

## **A's News Clips, Thursday, March 29, 2012**

### **A's ride Yoenis Cespedes' first career home run to 4-1 victory over Mariners in Japan**

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group [mercurynews.com](http://mercurynews.com)

Yoenis Cespedes authored his first big moment in an A's uniform, and was it ever well-timed.

Oakland's hitters were stuck in sleep mode Thursday until Cespedes lit into a 1-1 pitch from Shawn Kelley, lining a two-run homer in the seventh inning that spurred the A's to a 4-1 victory over the Seattle Mariners at the Tokyo Dome.

The win gained the A's a split of a season-opening two-game series and ensured they boarded their flight home in good spirits after dropping Wednesday's opener.

The A's had managed just two hits when Cespedes connected off Kelley (0-1), hitting a laser into the seats in left-center for his first major league homer and RBI.

"Loud and fast," A's manager Bob Melvin said in describing the homer. "It was just a matter of time really. You just feel him getting more comfortable every day."

It appeared to light a fire under his teammates.

Josh Reddick made it back-to-back homers with a shot to right field off George Sherrill for a 3-1 lead and Jonny Gomes went deep in the eighth to pad the lead.

"He definitely picked us up at a big time when we needed it," Reddick said of Cespedes. "You tend to feed off that as a team and it becomes contagious."

The offensive flurry made a deserving winner of right-hander Bartolo Colon, who was outstanding in his first start for the A's. Colon allowed just three hits and one run over eight innings, the only damage coming on Justin Smoak's homer in the top of the seventh that put Seattle ahead 1-0.

Colon was at 86 pitches after eight innings, but Melvin said he didn't hesitate to bring in closer Grant Balfour, who delivered a 1-2-3 ninth.

Colon (1-0) hadn't pitched in a big league game since a March 10 exhibition in Arizona. After he developed a blister on his finger, the A's pitched him in two minor league games, and Melvin said Colon was maxed out on his pitch count after eight innings.

"I was mixing my pitches well," Colon said through interpreter Ariel Prieto. "I tried to go inside a lot with my two-seamer."

It was a big night for A's newcomers, as Cespedes, Reddick, Gomes and Colon all are in their first seasons with Oakland.

What a shift in mindset for the A's over a 24-hour span.

They were silenced on five hits in a 3-1 loss to open the season Wednesday, going 1 for 14 with runners in scoring position.

And they managed zilch through six innings Thursday against Seattle lefty Jason Vargas.

Things turned after Cespedes made Kelley pay for a hanging slider. Cespedes struggled handling breaking balls during Cactus League games, and his ability to adjust to breaking stuff likely holds the key to how he fares in the major leagues after signing a four-year \$36 million contract March 3.

Cespedes was named the game's MVP, getting interviewed in an on-field postgame ceremony and earning a check for 1 million yen — or \$12,000.

A's starters Brandon McCarthy and Colon combined to allow just nine hits and 2 runs over 15 innings in the series.

Oakland heads back to the Bay Area and will play four exhibitions before resuming regular season play April 6 against the Mariners at [Q.co](http://Q.co) Coliseum.

### **A's first base job still a three-man race between Brandon Allen, Kila Ka'aihue and Daric Barton**

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

The A's first base job remains an open battle, and Daric Barton is very much in the mix even though he did not accompany the team to Japan.

Manager Bob Melvin said he considers the position a three-man race between Brandon Allen, Kila Ka'aihue and Barton. He didn't give a time frame for naming a starter.

After the A's return from Tokyo following their two-game series with the Mariners, they play four exhibitions over the next week and don't return to regular season play until April 6.

That gives team officials more time to evaluate all three players, but also more time to feel out the potential trade market for Allen and/or Ka'aihue.

Both players are out of options, meaning they would have to clear waivers before they could be sent to the minors. If the A's decided one (or both) wasn't a fit for the 25-man roster, it stands to reason they would prefer getting something in return as opposed to simply losing them on a waiver claim.

"There are some variables involved," Melvin said of choosing a first baseman. "We have to make some decisions here, especially if Daric's ready to play, and we feel like he's ready to play in regular season games."

Considering Allen, Ka'aihue and Barton all hit left-handed, there doesn't seem much reason to keep two first basemen, although the A's could make room if they wish because they don't need a fifth starter until April 17.

Barton appeared in just seven Cactus League games as he was slowed early in camp while returning from surgery on his throwing shoulder.

He stayed in Phoenix to continue working as the team left for Tokyo, and Melvin said the reports on Barton have been good. None of the three has a major league track record to suggest they're the undeniable answer.

Allen is a .210 hitter with 128 strikeouts in 106 career games. Ka'aihue has hit .216 in 87 career games. Barton hit .273 with 33 doubles in 2010, but slipped to .212 in 67 games last season before being sent to the minors.

Allen started Wednesday's opener and went 0 for 4 with two strikeouts. Ka'aihue got the nod Thursday against lefty Jason Vargas.

Right-handed hitting Jonny Gomes got the start at DH against Vargas, with Seth Smith out of the lineup. Gomes, a Petaluma native, launched a solo home run in the eighth inning to pad the A's lead to 4-1. Melvin said he'll make an effort to get as many as players as possible involved in early games. "I'm a firm believer that early in the season, you try to use as many guys as you can," he said. "It lends for a good team atmosphere and you can play some matchups as well."

Melvin hasn't officially announced his rotation past Brandon McCarthy and Bartolo Colon, and said the earliest he might do so would be in Saturday's exhibition at Triple-A Sacramento. The A's don't even need a third starter until April 9, as McCarthy and Colon will pitch the first two games when Oakland returns to regular season play April 6-7 against Seattle. They're off April 8. Tom Milone appears a lock to make the rotation and Tyson Ross is a strong bet too. Graham Godfrey could slot in as the fifth starter unless Jarrod Parker or Brad Peacock — two highly touted prospects in the minors — force the A's to reconsider.

### **Inside the Oakland A's: A's first base decision remains TBA**

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/29/2012, 1:09am

For those of you who stayed up to follow last night's game, did the A's motivate you to do the same tonight? It certainly wasn't an inspiring offensive performance, and it looked quite familiar to the team we've seen flounder hitting-wise the past few seasons. But that's just one game — against one of baseball's best in Felix Hernandez — so we'll see what the A's bring tonight. Getting swept in the first two games of the season certainly is nothing to panic over, but I would think salvaging a split would be a lift psychologically. After traveling so far to play, you want more to show for your efforts than just the memories and a suitcase full of souvenirs.

The lineups:

A's — Weeks 2B, Pennington SS, Crisp LF, Gomes DH, Suzuki C, Cespedes CF, Reddick RF, Donaldson 3B, Ka'aihue 1B; Colon RHP

Mariners — Figgins LF, Ackley 2B, Ichiro RF, Smoak 1B, Montero DH, Seager 3B, Olivo C, Saunders CF, Ryan SS; Vargas LHP. With a lefty on the mound, Jonny Gomes gets the start at DH and Kila Ka'aihue plays first base. Manager Bob Melvin liked Ka'aihue's at-bats this spring against left-handers better than Brandon Allen's. But it's looking like the decision on a starting first baseman will go perhaps through the final four exhibitions in the Bay Area. Melvin said he still considers it a three-man race, with Daric Barton joining Allen and Ka'aihue. Are you surprised to still be hearing Barton's name in the mix? I'm wondering myself if he can be ready to roll April 6 considering how little he's faced big league competition this spring. There are lots of factors at play here. Allen and Ka'aihue are out of options, meaning the A's run the risk of losing those players to a waiver claim if they try sending one of them (or both) to the minors. It could be that the A's are gauging trade interest right now in Allen and/or Ka'aihue. Certainly they would like to get something in return for one of the players rather than losing them to waivers and not get any compensation. "There are some variables involved," Melvin said about first base. "We have to make some decisions here, especially if we feel like (Barton) is ready to play in regular season games." Yoenis Cespedes moves up a spot in the order to hit sixth. We'll see how he looks after getting his first big league game out of the way.

