

A's News Clips, Thursday, December 17, 2011

Catching up on a quiet (so far) A's offseason

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 11/16/2011 6:31pm

Hello everybody ... long time, no blog.

I've been doubling up lately with Cal football coverage and that's taken the lion's share of my time. But "Inside the A's" has been neglected long enough, so I wanted to drop in. Not that there's been a ton of A's news to report anyway this offseason. By now you've caught the drift that the A's won't be as aggressive going after players as they were last winter (unless those acquisitions come in the form of prospects via trade). You might have seen this story from ESPN's Buster Olney regarding the A's being sellers, largely because their stadium situation remains unsettled. If the A's get approval to build a ballpark in San Jose, we know that GM Billy Beane plans to rebuild with younger players, hoping to have a nucleus ready to blossom when that ballpark opens for business. If they were to be denied, it's possible they might open the checkbook a little more. And what if the issue continues to drag through the winter with no word from MLB? The indications I've gotten are that the A's won't spend aggressively as long as they remain in limbo.

Olney wrote that he could see the A's trading starting pitcher Gio Gonzalez and closer Andrew Bailey. Of the two, I see Bailey as the stronger possibility to go. If the A's don't see themselves contending in 2012, then a dominant closer becomes less of a necessity. And Bailey could fetch a nice haul given he's just 27 and under team control for the next three seasons. A front-of-the-rotation starter such as Gonzalez is more of a foundation piece and much tougher for a team to replace. Having said that, if a team knocks Beane's socks off with an offer for Gonzalez, I think he would certainly pull the trigger. The Marlins are looking for starting pitching as they move into their new ballpark in Miami, and this report out of Florida says they're eyeing Gonzalez, who is from the Miami area and would be a great addition from a baseball and marketing standpoint. The question is whether the Marlins (or any team) have the pieces to pry Gonzalez away.

Here's some key dates to keep an eye on:

Nov. 23: This is the last day for teams to offer salary arbitration to a Type "A" or "B" free agent in order to get compensation should that player sign elsewhere. The A's have decisions to make on outfielders Josh Willingham and David DeJesus. Willingham is a Type A, meaning the A's stand to get a first-round pick and a sandwich pick (between the first and second rounds) should he be offered arbitration and sign elsewhere. DeJesus is Type B, meaning the A's would get a sandwich pick if he's offered arb and signs elsewhere. The risk for teams, of course, is that a player unexpectedly accepts arbitration, and the team is stuck paying a large salary to a player it didn't expect to have around. I see no such risk with Willingham. He's likely to land a multi-year deal somewhere and would seemingly want to keep his options open. DeJesus might be more willing to accept arbitration, so unless the A's feel good about him returning, they have a decision on whether to offer it. Sometimes a team and player will reach a gentleman's agreement that the player won't accept arbitration if offered. I'm not sure if that's being discussed with DeJesus.

Dec. 5-8: The four-day event known as the winter meetings, where reporters bump into each other as they walk with noses buried in cell phones, monitoring Twitter. The A's are often subject of rumors at the meetings, but usually this period is a time for them to lay the groundwork for future moves. Now that I've said that, they're bound to pull a blockbuster there. Just you watch ...

Dec. 12: The deadline to tender contracts to arbitration-eligible players. It's an important day because any arb-eligible player not offered a contract is cut loose and becomes a free agent. The A's have 10 players eligible for arbitration – Gonzalez, Bailey, relievers Craig Breslow and Joey Devine, starters Dallas Braden and Brandon McCarthy, first baseman Daric Barton, outfielder Ryan Sweeney, infielder Adam Rosales and catcher Landon Powell. Beane said at his season-ending press conference he expects all will be tendered contracts, but we won't know until deadline day.

A's ponder prospects to protect from Rule 5

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Aside from the removal of a handful of free agents, the A's roster has seen little action this offseason.

Not much is expected before the club's stadium issue is resolved, but the organization does face a few decisions this week regarding which prospects to protect from the Rule 5 Draft.

Those choices need to be made by Friday's deadline, when 40-man rosters must be set. Currently, the A's have no openings on their roster, but they could decide to remove a few players to open slots -- perhaps a couple of arbitration-eligible players who will not be tendered contracts -- to protect prospects who are Rule 5-eligible.

