

A's News Clips, Saturday, March 24, 2012

Oakland A's dazzled by arrival in Japan

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

The A's week spent in Tokyo promises to be an eye-opener for players.

Their arrival Friday was an experience in itself.

The team's charter flight touched down at Narita Airport around 5 p.m. local time (1 a.m. PST), and the A's were greeted by a huge contingent of Japanese media. Camera flashes popped everywhere as players walked through the terminal and to the buses that transferred them to the New Otani hotel, located in Tokyo's upscale Akasaka district.

To A's left-hander Tommy Milone, it was straight out of a "TMZ" episode.

"You see it on TV, the lights flashing and everything," Milone said. "It was cool, but it's a little different. I'm used to being on the other side watching it."

The A's open their regular season Wednesday against the Seattle Mariners at the Tokyo Dome. By the time they fly home Thursday, they'll have a better understanding not only of Japanese culture but also of what sort of team they've assembled for 2012.

Their itinerary is busy leading up to that two-game series.

One group of players is visiting a nearby military base Sunday, while others will take part in an autograph session at a local store. On Tuesday, more A's players will take a bullet train ride to conduct a baseball clinic in an area that was hit hard by last year's earthquake and tsunami.

But baseball is primary on the agenda.

"You hear about different cultures and stuff," Milone said. "But to actually come out and play baseball, which is something we do all the time over in our country ... it's cool to come to someone else's country and do the same thing."

Milone will make the start in Sunday's exhibition against the Yomiuri Giants, which is set for a 7:06 p.m. start local time (3:06 a.m. PST). The A's follow up with an exhibition against the Hanshin Tigers on Monday at 12:06 p.m. (8:06 p.m. Sunday PST).

Playing in front of Japanese fans will provide a unique experience as well. The atmosphere is more like a college football game, with fans in the outfield bleachers beating drums and belting out cheers in unison.

A's catcher Kurt Suzuki is the only player on the current trip who also made Oakland's 2008 journey to Japan to play the Boston Red Sox. For everyone else on the roster, the atmosphere inside the Tokyo Dome will be something new.

"We're excited to see what it's all about," reliever Grant Balfour said. "It's exciting for sure. There's a little unknown for guys who haven't been here. I look forward to it."

The A's were allowed to bring 30 players on the trip, but A's manager Bob Melvin and the rest of the front office staff must decide on a 25-man active roster to be turned in for the regular-season games against the Mariners.

The extra players are brought along to provide depth for the exhibitions, but there's strategy involved in selecting the 25-man roster, which can be changed from the first regular-season game to the second only if there's an injury.

The A's brought extra relievers on the trip, so they're likely to carry a larger bullpen than the standard seven-man unit they will have during the rest of the regular season.

Wednesday's opener will also be special in that it marks the A's debut for Cuban center fielder Yoenis Cespedes, who signed a four-year \$36 million contract March 3 and is expected to provide some much-needed offensive punch.

A's hold their first Tokyo workout

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/23/2012, 10:23pm

Greetings from the Tokyo Dome, where the A's are just taking the field for their first workout since arriving in Japan. It's a little late at night (in the Bay Area) for a blog post, but it's just after 2 p.m. in Tokyo. I'll be providing lots of online updates during the A's entire stay here, but the timing of them will be a little odd with the time difference. So fill up on caffeine and get ready to do some late-night reading over the next few days ...

—After spending a little time in the clubhouse, it seems most of the players are feeling well-rested after yesterday's 12-hour flight. The A's were fortunate to draw a late workout time, so they were able to sleep in. Not much else to report as far as real baseball news yet. There's a press conference coming up with GM Billy Beane, manager Bob Melvin and a few players, so we may get more there. We still don't know who the starting first baseman or third baseman will be for Wednesday's season opener.

—Some of the players are going karaoke singing tonight for a Comcast SportsNet Bay Area segment. Josh Reddick and Collin Cowgill will be there, but word is that the best singer on the team is Brandon Allen. That was surprising to hear at first because Allen comes across as such a quiet guy. But he sang "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone" for an A's commercial, so the guy has talent. "He's got some pipes," Kurt Suzuki said. Allen sang in the church choir from the time he was a young boy through high school. As for Reddick, he says he's a country music fan, but if they don't have that, "you can't go wrong with Journey at karoake."

—Yoenis Cespedes will play his first regular season game with the A's on Wednesday, but this won't be his first game in Japan. The Cuban outfielder was here in 2010 playing in the World University Games, and he said he remembers the fans being great ...

Monte Poole: Move to left field still bothers A's Coco Crisp

By Monte Poole Bay Area News Group

Coco Crisp pauses, sets his jaw and stares at the ground. He wants to be candid without sounding displeased. He is displeased, so this requires suppression.

Crisp is, or was, the A's center fielder, and a very good one. He has been informed he must move to left field, hardly a foreign country but undoubtedly out of his comfort zone.

Can an outstanding center fielder become an outstanding left fielder?

"I don't see why not," Crisp finally answers, "with practice."

He pauses again. It's apparent he wants to be deliberate, careful.

"There's an adjustment period that has to be made and a willingness to get better over there," he adds. "For someone like myself -- someone not really 100 percent onboard -- it takes . . . it's a challenge to trick yourself to be 100 percent on board."

Voiceless in this matter, Crisp is trying to digest reality. It's not going down well. He's 32, a 10-year veteran who last year led the AL in steals and played excellent center field.

His bosses realize this move, to which the A's are committed, at least for now, annoys Crisp. His teammates know, too, including Yoenis Cespedes, the rookie from Cuba who is being installed in center field.

Crisp, who spent the last two seasons in Oakland, re-signed Jan. 5 with the belief he would be in center, as he was throughout 2011. A little more than a month later, Cespedes, new to American professional baseball, signed the second-biggest biggest contract in A's history: \$36 million, over four years.

And now, four weeks into spring training, Crisp is displaced by the new guy. It's a demotion in status, a form of rejection.

"He's disappointed, no doubt about that," manager Bob Melvin says. "And I understand totally.

"I don't envision him being a problem, but he's disappointed. And I understand why. He's a terrific center fielder and he's being asked to do something that's uncomfortable."

To understand Crisp's predicament, you have to comprehend the significance of playing center field. It's a premium position, hallowed terrain once patrolled by Willie Mays, generally acknowledged as our greatest living ballplayer. The man previously introduced as such, the late Joe DiMaggio, also was a center fielder.

Prestige is inherent to the position, and Crisp has made the effort to earn his.

"I came up as a shortstop, so I had to make a transition to the outfield," he says. "I worked hard at trying to make myself as good as I could be, as quickly as possible.

"This . . . is another challenge where I have to do the same thing."

Crisp expresses no visible fury. He feels a bit of betrayal, a degree of reluctance and undoubtedly some resignation. He had learned how to play center field and made the adjustment smoothly enough to become one of the best.

And now this, ousted by the unproven new guy. It's not unlike a Gold Glove-caliber shortstop being moved to third base to make room for an untested rookie.

There is a part of Crisp, and he conceded this to USA Today, that now regrets signing with the A's. His contract, two years at \$14 million, is handsome and he's respected in the clubhouse. But he has been, in a sense, reassigned.

More to the point, reassigned without any sign of regression.

Melvin says the move was made because it's the simplest solution for the three best outfielders. The starters are going to be newly acquired Josh Reddick, Crisp and Cespedes. Reddick is most natural in right field, with Crisp and Cespedes most comfortable in center.

Because Crisp has played some left field, the A's believe he'll adapt more easily than would Cespedes. The decision is based less on merit than on projecting the trio and the desire to accommodate the new guy.

