

A's second baseman Jemile Weeks: Is he on the verge of stardom?

By Carl Steward, Oakland Tribune

As the A's prepare to resume the regular season Friday night in their home opener against Seattle, second year second baseman Jemile Weeks appears to be priming himself for stardom.

During spring training, A's fans focused most of their attention on the team's newest sensation, Cuban outfielder Yoenis Cespedes.

Meanwhile, last year's sensation quietly continued to hone his skills for a season that just might draw attention inside and outside of Oakland. Weeks, who hit .303 and stole 22 bases in 97 games following his June debut, this spring hit .339, flashed a little power and looked far better defensively than he did last year, when he led AL second basemen in errors with 13.

"I see him improving because Jemile's just a guy who looks to improve every day," said manager Bob Melvin. "I think I'm even more impressed with his defense right now than his offense. When I got here last year, in my opinion he was a well below average defender at second base. But boy, he has come a long way. He looks like he wants to be an All-Star and a Gold Glover at some point."

At 25, Weeks doesn't know what his ceiling might be. And he definitely doesn't see the basement for this frightfully inexperienced A's team.

"I don't think you can set expectations on this team," he said. "We have so many new faces and there are so many opportunities out there for us. It's a new group with a lot of different ways to attack. Guys are out there to prove something. You might find the next Manny Ramirez or Albert Pujols. You don't know who it might be, because the team's young. Anything can happen."

Weeks knows he'll have to set a strong tone as the leadoff hitter and primary energy conduit for the A's to rise above the low expectations outsiders have regarding the team's fortunes this season. He is braced to accept that role, which he did throughout the spring as well as during the off-season when he consulted Hall of Famer Barry Larkin about ways he might improve his defensive skills.

Weeks also put in significant extra time at spring training working on defensive drills, maintaining proper mechanics, making the routine play and improving his throwing. Almost every day in Arizona, Weeks showed up early in the morning with infield coach Mike Gallego to take extra ground balls, often with shortstop Cliff Pennington.

"The last thing you want is a coach have to prod somebody into doing early work," Melvin said. "But it was just the opposite with him. I think the last day before we left for Japan, we had an easy day and didn't have early work scheduled. But Weeks and Pennington both went to Gags and told him, 'We want to continue our program.'"

It has showed in games thus far. Weeks looks smoother, more confident and better able to use his speed to expand his range. His throws are surer and stronger, and he looks more in sync with Pennington around second base.

"I think I just put in the work," he said. "I took a lot more ground balls, but I also worked on quality as opposed to quantity. The more you do that, the better you tend to get. But I have to continue to do it throughout the season. I'm not there yet."

Weeks also knows he has set a formidable bar for himself offensively based on last season. Can he match or exceed the impressive totals he logged in 2011? His high average this spring may have been a positive indicator.

"I think from the outside, people want to see the same thing or better," he said. "For me, it's just a case of putting my best on the field. If effort and hustle and love for the game count for anything, that's what you'll get from me. I think the numbers will take care of themselves."

Weeks sees the same kind of projection for the team. He definitely thinks this group has more energy than last year's club, simply because it wants to better the low preseason expectations.

"We've got power, speed, all-around game in our lineup, and our pitching should be OK, too," he said. "We can kind of hit you from every angle. It's what you need to compete at the major-league level and be a good team. If we can get the best out of each person, I think it could be a special team."

As for becoming an All-Star, Weeks has his work cut out in a league that includes Robinson Cano, Dustin Pedroia and Ian Kinsler. But he stands out as one of Oakland's potential stars.

"I'm ready to go," he said. "We're 1-1 and we've already shown we can make things happen. We had a winning record in spring and I think that may have surprised some people. Hopefully we can keep surprising them. I think we will."

In 20 years, A's go from top tier to bargain basement

By Matthew Artz, Oakland Tribune

OAKLAND -- This is an anniversary season for the Oakland A's, but not one the team or its fans will be celebrating. It's been 20 years since the club last outspent and outdrew the New York Yankees.

The A's also had a higher payroll and attendance than the Giants in 1992, but that used to happen frequently.

Today, Forbes values the A's at less than half what the Giants are worth; the team is coming off a season where it had baseball's lowest attendance and the Coliseum has become a foster home of sorts as a custody battle for the club between Oakland and San Jose drags on interminably.

This past offseason, the A's dealt away more of their best young players for yet another crop of bargain basement prospects that the ever-frugal team might have to trade away a few years hence.

