

Oakland A's GM Billy Beane, Post-Moneyball, Visits Athletics Nation - Part I

by Tyler Bleszinski, Athletics Nation 10/5/2011

It's been quite a month for Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane. He was the subject of a movie that's come in second at the box office two weeks in a row (twice to children's movies). There has been persistent rumors that Beane is the main candidate to take over the vacant Chicago Cubs GM position - and Jenkins also wrote that Beane could even consider an Angels move (speculation on his part which Beane isn't big on).

That being said, Beane's baseball team had another rough season. Despite many people believing the A's had the potential to at LEAST be a .500 ballclub, they wound up in basically the same place they've been the last few seasons, out of the playoffs.

Billy took some time out of his ridiculously busy schedule to talk with me for close to two hours. What you'll see here and over the next two days is the transcription of that interview. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did conducting the interview.

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*Tyler Bleszinski: I'll get to Moneyball in a little bit, but obviously this is for the A's audience. I want to chat about how the season has unfolded. It's been a rough season, I think more so than most people probably predicted. So many experts predicted that the team would be one of the surprises of 2011, and it didn't seem to materialize. In your view, what happened?*

Billy Beane: I think the challenging thing we have here is that everything has to go almost perfectly and this is a team that was, based on the previous year, relying on a foundation of 1) pitching and 2) defense. And I can remember really the exact date - the day after shoulder surgery. We had Dallas (Braden) go down the previous week and then (Brandon) McCarthy and Tyson (Ross) go down on back-to-back days, if you recall. It was against Minnesota. And then, I think it was a week and a half later, is when Brett (Anderson) went down for the entire year. So, you lose those four stars and you look back on where we were on that date, even after losing Dallas, I think we were a game out or tied for first. I think we had beaten the Angels. We had a big game against the Angels and I think that tied us for first. Even then when we weren't hitting - but because of the way the team was structured, because of the defense and the pitching, we're still there. And the hope was that the hitting would come around. But when the foundation on which the team is built upon, that crumbles, you know the best laid plans sort of go to waste.

*TB: You seem to surprisingly get some good contributions from unexpected sources though. For example, Moscoso came in and he pitched well, and some of those other guys. So the pitching didn't really seem to be that much of an issue, even though you lost so many talented guys.*

BB: Yeah, I would agree with that. And as I mentioned, the defense too. Even though we had some good things happen over the year. In our market and certainly the way we put the team together, one is linked to the other. And Ellie (Mark Ellis) goes down and was ultimately traded. Kouz (Kevin Kouzmanoff) struggled and eventually wound up being sent down. We made the trade for Sizemore. Then Barton was another huge factor for us. I mean, Daric got out of the gate very slowly and never really got going offensively and he was also an important part defensively. He's arguably one of the best first defensive basemen in the game. There was a brief time when the team really struggled. In fact, it was right there up until the end of May and the beginning of June and that was ultimately when we made the managerial change. That was the most difficult part of the year. When you lose guys, when you lose a Brett it puts more pressure on a Gio and that puts more pressure on a Cahill and we didn't get Rich Harden back until July 1<sup>st</sup>. When Rich came back I think it provided us with a shot in the arm. But when you take one or two links out it stresses out the other parts. Ironically, what ended up happening is after we lost some of our pitching, we actually started swinging the bats pretty well, or at least to the level we somewhat expected. I don't think anyone had any illusion this was a great offensive club, but we thought it was enough to support the

pitching. The other thing too is that you miss Bailey for the first 53 games and while I think by and large they kind of held together there, we did have some tough losses where if Andrew had been there, it might have been a different story.

*TB: You mentioned both the bullpen situation in the beginning of the year and you also mentioned the managerial change, but did the Brian Fuentes situation - his coming out publicly - have any impact on the decision that you had regarding letting Bob Geren go?*

BB: No, and I think it's easy to point to that but I don't think you make a decision on that level based on emotion. It's not how I would make a decision in a position like that and it wouldn't be a great way to do business. I had conversations with Bob at different points during that time period, as we were considering a change. And so, the fact that the comment came out and the timing afterward, is just more coincidence than anything.

*TB: What made you decide that that was the right time to let go of Bob, because I think rarely in your tenure, if ever, had you let go of a manager mid-season. So what made you decide that was the time?*

BB: I think when you are at the point when the focus becomes so much on the manager's office and away from the field, I think you've lost the plot and you need to redirect it to really what is the important part of the game, which is what happens on the playing field. Once that momentum starts to happen, it is very difficult to turn it around. Particularly with some of the injuries we had and the cards we were dealt at the time, I just didn't see that momentum shifting back and the focus going back to the field. I don't have any experience in it, but it seemed at the time that this was the right thing to do right now.