Last year, the A's were forced to add a bundle of prospects to the roster, including popular names Michael Taylor, Sean Doolittle and Adrian Cardenas. This time around, the list is limited, because Jemile Weeks, Tyson Ross, Jai Miller, Anthony Recker and Graham Godfrey are already protected.

Still, the A's have more than 30 players who qualify for December's Rule 5 Draft -- to be held at the Winter Meetings in Dallas -- if left exposed. Those eligible include players who signed at age 19 or older who have spent three full seasons in the organization, as well as those 18 or younger who have spent four seasons in the organization.

Below is a look at a handful of notable A's players who are Rule 5-eligible:

Travis Banwart: Unclaimed in last year's Rule 5 Draft, Banwart is among the organization's crop of young starting pitching. The 25-year-old right-hander, originally a fourth-round selection in the 2007 Draft, finished the 2011 season with a 9-9 record and 4.63 ERA in 27 games (25 starts) for Triple-A Sacramento. He struck out 120 and walked just 46 in 149 2/3 innings, marking the third straight season in which he's tallied at least 145 innings.

Jared Lansford: The son of former A's third baseman Carney Lansford, Jared was once considered a top relief prospect upon being drafted in the second round in 2005, but his stock has since dipped after a few mediocre seasons. Most of his 2011 season was spent with Double-A Midland, where he fanned 48 and walked 27 while posting a 4.54 ERA and 1.44 WHIP in 79 1/3 innings. Jared's brother, Josh, is also a pitcher in the A's organization and Rule 5-eligible.

Josh Horton: Horton, Oakland's second-round selection in the 2007 Draft, was a non-roster invitee to big league camp this year before being awarded a spot on Sacramento's roster. But the 25-year-old infielder endured a rough season at Triple-A, not only on the field -- where he hit just .217 in 26 games in a bench role -- but away from it, as he suffered a pair of hamstring injuries.

Tyler Ladendorf: Part of the 2009 trade that sent Orlando Cabrera to Minnesota, Ladendorf has since performed well defensively but struggled at the plate, where he hit just .224 while spending most of the 2011 season with Midland. Ladendorf's path to the Majors could ultimately resemble Adam Rosales', given his versatility as a middle infielder and center fielder.

Jermaine Mitchell: After three subpar seasons, Mitchell put together a breakthrough 2011 campaign, posting a .332 average with 15 home runs, 16 triples and 78 RBIs between Midland and Sacramento. His solid defensive skills and versatility, combined with his offensive potential, seemingly make him a potential outfield option in 2012 for the A's, who are preparing to replace Josh Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus. But Mitchell underwent knee surgery recently and likely won't be ready by season's start, leaving his status as a potential roster add in question.

Petey Paramore: Paramore, a switch-hitting catcher whom the A's made their third-round pick in 2008, has displayed good skills behind the plate but hasn't found a groove offensively. He began the season at Midland but hit just .192 in 45 games before being demoted to Class A Stockton, where he hit .235 with seven home runs in 31 games. Paramore has plenty of work to do, especially with the likes of Recker and Josh Donaldson ahead of him.

Shane Peterson: Peterson was one of three prospects the A's acquired in the 2009 Matt Holliday trade, and he is the only one remaining in the organization. Peterson, who plays first base and all three outfield positions, split his time this year with Midland and Sacramento, collecting a .274 average -- .260 in 59 games at Double-A, .293 in 46 contests at the Triple-A level -- with nine home runs and 59 RBIs.

James Simmons: Oakland's 2007 top pick finally made his way back to the mound this year after sitting out all of 2010 following shoulder surgery. Simmons, 25, threw 47 2/3 innings (all but five coming at Stockton) and compiled a 4.91 ERA while splitting his time between the rotation and bullpen. Given the opportunity to pitch an entire season next year, Simmons could again find himself in the mix of can't-miss A's prospects.

Justin Souza: Souza missed the first half of the 2011 season while recovering from an elbow injury but still managed to tally 63 innings between Midland and Sacramento this year, posting a 3.71 ERA in 40 relief appearances. The right-hander was originally a ninth-round pick by the Mariners in 2006 and was on the A's 40-man roster in 2010 before being sidelined by injury.

