's depends on stadium deal

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Billy Beane said Thursday at his annual end-of-the-season media session that he's not planning on going anywhere, and the A's general manager also believes that the team will get a decision soon on its stadium search after a wait of more than 2 1/2 years.

Those two things might be related; baseball sources, including some close to Beane, told The Chronicle last month that frustrations over the dragged-out stadium issue might lead Beane to consider other general-manager opportunities.

Asked Thursday about his status for next season, Beane said, "I will be here," and he also noted that while manager Bob Melvin's recent three-year contract is independent of his own situation, "Certainly I want to be a part of that commitment, because I gave it to him."

"Certainly, I hope he's here," Melvin said. "He's one of the biggest reasons I want to be here."

Beane said the team has been told that Major League Baseball's committee looking into the A's stadium possibilities has completed its work, but he was not specific about the source of the information. A source at MLB told The Chronicle that there are no indications there that any announcement is pending.

Beane said the A's have been told repeatedly that the decision will be soon, but when asked if the team has been told that just recently or over the course of the entire process, he said, "Over the course of 2 1/2 years we've been told it. So this time, I'm going to believe it."

Beane confirmed The Chronicle's report Sunday that the team's spending will be predicated on the stadium issue. He also confirmed that should the A's get the OK to go to San Jose, they will focus on player development, drafting and international acquisitions to put together a young contending team ready for a new stadium in three years. A rebuild, in other words, a la the Cleveland Indians before they moved into Jacobs Field.

That would preclude signing the team's top free agents, Josh Willingham and Coco Crisp. Hideki Matsui and Rich Harden are the only free agents the team would be likely to pursue in that scenario because of their reasonable cost control on one-year deals.

The opposite scenario - in which the A's San Jose plans are denied by MLB - could have them spending more in an effort to draw bigger crowds and make the franchise more attractive to potential buyers.

And if the A's don't hear anything from the committee soon and wait too long for a decision, they'd risk losing a shot at any premium free agents.

If Willingham and Crisp do not return, outfielders will be the A's most pressing need because it appears they would also lose David DeJesus. Should the team opt to go young, Melvin said he's comfortable with the potential options. One candidate left a strong impression in the team's final game: After Jai Miller homered to give Oakland the win at Seattle on Wednesday, Melvin said he's impressed with Miller and that he's expected to be in the mix during the spring.

Other internal possibilities include Ryan Sweeney and Michael Taylor. Beane acknowledged that replacing Crisp in center might be a particularly difficult task, and he mentioned that minor-league center fielder Jermaine Mitchell recently had knee surgery.

The A's replaced three-fourths of their infield during their season, and Beane and Melvin have been effusive in their praise of Scott Sizemore, recently converted to third. First base remains a bit hazy, though, with Brandon Allen as the likely front-runner, and Daric Barton and Kila Ka'aihue also in the mix.

Beane said the team is loath to consider outfielder/first baseman Chris Carter a designated hitter yet because he's only 24, and the A's believe that Carter can continue to improve in the field. It's less clear how sold the A's are on Carter, who has yet to stick after several call-ups.

Along with their five free agents, the A's also must make a decision on reliever Michael Wuertz's \$3.25 million option. With Fautino De Los Santos' emergence, that option might not get picked up. Oakland also has 10 arbitration-eligible players, including first-timers Andrew Bailey and Gio Gonzalez; Beane said he expects all will be tendered contracts.

As the team waits, and possibly waits, on the stadium decision and territorial rights, the first order of business will be the coaching staff for next season. It's likely that Melvin will want to bring in his own coaches, and it's not unheard of for managers to replace entire coaching staffs.

The incumbent most likely to remain is pitching coach Ron Romanick, who has helped develop the A's young staff - the team's strength. Many of the pitchers have worked with Romanick their entire pro careers.

Melvin reiterated that one of his primary areas of emphasis next spring will be defense, though he's encouraged that the team began to play better in the field down the stretch.

Key decisions

Josh Willingham: The free-agent outfielder, Oakland's top offensive player in 2011, might have signed for below his expected market value, but the A's want to wait on a stadium decision before committing major payroll dollars, so he will more than likely go elsewhere.