"The decision was made for the (comfort) of everybody else," Melvin offers.

Crisp, in essence, is a victim of his own versatility, despite his preferences.

"I see myself as an above average outfielder, one of the best center fielders in the game," he says. "I feel I'm a below-average left fielder right now. So I have to work hard to change that. I'm a realist, and I'm pretty good at self-evaluation.

"That said, being (in left field) is not where I want to be -- below average while I'm playing the game. I can deal with 'average,' but right now I feel I'm below average. I have to work hard to improve over there. That's all I can do right now."

He asks if I have more questions. I don't. Relieved, he can now simmer in solitude.

Star power takes on different meaning

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Reliever Jerry Blevins said he never gets recognized when he is in the United States.

So he was amazed with the A's flashbulb reception in Tokyo, with flocks of Japanese reporters and fans shouting players' names as they came through customs and then again two hours later as they arrived at the New Otani Hotel.

"Getting the star treatment is pretty cool," Blevins said with a grin. "Every single person who asked for an autograph knew my name. No one does at home."

Outfielder Jonny Gomes was one of the few A's to make it out of the hotel Friday evening. The 12-hour flight and two-hour bus ride left nearly everyone else too exhausted to check out the Akasaka neighborhood, plus it was raining.

"I just walked around, I have no idea where," Gomes said. "I got some noodles."

He also got some stares, thanks to his Mohawk.

"No one looked at me normal," he said.

Outfielder Coco Crisp is one of the few A's players to have played in Japan, but he said he'd like to get more out of this trip than he did in 2008 with the Red Sox.

"I wanted to do more, see more, this time around," Crisp said. "I'm a big fan of the culture. I've always said that if I ever have the opportunity to build my own house, I'd like to do it in that minimal Japanese style - low furniture, serene atmosphere, sliding doors.

"Growing up, my introduction to Japan was 'Mr. Baseball,' " said Crisp of the 1992 movie starring Tom Selleck. "That's the truth. It made me curious about what was behind it."

Crisp started off his morning in unusual fashion - his wife, Maria, had a problem with her braces, so the couple were sent to see a local dentist.

"Wild isn't even the word for it," Crisp said of making an emergency dental trip in a foreign city. "It was cool, though. We were in and out in 30 minutes."

Third base hopeful Josh Donaldson was fired up to see the media awaiting the A's at Narita airport, so he mugged for the cameras and made a "We're No. 1!" gesture.

"Japanese culture has always been a fascination of mine," Donaldson said. "I love the discipline, like in the 'Last Samurai'; that's one of my favorite movies. Perfecting your craft - that's what we try to do every day. I can relate to that."

Many A's were shaking their heads at the steep prices: The breakfast buffet was \$36, and catcher Anthony Recker noted that there was a Kobe beef steak on the room service menu that cost 36,000 yen, or \$500.

So some of the players headed out to eat in the morning. Wes Timmons and his wife, Randi, found a restaurant "based on the pictures of food in the window," he said. "That worked out really well."

Josh Reddick, Brandon Allen and Collin Cowgill are heading out for karaoke tonight with CSN Bay Area cameras in tow.

"I'll sing country if they have it, but you can't go wrong with Journey," Reddick said.

Drumbeat: A's Yoenis Cespedes puts on a show at Tokyo Dome

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser in Tokyo, 3/23/2012, 11:16pm

Of all the interesting sounds and scenes for the A's today as they visit Japan, perhaps the most amazing sight was something they hope to see all season: Yoenis Cespedes launching homer after homer during batting practice.

Cespedes has been to Japan before, for a series between Cuban and Japanese teams in 2010, and he loves it here. He must feel comfortable: He was the star of that 2008 series, the World University Games, hitting five homers in seven games.

Today, he nearly hit the roof with several drives, which usually means a sky-high pop-up. In this case, he hit one of those balls over the wall, and another landed just short of the fence.

And in his third turn in the cage, Cespedes launched a homer that nearly hit the back wall in left field. I'm going to try to get an estimate on the distance, but it's a high wall up there and he hit it more than halfway back. The Japanese journalists standing near me all gasped. I think I might have, too.

So, OK, that's batting practice. Still, impressive stuff. He might be primed for a big major-league debut – if he gets any fastballs to hit. It was clear during spring training that teams were throwing Cespedes as much breaking stuff as possible.

Here's a view of the A's taking batting practice at the Tokyo Dome:

UPDATE: Josh Donaldson had an even better batting practice than Cespedes; he hit five billboards.

"It was nasty," he said with a grin, crediting Manny Ramirez and hitting coach Chili Davis with helping him stay more relaxed in the hitting zone.

A's soaking in Japan visit ahead of games

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Venturing out from the confines of their hotel on Saturday, A's infielder Wes Timmons and his wife, Randi, had just settled in for lunch in the nearby Akasaka neighborhood and, thanks to a few pointing gestures, successfully placed their orders.

Timmons, doing his best to be friendly with their waitress, then decided to bust out one of the few Japanese words he knows. He politely smiled and offered a "Sayonara." Translation: "Goodbye."

"She laughed at me," Timmons said, with his own laugh. "I don't know if it was because I didn't have the right word or because I don't have the Japanese accent."

It's likely the former, but the language barrier isn't stopping Timmons or any of his teammates from soaking in an experience that A's general manager Billy Beane wishes all players could enjoy.

"The value that we get out of this -- not just the baseball, but the cultural exchange, the experiences that these guys get -- it's incredibly unique," Beane said. "The baseball's great, but for me, as a general manager, it's about the growth of the game and spreading the game, and I think this is part of that. I think it would be great if we saw more and more of these games."

The fans wouldn't mind either, it seems. They're enamored by American baseball and its players, evident not only in the flashbulb reception with which they loudly welcomed the A's upon their arrival at both the airport and hotel on Friday night, but in the way they've embraced players on the streets.

"I've got all these people wanting to touch my Mohawk," Jonny Gomes said. "I say, 'Sure, feel free to touch it. Don't hurt yourself, it doesn't bite.'"

"They kind of get shaky and nervous when they come up and ask for an autograph," Josh Donaldson said. "It's hard to know what to expect, but you can tell right away that this is all a really big deal to them. It's cool for us to see."

Donaldson drew a crowd of people while walking around Saturday morning, leading him to believe the fans must have thought he was Josh Reddick, whose Red Sox roots have made him quite the popular face around town.

"I wasn't expecting it, no," Reddick said. "I was obviously shocked. I had [Kurt] Suzuki walking behind me and Coco [Crisp] around me and thought, 'How come I'm the one getting yelled at right now?'" But the best part about the fans here is that they all know your name. Most people don't know your name in the States."

Reddick and the rest of the team took part in their first workout at the Tokyo Dome on Saturday afternoon, in preparation for exhibition games Sunday and Monday against the Hanshin Tigers and Yomiuri Giants. Lefty Tommy Milone is scheduled to start Sunday's night contest, but it's a mystery who will join him on the field. Manager Bob Melvin was waiting to hear whether the opposing pitcher was a right-hander or left-hander to determine his lineup.

Reddick was to spend his night with Brandon Allen and Collin Cowgill showcasing his singing skills at a karaoke bar in front of Comcast Bay Area's camera crew. Allen is known to have quite the voice, which is usually shared with only his church choir and shower curtain, though Reddick deems himself a karaoke frequenter.

"I'll be singing country," the Georgia native said, "but I don't know if they have that here. I pretty much know all the country songs that come on the radio. If I can't find anything, I can't go wrong with Journey."

