

A's News Clips, Wednesday, March 28, 2012

A's lose opener in extra innings to Mariners in Tokyo

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

The A's were held to five hits in a 3-1 loss to the Seattle Mariners in 11 innings Wednesday morning to open their 2012 season.

The A's lost their eighth straight opener, extending a franchise record.

A crowd of 44,227 whipped itself into a frenzy over native son Ichiro Suzuki, the Seattle right fielder playing his first game in Japan as a Mariner. He obliged his fans with a four-hit night.

But it was second baseman Dustin Ackley who hurt the A's most, homering off Brandon McCarthy in the fourth to give Seattle a 1-0 lead, then delivering a go-ahead single off Andrew Carignan in the top of the 11th to break a 1-1 tie. Ichiro followed with a run-scoring single to pad Seattle's lead.

The A's scored their only run on Kurt Suzuki's double to left that scored Cliff Pennington in the fourth to tie the score.

McCarthy pitched well enough to win, going seven innings and allowing just the Ackley homer.

Mariners starter Felix Hernandez went eight innings, allowing five hits with six strikeouts.

Suzuki singled in his first three at-bats, two of them infield jobs, and lined out to left in the ninth.

Inside the Oakland A's: A's third base intrigue continues

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/28/2012, 2:15am

Eric Sogard gets the nod over Josh Donaldson at third base tonight. "I wanted to get, really not so much a left-handed bat, but more of a contact bat tonight with Sogard," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "I think Sogard has played well enough to deserve the start tonight." Interestingly, Melvin said he still considers Donaldson his starting third baseman. "I told Josh yesterday, 'You know what? You're our starting third baseman, you're just not starting tonight.' No matter what happens tonight, Donaldson will be in there tomorrow."

Remember that the A's go home and play four exhibitions before settling on a true 25-man roster and starting lineup, so they're still evaluating. Donaldson has not grabbed the reins on the third base job to this point, but I'm not sure I expected him to despite the opportunity he was given. Switching from catcher to third base is quite the adjustment. I know Donaldson got time at third last season and in winter ball, but he's still got a lot of learning to do over there. As for Sogard, he gets his first opening night start, so I'd expect lots of his family and friends back home in Phoenix to be staying up late tonight to watch this one.

-In the 'purely hunch' department, I'm going with Josh Reddick as my pregame prediction to have a big night for the A's. For the Mariners? Let's go Dustin Ackley, which ain't really going out on a limb ...

A's players tour disaster zone in Japan

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

A trio of A's pitchers visited the coastal Japanese town of Ishinomaki on Tuesday, helping stage a youth baseball clinic in an area still reeling from last year's 9.0 earthquake and tsunami.

It was a sobering and inspiring experience all rolled into one.

The tsunami ripped through Ishinomaki last March, killing nearly 5,000 and leaving more than 50,000 homeless. Signs of the destruction remain everywhere, from the barren plots of land where houses once stood to the stacks of wrecked cars piled on top of each other.

Contrast that with the celebratory scene that unfolded when A's pitchers Tom Milone, Tyson Ross and Evan Scribner stopped off a bus in front of Ishinomaki Municipal Baseball Stadium, accompanied by a group of Seattle Mariners players.

The 100 Little Leaguers chosen to participate in the clinic, plus numerous teammates and friends, burst into applause and formed a greeting line, high-fiving players as they went by.

Milone said he was amazed by the resilient spirit of those in Ishinomaki, located about 210 miles northeast of Tokyo.

"We can't be in their shoes," Milone said. "We can't feel what they felt a year ago when the tsunami hit. But you can get a feeling for the kind of people they are. They come out here and they're still smiling even though something devastating like that happens."

The clinic was scheduled in conjunction with the A's season-opening two-game series against the Mariners that begins Wednesday at the Tokyo Dome.

Major League Baseball and the MLB Players Association presented a \$500,000 check to city leaders to help renovate Ishinomaki Stadium, used by the Japanese military in relief efforts after the tsunami.

Players and team officials took a 90-minute bullet train ride from Tokyo to Sendai, where a chartered bus drove them on the hour-long trip to Ishinomaki, a city of approximately 160,000.

Making their way toward the stadium, they surveyed the damage.

Entire blocks of houses were washed away by the tsunami, which was triggered by the massive earthquake that struck approximately 45 miles off shore in the Pacific Ocean.

The tsunami came 30 minutes after the earthquake, in the form of a 16-foot high tidal wave that crashed through the city. Seventy of 108 children at Okawa Elementary School died, and for weeks, people waited for word about loved ones who had gone missing.

"It's incredible how much damage there was," Ross said. "You see debris everywhere, the large piles of cars off on the side of the road, the little cemeteries that they had right down the hillside. It's devastating."

But at the stadium Tuesday, all troubles seemed temporarily left behind.

The kids — half wearing A's hats and half wearing Mariners hats -- gathered in the field area as parents watched from the elevated bleachers that form a half-circle around the field.

Every time a reporter or photographer pointed a camera at a particular group of kids, they would form a tight bunch and pose.

Stomper, the A's mascot, proved a bigger attraction than the major leaguers, with groups of kids swarming him wherever he went.

"As you can see from the looks on the kids' faces, they're smiling, they're happy," city official Shoshin Kometani said. "When we see the kids' faces and they're happy, it's a really good thing."

Ross and Scribner looked on as a group played catch in right field. On occasion, one of them would step in and offer instruction.

"They're so thankful," Scribner said. "You can tell that they just want to be near you."

A's and Mariners players served lunch to the kids — Tonjiru, a Japanese pork stew — before climbing back on the bus and heading back to the Sendai station.

The day's only glitch — the two buses carrying players, team officials and media were late getting back to the Sendai station. Players from both teams missed their train, though they caught another one shortly after that and were delayed less than an hour getting back to the New Otani hotel, where both teams are staying.

A's president Mike Crowley said the afternoon meant a lot to him.

"It's a small piece, but it's part of their recovery," he said. "Fortunately, kids are resilient. Just to see the smiles — it's a pretty good day."

The Drumbeat: Cespedes records first big-league hit in A's Opening Night loss

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Tokyo Dome, 3/28/2012, 5:08am

Yoenis Cespedes was hitting seventh tonight, which was unexpected, but manager Bob Melvin said it wouldn't hurt to take a little pressure of him, and after striking out in his first big-league at-bat — against Felix Hernandez, no shame in that — and getting hit in his second plate appearance, Cespedes drilled a double to right center in the seventh.

That was the biggest moment of the night for the A's, who lost 3-1 in 11 innings. They've dropped eight in a row on Opening Day, the most since the Phillies from 1985-92.

The center of attention on Opening Night here was Ichiro Suzuki. Flashbulbs blazed every time he came up, and each time, he responded, with singles in each of his first three at-bats.

But besides Ichiro's relentless hitting and a solo homer by Dustin Ackley in the fourth, the Mariners got little against Brandon McCarthy, who went seven innings and allowed one run on six hits and no walks. He struck out three, and he left with the game tied 1-1.

