

Oakland A's reportedly likely to sign Manny Ramirez

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

All signals point toward the A's signing free agent designated hitter Manny Ramirez sometime soon.

Ramirez, who must serve a 50-game suspension before he can play for violating Major League Baseball's drug policy, has attracted interest not only from Oakland but also the Baltimore Orioles and Toronto Blue Jays.

However, Orioles general manager Dan Duquette said recently he doesn't see Ramirez, 39, as a fit for his team. Discussions between the Blue Jays and Ramirez reportedly did not get far.

That leaves the A's.

General manager Billy Beane said last week that he wants to add a veteran D.H. to help bolster the middle of the lineup. A's co-owner Lew Wolff has expressed his interest in adding Ramirez, who has 555 homers and a .312 batting average over 19 major league seasons.

The San Francisco Chronicle has reported that the A's "are likely" to sign Ramirez just before or just after the team begins spring training this weekend.

Barry Praver, one of Ramirez's agents, declined to comment Wednesday, but A's officials have done nothing to dissuade speculation about Ramirez.

According to a Fox Sports report, while serving his suspension, Ramirez can play in spring training games and extended spring training games. When the regular season begins, Ramirez can work out with the major league team or a minor league squad, but he must leave the ballpark before the gates open.

Ramirez's addition would add to an already intriguing A's spring camp. The team created a buzz Monday by agreeing to a four-year, \$36 million contract with highly touted Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes, and there's already thought as to whether Cespedes might bump Coco Crisp out of center field.

Crisp stressed his preference to stay in center.

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

A's manager Bob Melvin told this newspaper he had no problem with Crisp's stance.

"I'm not upset by his comments," Melvin said. "I want him having that kind of confidence in playing center field. And in my opinion, he's one of the best center fielders in the game."

Baseball news and notes, Feb. 15

Staff and news services

The Giants, seeking to add minor-league depth, have given contracts to two pitchers who once worked in their system.

Right-hander Ramon Ortiz, 38, once a successful starter for the Angels, will report to the major-league camp. He had a 4.86 ERA in 22 games for the Cubs last year. He pitched fairly well for Triple-A Fresno in 2009 but did not get a call-up.

Australian left-hander Travis Blackley, who is 29 and pitched two games for the Giants in 2007, will be in minor-league camp. He was in the A's system in 2010 and last year pitched in South Korea.

- Henry Schulman

Hernandez in trouble: Former Giants pitcher Livan Hernandez's wage garnishment with the Nationals will be essentially transferred to the Astros through a series of court filings, according to the Washington Times, which reported paperwork was filed Tuesday in Miami-Dade County, Fla. Circuit Court.

A public records search of Miami-Dade County Circuit Court failed to turn up any filings this week.

However, an Oct. 28 judgment reveals that Hernandez owes SunTrust Bank \$469,387.22, covering two debts plus attorney's fees and other costs.

The writ of garnishment as it pertained to the Nationals was dissolved Jan. 31, court records indicate, as Hernandez had signed a minor-league deal with the Astros.

The Astros had no immediate comment on the filing Wednesday afternoon.

Hamilton in counseling: Rangers slugger Josh Hamilton says he's undergoing counseling individually and with his wife in the aftermath of his admitted relapse with alcohol and is "doing things right a day at a time."

In an exclusive interview with Pastor James Robinson on Glenn Beck's live streaming video network, Hamilton said he knows it's a serious issue. He said he's doing well and so is his family.

The interview came just more than two weeks after Hamilton had several drinks during dinner in Dallas and continued drinking later that night. It was the second known relapse with alcohol in the past three years for the recovering drug addict.

Hamilton, the 2010 AL MVP, says he feels shame about his mistakes, but is willing to admit them.

Astros voice to retire: Baseball Hall of Fame broadcaster Milo Hamilton, who had the memorable call on Henry Aaron's 715th home run, will retire as the radio voice of the Astros after the 2012 season. This will be the 84-year-old Hamilton's 28th year with the Astros and 59th year overall calling Major League Baseball games.

Hamilton made the call on Aaron's 715th home run April 8, 1974, as a broadcaster for the Braves.

