

A's News Clips, Sunday, March 25, 2012

With opening day nearing, Oakland Athletics' Yoenis Cespedes starting to feel more comfortable

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Yoenis Cespedes has yet to play a regular-season game for the A's, but he knows how to put on a show in batting practice.

The Cuban center fielder sent numerous balls sailing deep over the fence during the A's first workout at the Tokyo Dome on Saturday, including two that landed several rows behind the center field wall. His display drew noticeable reaction from the crowd of onlookers.

A's manager Bob Melvin, who was pitching, said he looks forward to seeing Cespedes in a game that counts.

"Each and every day he gets more confident and more comfortable," Melvin said. "I think it has a lot to do with not only how he feels on the field, but off of it."

The curiosity surrounding Cespedes has taken many forms since he signed with the A's in spring training.

Can he live up to the hype that followed him from Cuba? What outfield position will he settle at? And how will he adjust to life in the United States?

The answers to some of those questions start coming Wednesday when the A's open their regular season against the Seattle Mariners at the Tokyo Dome, and Cespedes plays in his first official major league game.

If A's fans eagerly await the moment, rest assured that Cespedes does too.

"I'm happy that I'm one step away from my dream coming true," he said Saturday through interpreter Ariel Prieto.

The biggest question, ultimately, is what impact he has on an A's lineup that scored the third-fewest runs in the American League last season and hit the third-fewest home runs.

After defecting from Cuba last summer and establishing residence in the Dominican Republic, Cespedes signed a four-year \$36 million deal with the A's on March 3.

His adjustment has not only been baseball-related, but culture-related as he transitions to a new country while knowing very limited English.

But general manager Billy Beane said he's noticed Cespedes has improved his grasp of the language. Cespedes is also noticeably more comfortable addressing reporters than he was upon his arrival, even sprinkling in the occasional English phrase.

"Yoenis is picking it up quickly," Beane said. "I was talking to him on the field, amazed at how far he's come in just a couple weeks."

Second baseman Jemile Weeks said Cespedes' production "for us is a big deal. We want him to go out there and have success. We want him to go out and get comfortable."

Cespedes' big-league debut will come in a familiar place. He played in the 2010 World University Baseball Championship in Japan, where he went 11 for 22 with four home runs in six games.

The A's still haven't made a decision on their starting corner infielders.

Josh Donaldson received the majority of playing time at third base during spring training, as the A's viewed him as the best in-house solution after Scott Sizemore was injured. But Eric Sogard hit .341 during the Cactus League to thrust himself into consideration for the job.

Donaldson hit just .231 during the spring, but the bigger issue for the former catcher is whether he can make the transition defensively.

"I feel really good over there," Donaldson said. "I feel like I've had quality at-bats 95 percent of the time. I'm looking forward to competing and getting that job."

The first base battle comes down to Brandon Allen or Kila Ka'aihue, although Melvin has insisted Daric Barton will still be under consideration when the A's return from Japan.

Both Allen and Ka'aihue hit left-handed and are out of minor league options, so the A's couldn't keep both on the roster.

Allen hit .303 during Cactus League play with two homers and a team-high 13 RBI. Ka'aihue hit .242 with three homers and six RBI, but he looked better at the plate as the spring wore on and Melvin counted him as one of the camp surprises.

□ A group of A's players went karaoke singing Saturday night, including Allen and outfielders Josh Reddick and Collin Cowgill. Word throughout the clubhouse is that Allen, typically one of the team's quieter players, is the A's best singer.

"He's got some pipes," catcher Kurt Suzuki said.

Inside the Oakland A's: Pennington will hit second, Cespedes fifth in A's likely opening day lineup; Allen gets nod at first base

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/25/2012, 4:05am

A's manager Bob Melvin unveiled his likely opening day lineup Sunday, and it contained a mild surprise near the top of the batting order. Cliff Pennington hit second in an exhibition against the Yomiuri Giants, with Coco Crisp batting third, Seth Smith cleanup and Yoenis Cespedes fifth.

