

A's News Clips, Tuesday, January 11, 2010

Inbox: A's set for competition at fifth starter

Beat reporter Jane Lee answers questions from fans

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Assuming the addition of Guillermo Moscoso is the last transaction going into camp, is it safe to say that the only real roster competition is for the fifth starter and perhaps a spot or two in the bullpen? It seems like every other position is set. Is that your take?

-- Paul T., San Diego

Yes. And while everyone loves a little friendly competition in the confines of Phoenix Municipal Stadium, the fact that manager Bob Geren could write a respectable Opening Day lineup right now stands as evidence to the commendable work general manager Billy Beane and Co. have committed to this offseason. To put things into perspective, it's important to remember where this team stood heading into Spring Training last year. Not only was a rotation spot open, but first base was up for grabs, as were a couple of outfield slots and designated hitter. That's not the case this time around. The infield and outfield are seemingly set, barring injury or some other wacky occurrence. So if watching grown men duking it out for a job is your thing, it's best you keep your eyes on the mound, where the likes of Rich Harden, Brandon McCarthy, Josh Outman and Joey Devine, among others, could keep it interesting for nearly six weeks.

Daric Barton's numbers are not what you expect from a traditional first baseman. If Chris Carter shows he can hit, do you think the A's go with him at first base this year?

-- Sean R., Sacramento, Calif.

Barton is the club's starting first baseman, without question. The A's brass made that very clear during the Winter Meetings last month when rumors were swirling about the team bumping Barton in favor of a home run-happy fella such as Derrek Lee. They like Barton, and, at this point, it seems they're more inclined to work out Carter in the outfield during spring, even if that means he starts the year at Triple-A. Barton's 10 home runs last year tied him for 13th among all American League first-base qualifiers, and his .407 slugging percentage ranked just eighth. However, he landed in the top five in several other offensive categories, including runs, hits, doubles, walks, batting average and on-base percentage, and landed in the sixth spot for his .802 OPS. Also note that Barton saw more pitches than anyone else in all of baseball, averaging 4.39 pitches per plate appearance. That might not mean much to some people, but it greatly affects the opposing pitcher. The A's take stock of such stats, not to mention Barton's excellent defensive abilities. He could easily find himself in Gold Glove talks this year, and he should be a key component at the top of the lineup with Hideki Matsui and Josh Willingham standing behind him.

I love the Oakland defense, but I'm not sold on Cliff Pennington. Do you think the A's would consider giving Jemile Weeks a shot at shortstop? I think this is the weakest part of the lineup and defense.

-- Kevin F., New York

That might be a fair assessment when solely looking at the basic defensive numbers, i.e. errors. Pennington collected more than any other AL shortstop (25) last year, and his .966 fielding percentage doesn't look too pretty on paper, either. However, that's not the only way -- or often times best way -- to judge a defender. In 2010, Pennington ranked first in the AL in zone rating, the percentage of balls fielded by a player in his typical defensive "zone," as measured by STATS, Inc. He also finished second in range factor, which simply calculates the number of plays made per game at the fielding position, taking into account the fielder's own ability to get to a batted ball. By day's end, this statistic ultimately rewards the more talented players at each position, which is why many in the game are now weighing its outcome more than a player's fielding percentage.

A's infield coach Mike Gallego has compared Pennington to Colorado's Troy Tulowitzki, who -- like Pennington -- tends to sit back on balls because of his tremendous range. As a result of Pennington's arm strength, not to mention his ability to get to more balls, he ends up attempting to make more plays. More times than not they prove successful, but, at the end of the day, the futile ones are going to stand out.

Offensively, Pennington will never find himself in the middle of the lineup. Rather, he's more inclined to finish in the middle of the pack at season's end in most offensive categories. But his speed and switch-hitting abilities lend this club some flexibility, and he was something of a clutch surprise a handful of times last year. That being said, Pennington won't be going anywhere until Grant Green's arrival. Weeks, naturally a second baseman, has been bedeviled by injuries and, as a result, has yet to move past the Double-A level. He'll have to do that first before prying into Oakland's infield.

Why do the A's need more bullpen help? If anything, they already have too many with Outman and Harden in long relief, Brad Ziegler, Craig Breslow and Jerry Blevins as setup men and Devine and Andrew Bailey as closers. I realize that a bunch of injuries were among them last year, but if they stay healthy, this is a

formidable bullpen.

-- Joe C., Lincoln, Calif.

Formidable indeed, but there's no guarantees of health in Oakland, and Beane and his front office will say time and time again that there's no such thing as too much pitching -- whether in the rotation or in the bullpen. There's no point in penciling anyone into either space at this point, as several guys will have to showcase health throughout most of spring in order to land on the Opening Day roster. Outman and Devine, not to mention potential addition McCarthy, haven't seen big league action in more than a year, and Harden, Blevins and Bailey, along with Michael Wuertz, were all sidelined for parts of 2010. With that many uncertainties lingering in the pitching department, it serves the A's right to acquire depth, which they've done this winter and could continue to do.

What's the latest news on a new stadium for the A's? It's been a very long time since I've heard anything about it.

-- Daniel M., Berkeley, Calif.

The latest news is there's no news. Just over a month ago during the Winter Meetings, a report from Ballpark Digest surfaced suggesting that Major League Baseball's blue-ribbon committee was prepared to recommend that Oakland move forward with its waterfront ballpark plans and that the city of San Jose is not an option for the A's. However, A's co-owner and managing partner Lew Wolff, when informed of the report, immediately shot down the notion, reiterating yet again that every option in Oakland has been exhausted. Major League Baseball then confirmed through a statement that a decision has not been made on the longstanding matter. Wolff has been awaiting a report from the three-panel committee which Commissioner Bud Selig appointed in March 2009 to study the A's stadium options, particularly one involving San Jose that potentially broaches the San Francisco Giants' territorial rights.

It seems to me that the new additions to the A's would be more palatable to the fans if the sports writers would give them nicknames a la Carlos Gonzalez (CarGo) or Alex Rodriguez (A-Rod). Along those lines, David DeJesus might be "DaHay," or how about "JoWill" for Josh Willingham? The fans won't believe a player is of star caliber until he has "made a name for himself."

-- Grey W., Dillon Beach, Calif.

Neither Gonzalez nor Rodriguez, or any other professional athlete with a household nickname, grasped star status by way of some sports writer's play on words. They did it by producing star-quality numbers, which, in turn, ultimately paved the way for fan-inspired nicknames to go viral. So by no means wait for me to tag Gio or Barton with a new name. That's up to you and your fellow A's fans, so have at it!