

A's News Clips, Friday, February 25, 2011

Josh Willingham provides the A's with character, without the flash

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- The questions surrounding Josh Willingham are the same ones faced by any impact hitter the A's import from the National League.

People wonder how he'll adjust to American League pitchers and whether he can thrive in the Oakland Coliseum, a ballpark that can be tough on right-handed power hitters.

"I'm sure there will be an adjustment," Willingham said. "Obviously I haven't seen all these pitchers and I'll have to do a lot more work in the film room. But it's still baseball. They've got to throw it over the plate and I've got to hit it."

That's a pretty basic philosophy, and it sums up the A's new left fielder in a nutshell.

There's nothing remotely flashy about Willingham, 32, whom the A's obtained from the Washington Nationals in December in exchange for reliever Henry Rodriguez and outfielder Corey Brown.

Those that know Willingham best talk first about his character and integrity before they mention his baseball skills.

"He's everything you want a person to be," said Willingham's agent, Matt Sosnick, a close friend who named his only son after Willingham.

Upon reporting to A's camp Saturday, Willingham spent a few minutes in the clubhouse before hitting the field, even though position players weren't required to practice until two days later.

"The one thing that you can do as a baseball player is kind of control what you can, and being prepared is one thing you can control," Willingham said. Willingham's value to the A's revolves around whether he can form an effective power combo with designated hitter Hideki Matsui in the middle of the lineup.

All indications are that A's manager Bob Geren will bat the right-handed Willingham cleanup, with Matsui right behind him in the fifth spot.

Without a 40-homer basher in the lineup, Willingham points out that Oakland needs contributions from everyone in the order, top to bottom.

He knows about ensemble efforts.

As a rookie in 2006, Willingham batted .277 with 26 homers and 74 RBIs with the Florida Marlins. He was part of a standout crop of Marlins rookies that included shortstop Hanley Ramirez and second baseman Dan Uggla.

While those two have risen to stardom, Willingham's quietly consistent career likely was an unknown to many A's fans before Oakland acquired him.

It's doubtful that bothers him.

Willingham lives in the same town he was born and raised -- Florence, Alabama -- which Sosnick describes as a small community where if "you're taking a shower and anyone in the town flushes the toilet, you get scalded."

Willingham attended Mars Hill Bible School -- a K-12 school where his parents both are still employed -- and even stayed in Florence to attend college at the University of North Alabama.

"I'm a real family-oriented person, and it's a great place to live," said Willingham, who's married with two boys. "It's right on the Tennessee River. It's always been home, and it probably always will."

Willingham has posted three 20-homer seasons in his career, and those numbers would probably be better if he could stay healthy.

A herniated disk sidelined him for the last month of the 2007 season and for 50 games in 2008. He missed the final 1½ months of 2010 after undergoing surgery to repair a torn meniscus in his left knee but is full strength now.

Willingham is not overly concerned about hitting at the Coliseum.

"You ask anybody," he said, "and if you hit a ball that's supposed to get out, most of the time it does. If you don't, it won't."

Oakland A's notebook: Pitchers Joey Devine, Josh Outman pitch in intrasquad game, step forward in recovery from elbow surgery

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

PHOENIX -- Joey Devine and Josh Outman both pitched in Thursday's intrasquad game and considered it a step forward in their comeback from Tommy John elbow surgery.

Outman retired five of the six hitters he faced, allowing just Coco Crisp's single up the middle, and hit 92 mph with his fastball.

"It feels good to be back out there because it has been a long time," the left-hander said.

A candidate to be the A's fifth starter, Outman hasn't pitched in a regular-season game since June 2009. And though he faced hitters in the A's instructional league this past fall, he considers it a stiffer test being in spring training camp and competing for a roster spot.

Outman topped out at 97 mph before his surgery, performed June 30, 2009. He's been told pitchers don't regain their full velocity until two years after surgery, so he's hoping to be back in the upper 90s after the All-Star break.

Devine, who has missed the past two seasons, had a rougher go Thursday. He faced four batters and allowed two singles and two walks. But his elbow felt fine.