"It gets frustrating because we really don't know what's going to happen," said Steve Bowles, a 34-year-old season ticket holder from El Cerrito, during Tuesday's exhibition game against the Giants. "There's a lot of blame to go around."

They say in baseball that hope springs eternal, and there were pockets of optimism in the Coliseum Tuesday, including 33-year-old Manuel Rivas, of Watsonville, who praised recent trades and said "the team is going in the right direction." But no one can blame those A's fans who are feeling ambivalent about the state of the franchise and its ballpark as the squad plays its 2012 home opener Friday evening against the Seattle Mariners.

The Coliseum

The recently christened O.co Coliseum is one the oldest ballparks in baseball, but it doesn't hold much sentimentality among A's fans. The Coliseum they loved had a view of the Oakland Hills and an upper deck that wasn't covered in tarp.

Most fans at Tuesday's exhibition game said they'd gladly pay "a few dollars more for tickets" if it meant a new stadium and a better team.

But there was also acknowledgment that new stadiums aren't always friendly to working class fans. When the Twins opened their stadium two seasons ago, they hiked ticket prices 45 percent, according to Team Marketing Report; the Yankees increased ticket prices by 76 percent when their new ballpark opened in 2009 -- with seats near the infield selling for more than \$1,000 apiece.

For all of its warts, the Coliseum, fans say, does one thing better than many of baseball's gleaming new publicly subsidized stadiums -- it makes baseball accessible to the entire public. The best seats in the house for an A's game typically go for \$46, less than half the price at AT&T Park.

Whether the A's new ballpark is built in Oakland or San Jose, Melissa Poulos doubts her family will be in attendance, at least not often. "We'd probably go to maybe one game a year because it would cost a lot more," said the 34-year-old A's fan from San Ramon.

Shawn Jenkins, 46, who grew up in the shadow of the Coliseum and now lives in Stockton, lamented that he'll be stuck in the nosebleed section or his living room whenever the A's finally open a new ballpark. "I get sick and tired of these owners who want everyone to help pay for a new stadium, but then the people can't go because the price is too high," he said.

The team

The economics of baseball have changed in the 20 years since the A's last outspent the Yankees. Teams have developed fresh revenue streams from increasingly lucrative local television contracts or their own regional sports networks as well as new stadiums with amenities catering to businesses and higher-end fans.

The A's famously still managed to win despite their economic disadvantages during the first half of the past decade, but in recent seasons the team has made more headlines with its stadium saga than its play.

"The Giants at least give you the impression that they're trying," Bowles said. "I don't get that impression with the A's."

In 1992, the A's had baseball's fourth-highest attendance, with just under 2.5 million fans watching a team with a \$41 million payroll -- fifth-highest in the majors and almost \$4 million more than the Yankees and \$8 million more than the Giants.

Last year, according to the website baseball-reference.com, the A's had the sixth-lowest payroll in the majors, less than one-third of the \$202 million spent by the Yankees.

"It would be nice to see them spend more money and be a little more competitive," said Ricky Couto, 37, of San Leandro. But like many fans at Tuesday's game, he'll still plunk down money for games this season on a squad he doesn't expect to compete.

"They're the hometown team," he said. "You hold on to the memories and hope those winning ways come back."

A's counting on 3 young starting pitchers

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

When the A's restart the season with their home opener Friday, they will have an all-new set of starting pitchers with the exception of Brandon McCarthy.

In three trades during the winter, Oakland traded four starting pitchers, two of them All-Stars. Bartolo Colon, himself a two-time All-Star, signed a one-year deal with the A's, filling one spot, but the final three-fifths of the rotation is green, green and green.

This fact does not faze McCarthy, tonight's starter, who likes what he's seen of No. 3 starter Tommy Milone, fourth starter Graham Godfrey and projected fifth starter Tyson Ross. He also knows the A's have potentially even better talent on the way in Jarrod Parker (acquired in the Trevor Cahill deal with Arizona) and Brad Peacock (from the Gio Gonzalez deal with Washington).

"It's not sexy names," McCarthy said. "Cahill and Gio and Andrew Bailey are all guys who've made names for themselves, and here it feels more like mix and match right now. It's an easy group to joke about, and it's on us to change that. You hope around the league they realize this is a good group, but it's all on us."

The A's, of course, have been through this before, moving from the Big Three years of Tim Hudson, Mark Mulder and Barry Zito to the Cahill-Gonzalez-Brett Anderson crew of the past two seasons. Oakland has a knack for trading for top-notch pitching talent, such as Gonzalez and Anderson (and Parker and Peacock), and also for developing it.

