

Oakland A's Josh Donaldson working hard to learn to play third base

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

If practice hours were the main criterion, Josh Donaldson would have third base conquered by now.

Since the start of spring training, no A's player has put in more overtime trying to improve defensively.

"This guy will wear you out," infield coach Mike Gallego said. "He wants to take a thousand ground balls."

But there's more to it for a catcher trying to make the transition to everyday third baseman. Donaldson hadn't played third base even on a semiregular basis since his junior season at Auburn in 2007.

But when Scott Sizemore, the A's projected starter, was lost to a season-ending knee injury early in spring training, the A's switched Donaldson from catcher to third, feeling he was their best option.

Now Donaldson is learning on the fly, and the growing pains are apparent.

He made a throwing error Friday after charging a bunt by Seattle's Chone Figgins, a play that helped open the gates to a four-run Mariners rally in a 7-3 A's loss. He also misplayed a bunt against the Giants during the Bay Bridge series last week when Oakland had a play on.

The A's know they have to live with Donaldson's mistakes as he acclimates to the position. But opponents surely will continue to challenge him, dropping bunts to the left side until he proves he can make the play.

"I think I had a lot of this stuff happen in spring training," Donaldson said. "But getting on a major league field where it's real and not spring training anymore, it puts a little bit of pressure out there. It's nothing I can't deal with."

The fact that the A's even called on Donaldson points to their lack of depth at third base. Since Eric Chavez's last full season with the team in 2006, they have struggled to find a player who provides capable defense while giving them offensive production typically called for at the position.

After Sizemore's injury, the A's reportedly had interest in trying to lure Melvin Mora out of retirement. They passed on bringing in a free agent such as Miguel Tejada, who lobbied for a chance to return to his former club.

And though the A's are known to have had interest in Los Angeles Angels third baseman Alberto Callaspo, they weren't willing to give up much in a trade.

Their best third-base prospect who is even close to major league ready is Stephen Parker, 24, a fifth-round pick in 2009 who is beginning his first full season at Triple-A Sacramento.

Eric Sogard, the A's utility infielder, started two of the first four games at third base, mainly to get an extra left-handed bat in against Mariners right-hander Felix Hernandez.

But manager Bob Melvin said Donaldson will get the majority of time at third, though he must keep improving defensively.

"At the big league level, it gets a little more precise," Melvin said. "(Hitters) get a little bit faster, guys are more precise with bunts. Therefore, you've got to be more precise with what you're doing."

Donaldson appeared in 53 minor league games at third base over four seasons, but tackling the position in the majors is entirely different.

"You have fast guys at every level who like to bunt," he said. "The difference is in the minors guys that can bunt can't necessarily hit and smoke the ball down your throat."

After making his throwing error Friday, Donaldson was back on the field with Gallego before Saturday's game, charging bunts and working to give himself the proper angle to make an accurate throw to first.

"He's got quick feet and great hands," Gallego said. "You watch. By the end of the year, people are going to be talking about the defense that he brings every day."

Ostler: Céspedes' livens up moribund ballpark

Scott Ostler, San Francisco Chronicle

I promised my wife I would avoid outdated references that make my column seem unhip (is it still hip to be hip?). But I can't ignore the news from Oakland, that pitchers facing the A's are sweating out a Cuban missile crisis.

If there is apprehension among opposing pitchers about the early long-ball binge of Yoenis Céspedes, it's a good thing they don't see him in the clubhouse with his shirt off. The Bambino Cubano has some seriously thick muscles. He looks like a young Willie Mays, if Mays had spent years power-lifting with the 49ers.

Céspedes' second homer of the season, on Friday, gave longtime A's observers flashbacks to the days when Jose Canseco seemed to be launching golf balls out of the park.

Céspedes' third homer, on Saturday evening, also was pulverized, to right-center at the dead-air Coliseum. This guy livens up the air in more ways than one.

He said he does it without trying.

"He is always going to the plate only to make contact with the ball and hit the ball well," translated Ariel Prieto, the former A's pitcher from Cuba who has been called away from minor-league coaching duties to be Céspedes' translator/sidekick.

That was a great call by the A's. Prieto is warm and worldly, the perfect surrogate big brother to the Bambino Cubano. Prieto's English isn't Churchillian, but he gets 'er done.

