

## **A's News Clips, Friday, March 23, 2012**

### **A's take off for a week in Japan**

Susan Slusser, Chronicle staff writer

Almost as soon as the A's finished their final game in Tokyo in 2008, team executives told Major League Baseball that they'd like to return any time games are scheduled in Japan.

Just four years later, the A's got their wish. They're embarking on a week-long trip to Tokyo that, just like last time, includes exhibition games against Tokyo-based Japanese teams Yomiuri and Hanshin, plus two regular-season games.

Kurt Suzuki will be the only Oakland to make the return visit with the A's, but outfielder Coco Crisp played for the A's opponent that year, the Red Sox.

Suzuki proved to be the A's most popular player in Tokyo the last time the A's were there, because he is of Japanese descent, but since Oakland's 2008 visit, the team has increased its profile in the country. Last season, A's games were broadcast in Japan because the team featured DH Hideki Matsui, one of the top two Japanese-born players ever to play in the major leagues, along with Ichiro Suzuki, who stars for the A's season-opening opponent this year, the Mariners.

In addition, the movie "Moneyball" was popular in Japan, opening at No. 3 when it released and making more money there than in any other foreign country.

The main reason people know the A's, though, is through Matsui. "Hideki, definitely," said Takako Nakamichi of Fuji TV, who covered Matsui when he was with Oakland last season. "People know that the A's were Hideki's favorite team as a kid, too, and they think, 'Oh, if Hideki liked them, they are a good team with a good tradition.' They are more popular now in Japan because of 'Moneyball,' but Hideki is the biggest reason."

Last year, Matsui's t-shirt was the top seller at the Coliseum, and the A's had numerous Japanese sponsors during the year.

"Every night when Hideki's four at-bats were shown in Tokyo, that's a good thing for your brand," A's team president Michael Crowley said. "Our merchandise does well there, and our trip there in 2008 and 'Moneyball' also helped give us some exposure in Japan."

Crowley sits on Major League Baseball's international committee and he believes expanding the game abroad is important, but he said that this year, the trip to Japan has special significance. The A's and Mariners will send several players each to hold a clinic in the area most affected by last year's earthquake and tsunami.

"It's hard for us to fathom the magnitude of destruction there," Crowley said. "It's incomprehensible - the town we are visiting (Isinomaki) lost 5,000 people. Holding clinics there and some other things will be good for the area and it also will be good for the players."

The A's have a working agreement with Rakuten, the Japanese professional team based in Sendai, the region hit hardest by the tsunami.

The A's will carry about 8,000 pounds of equipment and luggage, including the bases, home plate, the on-deck circle, the frame for the batter's box, special new uniform belts made in Pacific Grove, and a portable instant-replay machine.

A's equipment manager Steve Vucinich knows the drill from 2008 - take extra everything, because if you need something at the last second, you can't have it overnighted. That includes products that are tough to find in Japan, such as sunflower seeds and bubblegum.

Oakland's traveling party is 164 people, including 23 from Major League Baseball. Many players are bringing their wives or girlfriends.

A's travel secretary Mickey Morabito said all his work is in the weeks leading up to the trip, getting passports and visas processed and finalizing the flight manifest after all player moves. Once there, Morabito said, the Japanese officials help with almost everything, plus they provide Morabito with an interpreter.

There had been discussions about playing games in Osaka, too, but once that was scrapped, travel plans became much simpler. In addition, the A's are leaving today, on a day off, rather than after a Cactus League, as they did last time. That should help the players' body clocks adjust.

The team is advising players to sleep for perhaps half the 12-hour flight, to get dinner after arriving in Tokyo and then get to bed at 11 p.m. or so.

Two games come off Oakland's home schedule for this trip, but the A's wind up making some money: Major League Baseball compensates the team for all potential lost revenue, including that from spring training games, and the two regular-season games are calculated based on sellouts.

In addition, the players receive shares worth between \$40,000-45,000 based on the final total proceeds from the event.

### **Excited A's depart for Opening Series in Japan**

#### **Oakland to open regular season against Mariners in Tokyo**

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Traveling is a way of life for professional baseball players. The parameters of those journeys, though, typically trace an outline of the United States, give or take a stint in winter ball or a trip to Toronto.

