

With clear mind, Taylor focused on competition

A's prospect developing new swing, attitude in bid for job

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- A congested outfield scene has again descended upon Oakland, and normally that would equate to an equally crowded atmosphere in Michael Taylor's mind.

But the 26-year-old A's outfield prospect, whom many expected would already have cemented his place on a Major League roster by now, is done with the mind games following a pair of disappointing seasons at the Triple-A level.

"That would probably be a fair assessment with me, being a thinker," Taylor said recently. "I like to try to figure things out, but the more I get into my career, the more I realize I'm usually best when I'm not thinking -- and by that I mean, once a game starts, I just go play with whatever I have that day."

Where he plays this year is an unknown. The A's welcomed in the offseason needing to fill out the outfield, and Taylor finally, it appeared, seemed destined for a starting role in either corner.

But that notion was quickly shot down, not only in general manager Billy Beane's declaration at the Winter Meetings that he didn't believe Taylor had yet to play his way onto the roster, but in his decision to reel in left fielder Seth Smith and right fielder Josh Reddick -- both of whom are expected to sandwich Coco Crisp in the outfield come April.

Collin Cowgill, acquired in the Trevor Cahill trade, along with veteran Jonny Gomes, are also in the mix.

The moves didn't surprise Taylor. In fact, nothing really does anymore. Gone are expectations -- "At this point, I don't know if I can really remember having any expectations, because they've constantly changed," he says -- that have been replaced by a simpler approach.

"I've come to a point where I really enjoy playing baseball, and I'm just going to play it wherever someone lets me play it and have as much fun as I can," he said. "And I know that if you're going to play in the big leagues, to be one of those 750 guys, you're going to have to beat somebody out. If you're in my situation where you're a young and unproven guy, you have to do that. And that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Accompanying him will be a swing he's been revamping since 2010, when he entered Oakland's farm system following a trade from Philadelphia and compiled a .272 average and .740 OPS with six home runs in 127 games for Triple-A Sacramento.

In desperate need of a rebound campaign in 2011 to uphold his status as one of the club's top prospects, Taylor got off to a slow start because of a wrist injury that kept him off the field for nearly six weeks. But, by year's end, he had shown flashes of the 6-foot-5 kid who had posted OPS's of .968 and .944 in 2008 and 2009 while in the Phillies' chain.

Ultimately, he again walked away with a .272 average but, this time, finished with an .816 OPS and more than doubled his home run total (16) while playing in just 93 games. Moreover, his slugging percentage bumped up from a meager .392 to .456.

Upon his September promotion to the big leagues, Taylor managed just six hits in 30 at-bats, including his first Major League home run, and was mostly used as a platoon outfielder. A similar role could come to fruition this year as well, taking into consideration the fact both Reddick and Smith bat from the left side.

"He'll be like any other player going into Spring Training," manager Bob Melvin said. "He's competing for a spot."

Taylor's up for the challenge. A new conditioning program this offseason has led to more mobility and flexibility, which in turn has accumulated to greater strength -- not, though, to be confused with power.

"My original thought process was I've always been a pretty good hitter and I've been a guy who hits line drives and, when I feel good, hits line drives for home runs, and I think that's just the best version of myself," he said. "How many homers that translates to in a full big league season, I really can't tell you. For me, I'm not going to try to start hitting home runs. It's not efficient for me, and it just makes me worse. So I'm just trying to hit the ball as hard as I possibly can, line-drive wise, and if that's 20 homers or 25 or 40, it's going to be what it's going to be."

His swing, he says, is more continuous and fluid, all one motion. And instead of trying to pull the ball to left field, he's intent on reverting back to his old -- and natural -- ways of driving the ball to center and right-center. Meanwhile, he'll let the skeptics be.

"There's always been a gap of what people think I should be doing and what I have done," he said. "There's always been a high ceiling. In some respect, it's flattering. To have someone tell you that you should hit more is frustrating and flattering at the same time.

"But I've spent a lot of time working on my swing this offseason, and sort of solidifying all of the things I worked on over the last year or so and what I think will be successful and consistent at the Major League level. And I think I'm ready to go in more so than I have been in the two offseasons without really questioning what I'm doing with my swing."

In actuality, Taylor was ready yesterday.

"I look in the mirror and think, 'Just go play now,'" he said. "There's nothing else to be done. I couldn't watch any more video, I couldn't train any harder, I couldn't put any more physical or emotional effort into it. You've done everything you can possibly do on your end, so whatever opportunity you get, go enjoy it and see where things land."

Links: Best names in baseball history?

David Schoenfeld, espn.com, 2/2/2012

Diane over at the Value Over Replacement Grit blog needs your help: She's putting together a bracket of the 64 best names in major league history. [Click here for details on submitting your suggestions to her.](#) Great idea, Diane. Can't wait to see the bracket.

OK, some other good stuff from the network:

- I just wrote about the [Edwin Jackson](#) signing, which opens up the possibility of the Nationals trading [John Lannan](#). Our Nationals Baseball blog says: [Don't do it!](#)
- Now that it appears he'll be back with the Braves, Ben Duronio [takes a look at Jair Jurrjens](#) and how he can be expected to perform in 2012.
- Alex Convery asks: [Who should hit leadoff for the Red Sox?](#)
- Logan Burdine attempts to sort through the [Rockies' rotation options](#).
- Why [Jake Westbrook](#) has led to a [series of unfortunate events for the Cardinals](#).
- It's not usually a good sign when you have five guys in your rotation that are dangerous gambles. Unfortunately, [that's the case with the Twins](#).
- A good [wrap-up from the A's FanFest](#) from Jason Wojciechowski. It's too bad the A's probably won't be that good this year, because they may lead the majors in cumulative VAIR -- Value Above Interview Replacement. Guys like [Brandon McCarthy](#), [Dallas Braden](#) and [Jonny Gomes](#) are some of the smartest/most entertaining guys in the game.
- Joe Janish is running down spring training questions and issues for the Mets. Here's an interesting one: [Jason Bay's](#) batting stance. Bay has hit .251/.337/.386 in his two seasons since joining the Mets. Even if he does play better, the Mets have a tough situation: If Bay accumulates 500 PAs in both 2012 and 2013 he gets a \$17 million vesting option for 2014. Ouch.
- Chris Quick on whether the [Giants overreacted to the reliever market](#).
- A look at the [Cubs' non-roster invites](#).
- Jon Shepherd of Camden Depot looks at [cities MLB could expand to](#). I agree with Jon's assessment Charlotte would be the most likely, although I do wonder if the rapidly growing Austin area would be a consideration.
- [Jose Reyes](#) will have to cut his hair ... and he'll do it live on the MLB Network on Friday.