

Monte Poole: Chili Davis is a man on a mission with the Oakland A's

By Monte Poole, Bay Area News Group

It is one of the hottest seats in Bay Area sports, with turnover rivaling the positions of head coach of the Raiders and Warriors, but its instability is obscured by the dual public narratives that define 21st century baseball in Oakland.

If A's chatter is not about Billy Beane, and the books and movies celebrating the charismatic general manager, it's about the managing partners, first Steve Schott and now Lew Wolff, and their strident pleas for a new ballpark.

Meanwhile, on the field, where actual baseball is being played, the bats too often are silent, resulting in a lack of runs and a procession of fired batting coaches.

The latest man to accept this mission, former Giants star Chili Davis, is well aware of his dismissed predecessors and he comes to this job with no major league experience, a first-timer who spent last season at Triple-A. Still, he confronts the task with a swagger and a shrug.

"If I become overly concerned about just keeping the job, then I'm probably going to work accordingly," he said Tuesday, standing in the clubhouse at Municipal Stadium. "If I'm here to help and I believe in what I'm saying, I'll work according to that.

"And if the guys I'm working with buy into what I'm talking about and what these (coaches) are talking about, I think we'll have success. If that doesn't happen, chances are, we'll be gone, too."

Such confidence is natural when you're 52 years old and your big-league career offers testimony. Davis played 19 years, was selected to three All-Star games and won three World Series championships with two organizations. He hit 350 home runs, going deep at least 20 times in 10 different seasons.

Davis, then, was a more accomplished big-league hitter than the five men previously filling the role, whether it was Gerald Perry, Part II (2011) or Jim Skaalen (2009-10) or Ty Van Burkleo (2007-08) or Perry Part I (2006) or Dave Hudgens (2003-05), the last to see a third season in Oakland.

Other factors, in addition to his playing career, which may be even more crucial to Davis' fate with the A's, include remarkable general baseball knowledge, a good ear and enough presence to fill the room.

"As a player, he was a guy everybody migrated to, to talk about hitting," said A's manager Bob Melvin, Davis' teammate with the Giants in 1986 and '87. "He was always a very professional hitter, didn't give away any at-bats.

"And everywhere he's gone -- even when he was with the Yankees -- he was a big personality in the clubhouse."

Already, Davis is making an imprint in the A's clubhouse.

"I like his style," leadoff batter Jemile Weeks said. "You can come to him and he works off your approach. He listens. And because of his past, there's a level of respect."

The image of A's batting coach has in recent years been reduced to the worker bee following ideas passed down by Beane. Work the count. Embrace the walk. Make the pitcher labor and reach base to add stress.

No matter what any Oakland batting coach may have thought, the perception -- not always accurate -- was he had to operate within these restrictive guidelines.

None of the previous coaches, however, possessed such strong convictions as Davis. Not just about hitting, but about baseball. Davis is too invested in the game and too self-aware to sell someone else's agenda.

"There were no guidelines thrown at me," Davis said. "Bob and Billy just said, 'We like the mentality you bring. That's something we want.' It sounded good to me."

It's a different age in A's baseball. There has been, in the past couple years, more latitude within the philosophy if not the payroll.

The A's of a decade ago probably would have ignored Weeks, a small, assertive hitter who also relies on speed, and they likely would not have hired a batting coach like Davis.

"I think hitting is more a mentality than a philosophy," he said. "A philosophy is somebody telling you the way they think it should be. Well, different people believe in different things. My thing is this: Be ready to hit.

"The toughest thing in hitting shouldn't be deciding when to swing. It is, for me, deciding when not to swing. You should be swinging from the time you get into the batter's box until something says don't swing."

So Davis will ask his guys to be aggressive but smart, and aware of the game beyond individual at-bats.

We don't know if he'll do better than his predecessors, but it would be hard to do worse. And it is significant that a man of his gravitas has been granted a license to try.

Oakland A's manager Bob Melvin picks Grant Balfour as closer

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Reliever Grant Balfour has played parts of eight seasons in the major leagues but never has had the chance to be a regular closer.

He'll get that opportunity, after A's manager Bob Melvin tapped the right-hander for the job Tuesday. Balfour beat out left-hander Brian Fuentes, who will be a setup man.

Fuentes has 199 career saves, but Balfour enjoyed a stronger overall season in 2011, which Melvin said he emphasized. Balfour arrived at camp intent on being the ninth-inning replacement for Andrew Bailey, the two-time All-Star the A's traded to Boston over the winter.

"I let them know, 'Look, I'm really hungry for that job,' " Balfour, 34, said. "I've been playing a while now. I've wanted it in the past. I want to see what I can do out there in that situation."

Balfour carries a 7.94 ERA in six spring outings -- he gave up five runs in his first two outings but is unscored upon in his last four.

His fiery attitude certainly fits the bill for a closer.

"If you're profiling the demeanor of a closer, you would find a picture of Grant Balfour right there," Melvin said.

Balfour has only 10 saves in 323 career appearances. He went 5-2 last season with a 2.47 ERA. He recorded two saves but also blew five chances, tied for 10th in the American League.

Fuentes was 2-8 with a 3.70 ERA last season. He had a 7.50 ERA in six appearances this spring, though he has been decent aside from a four-run outing against Milwaukee.

"I wish I could have thrown better in spring to give myself an opportunity," Fuentes said. "I believe I'm very capable of doing it. Unfortunately, it wasn't the opinion of those in command."

Brandon McCarthy was not sharp in his final tuneup before his opening-night start.

He allowed four runs (two earned) in four innings in a 5-5 tie against the Chicago Cubs. He walked three.

McCarthy, who was bothered by a torn nail on his right middle finger, said: "It feels very hard to complete your pitches."

McCarthy has dealt with such a problem before, and he knows where to go for a remedy -- the nail salon.

The right-hander was heading to one after the game to get a fake nail applied. He can throw with that as his real nail is growing back.

McCarthy's next outing comes March 28 in Tokyo -- the season opener against Seattle.

He said he will probably throw to hitters after arriving in Tokyo, "something a little more aggressive than usual to stay sharp."

Coco Crisp had a rough start to his first game in left field. Tony Campana, the game's first batter, hit a soft liner that Crisp appeared to get a bad read on. It bounced in front of him, and Campana wound up with a double. Crisp went 0 for 4 with two strikeouts.

Right-hander Brad Peacock was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento, although Melvin said he remains a candidate for the fifth starter spot, as does fellow prospect Jarrod Parker. The A's don't need a fifth starter until April 17.

A's pick Grant Balfour as their closer

By Joe Stiglich, Bay Area News Group

Grant Balfour will open the season as the A's closer, manager Bob Melvin said Tuesday.

It came down to Balfour and Brian Fuentes, and Fuentes will serve as a left-handed setup man.

"I had a pretty good idea what we wanted to do coming in," Melvin said. "I think it's just based on results last year. You look at the numbers and what (Balfour) accomplished, and he deserves a chance to close."

Balfour, who has 323 career major league appearances but just 10 saves under his belt, never has gotten a crack as a regular closer in the majors. But he says he welcomes the chance to take the place of two-time All-Star Andrew Bailey, traded over the winter to Boston.

