

**A's News Clips, Monday, March 26, 2012**

**Oakland A's might not feel like 'home' team in Japan opener against Ichiro Suzuki and the Seattle Mariners**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's can't seem to catch a break when they play in Japan.

Twice they have crossed the Pacific to open their season here, and each time the opposing team is the toast of the town.

In 2008, the defending World Series champion Boston Red Sox had star Japanese right-hander Daisuke Matsuzaka on the mound and a packed Tokyo Dome crowd cheering them on in their two-game series against the A's.

This time, Seattle Mariners right fielder Ichiro Suzuki is enjoying a much ballyhooed homecoming.

When the A's and the Mariners open the season Wednesday at the Tokyo Dome, it will mark the first time in his 11-year major league career that Ichiro, a native of Kasugai, Japan, has played in his home country in a Seattle uniform.

He did play in Japan for the national team during the 2006 and 2009 World Baseball Classics. But many fans identify with him most as a Mariner, according to Masa Niwa, a reporter for the Tokyo-based Sankei Sports newspaper.

"Some people have just been waiting and waiting for this moment," Niwa said. "He's the biggest sports idol in Japan."

What portion of the crowd does Niwa expect to be rooting for the A's?

"Not much," he said. "These people are pretty much (all about) Ichiro."

The situation doesn't foster jealousy in the A's clubhouse. Aside from catcher Kurt Suzuki, no Oakland player on this trip was with the team for that 2008 series against the Red Sox, in which the A's split two games.

Suzuki remembers the scene, as cameras flashed everywhere once Matsuzaka took the mound. Perhaps it got to the right-hander, who walked five and didn't get a decision in Boston's 6-5 victory in the opener.

"They were home games for us, but it was more like they were the home team," Suzuki said.

The A's are the home team for these games too, but Suzuki isn't too worried about playing in front of a stadium full of Mariners fans.

"A crowd's going to be a crowd," he said. "You can't really control that."

It isn't as if the A's are walking around completely anonymous. Many of them get stopped for autographs as they go sightseeing.

The A's figure who by far draws the most attention around Tokyo is general manager Billy Beane.

A story in Sunday's Daily Yomiuri newspaper contained a story about Beane with the headline, "The Man Behind 'Moneyball,'" describing how Beane "outmaneuvered" the Florida Marlins to sign Cuban free-agent outfielder Yoenis Cespedes.

Niwa said Kurt Suzuki -- who is of Japanese descent but is a Hawaii native -- and Jemile Weeks are the A's players that register the most excitement among Japanese fans but that Beane is the true star.

Beane appreciates the attention but said he doesn't think the Mariners are hogging all of the player spotlight.

"We've been treated so well," he said. "I would expect with a guy like Ichiro that there would be more focus on that individual. But it doesn't seem to be that dramatic to me."

The Mariners feature two other Japanese players -- pitchers Hisashi Iwakuma and infielder Munenori Kawasaki. But Ichiro will be the marquee attraction Wednesday and Thursday.

The A's and the Mariners had a 2003 series in Tokyo canceled at the last minute because of the war in Iraq, otherwise this series might not carry so much anticipation.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I want to treat it specially," Ichiro told the Daily Yomiuri.

The Mariners, as a team, don't carry the same publicity punch as the Red Sox did in 2008, which added to the pro-Boston environment. A's left fielder Coco Crisp played for Boston in that series and remembers the crowd's overwhelming support for the Red Sox.

Now Crisp is on the opposite side of the situation, playing for an A's team that won't be feeling nearly as much love as its opponent.

"I don't think anybody in here is worried that (the Mariners) are getting more media than us," Crisp said. "We're just excited to be out here. That's enough excitement for me."

### **Oakland A's notebook: Yoenis Cespedes will bat fifth in his major league debut**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Center fielder Yoenis Cespedes was held out of the A's lineup as a precaution in Sunday night's game against the Hanshin Tigers after he suffered leg cramps a day earlier.

But he's expected to be fine for Wednesday's regular-season opener against the Seattle Mariners at Tokyo Dome.

Cespedes also found a home in the A's batting order.

Manager Bob Melvin will bat Cespedes fifth Wednesday, hoping to take some pressure off the outfielder as he makes his major league debut. Cespedes, who hit .200 in eight exhibitions overall, batted third or fourth in most of his Cactus League starts.

Melvin surprisingly tapped Cliff Pennington as his No. 2 hitter for Wednesday's opener, and said he'll likely keep him there for the foreseeable future. Coco Crisp will slide into the third spot ahead of cleanup man Seth Smith and Cespedes.

Pennington hit .395 in Cactus League play and homered in the fourth inning against Hanshin.

"I think the spring that Penny had probably warrants him hitting '2'," Melvin said.

Throughout the spring, Melvin had suggested he wanted Jemile Weeks and Crisp hitting back-to-back atop the order, with Pennington hitting ninth as a speedy threat to turn the lineup over.

The Weeks-Pennington-Crisp trio atop the lineup still keeps all three switch hitters batting consecutively.

After hinting the day before that Brandon Allen would start the season as his regular first baseman, Melvin hedged a bit, saying he's considering playing Kila Ka'aihue against the Mariners.

Still no word on whether Josh Donaldson or Eric Sogard will get the nod at third base.

Tyson Ross allowed 10 hits and eight runs through the first 32/3 innings of a 12-6 loss to Hanshin. He wasn't helped by errors from Pennington and center fielder Collin Cowgill.

Suzuki hit a three-run homer in the top of the fourth, his second in two games. He also lined a two-run homer in the A's 5-0 win over the Yomiuri Giants a day earlier.

In that game, four A's pitchers faced just two batters over the minimum. Lefty Tom Milone was very solid, allowing two hits over five innings with seven strikeouts and no walks.

Ryan Cook, Brian Fuentes, Jordan Norberto and Grant Balfour closed out the final four innings without allowing a hit.

Weeks drove in two runs with singles.

Ross and fellow starting pitcher Tom Milone, infielder Wes Timmons and relievers Evan Scribner and Travis Schlichting will be inactive for Seattle series, getting the A's roster down to 25.

### **A's lineup revealed with a few surprises**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Yoenis Cespedes will hit fifth in A's opening night lineup, and the top of the order will feature a surprising look.

