

A's News Clips, Wednesday, February 9, 2011

A's AL West foes all have large issues

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle, 2/9/2011

As much as spring training is about renewal and a universal sense of optimism, it's also about delusion. Teams might discover that, in fact, they are in the process of disintegration. That has become a recurring theme in the American League West, where the A's had the best offseason and have fewer chemistry concerns than anyone else.

Perhaps it's all a ruse. Who envisioned Texas in the World Series last spring — or the Giants, for that matter? Maybe the Mariners win 102 games, led by Jack Cust's 58 homers, and they all dance wildly atop the Space Needle.

More realistically, check out the landscape: **Rangers:** People around the game are stunned by Michael Young's transformation. For years the ultimate team guy, he suddenly wants out of Arlington at all costs, telling Fox Sports, "I've been misled and manipulated, and I'm sick of it."

Without question, the man has been jacked around. The Rangers moved him from second base to shortstop when Alex Rodriguez left for the Yankees. They shifted him to third to make room for Elvis Andrus, then told him he'd be a designated hitter after the recent acquisition of Adrian Beltre. Worse yet, they continued to negotiate with DH types (including Jim Thome) and traded for Mike Napoli, assigning him a catcher-DH-first base role. "I got pushed into a corner one too many times," he said. "I couldn't take it anymore."

This is a very big deal.

Young might be 34, near the end of his career, but he has been the unquestioned leader of that clubhouse. He's the man who spearheaded the players' full support of Ron Washington last spring when the manager dealt with his cocaine issues. He's a six-time All-Star who had five straight 200-hit seasons (2003-07) and drove in 91 runs last year.

As the Rangers deal with the departures of Vladimir Guerrero, Cliff Lee and Bengie Molina (who might put off retirement to sign elsewhere), the last thing they need is clubhouse disruption.

The Giants will be watching closely as trade talks continue, because the Colorado Rockies have designs on making Young their second baseman.

Complications: Young hasn't played second base since 2003, and he's owed \$48 million for the last three years of his contract. Whether he leaves or bitterly stays, it's a blow to the Rangers' image.

Angels: Who imagined this team would grow so old, and so slow, in such a short time? Just two years ago, the Angels were the hustling, runmanufacturing purveyors of intelligent baseball, under the sterling leadership of manager Mike Scioscia. Now they're trying to persuade their fan base they haven't completely lost their minds.

They still have Scioscia, which is good news, and a decent rotation anchored by Jered Weaver and Dan Haren. But after claiming they couldn't financially participate in the Carl Crawford sweepstakes, they turned around and acquired perhaps the most burdensome contract in baseball. Vernon Wells has four years and \$86 million left from his seven-year deal with Toronto, and get this: In acquiring Wells, the Angels actually took on more salary than they offered for Crawford or Beltre on the free-agent market.

The Angels had better hope that outfielder Mike Trout, widely considered the No. 1 prospect in baseball, is ready to join the club at some point this year. At the moment, they have committed \$56 million in salary to their experienced outfielders, including the departed Gary Matthews. That's not a whole lot less than the A's entire

payroll (\$68 million).

And their only offseason additions were relievers Scott Downs and Hisanori Takahashi.

Could it get any worse? Well, Crawford's agent, Scott Boras — now an archenemy of owner Arte Moreno — owns a luxury suite behind home plate and can be seen on most any telecast via the center-field camera. And Beltre, who spurned the Angels' offer, lives in L.A.

Mariners: Milton Bradley and new manager Eric Wedge despised each other in Cleveland, so that should work well. Cust is the only semblance of a power hitter, and A's fans know the limitations of such an exercise. The Mariners were the worst offensive team in all of baseball last year (the Orioles outscored them by 100 runs). They should have made a stronger run at Juan Uribe, because he's exactly the jolt-of-energy player this team needs.

So many things have to go right: the emergence of long-touted prospects Justin Smoak (first base) and Dustin Ackley (second base, after a likely start in the minors). Bounce-back seasons from Chone Figgins and Eric Bedard.

