

A's News Clips, Saturday, February 18, 2012

Report: Manny Ramirez close to joining Oakland A's

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

PHOENIX -- A's pitchers and catchers report for spring training Saturday, but anticipation runs high over who else might join Oakland's camp in the coming days.

The Associated Press reported Friday that the A's could reach agreement with free agent Manny Ramirez sometime in the next week, with the aging slugger possibly in uniform for the start of full-squad workouts Feb. 25.

The A's would pay Ramirez, 39, slightly more than the major league minimum of \$480,000, according to the report.

Neither A's officials nor Ramirez's representatives are commenting on any potential agreement.

One major league scout, who requested anonymity, said he had reservations about Ramirez because of his controversial behavior over the years. However, the scout still considers him a fit for the A's.

"I personally wouldn't do that," he said. "But they need a designated hitter. They're left-handed heavy. He's available and he's not an all-or-nothing guy. He hits for average, (and he will) even after a long layoff."

Ramirez, who must serve a 50-game suspension before he can play for violating Major League Baseball's drug policy for a second time, would provide a credible threat to the middle of an Oakland lineup that is also expected to add Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes.

The A's have reached agreement with Cespedes on a four-year, \$36 million contract, but he must obtain a worker's visa and pass a physical before that deal is finalized.

The A's are close to acquiring Texas reliever Koji Uehara, a source with knowledge of the situation told this newspaper.

However, there are reports that the Rangers are still talking to other teams as well about Uehara, a right-hander who went 2-3 with a 2.35 ERA last season for Baltimore and Texas.

A's general manager Billy Beane said last week that he'd like to add a reliever along with a veteran D.H.

Uehara, who turns 37 on April 3, is slated to make \$4 million this season. It's believed the Rangers are looking primarily to dump salary, so it's possible they'll look for prospects in return.

Stadium remains A's biggest question entering 2012

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

This spring, the volume of A's questions might exceed space available in The Chronicle to ponder them.

More than a quarter of the team's 40-man roster is new, with more to come when outfielder Yoenis Cespedes' deal is official and if the team signs designated hitter Manny Ramirez.

The rotation is unsettled, and so too is the closer spot. First base is up for grabs among four players.

And the A's have less time than usual to figure everything out: The club leaves for Japan on March 21 and the season opener is March 28 in Tokyo.

For brevity's sake, here are the A's top five questions as pitchers and catchers report to Phoenix Muni today:

1. Who will play first base? Brandon Allen showed flashes of great potential after being acquired from Arizona on July 31, but he was not consistent. Daric Barton underachieved for more than two months, was sent to Triple-A Sacramento, and shoulder surgery ended his season. Chris Carter has yet to show he can handle a big-league role in several brief call-ups, and Kila Ka'aihue, picked up on waivers at the end of last season, is new to the team.

Initially, the team was looking at Ka'aihue to pick up some at-bats at DH, but the arrival of Cespedes will probably push Seth Smith from the outfield to more of a DH role (along with Jonny Gomes), so Ka'aihue's best shot is at first. This race is wide open. The A's seldom go on spring training results alone, but this spot might be the exception - the last man standing will be playing first base on March 28. And those not up for a fierce competition will be among the first cuts.

2. Who follows Brandon McCarthy, Bartolo Colon and Dallas Braden in the rotation? Left-hander Tommy Milone is likely to hold down the fourth spot until Brett Anderson returns from Tommy John surgery, which the A's hope will happen in August. The leading candidate for the fifth spot is right-hander Graham Godfrey, who pitched well in some spot starts last year, with Tyson Ross, Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock also in the running. This is another competition where spring results will factor strongly.

Braden technically will go fifth in the rotation, though it doesn't reflect his standing in the hierarchy - the A's just won't need a fifth starter until April 16, giving him a little extra time to get ready as he returns from shoulder-capsule surgery.

3. Closer duties go to ...? Brian Fuentes' experience in the role probably gives him a leg up in the early going, but if he falters, Grant Balfour is a logical option - though he might be even more valuable as a set-up man because of his ability to get an out or two in the seventh and then pitch the eighth.