The A's, then, were more than willing to venture out of that zone when approached last year about the opportunity to travel to Tokyo, where they're set to open the regular season with two games against the Mariners, beginning Wednesday at 3:10 a.m. PT.

The team will also play exhibition contests against the Yomiuri Giants and Hanshin Tigers over the weekend before the Opening Series.

"This is an experience not too many people get in their lifetime," A's second baseman Jemile Weeks said. "I think we all see this as an opportunity that may only come once."

Both teams departed Arizona for Japan on Thursday. A 12-hour flight will take them more than 6,000 miles from home and bring about a 16-hour time change -- numbers that can surely shake up an internal clock by way of jet lag.

But the A's consulted with sleep specialists in an effort to combat the problem, and the players have been recommended to sleep nearly half of the flight. Excitement may interrupt those plans, though.

"I'm definitely excited," third baseman Josh Donaldson said. "I can't wait to learn about their culture and watch the way they embrace the game of baseball."

"We're excited about it," manager Bob Melvin said. "And the fact that you're playing against a team that's going through the exact same thing, there are no excuses for anybody. I honestly am looking forward to the trip."

While at the helm in Seattle in 2003, Melvin and the Mariners were scheduled to open the '03 season in Japan against the A's, but that trip was canceled at the last minute due to safety concerns and flight restrictions when the U.S. began military actions against Iraq the day before the trip.

"I was disappointed in that, and I'm looking forward to it this time," said Melvin, who is bringing his wife Kelly and daughter Alexi along.

The A's made the same journey in 2008, splitting two games with the Boston Red Sox at the Tokyo Dome. Catcher Kurt Suzuki is the only A's player from that '08 trip who is going this time, as first baseman Daric Barton and lefty Dallas Braden were on the trip but are staying behind because of injury.

Outfielder Coco Crisp has also been there, done that. He was in a Red Sox uniform in 2008 during the Opening Series in Japan, and though much of it remains a blur to him because of some jet-lag troubles, Crisp remembers it as "a really great time."

"The fans over there love the game," Crisp said. "You've got people hanging fishing rods over the wall with cards to sign, balls attached to all sorts of different things. They really get into it."

"It's pretty crazy over there," Suzuki said. "It's interesting to watch."

So, too, is eating Japanese food.

"I'm ready for anything," Weeks said. "Bring on the sushi. Everything about this trip is great. Just my love for wanting to see different cultures and different parts of the world, and beyond that, just being able to play in front of those people and understand their way of enjoying baseball. It will be a great experience."

### **Essence of Japan's legacy spreads to Majors**

#### **Opening Series 2012 in Tokyo puts Japanese stars in spotlight**

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

When Yu Darvish took the mound last week at Surprise Stadium for his third Spring Training start for the Texas Rangers since arriving from Japan in a ballyhooed offseason signing, the physical evidence of the significance of this event was firmly in place.

At least 50 members of the Japanese media, along with a good smattering of American national baseball writers, were crammed into a tent that was erected in front of the Rangers' offices solely for Darvish's arrival. The pitcher and his interpreter got comfortable, the flashbulbs popped, and the pair fielded questions about his four-inning exhibition start.

For 30 minutes.

It spoke loudly to Darvish's allure: the big right-hander, already revered in his homeland as a heartthrob worthy of rock-star billing at the age of 25, is believed by many scouts and pundits to be the most talented pitcher ever to arrive from Japan.

It also spoke to how far Japanese baseball has come in its evolving journey across the Pacific to the best league on the planet.

On Thursday, the Oakland A's and Seattle Mariners were in airplanes over the Pacific, about to start a week-long journey in Japan for Opening Series 2012. There, they will play exhibition games against Japanese teams and then the two season-opening games against each other in a sold-out Tokyo Dome next Wednesday and Thursday.

They'll get a front-row seat to watch the passion of Japanese fans, and, in the case of the Mariners, they'll see for themselves what their Japanese-born teammates Ichiro Suzuki, Munenori Kawasaki and Hisashi Iwakuma have been telling them about the Land of the Rising Sun.

And throughout the week, it will become even clearer to all involved that the Japanese influence on the American game is growing and getting stronger by the year.

