

A's News Clips, Thursday, December 15, 2011

Waiting game begins for Japanese ace Yu Darvish

San Francisco Chronicle

The Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters have until Tuesday to accept a bid from a major-league team for ace Yu Darvish.

Bidding for the posting fee closed Wednesday, and the commissioner's office said it will notify its Japanese counterpart of the amount of the highest bid, but not the identity of the MLB club that made the offer.

If the bid is accepted, MLB will announce the team that won the rights, and that club will have 30 days to agree to a contract. The posting fee will be paid only if an agreement is reached with Darvish's agents.

The Chronicle learned that the A's, who were hinting at the winter meetings last week that they had interest in the right-hander, did not bid on Darvish. Teams that lose out in the bidding are expected to pursue lefty Gio Gonzalez.

The Giants did not make a bid, either, it was learned.

The Yankees, Rangers and Blue Jays were among the likely suitors for the 6-foot-5 Darvish, 25, who was 18-6 with a 1.44 ERA and a league-leading 276 strikeouts last season.

Giants eye Mota, Whiteside: The Giants were working to finalize a \$1 million, one-year contract with free agent reliever Guillermo Mota to bring him back for a third season.

The Giants also were involved in talks to bring back catcher Eli Whiteside, who was non-tendered on Monday.

A's spring slate: The A's announced their spring training schedule, which will be shortened to 21 Arizona-based exhibitions because of a weeklong visit to Japan to open the season. An exhibition will be played in Sacramento on March 31. See the schedule on Page B6.

Boston gets reliever: The Red Sox acquired closer Mark Melancon from the Astros for infielder Jed Lowrie and right-hander Kyle Weiland. Melancon is a possible replacement for closer Jonathan Papelbon, who signed with the Phillies.

Melancon had 20 saves last season, an 8-4 record and 2.78 ERA in 71 outings. Lowrie, 27, played all four infield positions for Boston last season and hit .252 with six homers and 36 RBIs. Weiland, 25, was 0-3 with a 7.66 ERA in seven games, including five starts.

Briefly: With free agent Prince Fielder heading elsewhere and Ryan Braun facing a possible drug suspension, The Brewers finalized a \$36 million, three-year contract with third baseman Aramis Ramirez. ... The Cardinals finalized a two-year, \$14 million free agent deal with shortstop Rafael Furcal. ... The Diamondbacks reached agreement on a one-year, \$1.75 million contract with 41-year-old right-hander Takashi Saito. ... The Orioles signed Japanese left-hander Tsuyoshi Wada to an \$8.15 million, two-year contract. Wada, 30, was 107-61 with a 3.13 ERA and 1,329 strikeouts in 210 career games (207 starts) over nine seasons with the Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks.

A's unveil Spring Training schedule

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's unveiled their Spring Training schedule on Wednesday, releasing details on their abbreviated 21-game Cactus League tour that will be followed by a week-long visit to Japan to begin the regular season.

The schedule also includes a rare visit to Raley Field in Sacramento, where the A's Triple-A affiliate will host an exhibition game March 31.

Less than a month prior, on March 2, the A's Cactus League season is set to open against the Mariners at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, where the first of just 10 home games will be played. Oakland will also play host to the Cubs, Brewers, D-backs, Angels, Dodgers, Reds and Royals during the month.

Though the Giants are missing from that list, the A's will meet their cross-bay rivals in a split-squad game at Scottsdale Stadium on March 17.

Highlighting Oakland's spring will be a trip across the sea to Tokyo, where the A's will serve as the home team for two regular-season games against Seattle in the Tokyo Dome on March 28 and 29. The long journey marks the second time the A's have participated in Major League Baseball's Opening Series, as they engaged in a two-game set with the Red Sox in Tokyo in 2008.

Oakland's contest against the River Cats, which will represent its first appearance in Sacramento since 2007, will be followed by the annual three-game Bay Bridge Series against the Giants beginning April 2.

San Francisco will host Games 1 and 2, with the A's set to welcome in the Giants to the Coliseum for an evening game on April 3 -- just three days before the club's regular-season home opener against Seattle.

The A's Radio Network, heard on 95.7 FM The Game, will broadcast 10 of the club's exhibition games, as well as both regular-season contests in Japan.

Official travel packages and season tickets for A's Spring Training home games are now on sale at www.oaklandathletics.com/spring. Single-game tickets are also on sale at that site, or by calling 877-493-2255, and the box office at Phoenix Municipal Stadium will open Feb. 6.