Coco Crisp: He tied for the American League lead in steals, but probably will leave for the same reason as Willingham. Many believe he'd be a good fit for the Giants.

Hideki Matsui: One team official said that Matsui is the one free agent the team would consider re-signing "for a number of reasons," which include his improved production under Bob Melvin and the season-opening series in Japan.

David DeJesus: After a poor season, DeJesus will head elsewhere, with San Diego among the most likely destinations.

Rich Harden: Like Matsui, Harden's price tag will be reasonable enough to consider bringing him back on a one-year deal.

Michael Wuertz: Oakland holds a \$3.25 million option on the reliever with a \$250,000 buyout. Two disappointing seasons makes that option iffy.

Chris Carter: Will the A's give him a chance to play every day somewhere, or has the first baseman's stock declined too much after failing to produce in several call-ups?

Health watch

-- **Dallas Braden** had arthroscopic surgery to repair a torn capsule in his left shoulder in May and his rehab is going extremely well; he is already playing catch at a distance of 65 feet, and he's expected to be close to ready for spring training. It's possible that Braden will be a few weeks behind the other starters initially.

-- **Brett Anderson**, like Braden, is coming along well in his rehab from Tommy John surgery in July, but he will not be available until the second half, at the earliest. Elbow ligament replacement surgery can take up to 18 months to return from. Anderson is optimistic he'll be

back in 12 months, and while rehabbing he also has shed 20 pounds to improve his general fitness level.

Drumbeat: Beane says he's staying put, says A's told stadium decision soon

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Coliseum

Some quick hits from today's annual season wrap-up with GM Billy Beane, who when asked several times about his job status said he plans to return next year. When I specifically asked about how giving Bob Melvin a three-year deal might reflect his own level of commitment to the team, he said Melvin's deal was independent of his own situation, but, Beane said, "I certainly plan to be a part of that commitment, because I gave it to him."

Last month, I was hearing from baseball sources, including several close to Beane, that frustrations over the A's stadium situation might lead him to consider other GM opportunities if the A's limbo continued. But the A's stadium dilemma might be resolved soon, according to Beane, who has said several times in the past week-plus that the team expects a decision in the near future.

I asked him why he believes that and he said that the A's have been told the committee's work is done and a decision is coming down soon. He wasn't specific about who has told the team this bit of information, though it's logical to assume it's coming from Major League Baseball.

Beane said that the team has been told repeatedly that it's soon, so I asked if that was just recently, or over the entire course of the more than two-and-a-half year wait.

"Over the course of the 2 1/2 years we've been told it," Beane said. "So this time, I'm going to believe it."

I'm not sure that's entirely reassuring for A's fans – this is what the team has been told repeatedly for some time, with still no resolution, and I spoke to someone at MLB last week who said there were no indications on that side that anything is close.

Beane also confirmed what I reported Sunday, that the A's spending will be tied to the stadium decision, and, as I wrote then, that if the club gets the OK to build a stadium in San Jose, they will look to build a young contending team for that stadium – i.e., concentrating on player development in the interim. A rebuild.

That means no Josh Willingham, likely no Coco Crisp or any high priced free agents coming in from outside the organization, either, just as Willingham and Crisp's agents were hearing.

So now I guess everyone waits.

Melvin, Beane already thinking about 2012

Manager will address coaching staff, visit Arizona Fall League

By Rick Eymer / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A's manager Bob Melvin wasted little time making plans for Spring Training. He started thinking about it on the plane trip home from Seattle on Wednesday night following Oakland's 2-0 win over the Mariners.

"I was thinking about our routine, how many fields we would use and what we'd do on those fields," said Melvin, who has a 47-52 mark as the A's manager, including a 35-35 record after the All-Star break.

There are several items to settle between now and the day that pitchers and catchers are expected to report. The first priority for Melvin is to establish his coaching staff.

"The staff is very important to a manager," Melvin said. "You want guys you feel close around you. I expect there will be some changes."

Melvin anticipates something happening soon. Bench coach Joel Skinner was the only staff member with whom Melvin was familiar when he took over from Bob Geren on June 9.

