

A's News Clips, Tuesday, March 27, 2012

Oakland A's revamped rotation a key to the team's season

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Any talk of how the A's might fare in 2012 begins with the uncertainty surrounding their pitching staff.

That's unusual for a team whose question marks generally revolve around a toothless offense.

But consider the state of the A's staff as they open the season Wednesday at 3:04 a.m. PDT against Seattle at the Tokyo Dome.

Their No. 1 starter, Brandon McCarthy, has never cracked double digits in victories. Bartolo Colon, their No. 2 man, turns 39 in May and struggled over the second half of 2011. And new closer Grant Balfour is an eight-year veteran who never has held a ninth-inning gig until now.

If the staff doesn't jell quickly, it figures to be a long season for A's fans.

"I think the talent's here," McCarthy said. "It's just a matter of what combination is going to work. Anytime you have a young team like this, everybody has to flesh out roles and find out who can do what."

Just a year ago, people were discussing the A's as boasting one of the game's top pitching staffs. Then came the winter purge.

Convinced the team couldn't compete in the American League West this season, A's officials traded Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, their two top starters. Three days after Christmas, closer Andrew Bailey was shipped to Boston.

In their place came a host of prospects, including starters Tom Milone, Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock. Milone already appears set in the rotation, and Parker and Peacock might assume spots soon.

Their development is key if the A's are to become factors in the A.L. West.

"Obviously we're not as experienced," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "But we feel the talent level is all there, and they're gonna continue to get better over the course of their careers. They're probably just not as far along as a Bailey, Gonzalez or Cahill."

As things stand, the rotation will go McCarthy, Colon, Milone, Tyson Ross and Graham Godfrey, those last three in no particular order.

Parker and Peacock were optioned to the minors before the A's left for Japan, but Melvin considers them still in the running for the fifth starter spot, which isn't needed until April 17.

Consider: Colon has 161 career victories under his belt. The combined win total of the other four likely rotation members listed above: 35.

McCarthy, who went 9-9 last season with a 3.32 ERA and five complete games in 25 starts, is a crucial piece.

His ascension into the No. 1 role shouldn't mask the fact that his recurring shoulder problems make him an injury risk.

He spent six weeks on the disabled list last season with a stress reaction in his shoulder blade. Still, his 25 starts were a career high.

"I think it's good for him," catcher Kurt Suzuki said of McCarthy assuming the No. 1 role. "He's got the leadership qualities. He's more of an example-type guy. You watch his routine. It's so strict. He sets a good example to pitchers."

McCarthy will match up in the opener against Mariners ace Felix Hernandez, a pitcher the A's could face three times in the first three weeks based on how the schedule falls.

King Felix is 12-4 with a 2.54 ERA lifetime against Oakland.

"That's not the way you want to draw it up," Melvin said. "(But) we feel good about our guy that's pitching against him as well."

Oakland A's finish exhibition season with 12-6 loss to Hanshin Tigers in Tokyo

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

Different schools of thought exist about exhibition records.

Are they an indicator of what's to come in the regular season or just a collection of results from meaningless games?

The A's will choose to believe the former after a 15-6-2 run through the Cactus League and two exhibitions in Japan.

It was a solid body of work, but one that ended on a sour note with a 12-6 loss to the Hanshin Tigers late Sunday night.

The A's open their regular season with a two-game series starting Wednesday against the Seattle Mariners at the Tokyo Dome. Against Hanshin, they certainly played like a team looking ahead to bigger things on the horizon.

They committed three errors and got a poor start from Tyson Ross, who got knocked around for 10 hits and eight runs (six earned) in four innings.

"We just didn't play a good game, and they took it to us," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

Ross gave up a two-run homer to Takahiro Arai in the first inning and then got hit hard in a four-run third, though a throwing error by shortstop Cliff Pennington on what should have been a routine force play didn't help matters.

"I was up in the zone with some of my pitches, which makes it easier to hit," Ross said. "I didn't quite execute pitches with two strikes."

Ross came in having allowed just one earned run in four previous spring starts, a performance that's landed him in the starting rotation as things stand. The A's haven't set their final rotation yet simply because they don't have to.

After these two games against Seattle, they don't resume regular season play until April 6, so top starters Brandon McCarthy and Bartolo Colon are set up to pitch their first four games.

First baseman Kila Ka'aihue committed two fielding errors against Hanshin. Will that influence the A's decision-making for the Seattle series?

Melvin said before Sunday night's game that he was considering giving Ka'aihue a start in the second game against the Mariners on Thursday, with Brandon Allen starting the opener.

Melvin has not announced who will start at third base yet — Josh Donaldson or Eric Sogard.

Kurt Suzuki's three-run homer in the fourth was the A's highlight against Hanshin. He also homered in the previous game against the Yomiuri Giants.

Power hasn't been an issue at the plate with Suzuki. Though his average has progressively dropped from .274 in 2009 to .237 in 2011, he's hit 15, 13 and 14 homers in the past three seasons.

The A's deactivated Ross, starter Tom Milone, infielder Wes Timmons and relievers Evan Scribner and Travis Schlichting to get their roster down from 30 to the required 25 for the Seattle series.

None was a surprise. Timmons, Scribner and Schlichting weren't on the 40-man roster and Milone, who started against Yomiuri, and Ross wouldn't be available anyway.

Timmons has played 10 seasons in the minors and never cracked a big league roster. Talking earlier this week, he knew he probably wouldn't be activated against the Mariners and had come to grips with it.

"I've been here long enough (this spring) that whether I dress or not, I can still see myself as part of this team," he said..

Inside the Oakland A's: Visit to tsunami-wrecked city of Ishinomaki makes an impact on A's

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 3/27/2012 3:13am

I just got back from the town of Ishinomaki, where the A's and Mariners gave a youth baseball clinic in one of the areas hit hardest by Japan's earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. It was a pretty sobering and inspiring experience all at the same time. We took a 90-minute bullet train ride from Tokyo to Sendai, then embarked on an hour-long bus ride to Ishinomaki. Along the way, we saw the lasting effects of the destruction in the city – entire blocks that once contained rows of houses that are now leveled flat; an auto junkyard where stacks of totaled cars are piled on top of each other; the sight where a schoolhouse once stood before being completely destroyed.

And then to see the joy on these kids' faces when the A's and Mariners players showed up. They formed a long greeting line outside Ishinomaki Stadium and cheered when the players got off the bus and made their way through. Once inside the stadium, the kids hammed it up for reporters and photographers. The day left a lasting impact on A's pitchers Tyson Ross, Tom Milone and Evan Scribner, not to mention numerous team officials who made the trip.