"That's a new friend that I have in my life right now," Prieto said. "He's going to feel comfortable right here. For me, it was different. When I came over (in 1995), they didn't do this."

Prieto said of Céspedes, "There's a guy that has a great attitude. There's a guy (who) likes to play. There's a guy coming over here and working hard. There's a guy who is mentally really strong and positive."

My guess is that Céspedes will start picking up English quickly. He seems unfazed by the giant cultural and baseball leap he's making. He comes off as neither brash nor shy.

Prieto said they're starting the language education with baseball terminology. The Spanish word for home run works in either language. It's *jonron*, pronounced hone-ROHN.

After *jonron numero tres* in four games, Céspedes said he felt lucky.

"He says even in Cuba he never did that before," Prieto translated.

When Céspedes stood at home plate Friday and watched his homer sail deep into the concrete jungle beyond left field, he did so out of surprise. He wasn't trying to go Reggie Jackson on us.

What Céspedes is is a very earnest fellow. He fits right into the clubhouse, which seems to be less the old Jason Giambi frat house and more the domain of serious students such as Kurt Suzuki and Jemile Weeks.

Manager Bob Melvin said of Céspedes, "He's working to the extent where you almost have to back him off some. He's taking flyballs in the outfield basically the whole day. Working in the cage, taking BP, learning how to study films."

I asked A's hitting coach Chili Davis after Saturday's game if it's too early to get excited about Céspedes.

"You can be excited, if you like," Davis said.

Davis said he liked the home run at-bat that game because "it's important how he got the pitch to hit. He didn't chase early; he forced the guy into the zone. He was aggressive on the 2-0 pitch, the guy tried to get a strike over and he was ready to hit it.

"He's a young, aggressive hitter with some serious power. Pitchers are going to try to exploit his aggressiveness, and the more patience he shows, the more discipline, the better hitter he'll be, as time comes.

"There are times we're all going to be disappointed. He's going to get himself out on pitcher's pitches. Hopefully, he'll learn from that. You're going to see a real good player."

It's hard to tell where Céspedes is, development-wise, which makes the four-year, \$36 million contract a gamble. There's no strong book on where Cuban baseball rates on the baseball-hardness scale. Is it equivalent to Triple-A?

Maybe this is not such a big step for Céspedes. Maybe it is, and he has been lucky. The mystery makes this adventure more fun for everyone.

It could be an adventure for team ownership, too. What if Céspedes keeps hitting and stirs up interest, a la Linsanity, drawing big crowds to the Oakland ballpark?

That would throw a monkey wrench into ownership's aggressive campaign to prove that there is no market for baseball in Oakland.

If that happens, A's owners Lew Wolff and John Fisher will have their own private Cuban missile crisis, and they won't be able to solve it by picking up the Hot Line and threatening Nikita Khrushchev. Sorry, honey.

A's Tommy Milone is a classic, crafty left-hander

Steve Kroner, San Francisco Chronicle

Among the great mysteries in baseball: Why do people call left-handers "crafty," but not right-handers?

Not sure what the answer is, but the A's appear to have another lefty who won't overpower hitters but knows how to retire them. In the grand tradition of Tom Glavine, Jamie Moyer and Dallas Braden, enter Tommy Milone.

"He is out of that mold," A's manager Bob Melvin said.

The A's acquired Milone from Washington in the Gio Gonzalez deal in December. Milone makes his Oakland debut Monday night in the opener of a three-game series against Kansas City at the Coliseum.

"I don't throw ... in the 90s," Milone said. "I've got to use both sides of the plate and (change) speeds to keep hitters off balance."

Milone's balance has impressed the A's. As in, he displays an even keel on the mound.

"My job is to help guide him through the game," catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "With Tommy, he's pretty calm and cool, so there's not really much that I need to do on that part."

Said Milone: "I don't show emotion on my sleeve. It's kind of down inside. I feel like that's part of how I'm successful is, I don't really show any body language or anything.

"I just go out there and try to do what I know how."

Milone clearly knows how to throw strikes. In 148 1/3 innings last year with Triple-A Syracuse, Milone walked 16 hitters. In a September call-up with the Nationals, he allowed four bases on balls in 26 innings.

