

Mark Purdy: Oakland A's future part of unofficial agenda at owners meeting

By Mark Purdy Mercury News Columnist

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- No lightning bolts struck The Sanctuary resort here Wednesday, as Major League Baseball owners began their annual winter meetings.

Meaning that, there was no thunderous decision or announcement about whether the A's have the right to leave Oakland and pursue a new ballpark in downtown San Jose. That topic is not on the official agenda.

But it is absolutely on the unofficial agenda. It is absolutely part of side discussions on the patio or in the meeting rooms of this isolated mountainside retreat surrounded by cactus plants. And the vibe you get as you observe the process is that there is something ... um, percolating. Definitely. Percolating.

It's not boiling yet, to be sure. But the bubbles are forming.

The first percolating clue arrived at lunchtime Wednesday when a thin man with gray hair walked into the resort's restaurant. It was Bill Neukom, the ousted Giants owner who no longer has power.

Neukom said he is attending these meetings merely as the Giants' "chairman emeritus" and as a resource if needed. Hmmmmmm. Neukom, a celebrated lawyer, made his bones as Microsoft's lead litigator. He also formulated the Giants' legal stance about the territorial rights it claims to the San Jose market.

Those rights can be overturned by a 75 percent vote of the owners. It is only natural, therefore, to ponder what "resource" Neukom might be offering here. Might it be as an adviser on territorial-rights settlement talks?

Which brings us to the second bubbling clue that surfaced late in the afternoon: Members of MLB's so-called "Blue Ribbon" panel, the one charged with investigating the A's ballpark situation in the Bay Area, were spotted walking into a conference room. Inside, commissioner Bud Selig and his executive committee were meeting.

Later, Selig confirmed that the "Blue-Ribbon" panel had indeed presented a report to the executive committee but would say no more. Selig is scheduled to address the media Thursday.

One executive committee member, Chicago White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, was also mum on the Oakland/San Jose situation. He deferred when posed a question about whether the A's issue might be resolved soon.

"Only the commissioner knows that," Reinsdorf said. "You'll have to ask him."

This echoed the view of every other owner on the premises who commented on the subject.

Meanwhile, when A's owner Lew Wolff was asked if he thought the needle might move on his ballpark situation over the next two days, he said only: "I hope so."

Based on various MLB sources, most of whom wish to remain anonymous, the A's issue is finally coming to a head. That's for certain. One reliable report is that Wolff has been more stridently pressing Selig for an up-and-down vote on the matter, perhaps even exercising the right that every MLB owner has to demand a vote on 90 days notice, on any matter.

In fact, Wolff knows he would likely receive 75 percent support on the territorial-rights issue. The problem is, that sort of vote counting doesn't matter. The owners will not decide this thing. It will be Selig, who on Thursday is expected to accept a two-year extension on his contract.

As commissioner, Selig is a consensus builder. He prefers unanimous agreement. If Wolff demands a vote before the commissioner wants one, Selig could simply tell the owners they should vote to delay the A's decision until a more complete consensus is reached. And the owners would go along with that, because over the past decade, Selig has made them tons of money.

This is why the territorial-rights argument will be solved only when Selig negotiates some sort of peace with the Giants and arranges a settlement to placate them. And there are signs that such talks are at the top of Selig's agenda, now that he's negotiated a new MLB agreement with the players' union and the Dodgers' ownership mess is mostly settled.

Multiple sources say Selig has reached out to speak with Larry Baer, the Giants' new controlling owner, and de facto board chairman Charles Johnson in the past month about the territorial rights. One meeting was delayed by the December death of Baer's mother. But here on the resort grounds, Baer is being briefed on the issue. At some point, he may even have an informal heart-to-heart discussion with Selig.

Baer stressed, however, that this would be nothing unusual. "We've had ongoing conversations with the commissioner over the years about this," Baer said. "It's not a new topic. To me, it's part of the day-to-day rhythm of the team operation. ... We believe there should be a resolution to this. But you've got to have a resolution that's the right solution, a resolution that works."

