

A's News Clips, Friday, March 16, 2012

Oakland A's: Kurt Suzuki packs on weight by eating -- a lot

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Kurt Suzuki followed an offseason regimen that would make Jenny Craig cringe.

He ate nonstop.

The goal was to pack on weight, and the A's catcher found that maintaining a 4,000-calorie-a-day diet wasn't easy.

"There were times I went, 'God dang it, I can't eat anymore,'" Suzuki said. "You just gotta throw it down. It's tough, but I think it's worth it."

Suzuki put on about 15 pounds over the winter and reported to camp weighing 205. The hope is that some added bulk means more strength and decreases the chances of Suzuki wearing down over a long season.

"I know for a lot of catchers, guys that are slimmer guys like him, you're going to lose weight during the season," said A's manager Bob Melvin, a former catcher himself. "I think he felt maybe not as strong (last season) as in the past."

Suzuki has started 516 games at catcher over the past four years, most in the majors. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that his offensive production has dropped over the past two seasons.

His batting average dipped from .274 in 2009 to .242 in 2010 to .237 last season. He had 88 RBIs in 2009 but over the past two seasons has dropped to 71 and 44, respectively, though his homer totals have stayed consistent.

A's general manager Billy Beane approached him last season about adding weight.

"We kind of sat down and talked, and he said, 'Hey, you need to stop looking like my shortstop,'" Suzuki said. So the catcher began the anti-diet.

He met with A's strength and conditioning coach Mike Henriques, who hooked him up with Sunfare, a home-delivery meal service that left a daily allotment of food on Suzuki's doorstep every morning during the winter.

On a typical day, Suzuki would wake up at 7 a.m. and eat a "good-sized breakfast." He would have a protein bar at 10 a.m., work out for 2 1/2 hours and then drink a protein shake.

Lunch was served just 30 minutes later.

"You know, a couple burgers, some sweet potato fries, a salad, some fruit," Suzuki said.

Two hours later he might snack on a turkey-and-cheese sandwich.

A typical dinner featured a salad, eight ounces of filet mignon, rice or potatoes and some vegetables.

"And right before bed, I'd have some cheese or fruit, or fruit and some deli meat," Suzuki said.

Overindulgence? Hardly, according to Henriques.

"If you look at him, he looks a lot stronger," Henriques said. "I mean, he's not sloppy. That's because he put the right foods in his body. He's a good example of what guys should be doing."

The key is whether Suzuki can maintain his weight throughout the season, when he easily sheds pounds through perspiration.

"It's just making better choices in the clubhouse," Henriques said. "If he stays in his routine, nothing should change."

Suzuki has worked diligently with new hitting coach Chili Davis in hopes of rebounding offensively. But his most important task is helping to nurture the new crop of young pitchers the A's acquired in offseason trades, several of whom could play key roles.

Left-hander Tom Milone, obtained from Washington in the Gio Gonzalez trade, said Suzuki excels at familiarizing himself with a pitcher quickly.

"He's got a great personality," Milone said. "It makes it more comfortable for a pitcher. I think he's trying to build that relationship before the games start."

☐ Second baseman Jemile Weeks homered from both sides of the plate in an 11-7 victory over the Texas Rangers. Shortstop Cliff Pennington went 4 for 4 with two RBIs and is hitting .464 (13 for 28) this spring to lead A's regulars.

Weeks is hitting .419 (13 for 31). Upon returning to the dugout after his second homer, he got a message from hitting coach Chili Davis, himself a switch hitter.

"He says, 'You know who had the lead for switch-hit homers in a game before (Mark) Teixeira? It was me,'" Weeks said.

Indeed, Davis homered from both sides of the plate 11 times, tied with Eddie Murray for the all-time lead before Teixeira broke the mark last season.

☐ Bartolo Colon was scratched from Thursday's start because of a blister on the middle finger of his throwing hand. He'll pitch Friday, either in a night game against Seattle or a simulated game, and will likely make his final spring start Wednesday. He's slated to pitch the second game of the regular season March 29 against the Mariners in Tokyo.

Brad Peacock struggled in his place Thursday and surely lost ground in his bid for the starting rotation, allowing five runs and three walks in 2 1/3 innings.

☐ The A's rallied from a run down with two outs in the top of the ninth to win their sixth straight. Catcher Derek Norris hit a grand slam off Derek Hankins to break a 7-7 tie.

A's push Bartolo Colon's start back a day because of blister

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

A's pitcher Bartolo Colon was scratched from Thursday's start against the Texas Rangers because of a blister on the middle finger of his throwing hand.

It's not considered serious, and manager Bob Melvin indicated that Colon will pitch Friday, either in a Cactus League night game against the Seattle Mariners or perhaps a simulated game.

The tentative plan would have Colon making his final spring start March 21 against the Kansas City Royals. He's scheduled to pitch the A's second regular-season game March 29 against the Mariners in Tokyo.

