

A'S YEAR-END REVIEW

Another slog ahead: Hitting rebuild next

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

If the A's were conducting a clinical trial or product testing, this past season might be considered Phase 1: Pitching.

Next year, then, would be Phase 2: Position Players. That means more growing pains as Oakland adds players such as first baseman/outfielder Chris Carter, third baseman Brett Wallace, second baseman Adrian Cardenas and perhaps first baseman/outfielder Sean Doolittle and catcher Josh Donaldson at some point.

"We have a long way to go," A's general manager Billy Beane said Monday of the rebuilding efforts. "It's going to take some time and some commitment. I don't know in our marketplace if there's any way to speed up that process. There's no magic potion to turn a 21-year-old kid into an established major-leaguer overnight."

Despite a last-place finish, results for the pitching portion of the A's rebuild were relatively bright, especially when it came to left-hander Brett Anderson and closer Andrew Bailey, who became an All-Star. Between an outstanding bullpen and a promising young rotation, Oakland might be relatively set for arms next year, although Beane did not rule out adding an experienced starter.

He said that the team has not checked yet with its own free agent, Justin Duchscherer, allowing Duchscherer some distance in the wake of treatment for depression, but Beane expects to talk to Duchscherer and his agent soon.

The area in which the team needs the most help is the power department. Oakland finished at the bottom of the league in home runs and slugging percentage. It's unclear if the team would dip into the free-agent market for another bat, but it's fairly unlikely Oakland won't look at former stars on the decline after several misfires with that strategy since Frank Thomas' outstanding 2006.

Trading for a young power hitter could be a possibility, but it likely would mean the A's would have to move some pitching.

The A's have suggested that Carter play the outfield for his Mexican winter-league team, but they do not know if the team will allow it. The outfield might be a spot where one or two new faces arrive; Rajai Davis is set in center after his breakout season, but Scott Hairston "will have to be the one to grasp" the opportunity in left field, according to Beane, emphasizing that Hairston must prove he can stay healthy.

Even Ryan Sweeney might be pushed if he has any drop-off; Beane noted that the corner outfield spots are important for offensive production in the American League.

So is first base, and though the A's are encouraged by what Daric Barton did in the second half, if Carter or Doolittle or Wallace can provide more power there, Barton might be expendable. Beane said of Carter: "He does address one of our short-term and long-term needs because of his power."

There has been little mention of Sonoma's Tommy Everidge; he was a nice story during a brief call-up, but it's possible he won't be protected this winter.

Designated hitter Jack Cust is a potential non-tender because he is arbitration eligible and it's possible that Eric Chavez or some of the young up-and-comers could man the DH spot. (The team seems set on keeping Landon Powell behind the plate rather than DH-ing him much.)

Chavez is expected to be ready for spring training, but no one knows if he can return to third on a regular basis after two back surgeries. If he cannot, Wallace might be there sooner than later - or the team could re-sign Adam Kennedy, who was among the A's best hitters and who got raves from manager Bob Geren and Beane for his professionalism. He's still learning third, but a whole spring there probably would improve his defense.

The A's appear satisfied enough with rookie Cliff Pennington's performance that they won't aggressively seek a shortstop again. "It would not be the No. 1 thing we address this offseason," Beane said.

Reliever Joey Devine should be ready to go for the spring after reconstructive elbow surgery. Josh Outman (same surgery) would be back no earlier than midseason, and it's possible he'll miss the entire season.

The A's have little reason to believe Dallas Braden's foot problem will continue to be an issue. Travis Buck has received an MRI exam for his post-concussion syndrome and is expected to be healthy for the spring, as is Sweeney, who has knee tendinitis, including a minor tear in the patellar tendon in his left knee, which will be immobilized for three weeks to allow for scarring to take place. He's also getting plasma injections for the tendinitis.

On the minor-league side, pitcher Michael Ynoa (elbow strain) has been doing well with his throwing program but will not get into any instructional-league games. Right-hander Fautino De Los Santos is having some soreness after he pitches, normal after elbow surgery, but he is being double-checked.

Oakland will continue its emphasis on international scouting; though not expected to be among the highest bidders, the team has made calls on recent Cuban defector Aroldis Chapman, a hard-throwing left-hander.