"I don't care about results (right now), I just care about health," the right-handed reliever said.

Manager Bob Geren was asked Thursday morning about the chances of both pitchers breaking camp with the major league club.

"If they look like they're ready, they're going to be here, without a doubt," Geren said.

One intrasquad team featured David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui batting in the 3-4-5 slots, and Geren confirmed he's considering hitting them in that order during the season.

The trio strung together consecutive singles in the first inning against Bobby Cramer, including Matsui's liner up the middle that scored DeJesus. Trevor Cahill started for the White team, retiring four of the five hitters he faced.

Outfielder Michael Choice, the A's 2010 first-round draft pick, delivered a two-run single that gave the Green team a 3-2 victory. Catcher Anthony Recker launched a deep home run to left off Brad Ziegler.

Outfielder Conor Jackson will see time at first base in camp. Geren sees him as a right-handed hitting option there against tough lefties or when Daric Barton needs a day off.

Chin Music: A few vets, lots of prospects on display in Friday intrasquad game; some thoughts on the outfield

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/25/2011 10:14AM

There wasn't a whole lot of news coming out of A's camp this morning, but here's a brief rundown:

–Kurt Suzuki is behind the plate for one side in today's intrasquad game after he got yesterday off. Center fielder Coco Crisp, right fielder David DeJesus and shortstop Cliff Pennington are also in the lineup, though Pennington won't hit as his left shoulder is still recovering from surgery. Lots of top prospects are playing: Chris Carter (playing first, though the A's still consider him mainly an outfielder right now), second baseman Jemile Weeks, catcher Max Stassi, left fielder Michael Taylor and shortstop Grant Green.

–Ryan Sweeney is at DH today but he's still not playing in the field. Manager Bob Geren offered March 7 as the date Sweeney might make his exhibition debut as he comes back from right knee surgery, and Geren believes that is plenty of time to have Sweeney ready for the regular season.

–Geren talked about his outfield rotation and who might play where. Notably, he likes DeJesus as his main choice to play center when Crisp needs a day off. I envision Crisp getting a substantial amount of rest this season as the A's try to keep him healthy. A writer who has covered DeJesus extensively told me that he's an underrated defensive player, but that he's lost a bit of range and therefore isn't ideal in center anymore. I'll be interested to see what kind of ground he still covers. I could also see Sweeney drawing the occasional start in center to spell Crisp, especially against right-handers. Conor Jackson will see time in left and right field this spring, Geren said, but Jackson is playing first base in today's intrasquad game. He's a backup option at first when Barton isn't playing.

–Reliever Michael Wuertz will resume throwing Saturday or Sunday, according to Geren.

Chin Music: A's roundup: The heart of the order; Devine and Outman's roster chances; Conor Jackson to see action at first base

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune, 2/24/2011 10:43AM

We've got an A's intrasquad game this afternoon, which really isn't all that exciting or revealing in the big picture. But after watching nine days worth of workouts, it's nice to get some variety. And it's the first chance to see the team in a somewhat realistic game environment.

A few items of note:

–David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui are batting 3-4-5 for one team, and that's a heart of the order I'd expect to see lots in the regular season. "That's a potential 3-4-5 for the season. We'll see how the spring goes," manager Bob Geren said.

–I'll be interested to see Josh Outman and Joey Devine pitch today. Both have endured a long recovery from Tommy John surgery, and they could factor heavily into the pitching plans for the season – Outman as a fifth starter, Devine as a setup man.

Asked about the prospects of both making the 25-man roster out of camp, Geren said: "If they look like they're ready, they're gonna be here, without a doubt." Seems telling to me: There's open competition for the No. 5 starter spot, but if Outman looks decent and is healthy, he'll be the guy, especially with Rich Harden delayed by injury. And Devine's stuff is too good for him not to break camp w/the team if he's healthy.