—It's been a great overall experience in Tokyo, although I'll leave with the same thoughts I had in 2008: I wish I had more free time to spend wandering around this city and exploring everything it has to offer. It's definitely a place I would plan a vacation to.

Enjoy the game (and stay awake!)

P.S: My prediction about Dustin Ackley being the Mariners' impact player in last night's game turned out pretty well, huh? The Josh Reddick prediction? Not so much. As for tonight, I'm getting a strong Coco Crisp feeling. And let's take Justin Smoak for Seattle.

### **The Drumbeat: Cespedes crushes first homer, Reddick, Gomes go deep in A's win**

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at the Tokyo Dome 3/29/2012, 4:00am

Yoenis Cespedes is getting a lot of firsts out of the way. He knocked his first big-league hit last night in his major-league debut, and it came against Felix Hernandez, no less, and tonight he clobbered a two-run homer to left center for his first big-league home run.

"Loud and fast," A's manager Bob Melvin said after his team's 4-1 win over the Mariners.

Not only that, but the blast put Oakland up 2-1, and Josh Reddick followed with his first homer as a member of the A's, a shot to right. Reddick has done nothing but hit the ball hard in both games this season, and Cespedes — well, when he gets ahold of one, he just crushes the ball.

He earned the MVP award for the game and was presented a check for 1 million yen, about \$12,000.

"It surprised me," Cespedes said through interpreter Ariel Prieto. "I went to enjoy the game, I didn't think about any money coming or MVP. I didn't worry about that, I worried about playing the game hard."

Cespedes ripped a slider from Shawn Kelley, and Reddick, who was watching from the on-deck circle, noted that the question mark about the Cuban rookie was whether he could hit big-league breaking stuff, "and he stayed back on one and hit it out of the park."

Jonny Gomes, Petaluma's own, added his first homer with Oakland, a solo shot in the eighth. The A's have lost their past eight season openers, and they've won the second game of the season in 11 of the past 13 years.

Bartolo Colon had a slick debut with Oakland, allowing one run in eight innings and earning the win. He retired the first 13 men he faced, then when the Mariners finally got a hit (Jesus Montero) with one out in the fifth and went on to load the bases that inning, he got Brendan Ryan to ground to short for a fielder's choice.

Colon said he was mixing up his two-seam and four-seam fastballs, using the two-seamers inside.

"I don't know if he has a heartbeat," Melvin said. "His pulse doesn't look like it quickens much."

Melvin liked the fact so many new A's players contributed to the game, and said that will only help the team mesh and build confidence.

Grant Balfour worked the ninth and earned the save, his first since he was officially named Oakland's closer this spring. Colon's evening was somewhat reminiscent of Brandon McCarthy's the night before: Colon allowed just one run, and that on a homer, by Justin Smoak. McCarthy went seven Opening Night and the Mariners' only run off him came on a Dustin Ackley homer.

The A's got terrific defense from second baseman Jemile Weeks, who made several standout plays including a racing stop to his right to get Ichiro Suzuki, and Josh Donaldson, making his first regular-season big-league start at third base, made a nice stop on a shot by Chone Figgins in the fourth.

Suzuki, who had four hits in the Mariners' Opening Night win, was hitless in four at-bats.

Reddick, who smoked two balls on Opening Night with nothing to show for it, lined out his first at-bat tonight before finally getting something to drop, ripping a double to right with two outs in the fifth.

### **Ryan Cook could serve in A's setup role**

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

When Grant Balfour became the A's closer before the team left for Japan, it appeared as if Fautino De Los Santos would be the right-handed setup man.

Instead, the job might be filled, at least initially, by one of Oakland's newcomers, Ryan Cook, who came to Oakland in the Trevor Cahill deal with Arizona.

Cook throws in the mid-to-high 90s, and he had an impressive spring: Opponents went 2 -for-23 with two walks against him.

"He hasn't shown that anything bothers him," manager Bob Melvin said. "He seems to be a tough kid, makeup-wise."

Cook made his A's regular-season debut in the eighth inning, with the game tied 1-1, and he pitched a 1-2-3 inning with one strikeout.

Melvin said that Andrew Carignan, who put up a 2.45 ERA during the spring, also could see work late in games on occasion. De Los Santos didn't have a shabby spring, either, with a 1.42 ERA, so the A's have plenty of options.

No platoon at third: One of the biggest questions of the spring was third base after Scott Sizemore's season-ending knee injury. Eric Sogard was there Wednesday, in part because he went 1-for-3 against Felix Hernandez last year, but Melvin said that the position will not be a platoon situation. Though he didn't get the call on Opening Night, Josh Donaldson has the job.

Briefly: Among the youth-league players who took part in the pregame ceremonies: Ryuto Abe, 11, who was one of the subjects of a front page story in Wednesday's Chronicle. ... On Tuesday night, the Yomiuri Giants held a welcome party at the New Otani Hotel for the A's and Mariners that was attended by two former prime ministers of Japan. The highlights included a sake barrel-breaking ceremony and a massive tuna rendered into sushi on the spot. "That was terrific," Melvin said of the party. "I've never seen a fish that big or one that tasted that good."

Mariners 3, A's 1

Notable: A's starter Brandon McCarthy had a terrific outing, allowing one run in seven innings. He gave up six hits and struck out three. ... Ichiro Suzuki recorded the first hit of the 2012 season, a two-out single in the first with flashbulbs popping furiously around the Tokyo Dome. ... Oakland pitchers retired 14 men in a row until Brendan Ryan's leadoff double in the 11th off Andrew Carignan. Chone Figgins bunted him to third and Dustin Ackley singled him home. Ichiro added an RBI single. ... Ichiro had four hits in his first major-league game in Japan.

Quotable: "It was a really bad fastball. ... I kind of asked him to hit it out."

### **A's Céspedes slides down in order, steps up**

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Oakland's lineup was slightly unexpected Opening Night - outfielder Yoenis Céspedes, who hit fourth and fifth much of his abbreviated spring, was seventh in the batting order.

Manager Bob Melvin said that shuffling Céspedes was not any sort of poor reflection on him. In eight Cactus League games, Céspedes hit .200 with one home run and two RBIs.

"It's not as much about him as it is about the way Kurt Suzuki is swinging the bat right now," Melvin said of the catcher, who drove in Oakland's only run in a 3-1 11-inning loss to the Mariners at the Tokyo Dome on Wednesday. "We fully expect Céspedes to be a middle-of-the-order hitter for us at some point."

Sliding down the order perhaps took a little pressure off Céspedes: He recorded his first big-league hit in the seventh inning, hammering a double to right center off Seattle's Felix Hernandez.

"It's nice for him to get his first hit and a pretty good one, too," A's shortstop Cliff Pennington said. "That's about as pretty a swing as I've seen him take. Hopefully, we'll see a lot more of it."