In other news, Melvin said Daric Barton would play first base for the first time this spring on Saturday's split-squad day, either against the Giants in Scottsdale or the Chicago Cubs in Phoenix.

Barton has been slowed as he recovers from surgery on his throwing shoulder. He made his spring debut Monday at designated hitter and is serving as DH again Thursday.

Melvin hasn't ruled Barton out of the running for the first base job, but considering the team he has missed, it's possible he begins the season in extended spring training.

Weeks homers from each side of plate as A's win

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Surprise, Ariz. -- When **Jemile Weeks** homered from the left side of the plate Thursday, three innings after homering from the right side, he was greeted in the dugout by hitting coach **Chili Davis**.

"You know who had the lead in switch-hit homers in the same game before (**Mark**) **Teixeira**?" Davis asked. "It was me."

Teixeira has done it 12 times, Davis and **Eddie Murray** did it 11 times. Weeks said he does not believe that he had ever done it, at any level.

"It's a testament to the approach I have right now," Weeks said. "I'm still working on some things, but I've been able to power up some balls here. I know that will be surprising to everyone here."

The second baseman also added a single and a walk, he's 7 for his past 13, and he is batting .419 overall.

Cliff Pennington, batting second behind Weeks, was 4-for-4, and he is batting .464.

"He's been on all spring training," Weeks said. "I believe that will carry on throughout the year for him."

The A's trailed 7-6 going into the ninth, but first baseman **Brad Hawpe**'s two-out error on a grounder by **Daric Barton** allowed the tying run to score, and then catcher **Derek Norris**, obtained from the Nationals in the **Gio Gonzalez** trade, hit a grand slam for an 11-7 victory.

The A's have won six in a row and are 10-3-1, their best spring record after 14 games since 2000.

"It means a lot to me," manager **Bob Melvin** said. "We have a lot of new guys, and winning is important; it doesn't matter if it's an intrasquad game or a spring-training game. That's the kind of culture we're trying to create."

Colon scratched: A blister on **Bartolo Colon**'s right middle finger kept him out of his scheduled start against Texas as a precautionary measure, according to Melvin.

Melvin said that Colon either will work in a simulated game today or will start tonight against Seattle. Colon will start Wednesday against the Royals, and he remains on track to start against Seattle on March 29 in Tokyo.

Barton to play first: Barton will play first base for the first time this spring Saturday. Barton, the A's starting first baseman much of the past three seasons, had shoulder surgery last summer.

Because of his limited action this spring, Barton is likely to remain in Arizona for extended spring training when the A's leave for Japan.

Briefly: Reliever **Joey Devine** has not appeared in a game in the past week because of biceps soreness, Melvin confirmed. ... Right-hander **Hisashi Iwakuma**, whom the A's were unable to sign after winning the bidding for his rights in 2010, will start for Seattle tonight. Infielder **Brandon Hicks**, picked up on waivers from the Braves Tuesday, was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento as expected. ... **Brandon McCarthy** threw five innings in the A's Triple-A game, giving up two runs on five hits while striking out six and walking none.

A's 11, Rangers 7

Notable: Catcher **Derek Norris'** two-out grand slam in the ninth gave Oakland the victory. ... Jemile Weeks homered from each side of the plate. ... Outfielder **Yoenis Céspedes** singled up the middle in the first and went hitless in his other three at-bats. ... Starting pitcher **Brad Peacock** allowed three runs in the first - walking two with two outs didn't help - and gave up two more in the third. His ERA stands at 12.86 for the spring. ... Catcher **Anthony Recker** hit his first homer of the spring.

Quotable: "Weeksie made that out his last time up so I had to pull them both out."

- Manager **Bob Melvin** on Weeks and **Cliff Pennington**, batting 1-2, combining to reach base in eight out of nine plate appearances Thursday.

Tonight's game: Seattle (**Hisashi Iwakuma**) at A's (**Graham Godfrey**), 7:05 p.m. Radio: 95.7 FM.

Drumbeat: Jemile Weeks bangs homers from both sides of plate

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Surprise Stadium 3/15/2/12, 5:08pm

Jemile Weeks knocked homers from both sides of the plate today, the first batting right-handed in the first inning of the A's 11-7 victory and the second hitting left-handed in the fourth.

After that second blast, hitting coach Chili Davis greeted Weeks by saying, "You know who had the lead in switch-hit homers in the same game before (Mark) Teixeira? It was me."

Teixeira has done it 12 times, Davis and Eddie Murray did it 11 times. Weeks said he does not believe he ever has homered from both sides of the plate in the same game, at any level.

"It's a testament to the approach I have right now," Weeks said. "I'm still working on some things, but I've been able to power up some balls here. I know that will be surprising to everyone here."

Weeks also added a single and a walk, he's 7 for his past 13, and he is batting .419 overall.