Melvin brought in former big league manager Phil Garner for the final month of the season, possibly to entice him to stick around next year. Melvin has repeatedly said that Garner was his most important influence.

A's general manager Billy Beane has a different set of priorities. The potential wholesale change in the outfield appears to be the most pressing.

Josh Willingham, who recorded career highs with 29 home runs and 98 RBIs, is a free agent along with fellow outfielders Coco Crisp (a career-high 48 stolen bases), David DeJesus and Hideki Matsui. Ryan Sweeney is arbitration-eligible.

"The outfield is our biggest concern," Beane said. "Potentially that will be our biggest hole. Josh will be an attractive guy to a lot of teams. Finding a guy who can hit close to 30 home runs is not easy."

Both Melvin and Beane said they would like to have them all back, but that the market will dictate whether the A's will be able to compete for their free agents.

Matsui, after a sluggish start, came on in the second half of next season. He hit .295 after the All-Star break compared to .209 before it.

Chris Carter and Michael Taylor may be given every opportunity to break camp with the A's next spring, especially with the uncertainty of the outfield situation.

"I do feel good long-term about our infield," Beane said. "Scott Sizemore came in and did a terrific job, switching positions."

Cliff Pennington owns the shortstop position and Jemile Weeks, at second base, has already made people forget about the popular Mark Ellis, who was traded to the Colorado Rockies.

"We've always had high hopes for him," Beane said. "I didn't think he'd be here until next year. You can see what he did, arriving a half-year before anyone thought he would be ready. He's a dynamic player. He was a bright spot for us."

Beane also said he feels comfortable with Kurt Suzuki and whoever wins the backup catching job.

"The club's strength is going to be pitching as we move forward," Beane said. "This club was built on pitching and defense. We had it at the beginning. Then we lost a few of the pitchers and it started to snowball when the pitching started to crumble."

Oakland lost starters Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden and Tyson Ross. Josh Outman is just returning from major surgery. Anderson won't be back until the second half of the season.

Guillermo Moscoso and Brandon McCarthy endeared themselves to the organization.

"When we traded for Moscoso, we hoped he would provide depth initially," Beane said. "He took it further. Where he fits into the rotation we'll know next year. He proved he fits into the rotation. As we found out this year, having too much pitching depth is not a problem."

Melvin made defense a priority almost from the moment he took the field for the first time as the A's manager. It will remain a priority in spring training. Oakland led the American League with 124 errors, and was second most (to the Chicago Cubs' 134) in the Majors.

"There will be serious emphasis on that," Melvin said. "We've talked at length about defense and the guys know what to expect."

Melvin, who signed a three-year contract with the team, figures to spend plenty of time getting to know the personnel. He'll be a regular visitor to the Arizona Fall League and will be on the telephone getting to know as many players as he may bring into camp.

"I feel lucky to have the kind of pitching depth we have here," Melvin said. "Moscoso has certainly pitched himself into the conversation for a starting job."

The A's and Mariners will open the season with a two-game series in Japan on March 28-29, 2012. Melvin doesn't think it will be much of a problem.

"Spring Training is lengthy, especially for the position players," Melvin said. "You just want to make sure your starting pitchers are on schedule."

Beane has been told several times that a decision regarding the A's potential move to San Jose will be announced shortly.

"This time I believe them," he said.

Moving forward with stadium plans would impact the A's on several levels.

"The key to having a successful opening stadium is to have a good team," Beane said. "The Cleveland Indians in the early '90s is a perfect model. We would follow something similar."

Beane called 2011 "a tale of two seasons," though it could just as easily be termed a tale of two managing styles, with Melvin finding the right touch as the team made improvements in the second half.

"It's been an interesting season for a number of reasons," Beane said. "Every year you don't make the playoffs you're drained. I love doing this job despite the challenge. If you don't win this year, you go to work trying to win next year."

A's hope to use 2011 as a building block

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Unlike the 2010 installment of the A's, the 2011 version was expected to seriously contend, with many around the baseball community linking them to a division crown before the start of the season.

Not only did the A's not contend, but they fared worse than their .500 campaign the year before, finishing well under that mark because of a myriad of issues that were on display in front of sparse crowds at the Oakland Coliseum.