Céspedes struck out his first at bat and he was hit in his second plate appearance before his double.

"He looked good, and the first time, he got pitched pretty tough," Melvin said. "He hit the ball hard, he looked comfortable out there."

Suzuki homered in each of the two exhibition games in Japan, and he is a lifetime .308 hitter against Hernandez, by far the best numbers against Hernandez among the A's regulars. Suzuki rewarded Melvin's decision with an RBI double with two outs in the fourth to tie the game.

No one else managed to deliver with men in scoring position. The team was 1-for-14 in those situations, with 13 of the at-bats coming against Hernandez, "a tough customer," in Melvin's words.

## **Cespedes' first homer gives A's first win**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com | 3/29/2012 8:30 AM ET

TOKYO -- Breaking ball? Yes, please.

Yoenis Cespedes clobbered the pitch many thought he couldn't hit, drilling one -- "Loud and clear," as A's manager Bob Melvin described it -- from Mariners reliever Shawn Kelley to left-center field at the Tokyo Dome on Thursday, all the while giving his new A's team its first win.

The rookie's two-run, seventh-inning shot put Oakland ahead for good in the 4-1 victory -- one that proved to be an all-around effort from a handful of new faces.

Offseason acquisitions Josh Reddick and Jonny Gomes also homered, and right-hander Bartolo Colon, signed by the A's off the free-agent market in January, enjoyed a pretty swanky debut, as well.

"That builds team chemistry," Melvin said. "We've got a lot of new players we feel like have been working hard all spring to mesh together, and it shows when you get contributions all the way around like that."

But none created as much chatter as Cespedes' hit. Nor as much money, as the outfielder was awarded with a check worth \$12,000 in an MVP ceremony following the game.

"It was a blast," Reddick said. "Everyone's been questioning his ability to hit a breaking ball, and for him to sit back on one and then line one out, that's a big step for him."

"I know the whole game they were throwing sliders," Cespedes said through translator Ariel Prieto. "I tried to make adjustments, and that's the only way I hit that ball."

With their first win of 2012, the A's departed Japan having split the two-game Opening Series with Seattle. They will resume the regular season against the Mariners in the Bay Area on April 6.

Thursday's victory ensured both teams a share of first place in the American League West for at least eight days.

Considering the talent that resides in Texas and Anaheim, the A's might not enjoy such a lengthy stay there again this season. For now, though, they'll enjoy the view from above -- figuratively and literally.

The A's quickly exited the Tokyo Dome on Thursday to get to Narita International Airport for a nine-hour flight back across the International Dateline to Oakland, where they are scheduled to arrive around 5 p.m. PT.

Combined with the 12-hour flight they made to Japan seven days ago, the A's would have traveled a rather long way -- nearly 12,000 miles -- to return home with two losses. But several players ensured that wasn't the case. Cespedes' homer was followed by solo shots from Josh Reddick and Jonny Gomes, and it coincided with another stellar performance by an A's starter.

Bartolo Colon, more than 10 years the senior of the average age on the A's Opening Day roster, made his Oakland debut and put on quite the pitching clinic, retiring his first 13 batters faced and allowing just one run in eight innings.

He needed just 86 pitches to do so, relying on a steady diet of fastballs and two-seamers in front of a roaring crowd on an international stage.

"I don't know that he has a heartbeat," Melvin said. "His pulse doesn't seem like it's ticking much. He doesn't seem to let many things affect him. He's the kind of pitcher that takes it pitch to pitch."

The lone run off Colon came courtesy of a seventh-inning solo shot from Justin Smoak that shook up a pitching duel that also featured Mariners lefty Jason Vargas, who was responsible for just one of the A's runs while pitching 6 1/3 innings.

Colon's impressive outing, which included just one walk and six strikeouts, followed an equally encouraging start by Brandon McCarthy, who allowed one run through seven innings in Wednesday's 3-1 loss.

At the age of 38 years, 310 days, Colon is the oldest pitcher to start a game for the A's since Tom Candiotti, who was 41 years, 275 days when he made his final start for Oakland on June 2, 1999.

Thursday's performance is what the A's will need this season to stay in the win column -- good from the old and new. So far, so good.

"It's a lot different than last year," Vargas said. "Gomes and Cespedes make a big difference in the middle of the their lineup. They lost [free-agent outfielder Josh] Willingham [to the Twins], but they got some other guys that can do some things."

Melvin said the late-inning comeback following a season-opening loss is a confidence-booster.

"We go into that game," Melvin said, "and it seems like it's going to be another close one, and to come out with the win in that fashion, it really gives us some confidence."

## **Colon's debut is just what the A's needed**

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

TOKYO -- The revival act of Bartolo Colon has been riveting baseball theater, and it looks like it's been extended to a new season. And even a new continent.

The burly right-hander, who only two years ago looked like he would have to pack up his 150-plus wins and Cy Young Award and call it a heck of a career, brought his rejuvenated right shoulder over to Japan for Opening Series 2012, rested his Oakland A's teammates firmly on it, and delivered exactly what the club needed before boarding a nine-hour flight home: a masterful eight-inning performance in a 4-1 win that gave the A's a split of the two-game set in the Tokyo Dome.

Colon zipped through four perfect innings in 35 pitches, didn't give up a hit until a one-out single by Jesus Montero in the fifth, didn't give up a run until a solo home run by Justin Smoak in the seventh, and wound up getting through eight innings in 86 pitches, striking out six, walking one and allowing three hits.

For a pitcher whose shoulder woes kept him out of action for all of 2010 and considering retirement until an innovative stem-cell treatment brought him back to the mound with the Yankees last year, it has been a noteworthy comeback. For the A's on Thursday night, having lost the Opening Day game to the Mariners in 11 innings, it was a big relief before heading back to the United States.

"One of the reasons we brought him in was his veteran presence," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "He's the perfect guy to pitch in a game like this. We lose last night in a tough game and he goes out there and does his thing for us." Mariners manager Eric Wedge was asked after the game for the reason why his hitters went so quickly and so quietly in the loss. He said it was more about Colon than anything his offensive players didn't do.

"I thought Bartolo was excellent tonight," Wedge said. "He was doing a great job of moving his two-seamer around, he wasn't in the middle of the plate -- the one pitch that was probably is the one Smoak hit -- and I was really impressed with the way he threw the ball. He was down, he was working the two-seamer both sides, and rarely, if ever, was he in the middle of the plate tonight."

Colon is a man of few words, so he decided to simply describe his strategy and let the rest of it speak for itself.

"I was using fastballs and two-seamers well," Colon said. "And I was [most successful] going inside with the two-seamer and then outside with the fastball."

There was a lot more to it than that, according to Melvin, who has several youngsters on his starting staff and now can look to a 38-year-old with 14 big league seasons of distinguished experience to lean on moving forward.

"I'm not sure he has a pulse, to tell you the truth," Melvin said. "I know my heart was beating a lot faster than his was, and he's been around a long time, does this, and I don't think anything affects him as far as a big stage like this."

"He really was the right man that we had on the mound tonight, and really a credit to him, not only for what he's accomplished in his career but just who he is."

## **MLB says sayonara after memorable Japan trip**

### **Opening Series a success for A's, Mariners as clubs head home**

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Opening Series Japan 2012 came to a close when the Oakland A's earned a series split with a 4-1 victory over the Seattle Mariners on Thursday night.