Briefly: The Twins and second baseman Alexi Casilla have agreed on a one-year contract for \$1,382,500 to avoid an arbitration hearing. ... Outfielder Garrett Jones asked a three-person arbitration panel for a \$2.5 million salary this year, and the Pirates argued he should be paid \$2.25 million.

Inbox: What will Cespedes' impact be on A's?

Beat reporter Jane Lee answers fans' questions

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

What can we expect from Yoenis Cespedes? Will he be in the big leagues soon? -- Ryan H., Fairmont, Minn.

Though A's officials have yet to comment on Cespedes -- and won't until the deal becomes official following a physical -- it's safe to assume he'll immediately be slotted into the Opening Day lineup, barring a disastrous spring showing.

The A's didn't make him their highest-paid player this year (he'll make \$500,000 more than Coco Crisp) to start him in the Minors. And while there's thought that rushing him could derail his progress, I'd suspect the A's want to evaluate him in a big league setting right away. A deal such as this is a big risk, but in a marketplace where big-name free agents are looking

for mega-deals in homes not named the Oakland Coliseum, the A's couldn't pass up snagging this kind of talent when given the chance. Cespedes is a five-tool asset with big upside, and he gives the A's a potentially true middle-of-the-order threat - something they've been lacking in recent years.

Expectations, then, are clearly high for this young fella, who in the end could turn out to be a bust. Only time will tell if the A's won the lottery.

Now that Cespedes is in the mix, how do you see the Opening Day lineup looking?

-- James S., San Jose, Calif.

Assuming Cespedes is in the lineup, manager Bob Melvin can now keep both Jemile Weeks and Coco Crisp at the top of the order, rather than utilize Crisp in the third hole. That's his preference, for obvious reasons, and I'd think that Seth Smith would then become the best option to take over duties in the third spot as the club's designated hitter, in front of Cespedes. Kurt Suzuki could follow, with Scott Sizemore batting sixth and either Brandon Allen or Daric Barton -- whoever wins the first-base battle this spring -- in the seventh spot. That leaves Josh Reddick batting eighth, with more speed in the form of Cliff Pennington rounding out the lineup.

Now that the A's have shocked the world by signing Cespedes, are they done making moves before Spring Training? Is Manny Ramirez still a possibility?

-- Scott L., Mountain View, Calif.

Ramirez is a definite possibility. His signing wouldn't further affect the outfield scene, since he's being looked at by the A's as a DH, and he's not expected to reel in a ton of money, so his presence also wouldn't hurt payroll. Though other teams which have had reported interest in Ramirez have slowly shied away, the A's appear to remain as the favorites to sign him. But, first, they're expected to add a reliever. Texas' Koji Uehara is reportedly on their radar, as is free agent Mike Gonzalez.

On the 40-man roster, both Brandon Allen and Jonny Gomes have been assigned jersey No. 31. Allen wore it with the A's last year, but I know Gomes has had it throughout his career. Who is giving whom the Rolex?

-- John L., Orinda, Calif.

Look for the Rolex to land on Allen's wrist, considering Gomes can pull the veteran card, which is exactly what he jokingly said he would do if need be at FanFest last month. This kind of thing happens all the time, and it's usually settled rather quickly in camp.

At what time in the morning or afternoon do the A's start practicing for Spring Training? I would like to drop by the fields and watch.

-- Carl E., Mesa, Ariz.

Usually 9 a.m. is a good time to grab a seat -- there are plenty available at that time of day -- and catch a handful of morning drills for an hour or two before the club heads in to prepare for that day's game. Honestly, it's a great way to enjoy watching your favorite players in a casual and up-close atmosphere, which isn't necessarily available during the regular season, so I'd invite all fans to take advantage of it.

Cespedes signing logical in Oakland's picture

Deal could be a bargain in light of what premium talent costs

By Peter Gammons / MLB.com

Much of what Billy Beane does is seen through the refracted light of "Moneyball," so when the A's general manager traded Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey, then signed Yoenis Cespedes, there were countless references to attending this year's Oscars and all that the images of Michael Lewis and Brad Pitt have created.