But to track the arc of this success, it's important to go back to the real beginning, and Fred Claire remembers that time period very well.

It was early 1995, and Claire, the general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, received a phone call from agent Arn Tellem, who was working with a Japan-based agent, Don Nomura. Tellem who asked Claire if he'd be interested in signing a Japanese pitcher named Hideo Nomo.

Claire was aware of a few things about professional baseball in Japan. The first was that there had only been one native of Japan to come to the Majors, and that player, a left-handed reliever named Masanori Murakami, came over for the end of the 1964 season to join the San Francisco Giants, had a decent year in '65, and then went right back to his homeland because of contractual obligations.

The second thing Claire knew was that those very contractual issues had made it so difficult for American teams to sign Japanese players that Murakami was the last one to pull it off, and 30 years had passed.

But there was one thing Claire was not aware of.

"I had no idea who Hideo Nomo was," Claire said. "And for good reason. No Major League teams even scouted Japanese players at that time."

Claire and the Dodgers and the rest of the baseball world would know soon enough. Nomo signed with the Dodgers on Feb. 8, 1995, and he debuted on May 2 of that year in San Francisco, where he promptly pitched five innings of one-hit, shutout ball, striking out seven. He would soon dominate the National League, kicking off "Nomomania" in Los Angeles that rivaled the "Fernandomania" of 1981, when rookie Fernando Valenzuela was thrilling fans in Chavez Ravine. Nomo threw a two-hitter, a one-hitter, routinely struck out more than 10 batters in a game, pitched in the All-Star Game, and won the NL Rookie of the Year Award after posting a 13-6 record, 2.54 ERA and 236 strikeouts in 191 1/3 innings.

Nomo would go on to pitch 12 seasons in the Majors, throw two no-hitters, win 123 games and strike out 1,918 batters. But he did a lot more than that.

"Nomo paved the way for all the great Japanese players we're seeing in the game today," Claire said. "And I don't think he gets enough credit for it. He really put himself on the line. He wanted to test himself against the best players in the world, because he wanted to be the best. And that's really what it's all about."

Before Ichiro Suzuki became one of the best players in the world in America, he was one of the best players in the world in Japan. And before Suzuki came to Seattle, Kazuhiro Sasaki did.

There had been Japanese players in between Nomo and Sasaki, who won the Mariners' closer job from Jose Mesa in his first American Spring Training and never looked back, but other than Shigetoshi Hasegawa, an effective middle reliever, and Hideki Irabu, who had a good year for the Yankees in 1998, none had outstanding big league showings.

Sasaki was different. He came to the Majors in 2000 at the age of 31 after being the best closer in Japan, and his devastating forkball worked immediately. He won the American League Rookie of the Year Award after posting a then-rookie record of 37 saves plus 78 strikeouts in 62 2/2 innings, and the following year, Sasaki saved 45 games as the Mariners won an AL-record 116 games.

But that 2001 season was more about Ichiro than anyone else, and the biggest Japanese sensation in American baseball history was born.

Ichiro had played nine seasons in Japan for the Orix Blue Wave and had compiled a .353 batting average, seven Gold Gloves and 1,278 hits, and he was still only 27 years old. The Mariners were able to sign him, and it became clear in Spring Training that he was the leadoff hitter and sparkplug the team needed.

As the first Japanese position player to play in the Major Leagues, buzz was generated before he suited up for Seattle, and Ichiro lived up to it right away, making a highlight-reel throw from right field to nail Oakland outfielder Terrence Long, who was trying to make it from first to third on a single.

Ichiro became a Major League sensation that year, hitting .352, racking up a rookie-record 242 hits, stealing 56 bases, winning a Gold Glove, and capturing a rare AL MVP Award/AL Rookie of the Year Award double.

And 11 years later, Ichiro is an icon. Not only did he set a record by tallying more than 200 hits in 10 consecutive seasons in the Major Leagues, but in 2004, Ichiro broke one mark thought by many to be untouchable: George Sisler's 84-year-old record for hits in a single season. Sisler had 257, Ichiro finished with 262, and his legend was cemented. Oh, and Ichiro added the winning hit in the final of the 2009 World Baseball Classic, three years after helping Japan win the inaugural Classic.