So it says here that Joey Devine, if back to his old form, gets the closer job if Fuentes or Balfour don't produce. Devine had one of the best seasons ever by a reliever in 2008, going 6-1 with a 0.59 ERA, but elbow problems set him back the past three years.

4. What does the middle of the order look like? Power became the A's most glaring hole with the departure of home run and RBI leader Josh Willingham, but the additions of Smith and Cespedes will help, and Jonny Gomes has pop - the only question for him, with Cespedes joining the team, is how many at-bats he might get.

Then there's Ramirez, whom the A's are still considering strongly as they head into camp. He has few other suitors, Oakland could use a big bat, and he has 555 career homers. He'd have to sit out 50 games for violating the league's performance-enhancing drug policy, but if he looks as if he still has something (he'd be 40 when his suspension ends), well, a small, low-risk investment might pay off.

If the A's don't sign Ramirez, they will consider last year's DH, Hideki Matsui, and Magglio Ordonez, coming off a severe ankle injury.

5. What question looms over all others? The main issue for the A's: Will Major League Baseball make a decision on territorial rights in San Jose, leading to a new stadium? Owner Lew Wolff has said he'd like to know something

before the season starts, and if that happens, the news will dwarf all the rest of the team's considerations - whatever direction the decision goes.

A's enter spring camp with plenty of intrigue

Pitchers, catchers set to report to Phoenix with revamped roster

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Perhaps no other team in the game enters Spring Training donning such mysterious makeup as the A's.

"We have the potential to be a 60-win team and the potential to be a 90-win team," pitcher Brandon McCarthy said.

Odds are currently in favor of the former, particularly given Oakland's longstanding need for a potent offense which, even with the Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes in tow, is still missing a proven power hitter at the Major League level.

Pitching, meanwhile, may not appear to be of concern, given the club's depth. But two rotation spots remain open -- potentially three, depending on Dallas Braden's progress -- following the winter departures of Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez.

Plenty of questions face the A's as they prepare to open camp in Phoenix. And those days begin now, as the team's pitchers and catchers are slated to report to camp on Saturday. That group amounts to 35 players, all of whom are expected to be in uniform for Sunday's first mandatory workout.

Of the 35 players, 11 represent non-roster invitees, including 2011 first-round Draft pick Sonny Gray and backstop prospect Max Stassi.

Five days later, position players are called to report and, on Feb. 24, manager Bob Melvin will hold his first full-squad workout. A combined 58 players are expected in attendance by then, though that number will predictably increase once Cespedes is officially in the mix following completed paperwork.

And over the next seven weeks, look for the A's to fill out their rotation, name a closer, craft a lineup and perhaps form something of an identity in the shadows of division powerhouses Texas and Los Angeles.

Cactus League play begins with a 12:05 p.m. PT contest against the Mariners at Phoenix Municipal Stadium on March 2. Action in Arizona will conclude for the A's on March 21 against the Royals, a day before the club jets to Japan to open the regular season against Seattle.

A's still pursuing slugger Manny Ramirez

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Baseball Writer

PHOENIX—The Oakland Athletics still have strong interest in signing slugger Manny Ramirez, who presents a low-risk investment for the rebuilding franchise.

If things come together, the 39-year-old would sign a deal for slightly more than the league minimum of \$480,000.

He first must serve a 50-game suspension without pay for violating baseball's drug policy for the second time. With no rainouts, the first game Ramirez would be eligible to play is June 2 at Kansas City.

The sides could reach agreement as soon as the next few days or sometime next week, and Ramirez then likely would travel from Florida to Arizona to undergo a physical before joining Oakland's spring training camp for full-squad workouts starting Feb. 25. Pitchers and catchers report to camp Saturday.

Oakland recently sent representatives to Florida to observe workouts by Ramirez, who retired from the Tampa Bay Rays last season rather than serve a 100-game suspension. For Ramirez, this could become a chance to help repair his reputation and serve as a positive clubhouse influence on a young team—that's sure what the Oakland brass hope, anyway.

The A's last week agreed to terms on a \$36 million, four-year contract with highly sought after outfielder Yoenis Cespedes, a Cuban defector who has expressed interest in playing with Ramirez.