Beane reiterated that he is happy with the job Geren has done given the A's injuries and roster upheavals. The team will decide this week if all the coaches will return.

A's 2009 at a glance

Wednesday, October 7, 2009

The A's came into the season with an untested but promising pitching staff and a new cast of hitters to bolster the lineup. There were a lot of "ifs." Here's how things unfolded:

April W-L: 8-11

April 13: Bobby Crosby, adjusting to a new utility role, plays first base and second base, having played third base and right field in his previous two games. For the season, he started at shortstop in two games.

April 24: Eric Chavez, hitting .100 in 30 at-bats, plays his final game of the season. He later had back surgery in hopes of saving his career.

May W-L: 11-18

June W-L: 13-15

June 7: Vin Mazzaro shuts out the Orioles over 7 1/3 innings to make his line over his first two career starts 13 2/3 innings pitched, zero runs allowed. However, he would take seven losses over his next eight starts.

July W-L: 12-14

July 6: Rookie Brett Anderson throws a two-hit shutout against the Red Sox.

July 14: Rookie closer Andrew Bailey represents the A's in the All-Star Game. He plays catch with his idol, Mariano Rivera, and meets President Obama. "You're the young guy, you're the rookie," Obama said.

July 24: The A's trade Matt Holliday to the Cardinals for a package that includes top infield prospect Brett Wallace. Holliday, who hit .286 with 54 RBIs for the A's, hit .353 with 55 RBIs in 111 fewer at-bats for the Cardinals.

July 26: Memories of Rickey Henderson's career and anticipation of his Hall of Fame induction are a staple this summer, and when the day comes, Henderson delivers, again, with a stirring speech. "I am now in the class of the greatest players of all time," he says at the finish. "and at this moment, at this moment, I am ... very ... very ... humbled."

August W-L: 14-15

Aug. 7: The A's release Jason Giambi, who hit .193 for them in a second marriage that consisted of 269 at-bats. He ended up with the Rockies, for whom he went 7-for-24 (.292).

September-October W-L: 17-14

Sept. 18: Rajai Davis, having a career season, steals his 40th base by taking third on a throw back to the pitcher.

Sept. 26: As a highlight of their hot September, the A's come back from a seven-run deficit and win 15-10 at Anaheim.

Final record: 75-87, tied for 10th in the AL, tied for 20th in the majors

Rookies Anderson, McGehee honored

Young stars for A's, Brewers outshined others in September

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

The season may be over for the Athletics and Brewers after not making the playoffs, but they each have young stars who provided a more optimistic glimpse into their future during the final full month of the season.

On Tuesday, A's pitcher Brett Anderson and Brewers infielder Casey McGehee were each named Gillette Rookie of the Month for the American League and National League, respectively, thanks to their outstanding play in September.

Anderson, a 21-year-old left-hander, went 4-0 with a 2.28 ERA in four September starts. In 23 2/3 innings, he surrendered just 22 hits and three walks while striking out 26 and holding opposing batters to a .247 average.

Anderson was acquired from the D-backs as part of the Dan Haren trade in December 2007. He became just the third Oakland rookie to win at least four games in September, joining Barry Zito (five in 2000) and Mike Warren (four in 1983).

With 150 strikeouts, the second-round Draft pick in '06 set a new record for an A's rookie.

Anderson finished the season 11-11 with a 4.06 ERA in 30 starts. He led all American League rookies in strikeouts while finishing tied for second in starts, in fourth place in innings (175 1/3) and tied for fourth in wins.

"He's going to be one of the elite pitchers in the league, without a doubt," A's manager Bob Geren said recently. "He's a special young man."

McGehee finished September batting .337 (31-for-92) with five home runs. In addition, his 26 RBIs led all Major League rookies and was tied for second in the big leagues overall -- behind Ryan Howard's 27.

The 26-year-old added six doubles, 12 runs scored, a .565 slugging percentage and a .394 on-base percentage. He also collected nine multi-hit games and six multi-RBI contests. That included a 4-for-5 performance on Sept. 12 against the D-backs, when he cranked out two homers and a career-high six RBIs.

McGehee, claimed off waivers from the Cubs in October 2008, finished the year leading all National League rookies in RBIs (66) while ranking second in batting average (.301) and tied for second in home runs (16).