Cliff Pennington, batting second behind Weeks, was 4-for-4. Between them, they reached base safely in eight total plate appearances before Weeks struck out in the eighth.

"Weeksie made that out his last time up so I had to pull them both out," manager Bob Melvin joked.

Pennington is batting .464 overall.

"He's been on all spring training," Weeks said. "I believe that will carry on throughout the year for him."

Yoenis Céspedes, the most closely watched A's player this spring, ripped a single up the middle in his first at-bat and then was 0 for his next three with a strikeout.

Brad Peacock started for the A's because Bartolo Colon was scratched with a blister on his right middle finger, and Peacock allowed three runs in the first inning, walking two men with two outs and allowing a two-out, two-strike double to Nelson Cruz that accounted for all three runs.

Peacock settled down in the second with a 1-2-3 inning, but he allowed three more hits, another walk and two runs in the third inning.

"I can't walk guys," he said. "I put myself in a jam. I have to go right after hitters."

Peacock has faced some tough lineups, particularly today at Surprise, and Melvin said he likes Peacock's stuff.

It's possible, though, that Peacock is slipping in the hunt for the final rotation spot. He has an ERA of 12.86 and it's likely the team will want to send the right-hander to Triple-A Sacramento initially anyway, considering his limited (three games, two starts) experience in the big leagues. Tommy Milone is the more probable of those obtained in the Gio Gonzalez deal to earn a spot in the rotation out of camp.

The A's trailed today's game 7-6 going into the ninth, but Brad Hawpe's two-out error on a grounder by Daric Barton allowed the tying run to score, and then Derek Norris, also obtained in the Gonzalez trade, hit a grand slam.

The A's have won six in a row, and they are 10-3-1, their best spring record after 14 games since 2000. They're tied for the top record in the Cactus League with the Mariners, who play the Giants tonight.

Drumbeat: Bartolo Colon scratched today; Barton to play first on Saturday

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni, 3/15/2012, 10:11am

Bartolo Colon was scratched from his start against Texas today with a blister on his right middle finger; manager Bob Melvin said that Colon either will work in a simulated game tomorrow or start tomorrow night's game against the Mariners.

This was a precautionary thing, Melvin said; the A's build extra days into their starters' throwing schedules for just such events. Colon remains on track to pitch the second game against Seattle in Tokyo.

Melvin said that Daric Barton will get his first start of the spring at first base in one of Saturday's split-squad games. It's going to be tough for Barton to win the first-base job, with under a week to go before the team leaves for Japan, and it probably will make more sense for Barton to stay at extended spring training with Dallas Braden, who also is coming back from shoulder surgery.

Manny Ramirez also is likely to stay at extended spring, because he cannot play in the first 50 regular-season games, and it's possible that if the team settles on a fifth starter other than Braden (if Braden is not deemed to be on track for April 16) that that pitcher also will stay behind and get in regular work. The team can use four starters the first two weeks of April because of offdays.

With Barton so limited this spring – he had a setback with some shoulder and biceps soreness – and with Chris Carter receiving fewer at-bats than Brandon Allen and Kila Ka'aihue, it's pretty evident that that first-base battle is down to Allen and Ka'aihue. I think the A's have Carter pegged as more of a DH-type, anyway, and with Seth Smith and Jonny Gomes on the big-league roster and Ramirez eligible to play at the end of May, Carter might not be needed to DH on the big-league level. Plus, unlike Allen and Ka'aihue, Carter has options left. So, too, does Barton. Allen and Ka'aihue – out of options.

Weeks, Pennington put on a spring hitting clinic

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- Four runs. Seven hits. Two walks. Four RBIs.

That could be a combined line for Oakland's starting nine on a few occasions this year, but on Thursday, in a spring contest against the Rangers at Surprise Stadium, it merely represented the damage done by just two players.

It made for quite the day for the middle-infield duo of Jemile Weeks and Cliff Pennington, who together accounted for half of the A's hit total in an 11-7 win -- the club's sixth straight victory -- over division-foe Texas.

"Yeah, good day for them," manager Bob Melvin said grinning.

Weeks now has three home runs in Cactus League play, surpassing the two he posted in 97 games with the A's last year. Making Thursday's rare feat for the gritty 5-foot-9 second baseman all the more impressive was the fact each home run came from both sides of the plate.

Facing Texas left-handed prospect Martin Perez from the right side to lead off the game, Weeks sent one over the left-field wall. Just three innings later, having already added a base hit to his day, he stood on the left side of the plate and launched righty Neil Ramirez's pitch to right-center.

"That's one of the coolest things you can do, I think," Pennington said. "Show up from both sides, that's pretty awesome."

Weeks couldn't recall ever doing it before, and he realized that it may be the last time he does it. Either way, he has plenty work to do if he wants to catch up to A's hitting coach Chili Davis, who accomplished the feat 11 times in his 19-year professional career -- a record, previously shared with Eddie Murray, that has since been broken by Mark Teixeira, who has done it 12 times.