At baseball's winter meetings in December, it was announced that Ramirez had applied for reinstatement. He had his suspension for a second failed drug test cut to 50 because he sat out nearly all of last season. MLB had announced his retirement on April 8, saying he was notified "of an issue" under the drug program.

Ramirez, who will be 40 on May 30, ranks 14th on the career list with 555 home runs. He went 1 for 17 (.059) in five games last season for Tampa Bay, which had signed him to a one-year deal worth \$2.02 million.

This would be the 20th major league season for Ramirez, a career .312 hitter with 1,831 RBIs. Oakland, which traded away its top three pitchers this offseason including two starters, sure could use a power bat in the middle of the order in a tough AL West that already has seen the key additions of Albert Pujols on the Los Angeles Angels and star Japanese pitcher Yu Darvish for the two-time reigning AL champion Texas Rangers.

The A's haven't reached the playoffs or had a winning season since being swept by the Tigers in the 2006 AL championship series.

How Does The Cespedes Deal Impact The A's?

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Feb 14, 2012

The Oakland A's off-season has been filled with ups and downs but one thing it hasn't been is boring. The A's continued their headline-making ways on Monday with their most surprising move of all – the signing of Cuban free agent OF Yoenis Cespedes. We take a closer look at the impact of his arrival on the organization...

There is much that is known and much that isn't known about the newest member of the Oakland A's organization. Yoenis Cespedes has yet to play a single inning of professional baseball in the United States, but he has already become somewhat of a household name. The centerfielder was one of the most talked about free agents on the market after he defected from his native Cuba and declared his intentions to play in the major leagues earlier this year.

After several months of dealing with logistical matters, Cespedes was finally cleared by the Commissioner's Office to be an official free agent a few weeks ago. He chose to sign with the A's after being courted by the Miami Marlins, Detroit Tigers, Baltimore Orioles, Cleveland Indians and Chicago White Sox. Cespedes still needs to obtain his P1 visa in order to be able to work in the US, but that paperwork is expected to come through in the next week or two, at which time Cespedes should join the A's in Oakland.

When Cespedes does arrive in Phoenix, it will be the first opportunity for many fans to see Cespedes play live. However, many fans already have some familiarity with his skill-set, thanks to a variety of entertaining highlight videos of Cespedes' many exploits featured on YouTube. Some fans may also remember Cespedes from the 2009 World Baseball Classic, when he hit .458 with two homeruns and three triples in five games as the Cuban national team's starting centerfielder.

Scouts have seen plenty of Cespedes over the years, both in the context of his play for the Cuban national team and as a star in the Cuban professional baseball league. BaseballProspectus' Kevin Goldstein has raved about Cespedes five-tool talent and has rated Cespedes among the best all-around players to come out of Cuba in several years. However, like any player coming to the US after having played in another country's professional league, there are still questions as to how Cespedes' talents will translate to the major leagues. He hit 33 homeruns in 90 games in the Cuban National Series league play last year, but opinions vary as to what the level of competition he faced would equate to in the US.

Below we take a look at the pros and cons of signing Cespedes and what it means for the A's this year and moving forward...

The Pros

There are plenty of reasons to be excited about the Cespedes signing from the A's perspective. For many fans, there is the simple satisfaction of knowing that the A's were able to sign a player on the free market who was coveted by

several other teams, many of whom were in bigger markets and all of whom had bigger budgets. But the positives of the deal go beyond bragging rights. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, the Cespedes deal is worth \$36 million over four years, with Cespedes receiving \$6.5 million this year, \$8.5 million in 2013 and \$10.5 million in 2014 and 2015.

While those numbers are certainly not small, especially not for a team with a payroll in the \$50 million range, Cespedes' contract isn't one that is likely to hamstring the A's, even if he fails to live-up to his full potential. When compared to the contracts given out to other top position player free agents this off-season such as Albert Pujols, Prince Fielder and Jose Reyes, Cespedes' deal is chump change. Cespedes undoubtedly comes with more risks than those players, who have all established themselves as MLB superstars, but he also comes with some advantages over those in that group.