The A's tied it up in the bottom of the fourth when Cliff Pennington doubled, moved to third on a groundout, and scored on a doubled by Kurt Suzuki, who was hitting in the fifth spot in the lineup because of his good numbers against Felix Hernandez.

There was a terrific pregame ceremony honoring heroes of the tsunami recovery efforts before the game. Among those singled out were Andy and Jean Anderson of Virginia, whose daughter, Taylor, was killed in the March 2011 disaster — they came to Japan after Taylor's death to help in the area near Ishinomaki where she had been working.

MLB also brought some of the kids from yesterday's youth clinic to take the field before the game, and among those children was Ryuto Abe, featured in today's Chronicle. I also took a photo of Ryuto, 11, that was featured on the Drumbeat — he lost his mom in the tsunami, and as you might guess, his story really got to me. So it was terrific to see him again — they brought him and two other kids to a press conference — and to see how much fun he and the other youth-league players from the Ishinomaki area were having at a real major-league game.

Ready to take a run at AL West

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Even with the additions of Yoenis Céspedes and, when he's eligible to rejoin the team, Manny Ramirez, the A's cannot match their division rivals, the Angels and Rangers, when it comes to power.

So how can Oakland hope to compete in the AL West? With an asset that the Angels employed to good effect in their many playoff appearances the past decade: baserunning. Just being fast? Not enough. The club also must do everything right on the bases, including going from first to third with regularity — just like those winning Angels teams.

"Where is the power coming from?" wondered Hall of Famer Rickey Henderson, now a part-time A's coach. "We don't have (any). We don't have a threat. So we have to do something different to score runs."

The A's do have speed: With Cliff Pennington expected to hit ninth, and Jemile Weeks and Coco Crisp atop the order, that's three batters in a row with great wheels, and all three are switch-hitters, to boot. That combo could drive opposing managers, pitchers and catchers to distraction.

"I do like the dynamic of those three," manager Bob Melvin said of using them consecutively.

Even outfielders will think twice if the A's establish themselves as a team that runs at will, be it stealing bases or taking extra bases.

"It's not speed, it's applying pressure," A's outfielder Jonny Gomes said. "That's what's valuable. That's what Anaheim did. They'd hit a ball to the outfield, and it's panic. 'Get it in, get it in,' and the next thing you know, it gets bobbled. That's what happens when you play the game right.

"That's the name of the game. But you've got to have it on your mind from jump street - 'I'm going to third.' Even an out in that situation sends a message that can help you the next at-bat, or the next series, because everyone knows they have to rush. That can set things up down the road, thinking you might do that again."

For a team that cannot afford bashers who are in their prime - Albert Pujols went to the Angels, and the A's have struck out in recent years on Adrian Beltre and Lance Berkman - speed is something of the new "Moneyball." It's cheaper.

"If you don't have four guys hitting 15-20 homers, you've got to manufacture something," Henderson said.

Henderson is quick to say that it takes more than merely running: Players must get on base consistently, and then they must stay healthy. Crisp tied for the league lead in steals last year, with a career-high 49, but he usually goes on the disabled list once or twice a season.

Henderson is working with him and all the A's base-stealers on ways to limit the pounding that comes with sliding. "It takes a toll," Henderson said. "I believe in being flexible; that's what keeps you out of the training room when you're stealing bases. If you're not flexible and you're landing, bang, hard, something is going to give."

Crisp has established himself as a player who can steal 50, given full health, and Henderson believes Weeks could be a .300 hitter who nabs 35-50 bases.

There is the flip side, too, when it comes to speed. The A's must be able to limit opponents on the bases, which is why catcher Kurt Suzuki has spent much of the spring revamping his throwing technique with Melvin and Triple-A Sacramento manager Darren Bush. Suzuki has shown a strong arm this spring, as has backup Anthony Recker.

More important, the A's young pitchers must do an adequate job of holding runners, something the new starters did with varying degrees of success this spring. Melvin has said that will be an area of emphasis this season, along with team defense.

If, in the end equation, the A's running game is more successful than the opposition's, they've got a fighting chance.

"It's the element of surprise," Weeks said. "It puts everyone on edge. It keeps managers and players on their toes. Speed can be a big threat, and we have a lot of it."

"Obviously, a huge part of our winning will be utilizing our legs," Crisp said. "We're going to have a good group of guys who can create havoc."

2012 A's roster breakdown

Hitting

There won't be much of a power threat until Manny Ramirez finishes his 50-game suspension for violating baseball's drug policy, but there is speed aplenty. Overall, the lineup might be better than last year's, with the additions of Yoenis Céspedes, Josh Reddick and the platoon combo of Jonny Gomes and Seth Smith. If Céspedes adjusts to the major leagues quickly, the A's could have a candidate for Rookie of the Year, but in the AL West, Oakland's lineup is third-best, at best.

Projected lineup

Jemile Weeks, 2B: Many players experience drop-offs after a strong first season, but the A's have no such concerns about the confident Weeks, younger brother of Milwaukee second baseman Rickie Weeks.

Coco Crisp, LF: Crisp wasn't thrilled to move from center field to left to accommodate Céspedes, but when healthy, Crisp is a dangerous offensive player who can hit for average and steal bases, tying for the league lead last year.

Seth Smith/Jonny Gomes, DH: Until Ramirez returns from his suspension, Smith, a left-handed hitter, and Gomes, a right-hander, are expected to split duties here while occasionally playing the outfield.

Yoenis Céspedes, CF: A Cuban defector, Céspedes, 26, hasn't played pro ball in the United States, but he is a potential standout who hit 33 homers and drove in 99 runs in 90 games his final season in Cuba.

Josh Reddick, RF: Reddick, who came to Oakland in the Andrew Bailey deal with Boston, had a strong spring, batting .333 in Cactus League play.

Kurt Suzuki, C: Suzuki has put on 15 pounds in an effort to improve his stamina this season, and the weight gain might translate into some extra power, too.

Brandon Allen, 1B: This spot could remain unsettled until the A's play their home opener April 6. Daric Barton very well could wind up here in his old job.

Josh Donaldson, 3B: Expect to see Eric Sogard here a lot, too, unless the A's make a trade to bring in a more experienced third baseman, such as Alberto Callaspo.

Cliff Pennington, SS: The A's love having three speedy switch-hitters in a row in Pennington, Weeks and Crisp.

Bench: With Gomes and Smith platooning and another outfielder, Collin Cowgill, also available, the A's have a very capable set of extra outfielders, pinch hitters and pinch runners. Anthony Recker will take over the backup-catcher role. Sogard and Adam Rosales both can be used as utility infielders.

Pitching

Oakland traded three All-Stars during the winter, not a recipe for improved pitching. Until Dallas Braden returns to the rotation in late April or early May, three of the A's projected starters will have little big-league experience, and Grant Balfour, now the A's closer, hasn't handled that role before on a full-time basis. Brett Anderson is expected back around midseason, and young newcomers Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock are likely to join the rotation at some point.