The complete lineup:

Weeks 2B
Pennington SS
Crisp LF
Smith DH
Cespedes CF
Reddick RF
Suzuki C
Allen 1B
Donaldson 3B

Melvin had indicated during spring that he liked Crisp batting second behind leadoff man Jemile Weeks, with Pennington batting ninth. But Pennington's .395 average in spring training convinced him to move the shortstop up. "I think the spring that 'Penny' had probably warrants him hitting '2'," Melvin said before the exhibition. "... And it gives us speed with those three guys (at the top)." Though Cespedes batted third or fourth in most of his Cactus League starts, Melvin thinks hitting him fifth will take some pressure off Cespedes, who makes his major league debut in Wednesday's opener against Seattle. "And it surrounds him with a couple lefties" in Smith and Reddick.

"There's a decent chance this could be the opening day lineup," Melvin said. So it looks like Brandon Allen has beat out Kila Ka'aihue for the first base job. The one change Melvin said he might make is at third base, where he might insert the left-handed hitting Eric Sogard for Josh Donaldson against Mariners ace Felix Hernandez. Right-handers have hit just .236 off Hernandez over his career, though it's not like lefties are doing significantly better at .252. With the Mariners throwing lefty Jason Vargas in the second game, Melvin said he could switch things up after the opener. But he indicated that Sunday's look could be his lineup for the "foreseeable future."

There's not a lot of power up and down that lineup, but we weren't expecting the A's to be a bunch of bashers. They will need their speedy trio atop the lineup to get on base and create scoring opportunities. They'll need Cespedes to prove he's a major league run producer, and they could sure use a little pop from Allen at the bottom of the order.

A different style of baseball for A's in Japan

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Introduced by American visitors in the 1870s, baseball is the most popular sport in Japan. The nation has won both World Baseball Classics and has produced several successful major-leaguers, including Ichiro Suzuki and Hideki Matsui.

The game is played a little differently in Japan, however, as the A's will find today and Monday in exhibition games against the Yomiuri Giants - the Yankees of Japan - and the Hanshin Tigers. "Small ball" and defense are more highly prized, making Ichiro the quintessential example of a Japanese player; teams spend many more hours practicing; managers will sometimes wait until just before the game to announce starting pitchers.

A's manager Bob Melvin is now familiar with that last bit of strategy. He said Saturday that he hasn't settled on a lineup for today's game because he still doesn't know whether Yomiuri will throw a right-handed starter or a lefty.

Melvin is the only man to have managed both Ichiro and Matsui, the top two Japanese-born position players to have played in the majors.

"Matsui is a power guy, and Ichiro is a speed guy, so my guess is these clubs do everything," Melvin said.

Japanese baseballs are slightly smaller and harder than major-league baseballs; in the exhibition games, the Yomiuri and Hanshin pitchers will throw Mizuno-made Japanese balls, and the A's pitchers will throw standard Rawlings baseballs.

The exhibition games against Japanese teams are eye-openers for American players. The Japanese clubs warm up quite a bit differently - they use two batting cages at once, doubling the action on the field. Fans sing team songs during the game and wave flags, and they are a positive bunch. You won't hear heckling or booing from a Japanese crowd.

Beer is sold in the crowd by young women with small kegs strapped to their backs, and sake is available in cans at the stadium, as A's broadcaster Ken Korach found by mistake in 2008 when he pointed at what he thought was orange juice, then discovered it wasn't when he took a big gulp right at airtime.

The Tokyo Dome, where the A's will play the exhibition games and then two regular-season games against Seattle on Wednesday and Thursday, has its own quirks.

"The bullpen is back here next to the clubhouse," non-roster reliever Evan Scribner said, gesturing toward the stadium's innards and away from the field. "What do we do, sit inside there during the game? And the dugout has two rows of seats. I'm interested to see how they set everything up during the game."

Huge billboards line the outfield wall, including one with Ichiro's face - and A's third baseman Josh Donaldson was aiming for that during batting practice Saturday.

"I was trying to hit Ichiro," he said. "I did hit five other billboards out there. It was nasty."

"J.D. was hitting signs all over the place," A's outfielder Coco Crisp said. "I think he hit the Teletubby."

"He told me he was going to hit the ball out of the stadium," outfielder Collin Cowgill said.

Cuban outfielder Yoenis Céspedes, who will play in his first regular-season big-league game on Wednesday, also had a spectacular batting practice session.

"We know he has that kind of power," Melvin said.

Céspedes has performed well in Japan before, going 11-for-22 with four homers, 14 RBIs and 12 runs in six games in the 2010 World University championships.