Cespedes' contract is only for four years, which means that even though he will be a rookie when he makes his major league debut this season, he will be under the A's team control for only four seasons instead of the customary six. There are some disadvantages to this arrangement for Oakland obviously (more on that later), but the trade-off is that the A's are able to sign a player for what should be the prime years of his career (Cespedes is 26) without having to commit themselves into his "non-prime" seasons. Because players are tied to their major league teams for six years, top-tier players rarely come onto the market as free agents before their 28th birthdays. Prince Fielder, at 27, was an exception this off-season, but generally speaking, most top-tier free agents have given many of their prime years to their original organizations before they ever sign with a new team.

Because top-tier free agents are generally at or near 30 years of age, most are only interested in signing deals that will take them well into their late-30s in order to ensure that they are still being paid as high-level talents even if the level of their play has diminished with age. The deals handed out to Fielder (nine years), Pujols (10 years) and Reyes (six years plus a team option for a seventh season) will all take those players into or past their mid-30s, when their production should be expected to decline precipitously. By keeping the deal at four years, the A's are committing to pay Cespedes only when he should be performing at his peak level and not beyond that point.

In terms of talent, there were only three hitters with similar talent to Cespedes under the age of 30 to change teams this off-season. Two were Fielder and Reyes and both of them signed long-term, nine-figure contracts. The other was prospect Jesus Montero, who was traded to the Seattle Mariners in January. Montero has the potential to be one of the top hitters of the next decade and he is only 22 years old. The Mariners will have the benefit of having him under their team control for the next six years, rather than the four the A's will have Cespedes. However, Seattle had to give up two top arms, including potential ace Michael Pineda, for Montero's services. One could make the argument that the A's traded Trevor Cahill or Gio Gonzalez to clear salary room to sign Cespedes. But Oakland received a lot more talent back for each of those pitchers than the Mariners received as the second piece in the Montero deal (pitcher Hector Noesi). Also, Montero doesn't offer any upside defensively or on the bases, whereas Cespedes comes to the US with a reputation for being an above-average outfielder and a decent base-runner. While Montero will be cheaper for the Mariners for the next year or two, he could command an even bigger contract than Cespedes signed once he reaches his arbitration years.

From an on-the-field perspective, Cespedes brings a dynamic that has been missing from the Oakland roster since Frank Thomas departed after the 2006 season. Over the past five years, the A's have, for lack of a better term, been boring. While at times they have pitched extremely well and, at other times, flashed highlight-reel leather, they have been a terrible hitting team with little to no flash. When trying to woo fans, being bad is a detriment, but being boring is a death sentence. Jemile Weeks brought some excitement to the A's line-up last season with his frenetic style of play, but the A's were still lacking a player that would make fans skip the popcorn until his at-bat was over. Cespedes profiles as that kind of popcorn-delaying player.

When it comes down to it, perhaps the biggest pro from the A's perspective is that this move should simply make them a better team. Sometimes in the rush to analyze every move on a financial level or to try to relate every move to the A's push for a new stadium, everyone tends to forget the bottom line for most deals – does this make the team better? In this case, it most certainly does, as it means adding a very high-level talent to a roster that was in need of that level of talent. How many extra wins Cespedes will bring to the A's over the course of his four-year deal remains unknown, of course, but if he is the player he is projected to be, he should give the A's several wins over a replacement-level player over the course of his contract.

This move does not make the A's a favorite for the AL West crown and it doesn't catapult them into the discussion of the elite teams in the American League. However, it does give them a chance of being good now and a much better chance of being good in a year or two. With the additional Wild Card playoff spot on the horizon for Major League Baseball, there is even more incentive for teams to try to push to improve themselves. With an extra playoff spot comes an increased chance at the post-season, making those teams on the outside of the elite list (those not the Rangers, Angels, Rays, Yankees, Tigers or Red Sox) incentivized to try to be more competitive now, rather than

building for that perfect season later.