That sounds like a slight softening of the Giants' hard line stance on surrendering their territorial-rights claim to the South Bay.

"There's no change in our position," Baer clarified.

Fair enough. But let's check back with him when the pot stops percolating. And hits boil.

A's stadium committee in action

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

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"They wouldn't be here, all three of them, if they were not doing something," Wolff said by phone. "I am hopeful there was some discussion about this, but I don't have a date for any decision and I don't know the outcome."

Wolff, who's trying to relocate to San Jose, said he believes the panel simply updated the council on its activities, something he believes has happened at other owners' meetings. "Over three years, I hope so," he said.

Wolff said he believes the A's will move their spring training home to Mesa (Hohokam Park, the Cubs' former complex) in 2015, adding Phoenix has been cooperative but doesn't have funds to upgrade Municipal Stadium.

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San Francisco Chronicle

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He was encouraged the panel had met with the council, saying, "What we're looking for is an answer, yes or no."

The A's want to build a privately financed park in an area that's considered the Giants' territory.

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- *Susan Slusser*

Owners' moves: Commissioner Bud Selig's two-year contract extension is expected to be offered today. The deal would keep him in office until after he turns 80.

-- Owners are expected to approve completion of the sale of the Padres from John Moores to Jeff Moorad and discuss plans to use the new wild-card playoff format this year.

Briefly: First baseman Kendrys Morales, who hasn't played since May 29, 2010, because of a broken ankle, re-signed with the Angels for \$2,975,000. ... Scott Hairston finalized a \$1.1 million contract with the Mets. ... South Korea's Doosan Bears said they signed pitcher Scott Proctor for \$300,000.

A's arms ready to battle it out for rotation spots

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The departures of All-Star hurlers Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill perhaps left more than a few A's fans heartbroken -- maybe angry or annoyed.

But even though Oakland enters the 2012 season without the duo, pitching depth remains one of the club's biggest strengths -- thanks, in part, to some of the return goods acquired in the Gonzalez and Cahill trades.

Nearly 10 pitchers figure to be in the mix for a rotation job come spring. Just a couple are assured of one, whereas the rest figure to duke it out in the weeks leading up to the season opener, against the Mariners in Japan on March 28.

Here's a look at all of the players involved.

Brandon McCarthy: The right-hander is coming off the best season of his six-year Major League career, having posted a 3.32 ERA in 25 starts, five of which were complete games. He also struck out 123 against just 25 walks in 170 2/3 innings. Those numbers have catapulted him to the top of the rotation, especially with Brett Anderson out until midseason and Dallas Braden on the mend as well. Health has been an issue for McCarthy in the past, but if he can pitch his way through Spring Training without any bumps or bruises, count him as a candidate for the Opening Day job.

Braden: Rehab couldn't be going better for Braden, who underwent surgery on his left shoulder in May. There's a good chance he could be ready by Opening Day, barring any setbacks. And if that's the case, he'll slot into the middle of the rotation and look to make up for lost time, having taken the mound just three times last year.

Guillermo Moscoso: Moscoso was something of an afterthought for a starting job last spring, but he is very much a part of the picture this year following a breakout 2011 campaign. The right-hander began the season at Triple-A Sacramento but ultimately made 21 starts, going 8-10 with a 3.38 ERA in 23 total appearances spanning two stints.

Josh Outman: Pitching in his first season since undergoing Tommy John surgery in 2009, Outman made 17 starts for Sacramento and also appeared in 13 games with Oakland, all the while battling control issues -- a problem not too uncommon for pitchers recovering from that procedure. If Outman can prove that control is of no concern come spring, he could find his way into the rotation. If not, a bullpen job isn't out of the question.

