

Carl Steward: Darting here and there ...

By Carl Steward, Contra Costa Times

Darting here and there ...

Congrats to Major League Baseball for scheduling the 2012 season opener between two potential cellar-dwellers at 3 a.m. Pacific time 5,000 miles away on artificial turf in a dingy barn that looked suspiciously like the old Kingdome.

Credit due to baseball fans who got up in the wee hours and stuck it out. It's going to be hard enough not to doze off watching the A's and Mariners during normal waking hours.

How weird is it that a Cuban defector got his first hit and first home run in the U.S. major leagues while playing games in Japan? Something Yoenis Cespedes can at least try to explain to his grandchildren someday.

It was bound to happen. Heard with our own ears a radio news report on the Giants' flagship referring to the A's new center fielder as "Orlando Cespedes."

Since they were their home games, do the A's get credit for the two sellouts in the Tokyo Dome, or do they have to give Ichiro a major cut?

You can't look at the flowing hair of new A's right fielder Josh Reddick and not think Jason Giambi, especially the way Reddick was knocking the ball around in Tokyo.

We want some of Bartolo Colon's cologne. It's smelling pretty good after that opening performance.

You don't want to say it's going to be another tough injury year for Oakland, but when broadcaster Ken Korach (knee replacement) starts the season on the disabled list, it's ominous. Get well, KK.

There must be an ugly dome fever going around. ESPN the Mag picked the Tampa Bay Rays to win the World Series (and good luck with that choice, fellas).

Giants fans all just switched over to Sports Illustrated, which picked their team to get to the World Series, albeit losing to the Los Angeles Pujols.

Easiest prediction of the spring -- Freddy Sanchez wouldn't be ready. Check back in mid-May.

Speaking of the ESPN mag, shouldn't it be Clayton Kershaw giving Tim Lincecum noogies on this week's cover based on how their meetings turned out last year?

A group is flush enough to pay \$2.15 billion for the Dodgers and their stadium, yet it only gets half the parking lot?

That \$2.15 bil investment -- does that come with or without Tommy Lasorda?

Magic Johnson should have been saving his money for the Lakers or the Clippers. What does he know about baseball?

Warriors co-owner Peter Guber is part of the new Dodgers ownership group. Now Joe Lacob has a built-in boo patsy whenever he gets the temptation to grab a microphone.

Memo to the Giants ownership group: All in on Matt Cain right now, or count on the next six or seven years after this one watching him in Dodger Blue.

Honestly, if you're Cain, why would you settle for a penny less than what Barry Zito got five years ago? And that was even before gas prices went ballistic.

Aaron Rowand, released in Miami. Apparently, it wasn't just AT&T Park.

It would be a Hall of Fame prank, for sure, if Don Nelson comes out Sunday and guffaws, "April Fool! I didn't really make it."

So far, Nelson is the only person who has verified his induction into the Naismith Basketball Hall pending Monday's official announcement. As he told Tom Tolbert on KNBR, "Nobody told me to keep it a secret."

Yo, Bill Parcells, take a cue from Nellie. Absence makes the heart grow fonder when it comes to enshrinement.

We've got a Big East, a Big Ten and a Big 12 team in the Final Four. Big year for conferences starting with Big. So what the hell happened, Big Sky and Big West?

The women's Final Four, meanwhile, is comprised of all No. 1 seeds. Apparently, when it's all females involved, you don't need a Cinderella.

It's this simple for Stanford against Baylor: Get Britney Griner in foul trouble, and the good news is Tara VanDerveer has the players to do it. We're sensing an upset.

Stanford's men saved face for the entire Pac-12 Conference by winning the NIT. Well, maybe more like an eyebrow or part of an ear.

Seriously, do you know what the NHL's Western Conference playoff scramble reminds us of? Dot racing. And the last couple of games notwithstanding, we still like the teal dot to get to the finish line in front.

That said, the Sharks better find more ways to put that black dot in the net, or it'll be a quick playoff exit if they get there.

Jon Gruden's schtick with Andrew Luck on ESPN was fun. It'd be even more fun if the Indianapolis Colts saw wisdom in making it a lasting relationship.