"We can't be in their shoes," Milone said. "We can't feel what they felt a year ago when the tsunami hit. But you can kind of get a feeling for the kind of people that they are. They come out here and they're still smiling even though something devastating like that happens."

I'll have a full online story up a bit later. I posted some photos on twitter (@joestiglich) and I'm hoping to get those shots on our websites before long, as well as some video footage.

A's overshadowed by Ichiro in Tokyo

Susan Slusser, Chronicle staff writer

When the A's opened the season in Japan in 2008, they were massively overshadowed by their opponent, the defending champion Red Sox, who featured Japanese pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka.

The A's didn't even get the home clubhouse, despite the fact that they were considered the home team - the games in Tokyo came off Oakland's home schedule and the A's batted in the bottom of each inning. But the nicer home digs went to Boston.

This time around, the A's will be an afterthought again - the Mariners have Japanese star Ichiro Suzuki, and they brought two other Japanese players with them, right-hander Hisashi Iwakuma and shortstop Munenori Kawasaki.

"We're wearing white uniforms," A's manager Bob Melvin said, "but based on the fact the Mariners have more Japanese players than we do, sentiment might go the other way."

Oakland has no Japanese players this year, but when the trip was first announced, their then-DH Hideki Matsui still was considered a possible candidate to be re-signed. That would have made this series and even match in terms of popularity: Matsui is beloved in Japan, where he starred for Tokyo's team, the Yomiuri Giants.

"That could have equaled it out," Melvin said. "Particularly in this building."

"It would be totally different," said Masa Niwa, a baseball reporter for Sankei Sports. "It would be even, I guess."

At least the A's get the home clubhouse this time. They had to take the visitor's side on Sunday when they played an exhibition against Yomiuri, but after that, they moved to the more comfortable first-base side.

Brandon McCarthy will start Opening Night tonight, opposing Seattle's Felix Hernandez. The A's now have faced Hernandez, the Mariners' ace, four times on Opening Nights, and because of this series and then the home opener April 6 against Seattle, Oakland will see Hernandez twice in three games. They're also likely to face Hernandez in Seattle the second week of the regular season.

"That's not the way we'd particularly want to draw it up," Melvin said. "But we feel good about our guy pitching against him as well."

King Felix is 12-4 lifetime against the A's, with a 2.54 ERA, and the A's have hit just .224 against him in his 21 starts against them. No other pitcher ever has started four Opening Day games against Oakland.

"I know there are games where it's tough to get him," McCarthy said. "But if Opening Day we set a tone, maybe jump on top of a guy like that, it becomes part of our identity, get some confidence, believe in the strength of our offense."

McCarthy tore a fingernail during his final start in Arizona, and the fake nail he'd had put on fell off Sunday, so he got another one Sunday evening and he said he's ready to go Wednesday. He will be working on a week of rest.

"It feels like a month since I've thrown," he said.

McCarthy is making his first-ever start in an opener, a reward for his solid 2011 season - and it's also because he's the only returning member of last year's regular rotation currently on Oakland's active roster.

"He's basically the Lone Rangers as far as who's still here," Melvin said.

Melvin said Monday that he still has not settled on a third baseman for tonight. It's between Josh Donaldson and Eric Sogard, and Melvin might select Sogard based on the fact he's a left-handed hitter and Hernandez's splits are slightly worse vs. lefties.

Melvin said after Monday's game that, as expected, non-roster players Wes Timmons, Travis Schlichting and Evan Scribner will not be on the 28-man roster for the two games against Seattle. Starters Tommy Milone and Tyson Ross and first baseman Daric Barton (who remained in Arizona) will be on the 28-man roster but will not be active for the two games.

Transformed McCarthy ready for opener

Right-hander resurrects career, stands tall as Oakland starter

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Everything about Brandon McCarthy reflects the characteristics of a team that A's manager Bob Melvin hopes to field this season.

McCarthy is set in his routine, intent on improving, and no matter the success that results from either, humble in his ways. Every single day.

"That's the way we have to be as a team," Melvin said.

It will start with McCarthy, the 28-year-old right-hander who will take a backseat in the limelight that is sure to follow Mariners ace Felix Hernandez on Opening Day at Tokyo Dome on Wednesday. Hernandez, 25, is set to make his fifth Opening Day start. It will be McCarthy's first.

Add in the fact that it's coming on an international stage, in front of fresh-faced, rowdy fans whose excitement for Ichiro Suzuki likely won't be contained, and it'd be easy to think McCarthy might be a little giddy, a little amped, perhaps a little nervous.

Not so much.

"To stop and think about it is cool, but I really don't do that," McCarthy said. "My parents are proud, and there are people that are happy for me, and it's a cool thing personally, but really I'll be more excited if I pitch up to that level and do everything I'm capable of doing, not just on that day but the entire season."

McCarthy will take the mound to high expectations. It's his own doing, having catapulted from an injury-prone pitcher who barely made the rotation in camp last year to one who is the unspoken leader of a young staff following a commendable season that resulted in a 3.32 ERA and a 123-to-25 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 25 starts.

The transformation is no accident, and it's been well-documented, most recently in ESPN The Magazine, on which McCarthy and his wife, Amanda, graced the cover earlier this month. The story that's told is one that never gets old, one that Melvin deems "unbelievable." Catcher Kurt Suzuki calls it "incredible."

In the short version, McCarthy, once a highly regarded prospect with the White Sox, embraced analytics to turn his career around. He extended his repertoire, previously consisting of only a fastball and curveball, to include a sinker and a cutter. Suddenly, he started throwing more strikes, getting more ground balls.

In December 2010, he set out to showcase himself to the A's, by way of a one-year deal worth \$1 million, after losing parts of each of the previous four seasons to injuries, including three stress fractures in his right shoulder. What he did between then and now is represented by his latest salary: \$4.275 million, a 328-percent raise.

"It's as big of a transformation by any pitcher I've ever been around," Melvin said. "When I first came in here, I knew not nearly as much as I know about him now. I knew his history as a pitcher, but I didn't know about the changes he sought out and made for himself at all. And, really, I haven't delved too into it with him personally, because he's a guy I let do his own thing. He's earned that."

McCarthy strives on mental preparation. So as much as he's appreciative of the journey he's enjoyed with teammates in Tokyo, he's not about to let the emotions that come with it override the ones that have guided his work to this point.