This week will be Billy being Billy -- nothing more, nothing less. This week he'll drive with his dog, Taggart, to Phoenix for Spring Training. Some of us know one doesn't force one's dog to fly.

On the surface, the trades and the signing of the Cuban refugee seemed contrary. They are not, of course. They begin in the reality that is being a small-market team, which the Athletics will be until, and if, they are allowed to move to San Jose. One of the problems for the Oaklands and Pittsburghs of the world is that beginning this season, it will be more difficult to get premium-talent players without losing 90 games and getting high Draft picks in return. The Pirates, for instance, have invested heavily in high-ceiling draftees like Jameson Taillon, Josh Bell and Stetson Allie, players whose talents they'd be hard-pressed to afford if they were international free agents under the new rules that are coming soon.

The Athletics thoroughly scouted Cespedes. Risk? "Of course there's risk," says Beane. But their consensus is that when he arrives in Oakland, be it April or June, he will hit somewhere in the .250-.260 range with power and be an aggressive, above-average defender in the middle of the field, in center. What does \$9 million buy the Athletics on the free-agent market in terms of a 26-year-old who can play in the middle of the field and offers power?

Forgetaboutit.

This was one of Oakland's reports on Cespedes: "Built like an explosive and physical NFL running back. Arrogant defender with closing speed. Throws plenty. Real speed offensively. Solid hitter who will have to adjust to the big league breaking ball, to harness strikeouts. Cares about his craft. Not flamboyant off the field. Has a lot of pride."

This didn't come from "sun-deprived nerds," as one traditional baseball writer refers to any executive from the Moneyball Era, with all their printouts. This came from scouting and background work and days and hours spent at ballparks in the Dominican Republic.

The signing makes sense because if Cespedes hits .250 with power and good defense in the second half of 2012, he will be a valuable commodity. Then, if he makes adjustments, the A's will have him for his prime years at ages 27, 28 and 29. Remember, this is a one-year, one-year-only sale on Cespedes and Jorge Soler, because after this season, clubs will be capped on what they can spend internationally. So Beane didn't need to listen to Dylan's "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" because as soon as Cespedes did so, Billy jumped.

It makes sense because right-handed power is such a scarcity, which is why the Jesus Montero deal made sense for Seattle even if he never catches 100 games in a season. Where else were they going to get a young middle-of-the-order right-handed bat and have Brian Cashman admit, "I took the risk in this trade?"

Now Oakland soon could have Cespedes and Michael Choice in the outfield -- two right-handed power hitters. They hope that Derek Norris, the catcher they acquired from the Nationals in the Gonzalez trade, provides them an above-average bat behind the plate.

Oakland has used Gonzalez and Cahill to get three big-time arms in Jarrod Parker, Brad Peacock and A.J. Cole, with last year's first-round Draft pick, Sonny Gray, also on board. Norris has promise. Grant Green, the 2009 first-rounder, will stay in center field for the time being as he progresses through the system.

"Essentially we've gone from being a bottom-10 system to a top-10 system," says Beane. Theoretically that could bode well for the San Jose opener, if it ever happens.

Beane doesn't know what Cespedes will turn out to be. Wily Mo Pena? Adam Jones? Someone somewhere in-between Jones and Matt Kemp? At ages 27-29, \$9 million seems a bargain, especially when the A's will be stuck at The Coliseum for at least the next three seasons.

Cespedes is an investment that for the Oakland Athletics makes sense. He will not be walking down the red carpet in a couple of months. He will be trying to hit breaking balls.

Cespedes heading to Oakland but few are sure what to expect

Joseph Lemire, SI.com

Baseball's most bizarre showcase video begins with Star Wars-style scrolling text, pronouncing Yoenis Céspedes to be "A New Hope" (not coincidentally, the name of George Lucas' first film in the intergalactic series) and revealing that the Cuban outfielder -- who reportedly agreed to a four-year, \$36-million contract with the Athletics this week -- is nicknamed "El Talento or La Potencia."