"I'm hungry for the job," he said. "I've been playing for a while now, and I've wanted it in the past. My mindset is going to stay the same. I want to put up zeroes."

Balfour went 5-2 last season, his first with Oakland, with a 2.47 ERA in 62 appearances. He recorded two saves but also blew five chances, tied for 10th in the American League.

Neither Balfour nor Fuentes made a particularly convincing case with their work this spring. Balfour carries a 7.94 ERA in six outings — he gave up five runs in his first two outings but is unscored upon in his last four.

Fuentes also has made six appearances and has a 7.50 ERA, though he's been decent aside from an outing against Milwaukee in which he allowed four runs.

"I wish I could have thrown better in spring to give myself an opportunity," Fuentes said. "I believe I'm very capable of doing it. Unfortunately, it wasn't the opinion of those in command."

Fuentes, who was 2-8 with a 3.70 ERA last season, sits one save away from 200 for his career.

Meanwhile, right-hander Brad Peacock was sent to the minors. He was scheduled to start Wednesday against Kansas City but Graham Godfrey will take his place. As is the case with fellow prospect Jarrod Parker, Melvin said Peacock remains a candidate to be the fifth starter even though he's going to the minors. The A's don't need a fifth starter until April 17.

A's pick Grant Balfour to be their closer

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Brian Fuentes has made four All-Star appearances as a closer, but on Tuesday, the A's picked **Grant Balfour**, a premier setup man, to finish games for the club.

Manager **Bob Melvin** said the decision was based in part on Balfour's strong 2011 season and in part because of Balfour's strong desire to close.

Balfour did not make that wish a secret.

"I let them know I'm hungry for the job," he said. "I really wanted it. ... I want to see what I can do in that situation. I'm pretty confident I can do it."

Balfour learned that he'd won the job after coming off the mound the previous day. Melvin, in a "whispered-in-my-ear kind of thing," told him, "I'm going to go with you as closer," Balfour said.

"I was happy to hear it, but I don't want to get too excited and lose focus of what I'm trying to do."

Fuentes, who has 199 lifetime saves, said he was disappointed with the decision, but he plans to help Balfour, who has 10 career saves, in any way he can. He believes that Balfour has the ability to handle the closer role well.

"He has the stuff for sure," Fuentes said. "The last four, five years, he's been pitching at a high level, very effective. ... I think he can do it."

Fuentes lost 15 pounds during the offseason, but he didn't pitch particularly well, entering Tuesday with a 7.50 ERA.

"I wish I could have done well this spring," Fuentes said, "but I understand regardless, it could have ended up the same way."

Balfour had a 7.94 ERA this spring but was unscored upon in his most recent four appearances.

Last year, Balfour had a 2.47 ERA and batters hit .199 against him. Fuentes' ERA was 3.70 and batters hit .237. He was the A's closer for the first two months and was 1-8 with 12 saves, three blown saves and a 5.09 ERA.

Balfour said he does not have any incentives built into his contract for games finished. Fuentes does have such incentives.

The A's optioned left-handed reliever **Pedro Figueroa** to Triple-A Sacramento after Tuesday's game, leaving a clear seven-man bullpen on the roster: Balfour, Fuentes, **Fautino De Los Santos**, **Jerry Blevins**, **Andrew Carignan**, **Ryan Cook** and **Jordan Norberto**. The other two relievers, among the 30 players going to Japan, are **Travis Schlichting** and **Evan Scribner**, both nonroster players.

A lot of yen: Players on the Japan trip will receive between \$40,000-\$45,000 each, depending on the final profits from the Tokyo series, slightly more than the player shares last time the team played in Japan.

Ramirez in Bay Bridge series: **Manny Ramirez** said that he will remain at extended spring training while the A's are in Japan, as expected.

Ramirez will rejoin the team for the Bay Bridge series against the Giants, according to a team source, though he will be limited to pinch-hitting in games at San Francisco unless the Giants grant the A's the use of a designated hitter.

Ramirez said he's OK with spending time in extended spring training; except for the Bay Bridge series, he'll be there until mid-May, when he can begin playing in minor-league games. He'll play in 10 games, probably split between Triple-A Sacramento and Class A Stockton, and he's expected to be a regular visitor to the A's clubhouse when the team is at home.

"I'm excited to go over there," Ramirez said of the A's minor-league complex. "I'll be able to play a lot. I'll take advantage of it, do what I do best."

Peacock cut: Right-hander **Brad Peacock**, obtained in the **Gio Gonzalez** deal with Washington, was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento, and, like **Jarrod Parker**, who was optioned out Monday, Peacock ostensibly remains in the fifth-starter race.

Graham Godfrey is the front-runner for the fifth-starter spot, with **Tommy Milone** and **Tyson Ross** in the third and fourth spots.

A's 5, Cubs 5

Notable: Brandon McCarthy, who will start Opening Night in Japan next week, said he was not sharp in allowing five hits and four runs, two earned, in four innings. He walked three and struck out one. ... McCarthy was dealing with a torn middle fingernail; he planned to get a fake nail at a salon later in the day. He should be fine for Opening Night. ... **Yoenis Céspedes** made a terrific diving catch to end the top of the ninth, then doubled and scored the tying run in the bottom of the inning on **Kila Ka'aihue's** double. ... Ka'aihue also homered for the second time in three days, and he remains in a wide-open race for the first-base spot with **Brandon Allen** and **Daric Barton**.

Quotable: "I know that on that day I'll be ramped up, but I'll treat it like any other day, or I can quickly spin myself into a hole."

- McCarthy on his Opening Night start against . Seattle in Tokyo next Wednesday.

Today's game: A's (**Graham Godfrey**) at Royals (**Luis Mendoza**), 1:05 p.m. Webcast only.

A's hitting coach Chili Davis returns to area

John Shea, San Francisco Chronicle

When Chili Davis was hired as A's hitting coach in early November, Yoenis Céspedes wasn't even a twinkle in Billy Beane's eye.

Now, Davis is nearby every time Céspedes picks up a bat.

"I love it," Davis said. "He's a great kid, and he knows one thing: He knows he can hit and play this game."

Davis is making a Bay Area comeback, returning professionally for the first time since the 1987 National League Championship Series. That was his last of seven seasons as a Giants outfielder, and he played another 12 years, mostly as a designated hitter.

With the Giants, Davis befriended Bob Melvin, who handpicked him and made him a big-leaguer again. Davis has his hands full, not only with helping to usher in the Céspedes era and monitoring Manny Ramirez - another unexpected late signing by Beane - but getting life out of an offense that last year produced the seventh-lowest batting average and on-base percentage in Oakland history.

"He was always a clubhouse presence, a guy hitters migrated to, veteran guys and younger guys," Melvin said. "He's a hitter's hitter."

In retrospect, Davis said he wished he could have played more for the Giants. Not that he regrets leaving after the '87 season. Rather, "I wished I could've finished my career in San Francisco." Problem was, he strictly was a DH by then, a commodity not in high demand in the National League.

He still has the memories. The two All-Star seasons. The quick rise from 100 losses to the postseason. The ecstasy of winning a division. The agony of squandering a three-games-to-two lead to the Cardinals in the NLCS. The relationships with Jeffrey Leonard, Jack Clark, Reggie Smith, Joe Morgan, Larry Herndon, Darrell Evans and others.