Crisp, meanwhile, is hoping his night proves less hectic than his morning, which was spent at the dentist's office with wife Maria, who had a problem with her braces. Gomes and Kila Ka'aihue are without their wives on the trip, so they're teaming up Saturday night to ride on a boat that will take them through the canals of Tokyo.

And Timmons, a non-roster invitee who has 998 Minor League games to his name but not one of the big-league variety, plans to take in all he can with his wife before he really does have to say, "Sayonara." It's unlikely he'll be part of the 25-man group eligible for the two regular-season games Wednesday and Thursday, but simply having traveled the nearly 6,000-mile journey has Timmons all sorts of thrilled.

"We've just been in awe the whole time," he said. "You hear stories about the big leagues. I know this isn't quite the big leagues yet, but I guess it's a pretty good glimpse of what goes on and what takes place. We kinda joked around, saying, 'If this is it, we kinda got a taste of what it was.' You can't tell your grandkids you ever made it, but you did have the trip to Japan."

Cespedes puts on BP power display in Japan

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Yoenis Cespedes is no stranger to Japan -- having hit five home runs in seven games here while a member of the Cuban team in the 2010 World University Games.

On Saturday afternoon, he appeared to pick up right where he left off.

Cespedes wowed onlookers during batting practice at the Tokyo Dome, launching at least seven home runs over the wall, many of which nearly hit the roof. Though it remains to be seen how he'll fare in regular-season games, A's manager Bob Melvin hopes Saturday's spectacle is a hint of what's to come.

"I thought what I always think when I throw batting practice to him," Melvin said. "I duck behind the screen so I don't get hurt. Each and every day he gets more confident and more comfortable. In turn, the batting practices get better and he's got more confidence. I think a lot of it has to do with not only how he feels on the field, but off the field. We know he has that kind of power."

Cespedes said through translator Ariel Prieto that he is "very happy" to be back in Japan, notably because of the success he found there during his previous visit. He also mentioned being excited about playing in his first regular-season game on Wednesday. Cespedes said he "will be one step closer to my dream."

Cespedes is slated to start that contest in center field, with Coco Crisp in left field and Josh Reddick in right field.

A's arrive in Japan for Opening Series

Will play two exhibitions before facing Mariners Wednesday

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO, Japan -- Fresh off a 12-hour flight from Phoenix, a large contingent of blurry-eyed A's players and front-office personnel were awakened by a crowd of hundreds of photographers and fans awaiting their arrival at Narita International Airport around 5 p.m., local time, on Friday evening.

That was 1 a.m. PST, following the 16-hour time change, and traffic to The New Otani -- the A's home for the next week -- stalled their arrival at the hotel until after 3 a.m. PST. More fans greeted them there, before they were led away for a meal and advised to get to bed around 11 p.m. or midnight local time -- just as they would in the States, to help their internal clock adjust.

First up on the schedule is a workout planned for Saturday, which will be followed by a pair of exhibition games against the Hanshin Tigers and Yomiuri Giants Sunday and Monday.

The A's and Mariners then open the regular season with a two-game set on Wednesday and Thursday at the Tokyo Dome.

The Mariners arrived at The New Otani two hours later than the A's, who are enjoying their second trip to Japan in the past five years. However, Kurt Suzuki and Coco Crisp, who played for the opposing Red Sox in 2008, are the only players on the current trip who took part in the last one, making for quite the new experience for the rest of their teammates.

A total of 30 A's players are on the trip, with several of their wives and girlfriends also on board.

An ocean away, Japan follows hardball heroes

Baseball-crazed fans revel in homegrown players in Majors

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Japan is a baseball-crazy country.

The fans love their homegrown stars. They love watching them rise up through the Minor Leagues, excelling in their big leagues -- Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) -- and helping their teams win titles.

But as every Japanese fan knows, the next logical step for superstars from the Land of the Rising Sun requires a drastic change of lifestyle that will take their favorite players away from them and across the largest ocean in the world, all the way to the United States ... maybe for the rest of their careers.

Saying "Sayonara" can't be easy, but Japanese fans are used to it by now. They understand the reasoning behind it. They deal with it. And more often than not, they figure out ways to revel in it.

"They don't want to lose their stars, but on the other hand, they take great pride in their achievements in Major League Baseball," wrote Robert Whiting, a noted expert on Japanese baseball and author of one of the definitive books on the phenomenon, "You Gotta Have Wa," in an email to MLB.com.

"Some fans get mad and go to the park with protest signs, but it's nothing like you would imagine."

Whiting has seen many great Japanese players reach their potential in NPB and leave for lucrative deals in the United States. Among them are Hideo Nomo, who departed in 1995, Kazuhiro Sasaki (2000), Ichiro Suzuki ('01), Hideki Matsui ('03), Daisuke Matsuzaka ('07) and now Yu Darvish, the heralded pitcher who signed with the Texas Rangers this past winter and has been the subject of a media frenzy each time he's pitched this spring.

But Whiting has also seen how passionate the country is about the game and its players, and knowing that the Major Leagues offer the highest level of competition in the sport makes a ticket to America a great source of pride.

"Fans recognize that MLB is the ultimate in baseball," Whiting wrote. "They like to see their stars make the challenge. And they will be on TV all the time anyway, so that mitigates the loss."

Ah yes, TV.

The necessity for Japanese media members to track every move of one of their countrymen's careers in Major League Baseball is so overwhelming that the newspapers, websites and television stations from the big cities have moved journalists to the U.S. markets where these players are based simply to cover their teams.

For example, sportswriter Nobu Kobayashi, who was living in Chicago and working for a Japanese community newspaper in the late 1990s, was hired by the newspaper Daily Sports, based in Kobe, Japan, solely to cover the Ichiro and Sasaki Mariners in 2001. He's been in Seattle ever since, asking Ichiro questions after every game.

"Japanese people are always looking forward to watching the Japanese players play in the Major Leagues," Kobayashi said. "When Nomo came, we were so excited. Same thing with Ichiro, Matsui, Matsuzaka, Darvish. I think most of the fans are happy to see that."

Kosuke Fukudome, the Japanese outfielder who came to the United States in 2008 and played for the Cubs before moving on to the Indians in '11 and now the White Sox, agrees. He says he always dreamed of playing in America and hopes and believes that his Japanese fans can identify with those aspirations.

"If people want to come over from Japan and try to succeed here, it's only going to make the game that much better," Fukudome said. "We've proven that we can play here, and we bring our style of play to America, so it's a great thing."

Hisanori Takahashi, the veteran left-handed reliever on the Angels, was an NPB stalwart until 2010, when he joined the New York Mets at the age of 35. He said he never experienced any anger from Japanese fans regarding his departure.

"It was kind of difficult to leave the fans, because I really appreciated their support, but at the same time, I wanted to see what I could do as a Major League player," Takahashi said.

"Most Japanese fans are very supportive of what the players think or what the players do, and they know how good the baseball is in the Japanese leagues, so they want to see how we will do. Especially Darvish. They're really excited to see what he can do."

Ultimately, it might be harder on the players than the fans. The players are the ones who have to adjust to a new country, a new language, new food, new teammates and the competition of 29 other teams trying to beat you every night.

Fukudome smiled when asked if it's all too much, echoing the sentiments of a lot of the Japanese fans who can't wait to see their local heroes make their marks in the Majors.

"Baseball is baseball," he said. "It's not that big of a difference, other than the number of games and the distance on road trips. Other than that, it's the same game."