Tyson Ross: Ross has a chance to grab a starting job if he can stay healthy and showcase control of his mechanics -- both were struggles last season. He did well in Oakland at the start, posting a 2.75 ERA in nine games -- six of them starts -- before hitting the disabled list with an oblique strain. Following a rehab stint, he spent the remainder of the year in the

Minors and, in nine starts with Triple-A, struggled to a 7.61 ERA. He fared better in the Arizona Fall League, fanning 13 and walking only five in 16 2/3 innings.

Graham Godfrey: Godfrey proved to be the ace of Sacramento's staff last year, winning a team-high 14 games and recording a 2.68 ERA. He allowed more than two runs only four times in his 19 appearances and gave up just six homers in 107 1/3 innings. He fared well in two stints with the A's and most recently compiled a 3.31 ERA in 16 1/3 innings for Leones del Escogido of the Dominican Winter League.

Tom Milone: Acquired from Washington in the Gonzalez trade, Milone is very much big league-ready, having posted a 3.81 ERA in five starts for the Nationals last season. He also compiled a 3.22 ERA with 9.4 strikeouts per nine innings in 148 1/3 frames in Triple-A. General manager Billy Beane has said that of all the pitchers reeled in through trades, Milone could be closest to making an impact in 2012.

Brad Peacock: Also brought over in the Gonzalez trade, Peacock went a combined 15-3 with a 2.39 ERA between Double-A and Triple-A last year before being promoted to Washington, where he allowed just one run in 12 innings down the stretch. Along with a plus-fastball, Peacock has an impressive breaking ball and changeup. He turned heads in a relief stint in the Arizona Fall League, fanning 17 in 12 innings, but figures to be in the mix for a rotation spot.

Jarrold Parker: The highly regarded right-hander, the key player acquired from Arizona in the Cahill trade, bounced back nicely in 2011 after missing the entire 2010 season while rehabbing from Tommy John surgery. He posted a 3.79 ERA in 26 starts for the D-backs' Triple-A club, striking out 112 in 130 2/3 innings. He made his Major League debut in late September, quickly making an impression by tossing 5 2/3 scoreless innings in his one start.

West teams young and powerful on mound

Stockpiles of pitching exist from top to bottom in both divisions

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

If the most sincere form of flattery is imitation, franchises out West are falling all over themselves in praise of San Francisco's Giants.

All across the nine-team landscape, covering three time zones from Texas to Seattle, front offices are putting together young, power-armed rotations, with a thirty-something veteran or two tossed into the mix.

This formula clicked like a Swiss watch for manager Bruce Bochy's 2010 World Series-champion Giants, who unleashed young guns Tim Lincecum (26 at the time), Matt Cain (25), Jonathan Sanchez (27) and Madison Bumgarner (21), with Barry Zito, then 32, the resident sage.

Tying the youthful blend together, 23-year-old catcher Buster Posey put down the right fingers and made all the big plays. If he's back after multiple leg injuries ruined 2011, so are the Giants.

A study of the West rotation depth charts shows that a premium is being placed on grooming stables of young arms to grow and glow together.

Even the most experienced of units -- the two sharing Los Angeles and, surprise, San Francisco -- aren't exactly ancient.

The Dodgers' rotation is fronted by National League Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw, 24, and Chad Billingsley, 27. Age arrives in complementary components Ted Lilly (36), Chris Capuano and Aaron Harang, both 33.

Manager Don Mattingly has a flock of talented arms on the way, headed by Zach Lee (20), Nate Eovaldi, Allen Webster and Chris Withrow (all 22), Chris Reed (21) and Garrett Gould (20).

The Angels' big five all fall in the mid-career, 29-to-31 age range: Jered Weaver and Ervin Santana at 29, Jerome Williams (30) and Dan Haren and C.J. Wilson, both 31.

The youth -- Trevor Bell (25), Garrett Richards and John Hellweg (both 23) and lefty Trevor Reckling (22) - waits in the wings.

The Giants have Zito, 33, and Ryan Vogelsong, 34, in support of Lincecum, Cain (both 27) and Bumgarner (22). Sanchez was shipped to Kansas City for outfielder Melky Cabrera.