"Everything has been the same, whether if this was in the States or a game in the middle of July," he said. "It's just getting prepared to pitch, making sure everything's there. It's been a little different with the shorter spring, trying to get pitch counts up faster, so it's been a bit of an adjustment there, but mentally, it's one pitch at a time. Different location, different fans, but when you start to consider all that, it becomes too much. I like to keep it as simple as I can."

And, quick, too. Working at a fast rate, McCarthy said, was sort of the finishing touch to everything he had changed. Away from the field, though, he only does so when he's procrastinating -- a frequent occurrence.

"I don't like to do what I'm told, so I wait until it's my time and then I try to get it done as quick as possible so I can go take a nap or do anything else," he said, smiling. "So maybe that's my philosophy with the game. If we can get out of there in two hours, I can go to sleep or go have dinner or something."

Allen named first baseman for opener in Tokyo

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Bob Melvin wouldn't reveal his entire Opening Day roster Tuesday, but the A's manager did disclose his starting first baseman: Brandon Allen.

The decision comes just one day after Kila Ka'aihue, who was also in the mix for the starting job, made two errors in the A's 12-6 exhibition loss to the Hanshin Tigers.

Defense, Melvin said, proved a big factor in his decision, especially with groundball pitcher Brandon McCarthy on the mound Wednesday against the Mariners.

It's still possible that Ka'aihue -- who, like Allen, is out of options -- will start in the second game against Seattle on Thursday, though his most recent performance didn't exactly help his cause.

Either way, Allen appears the favorite to start the April 6 opener back in the States, yet Daric Barton is a name Melvin isn't quite ruling out.

The A's skipper said he's been getting good reports on the first baseman, who stayed behind in Arizona to get more innings after missing most of the Cactus League campaign while rehabbing his surgically-repaired shoulder.

The A's could conceivably restart the regular season in Oakland with three first basemen on their roster, since they won't need to include a fifth starter in the 25-man count until April 16 or 17.

Worth noting

- Melvin will not announce his Opening Night third baseman until Wednesday. It's possible that the left-handed hitting Eric Sogard will get the start against Felix Hernandez in the opener, and Josh Donaldson the next day vs. southpaw Jason Vargas.
- Center fielder Yoenis Cespedes has fully recovered from a cramp in his quadriceps and is slated to make his Major League debut in Wednesday's regular-season opener.

A's see 2012 as beginning of steady rise

From Cespedes to Milone, fresh faces eager to make noise

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

TOKYO -- Over the offseason, the A's subtracted a trio of All-Star pitchers and a veteran outfield duo from their roster and added an array of young, unproven talent in bulk. Standard calculations forecast an unfavorable outcome in the immediate future, but the A's would prefer to write their own ending.

That means they're opting for a winning atmosphere now, not later.

"There are some teams in our division that can probably say, 'All right, we expect to be here,'" manager Bob Melvin said. "I don't expect us to be anywhere but the next day, the next game and expect to win that game. That's what I talk to these guys about."

The A's journey begins earlier than most, as the club is set to open the regular season on Wednesday with the start of a two-game series against the Mariners at the Tokyo Dome, marking its second trip to Japan in five years.

Right-hander Brandon McCarthy, who just one year ago was simply trying to find room in a crowded rotation, will take the mound for the A's as the unspoken leader of a fresh-faced staff that will also include veteran Bartolo Colon and youngsters Tommy Milone, Tyson Ross and Graham Godfrey -- the latter three of whom have made a combined 17 Major League starts.

Gone are Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, who, like closer Andrew Bailey, were traded during the offseason. But the A's still believe that pitching is one of their biggest strengths, and they're ready to prove it.

"Obviously, we're not as experienced, but we feel like the upside amongst all the guys that will be incorporated -- the talent level is all there, and they're only going to get better over the course of the season," Melvin said. "They're just not as far along as a guy like a Bailey or Gonzalez and Cahill."

"I think the talent's here," McCarthy said. "It's a good group of guys that works hard and is very serious about what they're doing."

They've got help behind them, including new center fielder Yoenis Cespedes -- brought in via a four-year, \$36 million deal -- and right fielder Josh Reddick, acquired from the Red Sox in the Bailey trade. Cespedes is something of a gamble, given that he has no Major League experience, but that's the way the small-market A's have to go about their business, and they're hoping he turns out to be the power hitter they've envisioned plugging into a lackluster lineup for several years.

Not much power exists outside of Cespedes, though -- at least not at first glance.

"He obviously brings a little more of the power element, plus some more speed," Coco Crisp said of Cespedes. "But I think some other guys are going to shock some people this year. I think when people say we don't have power, my response is, 'It's there; it's just unproven at this level.'"

Still, it remains a challenge for a club that will look to collect wins utilizing other strengths, including speed and defense. The speedy switch-hitting trio of Jemile Weeks, Cliff Pennington and Crisp are penciled into the Nos. 1-3 spots in the order -- a group that should find its way on base in front of the likes of Cespedes and the designated-hitter platoon of Seth Smith and Jonny Gomes.

Even Manny Ramirez could potentially join in that mix come May 30, following his 50-game suspension.

"People don't think our offense is very good, but I do," Melvin said. "I think our offense will be better than people think, because of the personnel that's here. We have some unknowns. Certainly, our center fielder is an unknown. If we get down that road and add Manny [Ramirez] after those 50 games [of suspension], that's another potential upgrade to the offense. So I think we're an intriguing team, more so than we were three weeks before Spring Training started."

"I think with the additions," Crisp said, "our attack can be a little bit more well balanced, and that will give us the opportunity to win in different fashions, as opposed to just relying on our pitching, which last year was our backbone. I'm pretty confident in our team and in our ability as a ballclub."

The A's are in search of a winning record for the first time since 2006, though a popular notion in the baseball community is that if Oakland can at least match the 74-88 mark it posted last year, the season will be considered a success.

Perhaps that's true, given the challenges presented by the A's American League West rivals -- particularly the potent Rangers and Angels. But despite their underdog status following a busy and strange offseason, the A's aren't yet raising the white flag.

"I think our energy is our biggest strength," Weeks said. "Our hunger to win is there."

"I'm excited about where this team is going," Melvin said. "This could be the start of something that we feel is going to get better each and every year."

Scrappy rivals set to draw curtain overseas

By Doug Miller / MLB.com | 3/26/2012 5:00 PM ET

TOKYO -- The wait is just about over for the Seattle Mariners, the Oakland A's ... and Major League Baseball and its fans all over the world.

The regular season will officially begin on Wednesday around 7 p.m. in Tokyo, which will be 6 a.m. ET and 3 a.m. PT, when Oakland right-hander Brandon McCarthy throws the first pitch of the regular season, most likely to Mariners leadoff man Chone Figgins, and Opening Series Japan 2012 gets under way in earnest.