Other intriguing Rule 5-eligible players in the A's organization include: outfielder Jeremy Barfield, right-hander Bruce Billings, infielder Dusty Coleman, right-hander Ryan Doolittle, right-hander Brett Hunter, right-hander Jose Guzman, left-hander Julio Ramos and outfielder Matt Sulentic.

Pridie signs Minor League deal with A's

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's bolstered their outfield depth on Wednesday, signing Jason Pridie to a Minor League contract.

Formerly a second-round pick by the Rays in the 2002 Draft, Pridie spent the 2011 season with the Mets, hitting .231 with four home runs and 20 RBIs in 208 at-bats spanning 101 games before he was removed from their 40-man roster last week.

Pridie, who turned 28 in October, gives the A's yet another option in a depleted outfield that likely won't see the returns of free agents Josh Willingham, Coco Crisp and David DeJesus. He's widely regarded as an excellent defender and spent much of his time in New York manning center field, but his arm strength and versatility lend the A's the choice of playing him in left or right, as well.

Pridie enters an outfield mix that already includes familiar face Ryan Sweeney, along with youngsters Michael Taylor, Jai Miller, Chris Carter and Cedric Hunter, who was claimed off waivers by the A's in late October.

"The outfield is obviously an issue because of the fact that all our guys are potentially going away, including [Hideki] Matsui," manager Bob Melvin said this week. "That's an area we're going to have to take a hard look at. We'll see what we have internally and then look at possible other options."

Search for hitting coach continues for A's

OAKLAND -- The A's search for a hitting coach returned to square one on Wednesday, when top target Mike Aldrete was named St. Louis' bench coach.

Oakland received permission to speak with Aldrete -- St. Louis' assistant hitting coach this past season -- after the Cardinals won the World Series, and he was in close contact with A's manager and friend Bob Melvin in the following weeks.

"We really felt like there was a great shot we'd get Mike," Melvin said. "It was very close with us, but obviously when you get another opportunity like that in a place he's familiar with where they value him, I understand the decision. Now we'll look at other choices."

The A's are expected to continue their search outside of the organization, and there is no timeline when a decision will be made. It marks the only remaining coaching vacancy for Oakland, which chose not to renew hitting coach Gerald Perry's contract at season's end.

Melvin and Aldrete played three seasons together with the Giants, and Aldrete -- like newly named A's bench coach Chip Hale -- is a California native. He served as Melvin's first-base coach in Seattle in 2004 and also as his hitting coach in Arizona during the 2005 and 2006 seasons.

A's Ortiz goes yard twice in Desert Dogs win

Fellow farmhand Coleman homers in his second straight game

By Andrew Pentis / Special to MLB.com

Moments after the last pitch of the Phoenix Desert Dogs' penultimate Arizona Fall League game, catcher Ryan Ortiz reflected on his two-homer, five-RBI effort as succinctly as possible.

"This," the A's farmhand said, "was a good way to go out."

The same could be said of another Oakland prospect -- Dusty Coleman also parked one and fell a double shy of the cycle -- as the Desert Dogs defeated the AFL title game-bound Salt River Rafters, 12-7, on Wednesday afternoon.

Shortly before Coleman tripled home Phoenix's seventh run, Ortiz struck a two-run blast on an 0-2 pitch by reliever Rob Waite (Tigers) to give the Dogs a 6-3 advantage in the sixth.

"I was really just trying to make contact," said Ortiz, who saw a cutter, a fastball and finally a slider. "I was choking up, just trying to put bat on ball."

The Dogs catcher then launched his second long ball in as many innings, connecting on a 2-2 pitch by Steve Ames (Dodgers) that also brought home Corban Joseph (Yankees). Ortiz came to the plate with two on and two out in the eighth and singled in Joseph again to complete his first three-hit game this autumn.

"Throughout the Fall League, I have been happy with my at-bats. It's tough playing every third game," said Ortiz, who batted .310 and drove in a dozen runs in his 15 games in Arizona. "I just wanted to play more games, get my catching right and my arm healthy."

The Oregon State product, Oakland's sixth-round draftee in 2009, underwent surgery on his throwing arm last year, then batted .277 in 75 games split between Class A Advanced Stockton and Double-A Midland this season. His .340 average for the Ports sank to .237 with the RockHounds, though it was his first Texas League trial.