I just wonder what Ichiro Suzuki, a seeker of tranquillity, thinks of Bradley, the often-overbearing Wedge and another season in the basement. The good people of Seattle deserve better than this.

Non-roster invitees could yield surprise for A's

Choice, Stassi, Green lead group of 18 looking to turn heads

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- There's no telling who will represent this year's version of Andrew Bailey or Tyson Ross, or even if one will exist.

But nearly 20 non-roster invitees will descend upon A's big league camp in Phoenix next week, looking to take on that very role -- Minor League obscurity turned surprise sensation.

While Oakland's roster has taken on new form this year -- think depth, and lots of it -- there's no reason to write off the surprise factor just yet. Rather, there's plenty of reason to keep an eye on the club's 18 non-roster players.

"I think we definitely have a bunch of talented players on the roster right now," A's director of player personnel Billy Owens said. "I guarantee you there's going to be a surprise or two. Somebody will step up. We're hoping we're going to be injury-free, but you never know what can come up. The great thing about the roster is that Billy Beane, along with David Forst, has given us so much flexibility. We have a strong roster top to bottom, and that includes these non-roster guys."

Said group is headlined by Oakland's 2010 first-round Draft pick Michael Choice, who posted a .964 OPS with seven home runs and 26 RBIs last year in his first 30 professional games, 27 of which came at short-season Class A Vancouver after just three contests in the Arizona Rookie League. The 21-year-old Choice, whom Owens believes boasts power reminiscent of Greg Vaughn, is entering his first big league camp carrying the maturity level of a player who's gone through the motions more than once.

"The intensity of how he cares about the game is incredible," Owens said. "His preparation is highly regarded, and he's a good teammate. Everyone raves about Michael Choice's character, how this kid appears like he was drafted in the 40th round. He's just thirsty for knowledge every day and hungry. That's a good reflection, when your peers in the Minor Leagues feel you're both strong in character and talent."

Those very attributes give Owens and Co. reason to think Choice will greet pressure with open arms. It's a weight all too familiar for top prospects Chris Carter and Michael Taylor, who walked into camp last year with quite the hefty dose of expectations attached to their names. That comes with the territory of being so valued, Owens said, and ultimately aides players when transitioning to the Major League level.

"If you're a high Draft pick or a well-regarded prospect, there's going to be a certain expectation of how you handle that," he said. "It's good people will be watching Michael Choice like that. They'll definitely be impressed, maybe more so by his energy and his intent and how driven he is. It'll be a good experience for him to rub elbows with Coco Crisp and Ryan Sweeney and Josh Willingham and the other outfielders. When he's ready, I know he'll be acclimated because of these experiences."

Owens, who is embarking on his 13th season with the A's, thinks the same of catching prospect Max Stassi, who wowed everyone surrounding him last spring with a sharp presence rarely found in the likes of an 18-year-old. Now 19, Stassi will again represent the youngest kid in camp after a 2010 season at low Class A Kane County that saw him struggle a bit offensively but greatly improve defensively.

"Max, I look at a kid who is mature beyond his years," Owens said. "He went to a difficult place to hit in the Midwest League, and he hit for power. He's comfortable pretty much in any environment, and I think we'll see that progression continue and watch how advanced he is. And as a kid who is only 19 or 20 years old, you'll also see a progression where he's improving on his offensive numbers."

"I like his overall ability, his persona, his confidence, his ability to handle a pitching staff, his leadership, his preparation. If anything, I think he can be a younger version of our own Kurt Suzuki in that regard, of someone who cares so much about their pitching staff but are also going to be very competitive on the offensive side of the ball."

Stassi's grooming process will likely continue for several more years, and that's just fine by the A's. In an ideal world, he'll be geared for a big league career behind the plate sometime in 2013, when Suzuki's contract -- which has an option for 2014 -- is set to expire.