The Tokyo Dome was quiet, the aisles were being swept up, and the players, club officials and Major League Baseball staffers who orchestrated another hugely successful venture overseas for the beginning of a season were readying themselves for the long flights back over the Pacific.

But while Japan's signature baseball stadium was empty, the emissaries of America's pastime were full of memories that will last forever -- snapshots of a whirlwind week that left everyone involved dizzy with excitement for the rest of the 162-game grind ahead, but also brimming with gratitude, pride, empathy and friendship.

Here are just a few of the images that will stay in the cameras, cell phones, hard drives and hearts of the MLB players, coaches, executives and families who made this incredible trip:

- Minutes after two buses full of MLB traveling party members roll past the devastated site of one of the worst natural disasters in modern history, in the once-vibrant and now-desolate city of Ishinomaki, the same buses pull up to the municipal baseball stadium, where hundreds of Little Leaguers, many of whom lost their parents, extended family members, homes and coaches, greet their A's and Mariners heroes with smiles as big as the entire island nation in which they live.
- Two nights later in the Tokyo Dome, immediately preceding the first pitch of the 2012 regular season, the Jumbotron shows a video depicting the heroics of the late Taylor Anderson, an American teacher who perished in the tsunami of last March 11 but whose parents, Andy and Jean, are honoring her memory every day by raising funds to rebuild the area. Local volunteers Shinji Takai and Naho Hozumi, who have dedicated their lives to raising money and awareness through similar projects, are honored as well, and three Ishinomaki Little Leaguers, Sho Chiba, Haruka Kumagai and Ryuto Abe, beam in the interview room, answering questions about meeting real big leaguers for the first time.
- The A's and Mariners are let loose in the streets and subways of Tokyo. A's general manager Billy Beane shakes hands with a fan in the Akasaka-mitsuke station as he's trying to negotiate the "Moneyball" to get on the right train. Mariners pitcher Blake Beavan struggles to find a garbage can for his morning coffee cup, amazed at the fact that the most populated metropolitan area in the world might also be the cleanest.
- Mariners reliever Tom Wilhelmson wakes up the morning before Opening Day and heads out for a peaceful solo excursion to Senso-ji, Tokyo's oldest temple. After soaking in some of the Buddhist vibes, Wilhelmson pitches two perfect innings and earns the first victory of the Major League season.
- A's wives Amanda McCarthy (Brandon) and Kaycee Sogard (Eric), living it up on a sightseeing tour to the wooded, alpine Hakone region of Japan, take a gondola ride to the wind-blown side of a volcano, sample the grilled cuttlefish squid on a stick from a local vendor and soak in the glory of the crater lake called Ashi as they brave the fierce winds on an ornate, restored pirate ship.
- Mariners first baseman Justin Smoak tells a U.S. Army pilot who flew members of the team to a nearby base for a troop visit that the trip out to the base was too calm, so the pilot goes ahead and makes the return ride a bit more bumpy. OK, a lot more bumpy. "We were up, down, sideways," Smoak said, giddy with laughter and adrenaline. "I thought we were going to go backwards. I could have sworn we were going to go upside down."
- While on their own military visit to a nearby Air Force base, several A's players are given a 40-minute scenic tour of the sprawling Tokyo area, during which the clouds clear out and Jemile Weeks, Jerry Blevins, Jonny Gomes, Cliff Pennington, Josh Reddick, Brian Fuentes, Collin Cowgill and Seth Smith can see the coastline, the famous Buddha statue in Kamakura and snow-covered Mt. Fuji.
- Mariners players Michael Saunders and Japanese infielder Munenori Kawasaki hold court in the MLB Café Tokyo during an afternoon autograph-signing session, and Saunders urges Kawasaki to read off the winning raffle numbers ... in English.
- A's catcher Kurt Suzuki, who is of Japanese descent, homers twice in exhibition games and then meets distant relatives for the first time before playing his first game of the big league season.
- Ichiro is everywhere. Mariners right fielder Ichiro Suzuki, an icon in his homeland, is greeted with popping flashbulbs, oohs and aahs, and raucous applause every time he comes to the plate and every time he's shown on the video screen. He

socializes with fans while warming up. His image looms over the left-field bleachers in the form of an enormous billboard for Kirin beer. He speaks of how much this visit, 12 years into his storied Major League career, means in his heart. And then he does what Ichiro does: he goes 4-for-5 in his team's first game.

- The man who now bats before Ichiro, Mariners second baseman Dustin Ackley, hits a solo shot early on Opening Day and realizes in the dugout that at that moment he is "leading the Major Leagues in home runs."
- Players and representatives from both teams can't stop talking about the shopping, the karaoke clubs, the neon lights, the controlled chaos at the busiest intersection in the world at Shibuya Crossing, plus the food, which included a 450-pound tuna that was cut open fresh at the hotel reception and served to the delight of hundreds, including Ichiro.

- And for Brendan Ryan, the Mariners' shortstop, two moments that will surely stand out for the rest of his life: turning 30, and then, a few days later, at sunset, taking his longtime girlfriend, Sharyn, up to the Sky Deck on the 90th floor of Mori Tower, one of Tokyo's tallest buildings, and popping the question. In Japanese.

Sharyn said the word that needs to continue to be uttered every time Major League Baseball has the opportunity to put on events like this: yes.

"It's great to be able to come out here and experience culture and play baseball in a country where baseball is so loved and the people are so appreciative of it," Mariners third baseman Chone Figgins said. "To see the way the culture here mixes the old with the new and to see the way everyone responds to baseball, it's amazing to see."

Added A's outfielder Coco Crisp: "To be out here, not only for the experience for myself but to be involved with the experience of everybody else, whether it's the Little Leaguers [from Ishinomaki] or the people that have been affected by the events that happened out here ... and to be able to put a smile on peoples' faces, it makes you feel good.

"There's the small thing, with baseball, and there's the larger aspect of it when you step outside the dome and do things that kind of bring a light to peoples' lives, even if it's just for a moment."

So sayonara, Japan. Hopefully MLB will be back very soon.

### **MLB Notebook: A's overpower Mariners**

By Roger Schlueter / MLB.com

On a Friday the 13th in April 1928, an estimated 18,000 fans were lucky enough to be eyewitnesses for a rollicking game between the Yankees and Athletics.

This affair included nine future Hall of Famers (Earle Combs, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Leo Durocher and Waite Hoyt for the Yankees; Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, Mickey Cochrane and Eddie Collins for the Athletics) who got into the game, was managed by two other future Hall of Famers (Connie Mack and Miller Huggins) and featured the Yankees -- who had smacked around the A's in the teams' Opening Day game two days earlier -- jumping out to a 7-0 lead after 2 1/2 innings before Mack's A's mounted a furious comeback with runs in the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth innings.

The Athletics homered three times in the game, but fell just short of a complete comeback, taking an 8-7 loss. The final pitcher of the game for the A's was a southpaw named Ossie Orwoll, who was making his Major League debut. Orwoll tossed seven innings in relief, and at the plate he picked up his first hit -- a double. In his next outing, Orwoll tripled, making him one of the very few Athletics players in club history to collect an extra-base hit in each of his first two career games.

A's three-homer games

Thursday, behind home runs from Yoenis Cespedes, Josh Reddick and Jonny Gomes, the Athletics beat the Mariners, 4-1.

Collecting at least three home runs in a game is a relatively rare occurrence for the Athletics, and generally an indication the ballclub will win.