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

At the top of that list, rather, was an inability to hit. The A's received solid second-half performances at the plate from the likes of Hideki Matsui, Josh Willingham, Kurt Suzuki and Cliff Pennington, but their first-half flop proved too much to overcome, even with newly installed manager Bob Melvin -- who took over for the dismissed Bob Geren in June -- at the helm the rest of the way.

Melvin's presence wasn't the only prominent personnel change. Oakland's infield watched the departure of Mark Ellis via trade in June, along with the demotions of Daric Barton and Kevin Kouzmanoff, leaving Cliff Pennington as the lone Opening Day infield starter by the time July rolled around. In return, the A's welcomed in third baseman Scott Sizemore from Detroit, top prospect Jemile Weeks from Triple-A to play second and, ultimately, first baseman Brandon Allen, acquired in the Brad Ziegler trade from Arizona.

Together, the new core experienced defensive frustrations and the expected growing pains but also delivered some offensive hope -- from Weeks a dose of pop and speed, and from Allen signs of much-needed power, with Sizemore contributing a few clutch hits.

Nevertheless, plenty of questions still prevail for this team, one which anticipates improvements to the lineup and increasing optimism in its ability to contend the way it was expected to this year. Both, though, could come at a slower pace than liked, given the A's stadium situation and unmoved payroll, not to mention unanswered questions surrounding prospects Chris Carter and Michael Taylor.

For the time being, what follows is a quick look back at a 2011 season the A's hope to use as a building block.

Record: 74-88, third place in American League West

Defining moment: The A's witnessed their first in-season managerial change in 15 years, when Geren -- under pointed criticism following public comments made by current and former players regarding his managing style -- was dismissed of his duties on June 9. It was a firm move by general manager Billy Beane, relaying a message that complacency wasn't to be had by a team he built to contend in the playoffs, that change was necessary even if it came at the cost of Geren, a longtime friend. Melvin was named interim manager and quickly injected a newfound energy and confidence into the club, which put together an improved second half, notably in the offensive department. The transition proved seamless, and Melvin was awarded for his efforts on Sept. 21 by way of a three-year contract that will keep him at the helm through 2014.

What went right: Melvin calmed the storm created by a nine-game losing streak, which ended one day after his arrival. The A's won seven of their first 10 games played under their new manager, including six in a row. Melvin wasn't the only thing that went right. Matsui assumed an everyday role and, in doing so, showcased his veteran offensive abilities and made nearly everyone around him better. Included in that group was Willingham, who rebounded from a slow start to put together perhaps his most productive year in the Majors, collecting career highs in home runs and RBIs in an otherwise lackluster lineup.

What went wrong: Injuries were again a factor, with lefties Braden and Anderson both undergoing season-ending surgeries, but the A's weren't ready to use them as an excuse. The underlying issues stemmed from consistent inconsistencies, as the club struggled greatly on the offensive side. David DeJesus endured a disappointing season at the plate, as did Suzuki for much of the year. And while those pains were eased slightly in the second half, it came at a time when the pitching staff endured multiple woes -- notably when the once-dominant Trevor Cahill and 2011 All-Star Gio Gonzalez took to the mound. Their numbers weren't nearly as good after the break, contributing to the team's inability to ever put together a string of good play. Not helping at any time in the cause was the A's defense, which racked up the most errors in the American League.

Biggest surprise: Right-handers McCarthy and Moscoso, both essentially stuck in Texas' Minor League system last year, gave the A's a large handful of tremendous pitching performances and were ultimately the most dependable arms in the club's rotation in the second half. The pair entered the season free of expectations and exited as definite candidates to fill the 2012 rotation. Not to be forgotten among this group, though, is Weeks, whose midseason takeover of second base for an injured Ellis -- later dealt to the Rockies -- turned into one of the year's most prominent moments. The rookie immediately added a spark at the top of the lineup and on the bases, all the while improving with his glove by year's end, as well, giving A's fans something to be excited about for years to come.

A's offseason figures to be eventful

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- For as active as the A's front office was last winter, which was deemed by many of the club's executives as the busiest in years, the 2012 offseason may prove to be even livelier.

