

Graham Godfrey sets sights on spot in the Oakland A's rotation

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX — With all the talk about the A's new young pitchers who are competing for the starting rotation, Graham Godfrey's name can get lost in the shuffle.

The right-hander is in the mix, however, and he thinks he's equipped to make a bid thanks to an improved changeup and slider.

Godfrey, who made four starts for Oakland last season, worked on a new grip for both pitches while playing winter ball in the Dominican Republic.

"I'm trying to get more depth on the (slider), so as it gets to the plate it's moving north and south as opposed to east and west," Godfrey said.

He went 1-2 with a 3.96 ERA in five appearances in 2011, his first big league exposure, and added a 14-3 record and 2.68 ERA for Triple-A Sacramento.

A's manager Bob Melvin has mentioned Godfrey as a rotation contender. The A's need to fill two rotation spots — three if Dallas Braden isn't ready by mid-April. Godfrey's competition includes Tyson Ross, Jarrod Parker, Brad Peacock and Tom Milone, the latter three of which were acquired in offseason trades.

Ross, a 2008 second-round pick from Oakland, is looking to rebound after an injury-plagued 2011 season.

"I try not to think about it too much," Godfrey said of the competition. "I think one of the secrets last year was keeping it simple."

Godfrey played for Leones del Escogido in the Dominican Winter League, whose general manager is former Giants outfielder Moises Alou. The team spent a day at Alou's beach house.

Godfrey learned a little about the rich baseball history of the Alou family.

"You don't realize how important that family is to that nation," he said.

Brandon McCarthy looked sharp in his bullpen session. Melvin said the right-hander remains on target "for one of the first couple of starts."

Melvin has been hinting heavily that McCarthy will get the opening night assignment in Tokyo against the Mariners, but he hasn't made it official.

Braden threw well once again, Melvin said, though it's too early to gauge what that means for the lefty's early-season availability.

Brett Anderson is progressing well enough from Tommy John surgery that he's been cleared to throw off the mound twice a week. He also looked sharp Friday.

Carl Steward: Darting here and there . . .

By Carl Steward, Bay Area News Group

Darting here and there ...

-- So Ryan Braun says he'd bet his life that substance was never in his body. Hey, maybe MLB can nail him for gambling.

-- Baseball can be as "vehement" as it wants, but it didn't just drop the protocol ball on the handling of Braun's drug test. It dropped the whole Tupperware set.

-- Part-time urine courier leaves sample on desk in basement over weekend. Look, you can't have effective anti-doping administered by dopes.

-- Don't know about you, but the term "sloppy handling of the sample" just gives us the heebie-jeebies.

-- Because ee've become so sensitive from all the past PED lies, Braun will never completely regain his credibility as a clean player. But if his press conference was an act, give him the Academy Award Sunday, not George Clooney.

-- Meanwhile, only a few miles away from the Braun bombshell, "reborn" Manny Ramirez certainly wasn't lacking for fawners at A's camp. So maybe credibility has become irrelevant anyway.

-- Between Ramirez, Brandon and Amanda McCarthy and Billy Beane at the Oscars, the A's already have demonstrated they can still compete for attention, if not a pennant.

-- Only one word for the McCarthys' ESPN the Magazine cover: Ace!

-- Ramirez will wear No. 1 with Oakland. Somewhere, Billy Martin is punching the lid of a box.

-- Quote from Dan Haren on the current A's in USA Today: "It's amazing that two or three years after I left, I couldn't name two or three guys that I played with that were still on the team."

-- To be exact, Dan, it's three: Kurt Suzuki, Dallas Braden and Daric Barton. How quickly they forget.

-- It's been a month and a half since Bud Selig said the A's were on the front burner. Geez, how long does it take for a bad egg to come to a boil?

-- From this view, the A's ballpark situation still is not a subject for one of those "hot stove" shows.

-- Hideki Matsui is still a free agent? Oakland has clearly cut that cord, but heavens, he wasn't that bad. Call us when Manny gets to 72 RBIs.

-- Tim Lincecum reported to spring training with a stiff back. Could it be all that added wallet weight he's carrying around?

-- Brandon Belt vs. Aubrey Huff at first base hasn't fully heated up yet, but it will. That's because Melky Cabrera is going to play left field.

-- The latest chapter in the Angel Villalona story is truly bizarre. Since when do people get denied a visa for being fatc?

-- Nice to see John Bowker back with the Giants. Oops, that would be the Yomiuri Giants.

-- Knowing what we know now about Jeremy Lin, we can't help but wonder if Jeremy Tyler might be the next Hakeem Olajuwon ... for somebody else.

-- Ah, but did the Miami Heat burst the Lin bubble? For a night, yes. But not to worry, the Knicks' next game is against Cleveland.

-- Chamberlain-sanity: The Wilt 100-point game tribute on the Warriors page at NBA.com is worth a look. Fifty years later, it's still one of the most unfathomable achievements in sports history.

-- Fantasy basketball stat: Heading into Friday night, the Warriors would have been 23-7 if you gave them a win for every game in which they led at some point during the fourth quarter. Like we said, fantasy.

-- Lots of local connections on the Basketball Hall of Fame's dozen finalists: Don Nelson (again), Bernard King, Jamaal Wilkes, even Ralph Sampson. But the biggest news is that the late Don Barksdale, Oakland native and Berkeley High grad, was directly elected to the Hall. Overdue but welcome honor.

-- All that 49ers fans want to know from the NFL Combine: Have they found a receiver yet? Have they found a receiver yet? Have they found a receiver yet?

-- Meanwhile, the Raiders are all over those potential fifth and sixth round picks. They don't have first, second, third, fourth or seventh round choices.

-- Between the Raiders and Chiefs throwing so much money at him, Stanford Routt could be on the Forbes 500 list at some point this year if he invests wisely.

-- Hannibal went on shorter road trips than the one the Sharks are currently navigating. Wouldn't want that laundry assignment once they get back.

A's to fans: Signs limited to 3x6 at O.co

By Angela Woodall, Oakland Tribune

A's fans may want to know one thing before they set off for a game at O.co Coliseum during the baseball season this spring: No signs larger than 3 feet by 6 feet will be permitted.

The team has never had a policy for the size of banners brought into the stadium. But the front office said homemade signs fans brought into the stadium were having a "negative aesthetic impact."

They decided during the offseason to implement the 3-by-6 policy after researching restrictions at other stadiums, team spokesman Bob Rose said.

Some believe the decision is intended to make messages critical of co-owner Lew Wolff harder to see.

The policy follows a 2010 episode involving a fan being ejected from the game for sheet-sized banners criticizing Wolff for his efforts to move the team to San Jose. Two of them read, "Lew Wolff lied, he never tried" and "Don't take our A's away." Such negative messages are rare in the stadium. Most signs are aimed at ballplayers, not owners.

The fan, Jorge Leon, is a Baseball Oakland booster dedicated to keeping the A's in Oakland. The banners were meant to be visible to other fans and the media. The strategy worked.

But kicking Leon out backfired. The team couldn't prevent him from attending games after then-Oakland City Attorney John Russo called the ouster an unconstitutional infringement on the free speech rights of fans.

That didn't stop the A's from cracking down on banners again during FanFest on Jan. 29. Leon and other fans who showed up with the same banners critical of Wolff were told by guards they couldn't display the banners in the Oracle Arena.

The team hosted FanFest in the arena, which sits adjacent to the stadium in the Coliseum complex. Leon said the guard told him to put away the banners and said they couldn't yell, "Lew Wolff sucks," because "It's a family environment."

The A's said the team determined prohibiting banners and noisemakers was in the best interest of FanFest attendees. The team said no one is restricted from expressing opinions as long as it's done in good taste and doesn't single out a player in a harmful way.

Those are the criteria Russo said were not sufficient to limit speech. Lawsuits against banner restrictions at the RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., and Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati came to the same conclusion: any restrictions on speech may not be based on the subject matter of the sign unless justified by a compelling state interest. That would include signs that incite violence, contain obscenities or other criteria.

"In other words," Russo wrote at the time, "the A's may not prohibit fans from speaking their minds about his ownership of the team," meaning Lew Wolff.

As for the 3-by-6 sign limit, the team said the policy does not restrict opinion and is within industry standards, citing the Dodgers, which do not allow any banners. The Seattle Mariners, Los Angeles Angels and other baseball teams tend to place a 3-foot height limit on signs, according to the A's.

Oakland City Attorney Barbara Parker did not provide a comment about the new sign policy. Alameda County Counsel Donna Ziegler said she could not comment on a policy with which she is not familiar. The Coliseum's governing body, the Joint Powers Authority, has no policy about signs, Executive Director Marc Kaufman said. Alameda County and the city of Oakland share ownership and oversight of the Coliseum complex.

