

A's News Clips, Tuesday, November 22, 2011

Purdy: A's and San Jose heading to final inning

By Mark Purdy, Mercury News Columnist

At long last, the A's ballpark drama -- which has lasted more seasons than Barry Zito's contract with the Giants and been just as agonizing to watch -- could be entering its final inning.

We've been fooled before. But this time, a resolution seems more real. Fans of the A's in both Oakland and San Jose should know the fate of their team's future home before spring training begins.

Can the A's relocate to the South Bay? The timetable for a definitive answer is mid-January, according to multiple reliable sources.

Here are the latest developments, all significant:

Two weeks ago, Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig and members of his so-called "Blue Ribbon Panel" met with A's executives in Arizona to address San Jose's ballpark plan. The city of Oakland's latest proposal was never discussed. The A's were requested to increase the San Jose park's seating capacity from a proposed 32,000 to at least 36,000. This would require no additional property acquisition, just a reconfiguration within the existing footprint. Lew Wolff, the A's owner, agreed to do so.

Selig has scheduled a meeting with the Giants sometime in the next few weeks to discuss the team's ongoing dispute with the A's over territorial rights to the South Bay. This move was first reported by the Fox Sports website and has been neither denied nor confirmed by the Giants and Selig's office. So it's almost surely happening.

At an owners meeting last week in Milwaukee, the Giants' plan for team president Larry Baer to take operating control of the franchise was unanimously approved by owners. The A's could have held up Baer's confirmation by enlisting seven other owners to thwart the necessary 75 percent approval. Instead, Wolff voted in Baer's favor after Selig recommended a "yes" vote. It is unclear if Selig, in return, asked Baer to be more open-minded about the territorial rights to San Jose. But that's a possibility.

An agreement between owners and players to extend their collective bargaining agreement through 2016, plus the seeming resolution of the Los Angeles Dodgers mess, has cleared Selig's plate to deal with the A's ballpark situation. Matters probably will come to a head at an owners meeting in Phoenix scheduled for Jan. 11-12.

That timetable also would mesh with San Jose's ability to place a ballpark referendum on the ballot next spring. Any ballpark proposal must by ordinance be approved by city voters. The mechanics of that process call for an 88-day advance notice of any special election, which would mean roughly a mid-April public vote. In 2010 when mayor Chuck Reed wanted to rush along a ballpark referendum, he was dissuaded from doing so by MLB, which promised to help pay for any such special election in the future.

The Fox Sports website also reported an alternate resolution to the ballpark quandary that would call for MLB to purchase the A's from Wolff, then assemble a stadium deal in Oakland before reselling the club -- or failing to get an Oakland deal done, MLB could move the team. However, baseball insiders say that Selig has never mentioned such a scenario to the A's or even to any others in his immediate circle. So it's uncertain where this "plan" originated. The Giants' first choice, of course, would be for the A's to leave the market entirely -- and if MLB owns the team when that happens, it could take the fall as the "bad guy" instead of Wolff.

You can examine all of the above bullet points and draw your own conclusions. But at the very least, the machinery is grinding with a little more purpose and energy. Wolff, reached by telephone in New York, was certainly eager to get on with it. He was also his usual circumspect self in terms of offering opinions about what might happen.

Wolff was most concerned, actually, about the notion that he and co-owner John Fisher might be asked to sell the team back to MLB for any reason.

"There's been absolutely no discussion with me about anything close to that," Wolff said. "We would certainly object to selling the team -- to anybody. That's not why we are in it."

Meanwhile, Reed said that he can't fathom how MLB would be able to pull together a ballpark deal in Oakland, where Wolff spent millions in pursuit of options that failed.

"I've seen the economics of a stadium deal in Oakland, and it won't work," Reed told this newspaper. "They don't have the fan base, for starters, which is one of the reasons the A's want to move. They also don't have the money and the land."

At the Giants' offices, Baer could not be reached for comment Monday. However, Giants spokeswoman Staci Slaughter said that she does not expect the Giants' position on territorial rights to change, saying, "We have had that position from when Peter Magowan was the president and managing general partner, and it will remain the same with Larry as well."

We'll have to see if Selig can wrestle away that position. Make no mistake, this is strictly about the Giants' ownership and protecting its investment -- and nothing else. Baer has a legitimate business stance in that regard. But do his team's fans really care how much money Baer and his fellow owners profit whenever they cash in on their shares?