"Overall, it was a good year," he said, "getting [my arm] back to where it was. In Stockton, I started out really well, and at Midland, I struggled at the end."

Coleman, with whom Ortiz played at Stockton this season, mashed a 1-1 pitch by starter Stephen Fife (Dodgers) in the third to tie the score, 3-3. The shortstop also went yard **in Tuesday's victory** over the Surprise Saguaros.

Slotted second in the lineup Wednesday, Coleman had singled in his first-inning at-bat, leaving him a double shy of the cycle. The 28th-round draftee in 2008 grounded out toward the mound in the eighth.

"We all knew it," Ortiz said of the cycle bid. "We were all cheering for him. We told him to round first and go to second."

In his Fall League debut Oct. 5, Coleman went 2-for-4. After registering a third hit -- a two-run homer -- in his next game Oct. 8, he endured an 0-for-35 slump that lasted 10 games. Those struggles made this week all the more enjoyable.

"It's awesome," Ortiz said. "He doesn't get to play every day, [having been] on the taxi squad. When he hit the home run today, everyone was pumped for him."

Dogs starting pitcher T.J. McFarland (3-0) fanned a season-high seven over four innings. He allowed three runs -- one earned -- on five hits, including a two-run double to Jay Austin (Astros) in the opening inning. Ortiz said McDonald's five groundouts were in no small part due to his sparkling sinker.

Austin finished the game 3-for-5 with three RBIs. Another Houston prospect, first baseman Kody Hinze blasted a three-run shot in the ninth.

Fife (1-6) gave up four runs on six hits and exited with two outs in the third.

Green Garners Honors As Topps' All-Star

MIDLAND, TX - Green's selection marks the fourth consecutive season in which a member of the RockHounds has been named to the Topps Double-A All-Star Team.

The previous selections were outfielder Corey Brown (now with the Washington Nationals) in 2010, first baseman Chris Carter in 2009 and pitcher Vin Mazzaro in 2008.

Carter (who has since reached the Major Leagues with Oakland) was also the 2009 Texas League Player of the Year and Mazzaro (now with the Kansas City Royals) was the TL Pitcher of the Year in 2008 (he remains the only pitcher in franchise history to earn that honor).

Green finished the 2011 season appearing with Sacramento in the (Triple-A) Pacific Coast League playoffs (hitting .296), and was then invited to the prestigious Arizona Fall League, which features some of Minor League Baseball's top talent. There, Grant hit .288, with five home runs and 19 RBI in 21 games. *Following Release courtesy of Minor League Baseball*

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - A quartet of players, Paul Goldschmidt, Josh Satin, Mike Trout and Brad Peacock, who began their seasons in Double-A and wound up in the Majors are among the 10 players chosen for the Topps Double-A All-Star Team. The best performances in all Minor League Baseball classifications are again being honored by the Topps Company of New York, N.Y., in conjunction with Minor League Baseball.

GRANT GREEN (24) of Anaheim, Calif., ranked second in the Texas League with 154 hits and third with 33 doubles. The Midland RockHounds shortstop, a Topps Class-A All-Star last year, was 10th in the circuit with a .291 batting average and 76 runs. The Oakland Athletics selected Green in the first round (13th overall) in 2009 out of the University of Southern California.

Paul Goldschmidt (24) of The Woodlands, Texas led Double-A in on-base percentage (.435) slugging percentage (.626) and OPS (1.061). The Mobile BayBears first baseman's 30 home runs, 82 walks and .996 fielding percentage were tops in the Southern League. The Arizona Diamondbacks promoted their eighth round pick out of Texas State in 2009, who was a Class A All-Star last year, to the Majors on August 1.

Josh Satin (26) of Hidden Hills, Calif., led the Eastern League in on-base percentage (.423) and OPS (.962). The Binghamton Mets second baseman finished seventh in Double-A with his .325 batting average and 10th with a .528 slugging percentage. Satin was promoted to Triple-A on July 22 and ended his season by playing in 15 games for the New York Mets. He was a sixth round selection of the Mets in 2008 out of the University of California-Berkeley.

Will Middlebrooks (23) of Wake Village, Texas, ranked fourth in the Eastern League in slugging (.520) and RBIs (80). The Portland Sea Dogs third baseman finished sixth in the league in OPS (.865) and eighth with a .302 average. The Boston Red Sox, who took Middlebrooks in the fifth round in 2007 out of high school, promoted him to Triple-A on August 19.