Davis, of course, kindly relayed such numbers to Weeks, who is batting .419 this spring.

"I think it's a testament to my approach I have right now," Weeks said. "I'm still working on some things, but I've been able in the past to power up here and there."

"He stays within himself," Melvin said, "and he's got a little juice."

Pennington, meanwhile, tallied a pair of doubles and reached base in each of his five plate appearances, furthering quite the productive spring for the A's shortstop. He's batting .464 through nine games, but on Thursday, he downplayed his performance, given the nature of spring contests.

Weeks, though, wasn't afraid to pass along some praise for his fellow switch-hitting teammate, with whom he's essentially been joined at the hip while working with Davis.

"He's been doing it all spring," Weeks said. "I really believe it's going to carry on throughout the year for him."

The leadoff hitter's presence should only help Pennington, who figures to constantly be paired with Weeks this season, whether in the nine- or two-hole.

"He's a game-changing type of player," Pennington said. "So whenever you're close to him, it opens things up for both of you."

"We got some hits today, and anytime two guys in the lineup have good days together, that usually means good things for the team. It's always fun."

Un-Devine intervention: A's reliever sidelined

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- A's reliever Joey Devine has been sidelined for a week while dealing with right biceps soreness, manager Bob Melvin confirmed to MLB.com on Thursday.

Devine last pitched on March 8 against the Dodgers and struggled with command, walking three and surrendering four runs in just two-thirds of an inning, following scoreless outings in each of his previous two spring appearances.

According to pitching coach Curt Young, Devine threw from 100 feet on Thursday and also tossed 15 pitches from flat ground, coming out of the day feeling healthy. However, there is still no timeline for his return to games, and the oft-injured reliever's most recent setback could affect where he begins the season.

Coming into camp, it appeared injury would be the only thing preventing the 28-year-old, out of options, from landing on the Opening Day roster. Just how many more days Devine misses will determine his readiness for the season, and considering he's compiled just 2 2/3 innings this spring, the A's may decide it best to keep him in extended spring should that time be lengthy.

Back spasms interrupted Devine's season last year, his first full season since 2008 after missing the previous two while rehabbing from Tommy John surgery.

The A's, already counting on bullpen arms Brian Fuentes, Grant Balfour and Fautino De Los Santos, have several options for the other spots, including right-handers Ryan Cook, Andrew Carignan and Travis Schlichting and southpaws Jerry Blevins and Jordan Norberto, among others.

Colon scratched from his start vs. Texas

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- A's right-hander Bartolo Colon was scratched from his Thursday start against the Rangers because of a bothersome blister on his middle finger.

Manager Bob Melvin said the decision to rest him was more precaution than anything, and he expects Colon to either pitch in Friday's evening contest against the Mariners or in a simulated game that would offer him a chance to pitch in a controlled environment.

Colon is still on track to start Wednesday, putting him in line to make his scheduled start a week later in Japan for the second of two regular-season games against Seattle. In two starts this spring, the 38-year-old veteran has allowed four runs with five strikeouts and no walks spanning 6 2/3 innings.

In place of Colon, the A's slotted in righty Brad Peacock to start Thursday's road affair with the Rangers, while Brandon McCarthy stayed behind to pitch in a Minor League game at Papago Park.

Blevins feels his road will be a lot simpler

SURPRISE, Ariz. -- Jerry Blevins easily racked up more miles than any other A's player last year, a feat he's not necessarily looking to repeat this season.

That'll be hard to do, considering he's out of options. But that wasn't the case in 2011, when he traveled between Oakland and Triple-A Sacramento a half-dozen times. It surely didn't make for the easiest of seasons for the left-handed reliever, but in looking back, Blevins said it was a test.

"It really was a test, almost," Blevins said. "I thought if I can get through this and handle it and smile on my way to the park every day when I get sent down and was genuinely excited every time I was called back up, I can view every time as the first time. You don't ever want to be a bitter teammate in Triple-A, because you're not where you should be. You want to show them you can have fun no matter where you are, and I did that."

Blevins is having plenty fun this spring, for many reasons. His offseason wasn't defined by rehab, as it had been in recent years, and he's put himself in a good position to break camp as the second lefty in manager Bob Melvin's bullpen. He's also enjoying pitching under a coaching staff that he knows will be much more vocal about his role -- something he didn't have at all times last season.

"Early on in the year, I figured that was going to be my role, going back and forth like I did," he said. "It was never verbally relayed to be me, but I figured it out on my own."

It made for a strange season, as Blevins tossed 28 1/3 innings for the A's and 29 2/3 innings for the River Cats, yielding different results in each venue. Command plagued him in the Majors, where he walked 14, but still managed a 2.86 ERA. In Sacramento, he walked just seven next to 35 strikeouts, but posted a 4.85 ERA.