–Conor Jackson will start working at first base a little, giving Geren a right-handed option for the position to complement the left-handed hitting Daric Barton. "Daric played (159) games last year," Geren said. "Quite frankly, there were a couple times we would have liked to give him a day off but we didn't have the right option over there. The fact that (Jackson) is a righty over a lefty, it makes that option more enticing to me." Jackson also will be an extra outfielder. He'll occupy a roster spot that could have gone to Chris Carter – a right-handed hitting outfielder/first baseman. But the A's obviously feel Jackson is a better bet to hit early in the season, and another factor that can't be ignored – Jackson is a better defensive player than Carter, in the outfield and probably at first base.

That's all for now ...

Promising returns for pitchers Devine, Outman

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer

- **Joey Devine** didn't have the best outing Thursday during the A's first intrasquad game of the spring, allowing two hits, two walks and a run.

The right-handed reliever was more than happy, though. Devine is just glad to be on the mound nearly two years after Tommy John surgery. He'd hoped to be back with the A's last year but several setbacks ended that idea, and this spring, Devine is taking things more slowly.

"I'll start picking up the intensity later in the spring," Devine said "I'm hoping to get in 12 or 14 games, and there is plenty of time. The first five or six times out there, I can ease into it a little. ... I don't care about results, just about feeling good."

Thursday was Devine's first time on the mound with big-leaguers since 2008. So, even though he was trying to hold back, it was hard at first, which explained why his command was off.

"It's hard to slow everything down, and when you're too excited, your mechanics go quick," Devine acknowledged. "My body was going first and my arm was second. But stuffwise, I felt good. I had life on the fastball and I threw a few sliders."

"He got excited, I could tell," catcher **Anthony Recker** said. "But we're all excited to see him out there. We know what he can bring to the table. Seeing him out there pitching made me feel good."

Left-hander **Josh Outman**, also coming back from 2009 Tommy John surgery, turned in nice work after two strong bullpen sessions the first week of camp. He faced six batters and allowed one hit, and manager **Bob Geren** said he hit 92 mph on the radar gun five times.

"It feels good to get out there, because it does seem like it's been a long time," said Outman, who is contending for the fifth spot in the rotation.

Both pitchers will throw an inning in the Cactus League opener Sunday, and **Trevor Cahill** will start. Cahill faced five men and allowed one hit Thursday.

Hitters make noise: All three of the A's winter additions to the lineup provided base hits with two outs in the first: **David DeJesus** singled up the middle, **Josh Willingham** to left and **Hideki Matsui** to center, sending in DeJesus.

Recker hit a long homer to left off **Brad Ziegler** in the bottom of the third. **Michael Choice**, the A's top pick in the 2010 draft, provided a two-run single in the top of the fourth.

Wolff on stadium plans: A's owner **Lew Wolff** is in town for two days and said that there is still no clear picture of when the team's stadium issue will be resolved by a panel investigating it.

Wolff reiterated that he believes that the Bay Area should be considered like the other two-team markets, none of which have territorial rights assigned.

Wolff said that funding for any stadium approved in San Jose is in place. "We're prepared to build the stadium," he said. "We have the funding, the equity, the sources of revenue."

The A's are hopeful that Phoenix provides some renovations for the team's spring training homes, Phoenix Municipal Stadium and Papago Park, which both need upgrades. Wolff has suggested about \$30 million of work, which he called "minimal."

"We want to stay here," he said. "We're not looking to go anywhere else."

Drumbeat: Cahill vs. Cramer in intrasquad game today

From Chronicle Staff Writer Susan Slusser at Phoenix Muni 2/24/2011 9:31AM

It's the first intrasquad game, of three, this spring, and while manager Bob Geren said he tried to make the teams even, I am pretty sure you can spot the stronger lineup here:

Team One, with Bobby Cramer starting - Coco Crisp CF, Conor Jackson LF, Ryan Sweeney DH, Chris Carter 1B, Andy LaRoche 3B, Josh Donaldson C, Matt Carson RF, Steve Tolleson SS, Adrian Cardenas 2B.