It's pretty simple to understand what's happening. Keeping the A's out of San Jose would be an excellent outcome for the Giants. But is that an excellent outcome for all Bay Area baseball fans (who benefit from two healthy franchises) or an excellent outcome for MLB's overall landscape? No.

Baer and his fellow Giants owners are certainly allowed to put their own financial interests ahead of the game's best interests. But only if MLB permits them to do so. San Jose voters -- not the Giants -- deserve the right to decide if a ballpark should be built in the South Bay. Within two months, if Selig does the right thing, that will be the next step.

Billy Beane dives into A's stadium issue

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Since the end of the season, A's general manager Billy Beane hasn't hidden his frustration over his team's stadium limbo.

Now, the most recognizable face of the franchise - Beane is the subject of the bestseller "Moneyball" and Brad Pitt plays him in the movie - is getting personally involved in Oakland's quest to get a new stadium.

Beane had distanced himself from the process previously, but the team has been awaiting a decision on its future for nearly three years, since March 2009, when Major League Baseball appointed a panel to look at the stadium situation.

"It's now impacting our baseball planning," Beane said, "so I feel a need to get involved with this."

According to a major-league source, Beane accompanied owner Lew Wolff to meet with Commissioner Bud Selig in Scottsdale, Ariz., two weeks ago. Beane declined to confirm or deny his presence or that the meeting even took place.

A FoxSports.com report indicated that Selig plans to meet with the Giants next. MLB "won't be commenting" about any potential meeting, according to a spokesperson.

It's possible that major-league owners will address the A's stadium issue at their next meetings, in January, but many of the details would have to be finalized well before then. The A's would like to build a stadium in San Jose, but the Giants own the territorial rights to that city and have stated that they will not negotiate to relinquish them.

Oakland lost money last season for the first time this century, with an expected shortfall of several million dollars, according to Beane. The team is consistently a recipient of \$20 million or more in revenue sharing, and Oakland's attendance actually went up in 2011, but the payroll also went up \$15 million, from \$52 million to \$67 million.

Many fans point to the deep pockets of A's ownership, which includes the Gap's John Fisher, as a reason the team should spend more on payroll no matter what the revenue.

"It's a business," Beane said. "And the business should be able to stand on its own two feet."

Two A's players have become targets of increasing trade speculation, with reports Monday that Oakland was discussing dealing two-time All-Star reliever Andrew Bailey to the Reds and All-Star starter Gio Gonzalez to the Marlins. Multiple

Oakland sources said that the team is not preparing to move either pitcher in the immediate future, although there is a great deal of interest in both.

Beane would not address specific players, but he said, "We're not shopping anybody, but given our situation, we have to listen to anyone."

A's Michael Taylor: KNBR intern out of left field

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

Early in Michael Taylor's stint as an intern with KNBR, he found himself confronted by a homeless man, who started screaming into Taylor's microphone.

It was an unusual situation for a professional athlete to find himself in.

"The guy was getting really close to me and I stepped back and thought, 'Am I going to have to hit this guy?' " the A's outfielder said this week from the relative safety of KNBR's lobby. "I was looking - 'Does he have a weapon on him?' But we actually wound up playing it on the air. It was pretty funny."

Taylor made the startling moment work to his advantage, which is really the whole point of his internship at the all-sports station. The onetime Stanford player decided that because he finished last season healthy and didn't need to do extensive daily rehab, he should fill his down time with something that might serve him well down the line.

"We have a lot of time off and I felt like, 'Why not be productive?' " Taylor said. "This gives me experience in a world I'd like to know something about. One of my best friends told me, 'You're the only guy I know who goes to the big leagues for the first time and then gets a job interning for free. What's wrong with you?' "

Taylor, 25, has always had an interest in the media, but never had time in college to pursue it, so he figured why not now? His agent, Brodie Van Wagenen, is friends with former A's outfielder and current KNBR personality Eric Byrnes, so 680 AM found itself with a very tall, broad-shouldered intern.

And no one knew who he was.

"I never told anyone he played professionally," KNBR assistant program director Jenn Violet Kennedy said. "I was walking him around the building saying, 'This is my intern Michael,' or, 'This is Michael, he needs to fill out some paperwork.' And everyone would say, 'OK,' and keep going."

Even Byrnes didn't know. Van Wagenen had told him one of his "young players" was interested in interning. Byrnes assumed that was a low-level minor-leaguer, maybe just out of high school.