The Stick.

Davis was no fan of Candlestick Park. A lot of people felt how he did. He merely expressed it a little more colorfully than most.

"Looking back, I complained about Candlestick maybe because Jack Clark complained so much, and that kind of made it easy to complain," Davis said. "I was a young player. I should've realized, 'Hey, regardless of where you play, I'm in the big leagues. They can find a nice park for me in Triple-A.' "

Perhaps it was no surprise that when Davis became a free agent, he left the Giants for warm and cozy Anaheim. His final Giants season, he hit 24 homers and had 76 RBIs.

"It just wasn't in the cards," Davis said of remaining in San Francisco. "I said some things. I probably just should've kept my mouth shut. It was time to move on. But I played for a great owner, Bob and Connie Lurie. I loved (general manager) Al Rosen. (Manager) Roger Craig and I didn't see eye to eye all the time. I've seen him since, and I always respect him as a manager. That's in the past.

"I was there in the down years, but we also won a division and had a chance to get to the World Series in '87. It was good to see them get to the World Series in '89 and win it in 2010."

Davis hasn't participated in any of the Giants' reunions and said he received no invitations. A Giants spokesperson said they would have invited him had they been able to reach him, adding the team tried making contacts through former teammates and Major League Baseball.

"He's one of the players we've really wanted to have back since he was such a fan favorite during his playing days," the spokesperson said. "We're excited to have him back in the Bay Area and to welcome him to AT&T Park when we play the A's this season."

The A's desire Davis for more immediate matters. Josh Willingham, Oakland's most productive hitter in 2011, is gone, and Josh Reddick and Céspedes arrived to join Jemile Weeks, Coco Crisp, Kurt Suzuki, Cliff Pennington and a bunch of prospects. The lineup won't rank with the Rangers' and Angels'. There's plenty of room for growth.

"I know as a younger player how I was," Davis said. "I didn't care as much about what the coaches knew. I just wanted to know they cared.

"I think the same thing applies to these guys. They know if you care about their career and success, and if you listen to them much more than you talk to them, you'll form a relationship and gain their trust."

Davis stepped away from the game after his final year as a player (1999) and had a couple of out-of-the-limelight gigs with the Australian national team and the Dodgers' instructional-league team before joining the Boston organization last year as hitting coach for Triple-A Pawtucket.

He twice interviewed with Melvin when Melvin managed in Seattle and Arizona. "Those other interviews, he wasn't 100 percent in," Melvin said. "I think it was an experience thing for him, to go through the process. The timing is right for him now."

Davis, 52, wasn't close to being done after leaving the Giants. He collected another 249 homers and 954 RBIs with four American League clubs and won three World Series rings, one with the Twins and two with the Yankees. He's fifth all-time in homers among switch-hitters, trailing Mickey Mantle, Eddie Murray, Chipper Jones and Lance Berkman.

With the Giants, Davis was in an unfavorable ballpark with an owner who wanted to condemn it. With the A's, it's the same story. But back in the day, Davis loved hitting at the Coliseum.

"I had fun hitting at that ballpark. I didn't think there was any part of that ballpark I couldn't leave," said Davis, who hit 13 homers at the Coliseum, most of any visiting park. "If it's a tough home run park now, then you learn how to hit line drives and drive the ball."

Now the trick is teaching the A's hitters.

Drumbeat II: Cespedes has good day in A's stirring...tie; plus final Japan roster

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni, 3/20/2012, 4:50pm

OK, so a tie doesn't sound so exciting, but the A's fought back with three runs in the bottom of the ninth to tie the Cubs 5-5, and no one scored in the 10th, so the game ended all even, and the A's Cactus League-best record is 14-4-2.

Yoenis Cespedes had a strong day – he made a plunging catch to end the ninth inning, a grab that had observers still buzzing after the game, and then he doubled and scored in the bottom of the inning.

Manager Bob Melvin said that Cespedes' at-bats are getting better and he appears more and more comfortable each day. He went 2-for-5 today and Melvin particularly was happy with his baserunning.

Kila Ka'aihue might have landed himself back in the first-base conversation with his second homer in as many games, and then a game-tying double in the ninth. I asked Melvin if that competition is still wide open, and he said yes, and it's not just Brandon Allen and Ka'aihue, Melvin described Daric Barton as looking like the "Daric Barton of old." Barton was hitless today but he looked good in the field.

Brandon McCarthy wasn't overly happy with his day: five hits, four runs, two earned, plus three walks and a strikeout. He said he wasn't sharp. As it turns out, there was some reason for that – McCarthy's middle right fingernail was ripping off. He went to get it covered up and finished his day by throwing 20 pitches in the bullpen, and now he's off getting a fake nail put on at a nail salon. Yes, really. He's done it before and it's not at all uncommon for pitchers.

The A's just sent left-hander Pedro Figueroa down to Triple-A Sacramento, leaving their final roster of 30 for the Japan trip.

This clarifies the team's final seven-man bullpen, because two of the remaining relievers are non-roster additions, Travis Schlichting and Evan Scribner. The other seven: Grant Balfour, Jerry Blevins, Andrew Carignan, Ryan Cook, Fautino De Los Santos, Brian Fuentes and Jordan Norberto.

Drumbeat I: Balfour named A's closer, Fuentes will be set-up man

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni, 3/20/2012, 11:26am

It's Grant Balfour who emerges as the A's closer to start the season – in large part, I'm told, because he had voiced such a strong desire for the job, stating strongly that he believes he will thrive in the role. That went a long way.

Not that Brian Fuentes, a four-time All-Star closer, didn't want the job. He lost 15 pounds in the offseason preparing for the season, so he looked motivated to perform well, too. But Balfour had the better season last year, with a 2.47 ERA and a .199 batters average against vs. Fuentes' 3.70 and .237.

So the team is choosing Balfour's better numbers in 2011 and his fiery attitude over Fuentes' experience; Fuentes has 199 career saves and Balfour 10.

Balfour just said in the clubhouse before today's game that he let the A's powers that be know that "I'm hungry for the job," he said. "I really wanted it. ... I want to see what I can do in that situation."

Fuentes said he is a little disappointed not to win the job, but he has faith in Balfour's abilities. "He has the stuff for sure," Fuentes said. "The last 4-5 years he's been pitching at a high level, very effective. ... I think he can do it."

Fuentes said he's there to help Balfour if needed, to talk to him any time if Balfour wants.

I think that the situation could be fluid; Fuentes is obviously around if needed; Joey Devine, when healthy, could close; and Fautino De Los Santos is considered the closer of the future, though the team definitely would prefer to give him more time at the big-league level before throwing him into that role full-time.

As for the rest of the bullpen, the fact the A's have extra spots for the games in Japan – a 28-man roster and they don't need to use three starting pitchers – means that the team will carry just about all the relievers left in camp through the Tokyo trip and the Bay Bridge series. It's very possible that the team will keep three lefties in the bullpen even when the club is back in Oakland for regular-season games in April: Fuentes is left-handed, but his role isn't to be a lefty specialist, he's a set-up guy. So keeping both Jerry Blevins and Jordon Norberto – who has looked terrific this spring – isn't a real stretch.