Tokyo Diary -- First workout

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com, March 23, 2012, 11:10 pm

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Kate Longworth is Tokyo-bound with the A's! Although it's not her standard practice to let strangers read her diary, she invites you to go behind the scenes with the A's up-and-coming players. Log on throughout the day for Kate's journal posts from Japan, and tune in nightly for her A's reports on SportsNet Central and NBC Bay Area. Whether the players are in the Tokyo Dome taking BP or trying exotic sushi, you can explore the streets of one of the most fascinating cities -- Comcast SportsNet is your ticket to Tokyo!*

Tokyo Diary

Saturday, March 24, 2012

Saturday morning marked the Athletics' first workout at the Tokyo Dome. As we entered the Dome, after passing through security, we had to one by one, be let in to the facility through a pressurized door -- as to not offset the pressure inside, much like the MetroDome.

Taking the field here, was incredible. The turf is in impeccable shape and the Dome, to me just looked like a thing of beauty. You hear so many stories about watching games here, how it is an experience like no other. And although there was just a handful of media members on the field when I first saw it, I could quickly envision what it's going to be like starting tomorrow, and I can't wait!

And neither can the players. The team is currently in the visitor's clubhouse but will be moving over to the home clubhouse for some of the games next week. It's tighter spaces here than back at the Coliseum, but the players don't seem to mind one bit.

Many of them brought along their own cameras and video cameras to capture the moment. A half hour before team stretch, most of the players were already out on the field taking it all in.

The relievers found the bullpen placement interesting...it's behind home plate in a closed in room. So while a pitcher is warming up, facing his bullpen catcher, he can't see the action on the field. But Brian Fuentes quickly explained to the younger guys that there will be a TV in there so they'll know exactly what's going on.

I overheard the outfielders discussing the Dome, jokingly concerned that it'll be tough to track a fly ball because the Dome and lights literally are the color of a baseball. Some of the players compared the Dome to Tropicana, but quickly acknowledged it'll be a scene like no other when the fans are here.

As the players took the field for the workout, we put a mic on Jerry Blevins, and working along side MLB Productions who mic'd Jonny Gomes. We'll be featuring this footage of TokyoDome through the players' eyes on our Japan Special on CSN California.

"Players React to a New Culture"

I hung out in the dugout with the players as they came onto the field before stretching. We all commented on how unique the sunk-in dugout is with two rows of benches, and then two little seats above the steps for the manager and bench coach.

And after we got over the new digs, we all recapped the first night in Tokyo. Luckily for the fans wanting to see good baseball from the A's, the players got sleep. I, however, did not. My body woke up at 6 am after a restless five hours of sleep -- maybe it thought I had to attend our 3 pm newsroom meeting back home? Without Starbucks in me and minimal sleep over the last few days, I am guessing my internal clock will catch up, but right now the excitement keeps me going.

And the players are sharing that same excitement. Tonight they have a free night, and many can't wait to go try some sushi and take in some of the culture.

"Money Matters"

One thing that concerns the players is how much money they are spending. We're all still trying to figure out the Yen translation into US dollars. I've been told a rough guesstimate is to drop the last two numbers and you will know a ballpark price range.

For example, the soup I had last night was written in the menu at \$1,094... so yes, I had a \$10 bowl of soup!

Wes Timmons was sitting with me when we learned of this shortcut translation...when we started talking money, he joked "it's fun, kind of like we're playing with Monopoly money because you don't really know what you're spending."

After, we learned the Yen amount in US dollars.

"Ok, so I definitely should have eaten more at breakfast," Wes told me, moments after bragging about his great meal. "Apparently I spent \$27 for the egg and toast I got at the buffet."

It's humbling to see the minor league journeyman watching his dime. After all, he substitute teaches in the offseason to help make ends meet for his wife and two kids... slightly different than some of the millions of dollars his teammates make each year.

"On Deck"

Tonight we have a "Night on the Town with the Athletics." We will be dining with Brandon Allen, Josh Reddick and Collin Cowgill and then hitting up a Karaoke spot. Rumor is Allen is pretty incredible. I am guessing more players will be stopping by as well, so I will send updates American Idol style on Twitter!

Tokyo Diary -- Japanese Fanfare

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com, 3/23/2012

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Kate Longworth is Tokyo-bound with the A's! Although it's not her standard practice to let strangers read her diary, she invites you to go behind the scenes with the A's up-and-coming players. Log on throughout the day for Kate's journal posts from Japan, and tune in nightly for her A's reports on SportsNet Central and NBC Bay Area. Whether the players are in the Tokyo Dome taking BP or trying exotic sushi, you can explore the streets of one of the most fascinating cities -- Comcast SportsNet is your ticket to Tokyo!*

Tokyo Diary

Friday, March 23, 2012

"Lights, Camera, Action"

Actors and Actresses prepare for weeks before walking the red carpet, deploying special diets designer fittings. The Athletics? They endured 14-hours of air travel and patiently navigated customs before emerging in front of screaming fans and flashing bulbs in Japan.

After our 160-passenger charter cleared immigration, we made the 15-minute walk through the airport to the buses waiting to take us to our hotel. Once we passed the security checkpoint, hundreds of baseball fans were waiting, trying to get an up-close glimpse at Major League Baseball players.

Fans were loudly cheering and clapping as they held out baseballs, hoping for autographs, while players walked by arm in arm with the wives and girlfriends soaking it all in. It took me back to last September to the "green carpet" walk in Oakland for the "MoneyBall" premiere. Just as our American media lined up with video and still cameras to rapidly snap away at Brad Pitt, the A's players were bombarded with flashing lights and cheers.

"It was like the media reception [Hideki] Matsui got all last here from the Japanese media in the states," said a smiling Tyson Ross.

For those, like me, who choose a wardrobe of comfort versus fashion when traveling long distances, that is *not* the case when you are a pro. All the players were sporting suit jackets, and all of us on the charter had a strict dress code of "business travel."

"Not there Yet"

The best thing to do after you traveled for over half a day to get to your destination? Get on a bus! Yes, it was an anti-climatic arrival after such an incredible reception at the airport as we embarked on bus caravan No. 2. Just as we started Thursday in Arizona on buses traveling to the airport, a two-hour bus ride to our hotel awaited us Friday evening in Tokyo.

We flew into Norita Airport, which -- from what I gather -- is on the outskirts of the area. We left Arizona at 11 a.m. on Thursday. When we boarded the buses, it was 6 p.m. on Friday.

"We Made It...and it was Worth the Wait"

We finally arrived at Hotel New Otani in downtown Tokyo.

"We (the players) all played a game on the way over here," Wes Timmons told me as he got off the bus. "What's your

wish list to do first when you arrive -- shower, eat or sleep."

For those wondering at home -- eating won out for this team!

"Accommodations"

The New Otani hotel is like a miniature city in itself. Seriously, it is a campus of high rises boasting hundreds of room. We are on the 22nd floor of the third tower. I am afraid to leave our rooms, without another member of our group with me because I am not sure if I will find my way back -- and I have yet to even step outside into the city streets!

There are numerous restaurants, ranging from Japanese dining to American to steak houses. And there are shops around every corner as well; some are similar to lobby shops back home, but many more extravagant -- flower shops, jewelry, clothing, etc.

The entire hotel circles a traditional Japanese garden, depicting the traditional Japanese scene with red bridge and cherry blossom trees. It was incredible tonight in the rain and dark, and I can't wait to see it tomorrow.

"Making TV"

If you are wondering how you are getting behind the scenes access to your favorite A's players delivered to you -- all the way from Japan, every night -- here's the lowdown.

At 11:45 p.m. Friday in Japan, our CSN crew heads to the CNBC Bureau here in downtown Tokyo. It's 7 a.m. Friday back in San Francisco. Using the magic of technology, we send the video to Singapore than route it through New York and by 6 and 10:30 p.m. on SportsNet Central, you'll see exactly what our day entailed back home in the Bay Area.