"They've had a lot of talent come through here," McCarthy said. "It's like how Texas was offensively. Everyone who came through could hit, and everyone here can always pitch. The Big Three leave, and they end up with Gio, Cahill and Anderson. You hope you keep reloading."

McCarthy and Colon showed themselves to be in top form in Japan last week, combining to allow two runs in 15 innings. McCarthy is becoming known as one of baseball's more cerebral and witty pitchers, and he has developed a strong following on Twitter, while Colon is a cool veteran who lets nothing bug him.

In Japan, one teammate said, Colon came into the clubhouse after allowing a homer and he slammed his fist down on the table, making everyone jump in alarm. He laughed and said, "Just kidding!" and resumed pitching a gem against the Mariners.

"He's got a great demeanor on the mound," A's general manager Billy Beane said. "He's unflappable. He's been doing this a long time."

Milone, as impressive as he looked during the spring, has all of five big-league starts under his belt, Godfrey four and Ross has eight. Parker has one, Peacock two, and both are expected to be up at some point this season.

"The three at the back end of the rotation are going to have their growing pains," Beane said. "They're young. You hope they continue to make adjustments. But we've been through this process before. The thing you want more than anything is for them to stay healthy and to throw strikes."

The A's had hoped to add left-hander Dallas Braden into the mix soon, but he has had a setback in his return from shoulder-capsule surgery, and if he is able to rejoin the rotation in June, the team will be very happy.

"Obviously, Dallas' situation is a concern," Beane said. "We were looking forward to having him in the rotation the first month, and that doesn't look like it will happen. It's still a ways away."

Anderson's rehab from Tommy John surgery has proceeded smoothly, and July looks like a possible target for him to come back. His return would be huge for the rotation; he's among the more talented young left-handers in the game.

"No fooling around, Brett is the guy," McCarthy said. "He's the linchpin, and when he's back, this rotation hits fifth gear. The sky is the absolute limit for him. And if Dallas makes it back, it's all here."

A's On Deck

Friday

vs. Mariners

7:05 p.m. **CSNCA**

Vargas (10-13) vs. McCarthy (9-9)

Saturday

vs. Mariners

6:05 p.m. **CSN+**

Hernandez (14-14) vs. Colon (8-10)

Sunday

Off

Leading off

Devine's arm: Joey Devine will fly to Florida on Sunday to meet with Dr. James Andrews, who reviewed an MRI exam of the right-handed pitcher's sore elbow and wants to take an ultrasound. "I think we are getting close to getting answers," Devine said via text message. He had Tommy John surgery in 2009.

Baseball schedule has share of pure craziness

Bruce Jenkins, Chronicle Columnist

We've seen the A's open the season in Japan, then report immediately to Sacramento. We saw the Miami Marlins open their new ballpark Wednesday night, against St. Louis, then play the Reds - in Cincinnati - on Thursday. And if you think that's strange, wait until MLB's new playoff schedule unfolds in October:

-- The season ends on a Wednesday, Oct. 3. After an off-day allowing for tiebreakers, rained-out makeup games, etc., the postseason kicks into gear on Friday with two winner-take-all wild-card games. That will be a nationally televised doubleheader with drama of the highest order.

-- There are no divisional restrictions on wild cards. Both, conceivably, could come within the Giants' division. If one of the wild-card teams won 98 games and the other won 90, tough luck for the superior outfit. Lose that wild-card playoff game and you're done.

-- You can see why winning the division means everything. While the wild-card teams fight it out, you can regroup for the Division Series.

-- There's no room on this year's calendar for a conventional 2-2-1 Division Series format, where the team with the best record opens with two games at home. It's a 2-3 schedule, so the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds in each league will have to play the first two games on the road. That's just pure craziness.

-- Say the Giants win 102 games and take the No. 1 seed. Their "reward" would be almost two weeks without a home game. They would finish the regular season in San Diego and Los Angeles, then open the postseason with two road games against the wild-card survivor. Plus, each player gets a free bowl of soup.

-- Some complain that, with this system, we wouldn't have had the drama of the Giants' 2010 stretch drive or last year's unforgettable last day of the season. Dumb argument. There's no telling what exquisite storylines could unfold. And don't forget, under this system, the Giants would have sneaked into the second wild-card spot in 2009, 2004 and 2001. And in 1998, they got a preview of how the new format would work, losing a one-game playoff at Wrigley Field after finishing tied with the Cubs for the wild card.