- In 2011, Oakland tallied at least three home runs in a game only three times -- the fewest in the Majors. In '10, they were tied for the second fewest (six); in '09, they tied for the fifth fewest (nine), and in '08, they had the sixth fewest (nine). From '08-12, they have hit at least three home runs in a game 28 times -- the fewest in the Majors over this span.

- Since the start of the 2008 season, the Athletics are 25-3 (.893 winning percentage) when hitting at least three home runs, with their most recent defeat coming on May 23, 2009. They have won 18 games in a row when clouting at least three homers. Since '08, Major League teams are 1,326-327 (.802) when hitting at least three home runs in a contest.

- The last time the Athletics hit three homers in a game this early into the season was in 2005, when they smacked four against the Orioles in a 9-0 win in their second contest. The three-homer game Thursday marked the eighth time since 1920 the Athletics hit at least three in one of their first two games of the season. Besides 2012 and '05, they also did it in '00 (first game), 1989 (second game), '41 (second game), '34 (second game), '28 (second game) and '25 (first game).

Yoenis Cespedes

- In his second Major League contest, Yoenis Cespedes went 1-for-3 with a two-run home run -- his first four-bagger in the Majors. In his debut Wednesday, Cespedes went 1-for-3 with a double. Cespedes is the first Athletics player since 1997 to have at least one extra-base hit in each of his first two Major League games, and only the eighth to do it since 1920. In '97, Jason McDonald had at least one in each of his first three games, and Ben Grieve had at least one in his first two. The others: Jim Poole ('25), Charlie Bates ('27), Orwoll ('28), Dario Lodigiani ('38) and Buddy Blair ('42).

- Cespedes is the 75th Cuban-born player to homer in the Majors. The top five in career homers: Rafael Palmeiro (569), Jose Canseco (462), Tony Perez (379), Tony Oliva (220) and Minnie Minoso (186).

Bartolo Colon

- Bartolo Colon picked up the victory for the Athletics, allowing one run on three hits in eight innings. Colon was the first Oakland pitcher since Dave Stewart on April 4, 1988, to go at least eight innings and allow no more than three hits in either of the team's first two games of the season. Stewart's performance (8 1/3 innings, two hits, one run) came on Opening Day, and was also against the Mariners.

- Colon's game score -- an equation used to determine a pitcher's dominance -- of 77 was the highest for an Athletics pitcher in one of the first two games of the season since Tim Hudson (in Oakland's second game) earned an 80 in 2000. Hudson's line: seven shutout innings on one hit, with eight strikeouts and three walks.

• Colon and Grant Balfour combined to strike out seven with one walk. In the first game of the season, A's pitchers didn't issue a walk. In the live-ball era, the one walk over the first two games is the fewest for the franchise. Last year, both the Phillies and the Mariners each issued just one walk in their first two games of the season. It should also be noted that through the first two games in 2012, Mariners pitchers have issued only two walks, with both coming in the 4-1 loss Thursday.

### **Major League: Opening Series finale: A's vs. Mariners**

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 3/29/2012, 12:31am

Situational hitting gave the A's some trouble last night, as they went just 1-for-14 with runners in scoring position. It's a facet of the game manager Bob Melvin is really stressing this year, especially given the makeup of the team and the overall lack of power, compared to other teams.

"It's not like we played poorly," he said. "We made some nice plays and, at times, I thought we had some nice at-bats. We hit some balls hard that could have ended the game, but it was frustrating in that we could have scored some more runs than we did. But you have to put that away and play for today."

The A's have lost eight straight season openers, but the good news is that they've followed five of the previous seven defeats with a win.

Today's lineup is a bit different, with just two lefties in there against Seattle southpaw Jason Vargas. Take a look:

A's: Weeks 2B, Pennington SS, Crisp LF, Gomes DH, Suzuki C, Cespedes CF, Reddick RF, Donaldson 3B, Ka'aihue 1B (Colon SP)

And for Seattle: Figgins LF, Ackley 2B, Ichiro RF, Smoak 1B, Montero DH, Seager 3B, Olivo C, Saunders CF, Ryan SS (Vargas SP)

Melvin says the first-base job is still a three-man race between Ka'aihue, Brandon Allen and Daric Barton and, though he could potentially carry two first basemen, he noted Donaldson could also play first during the season. It's not the easiest of decisions, especially since both Allen and Ka'aihue are out of options. He's also been getting good reports on Barton from Arizona.

### **A's power past Mariners 4-1**

Associated Press

TOKYO -- Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes is starting to look at home with the Oakland Athletics.

Cespedes hit his first major league home run on Thursday to power the Athletics to a 4-1 victory over the Seattle Mariners that earned Oakland a split in the two-game season-opening series at Tokyo Dome.

Cespedes, who signed a \$36 million, four-year contract with Oakland on March 3, said he is starting to feel comfortable in his new surroundings.

"I wake up early every day and get to the field early and work hard because the baseball is different than in Cuba," Cespedes said.

Cespedes connected for a two-run homer off Seattle reliever [Shawn Kelley](#) (0-1) to give Oakland a 2-1 lead in the bottom of the seventh. [Josh Reddick](#) followed with a solo shot off [George Sherrill](#) to give the A's a two-run cushion.

"They tried to throw me sliders every at-bat, so I had to adjust to hit the ball," Cespedes said. "It was great to hit a home run here for the Japanese fans."

The A's opted not to re-sign Japanese slugger Hideki Matsui after a disappointing 2011 season and are hoping Cespedes can provide more production in the middle of the order.

The late rally Thursday was an encouraging sign for Oakland, which had only scored one run in the first 17 innings of the season.

Oakland manager Bob Melvin said Cespedes has been showing steady improvement since joining the team at the beginning of this month.

"He's getting more and more comfortable every day," Melvin said. "The challenges he faces on the field are probably the easiest for him. He's been dropped into a situation that is difficult both on and off the field."

The 26-year-old Cespedes played in Cuba's top league for eight seasons before defecting in 2011. He starred for Cuba in the 2009 World Baseball Classic, hitting .458 with two home runs and five RBIs in six games.

[Ichiro Suzuki](#), who was 4 for 5 in Seattle's 3-1 win over Oakland on Wednesday, was hitless in four at-bats Thursday.

Oakland starter [Bartolo Colon](#) picked up the win after striking out six and holding the Mariners to one run on three hits over eight innings. [Grant Balfour](#) pitched a scoreless ninth for the save.

"I mixed my pitches well," Colon said. "I tried to go inside with my two-seamer and outside with my fastball."

[Jonny Gomes](#) completed the scoring in the eighth with a solo homer off reliever [Steve Delabar](#). Seattle scored its lone run on a solo homer by [Justin Smoak](#) in the seventh.

Even though Suzuki was quiet at the plate he excited the crowd of 43,279 in the fifth inning with a fine leaping catch up against the wall in right to take away a base hit from [Kurt Suzuki](#).

MLB and the players' association are using the series to assist rebuilding in Japan following last year's earthquake and tsunami. A group of players and coaches traveled to the disaster zone on Tuesday to conduct a baseball clinic.

"The main reason we came here was because of the tsunami," Melvin said. "I know MLB has been coming every four years, but the tsunami made this trip happen for sure."

The rest of the big league teams start on April 4, when the renamed Miami Marlins open their new ballpark against the World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals. In the meantime, the A's and Mariners will resume playing spring training games this weekend before facing each other in Oakland on April 6.