Don't do it, Steph. The only playing you should be doing the rest of the season is backgammon or cards with Andrew Bogut.

Finally, at the end of the day -- Warriors coach Mark Jackson's favorite euphemism -- he likely can't wait until the end of the day. At least these days.

A's back in California, with a week to kill

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

After starting a little slowly and then gathering a head of steam in two regular-season games in Tokyo, the A's now return to the Bay Area with a week before their next regular-season game.

"It kind of stinks," said outfielder Josh Reddick, who homered in Oakland's 4-1 win in the second game in Japan. "You get geared up for those two games, then you shut it down and try to gear back up again next week. It's like an extreme All-Star break - but without the break."

The A's visit Triple-A Sacramento for an exhibition game tonight, then play the Bay Bridge series with the Giants on Monday through Wednesday before finally getting back to business against the Mariners at the Coliseum on Friday night.

"It's definitely a little different," shortstop Cliff Pennington said. "We're not used to it. What's weird is going back to spring training games, but that's the card we're dealt."

Might teams that played spring training straight through be better off?

"I don't know if there's a measurable difference," Pennington said. "Maybe if we played someone new next week there might be, but we're playing Seattle when we get back, so that's the same for both of us."

Manager Bob Melvin said that because the Mariners and A's have the same schedule, essentially, that the playing field is level. Some might say Oakland has the edge, because the A's returned home from Japan, while Seattle headed to Phoenix to

complete Cactus League play. The Mariners have kind of a rough schedule altogether; they started spring training a week before the A's, they flew from Phoenix to Tokyo, Tokyo to Phoenix and then will fly to the Bay Area for next week's two games. After that, they go to Texas before finally getting back to Seattle nearly two months after reporting to spring training.

The A's also have numerous days off in the next week and a half, four in all. The one issue there might be stale pitching - Opening Night starter Brandon McCarthy, for instance, said he felt as if he hadn't pitched for a month when he started vs. the Mariners, and he'd had a full week off. He'll have eight days off this time around.

The week layoff didn't seem to bother McCarthy and Bartolo Colon in Tokyo. They combined to allow two runs in their 15 innings of work.

One of the main oddities about the week between regular-season games is that the A's still have roster decisions to make. First base is particularly unsettled, and Melvin emphasized that Daric Barton is still in the hunt with Brandon Allen and Kila Ka'aihue. Allen and Ka'aihue have options remaining, so the team is likely to want to keep both as long as possible; because Oakland won't need a fifth starter until as late as April 17, the A's could continue to carry two first basemen for another two-plus weeks. By then, injuries or even a trade could change the whole outlook.

"It's still kind of a work in progress," Melvin said.

In addition, the A's must decide if they will keep a sixth outfielder, Collin Cowgill, as appears likely, or two backup infielders in Eric Sogard and Adam Rosales.

The rotation remains somewhat up in the air, with the Nos. 3, 4 and 5 spots unannounced to date. Tommy Milone is a virtual lock for the third spot, and Tyson Ross has a good shot at one of the final two slots, while Graham Godfrey remains in the running along with Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock.

A's-Mariners Japan trip a stumble for MLB

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle

It's too late for any American League predictions, given that MLB had the preposterous idea of opening the season in Japan this week, but at least the A's and Seattle Mariners can get back to serious business: exhibition games in America, with the resumption of the regular season still far in the distance.

That was quite a show, wasn't it? Hard-core A's fans - and there are many, even if they refuse to frequent **Lew Wolff's** neglected sewer - got their Opening Day at a convenient 3 a.m. Wednesday. Even if they intended to watch it live, sorry, the very first game of the season was shown on tape delay. The MLB Network production was anchored in a suburb outside Seattle, where a couple of Mariners broadcast "homers" handled the telecast and reacted to the A's better moments with muttering disdain.

Here's a tip for **Bud Selig** if he insists on showcasing baseball in Japan, where it was first introduced in 1872 and enjoys a raging popularity without any outside help: Go back to the old formula matching a top U.S. team against a Japanese powerhouse. If someone like **Ichiro** or **Yu Darvish** represents America, all the better. It will be great fun, fulfilling those marketing and charity-driven obligations, and for heaven's sake, *it won't count*.