On Sept. 29, the Brewers announced he would undergo arthroscopic surgery to remove loose bodies in a right knee that had bothered him pretty much the entire season.

But he never let it stop him from producing.

"He spends a lot of time in the training room getting ready to play, both [pregame] and post," Brewers manager Ken Macha said recently. "That takes a toll on a person, because it's not like he can just show up and play. It shows a desire to get out there to go out and do it."

Billy Beane Exclusive Athletics Nation Interview: Season End 2009 Part II

Tyler Bleszinski, Athletics Nation 10/6/09

Yesterday was part one of the Beane season ending Athletics Nation interview. Today is part two. I won't set this one up, I'll just let the interview speak for itself.

Hope you enjoy and can start looking forward to 2010. I know I am.

Blez: The starting pitching has really matured nicely with quite a few early ups and downs which you said you expected. The overall team ERA is fourth best in the AL.

Beane: Is it really? I didn't know it was that high. We fluctuated back and forth.

Blez: Not the starting pitching on its own, the whole staff together. It includes the bullpen.

Beane: And the bullpen has been spectacular. Numbers-wise, we'll have somewhere around 113-114 games started by rookies, which is an incredible number. I'm guessing that's the highest in the major leagues.

Blez: I'm guessing no one else is close.

Beane: It has been as we expected and we've had some good days and had some bad days. If you look at the guys who've been in there regularly, certainly Brett, who has gotten progressively better there from the start of the season and certainly Trevor Cahill has as well. Particularly look at his last six or seven starts. You remember the kid is 21 years old. He would've been a junior in college this year and eligible for the draft and here he is in the majors with double digit wins in our league too. The American League is not a forgiving place for a rookie pitcher, so I think he's shown himself nicely. Gio (Gonzalez) who came up and had some really tough starts, but he's definitely shown flashes of what he can be. I think overall we have to be pleased with some of these guys. The thing that was tough was losing (Josh) Outman who was pitching very well and you saw what this kid could become.

Blez: I was just going to ask about some of the progress of the injured pitchers like Dallas Braden, Vin Mazzaro, Joey Devine and Michael Ynoa?

Beane: Yeah but finishing up on the starting pitching, we certainly expected some ups and downs with the young starting pitching, there have certainly been more ups than downs. All the guys have justified our faith in them from their time in the minor leagues. I think they have a chance to be even better this year. We've stretched them out a bit in September here. Some of the guys we lost, we had to patch a starting rotation together in an effort to reduce some of the innings of some of these guys and in Vinny Mazzaro's case we were just very conservative in shutting him down. In another situation if we were fighting for a division, Vinny would probably still be out there but we want to be very, very conservative in how we treat these young guys. Some of the success, and the fact that we're fourth in the league, the credit goes to the bullpen which as I said has been absolutely phenomenal. After taking arguably our best reliever out of the equation in spring training in Joey Devine, it gets us very excited with what that bullpen will be like next year to think we'll be adding Devine to it.

To address the injury situation, Joey is doing great. He's right on schedule to be on a normal routine from the first day of spring training on. So we have complete faith that he's going to be back and at 100 percent next year. In Josh's case, he had the surgery a little later but he's doing great. If anyone knows Josh, he's a real hard worker. As far as his timetable, it's a little early now, but it's almost a full calendar year. There are cases where some guys come back a little earlier, some a little later, but you have to assume it's going to be a full calendar year. All indications are Josh is on that timeline.

Blez: It seems like it might be a little difficult to put a rotation together next year given all the candidates you have. Pleasurably difficult, if that makes sense.

Beane: Yeah definitely, it will be a good problem to have. I don't think you can have enough good starters with the injury factor and how difficult it is to go out and find them when you lose one. If it's a problem, it's one I welcome. In Dallas' (Braden) case it was just unfortunate with that infection in his foot, but when a starting pitcher has missed as much time as he has, there becomes a cutoff point where it becomes unrealistic that he can come back at any point during the remainder of the season. Dallas, in a very short time, established himself as a very good major league starting pitcher and one of the best ones we had on our staff so it's disappointing to lose him as he would've had a major impact on how we're finishing up now.

Blez: I was going to get into the bullpen, but it must be nice to feel like you already have one aspect of the team covered going into this offseason. You've got Ziegler, Bailey and Wuertz still around and if you throw in Joey Devine. That's four solid rocks of your bullpen already set for next year.