The Cons

Of course, this deal isn't a slam-dunk to be a success for Oakland. For the most part, Cespedes has not been tested outside of Cuban National Series league play, the exception being a few international tournaments. He had a brief appearance in the Dominican Winter League and it didn't go well, as he was frequently fooled by off-speed pitches and hit only .143. It was his first in-game competition since the spring, however, so rust may have played a factor in his performance. While all scouts agree that Cespedes has plus power, there are some questions as to whether he will hit for average in the big leagues. There are also questions as to whether he will be a centerfielder or a corner outfielder in the major leagues. He will have to make the transition to a new culture, not an easy task for anyone. Although his contract isn't huge, it could be difficult to move in the latter two years of the deal if he is a league-average player or worse.

Signing Cespedes to a four-year deal also may incentivize the A's to insert him into their Opening Day line-up right away, even if he isn't quite ready for primetime. Before the A's deal was announced, many of the pundits who had followed Cespedes closely believed that he could use a month or two of development time in Triple-A before he was "thrown to the wolves" at the big league level, so to speak. However, with Cespedes only under the A's control for four years, the team could overlook any spring training struggles and start him in the big leagues right away to maximize the time they have with him in the big leagues. If he is overwhelmed by big league pitching in April, it could impede his development long-term. The A's might not get as much time to evaluate Cespedes versus big league pitching as they'd like to this spring. It could take another two weeks before he has his visa to come to the US and the A's are already dealing with a truncated spring training schedule due to their series in Japan. A hot start by Cespedes out of the gate in spring training will make the decision easy for the A's, but if he struggles early in camp, it could make it hard for them to decide whether to keep him in the big leagues when camp breaks or give him some time with Sacramento.

Even if Cespedes reaches his potential, there are some risks to the deal. As was mentioned earlier, the contract calls for Cespedes to become a free agent after only four years. He will be 30 when he is eligible for his next deal and based on the contracts that were signed by players such as Fielder and Pujols this off-season, he could be in-line for a \$100 million or more deal if he is a star at that point. Even if the A's are in a new stadium by 2016, they may not be able to afford a contract that rich. That is a problem that most teams would be happy to have if it means getting star production from 2012-2015, however.

There is also the risk that Cespedes could become a star right away but the A's could continue to struggle as a team regardless. The American League West is quickly becoming one of the toughest divisions in baseball. With the Rangers' young nucleus and deep minor league system in place and the Angels' top-level rotation and Pujols-led lineup, it could be tough for even improved versions of the A's and Mariners to challenge those two for the division crown for the next few years. The addition of the second Wild Card mitigates this disadvantage some, but it is possible that Cespedes could become the next Jose Bautista – a superstar playing for a decent, but not great team. Again, that is a risk the A's are probably happy to take on at this point.

Impact On The A's For 2012

The A's outfield situation has been constantly changing this off-season. Given the current glut of outfielders both on the A's 40-man roster and on their spring training non-roster invitee list, it is hard to believe that back in early December Ryan Sweeney, Collin Cowgill, Michael Taylor and Jai Miller were the clear front-runners to fill the A's main outfield roster spots, with Jermaine Mitchell poised to make a push when he finished rehabbing a knee injury. Since that time, the A's have traded Sweeney and Miller and have acquired Seth Smith and Josh Reddick in trades and have signed free agents Coco Crisp, Jonny Gomes and now Cespedes. The A's are also bringing to camp four non-roster outfielders with big league experience – Jeff Fiorentino, Brandon Moss, Jason Pridie and Cedric Hunter.

Although depth at any position is only as strong as a team's disabled list is thin, it wouldn't be surprising to see the A's move one or two of their outfielders this spring. The A's will not only need to figure out how to parcel out playing time at the major league level amongst this group, but they also have to allocate enough playing time at the minor league level for those who don't make the Opening Day roster, while also keeping regular at-bats open for top outfield prospects Michael Choice and Grant Green. If the A's don't sign a veteran DH before the season starts, they can keep an extra outfielder on their roster to serve as the DH, but if the team does sign, for instance, Manny Ramirez, they

won't have that luxury once he has served his suspension.

