

**A's spring training preview: Who are these guys?**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

All discussion about the A's ultimately revolves around their future -- the team they hope to build and the ballpark in which they hope to play.

But as pitchers and catchers report to camp Saturday in Phoenix, another topic moves to the forefront:

What should we expect from this 2012 team?

You would be challenged to find a club with more unknowns than the A's as they begin spring training. And the consensus outside the organization is this team will take its lumps.

"What we are in anybody's mind is pretty inconsequential," starting pitcher Brandon McCarthy said. "It's just a matter of what we do on an everyday basis and how we come together as a group that will define where we go.

"We have the potential to be a 60-win team and the potential to be a 90-win team."

There is no doubt which of those two extremes seems more realistic.

The A's traded three All-Star pitchers in Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Andrew Bailey, and they are counting on a crop of inexperienced arms to help fill the void. They ranked 12th in the American League in runs last season and watched Josh Willingham, the team leader in home runs and RBIs, depart via free agency.

Even with the likely addition of much-hyped Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes -- who has agreed to a four-year contract pending the completion of paperwork -- and the possible signing of Manny Ramirez, there are concerns about the A's ability to generate offense.

With two-time defending division champion Texas Rangers signing standout Japanese pitcher Yu Darvish and the Los Angeles Angels breaking the bank to add slugger Albert Pujols and All-Star left-hander C.J. Wilson, the odds are stacked against the A's to remain relevant in the A.L. West.

"I think the biggest issue for me is scoring runs," said one major league scout, speaking on condition of anonymity. "They don't really have a power threat or middle-of-the-order run-producer."

General manager Billy Beane is stressing down-the-road vision, saying that the prospects acquired from this winter's trades eventually will pay off as the team waits for approval to build a new stadium in San Jose.

But manager Bob Melvin -- entering his first full season on the job -- is intent on drilling home the message that 2012 is not a throwaway season.

"This is the big leagues," Melvin said, "and in the big leagues you're expected to win. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about. And that's what we're going to be all about."

For the A's to have any chance at surprising people, they need to identify two starters to fill out the rotation -- three if left-hander Dallas Braden misses extended time as he returns from shoulder surgery.

McCarthy and Bartolo Colon are penciled into two of the rotation spots, and Melvin expects Braden back by late April. Brett Anderson also is expected to miss at least the first half of the season while recovering from reconstructive elbow surgery.

But at least two starters have to emerge from a group that includes Graham Godfrey, Tyson Ross and newcomers Tom Milone, Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock, all obtained in offseason trades. Those five have made a combined 20 major league starts.

Pitching coach Curt Young, back with Oakland after spending 2011 with Boston, is familiar with breaking in young pitchers. In 2009, he helped Anderson and Cahill ease into starting roles as rookies. Gonzalez also cut his teeth with them.

"Those were young guys who established themselves in a hurry," Young said. —... Hopefully we can help these guys and make them understand what they need to do and help them get to the level that those guys got to that quick."

The A's also must find a closer after Bailey's trade to Boston. Grant Balfour, Fautino De Los Santos, Joey Devine and Brian Fuentes are the leading candidates.

As for the batting order, Melvin isn't sure what it will look like.

"I've got a notepad with more lineups than I've ever written out," he said.

Melvin would like switch hitters Jemile Weeks and Coco Crisp hitting back-to-back atop the lineup. The bigger issue is who will fill the heart of the order.

Left fielder Seth Smith, obtained from Colorado, hit .284 with 15 homers and 59 RBIs last season. He might hit third. Josh Reddick, who came over from the Red Sox, is slated for right field, but the outfield figures to shuffle if and when Cespedes enters the fold.

The designated hitter spot also is up for grabs, which is why Ramirez remains an option. Chris Carter, whose power has yet to translate to the big leagues, Brandon Allen, Jonny Gomes and Kila Ka'aihue are all D.H. candidates. All besides Gomes will battle at first base, along with Daric Barton.

### **Oakland A's spring training preview**

Bay Area News Group

camp issues at a glance

1. Whose job is most in jeopardy this spring?

LF Seth Smith is being counted on as a run-producer. But he has struggled to hit left-handers and might lose at-bats to Jonny Gomes if Gomes isn't the designated hitter.

2. What unexpected nonroster player could make the 25-man roster out of spring training?

RHP Ryan Cook, an under-the-radar acquisition in the Trevor Cahill trade, has a high-90s fastball that could land him a bullpen spot.