"Saturday's Game Plan"

The team will take the field for its first workout at the Tokyo Dome. Tonight we will be featuring on Night on the Town in Japan with the A's players as we hit up an authentic Sushi Restaurant followed by some karaoke!

Tokyo Diary -- Flying like a pro

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Kate Longworth is Tokyo-bound with the A's! Although it's not her standard practice to let strangers read her diary, she invites you to go behind the scenes with the A's up-and-coming players. Log on throughout the day for Kate's journal posts from Japan, and tune in nightly for her A's reports on SportsNet Central and NBC Bay Area. Whether the players are in the Tokyo Dome taking BP or trying exotic sushi, you can explore the streets of one of the most fascinating cities -- Comcast SportsNet is your ticket to Tokyo!*

Tokyo Diary

Thursday, March 22, 2012

"Go Time"

We arrive at Phoenix Municipal Stadium at 8 a.m. Our luggage is tagged and loaded onto a moving van -- and our valuables are off to the airport!

Meanwhile, the players begin to file in -- most in taxis, some in their personal cars. They park close to the clubhouse because it's just a matter of hours before their vehicles will be shipped to Oakland for the season ahead.

The players share with me that they can't even put into words what they expect upon arrival in Japan. Kurt Suzuki is the only Oakland player who made this trip back in 2008, but he has shared with his teammates that the fanfare will be incredible.

"They have a different cheer for each player when they step up to bat," Jemile Weeks tells me.

"I would never have this opportunity if I wasn't a Major League Baseball player, playing for the Oakland Athletics," Seth Smith says with a big smile, "I have been looking forward to this since I was traded."

And now the trip of a lifetime is upon us.

"They Thought of Everything"

Major League Baseball hosts breakfast for the 160 of us traveling to Tokyo. Our crew consists of the Athletics players and their wives/girlfriends, front office staff, media members and MLB employees.

"Safety First"

Next up? TSA. We all line up single file, for our one-on-one searches from TSA. They go through our carry-ons, and pat us down before we board a bus. Four large greyhounds caravan to Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix. The 10-minute drive leads us right onto the tarmac. Nothing can prepare me for the massiveness of the plane we are about to board. Think biggest plane you can imagine, and then go bigger! Standing under the nose of the plane, I'm but a speck in my photo.

"It's a Bird, no it's a Superman of a Plane"

As we walk up the two-story jetway stairs, I'm thinking they could film a whole season of PanAm on this flight -- there's seriously space for a different scene in every corridor of this thing! It's a double decker, and it feels like I am boarding a house that's going to take off in the sky.

But don't get too excited, as I walk to my seats, joining the rest of the media members -- in the back of the plane -- I pass the most luxurious seats I have ever seen before. I'm talking padded bed with 15-inch individual TVs for each seat. Yup, that's for the pros. We're in the normal seats you're used to seeing on planes. It pays to be a player...

"Time for Takeoff"

I have my complimentary snack bag, my comes-with-the-flight toiletries that range from an eye mask, to emery board, toothpaste, socks and lotion. My "designer" PJs are sealed airtight in a bag the flight attendant just handed me, along with a specially designed menu for the A's trip. Hmm, chicken or pasta?? I think I will decide after watching a movie or two...

How will I ever fly commercial again...sigh.

Crowds greet A's arrival in Japan

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com

***Editor's note:** Kate Longworth, producer Dave Bernstein and a camera team are traveling with the A's for the season-opening series in Japan. Follow all their exploits with Kate's blog.*

NARITA, Japan (AP) The A's and Mariners 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.

Tokyo Diary -- Embarking on a journey

Kate Longworth, csnbayarea.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Kate Longworth is Tokyo-bound with the A's! Although it's not her standard practice to let strangers read her diary, she invites you to go behind the scenes with the A's up-and-coming players. Log on throughout the day for Kate's journal posts from Japan, and tune in nightly for her A's reports on SportsNet Central and NBC Bay Area. Whether the players are in the Tokyo Dome taking BP or trying exotic sushi, you can explore the streets of one of the most fascinating cities -- Comcast SportsNet is your ticket to Tokyo!*

Tokyo Diary

Wednesday, March 21, 2012

"I Can't Believe It's Here"

A's Media Guide - check. Durable shoes - check. Outfits for Embassy visit, MLB Reception and Tsunami grounds visit - check. ID - check. EmergenC - check. Laptop - check. Camera, Toothpaste, hair spray - check, check, check.

And just like that, I was off! On my cab ride to the Oakland Airport, my mind wanders just trying to envision what awaits me upon my arrival in Japan. I file through security with many Giants and Athletics fans in-tow, as we all board a plane for Phoenix, Arizona. They are heading there for a final weekend of Cactus League games. I am flying to meet Comcast SportsNet producer Dave Bernstein, photographer extraordinaire Keith Manglona and the Athletics team and staff to embark on a journey of a lifetime.

Outside the Phoenix baggage carousel, our CSN group reunites. It's official, we brought it all. I even think there's a kitchen sink in Keith's backpack because it DOES weigh that much. So, with our wide-angle lenses and mini-cams and Japanese-English dictionary, we head to the team hotel.

After evening meetings and going over the gameplan, it's finally bedtime. I wonder if I should even sleep or save the shut-eye for my 12-hour flight tomorrow.

It doesn't matter what I decide because it's impossible to fall asleep knowing what lies ahead tomorrow -- I'm covering Major League Baseball action in Tokyo, Japan!

Rounding Third: Mariners, Athletics set to open season in Japan

Sports Network

Philadelphia, PA – It's hard to believe, but we are closing in on the start of the Major League Baseball season.

Only this year the schedule kicks off in Japan with a two-game series between the Seattle Mariners and Oakland Athletics at the Tokyo Dome. Both teams took off for Japan on Thursday and are slated for a couple of exhibition games this weekend before lifting the lid on the season Wednesday.

These same two teams had been scheduled to play here in March 2003, but the series was canceled at the last minute due to the threat of war in Iraq. Coincidentally, A's manager Bob Melvin was the manager of the Mariners back in 2003.

"We're excited about it," 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."

Oakland opened the 2008 season in Japan against the Boston Red Sox, splitting a pair of games.

"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."

Perhaps it's not the best American baseball has to offer with Seattle and Oakland expected to be two of the worst teams in the majors this season.

Seattle is a team that last year lost 95 games, endured a 17-game losing streak and for the third straight season crossed the plate less times than any other team in the American League. Oakland, meanwhile, only avoided the cellar in the AL West because of Seattle, but this offseason traded its two best starting pitchers in Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, in addition to closer Andrew Bailey.

So, yeah, this isn't exactly Yankees-Red Sox we are talking about.

But, you'd be hard pressed to not find more excitement for this series than any other. Why? Well how about the return of Ichiro Suzuki, perhaps the most iconic sports figure to ever come out of Japan.

"We've never had this opportunity before, so it's new for me and new for the team," he said through interpreter Antony Suzuki. "This is something we'll probably do once in a lifetime, so I look forward to that and would like to take advantage of it."

Suzuki, of course, left Japan for the United States back in 2001 and instantly became a hit, winning the league's MVP and Rookie of the Year in his first season, then producing 10 straight years of hitting .300 or better with 200 hits and 25 stolen bases. Last year, though, the 38-year-old superstar showed signs of slowing down, as he batted just .272 and failed to reach 200 hits for the first time in his 11-year career.

This year, the great Suzuki is embarking on a new challenge, as manager Eric Wedge has moved him from his customary leadoff spot down to No. 3 in the order. Suzuki has adjusted nicely this spring, and is hitting .400 with eight RBIs through 30 spring at-bats.