Blevins' lengthy season was followed by a rather short offseason, as he began throwing extensively in November. His workload hadn't been so heavy since 2006, when he participated in winter ball. Not coincidentally, he believes, the lefty put together his best season statistically the following year.

"I feel stronger than ever before, and my arm feels great," he said. "Coming in, I wanted to basically be as healthy as I could and as prepared as I could. I wanted to be at 100 percent by Opening Day, because I've been a slow starter in the past. I feel like I'm there."

That work has Blevins primed for a spot on the team's trip to Japan, unlike four years ago.

"I was so sad in 2008 when I didn't go," he said. "I was literally the last guy they told wasn't going, so I'm really looking forward to it this time. I'm excited to see their take on baseball."

Worth noting

- Daric Barton, who has been restricted to designated-hitter duties as he rehabs his surgically repaired right shoulder, could potentially play first base for the first time this spring in one of Saturday's split-squad games, manager Bob Melvin said. Barton is still considered a possibility for the Opening Day roster, despite being delayed in camp.
- Infielder Brandon Hicks, whom the A's claimed off waivers from the Braves on Tuesday, has been optioned to Triple-A Sacramento.
- Time is running out for right-hander Brad Peacock to make his case for one of three open rotation spots, and Thursday's shaky performance didn't help those chances. He allowed five runs on five hits and three walks in just 2 1/3 innings against the potent Rangers, upping his spring ERA to 12.86.

A noticeably frustrated Peacock said he felt fine, but he was simply missing spots, forcing him to fall behind in one too many counts.

"He's going through a tough stretch," Melvin said. "He hasn't had the greatest draws in the world, but he's going to have to face them at some point in time. We still feel really good about him. The results aren't what he wants to see right now, but his stuff is still good."

- Outfielder Yoenis Cespedes hit a sharp single up the middle in his first at-bat Thursday, but went hitless in his other three times to the plate. He is now 3-for-12 in four games and will get the day off Friday.
- Right-hander Brandon McCarthy, pitching in a Minor League game Thursday, allowed two runs on five hits while fanning six and walking none in five innings. He threw 73 pitches and is scheduled for one more spring start before starting the A's regular-season opener on March 28 in Tokyo.

MLB players compete in NCAA bracketology

Reps from each team will vie for March Madness bragging rights

By Mark Newman / MLB.com

David Freese faced Matt Harrison in the final contest of last season, Game 7 of the World Series, and now they are competing again in regard to another big sports championship.

B.J. Upton is determined to fare better than brother Justin, and he had the good sense to keep Rays teammate David Price happy by picking his alma mater to reach the Sweet 16.

Jason Giambi and Troy Tulowitzki are a Rockies tag team, the former relying on what he calls the latter's uncanny ability to pick winners in college basketball.

Go to any Spring Training clubhouse and you'll find March Madness mixed in with Major League Baseball. Filling out a bracket for the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament is a traditional rite of spring, and for the first time, MLB.com has invited players from all 30 clubs to fill out theirs and partake in a friendly competition.

Bragging rights are on the line. We'll be showing you the players' bracket entries and tracking their progress throughout the Big Dance on the road to New Orleans.

BIG LEAGUE BRACKET CHALLENGE

MLB.com has invited a player from each club to fill out an NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament bracket. Their picks can be followed through the April 2 title game in New Orleans.

TEAM	PLAYER
Angels	LaTroy Hawkins

MLB.com has invited a player from each club to fill out an NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament bracket. Their picks can be followed through the April 2 title game in New Orleans.

TEAM	PLAYER
Astros	<u>Chris Johnson</u>
Athletics	<u>Cliff Pennington</u>
Blue Jays	<u>Casey Janssen</u>
Braves	<u>Brian McCann</u>
Brewers	<u>Chris Narveson</u>
Cardinals	<u>David Freese</u>
Cubs	<u>Bryan LaHair</u>
D-backs	<u>Justin Upton</u>
Dodgers	<u>Tony Gwynn Jr.</u>
Giants	<u>Emmanuel Burriss</u>
Indians	<u>Frank Herrmann</u>
Mariners	<u>Shawn Kelley</u>
Marlins	<u>Logan Morrison</u>
Mets	<u>Jon Niese</u>
Nationals	<u>Ryan Zimmerman</u>
Padres	<u>Cory Luebke</u>
Phillies	<u>Brian Schneider</u>
Pirates	<u>Nate McLouth</u>
Rangers	<u>Matt Harrison</u>
Rays	<u>B.J. Upton</u>
Reds	<u>Todd Frazier</u>
Red Sox	<u>Andrew Miller</u>
Rockies	<u>Jason Giambi</u> <u>and Troy Tulowitzki</u>

MLB.com has invited a player from each club to fill out an NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament bracket. Their picks can be followed through the April 2 title game in New Orleans.