3. Predicted batting order

2B Jemile Weeks

LF Coco Crisp

DH Seth Smith

CF Yoenis Cespedes

3B Scott Sizemore

1B Brandon Allen

C Kurt Suzuki

RF Josh Reddick

SS Cliff Pennington

Manager Bob Melvin mentioned Crisp as a potential No. 3 hitter, but he would prefer pairing Crisp with Weeks atop the lineup. If Chris Carter has a big spring, he could force his way into the designated hitter picture.

4. Predicted rotation

RHP Brandon McCarthy

RHP Bartolo Colon

LHP Tom Milone

RHP Jarrod Parker

RHP Graham Godfrey

Dallas Braden (shoulder surgery) isn't expected back at least until mid-April, so it's tough to pencil him in now. Godfrey was decent in five appearances with Oakland last season and dominated in the minors, giving him the edge over Tyson Ross and Brad Peacock.

5. What player probably will begin the season on the disabled list?

Braden is the obvious choice, but the A's have to hope that McCarthy's troublesome right shoulder holds up, which is no guarantee.

6. Best offseason move

Bringing back Curt Young as pitching coach was wise. He knows how to develop young arms, and that is a key for the A's in 2012. Young spent seven seasons as Oakland's pitching coach before joining Boston last season.

7. Offseason head-scratcher

Handing OF Coco Crisp a two-year, \$14 million contract is risky, given his injury history. He is an exciting player, but that is a steep price for a team generally on a tight budget.

### **Oakland A's roster breakdown**

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Rotation: RHP Brandon McCarthy, RHP Bartolo Colon, LHP Dallas Braden, RHP Graham Godfrey, LHP Tom Milone and RHP Jarrod Parker, RHP Brad Peacock or RHP Tyson Ross

McCarthy and newcomer Colon are the only healthy starters locked in, so the rotation is a huge question mark entering camp. Braden might not be available at the start of the season. Several young pitchers will battle for the remaining spots. Parker, obtained from Arizona in the Trevor Cahill trade, is the A's consensus top prospect.

Bullpen: RHP Grant Balfour, LHP Jerry Blevins, RHP Joey Devine, RHP Fautino De Los Santos, LHP Brian Fuentes, RHP Ryan Cook and RHP Andrew Carignan, LHP Jordan Norberto or RHP Neil Wagner

There is a decent core here, but with Andrew Bailey being traded to Boston, it's anyone's guess who takes over as closer. The hard-throwing De Los Santos has ninth-inning stuff, but he is inexperienced. The A's are trying to acquire another reliever.

Catchers: Kurt Suzuki and Landon Powell, Josh Donaldson or Anthony Recker

Suzuki has a lot of new pitchers to get familiar with, but the real issue is whether he hits better after two straight disappointing offensive seasons. He packed on 10 pounds over the winter with the hope it will give him more endurance. Donaldson or Recker might overtake Powell for the backup job.

Infielders: 1B Brandon Allen, Daric Barton, Chris Carter or Kila Ka'aihue; 2B Jemile Weeks, SS Cliff Pennington, 3B Scott Sizemore, Adam Rosales

Weeks and Pennington will continue to jell as a double-play combo, but they were culprits in the A.L.-high 124 errors Oakland committed last season. And the perennial question remains: Will the A's get adequate power from their corner men? That depends largely on who wins the first-base job, which is a wide-open battle.

Outfielders: LF Coco Crisp, CF Yoenis Cespedes, RF Josh Reddick, Seth Smith, Jonny Gomes and Collin Cowgill or Michael Taylor

Cespedes, whose signing should be completed in a week or two, gives the A's a middle-of-the-order threat with Josh Willingham gone. If Cespedes plays center, Crisp figures to move to left and Smith might wind up in a designated hitter platoon with Gomes. Taylor or Cowgill will have to turn heads to bump someone out of a roster spot.

Designated hitter: Smith, Gomes, Carter and Ka'aihue are candidates.

### **Oakland A's key dates**

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Pitchers and catchers report: Saturday

Rest of squad reports: Feb. 24

Exhibition opener: March 2 vs. Seattle, 12:05 p.m.

Season opener: March 28 vs. Seattle in Tokyo, 3:10 a.m. (PDT)

Home opener: April 6 vs. Seattle, 7:05 p.m.