Alex Castellanos (25) of Miami, Fla., finished third in Double-A with 102 runs and fourth in slugging (.573) and OPS (.958). He played in 93 games for the Springfield Cardinals before being traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers on July 31 for Rafael Furcal and cash. The outfielder then played in 32 games for the Chattanooga Lookouts. He hit a combined .320 with 23 homers and 85 runs batted in with the two Double-A clubs. The St. Louis Cardinals drafted Castellanos in the 10th round in 2008 out of Belmont-Abbey College (NC).

Starling Marte (23) of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, led the Eastern League and finished third in the classification with a .332 batting average. His 91 runs and 38 doubles for the Altoona Curve ranked among the top seven in Double-A. The Pittsburgh Pirates signed the outfielder as a non-drafted free agent in January 2007.

Mike Trout (20) of Millville, N.J., ranked among the top five in Double-A batting average (.326), on-base percentage (.414) and OPS (.958). The Arkansas Travelers outfielder, who was named to the Topps Class A All-Star Team last season, was seventh in the classification with a .574 slugging percentage. The Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, who drafted Trout in the first round (25th overall) in 2009 out of high school, called him up to the Majors on July 8.

Travis d'Arnaud (22) of Long Beach, Calif., finished in the top 10 in Double-A average (.311) and slugging (.582). The New Hampshire Fisher Cats catcher's 21 homers and 78 RBIs ranked fourth and sixth, respectively, in the Eastern League. The Toronto Blue Jays acquired d'Arnaud as part of the Roy Halladay trade with Philadelphia in December 2009.

Brad Peacock (23) of Palm Beach, Fla., went 10-2 with a 2.01 ERA for the Harrisburg Senators. The right-hander was leading the Eastern League in wins when the Washington Nationals, who drafted him in the 41st round in 2006 out of high school, promoted him to Triple-A in early July. Peacock ended his season by going 2-0 with a 0.75 ERA in three appearances with the Nationals.

Cory Burns (24) of Glendale, Ariz., led Double-A with 35 saves, 11 more than anyone else in the classification. The Akron Aeros right-hander had two stretches of recording saves in seven consecutive appearances, including Akron's first seven games of the season. He struck out 70 and only walked 15 in 59.2 innings. The Cleveland Indians took Burns in the eighth round in 2009 out of the University of Arizona.

Baseball: Houston Astros might be headed to American League West

Associated Press

Major League Baseball told Houston businessman Jim Crane it would not approve his purchase of the Astros unless he agreed to move the team to the American League, The Associated Press has learned.

Crane was forced to agree to move along the sale, a person familiar with the negotiations said Wednesday on condition of anonymity because no official announcement has been made by MLB or the Astros. Approval of the sale could be announced as early as Thursday at a meeting of baseball executives in Milwaukee.

Crane reportedly agreed to the move in exchange for a drop in the sales price valued earlier this year at \$680 million. The person who spoke to the AP could not confirm the sales price.

The MLB Players Association believes two 15-team leagues would create a more proportionate schedule and has urged baseball to make the switch. With schedules for next season already completed, the earliest such a move could take place is 2013.

Time is running out for approval of the deal: Crane has said that his offer, which was announced on May 16, expires Nov. 30.

An MLB spokesman did not immediately return messages seeking comment, though commissioner Bud Selig addressed an Astros' move during a Twitter chat Monday.

"For 15/15 realignment, Houston would be the team moving to AL West. Would create more fairness in baseball," Selig wrote via the Colorado Rockies Twitter feed.

Managers of the year: Kirk Gibson and Joe Maddon won Manager of the Year awards -- one for overseeing a worst-to-first turnaround that lasted all season, the other after a frantic playoff push in the final month. Gibson was a clear choice in the N.L. for guiding the Arizona Diamondbacks to the West title. Gibson was honored in his first full season as a big league manager. Maddon won the A.L. award for the second time. He helped the Tampa Bay Rays overcome a nine-game deficit to beat out Boston for the wild-card spot on the last day.