*TB: It's no secret that you're really close with Bob Geren. How tough was it for you to fire him and let him go?*

BB: Well listen, it's not easy letting anybody go. I mean, regardless of your relationship, I think that anybody who enjoys that part of decision making in business, there's probably something wrong with them. The difficult part for me was having somebody I consider one of my closest friends, somebody that I have as much respect for as anybody, going through the criticisms which in some cases I felt were very unfair, but he knows it comes with the territory, as do I. Because we have such a good relationship, we always had open communication. So it wasn't a situation where I just popped into his office one day and said, "Hey, we're making a change today and that's it." I have and continue to have such a good relationship with Bob that it's a subject that we could bring up and it wasn't really uncomfortable for either one of us.

*TB: You obviously think that Bob Melvin has done such a good job taking over since you rewarded him with a three-year deal. What has he done to make you think that he's the right long-term solution for the team?*

BB: Well, I think that one of the things he did do, was that he shifted the focus back onto the field. I do believe that he is an outstanding communicator. Communication comes in many different forms from the manager's office. It's communicating with players, communicating with the press; he's the daily representative for the team to the fans, and to the front office and even to the ownership. And Bob (Melvin) came with that reputation and I think in my eyes, it was even better than advertised. I've really enjoyed working with him and I think the rest of the front office has as well. The players enjoy playing for him and I think the communication that he brings is unique.

*TB: How do you figure out - is there a metric that you guys have outside of the really simple one of wins - but is there a metric to figure out whether your manager is doing a good job? Do you sit down at some point and review every decision they make in a game and then give him a ranking, or is it strictly the wins and losses? How do you guys go about judging that?*

BB: We don't have a specific metric for evaluating a manager. I've always been somewhat protective of our managers here in that you ultimately have to have good players. If you don't have the talent, then it is very difficult to do the most important thing, which is winning games. That is the metric by which we are all judged and certainly managers are as well. But ultimately you have to have the players to get it done.

*TB: Speaking of having the correct players and everything, you've talked about embarking on kind of a - I know you hate the "rebuilding" term - but you did embark on a rebuilding of this team. And I think the aim was really toward 2011/2012, possibly for the team to be back where it was 2001/2002 days. Where do you think the rebuilding process stands right now and do you think the team is that far away from being that powerhouse again?*

BB: In this market, to be a consistent playoff contender, you really have to have a group of young players that have come to your system and it has to be on both sides, not just the pitching. It has to be on the offensive side as well. I think we've proven that just having the best pitching staff in the league is not going to necessarily get you a division. And so you need it for both sides. Most of it has to come through the farm system. Every once in a while you get a little lucky on a trade, or a young player that emerges that you didn't expect. But for us to do that it takes time. I think in some respects, we've been blessed and cursed by just being mediocre. The impact-type of player will probably come through the draft. And by and large, that player comes at the top of the draft. And even if you look back at the earlier part of the decade, a large part of the core of that team were basically top ten picks. Where you take a Mulder, you take a Chavez, you take a Zito, those are all top 10 guys. I think we've drafted 10<sup>th</sup> - is the highest we've drafted since we drafted Zito back in 99 and that was Michael Choice. I mean, it's very difficult to attract star players, not just from a compensation standpoint but for other reasons which are well documented and there's no sense belaboring that point. So really the only way to get them is through the draft. And certainly through the draft, you're going to have guys that are second or third round picks that come out of nowhere and turn into stars. You take like a Mike Stanton from Florida who certainly has that ability. But if you're really examining the draft and looking at the real sort of high-upside premium, premium guys, by and large they're coming in the top three, four, five picks of the draft.

*TB: As a GM, is there ever a temptation to ...*

BB: No, you can ask the question - I know exactly what you're going to ask. And I say this because we sit here now. Listen, you know what? I was so happy that we won yesterday and I want to win today, and I want to win tomorrow, and I want to win Wednesday, ok? Bobby Melvin feels the same way. I want to win every day, you know? But once again there is a curse of mediocrity from a draft position. I mean, I think you see it in the NFL a little bit. Going 8 and 8 in the NFL isn't really you know - you feel good about being .500, but there you are come May, drafting in the middle. That's just it, that's just the way it is. But the fact of the matter is I don't think I get to this position, or Bobby Melvin gets to his position unless they want to win every day. And I was happier than happy when we won yesterday (against the Angels). We scored in the 9<sup>th</sup> to come back and beat a team going for the playoffs. I want to win all three games (starting in Seattle). That's just the deal. There is never a day we win that I'm not in a good mood. But once again, it is what it is. You asked about a rebuilding mode and listen the biggest challenge we have right now is putting together a business plan. And I've said it more publicly lately and will continue to do so, whether we're staying in Oakland or going to San Jose. At some point, we have to have some clarification about our situation so at least we can put together a business plan that lasts longer than six months.