Devine's soreness remains a mystery

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The good news for Joey Devine is that there appears to be no structural damage to his right elbow. The bad news is that there is still no explanation why he's been plagued by flexor tendon tendinitis for more than two years.

A's manager Bob Melvin said on Thursday that the team's medical staff is in the process of designing the best plan to combat Devine's lingering soreness. The right-handed reliever has shut down all throwing activity for the time being, and it's not yet known when he'll restart it.

"They're going to figure out what the best prognosis is and what the best direction to go is," Melvin said. "Whether it's strengthening, they're going to do everything they can to get it figured out."

Devine, 28, underwent successful Tommy John surgery in April 2009, but has made just 26 big league appearances since then. He had three spring outings early on in camp before the tendinitis sidelined him.

Worth noting

- On the eve of the A's second Opening Night -- and first in the States -- Melvin said his lineup for Friday is "going to be very similar," if not exactly the one he used vs. Seattle lefty Jason Vargas in Tokyo last week. With that in mind, Johnny Gomes is expected to be the designated hitter, with Kila Ka'aihue getting the nod at first base.
- Gomes, who designed and donned a customized Reds bathrobe while with Cincinnati, has a new one that screams yellow and flashes an A's logo in honor of his new team. The A's veteran was seen wearing it prior to Thursday's workout at the Coliseum, drawing attention from his manager.

"He's a unique individual, and I'm guessing that's not the only piece of attire we'll be talking about this season," Melvin said, grinning. "I'm sure we'll have a few conversations."

Mariners, A's resume series after split in Japan

By Lyle Spencer / MLB.com

Welcome to Opening Day II, American style.

After launching the season in Tokyo with a split of two games, the Athletics and Mariners resume their unorthodox four-game series on Friday night at the Coliseum. They'll face off again on Saturday night before taking a rare Sunday off.

Oakland and Seattle share a lot in common. They're housed in the American League West, a division featuring a pair of heavyweights -- the Rangers and Angels -- with World Series championship aspirations and the tools to make it happen.

The A's and Mariners are trying to stay afloat by the Pacific with reconstructed lineups hoping to generate more offense in support of capable pitching staffs and quality defenses.

Left-hander Jason Vargas, who held Oakland to two hits and a run in 6 1/3 innings in Japan, gets the start on Friday night for the Mariners. He'll oppose A's ace Brandon McCarthy, who pitched superbly in the opener with a no-decision against Felix Hernandez.

Hernandez, in prime-time form in his debut, will go on Saturday against Bartolo Colon. King Felix yielded a run on five hits and no walks in eight innings of the opener, striking out six. Colon was his equal, winning the second game by holding Seattle to one run on three hits in eight innings.

"With so much time in between both their starts, there was only one option to give one guy a work day and that was Felix," Mariners manager Eric Wedge said. "So instead of giving him that much time off, we were able to give him another start [Monday]. We weren't able to do that with Vargas because of the way the days set up."

This rotation likely sets up Hernandez to handle the Mariners' home opener on April 13 -- against the A's. These teams are really getting to know each other.

The emotional return of Ichiro Suzuki was the big story in Japan, but both clubs had solid showings from athletes around whom they are building their futures.

Highly touted Cuban center fielder Yoenis Cespedes hammered a decisive home run against reliever Shawn Kelley to power an A's victory in the second game after a four-hit eruption by Ichiro and a booming home run by young Dustin Ackley had lifted Seattle in the season opener.

Outfielders Josh Reddick and Jonny Gomes, two other new bats in A's manager Bob Melvin's attack, also went deep in the 4-1 win behind Colon. McCarthy went seven innings, yielding one earned run, in the opener before the Mariners prevailed, 3-1, in 11 innings, on RBI singles by Ackley and Ichiro.

The second time around, Vargas knows a few adjustments are in order.

"They have an idea of what I'm trying to do," he said, "and I have an idea of what they're trying to do. So it all comes down to who is going to execute.

"It's a lot different [lineup] than last year. Gomes and Cespedes make a big difference in the middle of their lineup. They lost [Josh] Willingham, but they got some other guys that can do some things."

Both managers came away from Japan encouraged.

"That builds team chemistry," Melvin said in the afterglow of the three-homer barrage and Colon's masterly work. "We've got a lot of new players we feel like have been working hard all spring to mesh together, and it shows when you get contributions all the way around like that."