Lefty Eric Surkamp, 24, and righty Kyle Crick, 19, envision future roles in the waterfront park.

The makeup of Texas' rotation hinges on the impending decision of Japanese sensation Yu Darvish. If the 25-year-old right-hander signs with the two-time defending AL-champion Rangers, they'll have seven solid starting options.

Derek Holland (25), Neftali Feliz (23), Matt Harrison (26) and Alexi Ogando (28) are joined by Scott Feldman (29) and the elder statesman, 32-year-old Colby Lewis. The organization continues to crank out future stars, led by 20-year-old southpaw Martin Perez.

Challenging Arizona for having the deepest of all West rotations is Seattle.

Felix Hernandez and Charlie Furbush (25), Michael Pineda and Blake Beaven (23), Jason Vargas (29) and newly signed Hisashi Iwakuma form a potentially superb group.

Iwakuma, 30, excelled for Japan in the 2009 World Baseball Classic and has excelled in his homeland for a decade. He resisted overtures from Oakland last year.

King Felix is the AL's answer to Kershaw, and Pineda has the skills to approach that level. Danny Hultzen, the No. 2 overall 2010 Draft choice out of Virginia, is on the way along with James Paxton, Erasmo Ramirez, Chance Ruffin, Mauricio Robles and Taijuan Walker. Only 19, Walker could be the most talented of the bunch.

But the collection of arms with the greatest likelihood of achieving the level of the 2010 Giants is Arizona's abundantly gifted starting staff, led by Ian Kennedy (27) and Daniel Hudson (25).

Kennedy and Hudson combined for 37 wins for the NL West champs in 2011, forming a duo approaching the dynamism of Lincecum and Cain.

Trevor Cahill, an 18-game winner for the A's at 22 in 2010, slides seamlessly into the No. 3 slot. Josh Collmenter, 26, comes off a solid year as the fourth starter, and Wade Miley, a 25-year-old southpaw, is on the cusp.

The presence of potential standouts Trevor Bauer (21), Tyler Skaggs (20), Archie Bradley (19) and Patrick Corbin (22) gave general manager Kevin Towers the leverage to include Jarrod Parker in the package that went to Oakland for Cahill last month.

With a history of finding pitching gold in remote streams, Towers is on the lookout.

"We're kind of just bottom-fishing," Towers said of his pursuit of a fifth starter, "trying to buy low and hopefully catch lightning in a bottle on a guy that's maybe coming off a bad year or somebody that's left out there with no real job that sees an opportunity."

Angels GM Jerry Dipoto, serving as interim D-backs GM in 2010 between Josh Byrnes and Towers, helped set up the organization for years. Dipoto had a hand in landing Kennedy from the Yankees after the '09 season and then acquired Hudson and lefties Skaggs, Corbin and David Holmberg in moving Edwin Jackson and Haren to the White Sox and Angels, respectively, creating payroll flexibility in the process.

Trades of that long-view nature have created mounds of youthful starting options in Oakland, San Diego and Colorado.

In addition, to Parker, 23, the A's have added Brad Peacock, 24, and Tommy Milone, 25, as candidates in a rebuilt rotation fronted at the moment by Brandon McCarthy, Guillermo Moscoso and Dallas Braden, all 28.

Peacock and Milone came from Washington along with another young arm, A.J. Cole, in the Gio Gonzalez deal. Milone, a lefty, was impressive in five starts for the Nationals in 2011. Josh Outman, 27, will bid for a role as well. Brett Anderson, at 24, has ace qualities but is coming off July elbow surgery and could miss most if not all of the season.

Having dealt ace Mat Latos to the Reds for four players, the Padres are comfortable with a rotation of Cory Luebke (27), Tim Stauffer (29), Dustin Moseley (30) and Clayton Richard and ex-Red Edinson Volquez, both 28.

Knocking on manager Bud Black's always-open door are righties Casey Kelley and Joe Wieland and southpaw Robbie Erlin. Kelley, 22, was part of the Adrian Gonzalez deal with Boston, while Wieland, 22, and Erlin, 21, came from Texas in last summer's Mike Adams swap.