*TB: Do you think you're any closer to getting an answer on that front?*

BB: Yes, I do. Do I have any inside knowledge? No, because it's been, as Lew (Wolff) points out 2.63 years (laughs) - but I'll just round it off to 2.6. All the information is there and we're either going to get a decision or there are other mechanisms we can use to at least get to a decision.

*TB: Does Bill Neukom leaving the Giants have any impact - because he seems to be one of the biggest anti-A's to San Jose force out there - so does that have any impact on...*

BB: I don't know to be honest with you. I have never really thought of an individual being able to be THE main reason.

*TB: Brandon McCarthy obviously had a great season and Rich Harden, while it wasn't exactly stellar statistically, seems to have bounced back and been able to remain mostly healthy, at least from what we can see on the field - I don't know what goes on behind the scenes - but how interested are you in bringing one or both of those guys back, considering that, you know, Dallas Braden is on his way back, and Brett won't be back for a while so obviously you have a couple of holes that need to be filled in the rotation? And as you learned this year, obviously pitching depth is an extremely important thing. How interested are you in bringing those guys back?*

BB: Good question for the time of year, that's for sure. Now Brandon will be back, we've got him for another year, he's arbitration eligible. So, it's easy for me to say that yes, Brandon will be back. He's only a four plus this year so we have another year of control. He'll be five-plus arbitration eligible next year. In the case of Rich or the other free agents, it's kind of what I alluded to in my previous statement, in that a lot of what we do will depend on what is going to happen here. And, as I said, we expect an answer very soon. And, if you're going to be one place you're going to do one thing, and if you're going somewhere else, you may do another thing. And quite frankly, I think we're all sort of at the point now where listen,

we need a decision so that we can put together a business plan depending on where we're at - whether it's here (in Oakland) or whether it's down the road (in San Jose). But until that decision comes, I'm not sure we can answer the other ones.

*TB: What's your level of frustration right now with how long this has gone on? I've talked to Lew and Lew clearly is beyond words frustrated when it comes to this stuff, but I wanted to gauge where you're at.*

BB: Well I'm not turning over desks in my office or anything (laughs). But listen, I would sort of echo Lew's feelings and everyone else's feelings. Yeah, I think I was a bit frustrated because I think as a fan, and the same goes for anybody in the front office or anyone that's working here, you would like to, at least, put together a long-term plan and the inability to do that... You know hope is part of the fan's mindset, but it's also part of my mindset and as long as you feel like you're building toward something special I think that's what gets you excited about coming to the office. But when you're in a complete state of limbo, that's where the frustration level peaks.

### **Vitters homers twice in AFL opener**

#### **Choice, Gose go deep as Phoenix claims slugfest victory**

By Paige Schector / MLB.com

The home runs were flying out of Phoenix Municipal Stadium as the 20th season of the Arizona Fall League got underway Tuesday.

Former first-rounder Josh Vitters smacked two of the game's seven long balls and plated five runs, but his Mesa Solar Sox fell to the Phoenix Desert Dogs, 12-8.

"The ball was flying today. It's a good way to get the season started," said Vitters, who was picked third overall by the Cubs in 2007. "I'm just trying to get back in swing of things. It felt pretty good for the first game back."

Vitters is something of an AFL veteran, having played in the league for the past three years.

"I was excited," he said about returning to Arizona. "I've been really excited to be here the last few years. It's great to play at this level. You know you're going to face good pitching every day."

Vitters will be working on defense at several different slots during the fall.

"I'm going to be playing a lot of different positions -- corner infield and corner outfield," he said. "It'll be good for me to get that experience. It'll definitely help me become more versatile on defense."

Indians prospect Jesus Aguilar gave Phoenix a 2-0 lead in the first inning with a two-run homer off Cole DeVries (Braves).

Vitters' three-run homer capped a five-run third for Mesa. Robbie Grossman (Pirates) also hit a two-run shot off Phoenix starter Murphy Smith (A's).

The Desert Dogs added another run in the third on a fielder's choice before collecting six more in the fourth when Anthony Gose (Blue Jays) ripped a two-run bases-loaded double, Corban Joseph hit a three-run homer and fellow Yankees prospect Ronnier Mustelier added a two-out RBI triple.

Phoenix wasn't done, though -- Gose led off the sixth with a homer to center off Phil Irwin (Pirates), and two batters later, A's slugger Michael Choice tacked on a solo shot to left. The Dogs added a run in the eighth when Joseph scored on an error by Twins shortstop Brian Dozier.

Smith lasted 2 2/3 innings in the start, allowing three runs on three hits on a walk. He struck out two.

DeVries was charged with three runs on five hits over 2 2/3 innings for Mesa.

"It's definitely more about working on your own game than the regular season is," Vitters said. "But you you still want to win and we definitely want to win the whole thing."

Vitters is already familiar with most of his teammates, some of whom he's played against and others whose names he has heard before.

"We've playing pretty well together so far in the practices and in the first game," he said. "Hopefully we'll do a little better. We did get the loss."