Where Cespedes will play in the A's outfield is also somewhat of a question. He has the reputation of being a solid defensive centerfielder. While there are questions as to whether he will be able to stay in centerfield long-term, he should be able to play the position now. It is the position he is most familiar with playing and keeping him in center could help ease him into the major leagues. However, earlier this off-season the A's doled out \$14 million over two years for Crisp to be their centerfielder. Crisp doesn't have the arm to play right field and his range would seemingly be wasted in left field. Consequently, the A's could line-up an outfield with Crisp in center, Cespedes in right and Reddick, Smith or Gomes in left. If the A's don't add another DH-type, it would make sense to have Smith and Gomes spend much of their time platooning at DH while occasionally filling in at either corner spot. Smith and Gomes are the least accomplished outfielders defensively amongst that group.

This arrangement would almost certainly send Taylor, Cowgill, Fiorentino, Moss, Pridie and Hunter back to Triple-A to join Green and (when he has recovered from his knee surgery) Mitchell, where one can start to see the playing time crunch coming into play. The A's will need to drop a player from their 40-man roster when the Cespedes deal is official, but it is hard to see them dropping Taylor, Cowgill or Mitchell unless they have a deal in place to trade one of them.

Although Cespedes is a potential asset defensively, it is on the offensive-side of the ball that he is expected to have his biggest impact. Assuming he is able to transition to the big leagues fairly seamlessly, Cespedes will serve as an anchor in the middle of the A's line-up. Before signing Cespedes, the A's were discussing a starting line-up that would feature Weeks, Cliff Pennington and Crisp as the one-two-three hitters in an attempt to manufacture runs through speed. Now with a bona-fide power hitter, the A's can move Pennington down to the nine spot and allow Crisp and Weeks to serve as table-setters rather than trying to make one of them a run producer. Cespedes' bat will also take some of the focus off of the A's other potential power hitters in Smith, Reddick and Gomes, and should guarantee that Kurt Suzuki, who has been miscast as a top-of-the-order hitter during some of his big league career, can stay in the bottom half of the line-up.

There is no question that the A's starting rotation has been weakened compared to where it was at the start of the 2011 season. Cahill and Gonzalez are gone, Dallas Braden is coming off of shoulder surgery and could miss a month of the regular season and Brett Anderson is expected to be out until at least August recovering from Tommy John surgery. The A's also traded away Guillermo Moscoso and Josh Outman, two starters that had given the team quality innings out of the rotation over the past couple of years. Brandon McCarthy, the A's top returning starter, and Bartolo Colon are the only two starters in A's camp who are guaranteed to be in the rotation (barring injury) on Opening Day. The remaining slots in the rotation – barring another signing – will be filled by pitchers with relatively little major league experience, at least until Braden and Anderson are healthy.

The A's bullpen should be strong despite the trade of closer Andrew Bailey. Oakland will be returning most of its bullpen from last season, sans Bailey and Michael Wuertz, and rumors have the team connected to several other veteran relievers available in the trade and open markets. The A's also have a number of hard-throwing, promising relief prospects who could claim significant roles as the season wears on. The strong bullpen should mitigate some of the potential growing pains for the rotation.

The A's offense, with Cespedes, Smith, Reddick and Gomes on-board and Weeks and Scott Sizemore in the line-up from Opening Day, should be improved over last season. They still don't have a line-up that stacks up well against the Rangers, Yankees or Tigers, but they at least have a few threats to break the double-digit barrier for homeruns. While a playoff run still seems unlikely, the A's are in a much better position to catch lightning in a bottle now than they were in December. It doesn't appear rebuilding is as much of the focus for the A's front office as it was when the team traded Cahill, Gonzalez and Bailey. Where young players such as Taylor, Cowgill, Chris Carter, Kila Ka'aihue, Brandon Allen and Daric Barton fit in the A's plans moving forward remains an open question.

In two years, the A's could have one of the most dynamic outfields in the big leagues. Choice has many of the same tools as Cespedes being a power-hitting centerfielder with above-average speed. Teaming them alongside Green – a potential perennial .300 hitter and an excellent athlete himself – in the outfield could give the A's their most powerful and athletic outfield since Jose Canseco, Dave Henderson and Rickey Henderson were roaming the Coliseum during the Bash Brothers days. Of course, a lot has to go right for the A's to feature a Green-Cespedes-Choice outfield, but it is something for A's fans to dream on.