

A's News Clips, Tuesday, February 15, 2011

A's pitching, defense remain a strong suit

[Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Forgive the A's if they don't quite embrace the idea that they're maneuvering themselves to follow [the Giants'](#) lead, with a good young rotation that could put them in the playoffs.

The A's were, of course, assembling this group well before the World Series looked like a possibility for San Francisco. And it was only a decade ago that Oakland was a playoff regular with another group of excellent young pitchers, the Big Three of Tim Hudson, Barry Zito and Mark Mulder.

"Having great pitching is a common thread with just about any championship-caliber club," A's general manager Billy Beane said Monday, the day before his team's pitchers and catchers report to camp in Phoenix. "And whoever wins, in any sport, becomes the supposed template for everyone else.

"The Giants, in fairness, put together a great pitching staff. Hey, listen, every team has a plan to have a great starting rotation. They made a conscious effort to do that, and they succeeded."

The A's won't complain, of course, should they somehow duplicate the Giants' feat, and if Oakland is able to return to the playoffs for the first time in five years, the rotation - Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson, Dallas Braden and Gio Gonzalez, plus a fifth starter to be named - will be the primary factor. Those top four average 24.5 years of age, Cahill was an All-Star last year, Braden threw a perfect game, Gonzalez didn't miss a start and Anderson is considered by many in the game to be the best of the bunch.

"The good thing is that they're very young and they have a chance to get better, and add into that that Brett missed a lot of last year," Beane said. "There is still a lot of upside to it."

Cahill also missed the first month, first on the disabled list and then at Triple-A Sacramento. Braden was out most of July with elbow stiffness.

All the starters are healthy, and so, too, are fifth-starter candidates Rich Harden and Brandon McCarthy, who have extensive injury histories, and Josh Outman, who is coming off Tommy John surgery.

Going hand-in-hand with the A's pitching - the team had the best ERA in the league last year - is the fine work of catcher Kurt Suzuki, as well as the overall defense, as Beane was quick to note. Oakland again is expected to have one of the better fielding teams in the league.

Harden is back with A's competing to be starter

By JANIE McCAULEY, AP Baseball Writer 2/14/2011

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) Rich Harden spent the postseason watching the Texas Rangers win a long-awaited AL pennant and reach their first World Series.

It was strange to suddenly be an outsider, and not to be part of it. He still considered those players his teammates, even if the Rangers had designated him for assignment after the regular season to give the right-hander his unconditional release.

Harden endured the frustration of yet another disappointing, injury-interrupted season - and went into the winter unsure of who might offer him a job. Turns out his career has come full circle: He returned to his roots with the Oakland Athletics.

Harden will report to spring training Tuesday in Phoenix hoping to make a case that he can still be a reliable starter for a club that knows just how dominant he is when pitching at his best.

He certainly still thinks of himself as someone best suited for the rotation - and one of the most intriguing stories around the A's this spring will be the competition for the No. 5 job in an already talented rotation.

"My preference is starting but I'm definitely open to pitching out of the pen, too," Harden said. "I feel I can go out there and make 30-plus starts. I'm going to go out and worry only about what I can control, and that's how I pitch."

The fifth spot is definitely up for grabs.

It could go to several candidates, including Bobby Cramer, Tyson Ross or left-hander Josh Outman, who missed last year recovering from Tommy John surgery but made a strong impression in the instructional league last fall.

"Rich is not really competing with anybody," manager Bob Geren said. "He's just kind of competing against himself - however he comes in. If he comes in throwing the ball like he can, Rich can do anything. He's one of the best pitchers in baseball. He's nasty. This guy has great stuff. If he's strong and he's healthy, he can be one of the best starters in baseball, he can be one of the best relievers in baseball."

For Harden, staying healthy is the big first step.

He is determined to stay on the field this season after being plagued by injuries for much of his eight-year big league career.

Harden received a \$1.5 million, one-year contract in December to rejoin the A's, who selected the hard-throwing righty in the 17th round of the 2000 draft out of Victoria, British Columbia.

Harden went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 appearances and 18 starts for the Rangers last season, when he struggled with injuries and control. After beginning the season as the Rangers' No. 2 starter, he walked 62 batters in 92 innings.

"I didn't just go through stuff at the end of the year. It was an off year for me," Harden said. "I wished those guys nothing but the best. I watched every single (playoff) game. It's a little strange to watch it on TV. It was an outstanding group of guys and the players were some of the best guys I've played with. I think that's why the team played so well. Everybody was really close and got along and there was that chemistry."

While many of the players he knew with the A's are gone, there still will be plenty of familiar faces in what is known as a loose, easygoing clubhouse that has its own share of good chemistry.