Beane: Breslow has also pitched very well for us and Blevins and Kilby have done very, very well in coming up. We've got a very good bullpen right now and looking ahead to 2010 it's one that could conceivably be better. We feel very good about that position.

Blez: You also add to that mix one of the starting pitchers that might not make the rotation because of all the starting pitching candidates you have.

Beane: These are all good problems to have and it isn't something we've had lately. Still you have to keep injuries in mind and be careful. We do have high hopes that Joey will be 100 percent ready to go come the spring. The past few years have proven that you have to have depth if you're going to be successful for 162 games.

Blez: The situation with Justin Duchschere is obviously very sad and it almost seems callous to talk about baseball in terms of him, but do you anticipate him being a part of the team in 2010 or is the situation too tenuous right now?

Beane: First and foremost, contractually, he's a free agent. It's not a unilateral decision we can make. In short, we hope he is doing well. We need to respect what he's going through right now and from a professional standpoint, also monitor it and deal with it when the time comes. But anyone who has seen Justin pitch for the five years he's pitched for us, it's pretty easy to recognize he's a really good pitcher and will be valuable to anybody. As to how we go forward, we'll know once we get into winter, but not one we can answer right now. I don't think there's any shortage of people around here who aren't fans of the person and also fans of the talent.

Blez: How do you feel about your draft this year? You drafted Grant Green and addressed the need for a shortstop. But when you're looking at Max Stassi, he slipped to later in the draft because of concerns over signability. Is that something that you're looking at to spend a little more of the organizations' dollars in terms of going after someone who other teams might have passed on because of the concerns of signability?

Beane: Yeah, that's why we were able to get him where we did. If you look at an organization that's trying to rebuild from within, it's one area you can improve yourself, it was a conscious decision this year to take some chances on guys who might be difficult signs but we thought were very talented players. We had not done that in previous years and we're a little bit behind the curve because of it. If you look at the lifeblood of an organization like ours, it's going to come from within. If we're going to compete, we're going to try and bring in as many good young players as we can because that's really where the bulk of our future lies. In Max's case, this is a really impressive 18-year-old kid. We thought that and a lot of teams did as well. We weren't unique there. But based on what I've seen so far, we couldn't be happier that not only did we draft him, but we signed him. We think he could be a really good major league player and that it could happen quicker than most people think for a high school kid. He's really impressive and has been since the first day he put on our uniform.

Blez: Do you think he was ultimately first round talent?

Beane: That's what we saw him as is a first round talent. We did and hence why we had to compensate him as he had a full ride to UCLA. I just feel fortunate we were able to get him and able to sign him.

Blez: You said the lifeblood of a small market organization comes from building from within, but the 2009-2010 free agent season is right around the corner. I know you can't really talk about any upcoming free agents or anything, but if you had to look at your shopping list for next season what are areas you'd like to improve for your team?

Beane: Free agency usually starts five days after the World Series and it isn't really an area historically we've been involved in. In understanding what we're trying to do here especially long term, when you sign free agents, you're giving up draft picks. We have to be cognizant of that in that whenever you're bringing players in it isn't just cost, but what you're giving up in terms of standing in the way of long-term development of a younger player who might be there for a long time. Historically, we haven't been in the free agent market early. It doesn't mean that we don't go through the exercise of looking at the club needs and how they will be addressed either short term or long term. We usually start a little earlier than people think, at least internally, but we will be looking at it over the next month or month and a half. I would expect us to try to continue what we've been doing here, particularly in the second half, which is creating a young team that has a chance to get better and better each year and one that can stay around for a while.

Blez: Speaking of free agents, Adam Kennedy is going to be a free agent at the end of the year. He obviously came in and did some amazing things for the team. Is he someone you're interested in bringing back, especially as he has already expressed interest in coming back? He seems like he'd be a good stop gap solution at third base until Brett Wallace is capable of taking over that position.