## Tokyo Diary -- Crosswalks, the metro and cleanliness

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com

TOKYO -- Folks here don't cross the street unless it's legal. You won't see anyone running out in the middle of traffic or cheating a walk sign. And in the rare instance that they walk out of turn, you'll hear a whistle. A cop whistles at you, and then will join you for a brief discussion deciding if you will be cited.

And if you're driving (on the right side of the car but on the left side of the road....) and violate a traffic law -- you'll also hear that whistle. It means pull over, and it's incredible folks listen and literally pull over at the slight sound of a whistle.

That very same whistle can also be heard at a ballgame. Ushers at the Tokyo Dome wears whistles and if a foul ball or home run is heading into the stands, they blow the whistle to alert the fans, as in "heads up".

### "Mastering the Metro"

After we mastered the rules and regulations of the roads, a few of us tried out the train system. Our CSN cameras went along with Jonny Gomes and Kila Ka'aihue for their first ride. They were pretty impressive figuring out where they were going on the massive city maps, buying their ticket (they found the button on the computer for the English version) and then navigating what train number and direction they were heading.

And being two of the tallest guys on the team, and with one of them sporting a mohawk, they were hard to miss on the subway -- much to the fans delight as they both took the time to sign autographs and pose for photos for any who asked. It's incredible how many sports fans have had a baseball on them this week, just in hopes that they might run into a Major Leaguer this week.

### "Cleanliness"

Everyone in our traveling group has been impressed with how clean the streets and trains of Tokyo are. Yet, we never see trash cans! People take pride in their city and are respectful and polite, minding all manners. They don't litter, and they minimize waste at all costs. Napkins aren't regularly handed out at restaurants. They bring warm cloths to wipe your hands before you eat, but after that, it's up to you to be neat! If napkins are given, they are much smaller and thinner than the ones you use at home. It's hit me on how wasteful I can be at home, at times, so I hope to take some of these tips back home!

## With Dodgers deal done, focus turns to A's-Giants

Ray Ratto, csnbayarea.com

The Los Angeles Dodgers are now officially worth three times as much as the San Francisco Giants, and part of the reason is Warriors part-owner Peter Guber.

Frank McCourt finally found a number he could live with -- \$2 billion -- and people who could deliver the number - Guber, Magic Johnson, Stan Kasten and a bunch of others. And unless Major League Baseball rejects the sale because Guber still hasn't explained what the hell the Warriors are doing to Bud Selig's satisfaction, the deal is done.

Which means that the A's/Giants San Jose spitfest is one hurdle closer to being settled. Maybe.

MLB has been grappling with the Mets and Dodgers, and their horrific ownership issues, as top priorities, which means that John Fisher and Charlie Johnson's inability to come to an equitable price to settle the matter of who gets San Jose have put the A's planned move on hold for more than two years now.

That's every song in the history of muzak, thrice.

And unless MLB actually doesn't give a damn what happens to San Jose, or the A's have been bluffing about having the money to cover the new ballpark and the tribute to the Giants, this could come to a conclusion sometime soon.

Again, maybe.

The number of moving parts that have to be greased for such an undertaking are far more than most people know, and since MLB has the antitrust protection that allows it to roadblock just about anything it doesn't really want to do, greasing is only part of the process.

There is also the matter of prioritization, and by almost any measure the Dodgers were more important than the A's and Giants combined. If you take the Forbes numbers released last week, the Dodgers were \$536,000,000 more important than our two teams, and that was when the Dodgers were listed at \$1.4 billion.

So now the gap is, for argument's sake, \$1.136 billion, and when you throw in the Mets' valuation of \$719 million, Bernie Madoff and all, the Giants and A's matter exactly \$1.855 billion less to Bud Selig and the other 28 elven rich than the Dodgers and Mets.

That, plus the intractability of our two little mom-and-pops to agree with each other, plus the matter of whether the A's have their financing down, is why we are in the holding pattern we are in.

Not because the mythical/nonsensical/P.R. illusion blue ribbon panel hasn't released its findings yet - that has been a pathetic lie from the start. The blue ribbon panel has found San Jose on a map, period. That's all it could do, because this is an argument between very rich folks, and nothing is more vicious than rich people arguing about becoming richer.

But the Mets have settled their end of the Madoff case now, and the Dodgers have finally rid themselves of the malignancy of the McCourt regime, which means Bud can start making phone calls and waiting for guidance on how to whip votes, and eventually a decision will be made that will satisfy one party, or maybe none.



If they want to. There is still the possibility that Selig and the owners that really matter still haven't found the strength to give a damn about the Bay Area. There is a bias in ownership circles, and it's not East Coast/West Coast. It's juice, and frankly, neither the Giants nor A's may have a lot.

Fisher has been a profit-taker, Johnson is the Giants' third lead money man in five years, and Larry Baer and Lew Wolff are front men who talk the talk so that Fisher and Johnson don't have to. That probably isn't the kind of throw-weight that makes the real powers in MLB sit back and say, "Boy, we'd better keep them happy."

But now the agenda items above them have been cleared, and now Bud is going to have to make the phone call he's been delaying all this time, in the Marlon Brando Godfather voice:

"How much will it take for us to come to an accommodation?"

And then things should move pretty fast after that. I'd give it 15 months.

### **Brandon McCarthy says arigato for cutter**

By Mark Simon, ESPN Stats & Info

The Major League Baseball regular-season opens in Japan for the fourth time, with the [Seattle Mariners](#) and [Oakland Athletics](#) squaring off at 6:10 a.m. ET on Wednesday.

[Felix Hernandez](#) will make his fourth straight Opening day start for the Mariners. It's the third straight time that his opening start has been against the Athletics. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, only one other active pitcher has thrown three consecutive season openers for one team against the same opponent. While with the [Indians](#), [CC Sabathia](#) started on Opening Day from 2006 to 2008, with all three games coming against the [White Sox](#).

His opposite number will be [Brandon McCarthy](#), who will be the seventh different Opening Day starting pitcher for Oakland in the last seven years. Elias points out that the Athletics are the only team in the majors to use six different pitchers to open the last six seasons. That's nothing new for Oakland, which tabbed different starting pitchers for 10 consecutive Opening Day games from 1993 to 2002.

Hernandez is the more well-known of the two Opening Day starters, but McCarthy garnered a lot of attention this offseason for his commitment to analytics and was [the cover story in a recent issue of ESPN The Magazine](#).

In 170 $\frac{2}{3}$  IP last season, McCarthy allowed only five home runs and had a nearly 5-to-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio. He did so by transforming himself into a ground-ball pitcher.

The pitch that made McCarthy into a successful major league pitcher in 2011 was the cutter. After missing 2010 due to injury, McCarthy made a very strong impression in his return to the majors, pitching with much better control. The cutter played a big part in that.

Last season, 69 percent of McCarthy's cutters were thrown for strikes. Opposing hitters recorded just 16 hits in 100 at bats that ended with a cutter. He was even more dominant with two strikes, allowing just one hit in 52 at bats ending with two-strike cutters.

#### Quick hits

The two franchises have headed in opposite directions on Opening Day recently. The Athletics have lost seven straight season openers, including one against the [Red Sox](#) in Japan in 2008. The Mariners have won five straight Opening Day games since losing to the [Angels](#) in 2006.

