

Oakland A's Jemile Weeks making best of chance to learn from Hall of Famer Barry Larkin

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Jemile Weeks' rookie season ended last September, but his baseball education continued into the winter.

The A's second baseman found a valuable tutor in Hall of Fame shortstop Barry Larkin. They live near each other in Central Florida, and Larkin dishes out whatever wisdom he can offer.

He has found Weeks to be an eager pupil.

"He's like a sponge," Larkin said in a phone interview. "He takes any kind of information, and you can see him applying it. I think the world of him as a person, but I think he has a tremendously high ceiling because of his ability to make adjustments and add things to his game."

Weeks made quite a first impression in 2011, batting .303 with 26 doubles, eight triples and 22 stolen bases in 97 games following his June call-up.

His batting average led major league rookies with 350 or more plate appearances. But more than anything, Weeks' speed and exciting play provided a shot in the arm for a team -- and fan base -- that suffered through a 74-88 record.

A's general manager Billy Beane proceeded to trade away several high-profile players during the offseason, but he labeled the switch-hitting Weeks as the one untouchable player on his major league roster.

"He's a great talent, a unique talent," Beane said. "And he's only got a half-year in the major leagues. He's a guy who is very much part of our long-term future."

Now the key is whether Weeks, 25, can build on his breakout season, which was hardly flawless.

His 13 errors led American League second basemen even though he spent roughly the first two months of the season in the minors. Weeks' glove work has been his weak spot since the A's drafted him 12th overall in 2008 out of the University of Miami.

He worked extensively with A's infield coach Mike Gallego after his promotion last June. And despite the errors, A's manager Bob Melvin said he thought Weeks actually made more progress defensively in 2011 than offensively.

So far this spring, Weeks has impressed Melvin in turning the double play.

"His mechanics are so much better," Melvin said. "I think a lot has to do with his confidence, coming into camp confident based on what he did last year."

Credit an assist to Larkin, who will be inducted into Cooperstown in July.

He began working several years ago with Weeks' older brother Rickie, who plays second base for the Brewers.

Jemile said he has benefited greatly from Larkin's tutelage over the past two winters.

"He's given me a number of drills that I can stick with," Weeks said. "He's talked to me about different aspects of the game, how to handle myself. Everything that comes out of his mouth is important."

While breaking into the majors with the Reds in the mid-1980s, Larkin said he tapped into the wisdom of veterans such as Buddy Bell, Dave Concepcion and Tony Perez. Now he's happy to take on the mentor role, and he said many of the techniques that served him well as a shortstop can help Weeks as a second baseman.

He has worked with Weeks to get the most out of his athleticism defensively.

"He's a young exciting player," Larkin said. "I wish I had a chance to play with him, to be honest. I love his makeup and love the way he plays the game."

Oakland A's notebook: Yoenis Cespedes could be arriving soon to camp

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The highly anticipated arrival of Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes to A's camp might happen as soon as this weekend, general manager Billy Beane said Wednesday.

Cespedes, who has agreed to a four-year, \$36 million contract, must obtain a worker's visa before he can join the team.

"There have been no hiccups, and we think the process is winding down," Beane said.

Asked about this weekend, he replied: "Possibly. Don't hold me to that."

Cespedes, 26 -- considered the best hitter available on the international free-agent market this past offseason -- will have missed two weeks of camp if he reports this weekend. The A's open Cactus League play Friday against Seattle and begin their regular season March 28 against the Mariners in Tokyo.

It's believed the A's will want to plug Cespedes into their outfield -- either in center or right -- to begin the season.

Beane's remarks Wednesday were the first time anyone in the organization has gone on the record giving even a somewhat specific time frame for Cespedes' arrival.

Beane made his first appearance at camp since attending the Academy Awards on Sunday. "Moneyball," the movie adapted from the book written about Beane and the A's, received six nominations, including a Best Actor nod for Brad Pitt's portrayal of the G.M. Though it didn't win any awards, Beane said he thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

He sat in the fourth row, "just behind Gwyneth Paltrow and just in front of Bo Derek." He didn't elaborate on which celebrities he met, but he did take a picture with Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow.

As for "Moneyball" being shut out, Beane said: "I was disappointed for Brad and the people who put the movie together. But I think it's an incredible honor to have six nominations for a baseball movie."