Suzuki, though, isn't the only Japanese star returning to his native land. Utility infielder Munenori Kawasaki and pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma also are returning to Japan.

"I think it's going to be crazy," said Mariners ace Felix Hernandez, who'll oppose Oakland's Brandon McCarthy on Wednesday. "We've got a lot of Japanese guys here. We've got Ichi, who is a big star there. It's going to be a good experience and it's going to be fun."

Oakland, meanwhile, doesn't have anyone from Japan on its roster, but catcher Kurt Suzuki was on the 2008 A's team.

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

This series marks the fourth season opener in Japan and the first since the Red Sox and A's played in 2008 at Tokyo Dome, site of next year's openers. Since 1999, 10 clubs (Colorado Rockies, San Diego Padres, New York Mets, Chicago Cubs, Texas Rangers, Toronto Blue Jays, New York Yankees, Tampa Bay Rays, Red Sox and A's) have participated in international openers.

BASEBALL PREVIEW SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

AL WEST

The Angels and the Rangers, flush with TV cash and talent, are the AL's new power brokers. With apologies to the I-95 corridor, they are the game's most fascinating rivals

By Albert Chen, Sports Illustrated

BEST BETS

MVP

ALBERT PUJOLS, ANGELS

He had career lows in batting average, OBP and slugging last year, but concerns over a decline were put to rest after a typically Pujolsian second half (.960 OPS) and otherworldly postseason. The new Angel is still the best hitter in the game and a Gold Glove first baseman.

CY YOUNG

JERED WEAVER, ANGELS

The Angels' ace keeps getting better: The 29-year-old's ERA and WHIP have improved each of the last four seasons. After he won a career-high 18 games in 2011, the only question entering this season is whether the departure of personal catcher Jeff Mathis will affect him.

MR. IRREPLACEABLE

JOSH HAMILTON, RANGERS

A year after his 2010 MVP season, Hamilton broke his arm on a headfirst slide and played through a sports hernia. He still fueled Texas's scorching second half, with 17 home runs over the last three months. Texas needs another big year from the Natural before he tests free agency.

ROOKIE TO WATCH

JESUS MONTERO, MARINERS

The kid can rake; the ex-Yankees prospect, who with his quick hands and opposite-field power has been compared with Miguel Cabrera, hit .328 with four HRs in 18 games in the Bronx last year. The question is whether he's a 22-year-old DH or can be a catcher.

STAR ON THE RISE

YU DARVISH, RANGERS

Enough with the comparisons to Daisuke Matsuzaka. The 25-year-old righty is more athletic, bigger and more durable than the last Japanese pitching star to arrive in the majors. Darvish also has a better track record, with a 1.60 ERA and 498 K's in 434 innings over the last two years in Japan.

STAR IN DECLINE

ICHIRO SUZUKI, MARINERS

Seattle is wisely moving the 38-year-old out of the leadoff hole after he posted career lows in average and OBP and fell short of 200 hits for the first time. The 10-time All-Star can still run (he swiped 40 bases in 47 attempts), but his days as a Gold Glove--caliber outfielder are over.

Forget Yankees-Red Sox. For baseball's baddest rivalry, go West. "The beasts of the East have had their day in the sun," says Angels rightfielder Torii Hunter, "but now there are two beasts in the West, too. People might have to stay up a little later now to tune into the Angels-Rangers."

The axis of power in the American League has shifted--the road to the World Series is no longer I-95. That became clear this winter, when it was the Rangers and the Angels who dominated the headlines with their spending: The two rising powers, enriched by monster TV deals, combined to spend nearly \$500 million on free agents that included the best hitter in the game (Albert Pujols), the best free-agent pitcher (C.J. Wilson) and the most-hyped Japanese import ever (Yu Darvish). Says Wilson, who defected from Texas to L.A., signing a five-year, \$77.5 million deal, "The way these two teams were spending money, it was like New York and Boston over the last 10 years."

When the big spending in Arlington and Anaheim was over, the gap between the AL West's two tiers had widened significantly. Seattle and Oakland, whose combined payroll is less than that of the Angels, began waving the white flag practically before the ink on Pujols's contract dried. Within three weeks, Oakland dealt away starters Gio Gonzalez and Trevor Cahill and All-Star closer Andrew Bailey for prospects. Says A's assistant G.M. David Forst, "The Pujols deal had to shape the way we looked at our club."

Seattle G.M. Jack Zduriencik, meanwhile, was already bracing Mariners fans for a long season in the first week of spring training. "Let's not kid ourselves," he told reporters. "This is going to be a challenging year at the big league level for us."

In no other division are the haves and have-nots so neatly cleaved. And no other division is loaded with more intriguing star power. In mid-February, Los Angeles's new \$240 million first baseman, Pujols, was working out at a Gold's Gym in Venice, when a tall young man with shaggy orange-tinted hair and a dark goatee walked in. It was Darvish. The two players who will be front and center in this season's most riveting rivalry shook hands and introduced themselves. Recalls Pujols, "He was a very nice man. He said he was looking forward to the battle."

Sitting in his office at the Angels complex in Tempe, Ariz., one spring training morning, Angels G.M. Jerry Dipoto quickly shot down the notion that the division is a two-team race. "We're in no different position from the Mariners and A's in that we're trying to catch the Rangers," he says. "They're the two-time defending [AL West] champs. We all have our work cut out for ourselves."

The addition of Pujols will undoubtedly improve an offense that struggled last season (it ranked 10th in the AL in runs per game, with 4.1), but the strength of the team remains the pitching staff, which led the league in ERA. The Angels were willing to sign Wilson for a hefty sum because they believe that despite the lefthander's age, his best years are ahead of him. "He doesn't have as much mileage on his arm as the typical 31-year-old," Dipoto says of the former closer, who joined the Texas rotation in 2010. "And he's done nothing but improve every year he's been in the big leagues."

It was over a three-hour dinner in November at the swank Soho House in West Hollywood that Dipoto and the Angels made their pitch to Wilson. At one point Dipoto said, "We want to give you the opportunity to beat your old team for the next five years." Wilson goes from being the No. 1 starter in Texas to a rotation where he'll pitch behind righthanders Jered Weaver (second in the AL, with a 2.41 ERA last year) and Dan Haren (11th, at 3.17). Righthander Ervin Santana, who was 14th with a 3.38 ERA, rounds out the top four. Asked in camp if Wilson will be giving Angels hitters scouting reports on the Texas hurlers, third baseman Mark Trumbo smiled and said, "He already has."

To dethrone the Rangers, the Angels will need Pujols to be Pujols. But Dipoto knows the division will also come down to the rotations. "Ours is proven," says the G.M. "We have four guys in the prime of their careers, four guys who've made All-Star teams in the recent past, four guys who are durable 200-inning pitchers. You don't want to pin too much on them in the way of expectations, but these guys create expectations."

No pitcher in the division faces higher expectations than the Rangers' 25-year-old Japanese sensation. On a cloudless spring training morning in Surprise, Ariz., Darvish arrived for his first bullpen session. It attracted more than 150 media members-more than were at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington for Game 1 of the ALDS last October. The session lasted less than two minutes.

The Rangers, who came within one out of winning the franchise's first World Series title last year, won two straight AL pennants without a bona fide ace. Now they believe they have one in Darvish. The 6'5" righthander has, depending on whom you ask, between six and eight pitches, though catcher Luis Martinez swears that during Darvish's first session, "he threw 10 different pitches."