#### MLB Opening Day in Japan

	"Road" Team	"Home Team"	Winner
2012	Mariners	Athletics	??
2008	Red Sox	Athletics	Red Sox
2004	Yankees	Rays	Rays
2000	Cubs	Mets	Cubs

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, only one American League team has lost eight straight Opening Day games. The Washington Senators dropped eight straight from 1963 through 1970.

Also from Elias, the Mariners' five-year Opening Day win streak is tied for the longest in franchise history. They previously won five straight openers from 1982 to 1986.

[Yoenis Cespedes](#) is expected to make his major-league debut for Oakland. He signed a four-year, \$36-million contract with the Athletics this offseason after hitting 33 home runs for Granma in the Cuban National Series during the 2010-11 season. That's tied for the most home runs in a single season in Cuba.

### **Ichiro Suzuki is 13-for-42 on Opening Day, and all 13 hits have been singles.**

#### **Opening Dawn: A's, Mariners get started early**

By Anthony Castrovince / MLB.com

It's 6:10 a.m. on a Wednesday on the East Coast, which can only mean one thing:

Opening Day, baby!

It's A's vs. Mariners, live from the Tokyo Dome (and don't you just love the lack of advertising in the stadium name?) via the magic of MLB.TV (now that's how you advertise, kids), and, for the betterment of a sleeping society, I chronicled it all:

First inning

For some reason, the team on which Ichiro Suzuki resides is the away team for today's proceedings. Whatever. At least it means Ichiro will get to be the first batter of the 2012 season in his native land.

Oh, wait. I almost forgot. Ichiro's no longer a leadoff hitter. He's a No. 3 hitter, and we must all wrap our heads around this new reality.

Bottom of Form

Besides, the Mariners have a capable replacement for Ichiro's leadoff responsibilities in Chone Figgins. Granted, it's been a few years since Figgins was a relevant solution for such a job, and he hit just a buck-eighty-eight last year. But did you realize Figgins hit a whopping .400 down the stretch last season? I mean, it was four games, 10 at-bats. And then he hurt his hip on Aug. 2 and didn't play again. But still ... .400!

All right, so it's Figgins vs. Brandon McCarthy with the first pitch of your 2012 Major League season. And Figgins grounds out. So much for that hot streak.

Next batter is Dustin Ackley, the Mariners' stud second baseman. And he grounds out, too. McCarthy is, ahem, on a roll. The ground balls are apropos outcomes for McCarthy. He had the best Fielding Independent Pitching mark (2.86) of any starter in the American League last season, largely on the strength of his 46.7 ground-ball percentage. At the end of '09, McCarthy, a former highly touted prospect who had seemingly flamed out, reinvented himself by incorporating the two-seam fastball into his repertoire. And last season, he rode it to all those ground balls and a sneakily good season for the A's. This could be the season when he truly cracks his way into the national consciousness, especially now that, two batters into 2012, he has an amazing 100-percent ground-ball mark.

Alas, Ichiro messes with McCarthy's mojo by singling through the left side for the first hit of the season. Boy, wouldn't that ground-ball base hit have looked good in the leadoff spot? Instead, Ichiro is stranded as Justin Smoak strikes out.

In the bottom of the inning, Felix Hernandez takes the hill. And his mere presence can only mean the Mariners' bats won't do much today. They scored two runs or less in 15 of his starts in his AL Cy Young Award season in 2010 and 14 of his starts last year. The guy gets less support than Ron Paul.

But King Felix does what he does best: He posts a scoreless inning.

Second inning

We get our first look at Jesus Montero in an M's uniform, and this at-bat will undoubtedly determine who got the best of the January swap with the Yankees. Michael Pineda's fastball velocity has been a topic of conversation all spring, so it would appear the M's have the upper hand at the moment. But Montero grounds out, leading me to the obvious conclusion that there are no winners here.

Speaking of new acquisitions, in the bottom of the inning, the A's Yoenis Cespedes comes to the plate for his first Major League at-bat. The dude can leg press 1,300 pounds, can bench 350, can hit home runs that start in his native Cuba and land in Cancun. But he can't solve "Bernandez," who strikes him out to end the inning.

Third inning

Not much to report here, so I'll instead just make the obvious remark that Eric Sogard's eyeglasses are awesome.

Fourth inning

Ackley leads off. And if you're looking for a reason to believe the M's will score more than 400 runs (or whatever ridiculously low total they've averaged the last two seasons), look to this guy. He got his rookie year out of the way, and now he presumably has better lineup protection with Ichiro hitting behind him. And wouldn't you know it? Just as the announcers are talking about McCarthy's "super sinker," he leaves one up in the zone, and Ackley smacks it over the center-field wall. It's 1-0, Mariners, the Tokyo Dome is rocking and the M's (for this one shining moment in time) lead the Majors in home runs.

Ah, but the A's answer back later in the inning, when Cliff Pennington doubles and Kurt Suzuki (the least popular Suzuki in the building) drives him in. We're all tied up.

Fifth through ninth innings

/>Fifth through ninth innings

Suffice to say the pitchers are ahead of the hitters. Or maybe the M's and A's offenses are just up to their old tricks. In any event, not much to see here, aside from Cespedes' first career hit. It was a seventh-inning double that bounced off the outfield wall. Somehow, the wall didn't come crumbling down.

There were also some nice defensive gems. Jemile Weeks, the exciting young A's second baseman, made a terrific stop of a high-hopper to the right side to steal a single from Justin Smoak in the top of the ninth, and Mike Carp made a leaping catch at the wall to rob Josh Reddick of extra bases in the bottom.

Hernandez and McCarthy were both terrific, too. And McCarthy's seven innings were a great start to what could be a big contract year for him, as he'll reach six years of service time and be eligible for his first round of traditional free agency.

Keep an eye on him, and say a little prayer that the M's bats give King Felix a little more love.

Well, we got up early and we're all heavily caffeinated, so I can think of no better outcome than ... you guessed it ... extra innings.

10th inning

The hits keep (not) coming in extras. Brian Fuentes sets down the side in order in the top half, and Tom Wilhelmsen holds the A's scoreless in the bottom half. Wilhelmsen's is one of the more unlikely baseball stories you'll ever hear. The guy wasted his raw talent by walking away from the game after a marijuana suspension (breaking his father's heart), spent five years working as a bartender and then decided to lace 'em up again. Last year, he broke camp with the Mariners, and here he is pitching the 10th inning of Opening Day in Japan. Pretty cool stuff.

11th inning

Andrew Carignan is pitching for the A's, and I'm embarrassed to say I have no idea who that is. But a quick baseball-reference.com search uncovers that he's struck out 11.7 batters per nine innings in his Minor League career, so color me intrigued.

Alas, this is not Carignan's night (or morning, for that matter). Defensive whiz Brendan Ryan provides some offense with a leadoff double. Figgins (1-for-4 in his newly initiated return to glory) puts down a sacrifice bunt to move him over. And then our main man, Ackley, comes through in the clutch with a single to center to give the M's the go-ahead run.

That's all for Carignan, and in comes Jerry Blevins. Ackley swipes second, and then hometown hero Ichiro bounces a single up the middle. As Ackley streaks toward home, the wily Ichiro gets caught in a rundown en route to second, allowing Ackley to score before the out is made. The Mariners go up 3-1, and Ichiro is now batting .800 in his new role as a No. 3 hitter. This might do wonders for his popularity in Japan.