One key to avoiding ball four is to make the first pitch a strike. Milone said he has become more aggressive at the outset of an at-bat.

"I just need to throw that first pitch for a strike," Milone said, "and then after that, when I'm ahead in the count, now I can kind of move to the corners of the plate - and it makes pitching so much easier because you're taking so much stress away from that first pitch."

The Nationals selected Milone, a USC alum, in the 10th round of the 2008 draft. He breezed up the organizational ladder in an almost mind-numbingly consistent manner:

-- 2009: 12-5, 2.91 ERA for Single A Potomac.

-- 2010: 12-5, 2.85 ERA for Double-A Harrisburg.

-- 2011: 12-6, 3.22 ERA for Triple-A Syracuse.

He said he learned the art of pitching out of necessity. After joining the varsity at Saugus High in Southern California as a sophomore, he figured he couldn't simply blow his fastball by more experienced hitters.

"I had to use both sides of the plate," Milone said. "I had to throw my changeup a lot, curveball, make it look like a strike and then keep it out of the zone."

That sounds mighty similar to Moyer's approach to pitching. When Milone was a kid (he estimates he was between 10 and 13 years old), he got Moyer's autograph at Dodger Stadium.

Milone, now 25, might get the opportunity to face Moyer when the A's play at Colorado in June.

"It's crazy to think that he's still in the game pitching and doing well," Milone said.

Another of the great mysteries in baseball: How is Jamie Moyer still a starter in the majors at age 49?

Defense still a prime concern for Melvin, A's

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Always honest and forthcoming, A's manager Bob Melvin has not shied away from using the term "work in progress" when speaking about different facets of his youthful ball club.

The ever-changing lineup, filled with plenty of inexperience, is a work in progress. So, too, is the first-base decision still.

Yet just four games into the regular season, it's been the team's defense that has encompassed those three words above all else.

The A's have been tagged for three errors, but that number truly doesn't characterize the sloppy play that defined their home-opening, two-game series with the Mariners on Friday and Saturday.

"I think we've fallen into a bit of a rut, but we pride ourselves on defense, and we've been working on it, so I don't think it has anything to do with work ethic, but more about going out there and giving more quality performances on defense," second baseman Jemile Weeks said. "I think it's something we'll be able to handle and we'll be able to fix."

The A's are already on pace to make 122 errors, following a disappointing 2011 campaign that resulted in 124. Only the Cubs, with 134, made more. Oakland ranked last in the American League and second to last in the Majors with a .979 fielding percentage, the lowest such mark since 2000.

Moreover, those errors led to 82 unearned runs, most in the league, and the A's were ultimately left staring down a 35-55 record when making one or more miscues. It was no surprise, then, when Melvin entered camp and proclaimed defense the top priority.

In 24 exhibition contests, the results of that work showed, as the A's exuded sharp defense and went 15-7-2, the third-best record in the Majors. But that crisp play has yet to carry over into the season.

It's obviously early in the year, much too early to get overly worked up about these misdoings. Yet it's still worth noting that an improved defensive effort will be significant to the club's progress going forward. The A's are not built to score an excessive amount of runs each game, making their pitching, running and defensive work all the more important.

"We've been working real hard on defense, and we haven't played near as well as we should," Melvin said. "This team knows it's a key element to our game, and we expect better."

While the middle-infield duo of Weeks and Cliff Pennington aren't so much of a concern, their teammates at the corners are. Josh Donaldson, who is still learning the intricacies of third base after taking over the position for the injured Scott Sizemore less than two months ago, is visibly not fully comfortable yet.

Donaldson, who spent the majority of his Minor League career as a catcher, made a throwing error at third on a bunt play Friday night and, by the following afternoon, was out on the field working on that exact play.

"I'd say positioning has been the biggest challenge for me, especially when you know that one step to the right or to the left can determine whether you make that play," Donaldson said. "It's something I'm going to have to continue to work on."

At first base, Brandon Allen has showcased a consistent glove, but Kila Ka'aihue has been shaky at times. And behind them, the outfield hasn't been perfect, either. Left fielder Coco Crisp was charged with a throwing error on Saturday, while Josh Reddick has bobbled two balls in as many games. Yoenis Cespedes, who has shined offensively, isn't to be left out, as he also endured struggles on the defensive end in both games.