### **Oakland A's fan essentials**

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A's FAN ESSENTIALS

When: Pitchers and catchers report Saturday, with first workout Sunday. Position players report Feb. 24. The first full-squad workout is Feb. 25.

Where: Home games will be played at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, 5999 E. Van Buren St., Phoenix, Ariz. 85008.

Practices: All workouts through March 1 will be held at Papago Park Baseball Facility, 1802 N. 64th St., in Phoenix. Workouts usually begin at 9 a.m. and are open to the public.

Tickets: Tickets can be purchased at the Phoenix Muni ticket office, by calling 877-493-2255 or 510-568-5600 or online at [oaklandathletics.com/spring](http://oaklandathletics.com/spring). Field box \$25, lower box \$22, upper box \$18, outfield reserved \$12, suites \$30 (per person).

### **A's outfield in motion after Yoenis Cespedes signs**

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

With the pending arrival of Cuban star Yoenis Cespedes, Coco Crisp might be moved from his beloved center-field spot: The A's are kicking around the idea of putting Crisp, a standout defensive player, in left.

Crisp said in a phone interview Tuesday that while he's excited that the A's have agreed to terms with Cespedes, he believes he's Oakland's best option in center.

"I'm going to make all the plays," Crisp said. "If someone feels there's someone better than me, it's hard for me to believe. Unless he's a demigod come down from the heavens, no one is going to outshine me in center field."

Crisp said that until the A's assemble all their outfielders - seven on the 40-man roster at last count, plus two infielders, Brandon Allen and Chris Carter, who play in the outfield - they won't really know what they have. Cespedes, Josh Reddick, Seth Smith, Jonny Gomes and Collin Cowgill are all new to the team.

"We'll just have to see, there are so many things that go into it," Crisp said. "It's a matter of getting everyone on the field, and then it's up to the team, and I'll be wherever they want me to be. But obviously where I want to play is center - that's one of the reasons I came back to Oakland instead of going to Tampa Bay. My goal is to play center field in the big leagues, and this year and next year, that will be in Oakland."

Or will it? With so many outfielders, the A's easily could trade some surplus. A proven contributor such as Crisp, who tied for the league lead in steals last season, might be valuable to a contender at midseason.

"You never know what might happen," Crisp said, adding, "When it comes to trades, I am dumb, for lack of a better word. I've tried to predict things, and without fail, I'm not right."

Crisp has played plenty in left, 216 career games, shifting there for Grady Sizemore in Cleveland. He remained in center in Boston when Jacoby Ellsbury came up, despite speculation that Crisp would be moved. Instead, he was traded to Kansas City during the offseason.

Either scenario might happen in Oakland, and Crisp will roll with it.

"You can't put the carriage before the horse," he said. "I'll just go out and do my thing. And I'm excited to play alongside Cespedes - no matter what side that may be."

Crisp might find himself welcoming another new teammate soon, a man he knows well. The A's are likely to sign former Boston star Manny Ramirez just before or soon after the start of spring training.

Ramirez wouldn't add to the A's outfielder total. He'd come aboard as a designated hitter after serving a 50-game suspension for violating baseball's drug policy. Crisp, though, has played next to Ramirez, and he's had Ramirez, playing left, cut off one of his throws from center field.

Crisp said, "I slid up against the Monster, going from center to left, and came up throwing, and the first person I saw was big old Manny, waving his arms. As I was throwing, I thought, 'Oh my God, it's Manny!' Afterward, I was like, 'Manny, look, you can't do that again.' "

Though Ramirez's reputation has soured in recent years because of performance-enhancing drug use and accusations that he has quit on his teams, Crisp is a fan.

"I like him," Crisp said. "He's a great teammate, he's cool, he works hard, he's just eccentric. He's different. All of the great players are quirky in one way or another. Manny is an awesome person, nothing but pleasant and fun, but the negative stuff always captures people's attention more than the positive things. I think the positive outweighs the negative, and I love the quirky guys. They're entertaining. No filter - that's exciting."

### **Challenges await Cespedes in big leagues**

### **Unlike other Cubans in Majors, slugging outfielder is without peers**

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

The real secret about Yoenis Cespedes is that he really is not a big secret at all.

A fixture on the international baseball scene for almost a decade, Cespedes' name has been scribbled in the notepads of big league scouts for several years. The only surprise regarding the Athletics' new outfielder came when he chose to defect from Cuba and begin the path toward the Major Leagues last winter.

Back in Cuba, Cespedes' exploits on the field were best described in five equal parts: Hits for average, hits for power, baserunning, throwing and fielding.