In the bottom of the inning, Brandon League is nearly decapitated by a Seth Smith single, but he retires the side to end it. There it is, folks. Your 2012 opener. A taut, tight pitchers' duel with a big blast from a rising star and a huge performance from a local legend. What more could you ask for ... besides a later start time?

Welcome back, baseball. Now go get some sleep.

### **Ichiro sparks Mariners win over A's in Tokyo**

Alastair Himmer, Reuters

The Seattle Mariners rode a wave of 'Ichiro-Mania' in Tokyo to beat the Oakland Athletics 3-1 in extra innings on Wednesday in the opening game of the Major League Baseball season.

Ichiro Suzuki, Japan's most successful sporting export, finished 4-5 batting third for the first time after playing lead-off nearly all his career, driving in Seattle's third run.

Dustin Ackley drove in the go-ahead run at the top of the 11th inning for Seattle, who had the worst offensive record in the majors last season.

Seattle's victory means Oakland have now begun the last eight MLB seasons with a loss, the longest active opening day losing streak in the league and the worst since 1992.

"I've never been that nervous before," Ichiro told reporters. "The warmth of the fans almost made me want to cry.

"I felt the significance of the occasion. I knew it would only happen once in my life. I wanted to share a special moment and give something back to them.

"Even Oakland's players were raving about the incredible atmosphere. I felt very proud," added the 38-year-old. "To get four hits and a win in Japan is obviously very special.

"I don't enjoy the pressure but I know it's something I have to live with. Tonight my nerves were really off the scale."

### SPORTING EXPORT

As the teams were announced, Ichiro doffed his cap as a sell-out crowd of 44,000 paid homage on his first appearance in his home country for the Mariners since he joined them in 2001.

His face staring down from giant advertising boards, Ichiro's famed hitting wind-up triggered an explosion of camera flashes every time he came to the plate.

Ackley smashed a solo home run at the top of the fourth but Oakland pegged the Mariners back when Kurt Suzuki drilled an RBI into left field at the bottom of the inning.

After Ackley's go-ahead single, Ichiro cracked a line drive to centre to add the insurance run. He got a standing ovation when he took his position in right field in the final inning.

Felix Hernandez pitched eight innings for the Mariners, striking out six while surrendering one run and five hits in the first of two back-to-back games at Tokyo Dome.

"It was an honor to open the season in Tokyo," said Hernandez. "We played unbelievable and the atmosphere from the crowd was awesome."

Reliever Tom Wilhelmson was credited with the win, while Andrew Carignan took the loss for Oakland.

Seattle and Oakland were scheduled to meet in Tokyo in 2003, but the series was called off because of the threat of war in Iraq.

### **Cespedes adjusts to slider, wins \$12,000**

By Jim Caple, espn.com

TOKYO -- Yoenis Cespedes must love major league baseball. He hit a home run in his second game and his Japanese hosts

called him on to the field after the game to present him with a big check for one million yen, roughly \$12,000.

That is probably not how it works in Cuba.

"He's probably got a few bucks in his pocket at this point but 12 grand is 12 grand," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said.

Cespedes should have more than a few dollars after signing a four-year, \$36 million contract with the Athletics late this winter after leaving his native Cuba. He made the team out of spring training and started in center field the first two games in Japan. The Mariners pitchers threw him several sliders those two games and he finally made them pay with a two-run homer off one from reliever [Shawn Kelley](#) in the bottom of the seventh to give Oakland a 2-1 lead in the Athletics' eventual 4-1 victory.

"They tried to throw me sliders and I had to make an adjustment," Cespedes said through his interpreter, former Athletics pitcher Ariel Prieto.

Asked what he thought of Cespedes' home run, Melvin replied, "Hard and fast. We've seen him getting more comfortable against right-handers. For him to hit one to put us ahead, I'm sure it gives him some confidence."

"You go out to the field to enjoy the game but you don't think anyone is coming out after to name you MVP," Cespedes said of the check. "You don't worry about that. You worry about going to the game and playing the game hard."

### **Sharing baseball, blossoms and earthquake jitters**

Puget Sound Business Journal by Art Thiel, Contributing Writer

In the week prior to departure to report on the Mariners and Oakland A's opening the Major League Baseball season in Japan for SportpressNW.com and the Puget Sound Business Journal, my coffee-shop conversation with photographer [Drew Sellers](#) couldn't help but be overheard by a young woman sitting behind us.

After Sellers left, [Kanako Yokoi](#) smiled and introduced herself as a student from Japan working and studying international copyright law in Seattle. She was excited for my trip and also a baseball fan. After I gave her a business card, she wished me safe travels, which I thought was the standard courtesy remark.

Then she motioned to me to look at her smartphone. She really meant it when she spoke of my safety, then gave me something back:

Earthquake-alert apps.

Well, of course. How pre-2011 of me to be surprised.

In the wake of the 9.0 quake on March 3, 2011 that changed Japan's world, a nationwide alert system by the government is now available in a mobile version. Obviously, no one has mastered the art of the seismic forecast, but once a significant temblor begins, the alert system can provide a precious few seconds to give people a chance to get to a safer place.

Yokoi said the system is a part of all communications media, so that even if you and the kids are playing in the yard, the TV inside will make a very unpleasant noise to catch your attention.

So if you're traveling, or just interested:

[Namazu Alert for Japan](#)

[Earthquake!](#)

[Earthquake alert](#)

As a longtime Northwest guy who's lived through some shakers, I have the traditional too-cool nonchalance when it come to matters tectonic. Then as I was in line Tuesday night at the Mariners hotel for the sushi at a reception thrown by MLB for the U.S. travel party, Sellers said to me in a near-whisper, "I hate it when the building moves."

I looked at him, snickered, pounded some fresh tuna belly, and we didn't speak of it again, because no one else seemed to notice. Wednesday morning, we learned Sellers was right:

[The 6.3 quake](#) was felt in Tokyo, but only slightly. Not enough to set off alarms, but for those with motion sensitivity like Sellers, enough to know. He felt the same thing an hour earlier while brushing his teeth on the 14th floor of our hotel.

An hour earlier, we returned by bullet train from Ishinomaki, the town hit hardest by "3/11," devastated by the 30-foot tsunami that rolled three miles into town. An old port city of fishing boats, paper mills and 160,000 residents a five-hour drive north of Tokyo, Ishinomaki lost thousands of people in a matter of hours.

A year later, devastation remains sickeningly fresh. While much debris has been picked up, dozens of homes and businesses nearest the the Pacific shore remain gutted, shattered sentinels of despair chock-a-block among empty lots where other homeowners could afford to have their domestic remains piled elsewhere.

Acres of abandoned car bodies are stacked upon each other, done as neatly as Japanese custom demands and yellow-iron technology permits. Blocks and blocks of temporary, FEMA-like housing cram families together as community leaders and the national government argue about what the future should look like.

Meanwhile, a couple of miles inland, a few players from the Mariners and manager [Eric Wedge](#), as well as some A's players, staged a baseball clinic for Ishinomaki's surviving Little Leaguers. MLB donated \$500,000 to the cause of repairing the town's municipal stadium, which amounts to the civic center in baseball-mad Japan. Another group of charities matched the donation.

In view of a landscape of epic despair, it seemed small. It WAS small. But only small steps will get this tragedy behind.

Wednesday morning dawned bright and nearly warm in Tokyo. On both sides of the Pacific, it's time for cherry blossoms and baseball. On both sides of the Pacific, earthquake season is 24/7.

My new app will tell me so.