Beane addressed his third base situation in light of Scott Sizemore's season-ending knee injury.

"Our first choice is that one of our guys internally takes it," he said.

He said his staff considers Josh Donaldson a very good defensive third baseman and that "he'll get a chance to win the job."

There is no indication whatsoever that the A's will pursue free agent Miguel Tejada, who expressed interest in joining his former club.

Manager Bob Melvin said he'll pencil an opening day-like lineup for Friday's exhibition opener. The A's play an intrasquad game Thursday beginning at 11 a.m. at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes could join A's this weekend

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

The highly anticipated arrival of Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes to A's camp might happen as soon as this weekend, general manager Billy Beane said Wednesday.

Cespedes, who has agreed to a four-year \$36 million contract, needs to obtain a worker's visa before his contract is finalized and he can join the team. He defected from Cuba and has been living in the Dominican Republic.

Beane said Cespedes' visa paperwork seems to be going through without any snags.

Cespedes will have missed two weeks of camp if he reports this weekend. The A's open Cactus League play Friday against the Mariners in Phoenix.

A's plan to play their regulars in Friday's exhibition opener

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

The A's play their exhibition opener Friday against the Seattle Mariners in Phoenix, and manager Bob Melvin said he expects to play what's close to an Opening Day lineup.

Granted, the A's still don't know who their first baseman or DH will be, or how their outfield will shake out. But Melvin wants to see his regulars in a game environment.

That means most starters probably won't be playing in Thursday's intrasquad game, which begins around noon (MT) at Phoenix Municipal Stadium.

In other news, left-hander Dallas Braden continues to progress well from shoulder surgery, but his timetable for a return to the rotation remains "late April to May 1st," in Melvin's words.

Miguel Tejada wants to return to A's

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Miguel Tejada had his best years in Oakland, and now the 2002 American League MVP would like to come back and help the A's with their hole at third base.

"I've always had a lot of love for the A's," Tejada told The Chronicle by phone. "I still have friends there. That's my family. I want to finish my career there. It would be great to put that uniform on again."

"That organization gave me a start when I was a little kid in the Dominican, they opened the doors for me."

A's general manager **Billy Beane** - who declined to comment on Tejada on Wednesday - recently signed Manny Ramirez to a minor-league deal, which is what Tejada says he's looking for.

"Tell Billy to give me a call," Tejada said. "I don't want big money, I just want to play. I want to prove I can play. And for me to come back to where I started would be unbelievable."

Such a reunion appears extremely unlikely; the A's want to see converted catcher **Josh Donaldson** at third, and if one of their current roster options doesn't pan out, the club likely would trade for a third baseman near the end of camp. The team does not publicly discuss free agents, but indications are that Oakland won't look at the free-agent market.

In addition, Tejada will be 38 in May and he's coming off a poor 2011 season in which he hit .239 with four homers and 26 RBIs in 91 games for the Giants. He said that he did not play well in San Francisco because he was not happy there, but Tejada also did not fare well in the Dominican Republic over the winter, hitting .190 in the first round of the playoffs and .226 in the second.

A's nonroster outfielder **Jeff Fiorentino**, however, believes that Tejada can still play in the big leagues. Fiorentino has worked out with Tejada several winters in Miami, and he said this offseason, Tejada appeared to be in great shape.

"Miggy worked his tail off," Fiorentino said. "There's no doubt in my mind he's ready to go. He can still do it."

Tejada pointed out that he is friends with Cuban outfielder **Yoenis Céspedes**, who the A's expect to report to Phoenix Muni this weekend, and having a familiar face around might help Céspedes, who hasn't played pro ball in the United States.

"We spent a lot of time talking in the Dominican, and the best that can happen to him is for me to go to Oakland and play with him," Tejada said. "He's a great kid, he's going to be a great story there. That kid is really going to be something."

Céspedes wants jersey No. 51, but it doesn't appear he'll get it; Dallas Braden threw a perfect game wearing that number, and while Braden has joked he'd part with it for big money, no one believes he will hand it over. Céspedes is likely to wear No. 52 instead.

Briefly: The A's, light on infielders with the season-ending injury to **Scott Sizemore**, will borrow **Josh Horton** and 2010 second-round pick **Yordy Cabrera** for today's interleague game. ... Few regulars will play today but Friday's Cactus League opener will feature a near Opening Day look, according to manager **Bob Melvin**. ... **Graham Godfrey** will start Friday, with **Tommy Milone** following.