"I know from the first time I was here that this will be fun," Céspedes said through interpreter Ariel Prieto. "The fans here are great, and the results were great."

This is the fourth time that major-league teams have opened the season at the Tokyo Dome. Preseason NBA games and NFL games also have been played there, and in one of boxing's biggest upsets, Buster Douglas defeated Mike Tyson in a heavyweight fight at "the Big Egg" in 1990.

The A's are not expected to make any 40-man roster moves for the two regular-season games; they'll go with a 27-man roster because first baseman Daric Barton, who is on the roster, remained in Arizona. The three non-roster A's players, Scribner, reliever Travis Schlichting and infielder Wes Timmons, will play in the exhibition games only.

The Drumbeat: A's vs. Yomiuri unveils likely Opening Night lineup

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Tokyo Dome 3/25/2012, 2:10am

Manager Bob Melvin said this looks like an Opening Day "type" lineup tonight against the Yomiuri Giants: Weeks 2B, Pennington SS, Crisp LF, Smith DH, Cespedes CF, Reddick RF, Suzuki C, Allen 1B, Donaldson 3B.

The only spot that might change on Wednesday for Opening Night is third base, where Melvin said he's still mulling over Eric Sogard as a possibility, based on some of Seattle starter Felix Hernandez's splits: lefties had a .314 on-base percentage vs. Hernandez last year, right-handed hitters .292.

Donaldson's performance tonight might help decide things, too, and Melvin stressed that Thursday's lineup, for Game 2 against Seattle, could be different than Opening Night, anyway.

At any rate, Brandon Allen appears set as the Opening Night first baseman. First and third were the A's two unsettled spots.

The lineup is unusual, too: Instead of batting ninth, Cliff Pennington is now up in the No. 2 spot in the order between two other switch hitters, Jemile Weeks and Coco Crisp. Melvin loves the speed that gives the A's, and the fact that Pennington gets up earlier in the game, will get extra plate appearances.

In the Yomiuri lineup tonight and batting second, former Giants outfielder John Bowker. Former A's outfielder (briefly) Matt Murton stars for Hanshin, the A's opponent tomorrow, but he's hurt. Another former Giant, Randy Messenger, will start against the A's tomorrow.

Wild-card game adds wrinkle to postseason picks

John Shea, Chronicle Columnist

Fast-forward to Sept. 28, the last day of the regular season. Barring a tie, the 10 playoff teams will be decided, but all eyes will be on the single-elimination, winner-take-all, best-of-one extravaganzas.

In each league, the two teams with the best records among non-division winners will meet in a one-game playoff. It's the new wild-card format, and it might be more intriguing than the actual division races, especially if you have interest in the AL Central, where the Tigers might as well start arranging their playoff rotation.

They're that good - **Prince Fielder** joined **Justin Verlander** and **Miguel Cabrera** on a team that won its division by 15 games - and the rest of the pack is that bad.

It's also a given the postseason will include at least two teams from the AL East. Let's assume it's the Yankees and Red Sox, if only because we're traditionalists. That leaves a final spot for the third-place team in the East or second-place team in the West.

Six months before the final regular-season pitch, it's somewhat clear-cut in the AL. It says here the Yankees (with **Michael Pineda**, **Hiroki Kuroda** and maybe **Andy Pettitte** improving the rotation) and Angels (with **Albert Pujols** and **C.J. Wilson** aboard) will win their divisions.

That leaves the wild-card game featuring the Rangers (getting used to being World Series runners-up) and Red Sox (simply not as bad as they displayed in their September collapse).

Sorry, Rays. Sorry, Blue Jays.

The NL is more wide-open with only the Phillies (same ol' **Roy Halladay**, **Cliff Lee** and **Cole Hamels**) as obvious division favorites, though the beefed-up Marlins (**Jose Reyes**, **Mark Buehrle**, **Heath Bell**, a healthy **Josh Johnson** and **Ozzie Guillen** babysitting **Carlos Zambrano**) are prepared to make a serious run.

The West appears a tossup between the Diamondbacks and Giants, and the Central is a hodgepodge now that Pujols and Fielder have fled the two best teams. We'll go with the Diamondbacks and Reds, clearing the way for a Giants-Marlins wild-card match.

Sorry, Nationals. Sorry, Braves (especially retiring **Chipper Jones**).