Now, on to the National League West and the annual Dead Wrong in Public predictions, always a disturbing brand of errant thought:

(1) Giants: It's all about **Matt Cain**. He says he wants a Giants extension to be signed by Opening Day so the issue "won't be lingering over our heads" during the season, but there's no chance of harmony if the talks break off. Fans will watch Cain with a sense of regret, figuring he's gone as a free agent or possibly even traded in midseason. He'll be constantly pounded with questions about his future, and whether the Dodgers would be in play. No, he won't answer the questions, and the whole mess will be patently unfair, but this will be the residue for Cain and his agent if the Giants don't lock him up: a lot of unrest and some very awkward moments.

If the Giants get this done, and I believe they will, they're the class of this division. They've got the pitching, the ballpark, the manager and the return of **Buster Posey**. **Brandon Crawford** will be a treat at shortstop and respectable at the plate. Keep the rotation and **Brian Wilson** healthy, and they win it comfortably.

(2) Arizona: This will be a real test of **Kirk Gibson's** motivational powers. That season-after mood just isn't the same, as the Giants discovered last year, and please: The Diamondbacks' lineup isn't *that* good. Keep **Justin Upton** and **Paul Goldschmidt** in the ballpark, and everything will be fine. If **Trevor Bauer** gets called up at some point, pray for a pitching matchup against **Tim Lincecum**: two wildly talented purveyors of the unconventional.

(3) Colorado: The Rockies have made a point of getting much older, at many positions, topped by the fact that 49-year-old **Jamie Moyer** has made the rotation. Not necessarily a worthy template. Way too many question marks about the pitching here, but the presence of **Troy Tulowitzki** and **Carlos Gonzalez** makes them a tremendous threat.

(4) Los Angeles: **Matt Kemp** and **Clayton Kershaw** aside, it's all about the future with this club now, in light of that mind-boggling \$2 billion sale. But it's not about **Mark Walter**, the money guy, or **Magic Johnson**. It's not even about president **Stan Kasten**, although he knows how to run a club. It's about the general manager, and (until further notice) that's **Ned Colletti**, who spent so many years as **Brian Sabean's** assistant.

Baseball is all about parity; money doesn't buy you a thing. It will be a blessing to the Dodgers' free-agent outlay, but great clubs are built on the strength of trades, draft picks and a constant flow of talent from the minor-league system. Colletti's the key guy in this gaudy operation.

(5) San Diego: They say it's nice down there in spring.

Come one, come all

Powerful evidence on the parity front: Last season marked the 16th time in 17 years that at least one team went from a losing record to the playoffs ... Since 1985, only six teams have won the World Series with the game's highest payroll ... In the decade of the 2000s, eight different teams won it all ... And these were the payroll rankings for last year's final four: Detroit 10th, St. Louis 11th, Texas 13th, Milwaukee 17th ... Like one of those giant cockroaches that can't be killed, **Frank McCourt** remains part of the Dodgers' new era - and that's another huge mistake by Selig. Credit the commissioner for triggering the sale, but as part of the arrangement, McCourt was allowed to share joint control of the parking lots and land surrounding Dodger Stadium. Unbelievable; no wonder so many potential owners backed out (although none could have

matched the eventual selling price). They wanted no part of the annoying little fraud. This is man who would rather sue than eat, so watch for McCourt to create some legal entanglements down the road.

MLB eyes regular-season games in Europe

By Barry M. Bloom / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Fresh off another successful opening of its season in Tokyo, Major League Baseball is considering playing regular-season games in Europe, possibly at new facilities in London or Amsterdam, the sport's top international official said earlier this week.

The A's and Mariners just split a two-game series at the Tokyo Dome, marking the fourth time that the regular season has opened in Japan. MLB has also opened the season in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Monterrey, Mexico, and has been considering playing regular-season games in Europe for years.

"We've been talking about playing games in Europe for some time, and venues have been our biggest obstacle in getting that done," Paul Archey, MLB's vice president of international business operations, told MLB.com this week in Tokyo. "Obviously, it makes sense for us to try to see if there's a way to play in London with the new stadium that they're building there, but there's also other locations in places that we've also been looking at and talking to.