"I found out a week after he'd started," Byrnes said. "I said, 'Michael Taylor? Of the A's? Wait a minute, you've got to be kidding me. I can't believe you withheld this information.' The next thing I said was, 'Why isn't he working on my show?' "

At a KNBR-sponsored event last week with A's general manager Billy Beane and other local sports executives, Violet Kennedy mentioned to Beane that Taylor was interning for the station. Beane's response: "Wait, what? What are you talking about? He's really on the air?"

Violet Kennedy laughed and added, "The important part for Billy to know is that Michael is working out before he gets here and after he leaves."

Taylor, who lives in San Mateo, has an 8 a.m. workout session with a trainer before he heads for the station, and when he gets home, he works out on his own, and he'll resume baseball activity in the next few weeks. A Type-1 diabetic, Taylor already is accustomed to a strict routine, but the KNBR job helps keep him going to bed at an early hour and eating right.

Taylor's duties at KNBR include a regular man-on-the-street style segment called "What's Bugging You?," which airs at 1:15 p.m. weekdays on the Fitz and Brooks Show. Taylor quickly found that wielding a microphone is wildly different than being on the other side of one, especially when approaching strangers for comments. He knows that, at 6-foot-6, he can appear a little intimidating, and, he said with a smile, "I try to make people comfortable. I'm not going to wear a hoodie, I dress neutrally."

Taylor figures he has about a 30 percent success rate getting comments, but that hasn't daunted him. He can be found late mornings around Fourth Street near Market and Mission, patiently making his pitch.

"People say no a lot of different ways, from a nice 'No, thank you,' to no words at all, to 'get a job,' " Taylor said. "If someone doesn't want to speak, I stay positive."

"It's very difficult. If I had a booth people could stop by, it would be easier, but sometimes people recognize KNBR on the microphone. And other people get freaked out."

Taylor has learned to cut and edit his own sound, and he recently edited a replay of the Giants' World Series victory, something that might make A's fans cringe, but Taylor is just pleased to be picking up some skills in a new field. And the Giants flagship is enjoying having an A's player around.

"I've never said this to Michael, but it's an honor that he wants to do this with us," afternoon host Rod Brooks said. "He wants to spend his free time here? That's awesome."

"Michael is doing great," co-host Bob Fitzgerald said. "He doesn't have any stage fright, he's himself on the air, and he's as much a smart-ass as Rod and I are, so he jumps right in. He's a pro athlete, wading out there into the public, editing his own tape. He's willing to do all the dirty work. It's amazing. It's really refreshing."

Violet Kennedy said that while KNBR has had some college athletes intern at the station, Taylor is their first pro athlete. She'd welcome more.

"Michael came in and has been just great, and he understands what a good opportunity it is if he eventually wants to go on and have a career in this business," Violet Kennedy said. "Right now, if you're an NBA player, why wouldn't you want to be here right now?"

"What Michael is doing is brilliant," Byrnes said. "He's got an advantage, he's already doing advanced work. Why not educate yourself and see what else is out there? It's so smart. He's got a foot in the door."

Drumbeat: A's aren't sending Andrew Bailey, Gio Gonzalez anywhere – right now

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser 11/21/2011 2:40pm

There were fevered reports today about the A's trading Andrew Bailey to the Reds and Gio Gonzalez to the Marlins, and it's apparent after several phone calls and emails that those reports aren't originating with anyone with Oakland and there is absolutely nothing imminent. From what I understand, the A's are fielding lots of calls, from lots of teams, about Bailey, and they're not to the point of talking specifics on any particular deal.

It also sounds as if many teams are calling on Bailey – and then segueing into inquiries about Gonzalez. As I wrote last week, Gonzalez is going to be a tough get. That hasn't changed. A's sources keep mentioning the Dan Haren deal as a comparison, and remember Oakland got five players back from Haren, including Carlos Gonzalez, Brett Anderson and Chris Carter.

Bailey is definitely the more available of the two, because the A's have other options in the bullpen and Fautino De Los Santos is seen as a potential future closer. I wouldn't be surprised at all if Bailey is dealt this offseason for two or three good young players, but it's not happening today, and probably not this week or even month. If there's that much interest in Bailey, the A's aren't going to rush into anything, unless they get everyone on their wish list in return.

Just going on past history, were the A's to deal Gonzalez, it wouldn't be until after the winter meetings, ala Haren, Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder. It only makes sense to try to get the best possible offer, and frankly, to pit teams against each other to up the ante. But the A's aren't selling cheap on either player.