Manager Bob Melvin tapped Cliff Pennington as his No. 2 hitter for Wednesday's opener against Seattle, with Coco Crisp sliding into the third spot ahead of cleanup man Seth Smith and Cespedes.

Throughout spring training, Melvin had suggested he wanted Jemile Weeks and Crisp hitting back-to-back atop the order, with Pennington hitting ninth as a speedy threat to turn the lineup over.

But Pennington's .395 average in Cactus League play convinced Melvin to move the shortstop up.

"I think the spring that 'Penny' had probably warrants him hitting '2'," he said.

The A's beat the Yomiuri Giants 5-0 in an exhibition early Sunday morning, with four pitchers facing just two batters over the minimum.

The batting order went Weeks (2B), Pennington (SS), Crisp (LF), Seth Smith (DH), Cespedes (CF), Josh Reddick (RF), Kurt Suzuki (C), Brandon Allen (1B), Josh Donaldson (3B).

Melvin said he might swap out Donaldson at third base for the left-handed hitting Eric Sogard in Wednesday's opener, because the A's will face Mariners ace right-hander Felix Hernandez.

But no other changes are anticipated. So it appears Allen has beat out Kila Ka'aihue for the first base job.

Cespedes hit third or fourth in most of his Cactus League starts, but Melvin is hopeful that batting him fifth takes pressure off his shoulders. Cespedes makes his major league debut Wednesday.

He struggled at the plate against Yomiuri, going 0 for 4 with two strikeouts. He went down swinging on a 64 mph off-speed pitch from Ryosuke Miyaguni in the first and waved at a curve from Junpei Ono in the seventh.

Cespedes left the game in the eighth when his left quad began cramping. Then his back tightened up on him once he returned to the clubhouse. He said through interpreter Ariel Prieto that he thinks it was simply dehydration, and that he could play in Sunday night's exhibition against the Hanshin Tigers.

Melvin said he would likely keep Cespedes out as a precaution.

Lefty starter Tom Milone was very sharp against Yomiuri, the most storied franchise in Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball league. Milone allowed just two hits over five innings and struck out seven with no walks. Ryan Cook, Brian Fuentes Jordan Norberto and Grant Balfour closed it out.

Kurt Suzuki lined a two-run homer in the seventh and Jemile Weeks drove in two runs with singles.

Weeks was also part of the pregame festivities. Japanese singer Kazuya Kamenashi threw out the first pitch, and as is customary in Japan on such occasions, the visiting team's leadoff hitter is invited to stand in the box and politely asked to swing and miss at the pitch.

Weeks obliged.

"That wasn't a good pitch to swing at," he joked afterward.

Fuentes was among a group of players who visited Yokota Air Force base before Sunday's game.

They flew there via helicopter and gave a baseball clinic to many of the kids living on the base, then had lunch with troops.

Fuentes said connecting with the kids meant the most to him.

"They're Americans, but some of those kids have never been stateside before in their lives," Fuentes said. "They were born here. They were excited to see us. It felt good to give back to the people who have given us so much."

Riding in a helicopter for the first time didn't go as smoothly.

"It was cool on the way there," Fuentes said. "On the way back I was ready to lose my lunch."

### **Inside the Oakland A's: Still no clear picture on A's corner infield spots**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/25/2012, 8:49pm

The A's are trailing the Hanshin Tigers 3-0 in the third inning as I write this. Tyson Ross gave up a two-run homer in the bottom of the first. To update you on the day's news so far:

–Perhaps Brandon Allen doesn't have such a firm grasp on the first base job after all. Manager Bob Melvin said he's leaning toward starting Allen in Wednesday's opener but that Kila Ka'aihue could draw a start in the second game of the series against the Mariners. Melvin is getting good at hedging his bets. We won't know for sure until we see Wednesday's lineup card posted. It's tough to say that either Allen or Ka'aihue has staked definitive claim to the position.

–Still no word on who will start at third base for the A's — Josh Donaldson or Eric Sogard. Sogard is playing third against Hanshin.

–As was expected, Yoenis Cespedes is not in the lineup after getting pulled from last night's game with leg cramps. Melvin said there's no concern about Cespedes being ready for the opener.

–Yesterday I tweeted about how clean of a city Tokyo is. Today I'm hear to tell you about the high-tech bathrooms. The toilets in this city come with more buttons to press than an airplane cockpit. There's your random observation for the day ...

### **A's probable Opening Day lineup fares well**

Susan Slusser, Oakland Tribune

A Japanese teen idol, strikingly well-coiffed actor Kazuya Kamenashi, threw out the first pitch of the A's exhibition against the Yomiuri Giants on Sunday - with Jemile Weeks in the box and swinging lazily so as to miss, as asked.

"I didn't know who he was at first, but you could tell he's a big-time celebrity," Weeks said. "He's definitely on TV a lot."

The real Giants pitchers had more difficulty with Weeks, who provided two RBI singles in Oakland's 5-0 victory. Kurt Suzuki, the A's lone Japanese American player, added the power, with a two-run homer off Levi Romero in the seventh.

Suzuki also homered in the A's 12-6 loss to the Hanshin Tigers today, with a three-run shot in the fourth inning. The weekday day game drew a much smaller crowd than the Yomiuri game, with the dome less than half full, but the Hanshin supporters were every bit as vocal as the Giants', singing and playing drums for each of the Tigers' players.

Groups of A's fans responded with regular "Let's go Oakland!" chants.

Manager Bob Melvin said he thought his team got an adrenaline boost from the loud and constant fan involvement when the Giants were up at the Tokyo Dome.

"It felt like a carnival during those innings," Melvin said of the singing and drums for each Giants hitter. "For us, that was a little extra incentive."

Melvin ran out what he hinted might be his Opening Day lineup on Sunday, though he said he is still undecided about third base. Josh Donaldson was there against Yomiuri, but Melvin said that because Felix Hernandez will be on the mound for Seattle on Wednesday, he also is considering Eric Sogard there. Sogard is a left-handed hitter, and Hernandez doesn't fare quite as well against lefties.

Donaldson came close to homering Sunday, settling for a long single off the wall. His hustle in the second inning helped lead to the A's first run - he raced hard down the line on a groundball to prevent an inning-ending double play. Weeks, the next batter, drove in Josh Reddick.