Projected rotation

RHP Brandon McCarthy: McCarthy established himself as a solid big-league pitcher with a fine season in Oakland, and that, combined with the A's trades this winter, means he was scheduled to start the season opener in Japan and the home opener in Oakland.

RHP Bartolo Colon: Complete with a stem-cell-repaired shoulder and elbow, Colon got his career back on track with a decent season with the Yankees, though he tailed off in the second half.

LHP Tommy Milone: Milone, 25, appears likely to be the only one of Oakland's new pitchers to win a rotation spot out of the gate; he was acquired in the Gio Gonzalez deal with Washington.

RHP Tyson Ross: Ross, who grew up in Oakland and attended Cal, put together an excellent spring; he simply needs to find a way to stay healthy.

RHP Graham Godfrey: Godfrey has impressed in brief appearances with Oakland, but Braden is likely to move into this spot in late April or early May.

Bullpen: With Bailey gone, Balfour becomes a full-time closer for the first time. Balfour has been one of the league's better setup men the past several years, and he stated a strong desire this spring for the closer job. Brian Fuentes will work in a setup role. Joey Devine, when he returns from biceps tendinitis, and Fautino De Los Santos also will work in late-inning situations. Lefty Jerry Blevins will be in the mix, and another lefty, Jordan Norberto, is likely to get some

duty this season. The A's regard right-hander Ryan Cook highly; he was obtained in the Trevor Cahill deal with Arizona.

A's, Giants among teams hustling to pick up speed

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

Gary Brown usually was the smallest kid on the baseball field, but he found a way to outperform everyone else despite his physical limitations.

"Going into my eighth-grade year, I was 4-11 and weighed 80 pounds," he said, "and all I could do is run."

There you go.

Brown has grown a bit but never stopped running. Nowadays, he's a blur on the basepaths and a force in the outfield, not to mention a dangerous hitter. His speed all over the diamond is a reason he's the Giants' top prospect and center fielder/leadoff hitter of the future.

"I still have a little guy's mentality," said Brown, now at least a foot taller. "The competitiveness is always there because of that. The ability to run has given me that confidence. The big guys can hit home runs, but I can go catch it or use my speed to prevent you from doing something or steal a base on you. Running is something I've always been thankful for."

Brown is the prototypical modern-day ballplayer, a five-tool talent in the steroid-testing era who emphasizes speed and athleticism over power and bulk. With fewer hitters consistently jacking the ball 450 feet, teams are pursuing more athletic players and using more advanced statistical analysis in their evaluations.

Coming off an eye-catching season with Class A San Jose, Brown gets on base a lot. Has pop. Runs the bases well. Defends well. Has numbers through the roof. He's a sabermetrician's dream. Just don't ask him if he's a sabermetrics kind of guy.

"What's that?" he asked.

It's a telling response from someone who simply plays the game hard and leaves the quantitative analyzing to the quantitative analysts. For all the talk of "Moneyball" principles and applying sabermetrics to find players with undervalued skills, it's still see ball, hit ball for the folks in uniform.

"I think, obviously, there's some good stuff in there or else it wouldn't be around," Brown said. "I'm from the old school. I think it comes down to the basics. You can either play or you can't. There are obviously things you've got to be able to do. I think the most important thing is having trust in your teammates and having teammates trust in you. You can't get that in any kind of stat."

Check the numbers

He's right. But stats - especially nontraditional stats - are more useful (and available) than ever for player evaluation and roster construction. No longer would a team pooh-poooh advanced statistical analysis when valuing a player. Even the Giants, traditionally a scouting-heavy organization under general manager Brian Sabean, had sabermetricians on staff on their road to the 2010 championship.

While on-base percentage was the hip undervalued commodity in the early 2000s - maximized by A's GM Billy Beane and later glamorized by actor/producer Brad Pitt - and defense was the undervalued focus a couple of years ago, speed now is at the forefront, and it goes well beyond the stolen base, which once was the primary stat for computing speed.

Nowadays, fans go to websites such as FanGraphs and Baseball Prospectus for measurements that rate various elements of speed in the game, and teams usually have their own high-tech setups to collect further data in a bid to gain an edge.

"You're seeing a more well-rounded view of players because the metrics have gotten more comprehensive through technology," Beane said. "People used to equate speed with the stolen base. But, really, you've seen an increase in wanting speed players because of the ability to measure speed's impact on defense and baserunning and quantifying that impact.

"I don't think you're seeing more stolen bases, but you may be seeing more speed because that speed does impact those two parts of the game. Guys who can run and guys who can play defense are being valued higher because we can measure their performance. It's the whole evolution of statistics. When I first started, it was really weighted toward offense. Now it's much more spread out.

"That being said, I'd like nine Babe Ruths. Because he could pitch, too, by the way."

Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence that the only free agent Beane re-signed was Coco Crisp, the fastest and most athletic player on last year's team, at least until Jemile Weeks arrived. Beane let go of Josh Willingham, David DeJesus and Hideki Matsui, but Crisp returned after leading the league in steals and ranking high in baserunning metrics, though he was a tad below average in defensive metrics.

Crisp now is in left, thanks to the presence of Yoenis Céspedes, who was a five-tool star in Cuba and joined the A's in an acquisition that stunned the baseball world: \$36 million over four years. Suddenly, with Weeks, Crisp and Céspedes, the A's potentially are dangerous atop the lineup, thanks in part to their speed.

Giants shift gears

Across the bay, Sabean sought a cheaper alternative to free-agent sluggers Albert Pujols and Prince Fielder by trading for Angel Pagan and Melky Cabrera and signing Gregor Blanco to a minor-league deal. If Brandon Crawford, Brandon Belt, Nate Schierholtz and Emmanuel Burriss get significant time, this could be the most athletic team on Sabean's 16-year watch as GM.

"Sometimes it depends on the pool of available players," he said. "Who's coming through your minor-league system? Who's out there in trades? Who's available in the free-agent market? Timing is a factor in tweaking your team. Having said that, with our ballpark and pitching staff, speed in some form is almost a must."

Sabean's two World Series teams weren't necessarily speed-oriented. The 2002 team was more about power, the 2010 team about pitching. Station-to-station baseball was acceptable. No longer. The Diamondbacks were the class of the NL West last year, unseating the Giants with a more athletic, healthier and quicker team.

So the Giants responded, replacing Carlos Beltran, Cody Ross and Pat Burrell with the speedier Pagan, Cabrera and Blanco. In one Cactus League game, Pagan doubled, tripled and made a diving catch in left-center. In another, Blanco opened the first inning with a walk, advanced two bases on a dribbler to first and scored on a grounder to short.

For a team that scored from second on singles 90 times (ranking 14th in the league) and went first to third on singles 74 times (ranking 10th), more speed would be refreshing.

"It's generally appreciated by all if you run the bases better, if your range is better, if your energy is better," Sabean said. "A lot of games are won first to third or first to home, challenging the outfield to make a play. So it's not just in the form of the speed itself. It's how usable it is."

The art of the stolen base

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle

Viewed in a certain light, the major leagues' stolen-base history reads like fiction. Some numbers simply do not look real. The notion of "eras" can be vague in sports, but not here. Long before the A's Rickey Henderson set the modern record of 130 in 1982, baseball underwent tactical shifts of seismic proportions.