Beane: There are some things that you have to address pretty quickly. I agree with you in that Adam Kennedy has just been outstanding for us this year. If you consider the fact that he'd never played third base as we put him over there

when Ellie (Mark Ellis) came back and he was learning the position at the major league level, we're very happy with not only what he's provided on the field but in the clubhouse too. He's a grinder and he brings a certain mentality to the game that I think is very positive. That's going to be one of the things I'm going to have to deal with pretty quickly after the season. The best thing I can say is that we've been very pleased with Adam and he's been great to have around. As far as him coming back next year, it will definitely be a topic of conversation. But from Adam's end, Adam is a free agent and he has the ability to choose where he wants to go. Rest assured we'll be having conversations internally and we'll be having a conversation with his representative as well as Adam himself.

Blez: What about Jack Cust? The team is seemingly pretty desperate for power and that's one thing that Cust does well.

Beane: You have to respect what Jack has done and the fact that he does have power on a team that doesn't have significant power. Once again, I'm not sure we could answer that question now. But he's arbitration-eligible so it isn't like he's a free agent. You have to respect Jack has hit 30 plus homers for us in a year and he probably isn't going to reach that this year but he's still our leading home run hitter. He and every other player on the team will be subject to evaluation going forward, not just for next year but for many years ahead. These are the things we get to do in October and November.

Blez: There was a lot of discussion heading into the season that Jack was going to try and cut down on the strikeouts so he could hopefully bring up the batting average. It didn't seem to work out. Do you think the focus on cutting down on those strikeouts wound up hurting his performance?

Beane: It would be better for Jack to answer that one. Jack is going to hit home runs. He's going to strike out. He's going to take his walks. The other thing about Jack is that 99 percent of the season, on a team that has more than its share of injuries over the past few years, Jack is ready to go out there every day. He keeps himself in good shape. There has rarely been a day that Jack has been here when Bob can't put him in the lineup. With the situation we've had the last three years, it's been nice that he's been healthy and available.

Blez: This is year three of the five-year rebuilding plan if you count the rebuilding starting after the 2006 season, but this would be the third year of the remaking of the team (Beane corrected me stating that the rebuilding actually started with the trading of Haren in late 2007). I know it's really early because we haven't even finished 2009 yet, but how do you feel about the team, especially because teams like Texas are on the rise and Anaheim remains a good team? Do you think the team will take that giant leap forward in year four of this rebuilding process?

Beane: I don't think you can really say until you start to go into the offseason and formulate next year's team. I think in the last couple of months, I've seen us put in some building blocks for a team that's going to be good. There's still a lot of areas that we need to improve on and some of that improvement will come by adding players from the minor league system but also just through these players getting better over time. I think it's hard to put a timetable on it, but anyone who follows this team on a regular basis can look at some positions, whether it be the pitching staff or in the field and say, this guy is a good young player and he has a chance to get better. As far as the timetable, it's tough to do. We're putting together a team that has a chance over the next few years to continue getting better and better. At what rate is hard to predict because sometimes young players will surprise you and develop quicker than you think, particularly when there is a lot of them that have a lot of confidence, but in some cases they can disappoint. When you take a guy like Brett Anderson over the course of a full season and chart his improvement, I think everyone is excited to see how good he can actually be next year after having a full year under his belt. And if you multiply that by say 25 guys, sometimes they can surprise you. The building blocks are in place and when that happens I certainly couldn't predict. I'm definitely very excited about what they could become.

Blez: Do you think Bob Geren is an ideal manager for this team simply because one of his strengths appears to be working with younger talent?

Beane: Absolutely. If you look at going into August in last place and you've traded away some of the most experienced and in some cases the best players, it's impressive to do what this team has done over the last couple of months. Case in point is this past weekend in Anaheim. The Angels had a chance to clinch the division and these guys never let up. I think that's the best indication in getting these guys to play the way they're playing in the month of September when other teams have more to play for than you do. He's been a young player himself at the major league level. He's managed at every single level. He's coached at every level. So he brings a lot of experience and a lot of it comes from dealing with younger players. It's been very much a positive that's revealed itself over this transition for us.

Blez: Is it the type of situation where maybe he grows up as a manager as the team grows up? Meaning that he becomes more comfortable in being a manager and dealing with veterans and veteran personalities as the team heads towards being more competitive.

Beane: Everybody in any position usually grows a lot the more you deal with those different circumstances. I'm sure there are some things Bob might do different today that he might not have done his first year. I think that comes with experience. Bob is gaining that and gaining it on the job. He's organized and guys are playing hard for him. He's prepared and Bob has all those things.

Blez: As usual, thanks so much for all your time.