Hot Stove Roundup: One smart signing, one questionable trade

Cliff Corcoran, SI., 12/41/2011

This week's Hot Stove Roundup finds one division champion making a questionable attempt to upgrade its rotation, another making a smart move to compensate for a departing superstar, and a perennial playoff club helping to solidify that status with what could prove to be one of the smartest long-term contracts in the game.

Trades and Upgrades

Diamondbacks acquire SP Trevor Cahill, RP Craig Breslow and cash from A's for RHP Jarrod Parker, OF Collin Cowgill and RP Ryan Cook; non-tender SP Joe Saunders and RHP Micah Owings

The core of the above is that the Diamondbacks, in an effort to repeat as National League West champions, sent one of their top pitching prospects, 2007 first-round pick Jarrod Parker, to the A's to upgrade from Saunders to Cahill. That seems like a mistake to me. Cahill, 23, may be younger, and temporarily cheaper, with the 30-year-old Saunders eligible for arbitration coming off a \$5.5 million salary in 2011 and signed for the next four years with options to keep him in Arizona through 2017. But Parker is younger (though only by eight months) and cheaper than Cahill, who will make \$3.5 million in 2012, followed by annual increases to \$12 million in 2015. Parker is also likely to be better once he's established in the majors, and the A's receive all six of his team-controlled seasons.

Meanwhile, it's not clear that Cahill will be a significant step up from Saunders in 2012. Cahill's big 2010 season (18-8, 2.97 ERA) was largely the result of opponent's .237 average on balls in play, and in three major league seasons, his ERAs outside of pitching-friendly Oakland Coliseum have been 5.10, 3.86 and 5.23, respectively. Cahill could benefit from moving to the weaker league, but he's also entering a hitter's park. Saunders posted a 3.85 ERA in two seasons with the Diamondbacks, including a 3.97 career mark at Chase Field. I see both as league-average pitchers with low strikeout rates. Cahill is certainly young enough that he could improve, whereas Saunders likely won't.

On the other hand, Parker is a potential No. 2 starter who could be ready to join a major league rotation as early as next season, and was too high a price to pay given the risk. If the Diamondbacks exercise both of Cahill's options, they could wind up paying more for Cahill over the next six years (\$55.2 million) than they would have paid for one more season of Saunders followed by six of Parker, meaning they could wind up spending more money for one fewer year of ultimately inferior pitching. Breslow provides the Diamondbacks with a second lefty in the bullpen, though one with a fairly neutral platoon split.

The A's -- likely nonfactors in 2012 anyway -- receive three players with six seasons of team control remaining, including a potential front-end starter in Parker. Cowgill is a stocky fourth outfielder who can play center, get on base, steal and hit for power, but none to a level that make him a viable starter for a contender. Cook is a fairly generic righty reliever, but his mid-90s fastball and slider should play in the majors. Cowgill, 25, and Cook, 24, made their major league debuts in 2011, but are both still technically rookies. Owings is an unexceptional swing man, but a .286/.313/.507 hitter in 217 career plate appearances. I'm still waiting for a team to turn him into a first baseman.

Brewers sign 3B Aramis Ramirez (\$36M/3yrs and a mutual option for 2015), trade 3B Casey McGehee to Pirates for RP Jose Veras

Ramirez turns 34 in June, and has been both healthy and productive just once over the last three seasons. But as a low-cost solution to replacing Prince Fielder, whose departure from Milwaukee this deal all but clinches, he's a good one. Fielder and McGehee were worth a combined 4.2 wins above replacement in 2011 according to Baseball-Reference's WAR (5.2 for Fielder, -1.0 for McGehee). Ramirez was worth 3.6 and averaged 4.4 bWAR in 2008 and 2009.

The Brewers still need a first baseman, but it won't take much from that player to sufficiently replace Fielder and McGehee, whether 26-year-old Mat Gamel, a .310/.372/.540 hitter at Triple-A Nashville last season, or an outside addition such as Carlos Peña (an average 2.0 bWAR the last four seasons), fills the role. Fielder will likely pull a contract in excess of \$150 million. Spending \$36 million on Ramirez, particularly given he was the only impact third baseman on the market, looks very smart in Milwaukee right now.

The Ramirez solution also makes last week's Alex Gonzalez signing look even better. Ramirez is a statue at third base, and the Brewers' shortstop will have to cover a lot of ground. Gonzalez does that well. As for Veras, he's a fairly generic hard-throwing righty reliever who strikes out a lot of hitters (more than 10 K/9IP last two years) but walks nearly as many (4.8 BB/9 over the same span and over his career). Since McGehee had fallen below replacement level last year and was benched throughout the playoffs, he's a solid return. The Pirates have little to lose, and can take a chance on a potential rebound while using him for depth at the infield corners.