I'd think Grant Balfour or Brian Fuentes might be heading elsewhere, too. I'd throw Kurt Suzuki in there if he were coming off a better season, but his trade value has dipped too much, while his value to the A's remains high: He's very good handling the young pitchers, and he's the longest tenured player and top team leader.

I just checked in with Bailey to see how he was taking all this. He went through it around the trade deadline, so he's pretty even-keel. Now that he's on Twitter(@AndrewBailey40), though, he was greeted to lots of rumors about himself right away.

"It's weird to wake up to all of that," he said, "but I know it's all speculation until something actually happens."

Would A's consider dealing Bailey, Gio?

Beat reporter Jane Lee answers A's fans' questions

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

The A's say they will listen to offers on anyone, and I understand most teams take that stance around this time of year. But do you really think they would be willing to part with Andrew Bailey and Gio Gonzalez?
-- Robert S., Petaluma, Calif.

As much as fans would hate to see either go, I do think general manager Billy Beane could pull the trigger on both if awarded the right return packages. Both pitchers are attractive to other teams for several reasons -- they're young, arbitration-eligible and unattached to a long-term deal. It's no surprise, then, that Bailey's already been rumored to be a good match for the Reds, and Gonzalez for the Marlins in his hometown Miami.

Bailey, it seems, is more likely to go -- whether to Cincinnati, which would likely have to give away prized chip Yonder Alonso in return, or to another team. Given the exorbitant amount of money being thrown at closers these days (note Jonathan Papelbon), more teams than not are going to turn to the trade route, and a two-time All-Star like Bailey, who is under team control for the next three seasons, is a favorable option. The A's could subsequently move Fautino De Los Santos into the closer's role -- with Grant Balfour as another option -- all the while getting a couple of prospects in return.

Meanwhile, it's going to take a substantial offer for Beane to let a frontline starter like Gonzalez loose. But several teams are looking for a No. 1 or 2 rotation piece, and I'd suspect at least one would be willing to give up a couple of top prospects if given the chance to land one.

Do you think the A's will make a legitimate run at Cuban star Yoenis Cespedes?

-- Justin G., Sacramento, Calif.

No. It's fun to think about, but the A's are not in spending mode right now, and that strategy won't work on a player who is reportedly looking to obtain more than \$60 million by way of an eight-year deal. Count the Yankees, Red Sox, Phillies, Blue Jays, Rangers and possibly a few other teams in on the bidding. The A's, not so much.

Jane, why has everyone given up on Ryan Sweeney? No, he didn't hit for power last year, but he was coming off knee surgery and wasn't playing every day. He is an above-average defensive outfielder and every year has hit for a high average. Shouldn't Sweeney be the best fit in center field?

-- Matt T., Sparks, Nev.

When I spoke to manager Bob Melvin last week, he acknowledged that Sweeney's name is sometimes lost in all the talk regarding Oakland's 2012 outfield, given the hype surrounding the younger crowd of Michael Taylor, Jai Miller and Jermaine Mitchell. But he assured me that Sweeney is very much a part of the team's plans for next year. He can play all three outfield spots and obviously has more experience than the three aforementioned names, and it's also worth noting he has plenty of motivation to earn a starting spot following a disappointing 2011 season that resulted in more bench and injury time than playing time.

I read somewhere that the A's will offer salary arbitration to Josh Willingham. Why would they do that if they know he's not coming back? And what about David DeJesus and Coco Crisp?

-- Mike R., San Jose, Calif.

The club's arbitration decisions will depend on the new rules for Draft pick compensation in the new Collective Bargaining Agreement, which will be announced on Tuesday. Under the old CBA, they'd pick up a first-round pick and sandwich pick (between the first and second rounds) from the team that does end up signing Willingham since he's considered a Type A free agent. DeJesus, meanwhile, was deemed a Type B free agent, meaning the A's would get a sandwich pick if he signs elsewhere.

Willingham has garnered interest from teams looking to lock him up to a multiyear deal this offseason, so it's pretty much a no-brainer for the A's to offer him arbitration under the old CBA. But if they do the same with DeJesus, they run the risk of him possibly accepting, which would equate to a large salary the A's can't necessarily afford to give a player like him. It's also possible the A's could discuss an agreement with DeJesus that would allow them to offer him arbitration so long as he chooses not to accept. Crisp is considered neither a Type A or B free agent, so don't expect the A's to offer him arbitration.