Names & Faces

Susan Slusser, Chronicle, Thursday, March 1, 2012

Billy Beane

The A's general manager sat in the fourth row at the Oscars, so close that he told the usher that there must have been a mistake. Beane found himself in front of Bo Derek, and near Gwyneth Paltrow, whom he met. Beane, there because of six nominations for "Moneyball," said that Brad Pitt's partner, Angelina Jolie, came over to take a photo with Beane's daughter, Casey, and he took a photo with Tim Tebow. "I was amazed at how gracious everyone was," he said. He never shook the feeling of being in a different world, though. "It was a little like going to a high-school party that's not your party," he said.

Cespedes expected to make arrival soon

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The wait could soon be over.

There's a strong possibility that Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes will make his highly-anticipated arrival at A's camp by weekend's end, nearly three weeks after news broke of his four-year, \$36 million contract.

"There's no reason not to think he won't be here very soon," A's general manager Billy Beane said Wednesday.

Cespedes, who has been living in the Dominican Republic after defecting from Cuba last year, has been waiting to obtain a work visa before joining the A's and undergoing a physical, at which point his deal will finally be deemed official.

It appears his visa paperwork is being processed without any issues, and that the three-week waiting period is rather normal. Still, Cespedes will have missed at least two weeks of camp by the time he reports.

It was thought that the A's, who open Cactus League play Friday against the Mariners, would immediately pencil Cespedes into an everyday outfield spot, likely center. But considering the time he's been away from the team, it's becoming more of a possibility that he may start the season at the Triple-A level.

Beane, family enjoy Oscars experience

PHOENIX -- Billy Beane was slightly confused when he and his family were brought to their seats at Hollywood's Kodak Theater for the Academy Awards on Sunday.

"We get to the fourth row," the A's general manager said, "and I say to the usher, 'Are you sure these are our seats?'"

The short version of the usher's response: Yes.

And though Beane watched "Moneyball" -- the film inspired by Michael Lewis' book about the A's 2002 season -- go winless in six nominations, he was simply happy to be part of such a prominent event, while sitting close by the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow and Bo Derek.

"It was great," said Beane, who brought along wife Tara and daughter Casey. "From the start, everyone involved with it, from Sony to the actors to the directors, everyone was absolutely fantastic, very unpretentious, and I couldn't be more grateful for everything. It was fun. We had a great time."

At one point in the night, Beane and NFL quarterback Tim Tebow were brought together for a picture. Casey posed for a few with Brad Pitt, nominated for a "Best Actor" Oscar for his portrayal of Beane, and even posed with Angelina Jolie, per her own request.

"Angelina said, 'I want a picture with Casey,' which was really sweet," Beane said. "She was just incredibly gracious."

Beane's night concluded at the Vanity Fair Oscars Party, which is always attended by stars of all stature.

"It's like going to a high school party, but it's not your party," he said.

Donaldson looking to fill third-base vacancy

PHOENIX -- While Josh Donaldson sat in the A's clubhouse on Wednesday afternoon resting from a lengthy day of workouts at third base, A's general manager Billy Beane stood not too far away, reiterating that the club will indeed give Donaldson every chance to win the open job at the hot corner in Scott Sizemore's absence.

"He came up as a third baseman, and we spoke in a bit of irony during our Spring Training meetings, talking about his third-base play, not realizing we would need it," Beane said. "When I heard about Scott, we kind of had a feeling pretty quickly it wasn't good. We're kind of excited to see how Josh does, because we've always thought highly of him. All reports on his defense were good, even leading up to this."

The A's only expect it to get better. Donaldson is working extensively at the position with infield coach Mike Gallego, both during normal workout hours and outside of that time. He's expected to see his first game action of the spring there Friday, when the A's open their Cactus League schedule against the Mariners.

Should the A's feel the need to look for extra help by Opening Day, it appears they'll stay away from the free-agent market and, instead, target trade possibilities. Some intriguing names that might pop up include the Angels' Alberto Callaspo and Detroit's Brandon Inge.

But Donaldson remains at the top of the list -- at least for now -- in the wake of Sizemore's season-ending ACL injury.