Texas won't concede that the Angels have the better rotation, nor should they-not with Darvish anchoring a staff that includes potential stars in lefthander Derek Holland and righthander Neftali Feliz. The day after a breakout performance in the World Series-he threw 81/3 shutout innings against the Cardinals in Game 4-Holland mugged for Fox cameras during Game 5, doing play-by-play in his Harry Caray impression. The fun didn't stop during the off-season: Holland played Wiffle ball with Dirk Nowitzki before a Mavs game, appeared on a Dallas newscast to deliver the weather (video of him disappearing into the green screen went viral), and grew his hair out into a Joe Dirt--like mullet. The 25-year-old, though, is dead serious about taking the next step as a pitcher. "My attitude is the same as everyone else's," he says, "to do everything we can to finish off what we started last year."

The biggest difference for Texas could be Feliz, who is attempting to follow in Wilson's footsteps and make the transition from the bullpen, where he's been a 30-save closer in each of the last two years. The Rangers' front office had been split over where the righthander belongs, but this spring they committed to making the 23-year-old a starter. "We know how good his stuff is," says Joe Nathan, 37, who signed as a free agent and will be the new closer. "He could step in there and be an elite guy right away."

The Rangers are loaded for the long haul, with one of the deepest minor league systems in the game. The offense, virtually identical to the one that ranked in the top three in the league in every major offensive category in 2011, will again be scary. This may, however, be one of the last runs for the lineup's current core. All indications are that outfielder Josh Hamilton will test the free-agent market after this season ("I don't feel like I owe the Rangers," the 2010 MVP said early in spring training), and DH Michael Young, third baseman Adrian Beltre and rightfielder Nelson Cruz are all 30 or older. "I wouldn't say there's a sense of urgency," says Young, 35, who is starting his 13th season and is the longest-tenured Ranger. "But we are aware that these opportunities to win a championship don't come along every year."

On the morning of Dec. 9, Jack Zduriencik had just stepped out of the Rule 5 draft at the winter meetings in Dallas when someone whispered to him, The Angels got Pujols."Before I can even process that," says the Seattle G.M., "I take two steps and boom, there are 25 cameras on me asking how I feel about Albert Pujols coming to our division. How do I feel? Clearly, I would prefer it if Mr. Pujols were not in our division."

The Mariners and the A's are trying to keep up with the Rangers and the Angels while facing challenges that extend beyond their smaller payrolls. Because the ballparks in Seattle and Oakland have well-deserved reputations for being graveyards for hitters, both organizations struggle to attract impact bats. That's a big reason the Mariners sent 23-year-old righthander Michael Pineda to New York in a deal for 22-year-old catcher-DH Jesus Montero, one of the most highly regarded offensive prospects in the game. "I never thought we'd trade Pineda, but getting that middle-of-the-order bat is a challenge," says Zduriencik, whose team ranked last in the league in runs, average and OPS in 2011. "We felt like it was a deal we had to do."

The A's were also forced to be creative, signing Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes to a four-year, \$36 million deal. It was viewed by many as an overpay for a hitter with no major league experience. "We just are having a hard time getting people to play in Oakland, thus the venture into the international market rather than [an attempt] to attract free agents that flat-out don't want to come here," says Forst.

The A's believe the 26-year-old Cespedes can immediately be a middle-of-the-order force for an offense that hasn't had a 30-home-run hitter since 2008. "The power is unquestioned," Forst says of Cespedes. "You can probably count the number of players on one hand with the athleticism and physique of this guy."

Seattle's emergence should come sooner than Oakland's-the Mariners are loaded with young pitching talent that will begin to arrive late this season. The A's are looking ahead to 2015, when they hope to be in a new stadium. (They are negotiating with the commissioner's office for permission to build in San Jose.) "We play in an outdated facility that does not allow us to maximize our revenue," says Forst. "We certainly feel that if Major League Baseball allows us to be in a new facility in the next few years, that very much levels the playing field."

For now, though, the AL West is a two-team race. "No one's overlooking the A's and the Mariners," says Hunter. "But we're chasing the Rangers because they're kings right now. And it's going to be fun trying to take the crown away."

AL WEST: 3 Oakland Athletics

ENEMY LINES

A rival scout sizes up the A's

The reality is that until they get their stadium situation settled, the A's are going to be in limbo. Everything they're doing is aimed at the future, to when the stadium is built, around 2015.... I think it was wise for them to trade guys like Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Andrew Bailey. Pitching was the strength of the organization, but if you looked at both the minor and major league levels, there were not a lot of impact players. Coco Crisp is their number 3 hitter. Enough said.... The system had been real thin, but they retooled and it's suddenly a lot better. Jarrod Parker is the ace of the staff right now. This guy is six feet tall, but he gets an incredible downhill plane on his fastball, which makes it very difficult for hitters. His changeup almost seems like it stops at times, and his slider is another out pitch.... Signing Yoenis Cespedes from Cuba was a great gamble. It's refreshing to see them spend money and get someone who isn't a marginal player. He's looked amazingly mature and calm in his approach at the plate, and he plays all three outfield positions. I'm not yet saying he's going to be an All-Star, but I don't see why he won't be the best hitter in that lineup right away.... I love Jemile Weeks. No one expected him to do what he did last year, but the fans at the Coliseum haven't really seen this kind of athlete in a while-hitting triples, making things happen.... They're going to score more runs. But they're going to have to score a lot more because the pitching is not as good, and the defense was as poor as it has been in years and won't be much better. This is a 75-win team at best.

THE LINEUP

With 2011 Statistics

MANAGER BOB MELVIN

2nd season with Athletics

B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	HR	RBI	SB
2B	JEMILE WEEKS					
S-R	.303	.340	.421	2	36	22
SS	CLIFF PENNINGTON					
S-R	.264	.319	.369	8	58	14
LF	COCO CRISP					
S-R	.264	.314	.379	8	54	49
CF	YOENIS CESPEDES (R)*					
R-R	.323	.424	.667	33	99	11
DH	SETH SMITH					
L-L	.284	.347	.483	15	59	10
C	KURT SUZUKI					
R-R	.237	.301	.385	14	44	2
1B	BRANDON ALLEN					
L-R	.200	.277	.377	6	18	3
RF	JOSH REDDICK					
L-R	.280	.327	.457	7	28	1
3B	JOSH DONALDSON** (R)					
R-R	.261	.344	.439	17	70	13
BENCH						
OF	MANNY RAMIREZ***					
R-R	.298	.409	.460	9	42	1
IF	DARIC BARTON					
L-R	.212	.325	.267	0	21	2

ROTATION	W	L	ERA	WHIP
RH BRANDON MCCARTHY	9	9	3.32	1.13
RH BARTOLO COLON	8	10	4.00	1.29
LH TOMMY MILONE** (R)	12	6	3.22	1.03
RH JARROD PARKER** (R)	11	8	3.79	1.28
LH DALLAS BRADEN	1	1	3.00	1.28
BULLPEN	W	SV	ERA	WHIP
RH GRANT BALFOUR	5	2	2.47	1.03
LH BRIAN FUENTES	2	12	3.70	1.23

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE *CUBAN NATIONAL SERIES STATS **TRIPLE A STATS ***2010 STATS

PROJECTED PAYROLL

\$53.1 million

THE NUMBER

11.99

Plate appearances per walk by A's hitters in 2011, sixth best in the AL but the franchise's worst since 1985. The lack of freebies wasn't due to a lack of patience. Oakland ranked first in the majors in percentage of pitches taken (57.5%) and lowest in percentage of pitches swung at and missed (18.3%).