In October, the Cardinals were the fifth wild-card team to win a World Series, but it's tougher now. Winning the wild-card game means you might have burned your ace and can't use him twice in a best-of-five Division Series. It also means you're going up against a rested team that owns the league's top record.

Suddenly, there's more incentive to shoot for a division title. In our little bracket, we'll take the Giants (behind **Tim Lincecum**) over the Marlins and the Rangers (behind **Yu Darvish**) over the Red Sox. Both will be underdogs moving forward - and fall prey to the Phillies and Tigers.

The Reds and Angels will get past their opening rounds, setting up a Phillies-Reds NLCS and a Tigers-Angels ALCS ... and a Phillies-Tigers World Series ... and Fielder and Co. dancing in the streets of Detroit.

Revenue discrepancy: A's managing general partner **Lew Wolff** said in February that revenues from the World Series, because it lasted seven games, provided the A's with a slight profit of \$370,000. That was *after* they received a \$32 million revenue-sharing check.

Forbes sees it differently. The magazine reported the A's operating income was \$14.6 million, considerably higher than the Giants' \$8.8 million.

When I asked A's officials to explain the discrepancy between \$370,000 and \$14.6 million, they said they calculate interest on debt, taxes, depreciation and amortization and weigh in deferred salaries while Forbes might not make such deductions.

This is an annual saga. Every year, Forbes puts out its rankings of teams' values, revenues and incomes, and every year teams dispute the figures. MLB never opens its books, so Forbes is making educated guesses.

Forbes also reported the A's had \$160 million in revenues, topping only the Marlins, and below the Giants' \$230 million. Of course, the Yankees had the highest reported revenue: \$439 million.

Forbes estimated the Giants are worth \$643 million (ranking ninth in MLB), twice as much as the A's - \$321 million, lowest in the game. The Yankees and Dodgers checked in at \$1.85 billion and \$1.4 billion, respectively.

Old pals: Rockies first baseman **Todd Helton** and **Peyton Manning** were teammates at the University of Tennessee, both quarterbacks, and they're reuniting in Denver now that Manning is a Bronco. They've remained friends, and Manning has taken batting practice and thrown out ceremonial first pitches before Rockies games.

No knock on **Tim Tebow**, but Helton said of Manning, "I know that it's a Bronco town and they get somebody to root for. He's going to come in and play well. I'm excited to see it." As for Helton, he knew his QB days were numbered in college after a knee injury forced him to the bench and opened the door for a freshman named Manning.

Around the majors: **Felix Hernandez** isn't like **Alex Rodriguez** and **Ken Griffey Jr.**, who jumped at chances to leave Seattle. Hernandez insists he wants to stay, even suggesting he should post a banner above his locker: "I'm not going anywhere." ... New White Sox manager **Robin Ventura** on how he's different from Guillen, his boisterous predecessor: "I just try to pay attention to what's going on in my little world, not in the whole world." ... Manager-turned-TV-analyst **Terry Francona** ran out of gas in Florida, so he and fellow ESPN-ite **Dan Shulman** pushed their SUV with ESPN staffer **Claire Smith** in the driver's seat until someone stopped to help - it was a guy who installed Francona's cable a year earlier. "I gave him some drinking money and he gave me a ride back," Francona said. "That was vintage my life." ... The Rangers and Angels, the AL West's premier teams, play today but don't want to provide any trade secrets, so Darvish and Wilson will pitch in minor-league games. Darvish is understandable, but hiding Wilson is a bit odd considering he was a Ranger the past seven years.

Milone sharp as A's win exhibition in Japan

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Japanese tradition calls for the ceremonial first pitch to be thrown to the opposing team's leadoff hitter. In Sunday's exhibition game between the A's and Yomiuri Giants of Japan's Central League, Jemile Weeks stepped in the box against local idol Kazuya Kamenashi.

Kamenashi's pitch was outside, but Weeks appeased a gregarious crowd with a slow swing-and-miss to the sound of much applause. The A's second baseman wasn't done entertaining, though, as he went on to tally two RBIs in Oakland's 5-0 victory over the Giants.

Kurt Suzuki homered for the A's, who got five shutout innings from lefty Tommy Milone in their first game at the Tokyo Dome to kick off the Opening Series week. Milone, who will likely slot into the rotation behind right-handers Brandon McCarthy and Bartolo Colon, allowed just two hits and struck out seven with no walks.