Wedge also saw positive signs.

"I was really proud how they handled themselves over in Japan with everything going on both on and off the field," he said. "I felt they represented themselves well. Now it's just to get them back on track."

Cespedes, signed for four years and \$36 million, picked up a \$12,000 check in an MVP ceremony. He had a double to go with his first Major League homer -- crushing a Kelley breaking ball -- in six at-bats in the two games.

"It was a blast," Reddick said. "Everyone's been questioning his ability to hit a breaking ball, and for him to sit back on one and then line one out, that's a big step for him."

Cespedes is aware of the book on him. It's nothing new for a power hitter arriving on the Major League scene.

"I know the whole game they were throwing sliders," Cespedes said. "I tried to make adjustments, and that's the only way I hit that ball."

The Mariners have redesigned the top third of their order with Ichiro sliding into the third spot and Ackley slotted behind Chone Figgins, who hopes to regain his mojo back in the leadoff role he occupied with the Angels.

Ackley showed why he's one of the game's most promising young hitters. Unloading against McCarthy leading off the fourth, the Mariners' second baseman owned the distinction of launching the first home run of the 2012 season.

"The first thing I thought of when I got back to the dugout was that I was leading the Major Leagues in home runs," Ackley said. "It might be the coolest thing I've ever done in my life. So to be a part of that and to be a part of this winning team and the game tonight in extra innings, it was awesome."

Ackley's 11th-inning RBI single following Brendan Ryan's double and Figgins' sacrifice gave Seattle the lead.

"He's just a good hitter," Melvin said of Ackley. "He's going to be one of the better middle-infield hitters in the league at some point in time."

Mariners: Montero, Smoak offensive keys

- The Mariners are hoping their new slugger, Jesus Montero, and first baseman Justin Smoak start smoking line drives in the middle third of the order after going a combined 2-for-16 in Japan. Montero, who was 1-for-7, took a pitch in the helmet in an exhibition game on Monday from Colorado's Edgmer Escalona but said he felt fine afterward. Smoak and Montero both have enjoyed productive springs.
- Known more for his glove as a shortstop in Japan, Munenori Kawasaki, 30, landed a utility infielder's role with a big spring, hitting .455 with his Ichiro-like approach.

Athletics: Cespedes reading the book

- Cespedes, whose homer in Japan came on a slider, is aware of the book on him. It's nothing new for a power hitter arriving on the Major League scene. "I know the whole game they were throwing sliders," Cespedes said. "I tried to make adjustments, and that's the only way I hit that ball."
- Infielder Eric Sogard, who batted .200 in 70 at-bats with the A's last season, hit .341 with two homers in 44 Cactus League at-bats. He's making a case for increased playing time.

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.
- Seattle is due to face Yu Darvish on Monday in Texas in the Japanese sensation's Major League debut. The Mariners have Hector Noesi, Blake Beavan, Kevin Millwood and Vargas lined up for the Rangers in the four-game series.

Opening Day in Oakland. With Prospects of Doubleheader of Anguish for A's Fans

By DAN FOST, New York Times

As the A's take the field for their home opener Friday against the Seattle Mariners, the team's overachieving glory days depicted in last year's "Moneyball" starring Brad Pitt as General Manager Billy Beane are a warm, if distant glimmer.

While Opening Day traditionally represents a time of hope, this year it presents Oakland with the twin quandaries of a team that seems overmatched on the field and eager to leave the Q.co Coliseum — the latest name for the former Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, its longtime home.

The owners, Lew Wolff and John Fisher, have been striving to get approval for a new ballpark in San Jose, a city eager for big league ball. But they have been thwarted thus far by the San Francisco Giants, who own the territorial rights to San Jose.

With the exception of 2010, when the A's finished 81-81, they have not had a winning season in five years. In this most recent off-season, the A's once again traded or failed to re-sign several of their best players, including pitchers Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez and Andrew Bailey.

"They don't want to win," said Garth Kimball, a founder of Baseball Oakland, a group trying to keep the A's in town. "They want to be able to get out of town without anybody caring."

Yet the A's are not totally conceding the division to big-spending rivals. They signed the Cuban slugger Yoenis Céspedes to a four-year, \$36 million contract, and also signed Manny Ramirez, a once-feared hitter who won't be eligible to play until May 30 because of a suspension for performance-enhancing drug use.