"I feel terrible for him," Beane said of Sizemore. "He had finally gotten a chance to play every day in the Major Leagues, and we really thought this was the chance for him to break out. From a team standpoint, this was the last thing we were thinking about. We felt more than comfortable with Scott being over there, so to start over is a little bit of a downer."

Worth noting

- Right-hander Graham Godfrey will start Friday's Cactus League opener against the Mariners at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, with lefty and fellow rotation candidate Tommy Milone slated to follow. Both won't pitch more than two innings.

Grant Balfour, Joey Devine, Fautino De Los Santos, Jordan Norberto, Erick Threets and Pedro Figueroa are also scheduled to pitch that day. As for the lineup, manager Bob Melvin is expected to field most of his regulars.

- Veteran righty Bartolo Colon is right on schedule for his March 29 regular-season start in Japan. Colon threw twice Wednesday at ease, prompting Melvin to say, "If there's ever a guy you don't have to worry about knowing himself and getting himself ready and understanding the parameters of getting ready early, it's him."

- Melvin is turning batting practice into quite the competition these days. The A's skipper was looking for payback Wednesday when throwing to the trio of Jonny Gomes, Seth Smith and Collin Cowgill which, days before, hit him pretty good.

This time around, Melvin said, "I won, 8-2. They didn't tell you that?" No, but probably because it was the other way around in reality, with several balls leaving the yard during their session with the manager.

"But I only count the ones I see," Melvin said. "It was a good day for me. Pitchers are ahead right now, hitters are behind. At some point in time, they'll start swinging the bats better. When they go home tonight, they're going to hang their heads a bit."

Cowgill laughed when hearing Melvin's playful remarks, responding, "I don't know what he's seeing out there."

Texas product Choice eyes bigs with Oakland

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Oakland outfield prospect Michael Choice rattled off the answer like he knew the question was coming.

"Hunter Pence, [John] Lackey, Ryan Roberts, Dillon Gee, [Adam] Moore," he said. "Who is that reliever? He pitches for the Rangers? Lowe. Mark Lowe. That's everybody from UT-Arlington in the big leagues right now. What's that? Six?"

If all goes according to his plan, Choice, 22, will be lucky No. 7. The Texan says he has already come a long way since his college days, when he was launching balls out of Clay Gould Ballpark, just a few miles away from Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, but he still has a lot of work to do.

"Basically, I've played a lot of baseball in a short period of time," said Choice, who was selected by Oakland in the first round of the 2010 First-Year Player Draft. "I can look at how many ABs I have as a professional and know that I pretty much have more at-bats professionally than I had in three years of college already. It's been a lot of hard work, adjusting to the speed of the game and the level of the game, but it's been fun."

There was no denying Choice's status on campus in Texas. He was the big man with the big swing, and it often led to big home runs in Arlington.

The first UT-Arlington baseball player ever selected in the first round, Choice hit .392 with 34 home runs and 162 RBIs in his three years with the Mavericks. He hit .383 with 16 home runs and drove in 59 runs the year he was drafted.

But once he became a pro, Choice quickly realized he had a big problem.

"I had a lot of movement [at the plate]," he said. "In college, pitchers are not throwing as hard, maybe mid-80s, and sometimes you get a guy that throws in the low-90s. You can pretty much unleash on every pitch, but in pro ball you can't do that."

Choice went 0-for-7 in Rookie League in 2010 and admitted that he got off to a slow start with Vancouver in Class A Short Season later that year.

"The team judges you right off the bat in what you do, but it takes time to learn the game a little bit, find yourself and how you can get better at the speed of the game," he said. "I figured that out. The struggles I had here and there, I worked with the coaches and staff to fix."

The fixes worked. Choice went on to hit .284 with seven home runs and 26 RBIs with 20 runs scored in 27 games for the Canadians. He also struck out 43 times. In his first full season of professional ball last year, Choice hit .285 with 30 home runs and 82 RBIs for Class A Stockton. He racked up 133 hits and struck out 134 times.

"Last year, I made a lot of adjustments," he said. "At first, it was really mechanical in terms of toning it down at the plate, but then I started to work on my approach, what the pitcher is trying to do and what I'm good at as a hitter. I was basically trying to win the battle between you and the pitcher, approach-wise."