Aside from the fanfare of a rabid Japanese crowd, a busy week in the Land of the Rising Sun replete with military visits, a somber Tuesday trip through the tsunami zone north of Tokyo for a baseball clinic and various autograph sessions around this sprawling metropolis, Wednesday's opening game will most of all match up two American League West rivals who are young, hungry and looking to surprise some people this year.

The two-time defending AL champion Texas Rangers and upstart Angels, with new first baseman Albert Pujols on board, are getting most of the love from preseason prognosticators forecasting the AL West, but the Mariners and A's have other ideas after stealthy winters and hard-fought springs.

For Seattle, Wednesday will represent the culmination of an extended spring that still isn't over; the club will return to Arizona after this two-game set to finish off its Cactus League slate. But the team is hoping it means a lot more -- specifically, the continuation in an ongoing progression of building a winner and a perennial contender.

"We played pretty good baseball all spring," Mariners manager Eric Wedge said. "I trust these guys, I trust in what we're doing, I trust in their ability, and when we turn that switch on Opening Day, I'm counting on us being ready to go."

Some things have changed since the Mariners' fourth-place finish in the AL West last year.

Ichiro Suzuki is batting third instead of leadoff. Catcher Jesus Montero, who was brought to Seattle in a trade with the Yankees for pitcher Michael Pineda, is hitting in the middle of the order. The bench has been strengthened.

Young right-hander Hector Noesi, who also came from New York in the Pineda deal, and veteran starter Kevin Millwood will round out the starting rotation behind Seattle's ace, former AL Cy Young Award winner Felix Hernandez, who gets the ball on Wednesday for his fifth Opening Day start.

"Everyone's excited," Mariners outfielder Michael Saunders said. "We're young, we're exciting, and when we get nine guys on the field taking care of business, we're going to be a really good ballclub. We're trying to build a winner in Seattle, and we want to do it as a nucleus of players that will stay together over the long haul."

The A's are heading into this season with a very similar attitude.

Oakland, after all, went 74-88 last year with a young team, then underwent an offseason roster remodel the likes of which fans have seen before from general manager Billy Beane. Oakland said goodbye to young starters Trevor Cahill and Gio Gonzalez, among others, bringing in prospects galore and a Cuban defector, Yoenis Cespedes, whom the team hopes will be a major presence in center field and in the heart of the batting order for years to come.

Attempting to win now while preparing to win in the near future, Oakland has clearly defined priorities in 2012 -- getting second-year leadoff man and second baseman Jemile Weeks a full season of at-bats and seeing what it has in Brandon Allen, Josh Donaldson, Josh Reddick and a revamped pitching staff that includes newcomers Graham Godfrey, Tommy Milone and Tyson Ross.

"I think the talent's here," McCarthy said. "It's a good group of guys that works hard and is very serious about what they're doing."

Serious is a good word, because serious is what will happen starting on Wednesday. The country might be foreign, the playing surface might not be natural grass and jet lag might still be a factor, but the players know that the bell is ringing. The 2012 season is beginning right here in Tokyo.

And when A's manager Bob Melvin talks about his team, he's echoing sentiments that Wedge has been drilling into his charges since the day his pitchers and catchers reported to Spring Training in early February.

"I'm excited about where this team is going," Melvin said. "This could be the start of something that we feel is going to get better each and every year."

Mariners: Hernandez an obvious choice

- Hernandez will make his fifth career Opening Day start for Seattle, having also done so in 2007 against the A's, '09 against the Twins, '10 at Oakland and last season at Oakland. Hernandez will join Randy Johnson (six: 1992-96, '98) as the only pitcher in franchise history to make five or more Opening Day starts. Hernandez's three career Opening Day wins are the most in Mariners history.
- This year marks the ninth time in club history that the Mariners will open the season against the A's, and the sixth time they'll open a season in road grays against Oakland (the previous five came at Oakland Coliseum). Seattle is 5-3 all time on Opening Day against the A's, having won the last three.

Athletics: McCarthy a no-brainer for Melvin

- McCarthy enjoyed a resurgence last year, and he was rewarded for it. Oakland's brass took notice of the right-hander's 3.32 ERA in 2011, and he was such an obvious choice to start Opening Day that Melvin named McCarthy the No. 1 starter in late February.

"I thought it was a natural [decision], based on what [McCarthy] accomplished last year," Melvin said. "With some of the pitchers that we traded away, we had a good feeling that would be the case."

- The other time the A's opened the regular season in Japan was in 2008, when they split two games with Boston. Oakland lost the opener, 6-5, in 10 innings and won the second game, 5-1. Catcher Kurt Suzuki is the only player on the roster who was on the A's Opening Day roster that year. Outfielder Coco Crisp was with Boston in '08.

Worth noting

- The Mariners are 20-15 in season openers, including a five-game Opening Day winning streak.
- McCarthy went 1-3 against the Mariners in four starts last year, but he still managed to carry an ERA of 1.99 vs. Seattle hitters.

AL West: Two heavyweights, two contenders

Angels, Rangers likely to battle all season for division title

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

The American League West, in the popular perception, is actually two divisions within one: the heavyweights (Rangers, Angels) and the light heavyweights (Mariners, A's) hoping to shock the baseball world and move up in class.

In all likelihood, hope springing eternal notwithstanding, the two-time reigning AL champion Rangers and the Angels - who won five of the previous six division races before Texas' rise in 2010 -- are destined to trade heavy blows and give us a memorable season. This is a rivalry that has been building for four years and is about to reach new emotional levels.

There is mutual respect in both clubhouses, but if you're looking for a jumping-off point in the escalation of ill will between the two organizations, it can be traced to the Saturday afternoon of May 16, 2009. Making his season debut in Arlington following an arm injury, then Angels ace John Lackey threw his first two pitches of the game in the general direction of Ian Kinsler's thinking apparatus. Lackey was ejected, making it the briefest start of his career.

The pitches "got away" from him, Lackey reported, as anticipated. The general feeling was the big Texan, never one to conceal his emotions, had seen Kinsler mouthing something to the effect of "kindly leave our lovely yard" -- in more colorful language -- the night before after handling the last out in a 10-8 victory.

The save that night, with the tying runs on base, went to C.J. Wilson. The southpaw became a starter in 2010, and this winter joined the enemy on the same day Albert Pujols made his stunning decision that he was taking his talents to Southern California.