That appears to leave the decision about size up to the A's during team events.

Leon said the policy won't deter him and fellow boosters.

"We will find a way to speak our mind," he said. "We'll figure out a way to keep up the fight."

A's Manny Ramirez says he's in a good place

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Manny Ramirez is just happy to be here.

The right-handed slugger, who sat out almost all of 2011 following his second suspension for a positive drug test, faced about 20 reporters with his family around him Friday at Phoenix Municipal Stadium. He repeatedly said that he

has changed his life and found God since his suspension, his abrupt departure from the Rays and then, last fall, charges of domestic violence in Florida.

"At that time, me and my wife got a little problem, and I said, 'Whoa, I've got to reflect on what's going on. I just made a huge mistake with a team and with my family,' so we just fix it and I'm here."

Ramirez's wife, Juliana, told The Chronicle that although Ramirez's legal case is still going through the courts, she has no interest in pressing charges and believes the case will be dropped.

She said she is the one who encouraged her husband to return to baseball, even though Ramirez was still facing a 100-game suspension, later reduced to 50 games.

"I pushed him from day one," she said. "I said, 'Baby, go back. You can't finish your career like this. This can't be your legacy. If you're going to exit, exit right.' He is doing this for our whole family, to show if you make mistakes, you get up and you face it, and you change."

"He's done that, I'm just so proud of him, and we're great as a family. Everyone goes through problems. Ours just happened to be public."

Several times during Ramirez's interview session, Juliana Ramirez hugged her husband as he discussed their tougher times.

"I thought I would lose my family and my career," Manny Ramirez said. "It was not easy. ... Sometimes when you don't got God in your heart, you do stupid things without thinking about it. When you start going to church, it's like you open your eyes and you realize it doesn't matter how much money you have, nice house, nice cars. If you don't have God in your heart, it doesn't mean anything."

"Now I appreciate my family more, my kids and the game. I want to show my kids that when there's problem, you can get up and fix it."

The primary question after the A's signed the 39-year-old to a prorated \$500,000 minor-league deal was: Is he the offensive force he once was? Ramirez has 555 career homers and a lifetime .312 average, but Oakland's track record with aging stars has been spotty at best since Frank Thomas' tremendous 2006 season.

"I think I still could play," Ramirez said, but he added later, "Only God knows if I could still play. So we'll wait until the end of the season and see what I bring to the team."

Batting practice isn't the best gauge, but Ramirez was impressive Friday, hitting seven homers. As shortstop Cliff Pennington noted, Ramirez didn't even think he'd hit three of them well - and one went off the backdrop in dead center.

Pennington and hitting coach Chili Davis were still raving about Ramirez's quick, fluid stroke hours later, and Pennington said, "He mis-hit balls farther than anyone else actually hit the ball. He looked pretty darn good. A guy like that is pretty special."

Ramirez said he believes his cautionary tale might serve as an example for the A's younger players, and manager Bob Melvin feels that just watching Ramirez will help the team's younger hitters.

Ramirez, however, hasn't always been known to run out every ball, and that's one of Melvin's few rules - bust it down the line.

"I told him what I expect, and he told me, 'You'll have no problem with me,' " Melvin said.

The A's expected Ramirez to take jersey No. 99, but he decided that he'd like to wear No. 1, "because everything starts with 1," he said, much like his own fresh start. Ramirez said he wasn't sure anyone would give him another chance, and he was even nervous en route to the ballpark.

He was comfortable once he was on the field, however, joking around with his new teammates and embracing many of them. He was clearly delighted to be back, beaming throughout his workout and even his media session.

"It feels good, let me tell you," he said. "I'm happy I've got a job, and I got to go and compete and prove to people I can still play, and with God's help, I'm going to make the team."

"This is like new life for him," Pennington said.

Ramirez cannot return until May 30 at the earliest, his 40th birthday, but he said that he feels blessed that this time, unlike his previous suspension, he can play in 10 minor-league games. He said he'll work on his outfield play, too, if he's used there.

Ramirez did have one "Manny being Manny" moment, when he mistook starter Brett Anderson for the team video coordinator.

"There's no reason he should know who I am, but it still was pretty funny - you couldn't make that up," Anderson said. "It's a good way to start off our relationship. It can only go up from here."

Juliana Ramirez and sons Manny Jr., 9, and Lucas, 6, provided one of the day's highlights when Juliana took the mound in a sundress and high heels and tossed baseballs for the kids to hit as their dad finished up his media duties.

A's reliever Joey Devine glad Ryan Braun will play

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Reliever **Joey Devine** is a good friend of **Ryan Braun**, his former Team USA teammate, and Devine was thrilled that Braun's pending suspension for a positive drug test was overturned on appeal.

"He's a phenomenal teammate, a phenomenal person," Devine said Friday. "When I saw that news about the positive test, I thought, 'That can't be right.' I'm very, very happy that was overturned. That's the right outcome."

Major League Baseball sources have told multiple outlets that Braun's suspension was overturned on a technicality, implying that the Brewers outfielder is guilty of using performance-enhancing substances. Such suggestions upset Devine.

"I disagree," Devine said. "He won his appeal. And I know him - if Ryan was guilty, he would have said so, like the others who have tested positive. But he knew he was right, and he showed it. If people say he's still guilty somehow, they shouldn't be doing that."

New A's arrival **Manny Ramirez**, who must sit out the first 50 games for a second positive test for performance-enhancing substances, was asked about Braun's win on appeal, and he said, "Good for him, he's clean. He's a great

guy and a great baseball player. I'm pretty sure his family has gone through a lot, like mine. No one deserves that. I'm happy for him."

Reliever **Jerry Blevins**, expected to be voted the A's new player representative this spring, said he couldn't comment on Braun's appeal.

Briefly: Brett Anderson said that his 30-pitch bullpen session went well and that he felt more under control than he did Monday, his first bullpen since his July 14 Tommy John surgery. ... **Dallas Braden** threw a 35-pitch bullpen and threw straight fastballs and sinkers, he said. ... The team will have an intrasquad game Thursday, starting between noon and 1 p.m. at Phoenix Muni. ... **Jemile Weeks**, the team's only other dreadlocked player, took one look at Ramirez's thick, long braids and said, "He's got me beat."

Ryan Braun affair isn't worth getting upset about

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle

So many questions surround **Ryan Braun's** successful appeal. The enforcement process is flawed, Major League Baseball comes under suspicion, and there's always the fact that Braun plays for the Milwaukee Brewers, so dear to Commissioner **Bud Selig's** heart.

Here's the level of angst in this corner: zero.

The worst thing you can say about an alleged drug user is that the "performance enhancement" inflated his numbers beyond reason. That was the stain of the so-called Steroid Era, when **Johnnie LeMasters** turned themselves into **Cal Ripkens** (to use a rather extreme hypothetical) and mere statistical evidence proved to be a glaring indictment.

Braun's allegedly tainted season was profoundly typical of his career. Not a number out of place. He hit more homers in his rookie year, 2007, than he did last season (34 to 33) and had a higher slugging percentage (.634 to .597). To be a .300 hitter (.332) was common for him. He has essentially been the same player throughout a magnificent five-year run.

It is widely believed that steroids have vanished from the major-league scene and that players have turned to more subtle pursuits of the "edge." I wouldn't be shocked if Braun falls into this category, or if he's joined by *hundreds* of others. Players will be out to circumvent drug-testing systems for the rest of time, and even the more straitlaced players, those with legitimate concerns about putting their long-term health at risk, express lingering disappointment over the ban of amphetamines.

As the new season unfolds, I'm going to watch Braun with the same unbridled enthusiasm as before. I've spent too much time around big-league clubhouses - those havens of *very* adult behavior - to feel otherwise. But he's going to pay for this episode, in the form of relentless heckling whenever the Brewers hit the road. My biggest fear is that this engaging man becomes jaded, perhaps to the detriment of his game.

And that's where it ends. I've been told many times that stress takes years off your life, that it makes no sense to get resoundingly outraged over every little thing. When it comes to the sublime entertainment of major-league baseball, that's always a sound policy.