TEAM	PLAYER
Royals	<u>Billy Butler</u>
Tigers	<u>Max Scherzer</u>
Twins	<u>Glen Perkins</u>
White Sox	<u>Matt Thornton</u>
Yankees	<u>Curtis Granderson</u>

"I do the brackets [each year]. I guess this one's a little more important this year," Harrison said. "I'm looking forward to doing them. ... I didn't really expect to be the one chosen for this, but I'll put everything I have into it and see if I can do a good job."

Last Oct. 28 at Busch Stadium, Harrison started for the Rangers in the decisive game of an epic World Series. Freese hit a two-run double off him in the first inning, and the Cardinals went on to win the championship. Now that the two players are representing their respective teams with their brackets, the obvious question is which moment carries more pressure?

"Probably this bracket," Harrison told MLB.com Rangers multimedia correspondent Emily Jones, with the kind of matter-of-fact intensity shared by millions of others. "I need to do my homework and make sure I read up on these guys and make sure I pick the right teams and pick the right upsets."

Make no mistake, this is serious stuff. At Spring Training, hitters take their hacks in the cage and in exhibitions, pitchers work up pitch counts, doing what it takes to prepare for Opening Day ... and in the process, they also talk for weeks about college basketball. Games are always on clubhouse TVs. It is an Arizona and Florida fact of life.

Kentucky (32-2), which opened Thursday in the South region as the tournament's top overall seed, is easily the most popular choice among players. The Wildcats are picked to win it all on 14 brackets, followed by North Carolina on six, Missouri on five, Ohio State on two and Kansas and Syracuse on one apiece. The other No. 1 seeds are Michigan State (West), Syracuse (East) and North Carolina (Midwest).

"Kentucky has been a powerhouse all season long," White Sox reliever Matt Thornton said. "A lot of times, those teams get upset, whether it's in the Sweet 16 or Elite 8 or something like that. They have a great team. They are unbelievably athletic and a fun team to watch. So, obviously, I'm kind of going with a stronger team right there. I like to pick upsets sometimes, but I didn't feel like anyone was going to knock them off."

"They made it look easy this year," Tulowitzki said after picking UK to go all the way. "I know they lost their conference championship, but I don't think they were even trying. To only lose one game in a college season is tremendous, and they have some NBA-type players. They have the No. 1 [seed], and they are definitely the team to beat."

Veteran Angels reliever LaTroy Hawkins is from Indiana, and he grew up an Indiana and Purdue fan. Both schools are in the tournament. But his godson is Elijah Johnson, a guard for Kansas, so Hawkins is a big Jayhawks fan now. Hawkins watched on Sunday as Kansas (27-6) was seeded No. 2 in the Midwest Region, matched against No. 15 Detroit (22-13) in the first round.

"I don't know, man. They've been playing well lately," Hawkins said of the Jayhawks. "If they continue to play the way they've been playing, they have a great chance to win a national championship. It's a good team. They play well, play together."

Hawkins was talking in the Angels' clubhouse, and he was hoping that teammate and Kentucky alum Scott Downs would hear him when he said playfully: "We just need [center Jeff] Withey to be healthy. We need him, because their biggest competition is Kentucky and I think they can beat Kentucky."

Interestingly enough, the bracket reps for both teams in the Washington-Baltimore market went to the University of Virginia: Ryan Zimmerman of the Nationals and Mark Reynolds of the Orioles. They probably did not share in agonizing over the matchup between the seventh-seeded Florida Gators (23-10) and the No. 10 Cavaliers (22-9), who are trying to reach a Final Four for the first time in nearly three decades.

"It's hard to go against Kentucky, I think," Zimmerman said. "It's not really a sleeper pick, but Michigan State is really playing pretty good. I like those two teams and Virginia, of course."

"I like Michigan State, because they have a good coach and play good defense. It seems like every year, nobody really talks about them and then they are in the Final Four. They are very well-coached, they know what to do, they never panic. They have guys who have been there."

North Carolina is the overall choice of B.J. Upton, the Rays center fielder, who put all four No. 1 seeds into his predicted Final Four. When asked if he is going to leave other bracket reps in his dust, Upton said: "Absolutely. Especially my brother."

Watching the [video](#) of B.J. completing his bracket, two things were apparent. One, he is just like so many other fans who are doing this with passion. Two, he found the regional openers to be, by and large, easy to select, but grimaced once or twice -- especially when he had to consider the early matchup between 15th-seeded Norfolk State (25-9) and No. 2 seed Missouri (30-4).

"I want to support Norfolk State; my whole family graduated from there, but they don't stand a shot," Upton said.

He has Vanderbilt -- fresh off its Sunday upset of Kentucky for the SEC Tournament championship -- beating Wisconsin to reach the Sweet 16. That one is a favor to a certain starting pitcher and Vandy alum he needs to keep happy in the clubhouse.