By that time, Stassi could be looking out at an infield led by Grant Green and Jemile Weeks, who are also among this year's Spring Training non-roster invitees. Green, a 2009 first-round pick, is very much ahead of his game offensively. The 23-year-old also made great strides defensively while with Class A Stockton last year, a facet of his game Owens only sees improving.

"Major League Spring Training will be a great environment where he can work on repetition and just being around the big league guys, giving him the chance to soak everything in," he said. "We want him to get to that comfort level. I don't care who you are or where you are in the game, but your first taste of the big leagues is excitement but also something new. It's something you dreamed about as a kid, and you're right there on the cusp. It's awesome to actually shake hands and rub elbows with guys you watched on TV four or five years ago."

Weeks, meanwhile, will not so much be looking to improve parts of his game as much as his health, which has derailed his progress in becoming the heir apparent to second baseman Mark Ellis. Currently healthy, Weeks will look to push aside those oft-injured days and focus on staying the course again.

"His defensive game improved tremendously last year," Owens said. "His backhand was better, the way he turned a play improved. And he's a catalyst offensively. We definitely feel he's improved on the skill level, and now it's a matter of him staying healthy and playing the bulk of the games in order to climb the ladder. When we drafted him, we considered him to be a Ray Durham type player. We still see that."

Not to be overlooked in the infield, though, is recently signed Andy LaRoche, the 27-year-old brother of Nationals first baseman Adam LaRoche. He received an invitation to Spring Training and immediately represents an extra infield option for the A's, who are not guaranteed a healthy Adam Rosales (right foot) by season's start.

"He's always had great walk-to-strikeout numbers," Owens said. "He's still young, he's still talented, he's got a great throwing arm. He has power potential. Who knows where he begins the season, but in a different environment, change of scenery, maybe we catch lightning in a bottle."

LaRoche hit .206 with four home runs and 16 RBIs in 102 games with Pittsburgh last year. Fifty-two of his 58 starts were at third base, and he also made appearances at second base and first base, making him a viable option along with Steve Tolleson and Eric Sogard as a potential roster addition come April if Rosales is not ready.

Not too far behind that group stands Josh Horton, a 2007 second-round Draft pick who has been an integral part of several of the organization's championship clubs in the past few years. He was the starting shortstop for both the Stockton Ports and Double-A Midland Rockhounds' championship clubs, as well as for the 2010 Midland team that lost in the final game of the championship.

"He offers a sound glove, and he actually improved on his range, his quickness, and his versatility last year," Owens said. "He keeps on getting stronger. He'll never be a high slugging percentage guy, so to say, but he can definitely defend himself with the bat and keeps on getting better. He'll be a big surprise in this year's camp and beyond, I think."

Rounding out Oakland's non-roster invitee list, which can still expand, are infielder Wes Timmons, outfielders Matt Carson and Jai Miller, catcher Anthony Recker and pitchers Joe Bateman, Fernando Cabrera, Vinnie Chulk, Gabe DeHoyos, Willie Eyre, Danny Farquhar and Yadel Marti.

"Each name, there's something to look for," Owens said. "It's an exciting time to think about all of the possibilities of what's going to happen here in 2011."

Major League: Answering the Michael Young question

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 2/8/2011 4:43PM

Lots of you have reached out to me about the possibility of the A's going after Michael Young, even though they're not on the list of eight teams to which Young has said he'd accept a trade. Young did add that he'd consider other teams on a case-by-case basis, but don't expect Oakland to get involved in what's really become an unnecessary mess for a truly classy guy. Despite their unsettling take on Kevin Kouzmanoff at third base, the A's never inquired on Young, I've been hearing, and there's reason to understand why.

Young is 34 and is due \$48 million over the next three years. There's also a good chunk of deferred money that's to be paid

out with interest over the next few years. Now I know some of you are asking why the A's can't fork up that kind of money when they're willing to offer Adrian Beltre \$76 million over six years, but you have to realize they're very different players. At the beginning of the offseason, Billy Beane made it clear that he wouldn't bring in offense at the expense of taking away from a superb defense, and Young doesn't exactly boast the golddest of gloves. In fact, he's considered to be a below-average defender. His bat's surely nice to look at, but not for that kind of money AND for the players they'd have to give up in exchange. Plus, the A's made their offer to Beltre before they handed good money to Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour.