Attendance at A's games, however, has been a persistent problem: Last year it was the worst in the major leagues. "For us to compete, we're going to have to have a new stadium," Mr. Beane has said — an argument Mr. Kimball calls tantamount to the 1919 Chicago White Sox throwing games for gamblers. "It's money-driven," he said.

Mr. Kimball is also irked that Mr. Wolff has placed tarps across 9,000 seats covering most of the upper deck. "It was a way of embarrassing the fans," Mr. Kimball said. "It's the Montreal-ization of the Oakland Athletics."

Jim Leahey, the A's vice president of marketing and sales, said through a spokesman that the team does not need 44,000 seats. "It is not a great fan experience to sit in the upper deck at our park, especially in the outfield," he said, "and it doesn't make business sense to staff those areas when there are not enough fans to fill the park."

Mr. Leahey said the A's offer fans many other enticements, from cheap tickets to novelty bobbleheads.

The San Jose gambit has been an ongoing story line with the Giants and A's. When Walter Haas owned the A's, he gave the Giants the rights in 1990, when the owner Bob Lurie was trying to escape Candlestick Park. The effort failed, but the rights stayed, even when Mr. Lurie sold the team to a group that included John Fisher's father, Donald Fisher, founder of the Gap stores.

Now the A's are in roughly the same position as Mr. Lurie was in the 1980s: Trying to persuade fans to come to the park, while publicly decrying its conditions in an effort to build a new one.

Breaking down the AL West

Fort Worth Star Telegram

Predicted finish

1 Texas Rangers: They return the majority of the team that has reached two consecutive World

Series, and don't have many holes on their roster. C.J. Wilson left via free agency, but they added Japanese sensation Yu Darvish and moved Neftali Feliz from closer to starter. They replaced Feliz with former All-Star closer Joe Nathan, and have one of the most potent lineups in baseball with Josh Hamilton, Adrian Beltre, Michael Young and Nelson Cruz in the heart of it.

2 Los Angeles Angels: The Angels want to get back to the top of the division, and had a memorable winter by signing first baseman Albert Pujols and starter C.J. Wilson. The Angels have one of the deepest rotations in the AL, led by Jered Weaver, Dan Haren, Ervin Santana and Wilson.

3 Seattle Mariners: The Mariners aren't on the level of the Rangers or Angels, but are trying to get there. They have one of the best pitchers in the game, Felix Hernandez, along with promising starters in Blake Beavan and Hector Noesi. The bullpen is solid with Brandon League at closer. Seattle has intriguing position players who have yet to break out, such as Justin Smoak, Jesus Montero and Kyle Seager.

4 Oakland Athletics: The A's are in rebuilding mode, trading away a talented core of young pitchers, Gio Gonzalez, Trevor Cahill and Andrew Bailey, in order to replenish the farm system. Brandon McCarthy leads a less-than-stellar rotation, while Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes is expected to spark the offense.

Rising

OF David Murphy, Texas: After struggling in the first half of the season, Murphy finished 2011 strong and had a solid postseason. He has been hitting left-handed pitchers better this spring, and could find himself playing more than he has the past four seasons.

2B Howie Kendrick, Los Angeles: He is coming off one of his best seasons, batting .285 with 18 home runs, 30 doubles and 63 RBIs. At 28, Kendrick is entering the prime of his career.

RHP Brandon McCarthy, Oakland: He didn't start one major league game in 2010, but bounced back last season by posting a 3.32 ERA over 25 starts. McCarthy fought through injuries and didn't live up to expectations with the Rangers, but has reinvented himself with the A's. And he's still only 28.

2B Dustin Ackley, Seattle: Ackley made his big league debut last season, batting .273 with six home runs and 36 RBIs. This spring, he said he has felt more comfortable at the plate.

RHP Jordan Walden, Los Angeles: The Mansfield product shined in his first season as closer with 32 saves and an All-Star appearance. The 24-year-old should only get better with more experience.

Falling

OF Ichiro Suzuki, Seattle: For the first time in his major league career, Ichiro failed to bat at least .300 and compile 200 hits last season. He also had a career-low on-base percentage, signaling a possible decline for the 38-year-old. Seattle has moved him from leadoff to third in the lineup.

INF Mark Trumbo, Los Angeles: The Angels brought in first baseman Albert Pujols, forcing Trumbo to play more third base and corner outfield this spring. He displayed immense power potential last season with 29 home runs, but didn't have great plate discipline.

OF Coco Crisp, Oakland: Crisp isn't the happiest player, as the A's moved him from center to left field in the spring. Along with his position displeasure, Crisp will be looking to improve his .264 batting average from last season. On the bright side, he did steal an AL-high 49 bases last season.