From there, the reel segues into an eclectic soundtrack that starts with Christopher Cross' rock ballad "Sailing" -- to which, incongruously, clips of Céspedes demonstrating his all-fields power are shown -- and later delves into modern hits sung by Lil' Wayne, Jay-Z and Chris Brown, while the 6-foot, 215-pound Céspedes shows off some impressive workout feats. Among them are, purportedly, a 6.3-second 60-yard dash time (with slow-mo, bare-chested close-ups), several 45-inch standing box jumps, a 1,300-pound leg press (with two men sitting on the machine to add weight) and a 350-pound bench press.

That doesn't include perhaps his greatest skill: home-run admiration. (Céspedes, who shares Cuba's single-season home-run record with 33 in 90 games, is not shy about batter's-box viewings of his work.) But at least there are cheery messages interjected throughout, such as "I've done it all in Cuba, now I must move on!" and "Doing Whatever It Takes To Be The BEST!!!" He also gives a shoutout to former NFL running back Ahman Green, who apparently helped him with his training.

Clear away the frivolities surrounding the video, however, and watch again on mute, cueing in only on the man at work. Even if the measurements and times aren't verifiable, the point is made: Céspedes is a sculpted specimen with extremely talented, if raw, tools. One doesn't have to be a major league talent evaluator to see the explosive athleticism of a professional athlete.

So while the video elevated his profile, it simultaneously detracted (or at least distracted) from its purpose of showcasing the 26-year-old Céspedes as a player with obvious discipline and a serious pursuit of improvement.

"He's really a levelheaded, dedicated young ballplayer," Cuban baseball historian Peter Bjarkman said in a telephone interview.

Bjarkman has tracked the Cuban Serie Nacional (the country's top league) and the national team for nearly two decades and over that time has seen the country's top players both in the domestic league and in international competitions. He's one of the few Americans who has had multiple conversations with Céspedes -- who, despite his name recognition as a highly-sought free agent, remains a mystery on a personal level -- and found him to be "a very outgoing, personable guy." Céspedes' agent, Adam Katz, echoed that sentiment. Katz first met Céspedes in the Dominican Republic shortly after his mid-summer defection and saw the ballplayer surrounded by a half-dozen family members -- his mother, Estela Milanés, a softball pitcher who competed for Cuba in the 2000 Olympics; an aunt; and a few nephews and nieces -- and made a positive first impression, despite having just gone through a travel ordeal.

"He was a smart, serious, sweet kid," Katz said.

Céspedes is also, much to the surprise of the baseball world, the highest-paid player in Oakland. The A's were not thought to be interested in Céspedes after spending most of their offseason trading major leaguers to replenish the farm system in order to make a serious playoff run in a few seasons, not to mention their small payroll and overflow of outfielders.

(Oakland's second-highest paid player is also a centerfielder, Coco Crisp.)

But in a marketplace where veteran free agents seem to be going for either mega-deals or one-year contracts, the A's perhaps believed they could gain value with a middle-class free agent. As a centerfielder with power, Céspedes is a prospect to dream on.

"We've actually scouted him for the last four or five years in international competition," Oakland's director of player personnel, Billy Owens, said on MLB Network Radio, "and he blows you away with the sheer physicality of him, the running speed, the power potential. He's a good makeup kid. Just from following the past couple years, he's a winning ballplayer." Last year Céspedes batted .333 with a .424 on-base percentage, .667 slugging, 33 home runs and 99 RBI in 90 games last year for Granma in Cuba. But he's had mixed success in international competitions.

He was Cuba's starting centerfielder in the 2009 World Baseball Classic, during which he went 11-for-24 with six extra-base hits (a double, three triples and two homers). He smacked one of his triples off Japan's Hisashi Iwakuma, who joined the Mariners this offseason, giving Céspedes experience against at least one intra-divisional pitcher.

But in the '09 Baseball World Cup Céspedes batted only .194 and lost his starting job to Leonys Martin, who spent last year in the Rangers' minor league system after his own defection.

In an article analyzing Céspedes' major league potential, Bjarkman described the player as "a legitimate five-tool prospect" though he "has not quite met expectations against better pitching and under the pressures of international play." Bjarkman raised questions about how Céspedes will fare against major league pitching, especially in his first season, because of a tendency to be a freeswinger.