They still are.

But as is the case with all players who defect from Cuba, there exists an element of mystery in Cespedes' story.

Did Cespedes leave Cuba at night or was it an afternoon escape? What's it like to leave your parents, your siblings and everything you have known to pursue a big league dream in a country you barely know? Faced with the same situation, would you do the same?

Could you do the same?

And, by the way, what took so long to get him signed?

In some ways, Cespedes will face many of the same questions and challenges that other Cubans have faced when they made their way to the Major Leagues. He'll face hardships on and off the field that many Americans may never understand. Cespedes could struggle with the language and it might take some time for him to get used to the customs that come with being a professional athlete in the United States.

Cespedes could also get homesick.

And the food. Oh, the food will never taste as good as it did on Cespedes' beloved island. It might not even taste as good as the food he enjoyed in the Dominican Republic, where he currently lives.

But in some ways, Cespedes is without peers. He's alone because his age, his talent level and the position he plays separates him from the Cuban players who have come before him.

There has never been an outfielder like Cespedes who has left Cuba's national team and joined the Major Leagues in the prime of his career. Sure, he's a risk. But it's a gamble -- a four-year, \$36 million bet -- Oakland is willing to take and Cespedes is ready to make good on it.

"Believe me, I'm going to give the best I have and I'm going to leave it all on the field," Cespedes told MLB.com. "I'll do my best and show I deserve this opportunity. I know I can do it. I'm ready."

But isn't there always a risk when dealing with Cuban players? The Reds took a chance with Aroldis Chapman in 2010, signing the pitcher to a \$30.25 million deal. So far, it has paid off. Chapman, who signed at age 21, is 6-3 with a 3.27 ERA in 69 games. He has struck out 90 big league hitters, but he has also pitched 108 innings in the Minors, including 101 1/3 at Triple-A.

It's too early to tell how the other moves will pan out.

Three months after Chapman, Toronto gambled on infielder Adeiny Hechavarria, also 21 at the time, signing him to a four-year, \$10 million deal. He's hit .255 with 12 home runs and 98 RBIs in 238 Minor League games. But he sported a .389 batting average in 25 games at Triple-A Las Vegas at the end of last season and could make his big league debut this year.

Before the start of the 2009 season, infielder Dayan Viciedo signed a four-year, \$10 million deal with the White Sox at age 20, and shortstop Jose Iglesias signed a four-year, \$8.25 million contract with Boston near the end of that season at age 19. Viciedo continues to make adjustments, while Iglesias could see plenty of playing time for the Red Sox in 2012 after spending the past two seasons in the Minors.

Last May, the Rangers signed outfielder Leonys Martin to a five-year, \$15.5 million deal at age 23. He spent the season in the Minors and will compete for a big league job in center field in Spring Training.

Martin could be headed back to the Minors, but that would surprise no one. Almost seven years ago, first baseman Kendrys Morales signed with the Angels at 22. He needed four years of seasoning in the Minors.

White Sox infielder Alexei Ramirez, who signed a four-year deal in 2007, when he was 26, and was immediately thrust into the starting lineup, is the closest comparison to Cespedes in terms of age and skill level, but Ramirez never faced the type of scrutiny that Cespedes is likely to see.

Today's Cuban players are young and known as much for their defense as they are for their prowess at the plate.

That wasn't always the case.

In 1991, right-handed pitcher Rene Arocha, then 27, became the first player to defect from Cuba's national team. He later signed with the Cardinals. Brothers Livan and Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez followed their big league dreams in 1995. El Duque was 32 when he made his big league debut with the Yankees in 1998, and Livan was 21 the first time he took the hill for the Marlins in '96.

Phillies right-hander Jose Contreras, arguably the most famous Cuban pitcher of all-time, defected in 2002 and was 31 when he made his debut with the Yankees the next year.

Cespedes will be 27 in October.

"My first goal is to make the team and stay healthy all season, and little by little, I'll make more goals," Cespedes said. "I've been preparing every day for this, and I 100-percent believe that I am ready for the Major Leagues. I have a lot of international experience and experience at a high level. I'm very confident in my abilities."

But can Cespedes hit big league pitching? Specifically, can he handle the pitching in the American League West? How will Cespedes do against some combination of Jered Weaver, Ervin Santana, C.J. Wilson and Dan Haren back-to-back-to-back in Anaheim? The Rangers have Yu Darvish, Derek Holland and a bevy of power arms in the bullpen. And don't forget about Felix Hernandez in Seattle.