A temporary setback

As the Heat-Knicks game unfolded on TNT Thursday night, **Kenny Smith** noted, "This is a *man's* game. This is the first time **Jeremy Lin** is seeing what the NBA is about." In a way, that's true. When **LeBron James** and **Dwyane Wade** are flying downcourt, simply crushing everything in their path, Lin is just a run-of-the-mill point guard without answers. Make no mistake, though; he's a man. Lin is tough, hardworking and astonishingly sensible in the manner he's handled the onslaught of media attention. Give him some time to alter his scorer's mentality and get the best out of **Carmelo Anthony** and **Amar'e Stoudemire** in the Knicks' ever-evolving offense. Right now, the smart money has that team in the postseason ... The sad state of women's soccer in America: The Women's Professional Soccer league folds, the incomparable **Marta** heads off to Sweden, and her three-year stay in the WPS is a distant memory. The saving grace - now and forever - is how the game thrives so beautifully at youth levels ... Here's what people would learn watching **Andrew Luck**, **Robert Griffin III** or any other quarterback throwing passes at the combine: Nothing. It's all about the games; now you're just wasting everyone's time ... I'm rooting hard for **Roberto Hernandez Heredia**, the Cleveland pitcher who got in trouble for using false identification papers to obtain a visa from the Dominican Republic. You just have to like a guy who changed his name to **Fausto Carmona** ... Dream scenario: The A's unveil a rotation featuring **Brandon McCarthy**, **Dallas Braden** (when healthy) and their much-heralded prospects. The repulsive **Bartolo Colon** has no business playing for that team ... Peerless surfer **Kelly Slater** made big news at San Francisco's Ocean Beach in November, winning his 11th world title. Now 40, Slater is back in action as the Association of Surfing Professionals' season opens in Australia (the tour has dropped Ocean Beach but added the Coldwater Classic at Santa Cruz's Steamer Lane Nov. 2-12) ... Sacramento coach **Keith Smart** has gone out of his way to spend extra time working with **Jimmer Fredette**, but that didn't stop Jimmer's older brother, **T.J.**, from tweeting, "Can we please get rid of this interim coach who should be an assistant at best and bring in a real head coach?" Jimmer has promised that "it's something he regrets. Won't happen again." ... What's the worst uniform in the history of pro sports? Could be the current New Orleans Hornets, featuring an all-blue front and lime-green back, as if mixing Cal and the Oregon Ducks, with a large and ugly "NOLA" on the front. I'd suggest adding headgear: a collection of top hats, or perhaps a nutty, **Carmen Miranda**-style ensemble featuring baskets of fruit.

Drumbeat: Video and more: Manny Ramirez arrives in A's camp

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, 2/24/2012, 10:08am

First of all, some video of Manny Ramirez taking his very first swings with the Oakland A's this morning:

Ramirez spent more than 10 minutes speaking to reporters in a large group, and he continued to talk to various Spanish-language outlets and CSN Bay Area after that, and he was pleasant and appeared very sincere about his motivation for returning to the game.

That motivation: Ramirez thought he was losing both his career and his family last year after a second suspension for performance-enhancing substances and then charges of domestic violence in the fall. He spoke quite a bit this morning about finding God, and I asked if that happened during the fall, and he said that it was. "Me and my wife had a little problem and that's the time I said, 'Whoa, I've got to reflect and make a change,'" he told us.

His wife, Juliana, and kids Manny Jr. (9) and Lucas (6), joined him, and at times, Juliana put her arm around her husband when he spoke of his fear of losing his family. Juliana and the Ramirez boys provided the best visual of the day when she threw batting practice to them while wearing a dress and heels.

Manny Ramirez said he thinks he can still play but he said isn't sure what he has left: We'll see at the end of the season, he said. He looked good in batting practice – he hit seven balls out of Phoenix Muni, one to dead center with a nice, easy swing.

Tough to tell how ready anyone is from spring batting practice, but the one thing that was certain was that the A's players greeted Ramirez warming, immediately joking around with him. He was all smiles, and looked delighted to be back on a baseball field.

Ramirez said he thought he might never get another chance. "It feels good, let me tell you," he said. "I'm happy I've got a job. ... I thought I'd lose my family and my career, that was not easy."

Ramirez said he wants to show his children "when you have a problem, you can get up and fix it."

He knows not everyone will accept his return to the game, and he offered no apologies for his positive drug test, though he said, "Sometimes when you don't got God in your heart, you do stupid things."

Ramirez said he believes he can be a good example for the A's younger players. "I can tell them what happened to me," he said. "You don't want to be in a deep hole. ... Everyone knows my story. I can tell them how I changed, and the way I used to think."

The A's thought Ramirez would wear No. 99, but he decided on his own to take No. 1. He said it's because "everything starts with No. 1." It's a reflection of a fresh start, he feels, though he'd actually wanted No. 7 initially "because God made seven days." (Adam Rosales wears No. 7 for Oakland.)

Special adviser Phil Garner also wears No. 1 but he's not on any official roster and he told me he doesn't plan to change. "I don't think anyone is going to confuse me with Manny," Garner said with a chuckle.

Manny makes strong first impression on A's

Humble veteran impresses new teammates with attitude, power

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- If actions really do speak louder than words, as Manny Ramirez says they do, then the 39-year-old slugger is off to an excellent start with the A's.

Ramirez, attempting to play his way back into the game he left behind nearly a year ago, made for quite the scene Friday morning, as he embarked on the latest chapter of a controversial career via a Minor League deal with Oakland.

The newest member of the A's, who will wear No. 1 "because everything starts with one," quickly made himself at ease with his teammates, whom he shared several laughs with when not showing off his picturesque swing -- at least seven home runs were counted -- during a round of batting practice.

"As soon as he made contact with the baseball," Cliff Pennington said, "you could tell it was a different animal. He's still got whatever it is he's got."

Much of the reason it's on display again can be traced to his wife and media darling, Juliana, who took to the mound in a white summer dress and four-inch heels and managed to throw strike after strike to sons Manny Jr. and Lucas during their own playful hitting session. Minutes before, they stood closely by Ramirez's side as he addressed media members for nearly 12 minutes and relayed a sense of gratitude for his most recent opportunity and the change he's found in himself since discovering God.

"I think I'm here because God brought me here," Ramirez said, exuding a genuine tone. "Sometimes when you don't have God in your heart, you do stupid things without thinking about it. When you start going to church and learning what really is going on, it's like you're opening your eyes and realizing it doesn't matter how much money you got, nice house, cars. If you don't have God in your heart, it doesn't mean anything. So now I appreciate my family more, my kids, the game."

Whether he can still play the game at the level he maintained in his previous 19 big league seasons remains to be seen. The A's presented Ramirez with a non-guaranteed contract worth just \$500,000, a number that will dwindle to around \$340,000 -- the league minimum is \$480,000 -- following his 50-game drug suspension.

Money, obviously, wasn't a factor in his decision to re-enter the game, which last saw him in a Rays uniform before he retired after just five games rather than serve a 100-game suspension that has since been cut in half.

"I made some mistakes and I want to show my children I can correct them," Ramirez said.

It was just last September he was formally charged with domestic violence, an event that nearly led him to lose his family. But just like Friday, his wife never left his side, and instead inspired him to attend church every Thursday morning and engage in prayer.

In turn, Ramirez not only found a listener in God but in himself.

"I'm happy I got a job. Just got to go and compete and prove to people I can still play. With God's help, I'm going to make the team."

The 12-time All-Star -- a career .312 hitter with 555 home runs, good for 14th on the all-time list, and 1,831 RBIs -- will receive plenty of at-bats at the designated hitter spot this spring. His suspension, which makes him eligible to play in a Major League contest as early as May 30, does not preclude him from participating in any exhibition games.

By Friday afternoon, manager Bob Melvin had already expressed to Ramirez what he expects from him during that time, and in any action that may follow under his watch.

"He said, 'You will have no problem with me,'" Melvin said. "I only have a couple rules. One is kind of all-encompassing, but all our guys know I expect them to bust it down the line every single time, and he said, 'I'll be the last guy you have to worry about that as far as that goes.'"

"His attitude that he came in with was awesome, and just the whole approach he had to the day in general was all that you could ever ask for," Pennington said. "I think he'll be an awesome guy on our team to have going forward. It was like we were long-lost friends."

Fellow dreadlock wearer Jemile Weeks was equally impressed, not just by Ramirez's performance, but in the genuine manner he conducted business on Day 1.

"For somebody with his stature and track record, to come and talk to the younger guys and make us feel comfortable, that's a big plus on his behalf," the A's second baseman said. "You can tell he has the right frame of mind, off the field and on. In my mind, he's still got it. The power hasn't gone anywhere."

"He jumps out of bed hitting home runs. He kept saying, 'Nah, I didn't get that one.' And they were all gone in a second."

Ramirez's time with the A's could be, too, should he act up in "Manny being Manny" fashion. But he insists his transformation is a permanent one.

"Sometimes you don't appreciate what you have until you lose it, and that's what happened to me," he said.

"Everyone knows my story. ... Now, I'm at peace."