Team Two, with Trevor Cahill starting - Mark Ellis 2B, Daric Barton 1B, David DeJesus RF, Josh Willingham LF, Hideki Matsui DH, Kevin Kouzmanoff 3B, Landon Powell C, Michael Taylor CF, Eric Sogard SS.

No offense to Coco's squad, but the bulk of the A's projected lineup is on Cahill's side.

Kurt Suzuki will be playing every other day initially, so he's "El Bencho," today, as he remarked when he walked by.

Joey Devine and Josh Outman both will be among the pitchers throwing 20 pitches today, a small but nice step for them as they work their way back from Tommy John surgery.

Geren said Cliff Pennington might get in to play defense; he's not expected to play the first week of the Cactus League, because he's just started hitting right-handed again this week. Pennington had left shoulder surgery after the season.

These games are really just timing exercises for everyone - get their work in, get a feel at the plate, see a batter standing in - but it's still kind of fun to see the new guys play. Like everyone, I'm eager to see Matsui, Willingham, DeJesus - but I also hope top 2010 pick Michael Choice gets in. He did so well last year, I hope we get to see a fair bit of him before he goes to minor-league camp. There are tons of outfielders, so he might not get a lot of time, but he's the guy every team wants when they call the A's these days. And they're not going to get him.

UPDATE: All of the above - Matsui, Willingham, DeJesus, Choice - recorded hits, and Matsui (one) and Choice (two) RBIs.

Some at-bats won't be completed today - pitchers are throwing 20 pitches no matter what, so innings could be four or five outs, if needed, or they could end in mid at-bat

Doolittle eager to reward A's faith

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- The tiring "one day at a time" sports cliché is no joking matter for Sean Doolittle.

Rather, it's become something of a theme in this ballplayer's roller-coaster life.

Doolittle, 24, once stood among the top tier of baseball prospects, an A's compensation pick following the first round -- 41st selection overall -- of the 2007 Draft. He enjoyed a successful 2008 campaign in the Minors but has since fallen off the manicured path because of knee problems.

Eager to place his name back on the radar again, Doolittle is in big league camp on the 40-man roster, slowly but surely reacquainting his left knee with the everyday feel of Spring Training workouts.

"Being here healthy, it makes the most boring, mundane defense drills seem fun again," Doolittle said. "There's a lot of anxiousness to see how it holds up. I put so much work into it that I want to make sure it holds up. It's just exciting to be here."

Two knee surgeries sidelined Doolittle, one -- at the beginning of the 2009 season -- to repair a tear in his patella tendon and the second, during Spring Training last year, an arthroscopic procedure to clean up the same area. Both have required extensive rehab, though the latter has brought about a different mindset.

"I have a lot more confidence this time around," he said. "I don't find myself thinking about it when I'm hitting or taking ground balls. It feels a lot sturdier. It's pretty much 100 percent. It gets a little sore after workouts, but as far as while I'm doing stuff on the field, it's not a concern."

Doolittle knows an asterisk needs to be attached to each of his words, as he's only finished four days of camp as of Thursday -- hence his "one day at a time" mantra. But he calls a full day's work of running, throwing and hitting "encouraging," and he's ready to prove his worth again.

The A's know it's there. If they didn't, Doolittle likely would have been exposed to the Rule 5 Draft. Instead, Oakland placed him on the 40-man roster in December to protect his status in the organization. That, he said, "was huge."

"That was something that really helped me get through the second rehab," he said. "I wasn't really sure if I was going to get protected, to be honest. I had been hurt for so long, essentially missed two seasons. I didn't really think a lot of other teams would see me as a high priority in the Rule 5 Draft, but when they protected me, I was ecstatic. For them to put that faith in me, it gave me that extra motivation."

Doolittle spent this winter by the side of his girlfriend and dog in New York City, more than 3,000 miles away from the scene of his injuries, lending him the necessary time and environment to solely focus on his rehab. In his downtime, he'd call his brother, Ryan, a right-handed pitcher in the A's farm system through whom he vicariously lived.

"I had an unbelievably supporting cast," he said.