Angels owner Arte Moreno, with new general manager Jerry Dipoto's bold vision, invested \$317.5 million that final day at the Winter Meetings in the game's most feared hitter and Texas' ace. Another free-agent deal had been struck with dependable setup man LaTroy Hawkins, upgrading the Angels in three areas in one fell swoop.

The Rangers, in turn, replaced Wilson with Japanese pitcher Yu Darvish at the total cost of \$111.7 million, winning the right to negotiate with the 6-foot-6 right-hander courtesy of a record \$51.7 million posting fee. With closer Neftali Feliz moving into the rotation, Texas signed former Twins star Joe Nathan to take care of the ninth inning. Texas returns one of the game's most formidable lineups to go with uncommon pitching depth and solid defense.

The Rangers have spent the spring disputing the popular notion that they'll suffer a hangover after coming within one strike of the franchise's first World Series title, falling to the amazingly resilient Cardinals -- led by Pujols.

The Angels have spent the spring seeing nothing to disturb their conviction that Pujols and Wilson give them the ingredients they need to return to the top of the heap, making up the 10 games they trailed the Rangers by when the 2011 season ended.

The stakes clearly have risen to dizzying heights in Texas and Southern California, leaving the Mariners and A's to find creative ways to make inroads.

Seattle, with a number of young players on the verge of making an impact, recognized its need for offense and dealt No. 2 starter Michael Pineda to the Yankees for catcher/designated hitter Jesus Montero, a young hitter with tremendous upside. With Ichiro Suzuki accepting a move from leadoff to the No. 3 spot and Chone Figgins ticketed for a welcomed return to leading off, the Mariners figure to have a new offensive dynamic in support of Felix Hernandez and a solid complementary pitching staff.

The A's, having earlier dealt quality pitchers Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, Andrew Bailey and Craig Breslow for a truckload of prospects, made a splash by signing a young, athletic potential star in Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes. General manager Billy Beane also signed Manny Ramirez to a Minor League contract, even though the former star won't be eligible until the end of May as he serves out a 50-game suspension stemming from his second violation of MLB's Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program.

The Rangers and Angels don't meet until May 11 in Arlington. Everything before that will be a prelude to the main event.

With all this in mind, we polled our AL West beat writers -- Rangers reporter T.R. Sullivan, A's reporter Jane Lee, Angels reporter Alden Gonzalez and Mariners reporter Greg Johns -- and asked them to rank the clubs in four major categories and predict how they'll be lined up on the season's final day.

Here are the results:



Best lineup

Texas has the most dynamic table-setters in the game in Kinsler and Elvis Andrus, and they're followed by loads of thunder: Josh Hamilton, Michael Young, Adrian Beltre, Nelson Cruz, Mike Napoli and Mitch Moreland. The big key is keeping Hamilton, a risk-taker, on the field in the final year of his contract. The addition of Pujols in the heart of the lineup with Torii Hunter and Vernon Wells, the anticipated return of Kendrys Morales and continuing development of Howard Kendrick, Erick Aybar, Mark Trumbo and Peter Bourjos could bring the Angels closer to Texas than many people anticipate. The Mariners, last in the Majors in runs scored and other offensive categories in 2011, figure to be much improved. The A's might struggle to replace Josh Willingham's 29 homers and 98 RBIs.



Best rotation

The Angels have four starters who conceivably could win the AL Cy Young Award: Jered Weaver, Dan Haren, Ervin Santana and Wilson. Veteran Jerome Williams and young gun Garrett Richards figure to fill out one of the game's best rotations. If Darvish is as good as he looked this spring and Feliz overcomes his shoulder issues, Texas will be loaded as well, with Colby Lewis, Derek Holland and Matt Harrison rounding it out and Alexi Ogando and Scott Feldman as safety nets. Hernandez gives Seattle a No. 1 to match up with anybody, but figures to miss Pineda. Oakland has rebuilt its rotation, giving opportunity to talented young arms.



Best bullpen

The Rangers, with Feliz starting and bullpen stabilizer Darren Oliver moving to Toronto, have done some reshaping of their group. Nathan is proven quality, but he's 37 and coming off a comeback season from surgery in which his ERA ballooned from 2.10 to 4.84 in Minnesota. Mike Adams, an elite setup man, has recovered from hernia surgery, and Ogando was lights-out in that role in '10 before joining the rotation last season. If closer Jordan Walden smoothes out his rough edges and finds consistency, the Angels could overtake the Rangers with depth from Scott Downs, Hawkins, Hisanori Takahashi, Rich Thompson, Kevin Jepsen, Trevor Bell, Jason Istringhausen, Francisco Rodriguez and Michael Kohn. The A's and Mariners have quality arms but don't appear to be in the class of the Rangers or Angels overall.



Best defense

No division in the sport plays defense more consistently or more effectively than the AL West. Solid across the board, with brilliance in the infield, the Rangers rate the slight edge. But the Angels -- featuring the best outfield in the game -- were second in the Majors last year in runs saved to the Rays, and figure to be just as good with Pujols moving in at first and Chris Iannetta taking over as the regular catcher. The Mariners and A's also keep their teams in the game with excellent leather work.

Predicted order of finish



Oakland A's GM Billy Beane 2012 Spring Training Interview: Part II

by [Tyler Bleszinski](#), Athletics Nation

Yesterday morning [AN](#) ran part one of the [Billy Beane spring training interview for 2012](#). Today is the conclusion of that interview.

Again, I'll just say that Beane's enthusiasm for this rebuild has me fired up for the future. I'm not sure I expect much in 2012, but you never know and the team should be interesting to see how it develops. Without further ado, check out the conclusion to the AN exclusive Billy Beane interview 2012. And GO A's!!!

TB: How many rotation spots are up for grabs right now?

BB: We don't need a fifth starting until April 16. If you say three after Colon and McCarthy, that's probably right. But there are some guys who have started to establish themselves down here. Millone has pitched extremely well down here. But that wasn't a surprise. He pitched great in Triple-A last year. He also pitched a bit in the big leagues. He's got a little more experience than some of the younger guys. We still have Graham Godfrey and Tyson (Ross). The younger guys in terms of experience are Peacock and Parker but they also have the highest upside of anybody. Realistically right now there are probably three spots. Then at some point Dallas (Braden) will come back. He's doing well but he's not going to be back to start the season despite his insistence on the first day of spring that he was going to be ready for Japan. I'm here to tell you, he won't. Once again Brett (Anderson) is doing great.

TB: When do you anticipate him coming back?

BB: You got to block out a year. That's what we've been working with. The good news with Brett is that he's had no setbacks whatsoever. He's met every timeline and passed every test with flying colors so that's been really encouraging.