"Certainly, there's a new facility being built in Amsterdam that could work. There's been some talk recently also about a new facility in Rome. So this isn't new. We want to play in Europe, and we just need to keep working at it and find a facility that can accommodate our game."

Next up for MLB internationally is the third World Baseball Classic, with an expanded qualifying round slated for September. Armin-Wolf-Baseball-Arena in Regensburg, Germany, was announced as one of the four venues to host the qualifying round, along with Panama, Taiwan and the U.S. It's the first time a Classic event will be staged in Europe. The venues for the remaining rounds of the tournament, scheduled for next March, have yet to be selected.

The Netherlands and Italy have long been the greatest baseball powers in Europe, and London has been placed on the MLB map now because of the construction of the new Olympic Stadium, which will host the Olympic Games this summer. A new \$20 million stadium being built near Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam may also be an option.

"There haven't really been a lot of new advances," Archey said. "If there's anything new, it would be the stadium in Amsterdam that's being built, and we've had some discussions with them. They came over to New York to talk to us about it and expressed their interest in having games. And we're still in discussions with the Players Association about a five-year play plan and international play plan where we can go play in new markets. Europe is a place we want to play, and we'll continue to investigate the opportunities we think could possibly work."

MLB began playing regular-season games internationally from Aug. 15-18, 1996, when the Mets played a three-game series against the Padres in Monterrey. Exhibition games have also been played more recently in Mexico City.

MLB's trip to Japan about much more than baseball

Lisa Olson, Sporting News, 3/30/2012

The grumbles still come, the complaints continue to rage. Some are born out of pure laziness, others prompted by latent cases of xenophobia. None are particularly attractive.

For the fourth time ever, Major League Baseball opened the season in Japan, and the whining from pockets of fans and large segments of the media could be heard far across the pond. The first pitch for both games between Oakland and Seattle came just after 3 a.m. on the West Coast, a troublesome time for those who aren't night owls or early risers.

In the Tokyo Dome that is fondly known as the Big Egg, Bartolo Colon showed flashes of regeneration Thursday in the A's 4-1 win that split the series, following a day when the Mariners snatched a 3-1 victory in extra innings as Ichiro Suzuki—naturally—had four hits, including an 11th-inning RBI single.

No, however loud the moans rise about MLB daring to thrust upon the poor public those torturous pre-dawn starts, this was a good thing. Scratch that, it was a great thing.

It was five whirlwind days of the Mariners and A's, having their eyes popped open like never before. It was both teams visiting the country's stricken northeast Sendai region and entering Ishinomaki, a city once so vibrant but now virtually

desolate after being flattened just over a year ago by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and the subsequent massive tsunami that came crashing into the port community.

More than 3,800 residents of Ishinomaki were killed, and as the MLB contingent toured the place they were knocked back by the stench of death that still hovers, the crushed neighborhoods now rotting from open sewer lines and mounds of abandoned garbage.

Ishinomaki Stadium survived one of the worst natural disasters in modern history, but its field and dugouts were ruined after being used as a staging area during recovery efforts. In this stadium 210 miles to the east of the Big Egg, there gathered hundreds of Japanese Little Leaguers, many of them orphans.

They lost their parents and extended family, their schools and homes, their friends and teammates, but for a few hours earlier this week, as some on this side of the planet griped about being deprived of a traditional opening day at a reasonable viewing time, there beamed these kids, dressed in Mariners and A's uniforms and rejoicing in the normalcy of the baseball clinic being put on by the gaijin.

My friend Susan Slusser, the Oakland beat reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote of being transfixed with an 11-year-old boy named Ryuto Abe, whose mother was killed in the tsunami. He couldn't stop grinning as he played catch with a teammate under the watchful eyes of A's righthander Tyson Ross, who shouted out encouragement.

"I lost my mother, and things did change a lot," Ryuto told Slusser through a translator. "I return to regular life with baseball."

"These players are in existence only on TV," added Ryuto, who plays for a team called the Oaks. "That is the only place we have seen them. So we are really happy they are here with us."

After helping some 100 local kids work on their hitting techniques, Seattle manager Eric Wedge was struck hard by the children's resilience, especially considering the annihilation extended for another 150 miles.