Doolittle's hoping that same cast is part of a different storyline this time around, one reminiscent of a 2008 season that saw him lead all of the A's Minor League players in hits (153) and doubles (40). He split that year between Class A Stockton and Double-A Midland, batting a combined .286 with 22 home runs and 91 RBIs in 137 games.

It was that same season he got his first taste of right field, hundreds of feet away from his natural home at first base. He also played there at the start of the 2009 season before the onset of his knee injury, at which point he was just getting comfortable out on the grass. Still, first base is his preference, and it's where the A's would like to keep him for now as his knee continues to heal.

Doolittle plans on taking part in a handful of outfield drills because he knows "beggars can't be choosers" at the Major League level -- a place that's finally within sight, albeit maybe from a long distance, again.

"Being on the 40-man and being in big league camp, it'd be easy to feel like I was knocking on the door," he said. "On the other hand, I've missed out on 1,000 at-bats in the last two seasons, so I know I have a lot of work to do to get my timing and my body right. Hopefully, this year I can make it a reality, but every once in a while those thoughts of being called up do creep into the forefront."

Doolittle's very much aware, though, that even if he were healthy he'd be hard-pressed to find employment in the Oakland infield at the moment. Daric Barton has made his mark at first base, and Chris Carter is viewed as the next in line. Doolittle's got time, though, as long as it doesn't involve more rehab.

"We would always be able to get to a certain point and then it would all come crashing down and lead back to square one," he said. "It's been a ridiculous roller-coaster ride -- lots of ups and downs. Hopefully, we're past that at this point. I'm just happy to be back on the field."

Outman delivers positive intrasquad outing

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Before undergoing Tommy John surgery in June of 2009, lefty Josh Outman sported stirrups and a hard-throwing presence with solid secondary stuff and excellent command.

Nearly two years and several setbacks later, on a warm day in the confines of Phoenix Municipal Stadium, all of the above were finally present again. Well, almost all of the above.

"I hadn't done this in so long that they forgot to get me stirrups," a smiling Outman said following a 20-pitch intrasquad outing.

Outman settled on long, yellow, green-striped socks -- "Like the ones you wear in Little League," he noted -- and proceeded to allow just one hit, a Coco Crisp single up the middle, during his 20-pitch affair.

"After everything he's been through, it's good to see him do that," A's manager Bob Geren said. "His velocity was pretty good, and he had a pretty good changeup."

Outman reached 92 on the radar gun five times and was admittedly throwing at a 90 percent exertion level. Reaching the 100 percent level, he explained, is something he's working toward as spring progresses, mindful of the time-consuming setbacks he endured during his lengthy rehab process over the last two years.

"I'm still trying to feel comfortable letting it all go," he said. "I'm pitching without pain, but there's still a little bit of hesitation to throw 100 percent. Finishing pitches, that's something I'm slowly getting used to again."

Outman, if healthy throughout camp, is seemingly on track to grab hold of the fifth starter's spot, especially given Rich Harden's latest bump in the road with a stiff lat muscle. Geren endorsed that notion on Thursday when asked about Outman and fellow rehabbing hurler Joey Devine, both of whom he said are "going to be here" come April if they "look like they're ready to pitch on this team, in this league."

"I'm going to go with the 12 best pitchers," the A's skipper said. "If they're one of them, then great. We saw what they're capable of doing when they're not hurt."

Devine, who also tallied 20 pitches in Thursday's intrasquad game, didn't quite fare as well on the mound, though good news came in the fact his elbow felt just fine after the contest. The right-handed reliever, battling for a spot in Oakland's elite bullpen, surrendered two walks and struggled with command, though Geren expects him to "get better each time out."

"He didn't have the command he wanted to, but his elbow felt great," added Outman of his rehab partner. "If we have to give up a few runs this spring in order to get back on track and feel comfortable again, then so be it. It's really not how you start but how you finish."

Both hurlers are expected to seek the mound again on Sunday, when the A's christen the Cactus League season with an away game against the Cubs at Hohokam Park in Mesa, Ariz. Righty Trevor Cahill is slated to start the affair, with Outman, Devine, Tyson Ross, Bobby Cramer, Brad Ziegler and Danny Farquhar scheduled to follow.