In other news, Brad Peacock was optioned to Triple-A Sacramento, and like Jarrod Parker, who was optioned out yesterday, he remains in the fifth-starter race, though I believe he's a step or two behind Parker and both probably trail Graham Godfrey. Godfrey gets the start at Kansas City tomorrow, and as I reported in today's Chronicle, Bartolo Colon will start in a minor-league game tomorrow. His blistered right middle finger has healed completely.

As I reported back when he signed, Manny Ramirez will not accompany the team to Japan. He told me he'll be at extended spring training, working on his hitting, playing in minor-league games, and he's looking forward to it. "This is what I love," Ramirez said.

A's pick Balfour over Fuentes for closer's role

Melvin cites righty's dominance as setup man in decision

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Grant Balfour wasn't necessarily expecting the news to come the way it did, but he was more than happy to hear it.

As Balfour was exiting the mound in the A's win over the D-backs on Sunday, Oakland manager Bob Melvin congratulated him for a good outing, took the ball and gave him a quick oh-by-the-way whisper.

"He just said, 'I'm going to go with you as the closer,'" Balfour said Monday morning.

Balfour, who has eight years of Major League service time but has never been a full-time closer, made no secret about the fact that he wanted the job heading into Spring Training. He is coming off two stellar seasons in a setup role, having put up a 2.47 ERA and 1.032 WHIP in 62 appearances last year with Oakland and a 2.28 ERA and 1.084 WHIP with Tampa Bay in 2010.

Balfour, 34, was spectacular in 2008 for Tampa Bay, striking out 82 batters in 58 1/3 innings and pitching to a 1.54 ERA for a team that went all the way to the World Series.

He's amassed 10 saves as a fill-in closer over the course of his career, but he said he's eager to start tallying a lot more.

"I was happy to hear it," Balfour said. "You don't want to get too excited and lose track of what you've got to do. ... I've just got to keep doing what I've been doing."

Balfour, a right-hander, had been in competition for the role with veteran left-hander Brian Fuentes, who has saved more than 20 games in seven separate seasons, including an American League-leading 48 when he was with the Angels in 2009. Fuentes saved 12 games last year with a 3.70 ERA, but he was a replacement for injured closer Andrew Bailey, who has since been traded to Boston.

So far this spring, neither Balfour nor Fuentes had been particularly impressive from a numbers standpoint. Heading into Tuesday's game, Balfour had a 7.94 Cactus League ERA and Fuentes' was 7.50. Then again, Balfour has been pitching better

of late. He was touched up for five runs in 1 2/3 innings in his first two outings, but since then he's been unscored upon in four innings over four appearances.

"The last four or five outings, it's been good," Balfour said. "I've been throwing up some zeros and I just want to continue to take that into the season. I'm starting to feel good and I'm excited about the season and I'm excited about what we've done here in the spring as a team. It's been great. So it's another part of the puzzle, and I want to pull my weight and do my job. Hopefully everyone can do their jobs and we'll be good."

That sounded good to Melvin, who said he picked Balfour primarily because of his dominance in the setup role last year. Melvin didn't foresee any issues with Balfour taking what, by all counts, is a super-intense mound demeanor and transferring it to the ninth inning.

"If you're profiling the demeanor of a closer, you would find a picture of Grant Balfour right there," Melvin said. "Now, the uncertainty is that he hasn't done it before, but he's excited about doing it, he wants to do it, he came into camp with the mindset that he wanted to do that, and therefore that's the direction we're going."

Balfour admitted that he brought the goal of becoming the team's closer into camp, and he even vocalized that wish to the coaching staff, but he said he had no plan to alter his approach now that he's tasked with getting the last three outs of games.

"My mindset's going to say the same, and that is going out there and throwing up a zero," he said. "No one wants to give up runs, no matter whether you pitch in the first or second or whatever inning you're pitching. You want to go after hitters, you want to be aggressive and I don't see anything changing."

Fuentes, meanwhile, said he wouldn't change anything in his routine either.

"You still have to go out there and get guys out," Fuentes said. "And now it'll be the seventh and eighth innings instead of the ninth. I'd take [the closer's demeanor] in the fifth inning if I had to. That's just the way it is."

Fuentes said he was disappointed that he lost the closer competition but that he'd be ready to take on the setup role he'll now be slotted into.

"I wish I could have thrown better in spring to give myself a better opportunity," Fuentes said. "Ultimately I understand that regardless of how well I threw, it might have ended up the same way. But I believe I'm very capable of doing it. Unfortunately it wasn't the opinion of those in command."

For now, Fuentes will root on Balfour. The two get along, and Fuentes said he believes Balfour can succeed as the team's closer.

"He has the stuff, that's for sure," Fuentes said. "Everybody who's watched him do it for the last four or five years, the way he's pitched has been at a high level and very effective. And I'll be there to help him if he needs help, or talk about it or whatever. But I think he can do it."

A's option prospect Peacock to Triple-A

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The A's pulled a *deja vu* maneuver with a promising young right-hander on Tuesday, when they optioned Brad Peacock to Triple-A Sacramento a day after doing the same with Jarrod Parker.

Both pitchers figure heavily into the A's future, and both are still competing for the No. 5 position in manager Bob Melvin's starting rotation because the A's will most likely be able to use a four-man rotation until April 17. But both needed to work on command, and both will get the opportunity to do that in the Minors before Melvin makes his next decision.

The A's have three open rotation spots, with lefty Tommy Milone and right-handers Tyson Ross and Graham Godfrey still in camp. Peacock, ranked No. 3 among the A's **top prospects**, was slated to start Wednesday's Cactus League game against the Kansas City Royals, but Godfrey will replace him.

"Both guys, we feel like, could pitch high in a rotation at some point in their careers, and really, I expect to see both of them at the big league level here at some point in time this year," Melvin said. "And the fifth starter job is still out there, so they're still competing for that. They're just not doing it here."

Peacock, 24, came to the A's from Washington, along with Milone, catcher Derek Norris and pitcher A.J. Cole, in the Gio Gonzalez trade over the winter. He was named the Nationals' Minor League Pitcher of the Year after going a combined 15-3

with a 2.39 ERA and 177 strikeouts in 146 2/3 innings at Double-A Harrisburg and Triple-A Syracuse, and he earned a September callup and went 2-0 with a 0.75 ERA in three appearances (two starts) in the Majors.

Peacock rebounded from back tightness that plagued him early in camp to make three spring appearances, two of which were starts. He went 0-1 with a 12.86 ERA, giving up 10 earned runs on 12 hits in seven innings.

Well-traveled Reddick embraces trip with A's

PHOENIX -- Josh Reddick is used to long airplane flights. He went to Taiwan in November as part of the Major League Baseball's All-Star series against the Chinese Taipei national team, and on Thursday he's going to Japan with his new club, the Oakland A's.

Aside from all the travel, it's been a whirlwind for the 25-year-old, who will open the year as Oakland's starting right fielder. He finished the season with the team with which he came up, the Boston Red Sox, and was set for a platoon role alongside Darnell McDonald in 2012.

But while he was on a cruise in the Caribbean in late December, he got a call from Boston general manager Ben Cherington telling him he'd just been shipped to the A's in the deal that sent Oakland closer Andrew Bailey and outfielder Ryan Sweeney to the Red Sox. Just like that, Reddick was on the move again, but he saw right away how beneficial a change of scenery can be.