MODEST PROPOSAL

An already difficult season for the A's got harder when third baseman Scott Sizemore blew out his knee on Feb. 25, putting him out for the season. Oakland is looking at utility infielders Eric Sogard and Adam Rosales, as well as converted catcher Josh Donaldson, to fill the hole. But perhaps a better answer lies outside the organization. The signing of Cuban star Yoenis Cespedes created a logjam in centerfield because the A's had previously re-signed **Coco Crisp** to play there. Meanwhile in Miami, the Marlins have blocked former No. 1 pick Matt Dominguez by moving Hanley Ramirez to third base. The Marlins themselves are using a utility player, Emilio Bonifacio in center, so why not see if they would take Crisp for Dominguez? Dominguez is a glove-first cornerman who fits the Athletics' current emphasis on defense, and he's cost-controlled through 2017. There's a question as to whether he will hit; however, the A's have nothing to lose by giving him a season to find out. The team would also get out from under a now redundant deal with a veteran centerfielder and allow them to commit to Cespedes.

-By Joe Sheehan

ANGELS

BEST CASE

Arte Moreno's spending is rewarded with a title-and Albert Pujols's seamless transition to the AL, the dominance of the rotation and the emergence of outfielder Mike Trout signal more to come.

WORST CASE

The Angels are all pitch and no hit as age catches up to Vernon Wells, Torii Hunter and the rest of the veterans in the lineup. The supporting cast around Pujols falls flat, and Texas's rule over the West continues.

RANGERS

BEST CASE

Yu Darvish lives up to expectations, Derek Holland and Neftali Feliz bloom into stars in the rotation, and the juggernaut offense keeps rolling. The Rangers return to the World Series-and this time seal the deal.

WORST CASE

Darvish wilts in the Texas heat. The Feliz-less bullpen struggles. Bad luck hits injury-prone stars Josh Hamilton, Ian Kinsler and Nelson Cruz. The Angels (and the AL East powers) squeeze the two-time league champs out of a playoff spot.

ATHLETICS BEST CASE

Oakland hits the jackpot with its two off-season lottery tickets: Yoenis Cespedes and Manny Ramirez each hit at least 25 homers. The A's finish over .500 and build momentum for a stadium project in San Jose.

WORST CASE

Cespedes struggles to hit major league pitching, and none of the prospects from their winter trades are ready to make an impact. With no move to San Jose imminent, the franchise continues to hang in limbo.

MARINERS BEST CASE

The young pitching arrives sooner than expected. The young core of Dustin Ackley, Jesus Montero and Justin Smoak makes big strides, and the Mariners play meaningful games in the second half for the first time since 2009.

WORST CASE

Montero struggles at spacious Safeco Field, and an anemic offense is just as unwatchable as it was last year. Felix Hernandez voices his frustration by asking for a trade, and the Mariners spiral toward a third straight 90-loss season.

HOW THEY'LL FINISH

TEAM	W-L	GB
1 ANGELS	97-65	-
2 RANGERS	94-68	3
3 ATHLETICS	68-94	29
4 MARINERS	64-98	33

How A's can move — and appease Giants

Ken Rosenthal, foxsports.net 3/23/2012

The **Los Angeles Dodgers** soon will be sold. The **San Diego Padres'** ownership struggle is starting to resolve. The owners of the **New York Mets** are in a far stronger position than they were a week ago.

That leaves two problem children for baseball — the **Tampa Bay Rays**, who lack an obvious solution, and the **Oakland Athletics**, whose solution is plain for all to see.

Commissioner Bud Selig needs to get the A's to San Jose. He needed to do it yesterday, last month, any time during the period since he appointed a special committee to study the team's situation three years ago.

Alas, it's not that simple.

Selig can't deliver a lightning bolt from the sky the way NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell did to New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton, as if it took any courage or particular wisdom for Goodell to penalize borderline criminal behavior.

No, Selig was left with this mess because the two teams involved, the A's and the **San Francisco Giants**, can't figure out a resolution. And while the commissioner is working actively behind the scenes, according to major league sources, this issue is more complex than most.

Still, the Athletics are tired of waiting. San Jose is tired of waiting. And the rest of baseball should be tired of waiting, too — the A's will be a revenue-sharing recipient as long as they remain in Oakland, but after a few years in a new ballpark in San Jose they actually might become a payer.

I spoke last week with a San Jose City councilman, Sam Liccardo, who said that he is "very willing" to explore the possibility of an antitrust lawsuit against baseball, "if our hand is forced by lawyers, lobbyists and baseball executives in San Francisco who persist in arguing that competition is healthy for every other industry and competition in America except their own."

I also spoke with an expert in the field, Tulane law professor Gabe Feldman, who said that such a suit would be a "real longshot." Even if the Supreme Court allowed San Jose to challenge baseball's antitrust exemption, Feldman said, the city would face a second hurdle — other legal precedent that allows sports leagues to place reasonable restrictions on relocation.

One could argue that the restrictions on the Athletics are *not* reasonable, particularly when the A's want to move further away from the Giants than they are now. Still, the process of trying to prove such a point would take years, with no guarantee of success.

A lawsuit is not the answer. The Athletics staying in the depressed Oakland market is not the answer. The Giants losing their territorial rights by a three-quarters vote of the owners is not the answer.

The answer is a deal — a deal not unlike the one that baseball cut for the **Baltimore Orioles** when the **Washington Nationals** moved into their territory in 2005.

That agreement established a regional sports network that serves the two teams under terms extremely favorable to the Orioles. The Giants and Athletics, both of whom are under contract to Comcast Sports Net, do not require such a component.

But the other part of the Orioles/Nationals deal — baseball's guarantee to the Orioles that they would receive at least \$130 million in annual revenues and \$360 million if the team is sold — absolutely applies to the Bay Area dispute.

The Giants' concerns about losing their share of the lucrative South Bay market are legitimate — and never mind that the Giants only acquired the territorial rights to the area when former A's owner Walter Haas granted them to former Giants owner Bob Lurie at a time when the Giants were considering moving to St. Petersburg, Fla.

The Giants worked hard to develop the South Bay market, just as the Orioles once worked hard to develop the D.C. market. And, when John Fisher and Lewis Wolff bought the Athletics in 2005, Selig explicitly told them they should not plan on relocating the franchise, sources say.

Well, things change.

Only a few hardy souls — a latter-day version of the flat-earth society — believe the Athletics still can make it in Oakland. San Jose is the largest city in the Bay Area. A new ballpark in the city not only would transform the Athletics' business model, but baseball's as well.

It's not just that the A's would cease to be the sport's Little Orphan Annie, collecting millions annually in revenue sharing. Even if I didn't work for FOX, I could figure out that baseball would prefer San Jose to Oakland when negotiating its national television contracts.

Yet, the balance here is so delicate.

Baseball needs to protect the Giants' interests, too.

The Giants privately financed their ballpark. They say they need to draw 3.25 million each season to break even. And while it might be difficult for them to show just how much they would be harmed financially by the Athletics' move to San Jose, there would be damage, without question.

That's why the Giants need financial guarantees from baseball. Ideally, the sport does not want to be in position to prop up multiple franchises. But what are the odds that it would even need to grant such assistance?

Forbes, in its most recent report on franchise valuations, valued the Orioles at \$460 million, or \$100 million over baseball's guaranteed sale price. The publication also pegged the team's annual revenue at \$179 million, or \$49 million over baseball's guarantee.

Baseball says every year that the Forbes numbers are inaccurate, but it's highly doubtful that the publications' estimates for the Orioles are so far off that the team is in actual danger of needing assistance from baseball.

The Giants' guarantees surely would be higher — baseball business is booming, if you haven't noticed — and perhaps the team would require other elements to the deal.

Whatever, Selig needs to figure it all out. How to get the Athletics to San Jose. How to make the Giants whole.

The process should not have taken three years. But better now than later. Better late than never.