Major League: Preview: Intrasquad Game No. 2

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 2/25/2011 11:39AM

Day 2 of intrasquad action, slated to take off shortly after noon here at Phoenix Muni, has plenty interesting prospects scattered throughout both lineups. They'll play 4 1/2 innings.

Team Grey

CRISP, CF

CHOICE, LF

SWEENEY, DH

CARTER, 1B

CARSON, RF

TOLLESON, 2B

TIMMONS, 3B

STASSI, C

PENNINGTON, SS

Team White

WEEKS, 2B

SUZUKI, C

DEJESUS, RF

JACKSON, 1B

TAYLOR, LF

LAROCHE, DH

SOGARD, 2B

MILLER, CF

GREEN, SS

On the bench: HORTON, DONALDSON, RECKER, CARDENAS

Dallas Braden, Brandon McCarthy and **Guillermo Moscoso** are among those scheduled to throw today. Like yesterday, each pitcher will throw exactly 20 pitches, no matter if it takes one out or five to do so.

Notes: **Bob Geren** said **Ryan Sweeney** won't be cleared to play the outfield until sometime between March 7-9. He's not yet running at full strength, and the team doesn't want to take its chances with his surgically-repaired knee. Geren noted that Sweeney is such a good outfielder that it won't take many reps for him to be season-ready. ... **Michael Wuertz** is expected to return to the mound either Saturday or Sunday after missing a few days because of shoulder soreness.

Major League: Preview: Intrasquad Game No. 1

Jane Lee, mlb.com, 2/24/2011 11:23AM

Here are your lineups for today's intrasquad game, scheduled to start around noon here at Phoenix Municipal Stadium. They'll play 3 1/2 innings, with each pitcher slated to throw exactly 20 pitches -- no more, no less. Bullpen catcher **Casey Chavez** will act as umpire.

Team Grey:

CRISP, CF

JACKSON, LF

SWEENEY, DH

CARTER, 1B

LAROCHE, 3B

DONALDSON, C

CARSON, RF

TOLLESON, SS

CARDENAS, 2B

CRAMER, P

On the bench: STASSI, TIMMONS, CHOICE

Team White:

ELLIS, 2B

BARTON, 1B

DEJESUS, RF

WILLINGHAM, LF

MATSUI, DH

KOUZMANOFF, 3B

POWELL, C

TAYLOR, CF

SOGARD, SS

CAHILL, P

On the bench: RECKER, GREEN, MILLER

Tyson Ross, Josh Outman, Brad Ziegler, Joey Devine and **Danny Farquhar** will also see work on the mound today.

Kurt Suzuki's not on either lineup card, but **Bob Geren** said he'll play in tomorrow's intrasquad game and start Sunday's Cactus League opener against the Cubs. Geren would like to keep Suzuki on an every-other-day schedule at the beginning so as to not overwork him straight out of the chute. Cliff Pennington (left shoulder) will be eased into game action, though his rehab is coming along quite well. In fact, Geren said he could be ahead of schedule at this point. He's been taking grounders on a daily basis, and he's back to hitting from both sides of the plate -- still more so from the left side, though.

What does Geren want to see in these intrasquad contests? From the hitters, timing. From the pitchers, strikes. A strike percentage of 65 percent is ideal, Geren said, but obviously that's a lofty number, so anywhere close is going to equal a good outing.

Harden says he's pain-free

ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Rich Harden is pain-free and ready to resume his spring-training regimen. As soon as Oakland's training staff gives him the OK, that is.

The Athletics right-hander was shut down last week, expected to miss two weeks of workouts after experiencing stiffness in the lat muscle below his pitching arm when he tried to throw Feb. 15. Harden still hopes to compete for the fifth spot in the A's talented rotation, even if he is a little bit behind as he begins his second stint with the club.

"It's coming along," Harden said Thursday. "I want to get out there, but it's on the trainers. I'm 100 percent pain-free."