At the turn of the 20th century, a time most historians pinpoint as the birth of the modern game, the baseball was a primitive sphere that didn't travel so well and was kept in the ballgame until it began to unravel. At the power-starved low point of the Dead Ball Era (1900-1919), the 1908 Chicago White Sox hit just three home runs *all season* - and four the following year.

There wasn't much point in trying to clear the fences, so teams were built around speed, strategy and the manufacturing of runs. You weren't much use to the 1911 New York Giants if you couldn't run, and that team stole a mind-blowing 347 bases while hitting 41 homers.

Tigers great Ty Cobb always said that Clyde Milan, an outfielder for the Washington Senators, was the fastest baserunner he ever saw - showcased by Milan's league-leading 88 steals in 1912 and 75 the following year. But Cobb was the master, clearing the 60 mark six times from 1909 through 1916 and setting a long-standing record of 96 in 1915.

Cobb wasn't merely fast and aggressive; he was downright mean. He slid into the bases angry, with spikes high, often with intent to maim. His batting was legendary (.366 lifetime average), and he came to symbolize a roguish, rough-

and-ready period in which gambling - in the stands, in the taverns and, yes, sometimes within the game itself - was commonplace.

Ruth changes the game

In February 1920, the owners agreed to employ a livelier ball, along with instructions to the umpires to keep a fresh ball in play at all times (one day in 1916, an entire game was played using one ball). Babe Ruth had shocked the baseball world with a record 29 homers the previous year, and he was about to change the game forever: 54 homers in 1920, a surrealistic feat akin to Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point game.

It would be an understatement to suggest that Ruth was ahead of his time. As the Bambino ascended to 59 homers in the 1921 season, the National League leader (San Francisco-born George "High Pockets" Kelly) had 23 for the New York Giants. But a major transition was at hand. Why gamble on a base when you can yank the ball out of the park? In 1910, the American League's combined slugging average was .276; by 1922, it had climbed to .455.

In 1930, a statistically earth-shaking season in which the entire National League hit .303, only one man stole more than 18 bases. By 1932, the league leader had only 20. People talk about the St. Louis Cardinals' swashbuckling "Gas House Gang" in 1934, but their leading base stealer, Pepper Martin, had 23.

As World War II drew closer, the baserunning stats became almost comical. The Cubs' Stan Hack led the NL with 16 in 1938. As epic feats went down during the 1941 American League season (Ted Williams' .401 and Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak) a rookie named Danny Murtaugh, later to manage the Pittsburgh Pirates, led the National League with 18 steals.

Robinson revolution

You won't find any evidence on the stats sheet, but the most significant baserunning development of the post-war era was Jackie Robinson's dismantling of the color barrier with the 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers. In those days, and throughout the 1950s, the art was defined by timing, presence, taking the extra base - something earned, not stolen. Barring the element of great urgency, it was considered "showboating" to make spectacle of the steal.

Robinson had more presence on the bases than anyone since Cobb - and to say the least, his brand of defiance carried infinitely deeper meaning. "He was center stage, and wherever he walked, center stage moved with him," wrote Roger Kahn in "The Boys of Summer." Standing at first base, "balanced evenly on the balls of both feet, he took an enormous lead. There was no action, only two men throwing hard looks. The cry in the grandstands rose. And Robinson hopped a half-yard farther from first ... He could steal home, or advance two bases on someone else's bunt, and at the time of decision, when he slid, the big dark body became a bird in flight."

Robinson became the idol of countless aspiring ballplayers, all of them respectful of stolen-base etiquette. Even with the young Willie Mays on board, the New York Giants totaled only 129 stolen bases from the 1952 season through '55. It wasn't until 1956, when Mays led the league with 40, that any NL player had cleared 35 in that decade.

The next face in the stolen-base pantheon was Luis Aparicio, the great White Sox shortstop. He led the AL in each of his first nine seasons, including a dazzling 56 in 1959, crafting his magic largely out of necessity. Home runs might have been the rage in Yankee Stadium, Seals Stadium (home of the Giants) and County Stadium (Milwaukee), but Aparicio played on hustling, scrappy teams that came to be known as the "Go-Go Sox." (And even at that, the '59 World Series team stole all of 113 bases total.)

Mays amazes

Still, it all came back to Mays. He was, and remains, the greatest baserunner anyone ever saw. The smartest, the most exciting, the most disruptive - you name the category. DiMaggio certainly had his backers, just for the utter perfection of his game, but the stolen base wasn't his thing: 30 in his 13-year career (you read that right), and none over the course of 51 World Series games.

DiMaggio was a connoisseur's delight, but Mays made fans out of people who didn't know a thing about baseball. They couldn't take their eyes off him. Dancing off second on a grounder to the shortstop or third, Mays routinely would take third - whether the fielder "looked" him back to second or fired to first. "The Mays Play," they called it, impossible to defend. And if you caught him in a rundown, he'd make it last until the batter reached second.

It was common to see Mays' cap fly off his head on the bases, but as Charles Einstein wrote in "Willie's Time," the act was "nothing artificial or contrived. It was not just the innate speed of Mays, but the way he could shift gears and suddenly turn on like an afterburner."

In a 1961 game at Philadelphia's Connie Mack Stadium, Mays shocked the Phillies, the fans and even the most seasoned writers by scoring from first on a groundball single to left by Orlando Cepeda. Mays could be tough, as well: That same year, against Cincinnati, Mays was on third when Ed Bailey hit a bases-loaded, one-out grounder to first. Gordy Coleman fielded it and stepped on the bag, then threw home, meaning there was no force play on Mays. It would have to be a tag - and Mays made sure it didn't happen.

"The visual memory I retain is that (Cincinnati catcher Jerry) Zimmerman exploded upon contact," Einstein wrote. "The ball, the glove, the mask, and several pieces of Zimmerman appeared to disassemble in midair, like the cat in a Looney Toons cartoon."

Wills thrills

At this stage of the game's history, nothing had approached the base-stealing frenzy perfected by Cobb, Eddie Collins, Honus Wagner and other greats of the Dead Ball era. But then came a switch-hitting Dodgers shortstop named Maury Wills.

Unlike the fearsome Giants, the Dodgers were a light-hitting bunch that depended upon the lights-out pitching of Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale. In their minds, it might as well have been 1911. One run at a time: Say, a walk to Wills, a steal of second, a sacrifice bunt by Jim Gilliam, and a sacrifice fly by Willie Davis.

There was nothing terribly unusual about the 1961 stolen-base leaders. The list spoke magnificently of the times: 35 for Wills, 23 for Vada Pinson, 22 for Frank Robinson, 21 for Henry Aaron, 18 for Mays. But in 1962, Wills went on a tear and didn't look back. His final total, 104, was downright inconceivable. It more than twice the total of eight *teams* that year.