Cardinals: New manager Mike Matheny is keeping most of Tony La Russa's coaching staff. Hitting coach Mark McGwire and pitching coach Dave Duncan are staying on for 2012, but first base coach Dave McKay and bench coach Joe Pettini were both dropped from their positions. Bullpen coach Derek Lilliquist returns, and assistant hitting coach Mike Aldrete was elevated to bench coach. The A's had shown interest in hiring Aldrete as their hitting coach.

Dodgers: The team sued Fox Sports, alleging the television company is trying to "interfere with the sale of the Dodgers and their assets in bankruptcy."

Cubs: The Chicago Cubs appear poised to hire Bay Area product Dale Sveum as their manager, assuming he will have them. There was no confirmation from the organization but multiple reports from national reporters said that Sveum, the Brewers hitting coach, has been offered the job. But the Red Sox, who twice have interviewed Sveum, remain a possibility.

Ramos: Venezuelan authorities have formally charged eight suspects in the kidnapping of Washington Nationals catcher Wilson Ramos. Prosecutors say the charges include kidnapping, illegal possession of firearms, using a stolen vehicle and criminal association.

AP source: MLB forcing Astros out of NL

By KRISTIE RIEKEN, AP Sports Writer

Major League Baseball told Houston businessman Jim Crane it would not approve his purchase of the Astros unless he agreed to move the team to the American League, The Associated Press has learned.

Crane was forced to agree to move the sale along, a person familiar with the negotiations said Wednesday on condition of anonymity because no official announcement has been made by MLB or the Astros. Approval of the sale could be announced as early as Thursday at a meeting of baseball executives in Milwaukee.

Crane reportedly agreed to the move in exchange for a drop in the sales price valued earlier this year at \$680 million. The person who spoke to the AP could not confirm the sales price.

"We'll let baseball talk about that," current owner Drayton McLane said Wednesday night. "There were a lot of adjustments, so we'll just wait and see what they have to say (Thursday)."

The players' association believes two 15-team leagues would create a more proportionate schedule and has urged baseball to make the switch. With schedules for next season already completed, the earliest such a move could take place is 2013.

Time is running out for approval of the Astros deal: Crane has said that his offer, which was announced on May 16, expires Nov. 30.

Messages were left seeking from Major League Baseball, but Commissioner Bud Selig did address the Astros' situation during a Twitter chat on Monday.

"For 15/15 realignment, Houston would be the team moving to AL West. Would create more fairness in baseball," Selig tweeted via the Colorado Rockies' feed. He also added that "15 teams in each league would necessitate interleague play every day but it will be better schedule overall."

The Astros currently play in the six-team NL Central. The AL West is the only league in the majors with four teams (Rangers, Angels, Athletics and Mariners).

McLane said it will be difficult, at least at first, to see his team in the other league.

"I've always been a National League fan," he said. "Change is a big part of my life and what I've tried to do in business. I think it's going to be interesting to see the American League teams come in and getting a rivalry with the Rangers. That won't be too bad. It's going to be good."

The move would put the Astros in the same division as Texas. But fans are unhappy the other three teams are all on the West Coast, meaning many road games would routinely end past midnight Central time.

Rangers president Nolan Ryan, who pitched for the Astros during his Hall of Fame career, said he has some of the same feelings as McLane.

"I grew up an Astros fan and I look at the Astros as a National League team but I understand the desire to balance out the two leagues," Ryan said Wednesday.

"From our perspective, I like having them in the same division because it gives us a team in our time zone. ... We've talked about the fact that there will be more interleague play and how does the schedule actually work. ... It's going to bring some dynamics. We're not sure how they'll work. Obviously, it's going to change some things."

McLane bought the team in November 1992 for about \$117 million. He turned down an offer from Crane to buy the franchise in 2008.

McLane said he's leaving with mixed emotions, something that hit him as he attended a meeting with other owners Wednesday.

"Last night when I went to bed, I thought about it. I can remember 19 years ago how elated I was. It's been a wonderful, wonderful ride," he said.

"Each of these owners have been my friends for 19 years. One of the strange things is, I'm one of the older owners right now," McLane said. "There's only seven or eight that have been here longer than I have. Been a world of turnover."

The \$680 million sale price is the second-highest in major league history, trailing the \$845 million purchase of the Chicago Cubs by the Ricketts family two years ago. The \$660 million sale of the Boston Red Sox in 2002 currently is second. Like the Astros' deal, the Cubs and Red Sox transactions included related entities.