With the possible exception of third base, it appears the rest of the lineup will look much like Sunday's, which means that Brandon Allen will be at first base, and Cliff Pennington will be hitting second, between Weeks and Coco Crisp.

That maximizes the speed at the top of the order, and it means opponents will face three switch-hitters in a row, which must make hitting coach Chili Davis, one of the all-time great switch-hitters, a little proud.

Yoenis Céspedes will be in center field and bat fifth, with designated hitter Seth Smith likely to hit fourth, going by the lineup Sunday.

Céspedes went 0-for-4 with two strikeouts on Sunday, leaving five men on base, and he came out in the eighth inning with a quadriceps cramp and some back tightness. He'll get extra liquids and he isn't expected to miss Opening Night on Wednesday.

**A's 5, Yomiuri 0; Hanshin 12, A's 6**

**Notable:** On Sunday, **Tommy Milone** started for Oakland and allowed two hits in five innings, while striking out seven. Milone is expected to be the A's No. 3 starter to open the season. ... The A's relievers retired all 12 men they faced, with **Ryan Cook**, **Brian Fuentes**, **Jordan Norberto** and **Grant Balfour** each throwing a perfect inning. ... Right fielder **Josh Reddick** had two hits and scored two runs. ... Former Giants outfielder **John Bowker** started in left for Yomiuri and hit second; he went 0-for-4 with two strikeouts. ... Today, **Tyson Ross** gave up eight runs in four innings, six of them earned. ... **Cliff Pennington** homered to lead off the A's four-run fourth. ... First baseman **Kila Ka'aihue** made two of Oakland's three errors, but had an RBI single in the sixth.

**Quotable:** "Milone from start to finish was great, and so was everyone who came in to back him up. That's what we want."

- *Second baseman **Jemile Weeks** on Sunday's two-hit shutout by A's pitchers*

### **A's Brian Fuentes has queasy helicopter ride**

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Reliever **Brian Fuentes** would have liked to enjoy the helicopter tour of Tokyo several members of the A's received courtesy of the U.S. Air Force on Sunday. He wasn't really feeling his best, though.

"I was a little queasy," Fuentes said, fully recovered before the A's game against the Yomiuri Giants. "It would have been cool to see if I wasn't fighting not to throw up."

Outfielder **Jonny Gomes** had a more colorful description of Fuentes' morning.

"Tito feels more comfortable on a mound than in a helicopter," Gomes said. "He was definitely a hint of green."

Fitting for an A's player, at least, and Fuentes did have a terrific time before the 45-minute sightseeing trip over Tokyo. The A's held a clinic for military children at Yokota Air Force Base, and then the players got a mess-hall lunch and met with service members.

"It was very cool, I'm so appreciative of what they do," Fuentes said. "It's nice to be able to give them a taste of stateside when they're so far away from home, and they're people making sacrifices for our country."

"There was appreciation on both sides," Gomes said. "They were thanking us. We were thanking them. It was a breath of fresh air."

Gomes was delighted to meet a fellow Petaluma native who was decked out in full 49ers garb, and he said there were a few base residents wearing A's caps.

"It's like you're in a whole different world - but you're not," Gomes said. "You come all the way to Japan, a 12-hour flight from Oakland, and there are people in A's gear and they know you."

**Jemile Weeks, Jerry Blevins, Cliff Pennington, Josh Reddick, Seth Smith** and **Collin Cowgill** also visited the base.

**Briefly:** Both of the A's regular-season games against the Mariners will be shown on a delayed basis on MLB Network, which will air the season opener at 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. Wednesday and the second game at the same times Thursday. ... Pitching coach **Curt Young** said **Brett Anderson** threw a 35-pitch bullpen session Saturday and all went well. He threw only fastballs and changeups. ... The opening series is sponsored by a Japanese social-media-games company called Gloops.

### **The Drumbeat:Cespedes out of A's lineup with leg cramps, and more**

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Tokyo Dome, 3/25/2012 6:41pm

As expected, Yoenis Cespedes is not in today's lineup after leaving last night's game with cramps in one of his quadriceps that then led to some back tightness. Day game after a night game, artificial turf – no reason to push it with Cespedes, especially given his shorter spring training time. Manager Bob Melvin said Cespedes is getting lots of liquids, and he's expecting him to be in center field for Wednesday's Opening Night.

*UPDATE: I asked Cespedes if he's feeling better, and he said he is. He took batting practice and Melvin said he got in a hard workout but he won't play today. Melvin believes Cespedes is not a question mark for Wednesday night.*

*Kurt Suzuki will catch through Tyson Ross' innings, and Travis Schlichting and Evan Scribner are likely to pitch in relief. Wes Timmons is a good bet to see action today, too. Schlichting, Scribner and Timmons are expected to be reassigned to the minors after the game, though of course they will remain here in Japan with the team. All three are non-roster players who will not be eligible for the games against Seattle.*

*Melvin says it's possible that he'll use different first basemen in the two games against Seattle, which means Allen probably would go Wednesday and Ka'aihue on Thursday.*

*Another interesting tidbit from Melvin: Right-hander Ryan Cook could see some set-up duty. He thinks he has the makeup to handle it, because he doesn't seem to get rattled much. Also: He throws mid-high 90s.*

Here's today's lineup vs. Hanshin: Weeks 2B, Pennington SS, Crisp LF, Gomes DH, Reddick RF, Suzuki C, Ka'aihue 1B, Cowgill CF, Sogard 3B.

Sogard remains locked in a battle with Josh Donaldson for the third-base job. When the A's return from Japan to start the regular season up again, they're going to need to trim three players to get to the 25-man limit; they have a 28-man roster here, but they've only got 27 of them with them because Daric Barton remained in Arizona for extra work. One infielder – Donaldson, Sogard or Adam Rosales – likely would come off the roster, and whichever first baseman doesn't win that job, either Kila Ka'aihue or Brandon Allen. Allen remains the frontrunner for the spot.

The team also could leave Barton at Triple-A Sacramento to start the season; he has options left and Ka'aihue does not. That means the A's could keep two first basemen, because they A's won't need a fifth starter until April 16 or 17. So they could (and probably will) leave one starter – probably Graham Godfrey – in the minors until then. (Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock remain in the running for that last spot, too, but they've already been optioned out).