Rehabbing A's lefties look sharp

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- A's lefty Brett Anderson is showing no signs of slowing his rehab after making a 35-pitch bullpen session - his second since undergoing Tommy John surgery -- look effortless on Friday.

"Again, with Brett, his arm looked real good," manager Bob Melvin said. "He's got the kinks worked out as far as soreness goes, and you really wouldn't think he had an arm injury the way he's throwing the ball."

Fellow southpaw Dallas Braden, on the road back from shoulder surgery, proved just as impressive during his sixth bullpen session.

"They look like regular pitchers out there, not rehabbing guys," Melvin said.

The duo will continue on the same schedule, which includes two bullpen sessions per week.

Worth noting

- Right-hander Brandon McCarthy, in line to start Opening Day against the Mariners in Japan on March 28, was one of several pitchers to throw live batting practice on Friday.

"He went after it hard and looks like he's in midseason form," Melvin said. "Even his bullpen sessions, he always treats everything like a game, and that's just the way he stays focused. If ever there's a guy you need to have a little early, it would be him."

- It appears name tags might be in order in the A's clubhouse, home to more than a dozen new faces. Anderson's first interaction with Manny Ramirez on Friday didn't exactly go the way he probably planned.

"Manny just asked if I was the video coordinator," Anderson tweeted. "Our relationship can only go up from here."

Crisp ready to compete to keep job in center

Newcomer Cespedes could push veteran speedster to left field

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Coco Crisp isn't shy about his desire to stay in center field, nor about his abilities and his experience at the position that seemingly make him the right fit there, despite Cuban sensation Yoenis Cespedes' pending arrival.

The A's veteran relayed that much, and then some, when speaking to reporters shortly after arriving at the team's clubhouse on Thursday morning, one day before all position players are expected to report.

Crisp, who waved off several interested teams this offseason to return to Oakland on a two-year, \$14 million deal, is well aware of the competition Cespedes brings to the table. And he's even willing to let the youngster take over center-field duties without fuss -- if he earns it.

"If anybody is better than me, I'll give them that," Crisp said. "I have no problem with that. If somebody is better than me, then they're better than me. Whether it's base running, base stealing, hitting, catching, throwing -- whatever aspect of life, if you're better than me, you're better than me, and I will take my cap off and there you go. But if you're not, then I'll say that, too. That's the way it should be I think."

Cespedes has yet to make an appearance in camp and won't do so until he acquires a worker's visa and undergoes a physical, at which point his four-year, \$36 million deal will finally be made official. There's thought that, once aboard, he could immediately be placed in center field -- in part to make him feel comfortable in such an unfamiliar environment.

If such a scenario unfolds, Crisp would likely move to left field, as he did in Cleveland seven years ago when Grady Sizemore assumed the center-field job. Meanwhile, Seth Smith would then probably see most of his at-bats as a designated hitter.

Asked about moving positions to accommodate Cespedes for that reason, Crisp replied, "Of course I can see that, but I'm not going to be happy with that."

"I don't think anybody should be happy with anything less than what they want," he said. "Obviously you have to make adjustments accordingly. That's just life. You're not always going to get what you want, but you strive to get that, and that's what I'm going to be out there trying to do."

Team officials, including manager Bob Melvin, are not allowed to comment on the situation, given the fact Cespedes is not under contract yet. But Melvin assured Wednesday that he planned to immediately sit down with Crisp to discuss the plan for the outfield.

The Oakland manager very much likes having Crisp in center, particularly during day games at the Coliseum, but also mentioned his ability to man left field, as well. In the meantime, the outfielder joked, "I'm just going to go out there and have fun, catch every single ball that's hit to me, do a cartwheel, catch some balls between my legs, play hacky sack, do things that I do."

"Honestly," Crisp said, "everything is going to fall where it falls. I welcome anything. Everybody in their career has always had some kind of competition, and that's the way it goes from beginning to end. That's what type of game it is. So, you just gotta deal with it and find some way to have fun and do what you do and see how it plays out."

Crisp's decision to continue his career with the A's was ultimately determined by financial opportunity. He was nearing a deal with Tampa Bay -- he liked what he heard about Rays manager Joe Maddon and was attracted to the team's direction - but, at the last minute, Oakland offered him a better deal to reel him back in.

Coming off a 2011 campaign in which he hit .264 with 54 RBIs and a career-high 49 stolen bases in 136 games, Crisp is expected to join fellow speedster Jemile Weeks at the top of the lineup again this year. The duo's presence there will represent one of few familiarities for A's fans, who are soon to be greeted by quite the new-look lineup that, depending on the day, could feature Manny Ramirez -- Crisp hit in front of him with Cleveland and Boston -- or Jonny Gomes.

"I think some of the moves we've done have been to kind of balance out the pitching as close as it can be with the offense," Crisp said. "It's more of a balanced attack rather than being so lopsided. I think, when Manny comes back, if Manny is Manny, we can expect a lot of home runs. That's what we need."

As for Cespedes, who Crisp is calling "C" for now, "That's to be determined," he said. "If he is able to be one of our star players, that will definitely help our lineup. Our team has definitely gotten better on paper."

In part because of an addition the team had all along.

"I think unless you're around Coco a lot, you really don't know what he means to a club and means to our club," Melvin said. "That's why [vice president and general manager] Billy [Beane] was so adamant about signing him."

Manny Ramirez wants to show he can still play

The Associated Press

PHOENIX—Manny Ramirez arrived at the Oakland Athletics training facility Friday to begin his return to baseball and said he was intent on demonstrating "I can still play."

The A's are hoping he can return to the level that made him one of the most feared hitters in baseball. Ramirez got off to a good start.

After taking batting practice, in which he hit seven home runs off A's coach Mike Gallego, Ramirez addressed the media accompanied by his wife, Juliana, and two sons, Manny Jr. and Lucas.

"I was kind of nervous coming to the stadium," Ramirez said. "I'm here because God brought me here. I know a lot of people are, 'Oh, he's not going to play anymore,' but you know something? When God says that they're going to open the door for you, no matter what anyone says, the door is going to open. That's why I'm here."

Juliana occasionally put her hand on Ramirez as he spoke about difficulties—he did not address specifics—he's endured since telling Major League Baseball he was retiring a week into the 2011 season. He was arrested last September for allegedly hitting his wife during a domestic altercation.

"I made some mistakes and I want to show my children I can correct them," Ramirez said. "I was about to lose my family. My wife brought me to church. She changed my environment and I found a lot of good people out there."

The 12-time All-Star signed a minor league deal with the A's on Monday that's worth \$500,000 if he's added to the big league roster. He will be allowed to participate in spring training games and exhibition games scheduled in Japan, but must serve a 50-game suspension for his second positive drug test before he can play in the regular season for Oakland.

"Sometimes you don't appreciate what you have until you lose it, and that's what happened to me," Ramirez said. "Now I appreciate my family more, my kids, the game. I've got a beautiful wife, I've got my kids, my family and I'm getting my career back. It's been a blessing."

Ramirez had retired from the Tampa Bay Rays last season rather than serve a 100-game suspension.

"I'm thankful that I have a job," Ramirez said. "At least I can still play baseball in the minor leagues and work on things."

Ramirez, the career leader in postseason home runs (29) and RBIs (78), said he has no expectations other than to show he can play.

A's manager Bob Melvin said someone of his stature could influence the rest of the team.

"He can be a great example with his work ethic," Melvin said. "We have some young kids and, who knows, maybe something will rub off."

Ramirez is 14th on baseball's all-time home run list with 555 and 18th on the all-time RBIs list with 1,831 and is a career .312 hitter.

"I think guys are excited to see what Manny Ramirez is all about," Melvin said. "He said all the right things; that he was thankful to be here. He said 'you will have no problems with me,' and I appreciated that."

Ramirez will wear the number 1—as in a new start—because his first choice, 7, belonged to infielder Adam Rosales.

"God made the world in seven days," Ramirez said. "And everything starts with one."

There was a buzz in the A's clubhouse the moment Ramirez walked in and sat in front of his locker. His new teammates warmed up to him quickly as introductions were made around the room.

Everybody stopped what they were doing to watch Ramirez take batting practice. Melvin was certainly impressed in the little he saw of it.

"I saw all I needed to see," he said. "I saw the one ball he hit off the center field wall. He truly is one of those guys who has the mechanics of his swing right away. Rarely do you see him off balance."

Notes: Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden, each coming off season-ending surgeries, threw side sessions, while tentative opening day starter Brandon McCarthy threw to hitters for the first time. "They both looked like regular pitchers instead of guys on rehab," Melvin said. "McCarthy really went at it and he looks to be in midseason form." ... Ramirez was slotted into a hitting group that also includes former teammates Coco Crisp and Jonny Gomes. ... RHP Ryan Cook continues to impress. "I look for him to compete for a spot in the bullpen," Melvin said. "He has an exploding fastball and movement on top of that."