"My fastball was very good, changeup as well," Milone said. "I was just throwing strikes and keeping them low. I felt everything was working good."

Yomiuri starter Ryosuke Miyaguni fanned even more, striking out nine A's hitters in five innings, all the while utilizing a fastball that averaged in the mid-80s and a breaking ball that was clocked as low as 65 mph -- the latter of which fooled a swinging Yoenis Cespedes for strike three to end the first inning.

But the A's jumped on the board in the second, when Josh Reddick led off with a base hit and ultimately scored on Weeks' two-out single to right field.

Oakland was kept quiet through the next four frames, going down in order, before sending 10 men to the plate in the seventh. Reddick led off the frame with his second hit of the night and quickly came around to score on Suzuki's line-drive homer to left off Giants reliever Levi Romero that extended the A's lead to four.

Brandon Allen was the next to reach base, via a walk, and advanced to third on Josh Donaldson's single before scoring courtesy Weeks' second RBI base hit. Cliff Pennington, sandwiched in the lineup between fellow speedsters Weeks and Coco Crisp, kept things going with a single, and an ensuing bases-loaded free pass to Crisp gave the A's their fifth and final run of the night.

A's relievers Ryan Cook, Brian Fuentes, Jordan Norberto and Grant Balfour combined for four scoreless innings to complete the shutout.

Melvin closing in on Opening Day lineup

By Jane Lee /

TOKYO -- Though not ready to commit just yet, A's manager Bob Melvin appears close to settling on an Opening Day lineup.

The one he ran out for Sunday's exhibition game against the host Yomiuri Giants at the Tokyo Dome has a "decent chance" of reappearing Wednesday for the regular-season opener with Seattle, he said.

Melvin decided to pack the of the order with speed, as Jemile Weeks, Cliff Pennington and Coco Crisp were handpicked for the No. 1-3 spots. Seth Smith, starting at DH, followed in the cleanup spot, with Yoenis Cespedes batting fifth.

"It gets Penny up earlier in the game," Melvin said. "He's had a good spring. It also gives us speed with those first three guys -- not that it couldn't change at some point during the season, but at least today and in the foreseeable future."

The A's ultimately envision Cespedes batting third or fourth, but Melvin likes him in the No. 5 spot for now, not only to take away some pressure, but as a way of surrounding him with lefties, with Josh Reddick pegged to bat sixth.

Kurt Suzuki hit seventh Sunday, and Brandon Allen and Josh Donaldson were penciled into the eighth and ninth slots, though Melvin said he has not yet decided who will start at first and third come Opening Day, when Seattle ace Felix Hernandez is set to take the mound. Third base, in particular, has made for a tough decision, as Eric Sogard is still in the mix.

"Sogard's had a great spring, and you look at some of the splits on Hernandez, that's the one I'm probably most undecided on," Melvin said.

A's visit troops at U.S. air base in Japan

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

TOKYO -- When the A's arrived at the Hardy Barracks helipad, right in the middle of the Tokyo sprawl, they stepped into a mutual admiration society.

Airmen from the nearby Yokota Air Force base descended in the UH-1H "Huey" helicopters that would fly eight Oakland players, team president Michael Crowley and other club officials to the base for a visit. The A's contingent was ready for an adventure of a lifetime.

So were the airmen. Their eyes sparkled as they saw Jemile Weeks, Jonny Gomes, Brian Fuentes, Seth Smith, Cliff Pennington, Jerry Blevins, Josh Reddick and Collin Cowgill standing on the asphalt in their home white jerseys, and they were quick to thank the A's for making the trip.

No, the A's assured them. The thanks were reserved solely for the troops and their families, and they couldn't wait to spend some time with them on what was sure to be a memorable day.

That day started with a smooth liftoff and a spirited 20-minute flight to the base. It was a sunny morning and the players were rapt, staring out of the windows, snapping photos and making home videos with their smart phones. They soaked in what, for quite a few of them, was their first real ride in a chopper.

"That was my first one," said Weeks, the A's second baseman. "To go up and ascend [over] Japan and see the country -- there's places everywhere, there's no unused space or anything like that -- it was a wonderful thing."