Choice admits he was also adjusting to the rigors that come with being a professional baseball player last year. He played in 166 games in three seasons in college and has already played in 148 games in his first two seasons as a pro. Moreover, he had 616 at-bats in his career with the Mavericks and has 576 at-bats so far in the Minor Leagues.

"It's different than in college when you play three games on the weekends, you have one day off, maybe have one game mid-week and a practice and then you get three games again," he said. "You get plenty of rest. In pro ball, you don't get that, and if you are struggling in one area, you have to play the next day and you don't have time to practice or figure it out. You just keep playing."

Choice, who is in his second big league camp this spring, is also adjusting to life outside of the batter's box. No longer is he the latest first-round pick. Now, he is just one of the guys.

"Coming here the first time last year, it was not only my first big league camp, it was my first big league Spring Training in general, and there was a lot I didn't know," he said. "You are meeting all these guys you are watching on television the year before and that was cool but eventually, you learn that the guys do the same thing you do and your job is to try to get where they are at. You go out and learn from them and see what it takes to be in big leagues."

Choice has already made quite an impression.

"The first pitch I saw thrown to him almost ended up taking one of the signs in left field down," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "He has a lot of velocity to his swing and you can see that he's a guy that's going to have plus-plus power. He uses his legs very well and he has a strong upper body on top of it. The organization is very excited about not only what he can do but also the pace he can be on."

For his part, Choice is not going to worry about his pace, and he's trying not to think about where he will start the season this year. However, he is confident that he'll make it to the big leagues one day and join the list of UT-Arlington alumni to wear a Major League uniform. He's also looking forward to playing in Arlington once again, this time against the Rangers, the team he rooted for as a child.

"Out of college, you don't know how long it will take to adjust to the game, but now I know what to expect and I feel very comfortable," he said. "From the time I touched the field in short-season until now, everything has improved for me. Things are running very smoothly."

NEWS IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

News Item: Cubs, Red Sox agree; Selig still has no San Jose decision

By Murray Chass, February 23, 2012

Now that the Cubs and the Red Sox have relieved Bud Selig of the burden they placed on him by asking him to determine appropriate compensation for Theo Epstein, maybe the commissioner can decide a weightier matter – the dispute between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants over the status of San Jose.

Just about three years have passed since Selig appointed a committee to study the San Jose situation, which should be more than enough time for any man who wants to make a decision to decide what his decision is.

Selig, however, is at his best when he is avoiding decisions, hoping that others will resolve the issues, as the Cubs and the Red Sox did months after asking him to decide whom the Cubs should give the Red Sox for allowing Epstein to leave Boston with a year left on his contract to become president of baseball operations for Chicago's North Side team.

Following the announcement that the Red Sox would receive a relief pitcher, Chris Carpenter, the commissioner issued a statement, saying, "I am pleased that the Cubs and the Red Sox have resolved this matter. It has always been my preference that Clubs resolve matters like this amongst themselves, as they understand their unique circumstances better than anyone else could. Though the matter required time, both Clubs demonstrated professionalism throughout their discussions, and I appreciate their persistence in finding common ground."

Is Selig demonstrating professionalism by letting the Athletics twist in the wind? I would say he's demonstrating irresponsible and amateur avoidance. Selig always says he'd rather take his time and get it right than rush into a decision. Three years, however, doesn't constitute rushing.

Voters are asked to choose a president every four years. Surely, the commissioner can choose the A's or the Giants after three years. Selig hasn't made a decision because he doesn't want to make a decision. He wants the A's and the Giants to work it out between them so he doesn't have to decide and alienate one of them.

The teams, however, can't reach an agreement if they don't talk to each other, and for a long time now the Giants haven't returned the A's calls. It's an arrogance that should be enough for the commissioner to show the A's the way to San Jose and tell the Giants "you blew your opportunity to keep that area in your territory."

Commissioners often talk about and make decisions based on the best interests of baseball. Allowing the A's to move to San Jose would clearly be in the best interests of baseball. The team is dying in Oakland.

Last season the Athletics had the smallest attendance in the majors, failing to reach 1.5 million. The Giants, third in the majors, drew more than twice that many fans. In 2007, the Giants finished last in their division and drew 3.2 million. The Athletics have the most meager revenue in the majors; the Giants rank fifth.

Would taking San Jose and its entire county, Santa Clara, from the Giants undermine those numbers? That's what the Giants claim, but it's an empty argument. The Giants don't talk about the additional fans and revenue they would inherit from the Athletics' absence in the Bay area.