Manny Ramirez Says He Found God Before Baseball Return With Oakland A's

By Rob Gloster, Bloomberg

Manny Ramirez, who faces a 50-game drug suspension if he makes the Oakland Athletics' roster, said he found God in the offseason and that he is eager to show his children and his teammates that he has changed.

Ramirez, 39, a 12-time All-Star whose 555 home runs rank 14th on the Major League Baseball career list, agreed to a minor-league contract with the A's earlier this week and reported to spring training camp in Phoenix yesterday.

Ramirez retired from baseball last season while with the Tampa Bay Rays rather than face a second unspecified violation tied to the sport's anti-doping rules. He also was suspended 50 games in May 2009 while playing for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"Sometimes when you don't got God in your heart, you do stupid things," Ramirez, who hit seven balls out of the park during batting practice yesterday, told reporters. "When you have a problem, you can get up and fix it."

Ramirez is a non-roster invitee to Oakland's spring camp. If he makes the major league roster, he would be eligible to play no earlier than May 30, his 40th birthday.

Ramirez, who won two World Series titles with the Boston Red Sox, asked to be reinstated as a player on Dec. 5. He said he hopes to mentor some of the younger players on the A's.

"I can tell them what happened to me, you don't want to be in a deep hole," he said. "Everyone knows my story. I can tell them how I changed, and the way I used to think."

Oakland Athletics' struggle to compete likely to continue

by Scott Bordow, The Arizona Republic | azcentral.com

Oakland A's fans might want to purchase the movie "Moneyball" before the season begins. It's the closest they'll get to a pennant race.

It's not a stretch to think Oakland not only will be the worst team in the American League but in all of baseball. Strapped for cash, General Manager Billy Beane again sold off most, if not all, of his best talent for minor-league prospects.

The A's plan is for those prospects to mature and be quality major-league talent by the time the organization moves into a new stadium in San Jose. But until that happens -- if it happens -- the team and the franchise will struggle.

How bad is it? Well, the A's won just 74 games last year and subsequently traded away arguably their two top starting pitchers: Gio Gonzalez to the Washington Nationals and Trevor Cahill to the Diamondbacks.

Their No.1 starter by default, until left-hander Brett Anderson can return from Tommy John elbow surgery, is veteran Brandon McCarthy, who won all of nine games last year. The No.2 starter is 38-year-old Bartolo Colon, who, if he pitches well at all, likely will be dealt by the trading deadline.

Oakland does have some nice young arms, including Jarrod Parker, acquired from Arizona in the Cahill deal, and Brad Peacock, part of the haul received for Gonzalez. But asking them to be durable, quality starters over the long haul of the season is, at best, problematic.

Maybe it's a good thing the A's won't win many games. That's fewer save opportunities for the bullpen to blow. Oakland shipped closer Andrew Bailey to the Boston Red Sox in the off-season.

The A's are not likely to score a lot of runs, either. Oakland's everyday lineup is so devoid of power that the organization contemplated signing 39-year-old Manny Ramirez to be its designated hitter. The last baseball saw of Ramirez, he was retiring to avoid a 100-game suspension for a positive drug test.

The A's do have some talent. Second baseman Jemile Weeks (.303 batting average, 22 stolen bases in 2011) and third baseman Scott Sizemore (.245, 11 homers and 56 RBIs) have good numbers, but without protection in the lineup their performances likely will suffer.

Oakland's best bet is to play small ball and let speedsters such as Weeks and center fielder Coco Crisp (49 stolen bases) try to create scoring opportunities with their legs. But again, who knocks them in? Oakland doesn't have a true power hitter at the traditional power positions .

But this year, in a division that features mashers such as the Texas Rangers and Los Angeles Angels, the A's will be lucky if they're not out of the pennant race by June 1.

But hey, there's always "Moneyball."

At a glance

Manager: Bob Melvin.

2011 record: 74-88.

Star power: Yoenis Cespedes, OF. The Cuban defector, 26, signed a four-year, \$36 million deal. He was an offensive juggernaut in Cuba.

Saviormetrics

By Eddie Matz, ESPN The Magazine

This story appears in the March 5, 2012 "Analytics Issue" of ESPN The Magazine.

IT'S LATE SEPTEMBER IN THE BAY AREA. A classic Indian summer day has given way to a classic Indian summer night. High above Oakland, the cobalt clear sky is filled with stars. Down below, so too is the Fox Theater.

A few hours earlier, *Moneyball* made its world premiere just around the corner at the Paramount Theatre. Now it's the after-party. Academy Award winner Philip Seymour Hoffman is here. Academy Award winner Aaron Sorkin is here. Superagent Scott Boras and rocker Billie Joe Armstrong are here. Even Brad Pitt is here.

Brad Freaking Pitt.

For one night, Oaktown has gone all Hollywood -- and Brandon McCarthy has gone all stalker.

Terms you'll need to know for this story

BATTING AVERAGE ON BALLS IN PLAY (BABIP) Percentage of all balls put in play that result in base hits (excludes home runs). BABIP below .300 means a pitcher has been lucky; above .300, unlucky.

FIELDING INDEPENDENT PITCHING (FIP) A measurement that improves upon ERA by discounting what a pitcher can't control (luck, fielding) in favor of what he can (homers, walks, strikeouts).

GROUND BALL/FLY BALL RATIO (GB/FB) The frequency with which a pitcher induces ground balls versus fly balls; the higher the ratio, the better, because ground balls are less dangerous than fly balls.

STRIKEOUT-TO-WALK RATIO (K/BB) A good measure of a pitcher's control; the higher the ratio, the better.

WHIP The number of combined walks and hits a pitcher allows on a per-inning basis. Average is 1.25; fantastic is 1.

WINS ABOVE REPLACEMENT (WAR) Number of wins a player contributes to his team above a replacement-level player.

The 28-year-old's early onset salt-and-pepper hair is impeccably coiffed above his angular face. Dressed in a gray Elevee suit with a skinny black tie and white sliver pocket square, the 6'7" McCarthy looks 100 percent Euro. If you saw him on the street, you might guess correctly that he was a professional athlete, but you'd probably mistake him for an imported small forward named Sasha or Bruno. He earns seven figures and is married to a model, yet tonight he's nothing more than a pimple-faced seventh-grader at a middle school dance, peering across the crowded floor and running line after line through his head.

Hi, I'm Brandon McCarthy. Too self-centered. Brandon McCarthy, Oakland A's. Too businessy. Hi, I'm a big fan of your work. Too sycophantic.

Close to midnight, McCarthy decides it's time. He's downed a sufficient quantity of Captain and Coke, and the crowd of a thousand has thinned to maybe a hundred. If he doesn't pull the trigger now, he never will. He will have forever squandered his opportunity to meet ... Bill James.

Bill Freaking James.

Heart pounding beneath the pocket square, McCarthy floats across the room to Queen's "Under Pressure." Like any self-respecting seventh-grader, he's added a wingman -- teammate and fellow pitcher Craig Breslow, a Yale grad with a degree in molecular biophysics and a passion for sabermetrics. In other words, the ideal wingman for *Mission: Bill James*.

With Breslow by his side, McCarthy spends the next 30 minutes completely ignoring Pitt, Hoffman and Sorkin, not to mention his beautiful wife, Amanda, in favor of talking sabermetrics with the 62-year-old rumpled stathead, which is roughly equivalent to talking lightbulbs with Thomas Edison.

They talk about ground ball rates, strikeout-to-walk ratios and how McCarthy led the AL in something called FIP. If the music hadn't stopped and the lights hadn't come up, they'd still be talking. James and McCarthy. Stalkee and stalker. The savior and the saved.

"I DIDN'T WANT to suck at baseball anymore." Brandon McCarthy is recounting how he was saved. How he and sabermetrics collided.

During the first century of America's pastime, the game's language was written in stone: batting average, home runs and RBIs. Wins, losses and ERA. Then, in 1971, some fans who loved numbers founded the Society for American Baseball Research. Six years later, a Kansas security guard and SABR member named Bill James self-published a book -- it was actually 68 photocopied pages he stapled and mailed to a few dozen folks -- titled *1977 Baseball Abstract: Featuring 18 Categories of Statistical Information That You Just Can't Find Anywhere Else*. It was the first of 12 annual (and ultimately best-selling) abstracts that James would write, and it was the beginning of a sea change.