Bjarkman said the overall level of play in Cuba's top league is comparable to Double A ball in the States, but he noted that Cuba's elite players -- the top 25 to 40 or so -- are obvious major league-caliber ballplayers. Céspedes is decidedly in that group, he said, but probably more of a top-10 player than a top-5.

"Few of the really top players have ever left [Cuba]," Bjarkman said. "The real cream of the crop has not left. The only ones who really are major stars at the time they left were [Jose] Contreras and Alexei Ramirez. Most of the guys that have left have been young ballplayers, some with more upside than others, like Kendrys Morales, but Morales had only played two years in the Cuban league at the time that he left. He was really young and untested."

Céspedes' performance in the Dominican Winter League last month was lacking, though that probably can be excused to rust, as he had not played a meaningful game in a year. Suiing up for Aguilas, he went 5-for-35 with one home run, 10 strikeouts and no walks.

Publicly, the Marlins were thought to his most serious suitor, but even they weren't convinced Céspedes would become a star. Manager Ozzie Guillen described Céspedes as "pretty impressive" and that "the tools are there" while acknowledging he was no sure thing.

"There are a lot of question marks out there," Guillen said to ESPN 1000 in Chicago. "How's he going to handle major league pitching? We don't know. How's he going to handle major league media? We don't know. There are a lot of ifs. Whoever signs him is gambling."

Much of the hype and the appeal of Céspedes and other international veteran players, as was the case with Japanese pitcher Yu Darvish, is the instant gratification. The presumption is that such ballplayers -- unlike even the most hyped amateur signees -- can make an immediate impact without having to toil in the minors for a season or more. It's why the baseball world is always looking for the next phenom. It isn't just a search for the next superstar.

It's a desire, in other words, for a new hope.

Blanchat: Is Billy Beane a genius or a madman?

By Jack Blanchat, The Stanford Daily, 2/16/2012

Billy Beane is a genius. Or he's a madman. I'm just not sure which one.

Every single day, the Oakland Athletics' general manager continues to defy all logic. In their most recent mind-boggling move, the A's signed Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes to a four-year, \$36 million deal on Monday, making the collective baseball world scratch its head. The A's not only have a small payroll, but they haven't been very competitive in the AL West since their last playoff berth in 2006—so why on earth would the perpetually rebuilding A's sign an unknown power hitter most famous for a preposterous YouTube highlight video to a deal this big?

The natural reaction is to think that Beane, the architect of the fantastic "Moneyball" A's teams of the early 2000s, has totally lost his mind.

First, he traded away almost all of the team's good young pitchers, shipping Gio Gonzalez to the Nationals, Trevor Cahill to the Diamondbacks and Andrew Bailey to the Red Sox. Next, he signed the rapidly-falling-apart-and-laughably-out-of-shape Bartolo Colon to join his rotation. After that, he spent big for Cespedes. Finally, he plans on signing Manny Ramirez in the near future to join Cespedes as the team's other power hitter. Yes, Manny Ramirez, the same guy who had just one hit in 17 at-bats for the Tampa Bay Rays before he retired because he failed his second drug test for performance-enhancing drugs.

How on earth do the A's expect to compete with in the AL West like this? The Angels sign Albert Pujols and C.J. Wilson, the Rangers break the bank for Japanese sensation Yu Darvish, and this is how Beane responds? By signing a washed-up, nutty steroid user and a guy who is known for a video that features him taking batting practice in slow motion set to Juelz Santana's "The Whistle Song"? Billy, have you lost your damn mind?

But in the midst of all these mind-boggling moves, a thought suddenly occurred to me: Is Billy Beane trying to tank his team on purpose?

I know Beane is smart—he somehow got the A's to extend his contract through 2019 despite the team not making the playoffs for five years—and I think he has finally found the way to revive Oakland's franchise.

Anybody who knows baseball knows the knock on Oakland: they have a payroll smaller than most WNBA teams, so they have to make every dollar count by counting on young prospects. They can't sign big free agents. But finally, Beane has found a way out of Oakland's status quo. If he tanks the franchise, the MLB will be forced to let the A's build the new ballpark in San Jose they desperately want, and Beane and company will get a big influx of new money with which to bring the A's back to greatness.