And have you seen the amount of foul territory in Oakland?

Don't be fooled by Cespedes' Spring Training statistics. The A's train in Phoenix, and the balls fly out of the ballparks in Arizona. There are many who believe Cespedes will show the type of hitter he really is by June 1. Others say you'll know if he can handle big league pitching by May 15.

What is certain is that he will need a support group in Oakland. He'll need a mentor, somebody who knows the highs and lows that come with Major League Baseball and is well-versed in the art of hitting in the big leagues. Manny Ramirez, anyone?

Also still to be determined is if taking the best deal on the market was really the best decision for Cespedes.

What's known is that the A's believe he is worth the risk and that Major League Baseball has never seen a player like Cespedes leave Cuba in recent years. But that's not a secret, either.

### **A's continue noisy winter for AL West**

### **Deal for Cuban outfielder Cespedes latest big move in division**

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

The American League West has emerged full force as the official Stealth Division of Major League Baseball.

All four teams in the sport's smallest division are thinking big and, moving under the cover of darkness, making bold strikes when it is least expected.

It all began with the Angels' swooping in on Albert Pujols and C.J. Wilson for their historic dual signing at the Winter Meetings, bringing the Yu Darvish reaction from the two-time AL champion Rangers. Then the offense-starved Mariners made headlines by lifting super prospect Jesus Montero from the Yankees at the cost of Michael Pineda.

The Oakland A's, seemingly on the outside looking in, are the latest to pounce in reportedly landing highly coveted Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes with a four-year deal in the \$36 million range. The club has not commented on or confirmed the agreement.

This is a pricey neighborhood for the A's, who had been cutting payroll left (Gio Gonzalez) and right (Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey) this winter with moves clearly designed to arm the organization for the future and a potential move to San Jose.

Cespedes, who has an impressive track record in Cuba, calls to mind a young Cesar Cedeno with his multiple physical gifts and explosive bat. He was romanced by a number of franchises after being granted free agency by MLB on Jan. 25.

Arriving Tuesday in Miami and touring the Marlins' new ballpark, Cespedes appeared to be a natural for the newly designed outfit.

The Marlins, given their ambitious winter, were considered runaway favorites to reel in Cespedes as an enticing attraction for the local Cuban population. The reconfigured franchise has installed entertaining Ozzie Guillen in the managerial role and spent lavishly on free agents Jose Reyes, Mark Buehrle and Heath Bell while also acquiring Carlos Zambrano for its rotation.

The Orioles, White Sox, Cubs, Tigers and Indians all were linked to Cespedes with varying degrees of interest, along with the Marlins and A's.

The A's, who had seemed more focused on divesting than investing, weren't viewed by insiders as serious contenders for Cespedes before making their stunningly successful leap into the fray.

A club in search of an identity might have just found it, giving discouraged fans reason to make the trek to the Coliseum and take delight, hopefully, in the development of a five-tool talent with enormous upside.

Cespedes is the clear exception in the long-term master plan of general manager Billy Beane -- and what an exception he could turn out to be if he lives up to advanced billing and expectations.

The Athletics in previous seasons had made unsuccessful efforts to sign Cuban defectors Alexei Ramirez (White Sox) and Aroldis Chapman (Reds). But they showed Cespedes the love -- and money -- and now have him ticketed for their East Bay outfield.

At 26, Cespedes is no Bryce Harper or Mike Trout, in need of another year of seasoning. This guy looks ready to go. Certainly he has the sturdy frame to endure and the physical gifts to bring fans out of their seats.

Cespedes batted .333 with 33 homers and 99 RBIs in 90 games in his last season in Cuba but struggled in the Dominican Winter League, always a tough proving ground.

Cespedes, like former Cuban slugger Kendrys Morales of the Angels, took up residence in the Dominican Republic in order to gain MLB free agency.

After he gained legal clearance by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, Cespedes was open to offers. The A's made their move, hoping that their new import can bring the brand of impact Morales produced for the Angels before his home-plate celebratory leap on May 29, 2010, halted his drive toward stardom.

Morales -- about to launch a comeback bid from the lower left leg fracture that forced him to miss all of 2011 with a second surgery -- is not really an ideal model in assessing and projecting Cespedes' development.