### **Ross has rough outing against Hanshin**

#### **Pennington, Suzuki homer in final Japan exhibition**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- The Hanshin Tigers, it appears, did plenty of homework on the American League West.

Just 24 hours after claiming victory over the Mariners, the Japanese club came out victors of a 12-6 decision against the A's, who watched righty Tyson Ross struggle against a feisty Tigers lineup in the Tokyo Dome.

Ross, in line to be Oakland's fourth starter, was tagged for eight runs and 10 hits in just four innings of work. Six of those runs were earned, as the A's defense also endured a rough day, committing three errors -- two by first baseman Kila Ka'aihue -- in the loss.

"They're a good-hitting team," Ross said. "I left the ball up in the zone on one too many pitches and got myself behind in counts."

It marked the final exhibition contest in Japan for the A's, who will take part in a workout Tuesday before christening the regular season with a matchup against the Mariners at the Tokyo Dome on Wednesday evening.

Offensively, the A's appear as ready as they'll ever be for a showdown with Seattle ace Felix Hernandez, who is 12-4 with a 2.54 ERA in 21 career starts against Oakland. After Sunday's 5-0 win over the Yomiuri Giants, they compiled

six more runs Monday, including a three-run shot from Kurt Suzuki -- his second home run in as many days -- and a solo home run from Cliff Pennington. Ka'aihue also hit an RBI single.

But the infielder's first error in the first inning proved costly, as a two-out home run off the bat of Takahiro Arai followed. Ross allowed another run in the second inning and four in the third, when the Tigers put together four consecutive hits.

"I liked [the offense] better than the rest of the day," manager Bob Melvin said. "Today wasn't our best day. We've had a real good spring, been focused all spring, played good defense. But I don't want to take anything away from them. They made a great impression on us all game long. We just didn't play one of our better games."

### **Cespedes rests in A's final Japan exhibition**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- As anticipated, Yoenis Cespedes was held out of Monday's exhibition game against the Hanshin Tigers after departing Sunday night's contest because of cramps in his quadriceps.

Cespedes, who was battling dehydration during an 0-for-4 performance, received plenty of liquids and took part in a series of workout drills in the morning. He's expected to be ready to go in center field for Wednesday's regular-season opener against the Mariners.

"We ran him pretty hard today," manager Bob Melvin said Monday. "He'll be good to go tomorrow."

The A's will take part in a workout at the Tokyo Dome on Tuesday before returning the next day for play vs. the Mariners. That gives the team an extra day to make sure Cespedes is 100 percent, and club officials have been intent on not rushing him since his arrival.

"He's coming to a new country, new team, and is expected to perform at a high level based on who he is and so forth, so there are a lot of challenges he's having to deal with that some of the other guys don't," Melvin said. "We knew there would be a bit of a time frame to help get him comfortable."

### **Third base still unsettled for Oakland**

TOKYO -- Brandon Allen appears set to take hold of the A's first-base job, while the battle for the one at third base continued in Tokyo on Monday, when Eric Sogard was handed a start at the hot corner against the Hanshin Tigers.

Manager Bob Melvin said in the morning he "is leaning toward" starting Allen over Kila Ka'aihue against Seattle's Felix Hernandez and Co. on Wednesday. But the skipper has yet to be swayed toward Sogard or Josh Donaldson, though a decision would likely come Tuesday.

Donaldson left Arizona having compiled a .231 average in 52 Cactus League at-bats. He tallied five RBIs but went without hitting a home run, while Sogard hit two out with seven RBIs and a .341 average in 44 at-bats.

Both could still land on the 25-man roster, as the A's are expected to keep two players out of the infield trio of Donaldson, Sogard and Adam Rosales upon their return to the Bay Area.

### **A's make final roster cuts for Opening Series**

TOKYO -- The A's set their 25-man roster Monday for the two-game Opening Series against the Mariners and, as expected, left off non-roster players Wes Timmons, Evan Scribner and Travis Schlichting.

Starters Tommy Milone and Tyson Ross, along with first baseman Daric Barton, who was held back in Arizona to get more innings, represent the three inactive players on the 28-man roster that was created specifically for Oakland and Seattle for the two games.

Milone and Ross pitched in the pair of exhibition games against the Yomiuri Giants and Hanshin Tigers, so their services are not needed for the regular-season contests, which will place starters Brandon McCarthy and Bartolo Colon on the mound.



Though Timmons, Scribner and Schlichting will not see action in the regular-season games, they'll conceivably jump right back into competition for a roster spot once the A's return to the Bay Area and play in another four exhibition games, one against Triple-A Sacramento and three vs. San Francisco.

Timmons, 33, is still seeking his first Major League appearance, having racked up 998 Minor League games in his 10-year professional career. But the A's already have several infielders on their roster, including Eric Sogard and Adam Rosales.

### **Challenge of playing in Japan can be worthwhile**

#### **Adjustments can be many, but some Americans discover success**

By Adam Berry / MLB.com

As Marc Kroon readied himself on May 3, 2005, to try for his second save in as many days -- his first attempt in front of his home crowd after taking over the Yokohama Bay Stars' closer's job from fan-favorite Kazuhiro Sasaki -- the stadium announcer excitedly belted out his introduction.

"Now pitching, Marc Kroon!"

The response from the 40,000 or so fans?

Silence.

"They were like, 'Excuse me?'" Kroon recalled. "It was the most awkward thing I've ever gone through in baseball."

As uncomfortable as the moment was, Kroon converted the save. He experienced many more rewarding moments during his six years with the BayStars and Yomiuri Giants, too.

That's the way it goes for the hundreds of Americans who have taken their baseball careers overseas: To reap the benefits of a fresh start, they must first overcome the challenges of being outsiders.

"I saw that guys who fought hard to make adjustments did well," said Orioles left-hander Tsuyoshi Wada, a four-time Nippon Professional Baseball All-Star. "And guys who didn't and just focused on what they wanted to do, they were not able to do that."

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Kroon was approached after a game in Colorado Springs in 2004. A man walked up to him in the parking lot, said he'd been following Kroon's pitching for a while and offered him a chance to play professionally in Japan.

The opportunity does not always present itself so directly.

Japanese teams scout Triple-A games and monitor Major League Baseball's transactions, looking for players being shuttled between the Majors and Minors.

Giants pitcher Ryan Vogelsong was approached in 2005 after bouncing between Triple-A and the Majors, declined, then accepted the offer after a rough 2006 season.