Brock and beyond

As such, a new era was launched. Lou Brock broke Wills' record with 118 for the 1974 Cardinals. With all of the old-school codes forsaken, the 70-plus-steal season became commonplace (Dave Lopes, Willie Wilson, several others) as the decade progressed, and this was the backdrop to Henderson's debut. Like all the great ones, from Cobb to Robinson to Wills, Rickey left impressions that spread well beyond the printed page.

Bay Area's best and boldest base stealers

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

The A's running game didn't start with Rickey Henderson.

When they moved from Kansas City in 1968, the A's already had an accomplished runner, an all-time base stealer who wreaked havoc atop the lineup and used his speed to help win games and, ultimately, championships.

"I'd steal second. I'd steal third. I'd score a lot of runs," Campy Campaneris said. "I had the green light."

Campaneris led the American League in steals three straight years in Kansas City and made it four in a row with Oakland's '68 team. By the time he retired, he had six stolen-base titles and ranked third all-time in AL steals behind Ty Cobb and Eddie Collins with 649.

For most of their time in Oakland, the A's ran wild on the bases, from the Campaneris years that included a young Reggie Jackson, Don Baylor and the emergence of Billy North to the Billyball era featuring Henderson running at will to Rickey's second Oakland go-round, in which he intimidated pitchers like no one else.

Along the way, Campaneris, North and Baylor swiped 50-plus bags in the same season, Claudell Washington had 40 steals at age 20, Jose Canseco became baseball's first 40-40 man, and Henderson was crowned the single-season and career steals king.

Meanwhile, the Giants weren't as much into stealing.

"We had power," Willie Mays said. "We didn't need to steal bases."

That was true in the '60s, when Mays, Willie McCovey, Orlando Cepeda, Felipe Alou and Jim Ray Hart flexed their power to diminish the need for speed, though Mays could steal a base pretty much at any time.

His two highest steals totals were in New York, and he became a more conservative base stealer in San Francisco, leading the team seven times from '58 to '67, but with modest totals.

"I had to wait for McCovey to hit. After him, I had to wait for Cepeda to hit," said Mays, not wanting to leave an open base for teams to pitch around his mighty teammates. "That's why I never did steal. Or else I'd be at third."

Not until Bobby Bonds arrived in the late '60s did Mays have a bona fide running mate.

"They wanted Bobby to hit third, and I said Bobby's got to lead off," Mays said. "Bobby could run."

Bonds was gone by 1975, and North arrived a few years later to re-establish the Giants' running game - he still holds the San Francisco season record for steals (58). Dan Gladden, Brett Butler and Darren Lewis passed the baton until another Bonds arrived in 1993.

Barry Bonds wasn't quite as fast as his father but stole bases at a record clip for a home run hitter and in 1996 joined the 40-40 club, which his dad missed in 1973 by one home run. In a mad rush to 40 steals, with nothing else at stake for the Giants, Bonds swiped 15 in September. In time, he founded the 500-500 club, showcasing a rare blend of speed, power and longevity.

Around the new millennium, Bonds ditched his running game and turned his attention to becoming the planet's greatest hitter. Since then, the Giants have gone mostly station to station, though Randy Winn added a dimension - high-percentage base stealing - when swiping 56 bases in 63 attempts (a striking 89 percent) in a three-year span through 2009.

In the game's history, nothing quite compared with Billyball, the anything-goes approach of Billy Martin's A's of the early '80s. Henderson stole 100 bases in 1980 and broke Lou Brock's record with 130 in 1982. Those '82 A's were going nowhere, and Martin told Henderson in spring training that Brock's record of 118 would fall.

Henderson was up to 115 entering the final game of an August homestand and swiped two bags in the first inning, and needed two more for the record. Martin, intent on Henderson breaking it at the Coliseum, ordered Fred Stanley off second base in the eighth inning to give Henderson (who was at first) room to steal two bases for the record.

Sure enough, Stanley was caught in a rundown, opening the door for Henderson. He was out trying to steal second, a disputed call that led to several ejections. Henderson still maintains he was safe and suggests the umpire ruled him out because of Martin's shenanigans.

Three days later, Henderson broke Brock's record in Milwaukee. Nine years later, he broke Brock's career record, this time at the Coliseum.

Vince Coleman reached 100 steals three times in the mid-'80s. Since 1988, no player has reached 80, though Jose Reyes came close with 78 in 2007. Clearly, the game changed with the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs. Teams no longer relied on speed to manufacture runs.

Under A's general manager Billy Beane, the stolen base became dormant, his statistical analysts concluding that the reward for attempting a steal wasn't worth the risk. For three seasons in the early 2000s, no one on the A's stole as many as 10 bases, and the A's weren't alone.

"If you tried stealing a base, it's almost like you were taking away an opportunity for a three-run homer," Winn said. "I was in the AL East, and two through seven in the lineup, you had potential 20-plus-homer guys, so guys didn't run as much. Now, teams don't have that type of lineup. There's a need to find other ways to score."

The A's no longer snub steals. Rajai Davis swiped 50 bags in 2010, and Coco Crisp led the league last year with 49.

"That era we had with all those homers - that's not there anymore," Henderson said. "Everyone is coming back to wanting speed."

The Drumbeat: A's, Mariners players visit area devastated by tsunami

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Japan, 3/27/2012, 9:00am

Several A's and Mariners players spent today visiting Ishinomaki, a city in the Sendai region hit hard by the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Everyone on the trip was stunned by the scope of the devastation. I'll have more about the trip in tomorrow's paper, but even after more than a year and after major rebuilding has begun, there are large areas of nothing where neighborhoods once stood.

There are mounds of rubble remaining, and A's special adviser Phil Garner said that to him, this was the most striking image – blocks and blocks of cars piled on top of each other, a "car graveyard," he said. He said he realized as the bus was passing all of these cars, which stretched on and on, that many of the people who'd driven those cars were gone, too.

The most upsetting sight was that of the elementary school near Ishinomaki that lost 70 of 103 students and nine of 13 teachers.

When we arrived at Ishinomaki stadium, however, you'd never imagine the local children had been through so much. Many of them have lost family members, teachers, friends, coaches; a little boy named Ryuto, 11, whose picture was posted in yesterday's Drumbeat, lost his mother in the tsunami. But these kids had a ball with the A's and Mariners players and with A's mascot Stomper.

The players held a clinic for representatives of local youth teams, and I think the players enjoyed it as much as the children did. Here's Tyson Ross providing some guidance:

I also posted some video from the visit on the SFGate Drumbeat YouTube channel. This might give you some idea of the volume of junked cars we passed – and I started filming this far more than halfway through the long stretch of cars.

There will be much more in tomorrow's newspaper on this trip, which was so heartbreaking but also inspiring. Several signs in the most barren areas read "We will rebuild," and "Let's go, Ishinomaki!" The children, parents and coaches at the clinic were wildly enthusiastic throughout the visit, and officials said that seeing the players meant so much to the kids, who turn to baseball for some normality. It was great to see them all smiling.