Morales was 21 when he signed a six-year deal with the Angels in 2004 after his 13th attempt to reach Florida's shores on a boat finally was successful. Morales is a powerful and accomplished hitter, but he is not as gifted athletically as the swift Cespedes.

Needing one full season in the Minor Leagues and parts of three others, Morales finally emerged as a major force for the Angels in '09 after Mark Teixeira elected to sign with the Yankees, clearing a space at first base.

Morales turned 26 -- Cespedes' current age -- during that breakout season that featured a .306 batting average and .569 slugging percentage, with 34 homers and 108 RBIs. He finished fifth in the AL Most Valuable Player Award balloting.

Cespedes will not be given a job this spring. There will be considerable competition in a deep Oakland outfield.

Veteran Coco Crisp is back in center field, with Seth Smith, Josh Reddick, Jonny Gomes and Michael Taylor gunning for corner spots along with Cespedes. Another newcomer, Collin Cowgill, also will bid for playing time.

With Cespedes now in the mix, Oakland will have potential trade options pending how quickly the new man in town takes flight.



The AL West, once seen as the least colorful and interesting of the six divisions, just keeps getting brighter -- and more fascinating -- by the day.

### **A's Coco Crisp not ready to give up center field to Yoenis Cespedes**

Sporting News

The Oakland Athletics shocked the baseball world earlier this week by signing Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes. And they also shocked Coco Crisp, who might have to move from center field to left to make room for him.

Crisp isn't ready to surrender his spot without a fight, however, and he believes he is the team's best option there.

"I'm going to make all the plays," Crisp told the San Francisco Chronicle. "If someone feels there's someone better than me, it's hard for me to believe. Unless he's a demigod come down from the heavens, no one is going to outshine me in center field."

The newspaper notes the A's have seven outfielders on their 40-man roster, as well as a couple if infielders who can handle the outfield. That surplus will create plenty of camp competitions and might even result in a trade.

"We'll just have to see, there are so many things that go into it," Crisp said. "It's a matter of getting everyone on the field, and then it's up to the team, and I'll be wherever they want me to be. But obviously where I want to play is center—that's one of the reasons I came back to Oakland instead of going to Tampa Bay. My goal is to play center field in the big leagues, and this year and next year, that will be in Oakland."

Crisp, who re-signed with Oakland for two years and \$14 million this offseason, hit .264 with eight homers, 54 RBIs, 69 runs and an AL-leading 49 steals last season.

He has played 216 games in left field during his 10-season major league career, compared to 1,011 in center.

### **A's shell out big bucks for Cespedes**

By: Alexis Terrazas, San Francisco Examiner

It was not that long ago that the 2012 season for A's baseball seemed to be one destined for mediocrity.

That perception changed Monday with the acquisition of outfielder Yoenis Cespedes.

The A's secured the highly coveted but untested Cuban defector Monday with a reported four-year, \$36 million deal. The A's bested the Miami Marlins, who were favored to add Cespedes to their A-list acquisitions of Jose Reyes, Mark Buehrle and Heath Bell.

"Miami was a great visit," Cespedes, 26, told MLB.com. "I had a good time. I ate with the team president and other people in the front office. They were nice and it was a great experience, but the A's were for me."

Cespedes was declared a free agent by Major League Baseball on Jan. 25 and was legally cleared by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, according to a report on MLB.com. Before reporting for spring training duties later this month, Cespedes will have to attain a worker's visa and his signing won't become official until he passes a team physical.

Cespedes' somewhat stunning move to the West Coast comes after an enigmatic offseason that saw Oakland deal away its best pitchers in Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey. And while the hard-hitting righty will be undoubtedly deemed an asset to the A's in keeping up with Albert Pujols and the division rival Los Angeles Angels, it's unknown how well he'll slug

big league pitches.

But Cespedes, an eight-year center field veteran of the Cuban League, isn't worried.

"I've been preparing every day for this, and I 100 percent believe that I am ready for the major leagues," he told MLB.com.

"I have a lot of international experience and experience at a high level. I'm very confident in my abilities.

"Believe me, I'm going to give the best I have, and I'm going to leave it all on the field. I'll do my best and show I deserve this opportunity. I know I can do it. I'm ready."

The rigors of the big leagues will determine soon enough if Cespedes is ready. But the 6-foot, 215-pound Cespedes was ready enough to desert the communist Caribbean island he called home.

"I am super happy because it's been a dream of mine for a long time," Cespedes told MLB.com. "To leave my country and play in the big leagues is what the goal was. My family is really happy, too. They are living their dreams through me.