He had to decide quickly, as the deadline to sign was before the Majors' free-agency period even began. The same was true for former Phillies reliever Scott Mathieson, now with the Yomiuri Giants.

"I'm not looking at it as a stepping stone back to [the] Major Leagues," Mathieson said via email from Japan. "More as a new chapter in my life."

Robert Whiting, an author and expert on Japanese baseball, said the trend has shifted from Japanese clubs signing older stars on the downside of their careers to the supposed "Quadruple-A" players who often provide one tool their homegrown players lack -- power -- while seeking a fresh start and a salary often twice as high as their Minor League pay.

That's not quite the case for former Major League starter Brad Penny, who signed a one-year, \$4 million deal with the Softbank Hawks this past offseason. Penny enjoyed a mostly successful 12-year career in the Majors, most recently with the Tigers, yet he opted to pursue a career in Japan.

"I could have stayed over there and played," Penny said at his introductory news conference with the Hawks, "but I just thought, not too many times in my career am I going to get an opportunity like this, and I thought I might as well do it now."

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Like many Americans, Kroon initially struggled with the transition off the field. He was ready to go home after two weeks. In that time, he lost about eight pounds because he didn't eat Japanese food -- he never did during his six years there, in fact.

He ate rice, but he had to get creative with it. He put vinegar on it -- tartar sauce, even -- to give it flavor. There was a McDonald's there -- a refuge for many Americans in the country -- but it was a \$15 cab ride away.

"It cost me like \$50 for a Big Mac, and I got tired of doing that," Kroon said. "I was miserable, man."

Kroon, Vogelsong and Mathieson didn't find the language to be a particularly big problem. It wasn't easy, but they found ways to communicate. Colby Lewis, on the other hand, said it was "probably the toughest thing of all," whether he was trying to get a point across or was asking for something at the grocery store.

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But many Americans' problems with being outsiders -- *gaijin* -- don't occur at the grocery store. They come at the ballpark and with their new teams.

Vogelsong felt like he faced outrageously high expectations, like he needed to throw a two-hit shutout every time, because they paid him to come to Japan and pitch well. A manager once told Vogelsong he'd be removed from the game, no matter what, after he gave up his first run.

"They bring you over there to help that team get a little better, maybe take the next step. We're the help," Vogelsong said. "And I say that because they want you to be good, but they don't want you to be too good. That was hard for me to understand."

It forced him to become mentally stronger, but it wasn't ideal to feel like he was battling members of his own club while trying to pitch well to help them win. Other Americans who have played in Japan expressed similar feelings, saying the fans would rather see their homegrown players succeed.

Perhaps the worst part of Vogelsong's time in Japan, however, was the realization that he wasn't guaranteed a spot with the big league club.

He didn't end up going the first time he was told, but he couldn't avoid a trip to the farm -- few ever do. Only four foreigners are allowed to be on the big league club at the same time, but they can have as many as they want in the minors.

The Japanese farm system is much smaller than the American Minor League system, with each franchise having only one affiliate. It's not used specifically to humble Americans, Whiting wrote, but to make them work on their games rather than have them sit on the bench.

"It's basically like you're playing in the Gulf Coast League in Japan," Vogelsong said. "It's not fun."

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Kroon was one of the few Americans to avoid the minors altogether in Japan; he says it's his proudest accomplishment from his time there. He admits he was fortunate, but he also put in the work.

He soaked up as much knowledge as possible from Sasaki, learning everything he could so he could be respectful of the culture. Sasaki was equally respectful of Kroon, publicly supporting him in a newspaper article the day after what Kroon called the most awkward moment of his career.

"Sasaki always told me, 'Kroon, if you want the people to like you here, you have to perform on the field first,'" he said. "'If you want the people to love you here, you have to know that you're not in America.'"

Kroon did his part on the field first.

He set the national record for fastest pitch at 162 kilometers per hour. He led the Central League in saves in 2008, was named an All-Star, won a championship in 2009 and became the leading foreigner in career saves.

He threw out a first pitch to pop star Mariah Carey and met several other American celebrities he certainly wouldn't have had a chance to meet as a Triple-A reliever. By the time he left Japan, he found himself fully immersed in the Japanese culture.

"Once I realized that I could make a living over there," Kroon said, "it was a different ballgame."

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The stories from Americans who have played in Japan run the gamut of experiences. There's success. There's failure. Happiness. Misery. Brotherhood. Loneliness.

So, with all that in mind, if a young player came to them saying he was considering taking his career to Japan, what would they say?

"Absolutely," Kroon said. "If you don't have any motivation to go over there because you already have the money, then you're going to be like, 'I don't have to deal with this.' But if you're hungry, if you still believe you can get people out, and you're getting guaranteed money, take it. That's what I did, and I ran with it."

"If you're going to play just for the money because the money's better, you're not going to succeed," added Vogelsong. "If you're going to play to get better and enjoy the experience while you're there, no matter how bad it gets, you're going to do fine. It really is about that."

### **A's visit kids, troops at Yokota before this week's Major League opener**

By DAVE ORNAUER, Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — How often do Yokota youths get baseball tips from the pros? About as often as Major League ballplayers s enjoy a mid-day meal with GIs at Yokota's Samurai Café.

Eight members of the Oakland Athletics, visiting Tokyo for this week's MLB season-opening games against Seattle at Tokyo Dome, took three hours out of their schedule Sunday to visit with troops and their children, conducting a clinic for youngsters , then signing autographs and shaking hands at Bronco Field, then the base dining hall.

"What these people do for our country on a daily basis ... we wanted to come out here and work with them and thank them," said Mike Crowley, the A's team president.

He and MLB officials led a delegation that included pitchers Brian Fuentes and Jerry Blevins, infielders Jemile Weeks and Cliff Pennington and outfielders Jonny Gomes, Josh Reddick, Collin Cowgill and Seth Smith. They choppered from Tokyo's Hardy Barracks and spent three hours at Yokota before returning.

At Bronco Field, the youths were divided into groups, getting pointers on fielding and pitching, with plenty of autographs thrown in.

"Better technique," Yokota High senior pitcher Jesse Christmas said of what he picked up from Fuentes. "Learning new skills is always helpful."