Possible conflict seen in oversight of Coliseum

Phillip Matier, Andrew Ross, Chronicle Columnist

Consulting payments to Oakland City Councilman **Ignacio De La Fuente** by a group tied to former state-senator-turned-lobbyist **Don Perata** are raising questions about a possible conflict of interest in the awarding of a \$7 million contract to run the Oakland Coliseum complex.

Campaign records show that De La Fuente, who chairs the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum Authority, received \$37,500 in recent years from the "Hope 2012" campaign, a dollar-a-pack tobacco tax initiative set up by Perata to help fund cancer research.

In return, De La Fuente was to help generate support among labor groups for the Proposition 29 tax initiative on the June ballot.

None of the payments was disclosed on De La Fuente's statement of outside earnings as a councilman and head of the Coliseum authority.

The possible conflict: Perata is also working as a lobbyist for SMG, one of three companies vying for the contract to manage the Coliseum for the next 10 years.

De La Fuente, in addition to being one of the eight authority members who will vote on a contract, sits on the committee reviewing the bids.

He doesn't see an issue with the payments from Perata's group.

"The work I did for cancer research ... started long before there was a discussion about the (Coliseum) management agreement with anybody," he said.

Perata also denied any ulterior motives, calling De La Fuente "a close and dear friend" but adding, "I do not see a conflict of interest."

Two other Coliseum board members, county Supervisor **Scott Haggerty** and Oakland school board member **Chris Dobbins**, said they were unaware of the payments and referred us to the Coliseum's legal staff for an opinion.

As of Tuesday's deadline, we were still waiting for a call back from Coliseum legal counsel **Deena McClain**.

As for not disclosing the payments, De La Fuente called it an oversight.

Grim scene: The killings of five people in a home near City College of San Francisco were so gruesome that police officers sent to the scene are being offered counseling.

"It was just unbelievable," one police official said of the scene in the Howth Street house where a couple in their 60s, their adult children and their son's girlfriend were found bludgeoned and hacked to death Friday.

The killer doused the small home with bleach, water and paint in an apparent attempt to cover up fingerprints or other evidence, one law enforcement source said.

And while police believe that "we have the guy" - Binh Thai Luc, 35 - others wonder how could one person have possibly done this without help.

Oakland 911: For all of Mayor **Jean Quan's** recent announcements of new hires, new grants and a new academy class, Oakland has fewer cops today than it did after the police layoffs of 2010.

According to a report by the city administrator, Oakland will end the month with 657 officers. That's 30 fewer cops than the 687 on duty following the budget-cutting layoffs of 80 cops that became a big issue two years ago.

It's also 175 fewer cops than the department's peak of 832 officers in December 2008.

But "bad as that might be, it was even worse a couple of months back," said **Barry Donelan**, head of the Oakland Police Officers Association.

The department reached its low point in July, with 631 officers.

Meanwhile, the latest crime stats show that homicides in Oakland are up 13 percent so far this year, robberies are up 33 percent, car thefts are up 28 percent and burglaries are up 42 percent.

In some places it's even higher, said City Councilwoman **Libby Schaaf**, who lives in the hills near Quan.

"On our beat, burglaries have quadrupled," she said.

Wiener wars: After 18 years, the San Francisco Giants are dumping the Stockton supplier of their quarter-pound hot dogs in favor of a Chicago import.

The \$6.50 "big dog" that will be sold at AT&T Park this season will come from Eisenberg Sausage Co., which also supplies wieners for the Chicago Cubs.

"It's too bad they're going out of state," said a steamed executive of the departing provider, Alpine Meats of Stockton.

According to the Alpine exec, who would only talk on the QT because the company will still sell smaller Giants Dogs at the ballpark, the company couldn't stomach the "low six-figure" fee the team was demanding to stay on as a Giants' official hot dog sponsor.

Giants spokeswoman **Staci Slaughter** says fans needn't worry about the change, considering they'll have 16 types of hot dogs and sausages to choose from.

"Most important is taste and providing good quality," she said

A's fall short in season-opening duel

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Flashbulbs showered the Mariners at the Tokyo Dome on Wednesday evening, images of hometown hero Ichiro Suzuki's club being captured by the millisecond.

Suzuki and Co. easily garnered the most attention during an Oakland "home" game being played on a different continent. And the A's, donning their home whites, tried their best to steal it away, but by night's end were left staring down their eighth consecutive Opening Day loss by way of an 11-inning 3-1 decision.

Both clubs entered the 11th with just one run to their name. But A's reliever Andrew Carignan surrendered a leadoff double to Brendan Ryan, who advanced to third on Chone Figgins' sacrifice bunt before tallying the go-ahead run courtesy of an RBI single from Dustin Ackley. Suzuki promptly followed with his own RBI base hit off lefty Jerry Blevins.

The loss left A's starter Brandon McCarthy with a no-decision, despite an impressive performance. The right-hander picked up right where he left off last season in his first career Opening Day start, tossing seven innings of one-run ball in an effortless performance that featured just six hits with no walks and three strikeouts. He utilized an efficient 82 pitches, 58 of which were thrown for strikes.

Seattle ace Felix Hernandez, naturally, posted similar numbers, making for quite the pitching showdown. Making his fifth career Opening Day start, the right-hander outlasted McCarthy by one frame, tossing eight innings and allowing one run on five hits with no walks and six strikeouts.

Little noise was made through the first three innings, before Ackley greeted McCarthy in the fourth with a leadoff homer to right-center. The A's responded in quick fashion in the bottom half, when Cliff Pennington reached on a double and came around to score on an RBI double off the bat of Kurt Suzuki.

The A's bullpen trio of Ryan Cook, Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour compiled nine consecutive outs before handing the ball over to Carignan in the 11th.

Cespedes ropes double in MLB debut

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Yoenis Cespedes appeared in a Major League starting lineup for the first time Wednesday, going 1-for-3 with a double in the A's 3-1 loss to the Mariners.

Cespedes struck out in his first Major League at-bat against Felix Hernandez in the second inning. His second time up, he ripped a ball to the warning track in center field and trotted into second base.

Cespedes did not appear in the middle of the order, as expected. A's catcher Kurt Suzuki found himself there instead.

Bob Melvin's first Opening Day lineup as A's manager featured Cespedes batting seventh and Suzuki, normally in that slot, up in the fifth hole as a reward of sorts.

"He deserves to be in there right now," Melvin said. "The way he's been swinging the bat, and also his numbers off of [Felix] Hernandez. With Yoenis, I think he's doing beautifully right now. I think it's more about Kurt than him."

It's hard not to consider Suzuki's history with Hernandez, against whom he's compiled a career .308 batting average (8-for-26) -- the best of any A's player. The 28-year-old backstop, making his fifth consecutive Opening Day start, is also hitting .300 in 12 exhibition games, the last two of which have included home runs.

Meanwhile, Cespedes is gradually making his way through an adjustment period against big league pitchers. The center fielder made his way through exhibition play with a .200 average, and his first assignment in a regular-season setting isn't exactly an easy one.

"I do expect Yoenis to be a middle-of-the-order bat at some point in time," Melvin said. "Whether that's tomorrow, a week from now, I'm not really sure yet. I think with all he's having to deal with right now, he's fine with where he is at this point in time tonight.