Though the transaction wire never tired in 2011, most of the moves made weren't of the long-term type, leaving the A's to address familiar situations this offseason, including the outfield and designated-hitter spots -- where the team would like to reel in more power.

They again may not be able to achieve such an objective, though, given their dire stadium situation, which has left the already low-budgeted A's without much curb appeal.

Bringing back the likes of Josh Willingham and Coco Crisp would ease some of those issues and lend a veteran presence to an otherwise youthful team. Even still, plenty of questions would surround a 2012 club that isn't expected to seriously contend.

Instead, the team will hope for health and to continually gain stability under manager Bob Melvin, who in September agreed to a three-year contract to rid himself of his interim status. Melvin will be involved in every offseason decision, general manager Billy Beane says, and is insistent on creating a winning atmosphere.

The A's skipper will utilize this winter to not only aide in the building process of next year's club -- "I don't think there are too many spots going into next spring where you can say, 'He's the guy,'" he said -- but those that come after, as he'll set out to educate himself on the entire organization.

Like the A's have done for much of the past decade, they'll rely heavily on their pitching staff, which again proved to be among the best in 2011. It's a big strength, no doubt, but the lineup's projected inefficiencies won't equate to much support, and -- as was the case in 2011 -- getting the team to click on all cylinders will be a daily challenge.

Though the A's will fight for more, simply improving upon a disappointing 2011 season would seemingly be considered a success, with any playoff hopes likely to be squandered by what are expected to remain potent Rangers and Angels clubs.

Catcher

The A's, again, are seemingly set behind the plate, with Kurt Suzuki ready to undertake the third year of a four-year contract that takes him through 2013 with a club option for '14. Less known, though, is who will be his backup. Landon Powell, if included in the Super Two mix and thus arbitration-eligible, likely wouldn't be tendered a contract. In that case, Spring Training could feature a showdown between Josh Donaldson and Anthony Recker. Neither has proven much at the big league level, though the opportunity to do so hasn't necessarily been there. And top catching prospect Max Stassi, considered the lock to one day replace Suzuki, is still recovering from right shoulder surgery and hasn't played above the Class A level.

First base

A year after finally seizing the starting role at first base, just as the A's hoped he would, Daric Barton lost it midseason following an unproductive first half, paving the way for Brandon Allen's arrival. Though it turns out Barton was playing hurt with a right shoulder that has since been surgically repaired, Allen held his own at first base upon his August promotion and displayed signs of power the A's lineup has lacked. His bat, combined with his steady defense and surprising speed, make him the frontrunner for the job heading into spring. Barton won't be able to throw a ball until January, so he'll already be faced with the task of playing catchup in camp, where he'll attempt to make a competition out of the starting role. The club maintains Chris Carter is still in this mix, too, but Carter's defense is too much of a liability for their liking.

Second base

This job may not be up for grabs for several years, barring any health setbacks to Jemile Weeks, who in convincing fashion took over the starting role in Mark Ellis' stead this season and proceeded to post numbers worthy of American League Rookie of the Year consideration. Weeks, a 2008 first-round pick, has continually improved on defense all the while grinding out

good at-bats and displaying an entertainingly speedy pace around the bases. That leaves the versatile Eric Sogard, along with Minor Leaguer Adrian Cardenas, as his two primary backups. Adam Rosales, who endured a frustrating 2011 campaign following rehab from right foot surgery, is at the top of the team's list of those with potential Super Two status, making his return iffy.

Shortstop

Cliff Pennington exited the 2011 season as the captain of the infield, and he'll enter next year in the same role, with the A's counting on him to not only lead a pack of young defenders stationed around him but use those same skills to garner a well-rounded leadership role in the clubhouse. His defense is expected to continually progress, and he'll look to capture consistency on the offensive side, where in recent years he's endured something of a roller-coaster effect. He also provides the team a good dose of speed anywhere in the lineup, which should again nicely complement Weeks' -- and, perhaps Crisp's -- presence at the top. How he performs in each of the areas will help dictate his paycheck going forward, as he's arbitration-eligible following next season. There was thought Grant Green might be overstepping Pennington's shoes by now, but the A's 2009 first-round pick has transitioned to center field.