"Vandy's going to have to play better defense," Upton said. "I think the overall better team is Wisconsin, but since I love Price, I'm gonna go with Vandy."

If Upton ultimately sees North Carolina winning it all, then consider how difficult it is for Harrison to contemplate the same. Harrison was born in Durham, N.C., in 1985, and he came into a world of Duke basketball, where Carolina is the unquestioned enemy. Mike Krzyzewski coached the Blue Devils to the Final Four in 1986, starting an era of success that has been unmatched in Division I men's basketball.

"I just grew up a Duke fan," Harrison said. "The whole side of my family is Duke fans. Unfortunately, my wife [Meghan] is a [North] Carolina fan. That's the only flaw she has, but it's a pretty bad one. We can deal with it. It's always pretty fun when we're watching the rivalry games. I hate to even say Carolina's name, but that's the way it goes."

Duke (27-6) is seeded No. 2 in the South, opening Friday against Lehigh in nearby Greensboro, N.C. In other years, it might be an obvious choice for Harrison to pencil or type Duke into the championship game, but not this time.

"They're my team, but I know that unless they're hitting three-pointers, they're not going to go very far," Harrison said. "I'll give them two rounds, but they're definitely not going to be in the Final Four for me. Unfortunately, I have to say that Carolina is going to go farther than them. I'm not sure who I'll have winning it, but I'm sure Carolina, Kentucky, Syracuse, Ohio State and those teams are probably going to be in my Final Four."

Now the fun is about to begin. Red Sox pitcher Andrew Miller will put his faith in the same North Carolina school that he and teammate Daniel Bard led to the final of the College World Series. Ohio State? Don't even get Padres pitcher Cory Luebke started. He went there and will be following a bracket with both head and heart.

"Overall, it's just fun to fill out the brackets," said Tulowitzki, who agreed to pick a Long Beach State upset of New Mexico in its South opener as a nod to the school both he and Giambi attended. "Get a group of guys together, compare the brackets. Then we're playing for bragging rights as well, so that's always a cool thing about it."

A's spring training: Weeks homers from both sides

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SURPRISE, Ariz. — Oakland manager Bob Melvin wasn't surprised by Jemile Weeks' power display.

Weeks homered from both sides of the plate, Cliff Pennington added four hits and Derek Norris capped a five-run ninth inning with a grand slam in the Oakland Athletics' 11-7 victory over the Texas Rangers.

"He stays within himself and he's got a little juice," Melvin said. "In certain counts, if you get the ball a little up he can take the ball out of the park."

Weeks was surprised by how he hit the two homers.

"Off the top of my head, I'd have to say it's the first time," said Weeks said of homering from both sides of the plate. "It's definitely tough to do, not to say even getting an at bat from the other side."

He homered from the right side leading off the game against Martin Perez and then homered from the left in the fourth off Neil Ramirez.

"It's a testament to my approach right now," said Weeks, who hit two home runs in 97 games and 406 at-bats last season. "I've been able in the past to power up on some balls out there, which might be surprising to everyone here."

Weeks also flashed his speed, reaching on an infield single in the second, before walking and striking out in his final two plate appearances.

Oakland trailed 7-6 entering the ninth but tied the game on an error before Norris' grand slam gave the Athletics their 10th win in 14 games.

"Winning's important," Melvin said. "I don't care if it's spring training, an intrasquad game or whatever. Winning matters. That's the environment we're trying to create here."

Both starting pitchers struggled. Oakland's Brad Peacock lasted only 2½ innings, giving up five runs on five hits and three walks with one strikeout and needing 61 pitches to get eight outs.

Perez went two innings, giving up two runs on five hits and a pair of walks. The left-hander struck out three.

Oakland A's take 1972 World Series trophy on road

Thomas Neumann, espn.com page 2

Obviously, championships are precious in sports.

Some fans go their entire lives without seeing their favorite team win one.

So maybe it's not so crazy, as the Oakland A's celebrate the 40th anniversary of their first championship in the Bay Area, that the 1972 World Series trophy wasn't simply packed in the cargo bay during its flight from Northern California to Phoenix on Thursday. Nope, it got a seat all to itself.

The trophy was brought to Arizona to be displayed at Saturday afternoon's A's-Cubs exhibition game at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, one of the first events the team has planned to mark the anniversary. The trophy usually resides in the lobby of the club's business offices, alongside its siblings from 1973, '74 and '89.

Meantime, in homage to the mustachioed stars of the '72 team, the A's are also encouraging fans to submit pictures of themselves sporting mustaches -- real or fake -- to participate in the team's "Mustache Madness" bracket. The winner gets to go on the field prior to the A's game against the Indians on April 21 and will receive an autographed version of that night's promotional giveaway, a Rollie Fingers bobblehead.