"We are here to play a couple of big league games but the overriding factor for everything is to raise the level of awareness internationally for what's happened here," Wedge said. "There are a lot of people who need help. I want to make sure that everybody really tries to respond and help these people out."

MLB donated \$500,000 to help reconstruct the city of Ishinomaki, money that mostly will go toward a new drainage system and synthetic infield surface at the stadium so children can use it year-round. Initially Wedge thought the funds would be better applied toward temporary housing for those left homeless, but in a preparation visit to Japan in January he heard often about how the ballpark had once been the community's valued gathering place.

"From my understanding, one of the lights of that community was that baseball field," Wedge told The Seattle Times. "And it was like nonstop. There was always something going on there. Nonstop. And then, when they lost that, it was just on top of everything else."

It's never a bad thing when Americans are reminded to count our many blessings.

Two of best assignments I've ever had involved traveling to Japan for opening day, the first with the New York Mets when they played the Chicago Cubs in March of 2000, and then four years later when I covered the Yankees' series in Tokyo against the Tampa Bay Rays.

Twelve years ago, Mark McGwire was not unlike the current gripers. He even convinced his St. Louis teammates to veto baseball's historic journey to the archipelago, saying playing regular-season games outside North America was all about greed.

Turns out, the Americans had much to learn about the cult of besuboru. I remember Mike Piazza of the Mets riding the bullet train nestled next to bemused businessmen. I remember Joe Torre telling the Yankees that if they kept their eyes open and minds clear, they might embrace a thing or three.

On both trips, players stood mesmerized during warmups as umpires practiced their ball and strike calls. We shook our heads upon learning of the Japanese' surreal dedication to the game, about how schoolchildren routinely train for six hours a day, perfecting the sacrifice bunt, studying strategy. We watched as fans graciously returned foul balls to ushers, who'd then doff their caps, bow, and sometimes present the fan a small gift.

In 2000, Bobby Valentine, the Mets skipper who managed in Japan for a couple of years at that time and then returned there in 2004, talked about how the trip was about expanding baseball—not just increasing revenue and selling souvenirs,

but about honoring the game's ideals, like fair play and collective harmony. We learned about wa, the sacrifice of self for the unity of the team.

After that fantastical opening day, the Cubs' Mark Grace said: "This is just the beginning of what we'd call a true World Series. Someday, somehow, there will be a true World Series. I want to thank Mark McGwire for saying no because I wouldn't have had the opportunity if he had said yes."

In 2004, against a backdrop of earsplitting brass bands and cheer squads mimicking the Yankees' famed Bleacher Creatures, Hideki Matsui taught his teammates the art of bowing, because in Japan offending pitchers are known to bow respectfully at batters they'd just plunked. Derek Jeter marveled at the kids who'd take grounders from lunch until sundown, and never object. In a country that worships brand-name exports, the appetite for the Yankees was beyond ravenous.

The Mets eventually shook off the jet lag following their trip to the other edge of the planet and careened to the 2000 World Series. The Yankees recovered from their Japanese hangover in time to make the 2004 season all kinds of fun before its awful, historic end—for them anyway. It's doubtful the A's or the Mariners will have similar success, but who knows?

They weren't terribly inconvenienced by the journey, that's for sure. They might even remember it as a life-altering experience.

Yankees, Red Sox no longer rule in free agency

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Baseball Writer

OAKLAND, Calif.—The Texas Rangers and Los Angeles Angels played an offseason game of "can you top this?" that used to be reserved for the AL East powers.

Albert Pujols is now swinging for the fences only a few home runs' distance from Disneyland. Yu Darvish, the Japanese pitcher who throws 97 mph heat and sports orange streaks in his shaggy hair, is a huge sensation deep in the heart of Texas. Prince Fielder is providing much-needed hope to the Motor City.

There's plenty of optimism in South Florida, too, as the formerly thrifty Marlins transformed into one of baseball's big spenders. And even the low-budget, rebuilding Oakland Athletics landed a prized Cuban defector.

With more money from revenue-sharing and newfound cable television riches, mid-market teams can splurge with the big clubs.