Third base

Though the jury is still out on Scott Sizemore, the A's seem to like his potential as an everyday third baseman, particularly if improvement with his glove continues at a rapid pace. The front-office folks have been high on him for years, and it appears top third-base prospect Stephen Parker could still be a year away from being Major League ready. Given the lack of depth here, though, this could be a definite area for upgrade this offseason.

Outfield

Each of the three outfield slots are far from set, though the A's could change that quickly by reeling in free agents Josh Willingham and Crisp again. David DeJesus is also prepared to hit the open market, but Oakland isn't expected to attempt to keep him in green and gold based on his surprising flop in 2011. Ryan Sweeney is an option for right field in his stead, but the A's may again choose to use him off the bench and pencil Michael Taylor into the starting role. Jai Miller and Jermaine Mitchell are both Triple-A names to keep an eye on, as is the trade market, where Beane is likely to explore options that could bring in some power.

Designated hitter

This remains a long-term area of concern for an A's team that again ranked near the bottom in the Majors in homers. There's a strong possibility of a Matsui return, especially with Melvin -- perhaps his biggest supporter -- in the fold. But should the Japanese veteran depart, the A's will be left with a major hole to fill. Their hope was that Carter would be ready to grab hold of the job by now, but a sluggish start to his big league career hasn't helped that cause. If the club was forced to pluck from the free-agent pool, options are expected to be limited to either the elderly or the expensive.

Starting rotation

Trevor Cahill, under club control through 2015, and fellow youngster and 2011 All-Star Gio Gonzalez are geared to head a rotation facing a few health questions entering Spring Training -- namely Dallas Braden and Brett Anderson, who both underwent surgery this year. Braden is a possibility to be ready for Opening Day, but there are no guarantees -- including whether the A's will elect to even bring back the arbitration-eligible hurler. Anderson, meanwhile, isn't expected back until the second half, meaning the A's are likely to again rely on the likes of right-handers Guillermo Moscoso and Brandon McCarthy, who came out of the season as great

surprise stories. Southpaw Josh Outman could easily pitch his way into the mix by the time camp breaks, and the A's are likely to take a long look at Graham Godfrey as well. Right-hander Rich Harden, who exited the season healthy, will be a free agent and has expressed interest in staying in Oakland, so perhaps he comes back at a discounted cost.

Bullpen

The back end of the A's bullpen should again be dominating, with the stalwart arm of Grant Balfour returning to set things up for closer Andrew Bailey, who is arbitration eligible. Like Balfour, lefty Brian Fuentes is under contract through 2012, with a club option for '13. Though shaky at the start of the year, Fuentes turned in a nice second half in a steadier role under Melvin. Hard-throwing right-hander Fautino De Los Santos will be a significant presence in key situations and, if the A's wind up using Bailey as trade bait, has potential to be the ninth-inning guy. Michael Wuertz has a club option for '12, but his inconsistencies make his return an unlikely happening. Instead, Trystan Magnuson and Andrew Carignan should lend the A's a unique mix of right-handed talent, and the arbitration-eligible Joey Devine could be back if Oakland takes the risk on the injury-prone righty. Southpaw Craig Breslow is also arbitration-eligible for a second year, though he could end up serving as a trade piece. Rounding out the pack are lefty Jerry Blevins and right-hander Neil Wagner, who will at least attempt to make a competition out of whatever bullpen spots remain open come the start of camp.

Tampa Bay Rays show Oakland A's they can win on small budget

By: Glenn Dickey, San Francisco Examiner

Blame game: The A's ownership has done virtually nothing to improve its facilities, while driving away attendance by tarping off the upper deck and changing the FanFest. (Getty Images file photo)

The Tampa Bay Rays have exposed the A's ownership team of Lew Wolff and John Fisher. So have the Giants.

The A's official line is that they can't compete because of a bad stadium which keeps them from attracting top free agents and low attendance which forces them to keep their payroll low.

So, while the A's seem stuck in the subterranean area of the American League, the Rays — with the worst stadium in Major League Baseball and a payroll in the same low area as the A's — are in the American League playoffs, despite the disadvantage of playing in a division with the two richest clubs in Major League Baseball, the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox.

What's the difference between the Rays and the A's? One team is trying to win. Hint: It's not the A's.