"One of the bad things with them is you weren't guaranteed how much starting time you'd have unless you had a big contract like [Carl] Crawford," Reddick said. "But fortunately for me it worked out that I could come over here and get that opportunity.

"After the Winter Meetings, I didn't think it was going to happen, but it just goes to show you that this business is always working and everybody's always doing something."

Reddick said he talked to Theo Epstein, his former general manager in Boston and now the Cubs' president of baseball operations, early this spring and Epstein told him that A's general manager Billy Beane had been inquiring about him since 2008.

"That was pretty cool to hear," Reddick said. "Billy's been in this game a long time and he knows what he's doing. The hard-playing guys seem to be the guys Billy likes, and it worked out."

Reddick said he needs to improve the most in pitch selection, and it's something he's been working on this spring. He's hitting .333 with two homers and 11 RBIs.

"Now that I'm here, I'm hopefully going to be one of the middle-of-the-lineup guys driving in the runs as opposed to in Boston, where I was one of the guys getting on and being driven in," Reddick said. "So making better pitch selections and getting the pitches that I can really drive is going to be even more important here."

And as for the travel, well, he's used to it now.

"I had a blast in Taiwan, meeting guys from other teams and playing with them and getting to know them," Reddick said.

"I've been welcomed here and already made great friends, and now we're going to play regular-season games in Japan, so it should be even more fun."

Worth noting

- The Oakland A's optioned left-hander Pedro Figueroa to Triple-A Sacramento and in the process finalized their 30-man travel roster for the trip to Japan. The total includes 27 players on the 40-man roster and three non-roster invitees. The breakdown includes 14 pitchers, two catchers, eight infielders and six outfielders. The A's have 40 players on the 40-man roster plus Brett Anderson and Scott Sizemore, who are on the 60-day disabled list. Daric Barton, Dallas Braden, Joey Devine and Manny Ramirez will not be making the trip to Japan. The A's can carry the 30-man roster for the two exhibition games against Japanese teams before finalizing their 25-man Opening Day roster in time for the two-game regular-season-opening series against Seattle on March 28-29 in the Tokyo Dome.

- A's second baseman Jemile Weeks said he's looking forward to trying out sushi in Japan ... *real* sushi. "I eat it on occasion here, every now and then," Weeks said. "I guess I'll go out there and see what it's really like. I've tried all of it. I think I'm more of an American sushi eater. But if I go out there, it's worth a try to eat what they eat. I might lay low on the octopus. We'll see."

- Coco Crisp went 0-for-4 on Tuesday, snapping a streak of nine spring games in which he reached base safely.

A's camp report: Constant roster change never stops in Oakland

By Danny Knobler | CBSSports.com Baseball Insider

PHOENIX -- The A's are different, and not just because there's a movie out about them.

The A's are different, and not because of market inefficiencies and on-base percentage.

The A's are different because when you play for them, you just figure that if you do well enough, you'll be playing for someone else before long.

"You do know your time is limited here," said opening day starter Brandon McCarthy, who figures this year is probably it for him in Oakland. "You're not looking to put down roots."

"Healthy with a heartbeat, there's a good chance I could have been out of here, too," said Dallas Braden, who (at least in his mind) was saved from an offseason trade because he's coming back from shoulder surgery.

That's not fair, of course. The A's don't trade away everyone.

They only traded away two-fifths of their starting rotation last winter. Well, only two-fifths of their starting rotation and their closer.

They seem to have done well in those trades, which shipped Trevor Cahill to the Diamondbacks, Gio Gonzalez to the Nationals and Andrew Bailey to the Red Sox. The buzz in A's camp this spring was about the great young arms, about Tommy Milone (acquired for Gonzalez), and Brad Peacock (also for Gonzalez), and Jarrod Parker (for Cahill).

"Seeing these guys, it's like, 'Oh, wow, we've got something to work with,'" catcher Kurt Suzuki said.

And something to eventually trade off for the next group of young arms?

Maybe it won't always be like this in Oakland. Or maybe the A's won't be in Oakland anymore. Maybe they'll finally find a way to move to San Jose, and all the churning will end.

That's the idea, they say. That's why they traded away Cahill and Gonzalez and Bailey, even though they were all young and not yet ridiculously expensive. The A's weren't going to keep them long enough for a new stadium deal to provide the revenue to pay them when they did get expensive.

The A's weren't going to be able to compete with the big-budget Angels and Rangers this year, so they swapped sort-of-young for very young, with hopes that they can compete a few years down the line.

They also re-signed Coco Crisp, signed Manny Ramirez and spent big for Yoenis Cespedes, capping off one of the busiest winters in baseball. But unless Cespedes becomes a star (and he could), the most significant moves they made were to trade away the three pitchers.

If you're trying to win now, you don't do that.

What's interesting is that the moves didn't seem to leave the remaining A's feeling like the front office doesn't care about them, or about winning. Perhaps because this is the way things have been done for quite a while in Oakland, there's acceptance without any hint of depression.

"This is the life I've lived since I've been here," said Braden, drafted by the A's in 2004 and with them in the big leagues since 2007. "Younger guys are somewhat taken aback. I liken it to growing up in the 'hood. A guy who grows up in the 'hood understands how to navigate through it.

"I've got a pretty good compass here."

Of course he does. After his first year with the A's, he saw them trade away Dan Haren. The next year, he saw Joe Blanton go.

He saw Brett Anderson come in the Haren trade. He saw Gonzalez come in the Nick Swisher trade.

McCarthy showed up last year, signed as a free agent. He's a free agent again after this year, and figures if he does well enough, he'll end up elsewhere -- and not because he wants to.

With the A's, it's just reality.

"I feel bad for fans of teams like this," McCarthy said. "You see the die-hard fans. Half the league is populated by guys they used to be fans of. It would be nice to see them win, even if I end up seeing it from the other side."

When McCarthy talks about the fans, it's not just hyperbole. He's thinking of himself, and of a guy named Fernando Torres.

If you don't follow soccer, you may never have heard of him. But McCarthy counts himself as a die-hard Liverpool supporter, and he can't forget Torres leaving Liverpool for Chelsea midway through the 2010-11 English Premier League season.

"It was the first time I was really affected by a player I liked leaving," he said. "I saw him play for Chelsea, and I was like, 'How can I cheer for you now?'"

He hopes A's fans will understand when he inevitably leaves Oakland. He figures they will, because by now they've got to be used to it.

He understands.

"At least there is a plan for success here," he said, pointing to the young pitchers acquired in this past winter's trades. "It might be after I'm gone, though."

Yeah, that's just the way it is, when you pitch for the A's.

"You know the realities," McCarthy said. "Some teams are feeder teams."

You think that's worth a movie?

Jonny Gomes' home run sparks rally for Oakland in 5-5, 10-inning tie against Cubs

By Associated Press

PHOENIX — Brandon McCarthy has a visit to the nail salon in his future.

McCarthy allowed four runs — two earned — and five hits and three walks in four innings in the Oakland Athletics' 5-5, 10-inning tie against a Chicago Cubs split squad on Tuesday.