A major selling point in Houston was the Astros' share in a new deal with the NBA's Houston Rockets to create a regional sports network that will begin airing Rockets games in 2012 and the Astros in 2013. Crane has said the team's 30-year lease at Minute Maid Park, which is owned by the Harris County Houston Sports Authority, will remain intact under his ownership.

Crane, who founded a Houston-based logistics company in 2008, is also the chairman and chief executive of Crane Capital, a private equity fund company. In 2009, he was in the running to buy the Cubs and last summer teamed with Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban in an unsuccessful bid to buy the Texas Rangers.

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Angels among clubs not thrilled with moving the Astros to AL West

Owners on Thursday are expected to approve the sale of the National League Central team, which would switch leagues in 2013 to achieve six balanced divisions, but the Angels offer several reasons why they are lukewarm on the idea.

By Mike DiGiovanna, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Milwaukee — A national baseball writer tweeted Wednesday that "there is some opposition to [new Houston Owner Jim] Crane from American League West teams not wanting the Astros in the division."

To which another writer in the work room at the general managers/owners meetings responded, "What's not to like? You get to play the Astros 18 times."

When owners gather at the Pfister Hotel on Thursday, they are expected to approve Crane's \$680-million purchase of the Astros from Drayton McLane.

As part of that agreement, Houston will move from the National League Central to the American League West in 2013.

The realignment will create three five-team divisions in each league and a more balanced schedule. Teams are expected to play 72 games — 18 each — against division opponents, 60 against teams in their league's other two divisions and 30 interleague games.

It will also require interleague play throughout the season.

The move would seem to benefit the Angels and other AL West teams to play 18 games a year against the Astros. Houston had a record of 56-106 last season, traded its best player, outfielder Hunter Pence, to Philadelphia and appears several years away from playoff contention.

"I don't look at it that way," said Angels President John Carpino, who is filling in for Arte Moreno at the owners' meetings. "Every team goes through ups and downs, and in three or four years the Astros could look different."

Carpino didn't say he's opposed to the Astros' move, but he is clearly lukewarm on the idea.

The Astros are not a natural draw in Anaheim, and Carpino doesn't like having to travel two time zones away to play another division opponent.

He also doesn't like the way interleague play will be sprinkled throughout the schedule, saying, "We could have our pitchers at risk because some series they're hitting, some they're not."

Carpino preferred a more dramatic realignment that would put the Angels in a division with the Dodgers, San Diego, San Francisco and Oakland.

The Rangers and Astros, Carpino said, could share a division with Arizona, Colorado and Seattle. In the Northeast, Carpino would put the New York Yankees and New York Mets, Boston, Baltimore and Washington in a division.

"If you're going to look at realignment, then why don't we really look at it?" Carpino said. "Let's look at natural rivalries and what makes geographical sense. Does throwing the Astros in the AL West solve the real issues except making two 15-team leagues?"

Nolan Ryan, Texas Rangers president and chief executive, likes the move, for obvious reasons.

"I like having them in our division because it gives us another team in our time zone," Ryan said. "We're disadvantaged that way, because so many of our games start at 9 p.m., and it hurts our TV ratings. And if both teams are competitive, I think it will create a good rivalry within the state."

Billy Beane, general manager of the struggling Oakland Athletics, doesn't see much benefit to playing more games against Houston. The Astros have had three consecutive losing seasons, but reached the World Series in 2005.

"That's very short sighted, because things could change," Beane said. "What's more a concern for us is how big and how competitive a franchise you are. Right now, everyone is bigger than us."

Joe Torre, MLB's executive vice president of baseball operations, played and managed in both leagues. He believes moving from the NL to the AL is more difficult than an AL-to-NL move.

"There's more offense in the AL, and you have to be ready," Torre said. "In the NL, you're basically pitching to seven hitters, because with the pitcher following the No. 8 hitter, most of the time you don't have to throw the No. 8 hitter a strike. In the AL, pitchers have to face nine guys."

Carpino is struggling to get his arms around this realignment plan but acknowledged fans could embrace it.

"It's not that we're opposed to it — we don't have all the particulars to cast judgment," Carpino said. "But if it's good for Angels fans and baseball, we're for it."