TB: What made some of the pitchers you acquired, Peacock, Parker, Millone, Cole, what made some of these guys appealing to you?

BB: Each one of them is different. Millone is very similar style to Dallas. He's not going to overwhelm you with his stuff but he really knows how to pitch. He has great command. He doesn't walk guys. He's moved through the system and been successful at every level. Peacock is a converted guy but he has a really good arm. He's a very good athlete for a pitcher, given his position player background. In Cole you've got a really young, tall and slender explosive arm that has a chance to be really good. He was 96 mph yesterday in our game in the minor leagues. Him, (Blake) Treinen and (Blake) Hassebrock are all pitching really well over there. Treinen is a kid who was a late draft choice for us but he's been impressive. Then he came over here and threw an inning for us and continued to be impressive.

TB: Maybe another Rich Harden?

BB: Different in that Rich was younger. Treinen transferred to a number of schools and went to three or four colleges and had a history of arm problems. With us he's been great, no issues.

TB: One of the criticisms that I read of the moves you made was that there wasn't enough of a push to get more young bats in the system.

BB: There wasn't any push because we were going to make the best deals we could make and get the best players we could. It's that simple. In truth, small market teams that have had success, whether it's ourselves, Tampa or Minnesota, they've all done it with young pitching that they've had around for a young time. And that's critical if you're going to be a small market team that has success. You have to have pitching that you've developed or traded for at a young age so you can develop it. If you don't, it doesn't matter how many bats you have, you aren't going anywhere. That's a good place for us to start.

TB: How do you start to get those young bats in there so you can theoretically develop a high quality offense to supplement that great pitching you're developing?

BB: We're going to have to draft them. It's all subject on what's available to you. You cannot take lesser deals just because a guy is a position player over a pitcher. We were trying to get the most talent we could.

TB: You re-signed Coco Crisp which I think was the first move where people said, "Whoa I thought they were rebuilding, what are they doing signing him?" What was the thinking in bringing Coco back?

BB: We need an outfielder because I think we had zero at that time.

TB: If you looked online, you guys had Ryan Sweeney listed in all three positions in the outfield.

BB: Yeah so someone else has to play out there. Coco played a position at that time that we needed before we signed Cespedes. He plays a very difficult position to fill. We traded for Colin Cowgill who can also play centerfield, but...

TB: Do you like him in center?

BB: He can play all three but we're just getting to know him. He's very good on the corner but he's been decent in center in the minor leagues. So far we do but we also like Coco. People would've been more upset if we just put it (the money spent on Coco) in our pockets, right?

TB: Coco has been pretty vocal in the media about wanting to play center field whereas Cespedes has been a centerfielder and I suppose might view himself that way. Do you have any problem with a player being vocal like that in the media?

BB: I don't think he was that vocal. Reporters ask questions and guys have to answer them. I think sometimes it's framed to make a guy look vocal. The final decision as to how the outfield is going to play out is Bob's (Melvin) and his staff. We'll have conversations with him but he's going to put the best outfield he can put out there with all three. I don't think he's really going to care what someone says. It might be Coco in center because that combination is better but it's going to be where people are the most comfortable. It's about the team, it's not about the individual.

TB: Who is going to give Bob the best chance to win.

BB: Yeah exactly. It's a defensive position so what's your best all-around defensive outfield with each guy playing in each spot. You don't want to put a guy out of position and hurt all three spots by putting one guy out of position. The best outfield will be chosen based on what works for all three.

TB: It seems like the outfield situation is pretty much sewn up. (Josh) Reddick is out there. Coco is likely out there. Maybe left field is up for grabs. First base and DH is seemingly...

BB: Wide open yeah.

TB: Yeah wide open as well. What do you like about the candidates that are there? Daric Barton could come back strong. Brandon Allen seems to have had a decent if not unspectacular spring.

BB: No one has sort of taken the job but at least he's now a factor because he's playing and getting in games. He's made a lot of progress the last 10 days. But between Brandon and Kila (Ka'aihue) and Chris (Carter), nobody has really taken the opening. We have some options there but no one has stepped in and said, "This is mine." Each guy has his own strength. One thing you like about all three of those guys is that they've all shown in the minor leagues that they have power. Brandon of those three is the best defender and at the end of the day, that could be what winds up making the decision if they're all very close offensively. When Daric gets back, he'll be a factor too certainly but he's not ready to play every day yet. Although he is getting closer.

TB: One of the big knocks on Seth Smith is his inability to hit left-handed pitching and you have Johnny Gomes here now. If you look at them statistically, they almost make the perfect player if you just platoon them. Do you believe that platoons can be effective or would you like to see players playing more regularly?

BB: Seth hasn't really had much of an opportunity to prove himself against left-handed pitching. Once you get that label or if you have another right-handed hitter on your ballclub who is good, you don't get that opportunity to prove yourself against left-handed pitching. He's actually swung really well against lefties down here (in spring training). That was certainly part of our reason for signing Johnny. It was to offset some of our left-handed hitting outfielders. But I don't think we'd go in with the idea that anyone is going to be a strict platoon.

TB: There were rumors all throughout the offseason about you trying to acquire another relief pitcher. How do you feel about the bullpen right now? Do you think it needs another pitcher and are you actively looking?

BB: We've got some good young arms out there but some of them are unproven. Relief pitching is one of those spots where you never really stop looking to improve. That is always me and David's (Forst) job, is to look out for relievers. We also want to give a chance to our younger arms to see if they can fill some of the spots.

TB: Would you consider moving one of your younger starting pitching arms to a relief spot to take care of that weakness? Especially once you get Dallas and Brett back eventually.

BB: That's a long way off. You would prefer to have them start. I don't think you'd ever prefer to take a potential starter and put them in the bullpen unless they failed as a starter. I doubt we would do that. I think what we want to do is give some of our young guys a chance. Carignan has thrown well down here. Cook has thrown great. Figueroa is a guy who we're going to limit his innings this year but long-term we like him as a starter as that's what he was in the

minor leagues. There's going to be some growing pains with that too but I think that it's something you can build on and that's the way we're looking at it right now.

TB: I have to ask you about Manny Ramirez. It's mandatory and required that I do so. I did a poll on whether you should've done it and 70 percent or so said they were in favor of it and said, why not?

BB: Yeah that's what we said, why not?

TB: There's a contingent of fans who are against guys who get caught doing something wrong like PEDs. How do you weigh...

BB: We don't make the rules. We have to follow the agreement between MLB and the player's association. They put in the testing and the suspensions. We just follow it and go from there. That's all we're doing. But in terms of...