"It was a difficult decision to leave Cuba, but I'm really excited with how things worked out."

### **Rounding Third: A's take a big chance on Cespedes**

Sports Network, Philadelphia, PA

There was one last major order of business before some baseball teams open camp on Sunday and that was to find a home for Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes.

Well, that has been taken care of, albeit by a team nobody expected, the Oakland Athletics.

It's funny. While updating major league depth charts the other day, I noticed just how thin the A's roster was because their offseason up to this point has been primarily a purge, as starting pitchers Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez were dealt along with closer Andrew Bailey.

In all, Oakland received a total of 10 prospects in those deals, as the team looked toward the future with the hopes of competing by the time they open a new ballpark, hopefully by 2015. That's still not a lock, though.

Now they may have the biggest piece of that puzzle, landing Cespedes with a four-year, \$36 million deal. That seems to be an awful lot of money for a player who's barely faced major league pitching from a team that just doesn't do business this way.

And with the way the contract is structured, Cespedes is not eligible for arbitration and can become a free agent after the 2015 season. Meaning, if Cespedes is this five-tool stud who everyone thinks he is going to be, the A's likely won't be able to retain him at that point.

The thought, of course, is that a stadium will be opening just as his deal is expiring and the team will be coming together as a contender, making the A's all that more enticing.

But, it's way too early to even get into that.

Cespedes had been a hot topic all winter, but most felt it was a fait accompli that he would eventually land with the Miami Marlins. The Marlins offered the same amount of money as the A's, but spread it over six years rather than the four in

Oakland.

Both Chicago teams, the Detroit Tigers and Baltimore Orioles also were said to be in the running.

So why all the fuss?

Well, the baseball public first got wind of the 26-year-old slugger at the 2009 World Baseball Classic, where by all accounts Oakland general manager Billy Beane fell in love with him.

Cespedes hit .458 in his six WBC games, then hit .333 with 33 home runs, 99 RBI and 11 stolen bases over 90 games in Cuba during the 2010-11 season. His 33 home runs were a Cuban National Series record.

He defected from Cuba last winter and was declared a free agent by Major League Baseball on Jan. 25. However, he was not allowed to sign with a team until he was legally cleared by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

And that happened on Monday.

Cespedes, whose deal will be finalized once he receives a visa and takes a physical, can play all three outfield positions, but will likely slot in at center field for the A's, where he joins an outfield that already includes the likes of Coco Crisp, Josh Reddick, Seth Smith, Collin Cowgill and Jonny Gomes.

So, yes, he should be able to contribute right away.

Cespedes will earn \$6.5 million in 2012, \$8.5 million next season and \$10.5 million in each of the final two years of the deal. It's a far cry from the "Moneyball" mentality that has seemed to take on a new life the last few months, given how well the movie did at the box office and was received by critics.

Billy Beane will be the first one to tell you that investing your money in the lottery is not always the best idea. But, sometimes you have to take a chance and think outside the box. And nobody has been more outside the box than Beane.

Even with Cespedes, this team likely won't compete this year. But they will be a lot more fun to watch. And, oh yeah, Manny Ramirez may be joining him by the team breaks for spring training in Phoenix on Sunday.

Stay tuned.

### **Leading Off: Cuban star might make A's worth watching**

Brian Blomster, Sacramento Bee

Though it's doubtful the A's will be competitive this season, in one pricey move they became relevant.

Signing Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes to a four-year contract created a reason to pay attention to the team.

The \$36 million deal seems a bit out of step for the A's, who depend mostly on untried youngsters – except in the outfield. There, Cespedes could move into center field, pushing the intriguing Coco Crisp to left or right and leaving the other corner to Seth Smith or Josh Reddick.

Cespedes is considered a multi-tool player with beastly power, speed, a strong arm, defensive grace and an aura that comes with taking the chance of defecting.

If he produces, as many experts believe he can, there could be quite a show in Oakland while prospects develop and a new ballpark materializes.

It's not new thinking. The Giants rode Barry Bonds' mystique to sellout after sellout while he chased the major league home run record, even though the team was faulty the final few seasons of the Bondsian era.

Cespedes will play in Sacramento, too, either as an Athletic when they play the River Cats in an exhibition at Raley Field before Opening Day or as a member of the Cats while preparing to join the big club.

Either way, he – and by extension, the A's – could be worth watching.