Then, there's the comparison between the A's and the Giants.

When the ownership group surfaced in late 1992 to buy the Giants from Bob Lurie and stop a move to sell the team and move it to St. Petersburg (Lurie had already reached a tentative agreement with Tampa businessmen), the new ownership signed a deal with Major League Baseball that they would get a new stadium and in return would have exclusive territorial rights on the Peninsula and in San Jose.

Peter Magowan, who became managing general partner, quickly decided that the Giants would have to privately finance a park, and Larry Baer, just promoted to the head of the

organization, was put in charge of getting the financing for the park, much of it from Silicon Valley businesses.

The ownership group agreed to take losses while the team was still playing in Candlestick Park to build a competitive team for the new park. They did that, with a team that reached the World Series in 2002, the third season in the new park, and should have won it.

And, while they were at Candlestick, they also put a lot of money into refurbishing the place as best they could, better restrooms, more spacious concession areas.

In contrast, the Wolff/Fisher ownership has done nothing but pursue a strategy aimed at eliminating the Giants' territorial rights so they could move the A's to San Jose. The word carpetbagger comes to mind.

They have put absolutely no money into refurbishing the Coliseum. Even the much-maligned Yorks have done their best to improve the Candlestick facilities for 49ers games, not relying on the cash-strapped city to do that, but Wolff and Fisher have not followed either the Giants' or the 49ers' plans.

The Wolff/Fisher ownership seems to have a plan to discourage attendance, tarping off popular seating areas in the upper deck, changing the popular FanFest from a February celebration with players in Jack London Square to a limited affair before the opening game. Two years in a row, Wolff sent out media emails just before the start of the season saying he had no desire to stay in Oakland.

The Tampa Bay Rays have a lot of problems, but at least their fans know the owners are trying to win. A's fans know better about their owners.

A's GM expects to hear soon from commissioner's office about whether team can move to San Jose

By Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Athletics general manager Billy Beane expects to hear "very soon" from Commissioner Bud Selig about whether the club will be allowed to move south to San Jose and build a new ballpark.

The reigning World Series champion San Francisco Giants currently hold the territorial rights to San Jose and technology-rich Silicon Valley in Santa Clara County, where the A's hope to build a new ballpark and then relocate some 40 miles south of their current home.

"We've been told a number of times a decision was near," Beane said Thursday. "Over 2½ years we've been told it a number of times. This time I'm going to believe it. ... We expect some resolution of the situation very soon. That certainly would be helpful from my standpoint and everybody else's on the club to determine what direction we're going."

It's something owner Lew Wolff, Beane and the rest of the brass believe could transform the blue-collar franchise into a bigger spender based on increased revenue. San Francisco likely would fight to protect its turf, too, if Selig gives the go-ahead.

Major League Baseball spokesman Pat Courtney said the commissioner's office had no further update or comment at this stage. The Giants declined to comment as Selig has asked the two clubs not to publicly debate the issue.

"We hope the term 'very soon' is how we interpret very soon," Wolff said in a phone interview. "Sometimes Commissioner Selig's definition of very soon is different from Billy's and mine. We think we deserve a decision — even one we don't like — as soon as possible because it has affected our whole organization. It permeates all the plans. We need to know in our minds where we're headed."

Beane said the decision on where the A's play in the near future would affect how he approaches free agency this winter.

Also Thursday, Beane put to rest any speculation that he might depart for the Chicago Cubs' vacant GM job, saying, "I have a little trip planned but I will be here."

Beane signed manager Bob Melvin to a three-year contract last week.

"I certainly plan on being part of that commitment because I'm the one who gave it to him," Beane said.

Beane, the central figure in the current "Moneyball" movie starring Brad Pitt as the innovative GM, enters the offseason following a fifth straight year without a winning record or playoff berth by the A's (74-88) since being swept in the 2006 AL championship series by Detroit.

Ideally, Beane would hear a decision from MLB sometime in October before the start of free agency. It's unclear whether that will actually happen.