The helicopters touched down at the base, which is in the nearby city of Fussa. The traveling party was whisked away through the impressive grounds, which can house up to 14,000 troops and personnel. When the players arrived at the baseball field, the Air Force members and their families were already there, many with gloves in their hands and already playing catch.

Fuentes and Blevins organized a pitching clinic while Weeks and Pennington worked with the infielders. Cowgill, Smith, Reddick and Gomes entertained the outfield prospects and members of the Yokota high school team in conversations about baseball and life before signing autographs.

"It's pretty special," Gomes said. "I'm biased to the military ... I actually thought I was going to go [into the military] in 2001, but I ended up being drafted [by Tampa Bay], so that kept me from going. I definitely don't take any of this for granted. I'm appreciative of all our servicemen."

Three of the A's have direct ties to the military, so it was special for them, too. Smith's brother-in-law was a member of the Navy, Cowgill's childhood friend is an Iraq veteran and member of the Army Reserve, and Reddick's grandfather is a retired member of the Air Force. Crowley came from a military family and was born on a Marine base in California.

"It's a tremendous honor to come out here and see these folks," Crowley said. "They work so hard to defend our freedom and the things we enjoy back in the States. The players are excited to be here, and it's a great opportunity to interact with the children and the men and women of the military here."

The interacting went on for the better part of an hour, and it continued in the Samurai Room -- the cafeteria for officers. The players lined up for their lunch, and once their trays were full, they sat down at the dining room tables to chat up more airmen.

The troops continued to remark to the players about how meeting and socializing with Major League Baseball players was an honor, and the players kept shaking their heads, telling the airmen that the real honor was meeting these brave patriots.

"The troops and their families have been such a big part of our lives and a part of our country and a part of all the countries," Weeks said. "For us to do our little part, it's just us trying to give back in whatever way we can."

After lunch, the players bid farewell to the base and got one heck of a ride: a 40-minute scenic tour in the helicopters that took them over the coastline under the watchful eye of Mt. Fuji. The trip also covered the city of Kamakura, where the famous Great Buddha -- an enormous, almost 900-year-old bronze statue -- resides, and back to the grandeur of Tokyo.

The players awarded their pilots with autographed baseballs and were on their way back to the hotel before departing a few hours later for the Tokyo Dome and their Sunday night exhibition game against the Yomiuri Giants. Yet, the day's events would surely live in their memories for a long time.

"It means a lot," Fuentes said. "Everyone's telling us thank you and really, the shoe's on the other foot because we're just privileged to be here, with as much as these guys sacrifice, being this far away from the States for years on years and jumping around, moving their families.

"We definitely know how that is ... so it's our pleasure, and we had a great time."

A's touring party takes in sights of Japan

Traveling contingent views many of country's top spots

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Amanda McCarthy and Kaycee Sogard's excellent adventure would not have been complete without a sampling of the local fare. When McCarthy walked up to the vendor, whose cart was parked with a beautiful view of Lake Ashi, she had to go for it.

The wife of Oakland A's starter Brandon McCarthy handed over 320 yen, or about \$4, and soon McCarthy and Sogard, the wife of A's infielder Eric, were digging into a local delicacy: grilled, marinated cuttlefish squid on a stick.

The verdict?

Salty because of the soy glaze, both women agreed, but not bad at all and certainly worth trying on a memorable day packed with natural beauty, eye-opening culture and the open warmth of the natives of this spectacular country.

While the Oakland A's and Seattle Mariners worked out in the Tokyo Dome in preparation for two days of exhibition games against Japanese teams and then the two-game Opening Series Japan on Wednesday and Thursday, a sightseeing tour was arranged for various A's officials, broadcasters and players' wives, girlfriends and families. The Mariners will experience a similar tour later in the week.

This tour was all about getting back to nature. The buses rolled through serious Tokyo gridlock -- yes, even on a Saturday -- and traveled more than two hours to the resort area of Hakone, a mountainous region that offers views of the iconic Japanese landmark of Mount Fuji. The location also features active volcanoes, a shimmering volcanic crater lake, historic shrines and resorts with high-end hotels, restaurants, golf courses and amusement parks.

On the way up the snaking mountain road, the sun peaked out from the clouds and Fuji followed. The tour guide said the traveling party was witnessing a bit of a miracle, since the area is usually so cloudy and often rainy that the fickle mountain is visible only 30 percent of the time.