Whatever happened to Tyson Ross?

-- Bob H., Ben Lomond, Calif.

Ross took part in Arizona Fall League action, compiling a 1-3 record and 5.94 ERA in seven starts for the Phoenix Desert Dogs. The 24-year-old right-hander walked five and struck out 13 in 16 2/3 innings. And while his fall numbers aren't overwhelming, the good news is he's healthy, and he figures to be in contention for a rotation spot next spring.

Technology has changed the art of the deal

Communications, stats analysis cause new ways for GMs to work

By Anthony Castrovine / MLB.com

In the lobby of the Pfister Hotel during the General Managers Meetings in Milwaukee last week, Kevin Towers was talking trade.

Not an actual trade, mind you, but the philosophy behind how a deal goes down.

Towers motioned over toward the lobby bar.

"It doesn't happen on napkins anymore," he said with a smile. "It used to happen right over there, late at night. Now, it's done through a tweet."

That was a slight exaggeration on the part of the Arizona general manager. To the best of our knowledge, no swaps have been consummated through that particular platform.

But it is true that the bartering business has evolved, almost to the point of being unrecognizable.

"It's changed, no question," Tigers president, CEO and GM Dave Dombrowski said. "I think we've always been prepared to make trades, but now it's done in a different style."

That extends to every element, from the way the subject of a swap is first broached by one GM to another, to the method in which teams evaluate others' talent, to the manner in which the news is relayed and dissected by fans.

An increased reliance on sabermetric detail has equipped front-office minds with a deeper knowledge of other teams' strengths and systems. And an increased value placed on prospects has made many teams more averse to risk and less willing to take chances.

That's a big reason why you'll hear a great deal more talk about potential trades that could or should be done this time of year than you will actual news. Nobody, after all, wants to give up the Next Big Thing, no matter how sure the return might seem.

"It gets tougher and tougher to make a deal," Dodgers GM Ned Colletti said. "It's nowhere near as easy as it was 20 or 30 years ago. People are always looking for a reason to say no."

Or, at least, they might have more voices leading them down that road.

Major trades, after all, can have financial and/or public relations components that must be taken into consideration, beyond the obvious baseball implications. It's why the GM's suites at the annual and upcoming Winter Meetings can often resemble something out of a war room, with the team's top baseball ops decision-maker often surrounded by his small army of statisticians and evaluators.

The best-run organizations tend to operate in this manner, in which the input comes from many angles before a deal is done, and it's a byproduct of the many moving parts today's trades create.

"There are so many people involved and so much information to process that often it's done on computers up in your room," Towers said. "In the past, it was maybe a GM, assistant GM and a chief scout in the room. Maybe three guys who would make a decision on making a deal. Now it's your analytical crew, your scouts, your chief financial officer. There are so many people involved in getting a deal done."

Trades, then, have become more science than art, and that is, of course, true of many things in our increasingly computer-savvy world.

The Billy Beane-influenced "Moneyball" model, as it has come to be known in book (and now film) fame, increased the weight of advanced analytics in player evaluation. The flaws of using batting average and RBIs as evaluative tools became exposed. And while old-school scouting had -- and will always have -- its place in the game, the truth is that all teams turn to the stats, to some degree.

"What we've seen over the last 10 or 15 years is teams are converging on how they value players," Indians GM Chris Antonetti said. "In the past, you may get a wide variation of how one team might value players versus another team. What we've seen is that gap closing and teams valuing players similarly."

In other words, it's more difficult for a team with more limited financial resources, such as Antonetti's Indians or Beane's A's, to pull a fast one on unsuspecting clubs. The diamonds in the rough are even harder to find, and the always increasing costs of free agency have made young players the game's greatest commodity because of the contractual control they provide.

This shift in strategy became glaringly apparent at the Trade Deadline this year, when the Yankees, who once treated young and undeveloped players as little more than bargaining chips, openly touted the fact that they didn't deal away any of their top prospects. If the club with the \$200 million payroll and seemingly endless resources is reluctant to part with its unproven yet cost-effective assets, that says a lot about the industry at large.

Fan relations have evolved, too. Even though baseball remains a game in which even so-called "sure-thing" Draft selections can take several years to make an impact at the Major League level, these once-faceless picks quickly become household names to the casual fan. MLB Network and MLB.com broadcast the Draft, and the Internet makes information on Minor Leaguers more accessible than ever.