Take a look at the franchise formerly known as the Montreal Expos, currently the Washington Nationals. They had to become the laughingstock of Major League Baseball before they could finally get into a spot where they were able to compete, and Beane is following their lead.

First, the Expos became one of the worst teams in baseball, and nobody showed up to their games. It got so bad that the team had to be sold to Major League Baseball, and even had to play games in San Juan, Puerto Rico in order to get anyone to show up to their games.

But once things got that desperate, the MLB finally did what it could to save the franchise.

First, they moved the franchise to Washington, D.C. and changed the team name to the Nationals. Next, the Nationals got a big, brand-new ballpark with a view of the United States Capitol building. They only had to suck for a few more years before

they could get two dynamite first overall picks in a row—Stephen Strasburg in 2009 and Bryce Harper in 2010—and now they have enough money and talent to put up a fight in the NL East. They just had to get worse before they could get better. And they are definitely getting better in a hurry.

Why does the tank-on-purpose theory make sense to me? After all, that's the "Moneyball" philosophy: You zig when others zag and you value things others don't. If Beane pulls this great gambit off, he'll have taken what he's been given and done the absolute best thing for the A's: get them out of the Coliseum, into a new park, infused with new money and ready to be contenders again.

And if you think I'm the crazy one, consider this: Beane got Brad Pitt to play him in a movie. Do you really need any other evidence that Billy Beane is a genius?

A's curious offseason coming to end

By Jeremy Walsh, Lake County Record-Bee sports columnist

Pitchers and catchers for the Oakland Athletics are set to report to spring training this weekend, bringing the club's up-and-down offseason to a close.

The A's, who finished the 2011 season at 74-88 and 22 games behind the division-winning Texas Rangers, dove right into the giving pool during the holiday season.

General manager Billy Beane made headlines in early December after dealing All-Star pitcher Trevor Cahill and reliever Craig Breslow to the Arizona Diamondbacks for three young players.

The front-page font got even bigger Dec. 23 when news broke that Beane traded 2011 All-Star Gio Gonzalez to the Washington Nationals for four prospects.

The moves left Oakland with gaping holes in the starting rotation - last season Gonzalez went 16-12 with a 3.12 ERA and Cahill was 12-14 with a 4.16 ERA.

The A's front office capped December by sending ace closer Andrew Bailey and outfielder Ryan Sweeney to the Boston Red Sox for major-league outfielder Josh Reddick and two minor leaguers.

Losing three of their top pitchers probably wouldn't have seemed so bad for the A's if their offense hadn't gotten crushed in free agency.

Outfielders David DeJesus and Josh Willingham, who figured to be one-and-done in Oakland coming into 2011, lived up to expectations this offseason, rushing out of the Bay Area in favor of bigger money in the Midwest (Chicago and Minnesota, respectively).

Early on, Beane appeared to be belly-flopping his way through the offseason.

Little did we know Beane, red chest and all, would get back on the platform and eventually stick a solid cannonball, making February's biggest MLB splash in the process.

The A's re-signed outfielder Coco Crisp and brought in aging starter Bartolo Colon during the first half of January - moves best characterized as lackluster but necessary.

Oakland made an understandable trade in mid-January, exchanging two big-league pitchers for Seth Smith to shore up a depleted outfield. Acquiring veteran Jonny Gomes Jan. 20 served the same purpose.

By late January, rumors flew about the A's wanting Manny Ramirez to fill the designated hitter void left by free agent Hideki Matsui.

Apparently the recent deals and chatter gave team ownership confidence enough to offer Beane an extension through 2019, which he accepted last week.

Then reports surfaced Monday that the A's finally won a bidding battle in the Beane era, agreeing to a four-year, \$36 million deal with Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes (who, if he settles his immigration dispute, should be an opening-day starting rookie outfielder).

By acquiring Cespedes, Oakland put itself back in the national baseball conversation.

But, judging by their roster and schedule, it looks like the A's will have difficulty staying there.