Almost the entire Panthers squad, fresh off a 2-2 outing in the DODDS Japan tournament last weekend at Naval Air Facility Atsugi, turned out for Sunday's clinic, including freshman outfielder Austin Halverson. "It's a reminder that baseball is all about fun, especially when you're doing it with the pros," he said.

One former Panther who now works for MLB International in Tokyo, Shawn Novak, did much of the legwork for Sunday's visit, plus Monday's visit to Camp Zama by the Mariners and a joint trip Tuesday to Ishinomaki in northeast Japan, site of devastation from last year's earthquake and tsunami.

"It's a big opportunity for these kids," Novak said as he observed the clinic. "These guys are up and coming stars. You just soak it all in and you adjust it to how you play."

Autograph seekers represented kids of all ages. Garry Raymond, 12-year-old son of 5th Air Force vice commander Brig. Gen. Jay Raymond, wore a half-and-half Mariners-A's jacket which got signed by all eight players – "Really cool," he said.

Later at Samurai Café, 4-month-old Tyson Cruz, fully decked out in Athletics green and gold, became a huge hit with the players, each of whom signed Tyson's beanie cap.

Tech Sgt. Johnny Payton Jr. and Staff Sgt. Carlos Sanchez of Yokota's 374th Security Forces Squadron were on break from work when they were joined by Fuentes and Gomes for a meal and conversation. "Good by me. I was starving," Fuentes said of his first time sampling military cuisine.

"We appreciate these guys," said Payton, 36, of New Orleans. "This is nice, for them to come and show us some love. Definitely a morale booster."

Fuentes said he once toured Walter Reed Army Medical Center to visit wounded GIs, something he called a "reality check," and something he remembers when teams line up for the National Anthem before games. "We think and pray for these guys every day," Fuentes said.

## **Oakland Athletics 2012 preview**

By [Justin Gambrell](#), Knoxville Baseball Examiner

The Oakland Athletics seem to be defined by the "Moneyball" era, which has turned into a rallying cry for fans searching for an answer to another one of Billy Beane's roster shake-ups. Gone are the top level pitchers like Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill, replaced by younger faces who are cheaper and under longer control to the team. A's fans won't have much to enjoy in the line of wins, but there are plenty of prospects who will see time with Oakland this season.

Best of the best: Jemile Weeks. Jemile, the younger brother of Brewers's second baseman Rickie, is one of the youngest and most talented second basemen in the major leagues and stands to continue improving with a full-time job this season. Second base has been such a shallow position around baseball the past few years, giving the A's a fantastic building block for their next push towards contention.

The new guy: Yoenis Cespedes. The 26 year old Cuban brings a tremendous amount of upside to the A's organization. Cespedes is projected to hit for power and has the speed to steal around 20 bags a year, though he may struggle with striking out. The A's gave Cespedes a major league contract and have every intention of him making the team out of spring training.

The fatal flaw: The Rebuild. In a typical Oakland A's move, General Manager Billy Beane has blown up the team once more in an attempt to compete a few years from now, trading solid big leaguers for assets that will help the club down the road. Gone are the likes of Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, replaced by a myriad of prospects headlined by Jarrod Parker. Oakland needs to upgrade their infield aside from Jemile Weeks, and the club hopes that the pitchers they acquired will become stars. The American League West is stocked full of talent in Texas and Anaheim, meaning the Athletics could be in for a bumpy ride in 2012.

Down on the farm: Jarrod Parker. Parker was acquired from Arizona in the Trevor Cahill trade and figures to be a part of the A's rotation very soon. The organization is going to let Parker continue to pitch in Triple A before they bring him to the big leagues, hoping that some seasoning in Sacramento will help the youngster. Parker in an impact arm, and will probably be the first man up if there's an injury on the Oakland pitching staff.

Final verdict: The A's are going to struggle this season, plugging several new faces into roles that they weren't used to in previous years. There will be many growing pains, but Oakland officials have to believe that the team is moving in the right direction. Athletics fans have been patient through the years, watching talented players traded away for prospects year after year. Beane is banking on competing in a few years, but for this season they'll be lucky to finish ahead of the Mariners.

## **Oakland A's Billy Beane Spring Training 2012 Interview: Part 1**

by [Tyler Bleszinski](#), Athletics Nation

It's been a fascinating offseason for the [Oakland Athletics](#) to say the least. For the first part it looked like he was simply tearing it all down and throwing in the towel on 2012. Many were in favor of this plan. But then Billy Beane suddenly re-signed Coco Crisp. Then he shocked many by signed Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes. And finally, he brought in likely future Hall of Famer (if the PED suspensions don't stop it from happening) Manny Ramirez. And the team had the look of not necessarily a contender for the AL West crown in 2012, but it won't be the same walk in the park that it might've been prior to the late offseason moves.

I sat down with Billy Beane in his office in Phoenix, Arizona with a few days left in spring training before the team departed for Japan. As always, I enjoyed the interview and it remains my favorite part of my "job" to be able to talk shop with a guy I consider the smartest man in all of baseball.

This is the first of two parts so I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed conducting it. Another season start is just around the corner. Go A's! Hit the jump for my interview with Oakland A's GM Billy Beane.

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*Tyler Bleszinski: How would you characterize the moves you made this offseason?*

Billy Beane: I haven't had to characterize them but if I had to, there are two things you'd need to look at. We needed to turn back the clock a little bit on the service time of our players. And the other thing is we had a few good young players but if we're going to succeed, we need a lot of good young players. I'm not in the habit of characterizing my own moves but those were the two primary reasons we did it.

*TB: It seemed to baffle some fans because at first it seemed like you were moving forward with, well, we'll just be terrible for a while, get some great draft picks and build towards something special down the road.*

BB: I'd like to build towards something special down the road.

*TB: I think it wound up being a curveball when they saw the (Yoenis) Cespedes signing and the Manny signing.*

BB: No one tries to be terrible and I guarantee you had we not made the moves we did we would've been terrible.

*TB: I think I know you well enough now to know it isn't easy for you to accept being terrible.*

BB: If we take the three pitchers we traded back then we would've had to build an entire outfield with about four million dollars. You're just not going to be able to do that. We weren't going to be better than we were last year because of the players we lost. This was the only way we had a chance. Even if we took a step back last year, this was our only way of moving forward. It was going to be so hard to add anyone, because of the payroll issues, to add anything to the club. What we usually do is that any money that we have left over we're going to use it to try and improve the team. The misconception here is that we're just taking profits and putting it in our pockets and we've never done that. We've basically spent what we have every year. That's why you can't overreact to things in November and December simply because there's a lot of winter left. You can't look at the winter in a linear fashion because it just doesn't work that way, as it's an entire process.