This is not to say the A's don't like what Young has to offer, because I'm sure they do. He's a tremendous player. But at this point, Kouzmanoff is their guy. 2010 represented his first in the league, and he still managed to put up 16 homers and 70-plus RBIs. Those numbers may not be ideal for a third baseman, but they're expected to escalate not only with that year of AL experience under his belt but also with the opportunity for him to bat in a more suitable sixth or seventh slot behind the likes of DeJesus, Matsui and Willingham.

It's fun thinking about Young possibly facing the Rangers while wearing an A's uniform, but it's likely not going to happen.

Urban: A's Bailey, Giants FanFest cooking on 'Hot Stove'

Mychael Urban, CSNBayArea.com 2/9/2011

The countdown has begun in earnest; we're single-digit days from the official opening of spring training for the Giants and A's.

As such, there's a sense of urgency attached to our new edition of "SportsNet Central's Hot Stove" show, which debuts live Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. on CSN Bay Area.

Since the New Year dawned, we've been taking weekly looks back at San Francisco's and Oakland's respective offseason doings, and occasionally looking forward to what promises to be an intriguing 2011 season for both clubs.

Now that the Giants and A's appear all but done manipulating their rosters, looking forward takes center stage.

With that in mind, we'll be talking via satellite Tuesday with Oakland's two-time All-Star closer Andrew Bailey, who's already in the Phoenix area in anticipation of the team's first workout for pitchers and catchers -- Feb. 16.

Pitching is the primary reason the A's have become something of a boutique pick to win the American League West this season, and Bailey, coming off September elbow surgery, is the headliner of a fortified bullpen that, on paper, is the deepest and most versatile the green-and-gold has boasted in years.

Bailey, a 26-year-old right-hander, will discuss the potential impact of new relievers Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour (and the anticipated return to full health of power righty Joey Devine); his willingness to share the closer's role in an effort to reduce the workload that's taxed him late in each of the past two seasons; the excitement surrounding Oakland's fine young starting staff; and what fans should expect from the team in the wake of adding a handful of quality veteran hitters in an effort to provide the pitching staff with greater margin for error.

Giants fans, meanwhile, will get their fill of face time with several of their favorites.

Last weekend's Media Day and FanFest at AT&T Park brought the world champions back to the City by the Bay en masse for the first time since the World Series parade, and we'll share highlights and interviews with the rock-stars-in-spikes that are Tim Lincecum and Brian Wilson in addition to hearing from Cody Ross, Buster Posey and, of course, Pablo Sandoval.

Helping us put it all in perspective will be two returning members of our rotating media panel: Henry Schulman, longtime Giants beat writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, and Chris Townsend, who hosts the A's pre- and post-game shows on XTRA 860-AM radio.

They'll help get the stove heated up in our free-form opening segment, rejoin us periodically to provide context to the player interviews, and answer your questions in "Extra Innings," our interactive segment that starts streaming live on CSNBayArea.com as soon as we sign off from the TV side.

"Extra Innings" is free-form as well, a 15-minute discussion sparked by Giants and A's fans. To submit a question, all you have to do is fire it via Twitter to me (@MURbanCSN), Schulman (@hankschulman) or Townsend (@townsendradio) -- Facebook and e-mail will work, too -- and we'll do our best to answer it for you.

We'll also open up a chat room and closely monitor it so we can occasionally respond to your comments during the segment.

So let the countdown continue. Let the excitement build. Camps open in less than a week for the Bay Area's big leaguers, and after a long winter of comings and goings, it's all coming to a boil -- starting Tuesday night on "SportsNet Central's Hot Stove," live at 6:30 p.m. It'll re-air at 10 p.m.