The Athletics' preseason begins this weekend and their regular season opens March 28 and 29 in Japan against the Seattle Mariners.

If Oakland wins those two games, it'll find itself atop the AL West - for what would likely be a short-lived division lead.

While the A's appear to have their late-2011 starting infield in place for the upcoming season, the outfield looks to be a makeshift collection of experienced underachievers and bright-eyed rookies.

And without a designated hitter in place, the A's look like they are going to have trouble scoring runs.

Then again, the offense might not matter too much in light of how Beane gutted the pitching staff.

Oakland's top starters consist of a decrepit Colon (who did OK for the New York Yankees last year) and two guys with the injury gene (Dallas Braden and Brandon McCarthy).

The only bullpen talents are Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes - the rest of the relievers are putting "green" in "green and gold."

Considering how uninspiring Oakland's roster is (and how stacked the Rangers and Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim are), this season will either be another dud or another Beane miracle.

Recent history certainly points to the former, given that the team hasn't had a winning record since 2006.

So, the highlight of the year for the A's might come fairly soon; on Feb. 26, when "Moneyball" could nab an Academy Award.

If the movie does win one, Oakland fans should revel for as long as they can because it'll likely be a long, tough season.

Either that or Michael Lewis will be penning "Moneyball 2."

A's building from the ground up with stars departed

By: Mychael Urban, San Francisco Examiner

Heading into spring training 2011, the A's were the boutique pick of many experts as the favorite to win the American League West.

They had finished at an even .500 the previous season, and the offseason additions of Josh Willingham, Hideki Matsui and David DeJesus were thought to be, should everything break right, enough to bolster a previously anemic offense and give Oakland's fine young starting rotation (and deep, versatile bullpen) a legitimate shot at unseating the defending division champs from Texas.

Suffice to say, things didn't break right. Quite the opposite. In fact, it was as much a Murphy's Law season for the Elephants as any in recent memory.

Matsui — "Godzilla" to his legions of Japanese fans — was anything but a monster at the plate until it didn't really matter; DeJesus looked every bit the Kansas City Royals castoff he was; and the injury bug that has been biting Oakland for years went all Jaws on all things green and gold, particularly as it applied to the pitching staff.

Manager Bob Geren, long a running joke of a leader within the walls of the A's clubhouse and press box, got the boot as things started to spiral out of control. And interim skipper Bob Melvin's infectious presence did little to stop the train as it barreled toward irrelevance and a finish of 22 games behind the division-winning Rangers.

In short, the boutique went bankrupt shortly after it opened.

Then, an offseason of angst saw Oakland's representatives at the past three All-Star Games — pitchers Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey — shipped off for prospects while we all waited for crazy Uncle Bud Selig's frozen blue-ribbon panel to flip a coin on a decision regarding the club's future stadium plans, which moved not a discernible inch.

So there's not a soul in the baseball world expecting the A's to do anything more in spring training 2012 than provide a glimpse of their uncertain future.

This is what rebuilding looks like, folks, and it ain't pretty.

Sure, this week's surprise signing of Cuban sensation Yoenis Cespedes — a 26-year-old outfielder said to be a five-tool talent with massive upside — spruces things up a tad. Manny Ramirez (and his impending 50-game suspension) remains an option, too, and that would certainly liven up the proceedings in the Valley of the Sun.

Yet with a pitching staff depleted of its top talent and now pocked with question marks, and with a roster of position players virtually devoid of proven, consistent big-league producers, it'll test even the world-class optimists among A's fans to remain sunny about this motley crew.

After all, it gets dark in the desert, too.

Three things to watch at A's camp

1. Is Yoenis Cespedes, the Cuban defector who agreed to a four-year, \$36 million deal that immediately made him the team's highest-paid player, really ready to step right in and start in the big leagues as a heart-of-the-order stud?
2. Who's on first? Daric Barton is running out of chances, and the other options are less than inspiring. The winner here could be by default.
3. Bartolo Colon is a house, and the rest of the rotation is a potential house of cards. Every candidate to start for the A's is raw or a major injury risk. Oh, how times have changed in Oakland.