*TB: Has that changed a lot in your time as GM? I remember just a few years ago a lot of the stuff was happening in November and December and now it appears like it's going over into January and even February.*

BB: Yes.

*TB: Why do you think that is?*

BB: There's been years that we've been aggressive and we have had money out there for a number of players but players haven't been interested in coming here. In a number of cases we offered more money. That's happened the last three offseasons. But there seems to be more players out there in January. We signed Grant (Balfour) in January. He was still out there and we had money. This year it was Cespedes. The timing on that helped us because had he been a free agent earlier in the winter it might've been a little more difficult for us to sign him, because a lot of teams would have a lot of capital left. When he was finally allowed to become a free agent there were a number of teams that might've been interested that had already spent a good portion of their money.

*TB: What was that process like in terms of signing him (Cespedes)?*

BB: It was actually pretty smooth. When he first became a free agent we had our guys down there and were staying on top of things. I don't think early in the winter we had any illusions that we were going to be able to sign him. We'd seen him in a lot of the amateur tournaments and as much information as you can have on those guys, which is admittedly not a lot, we'd seen him play in every tournament we could see him play. We did spend the whole winter to continue to try and get as much information as we could. Most of those players you don't know a lot about. But we did take some time to get to know him.

*TB: And certainly watch his YouTube workout video?*

BB: I actually couldn't get through the whole thing.

*TB: Why? You aren't a Christopher Cross fan or what?*

BB: (laughing) Yeah you got me. I don't think there's any denying his physical talent. The adjustment will start with him culturally. This is a major change in his life. And then the major leagues.

*TB: Does he speak any English?*

BB: No. Ariel Prieto will be with him throughout the entire season.

*TB: Did you travel down and see him down there?*

BB: No. Early on I sent all our guys down there but I didn't go down. When he first started working out for people it was in October and November and I didn't think we were going to be in a position to sign him because of what we thought he might command. We did stay on it though and when it happened it happened relatively quick in January.

*TB: The Manny Ramirez signing, did you give any thought to the potential impact and role Manny could play in helping Cespedes given that they're both right-handed hitters and Manny speaks his language?*

BB: We looked at each move independently. Although having a guy like Manny who does speak the language and knows the league as Manny does, as he's a student of hitting, it would certainly be a benefit. But it wasn't the reason.

*TB: Outside of being a remarkable athlete, what do you like about Cespedes as a baseball player? Does he have a lot of holes and learning to do?*

BB: We're still learning a lot about it. We simply don't know enough yet. Someone asked me recently, is he going to hit? It's a great question and we just don't know yet. But if we knew for sure that he was going to hit he would've cost \$100 million.

*TB: And he would've been out of your range.*

BB: Yeah. But he's got tremendous skills. Any decision that you make when you have a limited amount of information, there will be a certain amount of risk to it. What we've really been impressed with is his work effort. It's just been off the charts. In fact we've had to hold him back. He almost works too hard. He's here at the ballpark at seven in the morning out on the field doing something. He's an explosive athlete. I don't know if you saw the first game he played but the ball really jumps off his bat. He's a threat. He's going to have some growing pains. He's a tremendous physical talent with a great work ethic and that's an ideal combination.

*TB: When do you make the decision about whether or not he starts with the big club?*

BB: It will probably be 11<sup>th</sup> hour **(Author's note: Billy actually made the decision two days after I interviewed him so it was not really 11<sup>th</sup> hour)**. We're going to take advantage of all the time we have and it will probably be a last minute decision.

*TB: There was a rumor just yesterday, and I know how you feel about rumors so apologies for even asking it, that you were still actively seeking more talent right now in the international market.*

BB: We're keeping our fingers on it but there's nothing imminent. There was a rumor that we put out a significant amount of money to another free agent player but that's completely false.

*TB: Did it happen to be a shortstop?*

BB: Yeah an infielder. But it was completely false. Dan Kantrovitz (former scouting staffer with the A's) who got taken away from us by the St. Louis Cardinals. He's overseeing international and domestic for them which is a great promotion for him. He did a great job of really building an infrastructure here for us in looking at the international market. Sam Geaney who was our assistant scouting director, is going to take over as the coordinator of international scouting. He's taken right where Dan left off. But Dan did a fantastic job and worked really hard the last three years of putting the pillars in place. We're way farther ahead than we were years ago in knowing what is going on from an international standpoint.

*TB: Speaking of international, how do you feel about where Michael Ynoa is right now?*

BB: Right now he's ready to go. He got cleared.

*TB: Do you know how he's throwing?*

BB: No he's just getting over here but we know that he is healthy and that's the important thing. With him it's always been a matter of health. It's been two years sometime during the season when he had the Tommy John surgery. I don't think there's any denying his talent. When he was out there, he's been really good. Remember he's only 20 so he's very young and this would be a good year for him to take off.

*TB: Where do you think he's going to start the season? What level?*

BB: We're still talking about it. It's likely he might stay down here in the extended program for a little bit just to get him up to a certain amount of innings. We're going to try to get him out as soon as we can to a full season club.

*TB: When you were building the team this past offseason, was there a certain date that you were aiming for this team to come together? For example, I'm looking towards 2015. How much did the stadium situation and what you were anticipating happening with that impact the decisions in what you got back?*

BB: No one has winked at us or let us know anything about the stadium situation. We were going to have to do this any way. And truthfully if we're still in a state of limbo in a few years, we'll simply have to do it again. That's what surprised me going back to your first question. No one should be surprised by anything we do. We've done this for 15 years. It isn't because we're trying to irritate people. We do it because we have no choice. If we're still in the same situation we're in now in the future, we'll have to do it again.

*TB: It's all about the cycles then and the cycle will constantly repeat itself?*

BB: Yeah and the cycles are shorter so that's the problem.