The A's were afforded the chance to regroup on Sunday with a rare offday before they head back to the Coliseum for three games with the Royals beginning on Monday, and Melvin and Co. anticipate the start of cleaner play.

"We were doing it all spring," he said.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Oakland A's MLN: Ports, River Cats Hot

Melissa Lockard, OaklandClubhouse.com

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The Oakland A's two Northern California affiliates got off to strong starts to their 2012 seasons, finishing each of their first series of the season with a 3-1 record. We review Sunday's action within the A's system inside...

Sacramento Cashes In Against 51s

The Sacramento River Cats finished off an impressive series win over the [Las Vegas 51s](#) on Sunday, cruising to a 10-3 win behind a [Daric Barton](#) grand slam and a solid pitching effort. The River Cats now take their 3-1 record to Tucson.

Sacramento pounded out 12 hits, with every River Cats' hitter collected at least one hit except for shortstop [Brandon Hicks](#). Barton gave the River Cats an early cushion with a third-inning grand slam that was the big blow in a five-run inning. Sacramento would tack on three more runs in the fourth to separate themselves from the 51s.

[Wes Timmons](#), [Grant Green](#), [Stephen Parker](#) and [Joel Galarraga](#) each had two hits, while [Michael Taylor](#) reached twice with a hit and a walk. Sacramento finished the four-game series with six homeruns and a team batting average of .346.

[Tyson Ross](#) got the start for the River Cats. He allowed a run on five hits and three walks in four innings of work, although he didn't strike-out a batter. [Carlos Hernandez](#) took over for Ross in the fifth and earned the win by allowing two runs on three hits in three innings. [Jim Miller](#) finished off the win with two scoreless innings.

Rockhounds Lose Opener In Springfield

After taking their season-opening series versus the [Arkansas Travelers](#), two-games-to-one, the Rockhounds ran into a buzzsaw in their first game versus the [Springfield Cardinals](#). Springfield pounded out 13 runs and 12 hits en route to a 13-5 win over Midland.

[Shawn Haviland](#) had a rough 2012 debut. He allowed seven runs on five hits in 2.2 innings. He gave-up five hits and walked five while striking out two. [A.J. Huttenlocker](#) was touched up for two runs in 1.1 innings, both runs coming on solo homeruns. [Murphy Smith](#) threw the final four innings for the Rockhounds. He allowed four runs, but none of them were earned, and he struck-out six while walking none in his 2012 debut.

[Conner Crumbliss](#) smacked his second homerun of the season and also added a double to lead the Rockhounds' attack. [Tyler Ladendorf](#) also had two hits, while [Josh Horton](#) reached three times on a single and two walks.

Stockton Finishes Off Storm

The Stockton Ports earned a 3-1 series win over the [Lake Elsinore Storm](#) with a 4-1 victory on Sunday. [Blake Hassebrock](#) had a strong California League debut and [Josh Whitaker](#) continued to pace the Stockton offensive attack.

Hassebrock made it into the seventh inning in his first start of the season, allowing a run on eight hits in 6.1 innings. He struck-out two and didn't walk a batter. Hassebrock was the second starter in a row for Stockton to toss 6.1 innings. [T.J. Walz](#) went that distance on Saturday night in his California League debut. Lefty [Jake Brown](#) earned his first save of the season with 2.2 scoreless innings. He allowed only a hit and struck-out a batter.

Whitaker, playing in left field, collected two more hits and scored twice, while driving in his fourth run of the season. [Miles Head](#), who drew the start at first base, also had two hits, one of which was his second double of the year.

Stockton showed some speed on the basepaths, swiping three bases in the game. [Eliezer Mesa](#) captured his third stolen base of the year, while Whitaker added his second and [Nino Leyja](#) swiped his first of the year. Stockton will look to continue its hot start versus Bakersfield on Monday.

Burlington Set To Tackle Wisconsin

After winning their season-opening series, 2-1, in Clinton, Iowa, the Burlington Bees had Sunday off. They will resume game action on Monday at home versus the [Wisconsin Timber Rattlers](#). Newly acquired prospect [Raul Alcantara](#) will make his Oakland A's debut in the game.