So when teams do move their prospects -- such as the Indians taking the bold step of trading away former No. 1 picks Drew Pomeranz and Alex White to acquire Ubaldo Jimenez this past summer -- they are moving largely unproven yet popular

assets. The Indians received quite a bit of criticism for that particular move -- criticism they likely wouldn't have encountered a couple decades ago.

"Fans know more about everything," Seattle GM Jack Zduriencik said. "There's so much more social media now. Information is everywhere, whether it's about prospects, your big league club or a whole lot of elements tied to your ballclub. That's where we're at today in our world."

And GMs agreed that the realities of today's world have taken some of the personal touch out of the wheeling and dealing.

For one, turnover among general managers has become frequent enough that it's become more difficult to establish and maintain close, personal ties.

"Way back when, you knew everybody because you met with everybody," Dombrowski said. "Guys had been in the game a long time. It was like a fraternity. Now somebody new comes in as a general manager, and there are a lot of new faces a lot of times."

Texting and email have also drastically altered the equation.

"Trades are built on relationships," Towers said. "The better a relationship you have, the more apt you are to make trades. And building relationships is face time and talking on the phone. When I'm texting somebody, I've got no idea where he's at. ... It's easier to text them, maybe, but when you're talking to them on the phone you can tell if they really like you or not."

Braves GM Frank Wren, as an example, began the process of acquiring Michael Bourn from the Astros with a series of texts with Houston GM Ed Wade. By the time they actually spoke on the phone, much of the framework of the deal had been done.

"We do a lot of the vetting out using either texting or email, just to make sure we're on the right track," Wren said. "It saves a lot of time, in reality."

So, has all this technology and speedy information taken the fun out of making a trade? It depends who you ask. Some GMs polled at last week's Meetings got a little nostalgic talking about the old days of trades concocted on cocktail napkins, while others seemed quite comfortable with the current conditions.

Even with all advancements and adjustments that have impacted the trading game, the broad-based notion of what it takes to do a deal remains the same.

"When it's all said and done," said Zduriencik, "it's like going up to a girl and asking her to dance. She likes you, you like her, so, all right, 'Let's dance.'"

Or better yet, let's tweet.

Price, Gray show Rutherford's talent **Former prep standouts now pitching professionally**

Written by Tom Kreager, Daily News Journal

SMYRNA — They grew up about a dozen miles apart.

David Price attended Blackman High. Sonny Gray attended Smyrna High.

Baseball, though, brought them together.

The two standout pitchers will head to spring training in February. Price is the Tampa Rays ace. Gray is trying to win a spot on the Oakland A's roster. Both are the pride of Rutherford County, at least as far as baseball fans are concerned.

"That's good for the kids," Price said of the two pitchers playing professional ball. "Kids see that and if they are going to Blackman or Smyrna or Riverdale, Siegel or Oakland. They've heard of myself and Sonny.

"That may give them a little hope that they may need to make them feel like they can do the same thing we did. They can go to Vanderbilt, they can go to college, get drafted and go to the big leagues. It gives them that hope and extra push they need — and that's good."

Price is the only recent Rutherford County baseball player to make it to the majors. Chuck Taylor and Kenny Gerhart are among others that made it in the past.

Now, Gray will begin his pursuit.

"Before David, no one really that I can remember came out of this area and gone anywhere baseball wise professionally," Gray said.

"I think it's pretty cool because you won't meet a better guy than David. To have David set the path for me and whoever else follows — because there will be somebody else."

Price and Gray were at the Smyrna Bowling Center on Saturday for Price's Project 14 Foundation. The foundation held its annual Live Like Nate Bowling event, which benefited CAPE — Challenged Athletes Participating Equally. CAPE is a non-profit organization for physically or mentally challenged people that want to play in a sport or activity.

"It's grown," Price said of his foundation. "A lot of people want to be a part of it.

"I don't have a goal for it. As long as we continue to help people — that's what I'm looking for. I just want to continue to help people in this community and whoever else needs help, I'm fine with that."

Price went 12-13 in 2011 with 218 strikeouts and a 3.49 ERA in 34 starts. Price was named to his second all-star game in 2011.

Gray also got a brief stint in the professional leagues, albeit in minor league ball, after he was drafted 18th overall by the Oakland A's in June.

Gray went 1-1 in split leagues — rookie ball and AA — after helping lead Vanderbilt to its first College World Series appearance.