I don't know what the commissioner's three-man committee has found about the Oakland effect on the Giants in its three-year study, but I would guess the loss of Santa Clara County would be offset by the gain of Oakland.

But then, that's probably something the committee is still studying and accounts for the continued delay in the commissioner's decision. At the owners' meeting last month Selig said he was close to making a decision.

Years ago a writer friend wrote that the Yankees were on the verge of making a particular trade. As it turned out, they didn't make it for many months. Ah ha, my friend proclaimed, defending his report, they have created a new definition of "on the verge."

The commissioner has created a new definition of "close."

Rickles Ready To Compete

Chris Biderman, OaklandClubhouse.com

Mar 1, 2012

One of the deepest positions in the Oakland A's system is at catcher, where the A's have several talented prospects. One of those prospects is Nick Rickles, who opened a lot of eyes last season with a strong first professional campaign. Faced with stiff competition for playing time, Rickles is at the A's spring mini-camp readying for what he hopes is a repeat performance of 2011.

FREE PREVIEW OF PREMIUM CONTENT

If Nick Rickles' first professional season is any indication, the Oakland A's 2011 14th-round pick could add to the already crowded situation at catcher in Oakland's system with another solid year in 2012. After being drafted last June, Rickles went on post solid numbers across the board.

In a quick six-game stint with the club's rookie league team in Arizona, the Loxahatchee, Fla., native had seven hits and a .973 OPS. After a brief pit-stop with Triple-A Sacramento, where he served as the team's emergency catcher (although he didn't appear in a game), Rickles spent the rest of the season with short-season Vermont. With the Lake Monsters, Rickles' line of .310/.364/.441 with 33 RBIs in 41 games cemented a solid first impression. He also showed some athleticism by stealing six bases and only getting caught once.

"In college you'd face a No. 1 guy every Friday night. What I saw last year, every guy that runs out there has that Friday night-kind of stuff. They wouldn't be in pro ball if they didn't," Rickles said over the phone from Phoenix, where he is participating in the A's minor league spring mini-camp.

While at Stetson University, Rickles put up relatively pedestrian numbers during his first two seasons. In his junior year, he became one of the best hitters in the Atlantic Sun Conference. He walked 25 times to just 10 strikeouts, while generating far more power with 12 home runs compared to just three his previous season. His OPS ballooned from .722 to 1.008 with an ISO of .253.

For many players, adjusting to wood from metal bats can be a challenge during their first professional seasons. But with Rickles was already comfortable with wood bats at the time he was drafted.

"I loved hitting with wood [before getting drafted]," Rickles said. "So that was relaxing for me."

The A's also saw a maturity in Rickles' game that gave them the confidence to send him to Triple-A before he had even recorded an inning of work above Rookie ball. He didn't get any at-bats or innings behind the plate with the River Cats, but he did find plenty of value in just being there.

"It kind of helped me mature and humble out a little bit," Rickles said. "Going up there and seeing the maturity of the catchers that were already there. Anthony Recker was there before he got called up and gave me some advice. I got to sit in the bullpen in the game and I took advantage of that time, picking the pitchers brains and asking them questions."

With a fresh start in 2012, he will be using that advice to further develop as a player and improve his standing with the organization.

Coming into his first spring training as a pro, Rickles didn't change his routine. He went back to Stetson to work out with his

former teammates and utilize their facilities. On February 28, Rickles reported with 30 other minor leaguers to Oakland's mini-camp to get a head start on spring training and familiarize himself with his surroundings in Arizona.

The A's haven't told Rickles where he'll start the year. It's likely he'll go to Low-A Burlington with a chance at making it to High-A Stockton. Hitting in the California League could bode well for the progress of his Rickles' bat, but the A's will have to juggle playing time at the two full-season A-levels between Beau Taylor, Max Stassi and Rickles, as well as 2011 Burlington catcher John Nester and 2011 Stockton catcher Ryan Lipkin.

As far as the competition for playing time, Rickles feels like he's been there before.

"I love competition. I don't want to say underdog, but I have to make a name for myself as any new guy does," Rickles said. "It's like finding a college where you're competing with guys to go there. It's almost the same thing. You're competing in the minors to impress the organization."

"I just love it. I wouldn't trade this for anything."