He spent the day battling a torn middle fingernail on his right hand, an injury he'll fix with a fake nail applied at a nail salon.

"I wish it had torn away a couple of days ago so I could have put a false nail on it," said McCarthy, who was making his final start of the spring. "It makes it hard to complete any pitches."

McCarthy, who will make his first career Opening Day start on March 28 against the Seattle Mariners in the Tokyo Dome, was in trouble from the first pitch, facing only four batters before giving up the game's first run.

Tony Campana doubled to left, aided by Coco Crisp's ill-advised, last-second lunge for the quickly dropping ball, and Ian Stewart drew a one-out walk. Joe Mather hit an RBI single to center and Steve Clevenger hit a sacrifice fly to left to give the Cubs a 2-0 lead.

"He game up some 0-2 hits which shows he probably wasn't as precise as he'd like to be," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

McCarthy allowed two unearned runs in the fourth on an RBI single by Alfredo Amezaga and a run-scoring groundout from Edgar Gonzalez.

The right-hander then went to the bullpen to throw another 20 pitches.

"I wasn't sharp by any means," McCarthy said. "Getting in the 90 pitches was the thing for the day. I just worked through it. It's a cliché, but I just needed to get my work in."

Cubs starter Rodrigo Lopez, a candidate to earn a spot in the bullpen, allowed one run and three hits in five innings. He struck out four and walked one.

Kila Ka'aihue, who is competing with Brandon Allen for the first base job, hit a towering home run off the scoreboard in right-center field in the eighth, then doubled home the tying run in the ninth.

"Kila's at-bats seem to be getting better and better," Melvin said. "It's definitely wide open."

NOTES: Gonzalez had an RBI double taken away and the Cubs lost an apparent run in the sixth when he was called out at first on appeal for missing first base. ... Crisp was shifted to left field to make room for Yoenis Cespedes, who will open the season in center field for Oakland. "It'll take him a couple of days to settle in but he'll be fine," Melvin said. ... Jemile Weeks committed errors in consecutive innings, both on grounders by Clevenger. ... Before the game, the Athletics optioned RHP Brad Peacock to Triple-A Sacramento. Peacock had allowed 11 runs — 10 earned and 12 hits and four walks in just seven spring innings over three appearances. ... After the game, the A's optioned LHP Pedro Figueroa to Sacramento.

Canseco still wants to play pro baseball in 2012; knows return to MLB in any role a longshot

By Associated Press

Jose Canseco refuses to go down looking.

The 47-year-old former major league slugger still wants to play professional baseball in 2012. Canseco, once a feared Bash Brother for the Oakland A's, is willing to return to the independent league to keep his career alive. He'd still like to sign with a team in the Mexican league, even though it suspended him earlier this month after allegedly refusing to undergo a doping test.

How's this for a wild card: Canseco says if there's a Major League Baseball team willing to take a risk on him, he can still hit 30 to 40 home runs this season.

"I've got plenty of power," he said Tuesday by phone from Las Vegas.

Canseco showed flashes of it last season as a player/manager for the Yuma Scorpions of the North American League.

The former AL MVP hoped he had a deal to play this season for the Quintana Roo Tigers. Mexican league president Plinio Escalante claimed Canseco refused to take the test, which was treated the same as testing positive in the league. Quintana Roo Tigers team president Cuauhtemoc Rodriguez said doping control doctors advised Canseco against taking the test because he was using a medicine to produce testosterone.

Canseco, who last played for the Chicago White Sox in 2001, said he needed a prescription for testosterone treatment for the last five or six years. Canseco was shown using testosterone-boosting gels in the 2008 A&E documentary, "Jose Canseco: The Last Shot."

"I think the whole world knows I've been on testosterone therapy," Canseco said. "My levels are normal for what the 47-year-old levels are. They didn't want to accept that, I guess."

Canseco, of course, has long admitted using steroids. In Canseco's 2005 book, "Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big," he claimed he introduced Oakland Athletics teammate Mark McGwire and other stars to steroids and performance-enhancing drugs. He wrote about injecting himself and McGwire in bathroom stalls, and how the effects of the drugs were the reason he hit 462 career home runs.

Canseco still has mixed emotions about writing the book.

"I do in a way, because I suffered a lot," he said. "My family suffered a lot. I'm still suffering because of it. I can't get a job in Major League Baseball managing, coaching, whatever. I paid the price to tell the truth. But if it fixed the game, if it saved a kid's life along the way, it's worth it. It's a constant back and forth battle.

"When you look at it, in the big picture, it did fix Major League Baseball. It did correct everything. I believe there is no more steroid use in baseball. It changed the game, for the better."

Canseco used his very active Twitter account to reach out and apologize to his former manager, Tony La Russa. On March 8, Canseco posted, "(at)TonyLaRussa boy did I mess up by writing that book tell big mac i am sorry."

La Russa retired over the winter after winning the World Series with the St. Louis Cardinals. McGwire, 10th on the career home run list with 583, is their hitting coach. He was hired after the 2009 season, and the following January he admitted using steroids when he was a player.

Canseco doesn't expect either man to accept his apology.

"No, they're not supposed to call me," he said. "They can't call me. I'm like the leper or the pariah. No one from Major League Baseball can even talk to me because I told the truth and fixed the game."

Canseco said there are "couple of years" left in his bat, even his legs can no longer produce the 40-40 speed he had once. Canseco once claimed to have squandered the roughly \$45 million he earned over his career, pawned his World Series rings and purged his memorabilia collection to try and satisfy debts against him. But he said he's driven to play by his love of the game, not money.

"There's no reason to give up when you love the game," he said. "Believe me, you don't make money playing this stuff. You don't make money playing independent baseball. They pay nothing. I can make more money not playing baseball than playing baseball."

If he strikes out in his bid for a baseball comeback, Canseco would like to manage, in any league.

"I have so much information, so much knowledge of the game," he said.

He has kept his name in the spotlight the last few seasons with celebrity boxing matches, an MMA bout, reality TV, and he even competed on Donald Trump's television show, "The Celebrity Apprentice." He recently called out former NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal on Twitter to fight him in an MMA-style bout. He says O'Neal is open to the fight and believes it could be the next big thing in a post-MLB career stuffed with the wild and wacky to keep afloat.

Canseco even cut short an interview because he had just parked at a Las Vegas gym to train.

"I'm about to work out," he said. "I need to gain 30 pounds if I'm going to fight Shaq."

New-look A's gear up and wait for Ramirez to play

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP)

Manny Ramirez vows to be ready to return as his former sluggin' self.

Coco Crisp can already envision a little more than two months from now when the dreadlocked star might be swinging for the fences in the heart of Oakland's batting order.

Catcher Kurt Suzuki thinks about it. So does pitcher Dallas Braden and all the others, including Ramirez himself, of course. For all that this club went through this winter watching two starting pitchers traded away along with the All-Star closer, landing Ramirez and outbidding some big spenders for Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes means an awful lot to the Athletics. Ramirez must sit out the first 50 games for a second violation of baseball's drug policy, making him eligible to play his first game barring rainouts on May 30 - his 40th birthday.

"It's going to be cool," the slugger said. "I'm just so happy to be here. I never thought I was going to get another chance. I'm doing something that I like. We've got a bunch of great guys."