"I try to put myself in other people's shoes, and I can't even imagine what he's had to go through, and I think he's handled himself beautifully. He's already one of the guys, he's learning the language, and he's fitting in very nicely."

Donaldson wins A's third-base job

TOKYO -- Consider Josh Donaldson the A's everyday third baseman. Starting Thursday.

A's manager Bob Melvin opted to start Eric Sogard at third for Wednesday's regular-season opener against Seattle's Felix Hernandez and Co., but in no way did it reflect Donaldson's roster standing.

"I told Josh yesterday, 'You're our starting third baseman, you're just not starting tonight,'" Melvin said. "I wanted to get in not so much a left-handed bat, but a contact bat with Sogard. He's played well enough to deserve the start, but no matter what happens tonight, Donaldson will be in there tomorrow, and I still want him to think that he's the regular third baseman."

Melvin does not consider it a platoon situation. Rather, he's taking advantage of Sogard's presence during an adjustment period for Donaldson, who has had to endure plenty in the past month following his move from catcher to third base in the wake of Scott Sizemore's season-ending knee injury. Immediately plugging the right-handed hitter into a game against Hernandez wasn't a preferable scenario.

"He's playing a position that's a little out of character for him, he's shown he can play it, he's worked very hard -- I don't think anyone's worked as hard as he has this spring -- and I think, up to this point, he's done a great job," Melvin said.

Though four more exhibition games await the A's upon their return to the States this week, giving Melvin more time to determine who's best suited for the third-base job, it appears Sogard will remain a utility option because of his versatility around the infield.

"These are regular-season games, but we're still kind of in Spring Training mode, trying to find some things out and trying to find the right lineup and who fits where," Melvin said. "As of today, this is the lineup. I think it'll change against a left-hander tomorrow, and I'm not sure where it will be when we open back up at home again."

Cook seizes prominent role in A's bullpen

TOKYO -- Ryan Cook isn't the first name that comes to mind when thinking of the five-player deal that sent Trevor Cahill to Arizona, but it's one A's fans should get used to seeing in the later innings.

Cook, on his first career Opening Day roster, impressed manager Bob Melvin enough during the spring campaign -- opponents were just 2-for-23 against him -- to land a job as the primary right-handed setup option in the A's bullpen.

Things could change upon Joey Devine's return from the disabled list, but for now it's Cook and southpaw Brian Fuentes who will be looked upon for outs before closer Grant Balfour's arrival in the ninth.

"Those are the two guys I'm kind of targeting to have just before Grant," Melvin said. "You look at the personnel we have, and it really has to go on merit, based on what they've done in Spring Training."

The A's bullpen, which compiled a 3.74 ERA last year, is younger this season but well-balanced. In the two-game Opening Series in Tokyo, Melvin is equipped with three right-handers and three left-handers, along with a length option in right-hander Graham Godfrey.

Worth noting

- The A's entered Wednesday having lost each of their last seven openers, marking the longest Opening Day losing streak in A's history. It is the longest active Opening Day losing streak in the Majors.

- The A's on Wednesday officially placed Joey Devine and Dallas Braden on the 15-day disabled list, retroactive to March 24. Braden continues his recovery from left shoulder surgery and is expected to be back in the rotation by May, while Devine is on the mend from right biceps tendinitis.

Five questions for Opening Series in Japan

By Matthew Leach / MLB.com

Finally, games that count have arrived. When the A's and Mariners take the field in Tokyo on Wednesday morning at 6:10 ET (United States time), they'll be playing for wins rather than preparation and development. Kids with numbers in the 90s and no names on their jerseys will no longer be taking game-deciding at-bats and innings.

That means we can start putting a little weight on results, knowing that everybody's goal is the same. There's a danger in putting too much emphasis on results from even a few weeks or a couple of months of baseball, never mind two days, but let's be honest: it's also a lot of fun.

Here are a look at five questions that should begin to be answered with the two games at the Tokyo Dome this week.

What's a Cespedes? In Japan, the most anticipated sight of these two games will surely be Ichiro Suzuki playing on native soil. In the United States and perhaps much of the Caribbean as well, it will be an outfield import in the other dugout.

Highly hyped Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes has taken all of 25 at-bats against Major League pitching, all in the hitter-friendly environs of the Cactus League. He's played eight games for the A's. Now he's already on another continent, playing games that count at the highest level he's ever seen.

The consensus has long been that because of Cespedes' experience in the pressure cooker of Cuban baseball, he'll handle the stress of the big leagues just fine. Even so, it will certainly be worth watching how he approaches his first for-keeps American League at-bats. Will he swing from his heels or maintain his strike zone? Will he look like a veteran or a rookie? It may be the biggest subplot of the entire A's season, not just of the Opening Series.

Will Montero mash? Spoiler: eventually, yes, he will. Montero is a hitter, and hitters hit. He raked throughout the Minors. He raked in his 18-game cup of coffee with the Yankees last year. He raked this spring. He's going to rake as a big leaguer.

In the short term, though, there are going to be some adjustments. Teams will get more video on Montero. They'll scout him more closely. He'll play half his games in Safeco Field, which is not a fun place to hit. Montero's development likely won't be represented by a single upward line. There will be bumps.

Still, the kid is special. He's one of the most developed, complete hitting prospects to come along in quite some time. If you like pure hitters -- and they do in Seattle, having watched Edgar Martinez for nearly two decades -- you'll like watching Montero. Settle in and enjoy.

Can Chone Figgins be salvaged? Elsewhere in this same division, Figgins established himself as an on-base machine, a speedster and a valuable defender at multiple positions. The Mariners liked that profile so much that they signed him to a hefty four-year deal. Figgins' performance promptly plummeted, falling to subpar in 2010 and shockingly ineffective in 2011.

He's signed through next season with a vesting option for 2014, but it's not at all hard to envision this being Figgins' last real chance to save his career as an everyday player. He turned 34 in January, and even though he doesn't have "old players' skills," at some point everybody finds himself fighting not just opponents but the forces of time.

Figgins does have a chance, though. He's leading off for Seattle, with Ichiro moved to the third spot. If he can get on base once again, and help make the revamped Mariners offense work, nearly all will be forgiven. The leash probably won't be very long, however. He's not in position to withstand a pronounced early slump. The importance of the early part of the season is nearly always overstated, but for Figgins there's plenty of make-or-break even in March and April.

Is it Jemile Weeks' year? If the A's are going to score enough runs to be a factor this year, they're going to have to get an encore from second-year second sacker Jemile Weeks. "Rickie's little brother" is more than that; he can play. But the question is just how big an impact he'll make.

Weeks flashed a broad-based skill set through the Minors, with speed, a bit of extra-base pop, nice command of the strike zone and an ability to hit for average. As a rookie, he carried most of that over, though the plate discipline suffered. He walked much less than he ever had while striking out as much as ever. Should Weeks be able to regain some of that patience while still spraying line drives, he's going to be a very nice cog in the A's order.