Ichiro became famous for many things: his foot speed to first base; his pre-at-bat ritual with the bat point; his unique hip clothing; his uncanny ability to swing the bat while seemingly beginning his run to first base; his cryptic, sometimes philosophical comments to the media; his enhanced-English pregame speeches at the All-Star Game. But there's one thing that seems to rise above all of Ichiro's qualities.

"He's a hitting machine," said his first big league manager, Lou Piniella. "He's a professional. He's prepared. He can hit a baseball."

Hideki Matsui can hit a baseball, too.

And when the slugger known in Japan as "Godzilla" took his talents to the Bronx, signing with the New York Yankees prior to the 2003 season, the hype followed. Matsui delivered then, driving in 106 runs and helping the Yankees to a World Series appearance, and he continued his career in New York as one of his team's most consistent hitters. In his final season in New York, the 2009 campaign, Matsui hit 28 homers and drove in 90 runs in the regular season and then took home World Series MVP honors by batting .615 with three homers and eight RBIs as the Yanks took down the Philadelphia Phillies in six games to win the franchise's 27th World Series title.

Coupled with Red Sox starter Daisuke Matsuzaka's heroics in helping Boston win the 2007 World Series, it capped off a huge decade for Japanese stars in the Major Leagues.

And now, in a new decade, things are changing even more. According to Dan Johnson, the White Sox first baseman who played in Japan in 2009, the finesse that Japanese pitchers were known for in the past is giving way to a more power-centric game, a la Darvish.

"Their arms are getting better and better and better," Johnson said. "They're evolving into mid-90s guys -- before, you were going to get the [split-fingered fastball], and they were just going to keep moving it around. I think now the pitching is getting that much better, which in turn is making the players better players."

The new names are popping up all over Major League rosters, from Darvish in Texas to Iwakuma and Kawasaki in Seattle to Norichika Aoki in Milwaukee. There will surely be more next year, and the year after that as the legacy of Japanese baseball in America continues to grow.

"There's no secret about it anymore," Johnson said. "They can really play, and their really good players are usually really good players here."

### **Mariners, A's arrive in Japan for opening series**

By JIM ARMSTRONG, AP Sports Writer

The Seattle Mariners and Oakland Athletics arrived in Japan on Friday, five days before opening Major League Baseball's 2012 season at Tokyo Dome.

About 300 fans greeted the teams after they landed at Tokyo's Narita Airport, with Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki drawing most of the attention as the team made its way through the terminal.

Utility infielder Munenori Kawasaki and pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma are the other Japanese players here for Seattle.

Suzuki hit his second home run of the spring Wednesday against the Chicago White Sox. The Seattle outfielder is hitting .400 since moving to the third spot in the lineup this spring after batting leadoff for nearly all of his career.

The teams open the regular season with a two-game series on Wednesday and Thursday.

"We're thrilled to be back in Japan," Oakland general manager Billy Beane said. "When they asked who wanted to go we were the first to put up our hands."

Seattle and Oakland had been scheduled to play here in March 2003, but the series was scrapped because of the threat of war in Iraq.

The A's will be the home team in both games.

Beane said he expects Suzuki will be just as tough to get out in Japan as he was in the U.S.

"Suzuki is tough on us back home and it won't be any easier here," Beane said.

The teams left their spring training homes in Arizona on Thursday and will return to Arizona in a week. They will play preseason games against the Yomiuri Giants and Hanshin Tigers on Sunday and Monday.

"It was a long flight but everyone feels pretty good," Seattle infielder Chone Figgins said. "This is my third time here and it's always nice to be back in Japan."

Oakland's Manny Ramirez did not make the trip. Ramirez must sit out the first 50 games for a second violation of MLB's drug policy, making him eligible to play his first game barring rainouts on May 30 — his 40th birthday.

This will be the fourth Japan opener, following the New York Mets and Chicago Cubs in 2000, the New York Yankees and Tampa Bay in 2004, and Boston and Oakland in 2008.

MLB and the players' association said the series also will aim to assist rebuilding in Japan following last year's earthquake. On Tuesday, a group of players will travel to Ishinomaki in the disaster-hit northeast region to conduct a baseball clinic.