Perhaps best of all, the A's offer one of the most amazing ticket specials in all of sports -- \$2 tickets for every Wednesday home game.

Albert Chen > INSIDE BASEBALL

Sports Illustrated

The early word on Yoenis Cespedes is in. "He's the real deal," says a scout who has seen him this spring. "Very mature approach. Very professional. And he can hit. He's the best hitter on the A's right now. Oakland made a great gamble."

Says an executive on a rival American League team, "Impressive. We liked him, too. It's early, the jury's still out, but it's pretty clear he has the tools to be an impact guy -- with the bat and with the glove."

Oakland's \$36 million mystery man took the field for the first time on the morning of March 4, at the A's complex in Phoenix. He stepped up to the plate for his first B.P. session as A's hitting coach Chili Davis looked on. Cespedes' childhood idol, Manny Ramirez, was standing nearby. After Cespedes took his first cuts, Ramirez walked over to the 26-year-old and leaned in with a few words of advice. For the rest of the workout, the unlikely pair was inseparable. "Like two little puppies -- everywhere Manny was, Cespedes was," says a scout.

The A's won't be a playoff contender in 2012, not with the powerhouse Angels and Rangers in the same division. But at least they'll be interesting. Cespedes will be one of the most intriguing players in baseball this season -- and he may very well turn out to be the bargain of the winter. The A's, of course, don't know yet what kind of player Cespedes will be, but they scoff at the notion that the signing that stunned the baseball world was a big gamble. "I know that because the average fan doesn't have the access to Cuban players, it seems that this guy is a little more mysterious than most guys," says A's assistant GM David Forst. "We had a lot of information on him. Teams have had information on Cespedes for years. We'd done a lot of background work, spent years watching this guy play in international competition. It was one that was very calculated based on both subjective and objective data we've had over the years."

Adds Forst, "There's this idea out there that this was a four-year major league contract just kind of on a lark, when the reality is that we had a lot of information and a lot of background on this guy -- there is some amount of objective analysis you can do now on Cuban players based on their performances. And this guy is a pretty special physical specimen."

Every day in A's camp, there are more and more believers. Cespedes homered off Cincinnati's Jeff Francis in his first spring training game, but what he did in his first plate appearance was just as impressive: He didn't take a single swing as he drew a six-pitch walk off Edison Volquez. "I thought that for as long as he was away from spring training, it'd be a challenge for him to make the team, especially with them starting early in Japan," says the scout. "But after watching his approach, and watching him swing the bat, and how desperate they need someone like him in the lineup, I don't see any reason why he shouldn't break in with the team. I think he has to."

Here's the latest on four other AL players who are under the microscope this spring:

Phil Hughes

A word from Brian Cashman: Believe all the "Phil Hughes is In the Best Shape Of His Life" stories. "He looks great," says the Yankees GM. "He wound up doing what he did two years ago -- going to Athletes Performance in Arizona and working his butt off." Cashman says that last offseason Hughes "didn't do as much work. When you go 18-8 [as he did in 2010], sometimes when you're young you take a step back and rest on your laurels. Maybe that happened. He's got great strength now. He's in great shape. I know when he's healthy he's capable of big things. Let's remember, he's still just 25."

Carl Crawford

What will the Red Sox get from Crawford this year? The wrist injury is troubling -- "Because you use that joint every time you swing, it's not uncommon at all to have little flareups down the road," says Red Sox G.M. Ben Cherington --- but the Red Sox are very encouraged that the left fielder is in a far better place mentally than he was a year ago. "Everything else, with how he feels about himself and being a part of the clubhouse, we've been really impressed so far this spring," says Cherington. "In talking to Carl [this offseason], last year was a big adjustment. He had only known one organization and it was a pretty unique one, with the cocoon that can exist there in Tampa. Boston's a different ball of wax, and he's going to be much more prepared this year. He put too much pressure on himself. I just don't believe that's going to carry over for the long term."

Justin Morneau

It's no secret Minnesota's fortunes rest with the M&M Boys, Joe Mauer and Morneau, who missed a combined 194 days last year. Mauer has looked like the Mauer of old in camp -- the Twins should be much more concerned about Morneau, whose recovery from concussion symptoms continue. The signs this spring have not been good, says a scout: The first baseman has struggled at the plate and has had trouble pulling the ball. "I just don't think he's ever going to be the same player," says the scout.

B.J. Upton

"It seems that every year we say this about B.J. -- but I think this is the year that he's going to put it all together," a scout says of Tampa's perennially underachieving center fielder. This spring there are signs that Upton's hot September from last year will carry over. "[In September] he wasn't swinging and missing as much with stuff on the outside of the plate," the scout says. "He's driving the ball well this spring. Maybe it's the extra motivation of the contract year." Upton's future in Tampa will be a big topic all season long --- the 27-year-old will be a free agent after this season