Neither the Yankees nor the Red Sox made a big-ticket acquisition this winter. Instead, the spending spree spread South and West—and that has plenty more teams liking their chances for 2012. Players are refreshed by the free agent parity.

A power shift, indeed.

Rockies veteran Jason Giambi has been on both sides of the spectrum: starting his career with the A's and then going to the pressure-packed life in Yankee pinstripes.

"It's exciting that the game is really bolstering itself. Everybody's making an effort," Giambi said. "I really think that everybody feels like they've done a nice job in doing it the old fashioned way with some scouting, and they're on the doorstep of having a phenomenal team. It just shows all the hard work. Instead of just the Yankees or the Red Sox and a few other teams spending money, now everybody's out there spending money and they think they have a chance to win because they've done a nice job."

Pujols headed West to discover his California gold mine.

The Angels have plans to be back in the playoffs after a two-year absence with the star slugger anchoring the middle of their order—for the next decade. He left the World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals to sign a \$240 million, 10-year contract in L.A.

Fielder also took his swing to the American League, bidding farewell to the Brewers for a \$214 million, nine-year deal in Detroit.

Texas and Oakland scooped up the top two foreign players on the market.

The Rangers landed Darvish and took on the Japanese entourage that follows every tiny motion in that over-the-head windup—and spent more than \$107 million to do it. What a change from the days when the Red Sox made headlines by signing Daisuke Matsuzaka.

And it was the A's who signed Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes, giving him \$36 million over four years and a spot in center field on opening day in Tokyo. That after general manager Billy Beane traded away three top pitchers in recent months.

"I like when guys are shifting all around instead of always going to New York and Boston," Milwaukee manager Ron Roenicke said. "Before when you talked about Boston and New York, you always knew that their salaries were going to be at the top. I don't care so much about the salaries being up close to them, but the players. What I like and all baseball enjoys is that Albert Pujols can go somewhere besides New York and Boston, Darvish can sign with Texas.

"I think when you see that happening, it gives all teams a little more hope that they can sign a free agent."

The Yankees' final payroll is likely to top \$210 million after ending 2011 at \$216 million, while the Red Sox are right around \$170 million.

Someone like Pujols would have been on the Yankees' radar from Day 1 of free agency several years ago, but New York and Boston weren't in the mix this time.

For one thing, neither team needed a first baseman—the position played by Pujols and Fielder—but in late February, the Yankees signed Raul Ibanez to a bargain \$1.1 million, one-year contract to be their primary designated hitter against right-handed starters.

That's practically pocket change for the once free-spending Steinbrenner family. Yet Yankees managing general partner Hal Steinbrenner has vowed to streamline payroll, hoping to cut 10 percent to get his team down to around \$189 million by 2014.

The Marlins did their share of stockpiling for new manager Ozzie Guillen, adding All-Stars Jose Reyes, Mark Buehrle, Carlos Zambrano and Heath Bell.

"What I think is good for baseball—Miami gets a new stadium, so they've got a chance to maybe be a large market," former Boston manager Terry Francona said. "Seems like to me they should be. Miami should be a hot baseball town. The Nationals are trying to be really relevant. They should be a big-market team. Looks like they want to be. That stuff's good for baseball. When you start getting more teams wanting to be competitive and be relevant, that's great."

Hal Steinbrenner, son of late owner George Steinbrenner, and other regular large contributors to revenue-sharing, might be concerned about the luxury tax that will kick in soon.

Under baseball's new labor contract, the luxury tax threshold will be at \$189 million from 2014-16. By getting under the threshold, the Yankees would be eligible to get some of their revenue-sharing money back.

Whatever the motivating factors, more teams consider themselves in the mix.

Even the Los Angeles Dodgers, after all the turmoil they faced before Magic Johnson & Co. just agreed to purchase the club for a record \$2 billion. Next offseason, the boys in blue might just be in the chase for a heralded free agent the way Arte Moreno was in Anaheim.

Dodgers manager Don Mattingly, a six-time All-Star who spent his entire 14-year playing career with the Yankees, agrees that more parity would be good for the game.

And, by the way, you don't have feel sorry for his old team.

"It's not like New York doesn't have (Mark) Teixeira and A-Rod, (Derek) Jeter," he said.