Oakland general manager Billy Beane traded away All-Star starter Gio Gonzalez to the Nationals, All-Star closer Andrew Bailey to Boston and Trevor Cahill to the Diamondbacks - quite a blow to a pitching staff that had been among baseball's best only a couple of years back.

The new-look A's will open the season in Japan for the second time in four years March 28-29 against the Seattle Mariners, one of manager Bob Melvin's old teams. Melvin begins his first full season as skipper since taking over last June for the fired Bob Geren and proving enough to ownership and the front office that he landed a three-year contract.

Brandon McCarthy will get the ball on opening day for a rotation that also features new right-hander Bartolo Colon and is eagerly awaiting the return of lefties Braden from shoulder surgery and Brett Anderson, who was moved to the 60-day disabled list as he recovers from "Tommy John" reconstructive elbow surgery.

Beane's plan this winter was to rebuild in the hopes that Commissioner Bud Selig and Major League Baseball would grant the A's permission to relocate some 40 miles south to San Jose and begin building a modern new ballpark - rather than staying put in the run-down Oakland Coliseum.

Now, it seems there's no ruling imminent despite Selig saying at the January owners meetings the issue was on the "front burner." While clearly frustrated at how long it's taking Selig's committee to say anything at all, A's owner Lew Wolff has said he will respect the process.

Melvin can only concern himself with the players he does have and getting them ready on short order.

The A's formed a plan over the winter for the strange schedule of opening with two games in Japan before returning to finish the exhibition slate stateside ahead of the home opener with Seattle on April 6.

"Once you know you're going, you just deal with it," Melvin said of adjusting the spring routine to get his players ready in a hurry. "No excuses. We have another team doing the same thing that's going there. You find a way to alter your routine to be able to deal with something like that. Once we get there, it's not like we're playing the games right away. We'll have some exhibition games and some workouts, so once the games start we'll be in a routine to where we'll be ready for those two games."

Cespedes, given a \$36 million, four-year deal and a chance to start his career in the big leagues after the A's outbid Florida and others to land him, has shown the A's enough even as a late spring training arrival to earn the starting job in center field. Crisp will shift to left.

Crisp has said he didn't mind either way. He likes the way things are shaping up throughout the lineup.

"With Cespedes and Manny possibly being middle-of-the-lineup type of guys, that can extend our lineup," Crisp said. "That's just going to make our lineup better when you've got two guys who can come right into the middle of our lineup. It's just going to make our lineup stronger."

The A's signed Ramirez to a one-year minor league contract on Feb. 20 that is worth approximately \$500,000 if he's added to the big league roster. So far this spring, he has been on good behavior.

"I'm going to be ready. It's going to take time. I haven't played in a whole year, so it's like starting to walk again, getting into that feel," Ramirez said. "It's different from the players who are here. They played last year, so it's easy for them to get their rhythm back. I haven't faced a pitcher (in a major league game) since April - a whole year long. But, stay positive." Ramirez retired from the Tampa Bay Rays last season rather than serve a 100-game suspension for a second failed drug test. The penalty was cut to 50 games because he sat out nearly all of last season.

The slugger realizes full well this could be his last chance at mending his reputation - at least a little bit - and he also hopes to be a positive clubhouse presence for a young team.

Suzuki is optimistic that will be the case.

"He's going to bring a great energy to the lineup," Suzuki said. "It's going to be fun. I'm excited."

Ramirez ranks 14th on the career list with 555 home runs. He went 1 for 17 (.059) in five games last season for Tampa Bay. This will mark the 20th major league season for Ramirez, a career .312 hitter with 1,831 RBIs.

"It'll take time, but I'm going to put the time into it," he said, "and I'm pretty sure we're going to be fine."

Timmons, real-life Crash Davis, may finally get Hollywood ending

Joe Lemire, Inside Baseball/S.I.

PHOENIX -- Wes Timmons thought it was another march to the baseball gallows.

Eight of his A's teammates had already been cut from big-league camp in the previous 24 hours, so when he received a summons to the manager's office, Timmons figured he shared their fate.

"I just assumed it was that time," he said.

Timmons is, after all, a 33-year-old infielder -- and elementary-school substitute teacher -- who has played 998 minor league games in his 10-year pro career and hasn't spent a single day in the big leagues. Not as a doubleheader fill-in, not as a September call-up and, until last year, not even as an invitee to a major league club's spring training camp.

He entered Bob Melvin's office and took a seat. The manager read Timmons some of his spring statistics -- which, at the time, included a .323 average (10-for-31) with four walks and a .405 on-base percentage, though just one extra-base hit, a double -- and the two discussed how the spring had gone.

Then Melvin asked a curious question, "How's your Japanese?"

Timmons burst into a smile, as the realization dawned on him that he'd be joining the A's for their season-opening trip to play the Mariners in Japan. "I am more than willing to learn," he replied.

Two games shy of 1,000 in the minors, Timmons is on the verge of shedding the label of "real-life Crash Davis," the frequent joke he's heard the last few years, even if the fictional character in the movie *Bull Durham* at least had a cup of coffee in the big leagues.

"Minor league baseball has changed a lot since then," he said, "but when you watch the movie, I'm like, 'Well, that kind of fits, I guess.'"

Every profession has its rites of passage, but few entail such celebrated bumps in the road as being a minor league ballplayer. Perseverance is a series of incalculably long bus rides through mid-sized minor league cities

There are the eight-hour bus trips that are actually better than the alternative: when the bus breaks down along a scorched Southern highway, as happened to Timmons years ago.

There are the days the motel's hot water runs dry. There's the hotel in Savannah, Ga., whose air conditioning fails on a 100-degree afternoon. And plenty more.

"We could talk for hours," Timmons said, shaking his head at the memories.

None stand out more than the day the outfield wall caught on fire.

Ivy had grown along the wooden fence during the offseason at the home ballpark of the Mexican Pacific League's Mayos de Navojoa, and on the winter league's opening day in late 2010 the greenery went ablaze with red and orange flames.

"For whatever reason the fans thought it'd be cool to set the ivy on fire," Timmons recalled. Play was stopped for half and hour -- on two separate occasions -- and the fire burned a hole in the fence. "We finished the game with part of the centerfield wall not being there," he said.

Those incendiary delays weren't even the worst part of his stay. In the second week of the season a fastball struck Timmons on the left arm. The club took him to get an x-ray -- at a dentist's office. "So that was fun," he said with a wry smile.

There, the diagnosis of a fracture was confirmed and Timmons received an oversized cast that ensconced most of his left arm, from his wrist up past his elbow. (Back in the States, he received a more suitably sized cast for his forearm.)

He also noted that such minor league travails grow less outlandish in the higher levels of the minor leagues. Besides, other than seven weeks last season, Timmons hadn't been below Triple A since 2006. He has been a man stuck in baseball limbo.

* * *

Just last week Timmons sounded like a man beginning to accept his baseball destiny -- that a major league promotion may never come.

"That's the road God has chosen for me, man," he said then. "That's who I am, just kind of hanging around. If it comes, it comes. If not, you know, I've had a great career up to this point. I don't really have a whole lot of regrets on the field."