RHP Koji Uehara, Texas: The Rangers gave up two major league caliber players at the trade deadline for Uehara, who had been an elite reliever with Baltimore. He struggled in Texas, though, and eventually found himself off the World Series roster. Uehara didn't have a compelling spring, but the Rangers will give the veteran a chance to prove himself.

2B Jemile Weeks, Oakland: He had an impressive rookie season, posting a .303 average with 22 stolen bases over 97 games. However, players tend to go through sophomore slumps, and Weeks' minor league career suggests he could struggle at the plate.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Big Opening Night For A's Affiliates

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

Apr 6, 2012

The Oakland A's improved farm system was on display on Opening Night of the 2012 minor league season. Three of the four A's full-season affiliates earned wins on Thursday night and the fourth affiliate played well in its loss. Find out the details inside...

River Cats Outslugs The 51s

Offense is often on display in Las Vegas and Opening Night 2012 was no exception. The Sacramento River Cats and the Las Vegas 51s combined for 32 hits and 17 runs in the River Cats' 11-6 win. Sacramento pounded out 18 hits and nine of those hits went for extra bases.

Every River Cats' batter except for Wes Timmons had at least two hits. Chris Carter and Michael Taylor led the way with three hits apiece. Grant Green had a lead-off homer in his regular season Triple-A debut and Brandon Moss and Derek Norris each homered in their Oakland A's organizational debuts. Norris had three RBIs, while Green, Daric Barton, Carter and Taylor each scored twice.

Travis Banwart earned the start for the River Cats. He pitched fairly well until the fifth inning, when he was touched for four runs (three earned). In total, Banwart allowed six runs (five earned) on 12 hits and three walks in 4.1 innings. He struck-out four.

The Sacramento bullpen came on in relief of Banwart in the fifth and ensured that the River Cats' offensive efforts would not go to waste. Neil Wagner, Erick Threets and Merkin Valdez combined to toss 4.2 scoreless innings to secure the win. Wagner was credited with the victory and he allowed only a hit in 2.1 scoreless frames with two strike-outs. Threets gave-up only a

walk in 1.1 scoreless frames, while Valdez allowed a hit and a walk in a scoreless ninth inning.

Midland Loses A Nailbiter

The Midland Rockhounds wound-up on the wrong side of a pitcher's duel on Opening Night, losing to the Arkansas Travelers by a score of 1-0. The only run of the game was unearned.

Midland starter [A.J. Griffin](#) had a breakthrough 2011 campaign and he looked every bit as good in his 2012 debut. The lanky right-hander struck-out the first five batters he faced and finished with eight strike-outs and only one walk in five scoreless innings. Griffin allowed only two hits and threw 49 of his 71 pitches for strikes.

The Midland bullpen would also pitch well, although reliever [A.J. Huttenlocker](#) was stuck with a tough-luck loss. He allowed an unearned run in two-thirds of an inning of work. [James Simmons](#) pitched the final 2.1 innings. He didn't allow a run and he scattered two hits with no walks while striking out one. It was the A's 2007 first-round pick's first game at the Double-A level since 2008. Simmons missed all of the 2010 season and the first two months of the 2011 campaign thanks to a shoulder injury.

Offensively, the Rockhounds couldn't get much going against the Arkansas staff. Midland managed only four hits and five walks and they went 0-for-6 with runners in scoring position. [Conner Crumbliss](#) and [Michael Choice](#) each walked twice. Crumbliss also stole two bases. Midland batters combined to strike-out 10 times in the loss.

Stockton Routs Lake Elsinore

The 2012 season got off to a roaring start for the Stockton Ports. Despite an early morning bus ride down the I-5 corridor, the Ports looked lively in their 7-2 road win over the Storm on Opening Night. The Ports exacted some revenge after falling to Lake Elsinore in the California League championship series last year.

[Blake Treinen](#), the A's seventh-round draft pick last season out of South Dakota State, got the Opening Night nod and shined in the role. The hard-throwing right-hander allowed only two runs in 6.2 innings against a prospect-laden Storm line-up. Treinen scattered eight hits and didn't walk a batter while striking out four.