Sabermetrics, as James' musings became known, was at first a cryptic tongue spoken exclusively by stat-happy fans who analyzed the game but never played it. Then, in 2003, Michael Lewis wrote *Moneyball*, a behind-the-scenes look at how trailblazing GM Billy Beane and the small-market Oakland A's used sabermetrics to assemble one of baseball's best teams. In the decade since, the game's decision makers, many of whom sprouted from the Beane management stalk, have taken a shine to the New Testament. Today, the majority of MLB front offices -- from the A's to the Yankees -- rely on sabermetric analysis to evaluate talent.

What Billy Beane was to GMs, Brandon McCarthy is now to players. Despite Beane's success and the proliferation of baseball executives who swear by James' metrics, the list of players who do so is shorter than the rightfield fence at Fenway Park. Former pitcher Brian Bannister was a known disciple, as are current hurlers Zack Greinke, Brandon Morrow, Max Scherzer and, of course, Breslow, the Moneyball wingman. As for the other 745 big leaguers and 6,000-odd minor leaguers? Not so much. They are where McCarthy was in 2005: barely conscious of advanced statistics.

Back then, McCarthy was being heralded as the White Sox's next ace. But five lackluster years and four injuries later, the pitcher had nearly hung up his cleats. Instead, he placed both hands on the Bill James bible and swore his allegiance. Baseball, it is often said, is a game best played with the mind blank. But McCarthy had tried that and

failed. He was on the verge of becoming a clubhouse punch line -- an even bigger disappointment than he already was.

Instead, he became one of the best pitchers in baseball.

BRANDON McCARTHY spent the first decade of his life in Southern California. As such, he was an Orel Hershiser fan. If Pat McCarthy took his son to Chavez Ravine to watch the Dodgers star, the boy would proceed to recite a litany of Hershiser stats. But if he saw an anonymous arm like Jim Neidlinger, who started 12 games for the Dodgers in 1990, a disappointed Brandon would look at his father and ask, "Who?"

In 1994, after thieves broke into his family's Pasadena home for the third time, Pat decided he'd rather relocate his family to Colorado Springs, Colo., than bleed Dodger blue. He heard it was a good, safe place to raise kids, and he moved his family there even though there wasn't a single friend or relative nearby. California was the past, Colorado the future.

One Sunday morning after the move, 11-year-old Brandon sat next to his father on a wooden church pew in Fort Carson. They'd spent weeks crisscrossing El Paso County and couldn't find a house of worship that felt like home. So now here they were, getting sermonized on an Army base by a preacher going on and on, when suddenly the boy turned to his father and whispered, *What the hell is he talking about?* "Brandon never stood on convention," says his father. "He's always had the ability to look at something critically -- and if it came up short, he would move on."

FIP FLOPPER

After embracing analytics last year, the A's pitcher has improved in nearly every measurable way. Here are four of them. All data from FanGraphs.

K/BB RATIO

2005	2.82
2006	2.09
2007	1.23
2008	1.25
2009	1.81
2011	4.92 (A's franchise record)

GROUND BALL PERCENTAGE

2005	35.4%
2006	38.5%
2007	35.8%
2008	24.3%

K/BB RATIO

2009	39.0%
2011	46.7%

PITCHES PER INNING

2005	16.3
2006	17.1
2007	18.4
2008	17.0
2009	16.3
2011	14.6 (third in AL)

FIP (FIELDING INDEPENDENT PITCHING)

2005	4.96
2006	5.30
2007	4.73
2008	5.22
2009	4.70
2011	2.86 (Led AL)

When he wasn't challenging the establishment, he was busy challenging hitters. Ever since he first picked up a baseball, McCarthy had thrown a flat four-seam fastball that stayed up in the strike zone and moved about as much as the Rockies. What he lacked in deception, he more than made up for with control. "Brandon was never the hardest thrower," says Pat. "But he knew how to throw strikes."

As a rail-thin 6'5", 150-pound high school senior who couldn't top 83 on the radar gun, he threw strikes. During his one year at Colorado's Lamar Community College, where his team took third in the juco World Series, he threw strikes. "Brandon had a smooth, rhythmic, repeatable delivery," says former Lamar pitching coach Bryan Conger, who watched McCarthy add 25 pounds to his frame and 7 mph to his heater. He was no Nolan Ryan, but his remarkable command -- combined with a nasty 12-to-6 curve and a decent changeup -- was enough to interest the White Sox, who picked him in the 17th round of the 2002 draft. Over the next three seasons, McCarthy tore through the minors: Great Falls, Kannapolis, Winston-Salem, Birmingham. Strikes, strikes, strikes, strikes.

On May 22, 2005, in the finale of an electric interleague series against the Cubs, McCarthy made his major league debut against fireballer Mark Prior at Wrigley Field. He excelled, pitching 51/3 innings, striking out six, walking just one and leaving with his team ahead 2-1. "He'll be a big asset for that organization," Prior said after the game.

His second career start, against the Rangers, didn't go nearly as well. The rook gave up four homers in only five frames, including two to Alfonso Soriano. "He took one pitch that I swear was going to hit the dirt," says McCarthy, "and hit it out -- to right-center."

The shelling continued against the cellar-dwelling Royals and Rays, who hit him harder than a pinnate at a kindergartner's birthday party. Instead of going strike 1, strike 2, as he had in the minors, he would go ball 1, ball 2. "I was pitching with fear instead of confidence," says McCarthy. Pitches that used to miss the bat were getting driven; drives that used to stay in the park were going out.

The following season, the Sox slid McCarthy to the bullpen, where he felt utterly lost: "I'd be eating a Rice Krispie treat in the fourth inning, trying to stay warm, and an inning later I'd be facing the middle of the lineup with the bases loaded. I just didn't get it." Torii Hunter, then a Twin, homered off him that summer. "I was like, 'Who's the tall skinny guy with the straight fastball?'" Hunter remembers. "He wasn't hitting corners. He just threw it down the middle." When McCarthy's fortunes failed to improve, Chicago used him as trade bait to land Rangers blue-chip prospect John Danks in December 2006. "Brandon's age, makeup and ability is a rare combination we could not pass on," Rangers GM Jon Daniels said at the time.

In Texas, McCarthy and his four-seamer kept giving up homers and walks as if his contract contained an incentive for giving up homers and walks. After games, Amanda -- who had known McCarthy since high school -- knew not to ask questions, instead letting Linkin Park drown out the tension on their seemingly endless rides home. "My heart hurt for him," she says. Pitching coach Mike Maddux even convinced McCarthy that instead of breaking his hands at the beginning of his windup, he should keep them together and move them in a full circle, not unlike a softball pitcher's windmill motion. It didn't work. "I had so many mental problems that trying to fix something mechanical was like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*," he says.

To make matters worse, McCarthy's arm made him a regular on the DL. In 2007, he developed a rare stress fracture in his scapula (shoulder blade) that caused him to miss a month. The following season, elbow tendinitis gave him a spot on the bench for four months. In 2009, the stress fracture reappeared, shelving him for another three-month stint.

Standing on the mound in Arlington one day that season, McCarthy looked up at his name on the Jumbotron and realized the ugly truth: He was Jim Neidlinger. "I had become that guy, that mediocre guy," he says. "It was this weird, surreal moment. I knew I was way better than that; I just didn't know how to get it back."

IN RETROSPECT, McCarthy might have been the perfect candidate for a sabermetric transformation. An avid reader who effortlessly drops words like peccadillo, audacity and misnomer into casual conversation, McCarthy fancies grapes over hops and lives for Liverpool soccer even though he calls Dallas home and lives a block from American Airlines Center, the Mavericks' arena. Clearly he's attracted to unconventional thinking. He's also Pat McCarthy's kid, which means he knows the difference between the past and the future.

During his injury-plagued seasons, McCarthy stumbled upon a humor blog run by some Harvard kids who used sabermetrics to lampoon traditional baseball thinking. The site was called FireJoeMorgan.com, a reference to the Hall of Fame second baseman and then-ESPN analyst who famously denounced advanced metrics. The website's message

immediately struck a chord. "To this day," says McCarthy, "I still think it's the greatest thing that's ever been put on the Internet."

McCarthy also bookmarked sites like Lone Star Ball, a Rangers fan site heavy on sabermetrics, and FanGraphs, an instant favorite. He learned about FIP, or fielding independent pitching, a statistical aggregate that combines what a pitcher can control (homers, walks, strikeouts), ignores what he can't (luck, defense) and is a truer barometer than ERA. He also learned about BABIP, or batting average on balls in play, a stat that indicates whether a pitcher has been especially lucky (under .300) or unlucky (over .300). He learned about WAR, or wins above replacement, the all-inclusive, apples-to-apples metric that tells how valuable a player is to his team. He learned about ground ball rates, strikeout-to-walk ratios and more.