Oakland surely doesn't want Weeks going to the plate looking to walk. But look for signs of improved patience to go along with the rest of Weeks' tools. If that indicator is present, he's going to have a very nice year.

Who are these guys? OK, that's probably unkind. Baseball fans know plenty of names on these two clubs. But program sales at the two ballparks may still be a bit brisker than usual in the early part of the season. Both Seattle and Oakland underwent significant makeovers during the winter, and it will be intriguing to see the pieces start fitting together.

The A's are piecing together a new starting rotation following the departures of Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill. One of the new faces, Bartolo Colon, will start Game 2. First and third base are both works in progress, and the outfield features a slew of newcomers as well.

In Seattle, the changes are fewer, but still plenty significant. Michael Pineda, last year's No. 2 starter, is gone to New York. Hector Noesi, acquired in that deal, appears bound for the rotation, while Montero is set for the lineup. The Mariners hope there's more on the way, too, with last year's top Draft pick, Danny Hultzen, expected to be a fast riser.

Broadcaster Duskow set to fill in for Korach

By AJ Cassavell / Special to MLB.com

Johnny Duskow will join the Oakland A's radio broadcast on an interim basis while play-by-play man Ken Korach recovers from knee replacement surgery, the A's said Tuesday.

The longtime voice of the Sacramento River Cats -- Oakland's Triple-A affiliate -- Duskow will make his debut on Monday when the A's begin the preseason "Bay Bridge Series" against the Giants in San Francisco.

Korach's primary duties will go to Vince Cotroneo, and Duskow will assume the role as the booth's No. 2 man. He'll call four innings each game.

"I'm extremely excited and humbled to fill in for Ken Korach," Duskow said in the club's statement. "I have the utmost respect for the Athletics organization as a whole, and their talented broadcast team in particular. I can't wait to join Vince and Ray [Fosse] in the booth during Ken's recovery."

Korach is expected to return in April. He underwent the surgery on March 19.

Duskow has called nearly 3,000 Minor League games in his 19 years of Minor League Baseball broadcasting experience. The 2012 season will be his 12th year with the River Cats.

Major Lee-ague: A's, Mariners kick off regular season

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 3/28/2012, 12:39am

Happy Opening Night from the Tokyo Dome. Here are your lineups:

A's: Weeks 2B, Pennington SS, Crisp LF, Smith DH, Suzuki C, Reddick RF, Cespedes CF, Allen 1B, Sogard 3B, (McCarthy SP)

Mariners: Figgins 3B, Ackley 2B, Ichiro RF, Smoak 1B, Montero DH, Carp LF, Olivo C, Saunders CF, Ryan SS, (Felix SP)

You'll notice Kurt Suzuki is batting fifth, while Yoenis Cespedes is all the way down in the seventh hole. Bob Melvin said he likes the way Suzuki's been swinging the bat, and he had to consider his career numbers vs. Felix, which are rather good: 8-for-26 (.308) with one home run. Cespedes, meanwhile, is still going through an adjustment process, so this takes some pressure off him, even though Melvin said the club still sees him as a middle-of-the-order threat at some point.

Also of note, Eric Sogard is at third, rather than Josh Donaldson. Melvin said he spoke with Donaldson yesterday and told him he's still considered the starting third baseman, but "he's just not starting today." With Felix on the mound, it's obviously sensible for him to stick as many left-handers in there as possible. Outside of Suzuki, the A's other starters are a combined 14-for-70 (.200) against the right-hander. Brandon Allen, Cespedes and Seth Smith have never faced him.

Athletics place Braden and Devine on 15-day DL

The Sports Network

The Oakland Athletics placed pitchers Dallas Braden and Joey Devine on the 15-day disabled list, retroactive to March 24, on Tuesday.

Braden, who is still recovering from left shoulder surgery, made three starts for the A's last season before suffering the injury. The 28-year-old lefty had a 1-1 record with a 3.00 earned run average in those starts, striking out 15 batters while walking five through 18 innings on the mound.

Devine made 26 appearances out of the bullpen for Oakland last year, finishing with a 1-1 record and a 3.52 ERA. He is currently suffering from right biceps tendinitis.

Athletics and Mariners to open major league season in Japan

Seattle outfielder Ichiro Suzuki will play in front of countrymen when the clubs meet at the Tokyo Dome in a game that starts at 3 a.m. PDT on Wednesday.

By Mike Hiserman, Los Angeles Times

The Oakland Athletics will be the home team, but the Seattle Mariners and outfielder Ichiro Suzuki will be the crowd favorites as Major League Baseball opens its 2012 season Wednesday with a game that starts at 3 a.m. PDT.

Seattle is the only MLB team with a Japanese owner, retired Nintendo Chairman Hiroshi Yamauchi, who has had a majority stake in the Mariners since 1992 yet has never seen his team play in person — a streak that will be extended this week.

Even though the games against Oakland on Wednesday and Thursday will be played at the Tokyo Dome, about a two-hour drive from his home in Kyoto, Yamauchi, 84, will watch on television, the Mariners announced. No reason was given.

"He just indicated to me he's not going to be here," Mariners Chief Executive Howard Lincoln told reporters at a news conference when the team arrived last week. "Quite frankly, a man of his age and stature doesn't have to explain why he's not here."

The Mariners have one other Japanese player, infielder Munenori Kawasaki, on their 25-man roster. Another, pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma, was among the 30 they brought on a trip that also included two exhibition games against Japanese professional teams.

In all, the Mariners and the Athletics will spend about a week in Japan, which will play host to its fourth MLB opener, after the New York Mets versus Chicago Cubs in 2000, the New York Yankees versus Tampa Bay in 2004 and Boston versus Oakland in 2008.

The teams played before near-sellout crowds of more than 42,000 in each of their doubleheader exhibitions last weekend against the Hanshin Tigers and Yomiuri Giants of the Nippon Professional Baseball's Central League.

The Mariners lost 5-1 to the Tigers on Saturday and 9-3 to the Giants on Sunday. The A's beat the Giants, 5-0, and lost to the Tigers, 12-6.

Suzuki, the main attraction for Japanese fans, was greeted by the twinkling of thousands of camera flashes as he approached the plate in each of his eight at-bats. Around town, he is omnipresent, his likeness all over the street on billboards and all over television on commercials.

Suzuki had one hit, a single in his first at-bat.

"It's a special event, it's important to us," he said after Game 1, referring to the Mariners playing in Japan for the first time. "This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime event for myself."

Oakland has its own Suzuki — Hawaii-born catcher Kurt, who starred for Cal State Fullerton in 2004 when the Titans won the College World Series.

Kurt Suzuki, the only A's player who was also with the team when it opened in Japan against the Red Sox in 2008, hit a home run in each of the exhibition games, a two-run blast against the Giants and a three-run shot against the Tigers.

The Athletics and Mariners also play in their mainland regular-season opener, April 6 at Oakland.

MLB is still referring to April 4 as opening day, when the defending world champion St. Louis Cardinals play Miami in the Marlins' new ballpark. The Dodgers open April 5 at San Diego and the Angels on April 6 at home against Kansas City.