TB: Why do it?

BB: Why not, yeah. It's low risk, high reward.

TB: Are you guys going to monitor how well he does in the minors?

BB: He can play in the minors in the last 10 days of the suspension. He can play in the extended program down here in Arizona. But he can't compete in minor league games until 10 days before his suspension is over.

TB: Are you confident about him eventually being a part of the team down the road? I know there's a lot of stuff that has to break right between now and then.

BB: I think the biggest thing is how Manny swings. He's a DH at this point in his career. The one thing he has is that he's hit in the middle of a lineup before and he can handle that role and the pressure that comes with it. He's right-handed which we liked as well. All this stuff we'll find out because right now we just don't know. There's no sense in not trying to find out.

TB: There's been lots of stuff written about him with the "Manny being Manny" persona, etc. There's also been a lot of people saying he's been a different Manny. What's been your experience with him so far and what is your impression?

BB: He's a hard worker who loves to hit. So far he's been great. He's been fantastic. No complaints. If Manny being Manny means him hitting .335 and 35-40 home runs, I'll take that too. He hasn't been a distraction whatsoever. Even the first day he was here and the media came out, it wasn't that big a contingent. Since then he's blended right in.

TB: Talk about the advantages of having Curt Young back.

BB: It's nice having Curt back. There's a familiarity there. I've known him since I was playing back in 1989 so I'm very comfortable with him. He knows a lot of the young pitchers. There's a new group for him just in the one year he was away but a lot of the guys he has a history with. I think his personality fits really well with Bob. They had known each other previously really well. We all know and like Curt and respect what he does so it was seamless when he came back in. There was no adjustment period.

TB: Was there some adjustment with bringing Chili Davis in as the hitting coach even though you have a lot of different players? What's it been like having him?

BB: It's been great and it goes back to my comment about this being the best camp we've had. Bob is the leader of it but the coaching staff with Chip Hale who organizes everything for Bob and is a baseball rat who is the first one to the park every morning. We talked about bringing Chili in a few years ago but he wasn't ready to go full time on the field. We're lucky he was available. He brings a lot of credibility.

TB: What made him appealing to you?

BB: When Chili was playing he always had a great reputation as a leader and I think he understood the style of hitting we wanting to develop over here, as that's the type of hitter he was. He's got presence. He speaks Spanish which is great particularly now with Yoenis. Him and Chip and having Curt back is one of the reasons it's been such a great

camp. He's got an opinion, which is nice. You want guys to voice their opinion and he does. He's been a great fit and we're lucky that type of guy with that background was available to us.

TB: Would you be disappointed if Yoenis wound up spending the year in Triple-A?

BB: I wouldn't even want to answer that. We're all learning about him and to make a speculative statement about him wouldn't do any good.

TB: I saw you went to the Academy Awards. What was the most interesting thing that happened to you that night?

BB: I got yelled at by Casey (his daughter) and Tara (his wife) for walking the red carpet too fast. I was just trying to get off of it. I was a little bit of a curmudgeon as they were really enjoying it and I was just trying to get off of it.

TB: Were people asking you what you were wearing?

BB: Not really. The whole movie was a great experience. Everyone we met involved with the project from Sony executives to Brad (Pitt) to the director were class people. They were wonderful. Any perceptions that people have about people in Hollywood are untrue in my experience. They were so nice and treated our family so well. They asked if I would do some press and media for the release of the DVD in Japan and I said I'd be happy to do it just because they did so well by me. I'm glad it's over. It was such a great experience. And the night of the Oscars was sort of the bookend for it all. Tara and Casey had a great time and I actually had a great time at the show. I enjoyed the way they choreographed it. Everyone we met was just wonderful. They couldn't have been nicer.

TB: Any other stories that night?

BB: It's kind of a blur.

TB: You went to the Governor's Ball, right?

BB: Yeah we went to the Governor's Ball and right after we went to the Vanity Fair party.

TB: Did you get to meet Bryan Cranston (biggest Breaking Bad fan on the planet asked this)?

BB: I might have and not known it (laughs). After a while you turn around and you see someone else famous at every turn. You become numb to it a little bit.

TB: That was something I was actually going to ask. You've now been around Hollywood elite, global leaders like Tony Blair and many other business elite as well. Is there anyone left that you kind of get star struck about?

BB: Good question. I look at it differently. I don't get star struck but there are people that do things and accomplish things where my jaw drops.

TB: Is there anyone left like that for you?

BB: When I hear about Navy SEALs in the dead of night getting dropped out of helicopter into the icy ocean and then sneaking out, well that's where my jaw drops. There's nothing I can do in my lifetime that would rival some of the things that people like that do. They risk their life. Military people have always been people I admire. They're away from their families so often and the risks they take to protect the things we have. That's just incredible.

TB: Do you ever take any ribbing from players or rival GMs for going to the Academy Awards? Anyone start calling you Hollywood or anything?

BB: Ned Colletti went so there's two of us who went. Most everyone said to just enjoy the opportunity. I said if it got nominated I would go and try and enjoy it and I did and we had a good time. I think we're hopefully all beyond that kind of ribbing. I'm almost 50. If my 50-year-old friends are saying that then we need to grow up.

TB: One last question, obviously you've changed the dynamic of the franchise this past offseason. How do you feel about the minor league system now?

BB: The talent in the minors? If you use independent publications that rank minor league systems, we went from a bottom 10 system to a top 10 system. That's critical to us. We need to have that top 10 system if we're going to have a bright future. I feel a lot better about it now than I did a year ago. Those were some of my concerns last year. There was so much thrown in to try and do something for one, year and it's not that much fun because it just doesn't have that many legs to it. Our minor league system is going to have to be better. A lot of it is because we've had our first-round pick and that was kind of it. We didn't have a second round pick last year. There's been years where we've lost our second or third round pick and now we have those in addition to the comp picks. That's one of the reasons we didn't trade those guys at the deadline last year. What we would be getting back wasn't worth it to us compared to what we would get if we held onto them. We could've saved a lot of money during the season by trading them. I had that conversation with Lew (Wolff) during the season and I told him they would be more valuable if we kept them and to allow them to walk. We'd get draft picks for them.

TB: You traded two key guys obviously in Trevor (Cahill) and Gio (Gonzalez). Do you think you've taken that much of a step back with the rotation? It seems like some of the guys you got back are on the cusp of being good major league pitchers.