"She is welcoming you to Japan," the guide said.

The first stop was at the Hakone Ropeway, a ski gondola that sits on the banks of Lake Ashi and glides more than two miles to an observation deck where one can view Fuji (if the mountain cooperates) and the surrounding volcanic peaks with steam rising from their sulfuric pores.

The A's contingent braved ripping winds and cold temperatures at the top, but many were smiling and quick to note how special it was to be visiting such an awe-inspiring land.

"Seeing Mount Fuji for the first time, it looks completely different from what I thought it was going to look like," McCarthy said. "It's almost like an iceberg, with a massive base that just goes up slowly, snowy peaks ... it's really beautiful."

A's radio broadcaster Vince Cotroneo visited Japan when Oakland came over to play the Red Sox in Opening Series Japan 2008, but this was his first trip to observe the wonders of Hakone. He said he felt fortunate to be back in the Land of the Rising Sun.

"It's been a great experience," Cotroneo said. "You get an opportunity, when you come to Japan, to witness culture and witness centuries of history, and to hear from our guide about the scenery and the countryside and the different parts of the country that we've gone to, it's just been amazing.

"The vistas have been dramatic, a lot of the pictures have been stunning, and we've seen some things that certainly make you feel that this has been a worthwhile trip and it's great for us to be a part of it and great to be able to bring Major League Baseball here."

After the gondola descended, the buses rode over to a restaurant on another nearby shore of Lake Ashi, where the decorative replica man-of-war pirate ships that take patrons on tours came into clear view. As legend has it, a nine-headed dragon lived in the lake until a human sacrifice was made and the dragon became a deity called Kuzuryu Daimyojin.

No dragons were seen, but the A's party did get to hop on a pirate ship of its own, an ornate green ferry bedecked with gold topmasts. The ship cruised over the glassy water surrounded by green mountainsides covered with cedars, offering an inspiring close to an active day that will lead to four more in the loud, baseball-crazy Tokyo Dome.

"Coming in 2008 and enjoying that experience for the first time was amazing," Cotroneo said. "The energy in that building ... the stands are full, there's a lot of energy, there's a lot of noise, there's a lot of cheering back and forth.

"And I think, even though the Mariners have Ichiro [Suzuki] and the A's have become more popular over here, I think it's going to be a split in terms of the crowd, but they're going to have a lot of fun going back and forth, and I'm anxious to see the kind of show these teams are going to put on. It's going to be a lot of fun."

Major Lee-ague: A's players settle into Tokyo

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 3/23/2012, 10:36pm

Greetings from Tokyo, where it's been gloomy and wet since our arrival. Most players, it seems, opted for sleep rather than exploring the city last night – an understandable choice, given the 12-hour flight time and ensuing 90-minute drive to the hotel, along with a 16-hour time change. Many, like myself, couldn't sleep past 7 a.m., as I'm sure our internal clocks were struggling to adjust, though Tommy Milone should get some kind of award for falling asleep at 10 p.m. and not waking until 8 a.m. "I feel great right now," he said, grinning.

Milone and Co. are currently taking part in their first workout here at the Tokyo Dome. The Mariners are also here, and a press conference with manager Bob Melvin and a handful of players is to follow shortly. Otherwise, it's a light day, as both teams prepare for exhibition games the next two days.

Josh Reddick is also preparing for a different kind of performance. Reddick, along with Brandon Allen and Collin Cowgill, are karaoking tonight in front of Comcast Bay Area's camera crew. Allen, I've heard, has got some real talent, and Reddick deems himself a karaoke pro, though isn't sure how much country music Tokyo has to offer him. He can always settle on Journey, he said.

Reddick surely garnered the most attention upon the team's arrival yesterday, as several fans were heard both in the airport and hotel shouting his name. I asked him about being Mr. Popular over here, and he said it probably comes with having worn a Red Sox jersey during the past couple of years. He was still caught off guard by it all, especially since Kurt Suzuki – who is very popular over here – and Coco Crisp were by his side.

Jonny Gomes is also getting some looks, thanks to his mohawk. He says he's gotten plenty of requests from people on the streets wanting to touch it. Meanwhile, the obsessions over the heated hotel toilets have started, and several players are trying to figure out a way to take one home.

Stay tuned from more updates...