Cardinals re-sign SS Rafael Furcal (\$14M/2yrs), avoid arbitration with 2B/OF Skip Schumaker (\$3M/2yrs), non-tender IF Ryan Theriot

Furcal took Theriot's starting shortstop job after coming over from Dodgers in a deadline deal for minor league outfielder Alex Castellanos. By subsequently agreeing to a pay cut for the security of a two-year deal, Furcal, who made \$12 million last season and had his \$12 million option declined after the World Series, allowed the Cardinals to dump Theriot entirely following a season in which he made \$3.3 million for replacement-level play. Furcal's performance was a significant upgrade down the stretch, but over past five seasons, it's been as erratic as his attendance. The 34-year-old is almost guaranteed to miss time due to injury, and has played in 100 or more games just once in the last four seasons with chronic back pain and other ailments. Furcal's upside is significant, particularly relative to Theriot's. But even \$7 million per year seems to be a gamble on such a marked uncertainty.

Schumaker, after three years at the keystone, has shown mild improvements in the field. His bat has disappeared, though, making him a replaceable entering his fourth season as the Cardinals' starting second baseman. He'd be more valuable as a reserve given his ability to play all three outfield positions and his pronounced platoon split.

Planning for the Future

Rays sign Matt Moore to extension (\$14M/5yrs + three option years)

The most team-friendly contract in baseball belongs to Evan Longoria, signed just six days after his major league debut in April 2008. The Rays recognized that the earlier a team tries to lock up a young player, the more leverage they have in negotiations, attributing both to the uncertainty of his career path and his earning potential with restrictions of the reserve system. They played to that logic with Moore: When the Rays dangled a guaranteed \$17.5 million in front of a 22-year-old kid fresh off the bus from Triple-A, he snapped at it. They now have control of the budding superstar until he's 30 -- three years past his free agency -- for a maximum single-season salary of just \$14 million.

Of course, such a move only makes sense with an elite prospect, but that's precisely what Moore is to the Rays. They've handled his contract almost identically to Longoria's, as they offered him a guaranteed \$14 million to lock him up at a maximum single-season salary of \$11 million. It's a riskier bet on a pitcher than power-hitting third baseman, but the risk outweighs the reward, especially for a low-payroll team like Tampa.

Moore's deal includes five seasons with a guaranteed \$1 million each through 2014, \$3 million in 2015, and \$5 million in 2016, followed by three club options which start at \$7 million, \$9 million, and \$10 million, respectively, but can increase to \$7.5 million, \$9.75 million, and \$11 million if Moore triggers certain starts or innings-pitched bonuses. The buyouts for the

three options are \$2.5 million, \$1 million and \$750,000. For Moore, the total value of the deal could be worth up to \$39.25 million if the Rays pick up all three options and he hits all of each of his starts and innings totals. But if Moore pitches well enough for the Rays to consider doing so, the team would be more than happy to have paid less than \$40 million for the first eight years of Moore's career, which works out to an average annual value south of \$5 million.

It paid dividends with Longoria: They locked up the first nine years of his career for a maximum of \$47.5 million, or roughly just \$5.3 million per year.

Around the AL East

/1yr + incentives)

Shoppach returns to the team that drafted him, signaling the end of free agent captain Jason Varitek's 15-year tenure with the Sox -- if not the soon-to-be 40-year-old catcher's career. Varitek outthit Shoppach in each of the last two seasons, but opposing runners stole on him at will. Shoppach, who has power and patience but hit just .197 over the last three seasons, led the majors in 2011 in caught-stealing percentage, though he's typically closer to average in that category.

Blue Jays acquire OF Ben Francisco from Phillies for LHP Frank Gailey

The powerful John Mayberry Jr. surpassed Francisco as the righty platoon outfielder for the Phillies last year, allowing the Phils to dump Francisco on the Jays for Gailey, a 26-year-old lefty reliever who has yet to succeed above Single-A ball. In Toronto, Francisco could fit as the short side of a leftfield platoon, alternating with either Eric Thames or Travis Snider.

Orioles sign SP Tsuyoshi Wada (\$8.15M/2yrs + \$5M option)

A small, soft-throwing lefty starter who will be 31 in February, Wada spent the last nine seasons with the Japanese Pacific League's Fukuoka Hawks, showing good control and strikeout rates and overcoming an early-case of gopheritis. Despite its modest sum, his contract suggests that he'll enter camp with a spot in the Orioles' rotation, though no one can be sure how his deceptive delivery and slow repertoire will translate overseas. To date, the rate of sustained success for Japanese imports in is extremely low. A free agent this winter, Wada did not need to go through the posting process.