Watching his numbers for about a year, McCarthy began to appreciate that they couldn't be explained away. "I had a limited understanding of it early on. There's a lot of ego involved," he says. "I still thought I could be successful doing things the way I had always been doing them."

But clearly that wasn't true. According to FanGraphs, an average major league player has a WAR of 2.0, which means that if he gets injured and a reserve player or minor leaguer replaces him, his team would be two wins worse without him. In McCarthy's first five seasons, he never had a WAR higher than 1.4. In other words, he was below average. By a lot. Hell, even Neidlinger had a higher WAR.

"Everything I was doing as a pitcher did not line up with the typical model of success," says McCarthy. Too many walks, fly balls and home runs. Not enough ground balls and strikeouts. It wasn't anything he didn't already know intuitively: During his three years in Texas, he'd spent half the time hurt and the other half hurting his team. But seeing the numbers right there on the screen and comparing them with the game's aces was the wake-up call he needed. "I wanted to do what Roy Halladay was doing," says McCarthy, referring to the dominant righty, who was, at 32, a Cy Young Award winner and six-time All-Star. During the summer of '09, McCarthy had plenty of time to read and reflect while sidelined for three months by his second shoulder injury. "The more I read, the more it just made sense," he says. "I wanted ground balls and worse contact. I wanted to attack the zone and get deep into games." By the time McCarthy came off the DL in September 2009, he'd made a decision: He was going to become Roy Halladay.

Like McCarthy, Halladay had been a highly touted prospect from Colorado who at first flamed out; unlike McCarthy, he was a ground ball-inducing machine, owing largely to his mastery of the two-seam fastball. Actually, two kinds of two-seamers: a cutter, which ran away from righties and in on lefties, and a sinker, which did the opposite. "I could never be Justin Verlander because I can't throw 101," says McCarthy. "But there's nothing freakish about Halladay, nothing that wasn't within the realm of possibility for me." Except that he couldn't throw a two-seamer to save his life.

In college, McCarthy had tinkered with one, but he could never make it move -- and what was the point of throwing a two-seamer if it didn't dance? Now here he was nearly a decade later, an endangered species, and sabermetrics was sending him a message: The four-seamer was your past, the two-seamer your future.

The fact that McCarthy was essentially home-schooling himself in sabermetrics reflects how little it has yet to saturate locker rooms, dugouts and coaches' minds. Says Keith Woolner, a prominent sabermetrician who has served as the Indians' manager of baseball analytics since 2007: "We can observe outcomes and place value on them, but it's up to the coaches to translate that into an actionable plan that can be used on the field. Not all coaches are comfortable with that."

And, according to McCarthy's wingman Breslow, the only outcome players care about involves dollar signs. "WAR doesn't give you value in the salary arbitration process," the Yale grad explains. "Until the mainstream media and the common fan recognize the importance of sabermetrics, the average player will continue to focus on home runs, RBIs, wins and ERA. That's what's sexy. That's what gets you paid."

Facing Toronto in Arlington on Sept. 1, 2009, in his first start off the DL, McCarthy decided to channel his inner sabermetrician and take the two-seamer for a ride. He had briefly discussed grip and finger pressure with Rangers teammate Scott Feldman and had thrown a few cutters and sinkers during an August rehab stint. But for the most part McCarthy was about to treat big league hitters like guinea pigs. Typically, when a hurler fiddles with his repertoire, it's a minor adjustment: a slider tweaked, a changeup retooled. Yet McCarthy was considering retiring the heater he'd thrown three out of every five windups for his entire baseball life. "For a pitcher to reinvent himself midcareer is almost unheard of," says McCarthy's agent, Ryan Ware. On McCarthy's sixth pitch, leadoff hitter Marco Scutaro grounded out to short. Joe Inglett, up next, singled to right. Adam Lind, up third, grounded into a double play. Inning over.

Despite not fully committing to his new two-seamers -- he mixed the cutter and sinker in with his regular four-seamer -- McCarthy worked into the seventh, giving up just one run and recording more grounders than flies, an anomaly for him. Most important, in the Rangers' launching pad of a stadium, he kept the ball in the park.

Sabermetric research shows that, historically, fly balls generate 0.13 runs per out, while ground balls produce only 0.05 runs per out. In other words, the average fly ball is nearly three times as dangerous as the average ground ball. Prior to debuting the two-seamer, McCarthy's career ratio of ground balls to fly balls, or GB/FB, lived on the wrong side of one. In 2007, among pitchers with at least 100 innings, his 0.76 GB/FB ratio was fourth worst in the American League. Early in 2009, before he introduced his cutter and sinker, the ratio dipped even lower, to 0.73. But at the end of the season, when McCarthy logged on to FanGraphs, he was shocked. During that final month, his GB/FB ratio had nearly doubled, all the way to 1.44. That same season only six AL starters had a higher GB/FB ratio -- Halladay among them. "I remember standing on the mound feeling like, *Wow, that's a whole lot more ground balls than I used to get,*" he says. More ground balls meant fewer fly balls. Fewer fly balls meant fewer homers. In his final six starts of 2009, McCarthy allowed just two jacks. "Right then, I was sold," he says.

Unfortunately, the Rangers weren't. Grounders or not, McCarthy was still walking too many batters. He was like Son of Jor-El after arriving on planet Earth -- he suddenly had superpowers but couldn't harness them. "I'd never pitched with that stuff," he says. "I didn't know when to throw what." The following March, McCarthy was assigned to Triple-A Oklahoma City. Just like that, he was on the outside looking in.

During the next couple of months, McCarthy learned how to tame his two-seamer. But in June, when his scapula inexplicably flared up for the third time, McCarthy finally hit bottom. "I didn't think I'd be able to stay healthy enough to sustain an actual career," he says. So he booted up his laptop and started researching online universities. "It was the first time in my life that I truly entertained thoughts that I was done with baseball," he says. That is, until Terry Clark stepped in. The Oklahoma City pitching coach convinced McCarthy that what he needed wasn't a career change but a mechanical one.

Watching video of McCarthy's extreme overhand motion, Clark realized that the pitcher's arm was pronating at the moment of delivery, and the pressure was twisting his scapula. "It was really ugly," says Clark. "He's lucky his scapula

was the only thing that broke." Clark had McCarthy drop down to a more natural three-quarter arm angle, like Halladay's. McCarthy's whole motion became a study in minimalism. Less right arm, more back leg. No more falling off the mound toward first base.

In December 2010, after pitching lights-out in winter ball, McCarthy inked a one-year, \$1 million deal with the A's, who'd long had their eyes on him. "We thought so highly of Brandon," says Oakland exec Farhan Zaidi, "that when the deal went down in 2006, our thinking was, Damn, we can't believe Texas just got McCarthy." In theory, the Oakland signing was a marriage made in heaven: the Moneyballing franchise that popularized sabermetrics and the failed, undervalued hurler who used it to resurrect his career.

SEVEN PITCHES. That's how long it took for the verdict to come in. On April 5, in the first inning of his first start in an A's uniform, Brandon McCarthy went groundout, groundout, groundout. It was a one-inning sabermetric masterpiece. For the game, he lasted eight innings -- the second-longest start of his career -- and threw just 89 pitches.

Back with the Rangers, when he was throwing nearly 18 pitches per inning, stepping onto the mound felt more like stepping into the ring. "After starts," says McCarthy, "my entire body would be numb." Now taking the mound felt more like taking a vacation. "It was ffffun," says McCarthy, drawing out the F for emphasis. "I was getting outs at the big league level in ways I'd never gotten them before." His first couple of years in the majors, McCarthy's BABIP was among the lowest in the league (.249 in '05, .255 in '06). Put simply, he was one of the luckiest bastards in baseball. With Oakland last year, his BABIP was .296, just four points off the historical luck-neutral benchmark of .300. It's a stat that's not lost on McCarthy. "He's got a pretty acute knowledge of what his numbers are," says Breslow, whose astronomical .342 BABIP last year became a running clubhouse joke between the two amateur sabermetricians.

McCarthy's filthy stuff, on the other hand, was no laughing matter. "He's not trying to strike you out," says Hunter, who had long dominated the lanky pitcher -- until last season. "He's trying to get a ground ball. He's keeping guys off balance, and he's hitting his spots. He's learned how to pitch." ("The first time I got him out last year," says McCarthy, "I was like, 'Oh my god, I really did something!' That just wasn't possible before.") A's manager Bob Melvin says McCarthy's new pitching approach reminds him of Greg Maddux, the 300-game winner and surefire Hall of Famer. Says Melvin: "He takes great pride in being able to throw the ball where he wants." And when he wants.