*TB: That's what I'm saying. It seems like it's happening more quickly than ever before.*

BB: Even if you look at the history of our moves, Jason (Giambi) and Miguel (Tejada), they stayed the whole six years here up to free agency. And then the next group of guys, Tim Hudson and Mark Mulder, Tim was entering his free agent-to-be-year and Mark was entering his four plus year. Then the next group the Dan Haren and Nick Swisher's had just become arbitration-eligible. Now you're down to the zero to three guys. One of the reasons is when you do move guys you're trying to get as much as you can back. The return on players who are now into their arbitration years isn't much any more.

*TB: Because they're more expensive.*

BB: They're more expensive and teams that are going to give up good young players want to have as much control of what they're getting as much as possible. So the cycle keeps shrinking. Each group of guys has come down shorter and shorter. The cost of acquiring young players has gone way up.

*TB: Yet even though it seems to be getting more difficult, it's been widely reported that you've signed an extension to be with the A's through 2019.*

BB: Yeah it's not completely done. And it's not that cut and dry.

*TB: You must be enjoying the cycles is what I'm getting at, if you're willing to entertain it.*

BB: Listen every year I've had an opportunity to leave here and I stay here. I do love this franchise and I have to believe that there are bluer skies ahead. But we're going to need to hear something soon. We really are. It used to be in our league, we had the Yankees (payroll) and everyone had to deal with that. Then you had the Red Sox. Now these cable deals that these teams are signing such as the Rangers and Angels and their payrolls are going there too. And don't kid yourself, Houston is right around the corner. They're going to be a high revenue club in our division and they have a pretty bright guy taking over that club. They're going to do a good job and they're going to do it right and when they do they're going to have the capital to keep it around.

*TB: What keeps you so attached to this franchise then? Is it the hope for that new stadium and the bluer sky?*

BB: Yes. I do like the building process. I really like the group of young players that we have. I don't know what they're going to do this year. We acquired 10 players for those three players. I think on some level all of those 10 will be major league players. We've got the 11<sup>th</sup> pick in the draft this year. We've got three compensation picks this year. We've got four high picks. This is the first time we've had this many high picks in a long time. We're also starting to see guys like Michael Choice, Grant Green and Sonny Gray. Michael (Ynoa) will be back. We have a very good chance of having a lot of good young players which is what you need. You need that because you're going to have attrition and injuries with some of them and some of them aren't going to perform at the level (you expect them to). Then you'll be left with the rest of the guys. We have a much larger pool so I have a lot of hope for this group. I think this group will have a chance to play in a new stadium.

*TB: You talk about your feeling about this group and it's had an exceptional spring training, at least record-wise. Do you put any stock at all in winning and losing during spring training? At least maybe helping out the vibe and culture of the team. Or is it, this is just spring training and means nothing?*

BB: A little bit of everything you just said. It is just spring training. Bob (Melvin) has the perfect pitch to the guys. He really emphasizes yes, it is just spring training but when you're a young guy trying to make your mark it does mean something in terms of creating a positive environment. Listen, I'd rather be winning games down here than losing games. I saw Arizona down here and they had a terrible year down here and then they had a great regular season. I don't put much stock in performance. I will say this, this has been the best-run spring training since I've been here. Guys have played really hard.

*TB: You mean from the manager's standpoint?*

BB: Everything. It starts with the manager. He sets the tone and Bob had a plan when he came out here as to how he wanted guys to perform and how he wants them to play the game. They've done that every single game. They care. They're out there playing like they care. What you don't want is to have young players say, "Well this is spring training I'm just getting into shape." That's for veteran guys. We don't have enough veterans to have guys saying that.

*TB: Do you think it helps that you have open competitions for so many positions? It seems like a lot of the team is unsettled. Even with the Sizemore injury and him going down, third base is still kind of up in the air. There are very few spots that are already decided. You probably have two starting pitching spots with Bartolo Colon and Brandon McCarthy nailed down. You've got the catcher spot with Suzuki. You've got Pennington at shortstop and Weeks at second base. Almost everything else is seemingly up in the air.*

BB: It probably does help. I think we come into spring with an idea of who is going break with us. There might be a performance during the spring that might tilt you one way or the other. We've always tried to resist three-week auditions as the reason for making a decision. But it's hard to watch a guy who is playing well and not have it impact you. The guys on the field don't know that though. They're all fighting for a spot and I do think it has something to do with the spring we've had. I said this in our (internal) meeting today and I'll say it again right now, this is the best-run camp since I've been here.



*TB: Ever? That you've been involved in.*

BB: Since I've been the GM, yeah. During Tony's (Larussa) years, it was a different team.

*TB: Veterans going through the motions.*

BB: Yeah exactly. I remember with Bob Wells down here he had like a 10 ERA and then he won the Cy Young. So they're preparing differently. Going back to my time as GM, I know that in 2001 we had a really good camp but we had a really good team. We started out like 15-3. Given that there were so many young guys here, I've been pleased on a daily basis. They've cared about every inning in every game which is what you want to see. It's been a lot of fun.

*TB: Do you think this team can compete with payrolls as big as the Angels and Rangers this year?*

BB: Those are good teams. You never say never with young players. I think more than anything this spring has at least made them feel like they can compete. We'll see at what level. But I think they know that there are a bunch of guys around them that will be here for a while that have a chance to get better. This team has a chance to get better over the course of the season. It's also a team that by and large, the core of it will return next year. You've got a young guy like Josh Reddick, and Colin Cowgill has had a fantastic camp. The young pitchers. Then you have Dallas Braden and Brett Anderson coming back at some point during the season. Dallas before Brett. Those are two good players to bring in. I think it's a good building block going forward. I don't have any idea how they're going to perform because there are so many new guys.

*TB: Should they all wear nametags like Brandon McCarthy suggested?*

BB: (laughs) Yeah. You know what? This is more fun for me than last year simply because we had so many free agents, that we knew that everything had to be perfect in order for it to work. Everyone had to stay healthy and even if they did a lot of them weren't going to be back the next year any way. That's not a lot of fun for me. I want to create something...

*TB: That's building.*

BB: Building, exactly. The trendline is important to me. Where is the trendline going to hit? I'm optimistic that this is a group of players that is going to make a real solid core for us for a while, along with all the draft choices. It's a more enjoyable time to be running this club. Last year we knew that we put all our eggs in one basket and we knew if it didn't work we didn't have enough young minor league players and extra draft choices. That's all changed significantly.