Gray started five games for the Midland RockHounds (AA) and finished 1-0 with a .45 ERA in 20 innings pitched. He gave up just one earned run, striking out 18 and walking just six.

"It was a little different at first," Gray admitted. "I was there with older guys and was kind of there by myself. I didn't really know what to do."

Gray said he was initiated with a bit of the silent treatment by his teammates when he first got down there. However, he didn't get there until the final month of the season.

They warmed up after seeing what he could do on the mound.

"I was kind of on my own at first until they warmed up," Gray said. "But it was a really, really great experience. After the first couple of days they warmed up. After the first road trip I got in with them, which was cool."

Gray said he will report to spring training in February with hopes of making it to the A's as quickly as possible. However, he realizes that may not happen right away.

"I think the good part about being (in Midland) is getting to throw and compete and show people I could compete at the AA level," Gray said. "That was really good. I won't be going into spring training not knowing any of the guys.

"I'll go there (in February) and see what happens. Obviously, I'd like to be playing with Oakland this next year. Hopefully sometime next year, or the year after it will be able to happen."

Ironically the day Gray signed with the A's, Oakland was hosting the Rays.

"We stayed in hotel rooms next to each other," Gray said of he and Price. "He came over after I signed and talked to me. He got a lot of stuff from his teammates about that.

"Everyone knew we were both Vandy guys and both from the same area," Gray said. "Having David to look up to and following a little bit of a similar path has been good.

"It's a big advantage that I have that a lot of people don't."

Price knew of Gray during the former Smyrna standout's high school career and even told Vanderbilt coach Tim Corbin about him.

"I went and saw him throw twice in high school," Price said. "I remember going back to Vanderbilt telling coach Corbin, 'This guy is the real deal.' He's got an 83 mph curve ball and he's in high school. He's throwing a plus changeup and his fastball is 95 or 96 with some movement on it.

"That was the best high school arm I had seen at the time — and still is."

Former pitcher Vida Blue remembers AL MVP season

Matt Crossman, Sporting News

If Justin Verlander is voted the AL MVP today, he will join a small group of starting pitchers who have won that award. One of them, Vida Blue, did it 40 years ago in a breakout season that nobody has matched since. A relative unknown, Blue went 24-8 with a 1.82 ERA and eight shutouts and won the MVP and Cy Young awards. He did it the old-fashioned way—by rearing back and throwing gas.

As for Verlander, Blue pays him the highest compliment an old pitcher could pay: "I would pay to see him pitch," Blue says. "I like the way he goes about his business. He's an aggressive pitcher. He's light years ahead of where I was in 1971." Blue recounts that magical season:

"In 1970, I had a decent Triple-A season for the Iowa Oaks, the Iowa Cubs now. My manager there was Sherm Lollar. He really helped me. And Juan Pizarro, the old lefty, was on that team. He talked to me about pitching.

"In the offseason I went into the reserves. I went to Fort Bragg for boot camp in November and December, and I got out in the end of January. I went back to my mom's house in Louisiana for a week or so, then I went to spring training.

"The A's had a new manager in Dick Williams. I didn't know anything about him. He didn't know anything about me. I knew that he had been the manager of the Red Sox and was a good baseball man. He said he would take the best 25 players north. I got in there and worked my tail off.

"I ended up being the opening day pitcher in Washington. President Nixon was still in office, but I don't think he came.

"The season went on. I was just doing what was natural for me. I threw the baseball as hard as I could for as long as I could. I had movement on my fastball. I had a curve ball, but I still hadn't learned the art of pitching. It takes a while to do that, to pitch to spots, to know when to intentionally-but-unintentionally-intentionally pitch around a guy when you have an open base.

"I had a great time. I wish every athlete could experience a time like that, what they call now in the zone.

"It was a new experience dealing with the media. That was a bigger challenge than going out there pitching. To be on the cover of all of those magazines, that was a dream come true for a kid from Louisiana.

"It all just kind of fell into place. It was something I'll never forget. The game of baseball has opened a lot of doors for me and allowed me to pursue some great things.

"I was 21 years old—I was expecting myself to do that. But I didn't know the impact it had from a social standpoint. I still have people coming up to me, saying, "I remember the 1971 season, you were my dad's favorite pitcher, my grandfather loved you, he took me to your games when I was younger, but I still remember the name Vida Blue. You get all kinds of stories. It's very comforting to know you had an impact on people's lives like that."