Like the A's, the Rockies are rich in starting candidates, creating the promise of an exciting spring for manager Jim Tracy and pitching coach Bob Apodaca.

Potential ace Drew Pomeranz and Alex White, both 23, came from Cleveland for Ubaldo Jimenez. Colorado sent starting catcher Chris Iannetta (quickly replaced by free agent Ramon Hernandez) to the Angels for Tyler Chatwood. A 22-year-old right-hander with 25 pressure-filled Major League starts under his belt, Chatwood reaches 97 mph and should be effective at altitude with his ability to induce ground balls.

When he returns from surgery, Jorge de la Rosa will find company from the likes of Jhoulys Chacin, free-agent pickup Kevin Slowey (27), Jason Hammel (29), Juan Nicasio (25) and Esmil Rogers (26). Chatwood, Pomeranz and White will try to convince Tracy their time is now.

"When you look at our arsenal of arms, if you will," Tracy said, "there may be a few organizations that are envious of not just young arms, but a group of young arms with a lot of quality. [There is] a tremendous amount of upside to them."

Remember the 2010 Giants! The mountains, valleys and beaches out West are coming alive with the rally cry.

A's in talks to move spring camp to Mesa

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

PARADISE VALLEY, Ariz. -- There was no movement regarding a possible A's relocation from Oakland to San Jose on Wednesday, the first day of the Owners Meetings, despite a flurry of discussions. But the A's may shift their Spring Training venue from Phoenix to Mesa, Ariz., in 2015, said Lew Wolff, the team's managing partner.

Wolff and A's president Mike Crowley met with Mesa City Manager Christopher Brady on Wednesday morning to discuss the possible move to HoHoKam Stadium, long the home of the Chicago Cubs. The Cubs are moving to a new facility in Mesa after the 2014 spring season.

"We're preparing a draft lease for them and they're going to look at it," Wolff told reporters. "We're going to do a lot of remodeling of the ballpark."

The original wood-framed HoHoKam was demolished and replaced in 1996. It is now metal and stucco, has two adjacent fields and a practice facility at nearby Fitch Park. The A's have been playing at aging Phoenix Municipal Stadium for 31 years and also have a practice facility about two miles away at Papago Park.

The A's have been negotiating with Phoenix city officials about improvements in both facilities for the last couple of years. Two months ago, Wolff said he was told that those renovations wouldn't be happening.

"They were very cooperative, but they don't have the funds to do it," Wolff said.

About HoHoKam, Wolff said the current discussions call for between \$10 million to \$15 million in improvements, with the city of Mesa funding about 60 percent of that figure and the A's footing about 40 percent of the bill.

"It's in very good shape," Wolff said. "It's in better shape than what we have now. But we need to do some changes in the structure and the field."

On Election Day of 2010, Mesa voters approved spending \$84 million on a new combined stadium and practice field complex to keep the Cubs in Arizona. They had threatened under the new ownership of the Ricketts family to move across the country to Naples, Fla.

As far as the ongoing discussion about the A's moving to a new ballpark in San Jose, Wolff declined to comment. Wolff asked Major League Baseball in 2008 for permission to move from Oakland 35 miles south to San Jose, and Commissioner Bud Selig put together a three-person committee to review the A's relocation options inside and outside the Bay Area. The San Francisco Giants have blocked a possible move to San Jose, stating that Santa Clara County is part of their territory.

That panel of consultants -- Corey Bush, Irwin Raij and Bob Starkey -- was at the meetings on Wednesday and addressed Selig and the executive council.

"They made a presentation and we listened," Selig said after the late afternoon meeting, "but there's nothing new to report."

Wolff had said near the end of this past year that he was hoping for a resolution of the matter as soon as possible.

"I hope it would come in February. I'd like it to come in December," he said at the time. "But there is no timetable. It's a decision that has to be made by the Commissioner."