"I'm happy to be back here," Harden said. "It feels like home. It's a comfortable place. Definitely the last year or two I thought about (returning to Oakland). When I came to play here last year I really enjoyed coming back and it felt good pitching here again. That's a big reason why this winter this was somewhere I wanted to end up."

Harden would like nothing more than to return to his form from 2008, when he went a combined 10-2 with a 2.07 ERA in 25 starts between Oakland and the Cubs. Chicago acquired him on July 8 that year in a trade with the A's.

Harden worked this winter in Arizona with A's pitching coach Ron Romanick, regularly watching video from his standout '08 season.

"Just working hard to get back to where I need to be mechanically," he said. "I'm feeling good and feeling strong, looking forward to starting spring."

The 29-year-old Harden spent two stints on the disabled list in 2010, first from June 12-July 30 with a strained left gluteal muscle and later with right shoulder tendinitis.

Oakland saw him miss his share of time, too.

Harden went 1-2 with a 2.45 ERA in only 25 2-3 innings in 2007 because of an inflamed right shoulder, and didn't pitch after July 7 that year. He threw two simulated games late in the season with the hopes of making two final starts, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth risking further injury.

He was 4-0 in nine games in 2006, spending time on the disabled list with a strained back and then a strained elbow ligament.

Geren will approach the start of spring as though Harden is going to start. If that doesn't work out, Harden could fit in nicely in a deep, loaded bullpen.

"We have to look how he comes in, how he feels, how he's handling the workload and make that decision," Geren said. "Obviously building him up first as a starter is what we'll do."

The A's are hoping to only improve on an outstanding showing by their young pitching staff last year. With Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill, Dallas Braden - he pitched a perfect game against Tampa Bay last May 9 - and Gio Gonzalez leading the way, Oakland had an AL-best 3.56 ERA and also a league-leading 17 shutouts while holding opponents to a .245 batting average.

"From top to bottom it's one of the best pitching staffs in the big leagues. I don't think anybody would disagree with that," Harden said.

Is it Harden's turn to finally catch a break?

"I've had some injuries and there are some injuries that weren't injuries and stuff went on. I'm ready to go out there and pitch a whole season," he said. "I definitely feel like I can. No. 1, I want to go out there and just pitch like I'm capable, like my '08 season when I worked with Ron through the whole winter and we changed some things around. That's the best I've felt in my career."

Shipman Shows Promise In A's Instructional League

By Casey Tefertiller, Baseball America, 2/7/2011

OAKLAND—When the new church started up in Aaron Shipman's hometown of Quitman, Ga., there was no music for the choir. So he taught himself to play keyboard to provide backing for the congregation.

And Shipman just keeps learning.

The Athletics' third-round pick last year made serious noise at instructional league, drawing attention for his advanced level of play at the age of 18. A center fielder, he showed both the tools and acumen to make the A's believe he could have a bright future.

"He's physically very athletic and an above-average runner," farm director Keith Lieppman said. "He had good training from his coaches. He came in with a good idea about how to steal bases, (and) he's adapted quickly to the pro game."

Shipman learned from father and coach Robert at Brooks County High, where he finished with a 3.6 GPA and earned admission to Mercer. Shipman said he anguished over his decision to sign with the A's, stringing out his choice to the Aug. 16 deadline before signing for a \$500,000 bonus.

"I'm a big believer in school," Shipman said. "I like the challenge of school. I wanted to prove that I can be a student."

Baseball won out in the end, and the A's are glad he made that decision. Perhaps the biggest shock for Oakland was that the lefty hitter and thrower lasted until the 95th pick. Player personnel director Billy Owens crosschecked him, and he liked what he saw.

"He possesses a wiry, strong, sinewy, muscled, lithe build," Owens said. "His top-flight speed and strong arm immediately stood out. He showed his baseball IQ is top notch, and he has the work ethic to succeed."

Owens noted that Shipman may have been difficult to scout because he did not attend as many showcases as other prospects, and he played for a local travel team rather than driving two hours to Atlanta to play against more highly regarded competition. He's also a patient hitter, content to take walks when begin pitched around.

The A's were delighted that Owens and area scout Matt Ranson made the call.

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- The A's installed Phil Mastro as the organization's first-ever certified trainer at the Dominican Republic complex. Mastro, who served in the same capacity at Oakland's complex in Arizona last year, will oversee the strength and conditioning programs.
- The A's released righthander Kyle Christensen, a 15th-round pick in 2006 who impressed before injuries knocked him out for all of 2008. He pitched in just five games in full-season ball in five years.