"If you know you're going to be building a new stadium in four years, it's one thing that nobody's shown better than what the Cleveland Indians did at the beginning of the '90s, the key to having a successful opening is to have a great team," Beane said. "If you've got a stadium in four years you probably would do everything you can to put yourself in position to have the best possible team, not just for one year but for a number of years going forward."

Wolff has been waiting for more than two years for longtime friend Selig to give him a yes or no on whether he can go ahead with his proposal.

Selig appointed a committee in March 2009 to evaluate the issue facing the Bay Area teams, yet he has provided no timetable for when he might announce a decision. Thus far it appears Selig doesn't want to make a decision that would anger the A's or Giants.

"We're in a little bit of a flux right now," said Beane, who has five potential free agents including the entire starting outfield of slugger Josh Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus.

For now, Wolff is pleased to hear about one decision: Beane's choice to stay put despite the restraints that come with running the A's. In his years as a successful real estate developer in Los Angeles, Wolff said he has never tried to hold back an employee.

"There's probably serious thought not just with the Cubs opening but also others," Wolff said. "I want what's best for Billy. I'm hoping Billy will continue here for a long, long time. I think Billy's done such a magnificent job and he knows the odds of the position he's in. We're challenged until we can get revenue. I hope Billy will stay the course."

Beane would be thrilled to see this project that is the A's through to a new ballpark.

Wolff, a friend of Selig's dating to their days as fraternity brothers at Wisconsin, is ready to break ground on a ballpark projected to cost between \$400 million and \$450 million — if and when he gets the OK to relocate. There are working drawings of the venue and an architect has been chosen. Wolff expects getting building permits to take about nine months, then the actual ballpark would require another two years to complete.

The 49-year-old Melvin grew up in the Bay Area and isn't going to complain about the aging, rundown Coliseum, a shared facility with the NFL's Oakland Raiders.

"Lew won't want to hear this, I kind of like the place," Melvin said. "I grew up here, I went to concerts, it's well-documented. I know that it's outdated and we need a new place."

Melvin took over for the fired Bob Geren in June and went 35-35 after the All-Star break and 47-52 overall while dealing with key injuries to the starting rotation. He expects changes on his coaching staff looking ahead to 2012.

"Hopefully we'll be able to address that sooner than later, and that's something we're working on as we speak," Melvin said.

Epstein and Beane distance themselves from Cubs speculation

Wish-list GM candidates seem unlikely to leave Red Sox and A's, respectively

By Paul Sullivan, Chicago Tribune reporter

A spectacular collapse, an unbelievable comeback and a Hollywood box office hit all could factor into the Cubs' general manager search, potentially leaving the Cubs without three "A-list" candidates.

Red Sox GM Theo Epstein and the A's Billy Beane both shrugged off questions about the Cubs' GM opening in separate news conferences Thursday, while the Rays' Andrew Friedman was focusing on his team's playoff opener Friday in Texas.

All three are expected to be on the Cubs' wish list of potential replacements for Jim Hendry. Chairman Tom Ricketts' search process already is underway, but he has declined comment on it.

Ricketts has reached out to Friedman, according to Sports Illustrated. But unlike Epstein and Beane, Friedman is unavailable to talk now as the Rays earned an American League wild-card playoff berth with a walk-off victory in their final game after trailing the Red Sox by nine in early September.

One day after the Red Sox's season ended, Epstein referred to Cubs' rumors as "just speculation."

"The process we're going to undertake (with ownership) is identifying all the issues that need

addressing, taking a hard look at ourselves and seeing whether we're the people to address them," Epstein said of himself, manager Terry Francona and the coaching staff.

Epstein was considered a long shot to leave Boston before the collapse, and those odds may have increased because he would be leaving his organization at a low ebb.

Meanwhile, the movie "Moneyball" has become a critical and financial success. Beane, who is played by Brad Pitt in the film, appears unlikely to leave an A's organization that helped turn him into a movie character and downplayed Cubs' GM speculation Thursday.

"I have a little trip planned next week," he told reporters. "But other than that, yes I plan on being here."

Beane is hoping MLB gives the A's permission to relocate and build a new ballpark in San Jose. He's signed through 2014 and has a small ownership stake in the A's.

Asked on Wednesday if he had seen the movie, Ricketts laughed.

"I will," he said. "I hear it's a good movie."