BB: Listen there's no denying that Gio was outstanding last year and durable and getting better. And Trevor had two years of lots of wins. That's quite an accomplishment and a lot to fill. The one thing I'll say about this group is that they're a little further ahead than our previous group was when they entered the major leagues. There's also a few more of them. You're going to feel the impact of losing a Gio. Certainly at the beginning until these guys are ready to go. And Trevor as well. But these guys are a little further along than when we rushed the Andersons and Cahills along a few season ago. The hope is that they get their sea legs very quickly.

TB: I think that's it. Thanks so much as always Billy.

BB: That's great. Thank you Tyler.

Are Oakland A's uniform ads a vision of future?

Eric Young, San Francisco Business Times

How long will uniforms in baseball be advertising free?

The Oakland A's will be walking billboards when they begin the **Major League Baseball** season in Japan this week against the **Seattle Mariners**.

When you are up at 3 a.m. PDT Wednesday watching the first game, you might notice that the A's and Mariners are wearing advertisers' logos on their batting helmets. And the A's will wear a patch bought by a company named Gloops (If you're really curious about Gloops, click [here](#)).

Major League Baseball will be raking in the cash from these deals.

Any good baseball person knows that advertising on uniforms is anathema in the United States.

But should it be?

I'm not suggesting that baseball go all **NASCAR** on us and have players look like survivors of a corporate logo explosion. I'm saying maybe fans should consider the Japanese example of a carefully placed logo on a helmet or perhaps an advertiser's patch on a sleeve.

I know, it still sounds terrible. OK, what if the club that wore the advertising -- think the perennially small budget A's - got to keep 100 percent of the cash from an ad deal, thereby helping to pay for a pricey free agent? Does that make the ads more palatable?

In my gut, as a sports fan, I'm against ads on any uniforms, pro or collegiate. But I know as a sports business reporter money makes the sports world turn on its finely tuned axis. Baseball knows this. Remember back in 2004 MLB agreed to promote the release of a Spider-Man movie with ads on bases.

Fan anger prompted baseball's money men to kill that deal. But how long will MLB hold out?

The A's games in Japan prompt a consideration of baseball uniform ads in the United States. With MLB's voracious appetite for money, it might just be an idea that gains traction in coming seasons, whether we like it or not.

Kurt Suzuki homers in A's 12-6 loss to Hanshin

Associated Press

Programming note: Tune to SportsNet Central at 6, 10:30 and midnight on Comcast SportsNet Bay Area for our exclusive TV coverage from Japan!

TOKYO (AP) Kurt Suzuki hit his second home run in Japan on Monday in the Oakland Athletics' 12-6 loss to the Hanshin Tigers in an exhibition game.

Oakland shortstop Cliff Pennington led off the fourth inning with a solo homer and Suzuki, who hit a two-run home run in the Athletics' 5-0 win over the Yomiuri Giants on Sunday, connected for a three-run shot at Tokyo Dome to cut Hanshin's lead to 7-4.

"I was just trying to put the barrel on the ball and keep it simple," Suzuki said. "When you go out there you can't take anything for granted and have to play hard."

The Athletics are in Japan to open the season against Ichiro Suzuki and the Seattle Mariners on Wednesday and Thursday.

Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes sat out Monday's exhibition after leaving Sunday night's contest because of cramps in his quadriceps. Cespedes was 0 for 4 in Sunday's game against the Giants but is expected to be in the lineup for Wednesday's game.

The Tigers took a 7-0 lead through the first three innings, taking advantage of some sloppy defensive play by the A's.

In the bottom of the third, Hanshin scored four runs. Former major leaguer Craig Brazell hit an RBI single to right, scoring Takeshi Toritani. Tomoaki Kanemoto drove in another run with a double and Brazell and Kanemoto both scored on a throwing error by Pennington.

"Today wasn't our best day," Oakland manager Bob Melvin said. "We had a good spring executing defense, but weren't able to do that today. Take nothing away from them, we just didn't play one of our better games and they took it to us."

Brazell, who was 2 for 3 Monday and had three hits in his team's 5-1 win on Sunday, said it was good to face major league pitching again.

"I was a little nervous at first because it's been five years since I hit major league pitching," Brazell said. "But to be able to come out and hit like this gives me a lot of confidence for the season."

Oakland starter Tyson Ross gave up eight runs - six earned - and 10 hits in just four innings.

Jarrod Parker Feels Right At Home In Oakland

By Casey Tefertiller, Baseball America

PHOENIX—Almost from the moment he learned of his trade from the Diamondbacks to the Athletics, righthander Jarrod Parker started feeling at home as he received Twitter messages from his new Oakland teammates.

"It's a great social network," Parker said. "A week after I got traded, everyone was welcoming me."

Now Parker competes for a job in the A's rotation, which will be no easy task for a pitcher who missed the entire 2010 season while rehabbing from Tommy John surgery before bouncing back last year.

The 23-year-old Parker joined Oakland with big credentials, as the centerpiece in the December deal that sent Trevor Cahill and Craig Breslow to Arizona for Parker, outfielder Collin Cowgill and righty reliever Ryan Cook.

Parker was Arizona's first-round draft pick, ninth overall, in 2007, and he ranked as the system's top prospect from 2009-11. Despite those credentials, he had to re-learn how to pitch last season.

"Early in the year, the first month, month and a half, I was brutal," Parker said. "I struggled. I just wasn't the same. I fought through a lot of things, but I took what I learned from the failures and turned it into a pretty good second half."

After going 5-6, 4.87 prior to the all-star break in the Double-A Southern League, Parker went 6-2, 2.84 in the second half with Mobile. After helping the BayBears win the league title, he received a one-start September callup, pitching 5 2/3 shutout innings against the Dodgers. He even made the Diamondbacks' playoff roster, appearing as a reliever in one game against the Brewers.

"From where I came from early in the year, it was big," Parker said. "I tried to build on each and every start to that point. Obviously, I've still got a lot to figure out and to make myself better."

Parker added a two-seam fastball last year to mix with his mid-90s four-seamer, slider, curve and changeup. He made a big impression in the early days of spring training camp.

"I'm very impressed in the short time I've seen him," pitching coordinator Gil Patterson said. "He has been energetic, passionate and precise."

"His fastball has life and command to both sides. He has an electric changeup—the ball bottomed out when it went to home plate."

A's ACORNS

- Third baseman Scott Sizemore tore the ACL in his knee an hour into the first workout of spring training, clearing the way for catcher Josh Donaldson to prove himself at the hot corner. He played the position exclusively in the Dominican League in the offseason.
- Farm director Keith Lieppman said that righthanders A.J. Cole, Blake Hasselbrock and Blake Treinen, all of whom spent last season in low Class A, made big impressions in a mini-camp before spring training.