Bullpen Support

Diamondbacks sign RP Takashi Saito (\$1.75M/one year)

The former Yokohama BayStars starter and Dodgers closer will turn 42 on Valentine's Day, and has missed 95 games over the past two seasons with nagging left hamstring strains. He's very good when healthy, but his body may be giving out on him. Still, for a one-year deal worth less than \$2 million, he's worth the gamble in an otherwise deep bullpen.

Phillies sign LHP Dontrelle Willis (\$1M/1yr + incentives)

Willis salvaged his career with the Reds in the second half of 2011 (throw out his disaster start against the Cubs in September, and he posted a 4.23 ERA and 7.1 K/9 in 12 starts), and now, heading into his 30-year-old season, will make an inevitable transition to the bullpen, where his extreme platoon splits make him a valuable lefty specialist. His ability to start remains a bonus, but his shaky control and lack of success with righties are problematic. But they're not uncommon: The issues are shared among the bulk of the lefty specialists around the majors.

Tigers acquire RP Colin Balester from Nationals for RP Ryan Perry, Nationals non-tender Doug Slaten

In a challenge trade of young, hard-throwing righty middle relievers, I'd rather have Balester. Though Perry's fastball touches the upper 90s, his strikeout rate plummeted after it lost some steam and seemingly all of its movement. Slaten, who will be 32 in February, is a lefty specialist who failed to retire lefties in 2011.

Rays acquire RHP Burke Badenhop from Marlins for C Jake Jeffries, non-tender RHP Andy Sonnanstine

Badenhop is a solid righty middle reliever who generates steady ground balls with his sinker and slider. Jeffries is unlikely to make the majors, and Sonnanstine, a vestigial piece of the 2008 rotation that hasn't had a definitive role on the team since, was set to break into seven figures via arbitration. He was finally non-tendered.

Non-tendered

ATL: IF Brooks Conrad, RP Peter Moylan

BAL: OF/1B Luke Scott, SP Jo-Jo Reyes, RP Willie Eyre

BOS: LHP Rich Hill

CHC: C Koyie Hill

COL: OF Ryan Spilborghs, OF Cole Garner

DET: 2B Will Rhymes

KCR: RP Aaron Laffey

MIA: RP Clay Hensley

MIN: RP Jose Mijares

NYM: C Ronny Paulino, OF Mike Baxter

PIT: SS Pedro Ciriaco, C Jason Jaramillo

SDP: OF Jeremy Hermida

SEA: C Chris Gimenez, RP Dan Cortes

SFG: IF Jeff Keppinger, C Eli Whiteside

TEX: RHP Fabio Castillo

Despite the fact that Luke Scott hit .272/.357/.512 from 2006-10 while averaging more than 20 home runs per year, a torn labrum in his right shoulder made him expendable coming off a season in which he made \$6.4 million. That's the key to tendering a player a contract: It guarantees the player at least 80 percent of his previous year's salary. Once a player is non-tendered, however, his salary is determined by open market value.

Other than Scott, none of the others above should be particularly surprising, as several had already been dropped from their respective teams' 40-man rosters. Still, expect most to find homes before pitchers and catchers report, many via major league contracts, some perhaps with the team that just non-tendered them.

Other

Dodgers avoid arbitration with OF Tony Gwynn (\$2M/2yrs), non-tender RP Hong-Chih Kuo

Gwynn and Schumaker were the only non-tender candidates signed to multiyear deals before Tuesday's deadline, and Gwynn's two-year deal comes as a major surprise. "The first offer they made me was a two-year deal, I hadn't even thought of that," he recently told the Los Angeles Times. Kuo is among the best lefty relievers in baseball when healthy, but elbow, back and anxiety problems derailed his 2011. Though his arthroscopic elbow surgery in October wasn't a major procedure, it was already the fifth operation he's had performed on his joint. That could be cause for concern.

LF/DH Manny Ramirez reinstated from the retirement list

Ramirez retired rather than serve a 100-game suspension for performance enhancing drug use last April, meaning that he still has to serve the suspension despite his reinstatement from the retirement list. The suspension has been reduced to 50 games given that he did miss all of 2011, but he'll still be 40 before he's able to play in another major league game. Expect a very limited list of suitors, if any at all.