The Ports' bullpen was equally impressive on Thursday night. [Sean Doolittle](#) made his full-season affiliate pitching debut a memorable one. The left-hander faced five batters and struck-out four of them en route to a perfect 1.2 inning outing. This was Doolittle's first full-season affiliate game since early May 2009, when he injured his knee playing the outfield for the Sacramento River Cats. Right-hander Arnold Leon, who missed most of the past two seasons thanks to an elbow injury that required Tommy John surgery, pitched a scoreless ninth inning to finish off the win. Leon last pitched for a full-season affiliate in April 2010.

The Ports had plenty of offense on Thursday night. Designated hitter [Josh Whitaker](#) had a big Stockton regular season debut. He homered and doubled in four at-bats and also added a walk. Whitaker, a Midwest League post-season All-Star last year, appeared in the championship series for the Ports last year after spending the entire 2011 regular season with the Low-A Burlington Bees.

Leftfielder [Eliezer Mesa](#), a former Colorado Rockies' farmhand, collected two hits in his debut as an Oakland A's minor leaguer. Centerfielder [Myrio Richard](#) also had two hits, including a double, and third baseman [Tony Thompson](#) had a key two-RBI double during the Ports' five-run second inning. Catcher [Max Stassi](#) and first baseman [Miles Head](#) also added doubles. Stockton totaled 11 hits, including six extra-base hits, in the win.

Bees Cruise Past Clinton

The Burlington Bees used a six-run third inning and a strong pitching performance to earn a win on Opening Night over the Clinton Lumberkings, 8-2. Designated hitter [Dusty Robinson](#) had a huge game in his Bees' debut, hitting a grand slam and going 2-4 with a walk and four RBIs. Three Bees' pitchers combined to limit the Lumberkings to six hits and two walks.

Right-hander [Drew Granier](#) got the start and he survived a rough second inning to put together a solid four-inning outing. Granier allowed one run on two hits and one walk in four innings and he struck-out three. All of the base-runners Granier

allowed came in that second inning.

Nathan Kilcrease got the win with four strong innings of his own. He allowed only one run on four hits and a walk. He struck-out three in his Burlington debut. Right-hander Ryan Doolittle finished off the win with a scoreless ninth inning. Doolittle is attempting a comeback after an injury-shortened 2011 season.

On offense, Robinson was the star of the show, but the Bees had plenty of other contributors, as well. Middle infielders Zhi Fang Pan and Sean Jamieson each collected two hits. One of Pan's hits was a double and Jamieson also added an RBI and a walk, reaching base three times. Chad Oberacker, B.A. Vollmuth and Royce Consigli also chipped in with RBIs.

A's Shift Miles Head Back Across Diamond To Third

By Casey Tefertiller, Baseball America

PHOENIX—Miles Head hadn't played third base since his pro debut in the Red Sox system in 2009, but that didn't stop the Athletics from thinking creatively.

Oakland shifted Head, 20, from first base back to the hot corner after acquiring him in the December deal that sent closer Andrew Bailey to Boston.

"I was a little rusty at first, but it's like riding a bike—you get it back," Head said after spending time during the A's spring mini-camp working with coach Juan Navarrete to make the transition.

Both Navarrete and farm director Keith Lieppman believe Head has the potential to stay on the left side of the infield.

"He has good hands . . . (and) enough arm to stay there," Lieppman said.

That could be important for the A's, who have struggled to find a capable third baseman the last few years.

Head began 2011 with low Class A Greenville and batted a loud .338/.409/.612 with 15 homers in half a season. The righthanded hitter earned a promotion to high Class A Salem, where he hit .254/.328/.405 with seven homers in 232 at-bats.

"He's got a chance to put up numbers," Lieppman said. "From what we've seen so far, he should be able to hit for average and power. He goes to all fields and looks like he's got a really good idea of what he's doing.

"He's very instinctual with the bat. I'm very impressed with his ability to barrel balls up. He's ahead of his time as far as knowledge."

Head passed on a scholarship to Georgia to sign with the Red Sox for \$335,000 as their 26th-round pick in 2009. He said he wanted the fastest route to professional baseball coming out of high school in Fayetteville, Ga.

Head knows he has much to learn over the next few years, citing consistency and improving his mental game. The A's are also intent that their new 6-foot, 215-pound third baseman improve his conditioning.

A's ACORNS

- A 14th-round pick from Stetson last year, catcher Nick Rickles made an impression this spring by working with veteran pitchers and playing in Triple-A games.
- The A's claimed 26-year-old shortstop Brandon Hicks on waivers from the Braves and assigned him to minor league camp. He batted .252/.333/.446 in 361 at-bats in Triple-A last season.