Timmons, a utility infielder who has primarily played third base in his career, is coming off his best season, batting .341 with a .420 on-base percentage in 95 games split between Double A and Triple A in 2011. His lack of power -- he's never hit more than eight homers in a season -- is a detriment when compared to the prototypical third baseman, but his versatility in playing every infield position helps.

"It's hard to get the guy out," Oakland assistant general manager David Forst said. "He's played himself into the conversation, very much so."

The A's were in need of extra infield help after projected starting third baseman Scott Sizemore tore his ACL early in camp. But roster decisions aren't always linear; one injury doesn't necessarily bump everyone up one spot on the depth chart.

Though the A's will need to whittle the roster down to 25 players for the rest of the season, they will travel with 30 to Japan and will designate 25 players to dress before the two games with the Mariners.

"He's played well enough that he deserves to go," Melvin said. "He should be proud of that."

Timmons' situation is complicated by not being on the 40-man roster, which means that, not only does he need to be good enough to make the club, he needs to sufficiently outplay the competition that the club is willing to remove another player. Making this trip to Japan does not guarantee placement on the 40-man.

If he does eventually make Oakland's 25-man roster, he'd be the oldest position player on the rebuilding club; only pitchers Grant Balfour, Bartolo Colon and Brian Fuentes are older.

"He's veteran-minded, but he's still got that youthfulness where you don't really expect that he's been in the game that long," said second baseman Jemile Weeks, the 25-year-old starter who lockers next to Timmons. "He'll give you the impression that everything's fine and dandy. He's not a complaining type. He acts like he's just getting started, and he's happy to be here."

* * *

Each of the past few winters Timmons has huddled with his wife, Randi, in their Jacksonville, Fla., home and deliberated whether it would be best for him to retire or to trudge ahead with his major league dream at the expense of time and distance away from his family, which includes two daughters -- Kallyn, who is almost six years old, and Irelyn, who is three.

"So we weighed the pros and cons of coming back, and God willing and my wife being so wonderful, I'm playing again," he said. "Would I rather be working 9 to 5 or playing a kid's game? I've gotten to the point in my career where the money has gotten a little bit better, and there are just not a lot of jobs in this world that are better than what I'm doing."

Modern technology makes the separation from his family almost bearable -- "If it weren't for Skype or FaceTime, I don't know how anybody ever did this," he said -- but he knows he's missing out.

Also, minor league salaries are a pittance compared with even the major league minimum of \$480,000. The salaries for even veteran minor league free agents can be less than \$20,000 for a season; only a handful of players make more than \$100,000. Most make something in between, including Timmons (the exact terms of his deal were not disclosed).

Timmons has his degree in physical education -- he began college at Appalachian State and later transferred to Bethune-Cookman -- and spends his winters as a substitute teacher at Chets Creek Elementary School, where his wife and mother teach fulltime.

"Any subject you can think of, kindergarten through fifth grade," he said. "Some of the students follow [my baseball stats], and some of them make fun of me because I don't hit a lot of home runs. I get it from all ends of the spectrum."

Taped above Timmons' locker at Phoenix Municipal Stadium is a baseball card of Chipper Jones. A mischievous teammate placed it there, a regular reminder of Timmons' stunted progress.

The Braves drafted Timmons in the 12th round in 2002, and Timmons advanced at a typical pace through the minors, reaching Triple A for the first time three years later, only to be blocked from the major leagues in a way few recent players - a Yankees shortstop prospect, for instance -- could appreciate.

"These guys clown me over here a lot," Timmons said of his A's teammates, "because I happened to play third base over there [with the Braves], and we all know who's their soon-to-be Hall of Fame third baseman."

Timmons said he never had a formal invite to Braves major league camp and only played sparingly in spring games as a backup. He figures he got nine at bats in three years, meaning he often had some time to kill on the dugout bench.

Outgoing and gregarious, Timmons figured he might as well pass the time in conversation and ultimately learned a lot from Jones' predecessor at the position, Terry Pendleton, who for most of the past decade served as Atlanta's hitting coach.

"A lot of that time I would hang out on the bench and talk to players and coaches," Timmons said, "number one, to pass the time because you've got to figure out how to spend three and a half hours and, number two, if I might be able to bring something with me."

Timmons credits those conversations with Pendleton as an important lesson in honing his disciplined approach at the plate, even with two strikes. He's never been a power hitter, but in only one minor league season did he have an on-base percentage below .375. For his career he has walked 468 times and struck out only 287.

After making consecutive Triple A All-Star teams in 2009 and 2010 but finding his path still blocked in Atlanta, Timmons signed as a free-agent after the 2010 season with Oakland. There he not only had the best season of his career -- with personal bests for batting average, home runs, RBIs -- but made his mark in other ways, too.

"He ran the best kangaroo court I have ever seen," said A's pitcher Brandon McCarthy, who was making a scheduled rehab start in Sacramento when he witnessed Timmons presiding over a riotous clubhouse scene. "He was really good and really funny. Usually they all collapse in the middle and the rules are weird, but he was on top of everything."

* * *

Part of Timmons' deal with his wife was always this: When the door to the big leagues closed, he'd walk away.

Last July Timmons thought his dream was over. The A's, facing what they called a "numbers issue" on the Triple A roster, demoted Timmons to Double A, a move that made him six years older than all but one of his position-player teammates. Timmons called his wife and said, "I'll come home."

After some discussion, however, they decided that he should honor his one-year contract, and so Timmons packed for Midland, Texas, barely a fifth the size of Sacramento, and joined the Double A Rockhounds, an experience he initially described as "very humbling."

But a funny thing happened on his demotion to obscurity: He crushed the ball. Timmons hit .365 and at one point had a 15-game hitting streak. He made new friends and the front office received glowing reports.

"We had to send him to Double A, which we didn't want to do, but he took it great," Forst said. "He's a professional. I heard constantly from the Double A manager -- 'Hey, this guy's a veteran and he's great in the clubhouse. He's great with the younger kids.' We made sure to get him back to Triple A as soon as possible."

After 39 games Timmons returned to Sacramento, but that's as far as he got in 2011.

Lacking space on the 40-man roster, the A's were unable to promote him for a September call-up to the big leagues.

"I had no expectations," Timmons said. "I've never been in the big leagues. A lot of guys have been there and when they don't get called up in September, it's a real disappointing time. It makes the Triple A clubhouse kind of tough."

After the Triple A playoffs ended, Timmons began his long cross-country drive. He had reached West Texas when his phone rang. Forst prioritized Timmons as his first call of the offseason and extended the invitation for a return.

"I've never had anyone call and just say they appreciated what I've done in a season," Timmons said. "That phone call by itself pretty much got me hook, line and sinker back to the A's."

* * *

Another phone call on Monday morning was even better. Upon leaving Melvin's office, Timmons called his wife, who was at the zoo with their daughters, and told her to start packing for Japan.

"I'm not sure she believed me," Timmons said. "But she was super excited."

At the end of the call Randi asked, "What am I supposed to do?"

Timmons responded, "I have no idea. I'll have to call you later. What do we do?"

It's a whole new world for the minor league journeyman. Eight months ago Timmons called his wife and offered to fly east and home, his baseball dreams over; this time he called to offer her a flight west, his baseball dreams having taken a step closer to coming true.