Michael Young, who led the AL in hits last year, recalls one recent at-bat when McCarthy, who'd been pounding the outside corner, threw a sinker in that crossed up Young and shattered his bat. "You piece of s--," Young texted McCarthy after the game. "I really liked that bat."

Not that McCarthy did everything perfectly. By season's end, he had missed six weeks due to injuries and won just nine games pitching for an Oakland team that had the AL's third-worst offense in terms of runs scored. Still, his home run rate (.58 per nine innings) was third best in the AL, his 4.92 K/BB ratio set an A's record and his 4.7 WAR placed him ahead of Yovani Gallardo, Tim Lincecum and Josh Beckett, all of whom received Cy Young votes.

But even in defeat McCarthy could look brilliant. On Sept. 26, exactly one week after stalking Bill James at the Moneyball premiere, MacNasty -- the name given to him by Feldman, his former Rangers teammate -- made his final start of the year in Seattle. In the top of the eighth, Melvin moseyed over to the outfield side of the visitors' dugout, where the lanky righthander sat. "Great game," the A's manager told his horse. "Great season." McCarthy had just

retired the Mariners in the bottom of the seventh. He'd put in a full day's work, throwing 108 pitches. The A's were trailing 4-1 and Seattle's 3-4-5 hitters were due up. There was no point sending the righty back out there. "I wanna finish," McCarthy told his skipper. Melvin stared out at Safeco Field for a moment. "All right," he said. "But you get no baserunners."

Six pitches. That's how long it took to finish. In the final inning of his final start of the season, Brandon McCarthy went groundout, groundout, lineout. Another sabermetric masterpiece.

On a Wednesday afternoon in January, the 2011 American League FIP leader stands in the private locker room of Grailey's, a swanky Dallas wine shop, surveying the gold nameplates above each bottle-filled cubby: Brad Richards ... Brett Hull ... Brandon McCarthy. On the top row, three letters mark Dirk Nowitzki's collection: MVP. "How cool would it be if, a couple years from now, yours reads, 'Cy Young?'" an onlooker says.

"It was one year," says McCarthy, humoring the query. The A's seem to like his odds: Six days later, they'll sign the righthander to a one-year deal worth \$4.275 million, good for a 328 percent pay raise. For now, though, McCarthy focuses instead on life's little victories.

"I don't suck anymore," he says.

Former A's Press Officer Recalls the "Moneyball" Season

Novato's Jim Young remembers being inside baseball during the epic Oakland A's season pictured in the Oscar-nominated film

By Christian Kallen, patch.com 2/24/2012

As a high school pitcher for Marin Catholic, Novato homeboy Jim Young once struck out Barry Bonds - although on his next at-bat the San Mateo slugger took him downtown. Fortunately, Young's baseball career didn't end there.

Between the years 2000 and 2008, Young served as Director of Public Relations for the Oakland A's. "I was responsible for all of the team's media relations and publicity efforts and also served as the primary liaison with the players," he told Novato Patch in an email interview. "I also traveled with the team on a regular basis."

That means, of course, that Young was literally "inside baseball" during the epic 2002 Major League Baseball season depicted in this year's Academy Award-nominted film, "Moneyball."

With the coming Oscar ceremony in mind, we asked Young about that season, and the film. His generous responses follow.

· *What's your current connection to Novato?*

I was raised in Novato, but moved away after I graduated from USF in 1985. I returned to Novato in July of 2003, where I still choose to make my home, despite a 62-mile commute to work. It still has that small-town feel I remember growing up, but I'm happy to see all of the development that has taken place over the years.

· *What was your role with the Oakland A's during the "Moneyball" period, the 2002 baseball season?*

I caught the team at a very exciting time. During my eight years with the team, we went to the playoffs five times, had two MVPs, a Cy Young Award winner and two Rookies of the Year.

The 2002 season was incredible. After winning 102 games the year before and then losing Jason Giambi in the off-season, many had picked the A's to finish near the bottom of the division. But we still had some of the best young talent in baseball, with Eric Chavez, Miguel Tejada, Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito all entering their prime, along with Jermaine Dye and Ramon Hernandez. We picked up David Justice and Scott Hatteberg in the offseason, two players many thought were past their prime. We also added Cory Lidle, rest his soul, who was the best pitcher on the planet for a month and a half.

The 20-game winning streak was amazing, to say the least. I remember early in the streak Justice had a ritual of saying, "Well, you can't win four in a row until you win three in a row," and so on. The mantra took on a life of its own. We won the last five games of a home stand in August and then I accompanied the team on a 10-game road trip to Cleveland, Detroit and Kansas City.

Tejada had a huge series against Minnesota in late August which I think clinched the MVP for him. I was on the field near the corner of the dugout when Hatteberg hit the walk-off home run against Kansas City for the 20th straight win. Unfortunately, the season didn't end like we would have hoped, as we lost to a hot Twins team in the playoffs.

· Was the book by Michael Lewis an accurate representation of the period and issues?

By in large, yes. Michael came to spring training that season on assignment for New York Times magazine. After spending a week with us, he called his editor and said he thought he had something much bigger here. He had virtually unlimited access to the team and front office meetings. He was a pleasure to work with, although our beat writers were more than a little jealous about the access he was receiving.

· How about the movie – in general, did it do justice to the story?

The movie was very entertaining but of course, it took some liberties for story-telling purposes. Don't forget, the A's were coming off a 102-win season the year before and weren't exactly the rag-tag bunch as depicted in the movie. The 2002 team was loaded with Mulder, Hudson, Zito, Chavez, Dye, and Ramon Hernandez, to name a few. Tejada won the MVP and Zito the Cy Young. That was the core of the team.

· Any "spot-on" moments or characterizations in the movie that you appreciated?

The highlights of the 20th win gave me chills all over again. Chris Pratt was pretty good playing Scott Hatteberg and Stephen Bishop was excellent in playing David Justice. Of course, Brad Pitt was amazing.

The 20-game winning streak was amazing too, to say the least. I remember early in the streak Justice had a ritual of saying, "Well, you can't win four in a row until you win three in a row," and so on. The mantra took on a life of its own. We won the last five games of a home stand in August and then I accompanied the team on a 10-game road trip to Cleveland, Detroit and Kansas City and we came home riding a 15-game winning streak. What a trip!

· How about Brad Pitt as Billy Beane? Was the performance anything like Billy?

Unbelievable. Brad was spot on. He many so many of Billy's mannerisms down to a tee.

· How about Jonah Hill as assistant GM Peter Brand?

The movie took great liberties in casting this role. Our assistant GM was Paul DePodesta, a Harvard graduate who was in his fourth year as Billy's assistant in 2002. He did spend some time with the Indians organization and paid his dues as an advanced scout. He had a strong baseball background, unlike the Peter Brand character.

· How about Philip Seymour Hoffman as the manager, Art Howe?

It was a very unfair depiction of Art, who is one of the nicest guys you can ever hope to work with. He was far from the curmudgeon he was portrayed as in the movie. There was definitely some "creative friction" between Billy and Art, but that's not uncommon over a course of a long season.

· Were "you" in the movie? Any character or bit-part you thought might be based on you?

There was a brief scene where the PR Director was holding the media in the clubhouse hallway after an intense meeting in the manager's office, which brought back a lot of memories. I think the PR Director was played by Eric Winzenried, but wasn't referred to by name.

· Did the movie accurately convey the central point of the book, that with smart trades and attention to statistics, a contending team can be built without big stars?

The movie gave the impression the A's were made up of a bunch of misfits and castoffs, which couldn't be more far from the truth. The team was absolutely loaded with some of the best young talent in the game... We were able to add a few missing pieces in Scott Hatteberg, David Justice and John Mabry.

The whole concept of "Moneyball" is more than a means on how to interpret statistical data. It's about capitalizing on inefficiencies in the market and taking a critical view and challenging conventional thinking in all parts of your organization.

Branch Rickey was an advocate of on-base percentage when he was running the Brooklyn Dodgers. Sandy Alderson, who preceded Billy as GM, also used Sabermetrics to evaluate players. Billy continued to embrace this organizational philosophy when he was appointed GM in 1998. Where the Yankees were quick to sign Roger Clemens for \$15 million, the A's got the same, if not better production out for Cory Lidle, for example.

· What's your job now at Stanford University?

I serve as assistant athletic director for communications and media relations for Stanford's 35-sport athletic program. I work closely with football and oversee all publicity aspects of the other programs. My timing has been impeccable. After going 5-7 my first year in 2008, we have been on quite a run for the last three seasons.

· Will you be watching Oscar-night and rooting for "Moneyball"?

Absolutely. Both the movie and Brad Pitt are worthy of their nominations but I think this is George Clooney's year.