Harden hopes he will be able to throw again before the two-week timetable next week. He has been doing strengthening exercises for his throwing arm to help alleviate the problem. He believes his new mechanics and delivery may have contributed to the injury.

"He has had kind of a run of bad luck with little, nagging injuries," starter Dallas Braden said. "Selfishly, I want him back sooner because if I'm going to be part of a rotation where Rich Harden is battling for a fifth spot, with his front-line ability, I think our rotation is in pretty good shape. The team is in pretty good shape. That speaks volumes about our depth."

The A's are certainly going to be careful with a pitcher who has endured so many injuries in recent years. Harden received a \$1.5 million, one-year contract in December to rejoin Oakland. He went 5-5 with a 5.58 ERA in 20 appearances and 18 starts for the Texas 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.

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. Texas released him after the regular season.

Harden went 1-2 with a 2.45 ERA in only 25» 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.

Harden understands he has to be a little bit patient — even though he's determined to get going and return to the form he showed in 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, 2008, in a trade with the A's.

"You don't want to go out there too early and set yourself back," he said. "At this point, you don't need to do that."

Ratto: Temperatures run warm and fuzzy for A's, Ellis

Ray Ratto, CSNBayArea.com

For teams that have been off the grid for the last several years the way the A's have, expectations tend to be frothy-headed cobra venom. Looks like a nice cold beer, ends up laying you out.

But there Mark Ellis is anyway, the longest-running Elephant, noticing not only that this is the warmest, fuzziest spring he can remember in years but that all the things that tend to beat the A's down can now be used as shoulder chips.

Like the relentless anonymity. Like the minimal crowds. Like the general unfashionableness of A's-hood.

"This is honestly the most excited I've seen things around here in years," the veteran second baseman said before Thursday's intrasquad game won by, well, the A's of course. "You always come to spring hoping for good things, but I don't even remember things humming like this in '06."

Ellis enters his 10th year as an Oak-towner, if you count the year he missed after tearing his labrum in a spring training collision with Bobby Crosby. He has known good times and bad ones, the years when Oakland was a destination and when it was a place to avoid.

But now, with a pitching rotation of considerable note and new bats in place of no bats, the A's are one of those stealthy/fashionable next-big-thing picks that occasionally hit but far more often miss. And he'll take it for what it is.

"I remember when it was Mark, Barry and Tim, we were a pretty promising team but they were the ones who got the notice," Ellis said, referring to those halcyon days of MulderZitoHudson. "This feels different to me, with getting DJ (David DeJesus) and (Hideki Matsui) and all our pitching. It's like we've got something going here, and people are ready for it all to hit.

"Now we sort of look at the things that used to keep people away and say, 'Fine. It doesn't matter.' Nobody pays attention to us? Nobody comes to see us? Fine. The stuff that people used to whine about, now we can use it as motivation, like 'You'll find out about us.'"

He says it with not with a grimace but with a knowing smile, as though he sees something the rest of us can only guess at. The A's have had pitching before but no bench or bullpen. They've had hitters with no bench or enough pitching. And they always manage to find the disabled list in droves.

They may do so again; health is as predictable as an agitated chicken, and until they prove they can stay healthy, the logical person must assume the A's will not be.

But Ellis believes that health is the only thing keeping them from being a real deal. And he got that sense in the most counterintuitive way.

"I got a good feeling about us when the Rangers got to the World Series," he said. "I thought when we played them that we were as good as they were. I know Cliff Lee is a hell of a pitcher, but we hung with them the whole year."

The A's, in fact, were 9-10, and the run differential of 76-88 wasn't so overwhelming that Ellis is wrong to believe that the A's could be the 2011 Rangers. Or the 2011 Giants, for that matter.

And yet almosts and if-onyms more often end up in what-the-hell-happeneds and how-did-it-all-go-wrongs. Teams win when they win, and for all the metrics that accurately measure what did happen, guessing in advance when it will is more a matter of art.

Spring training is the time when fanciful thoughts make the most sense, but players like Ellis aren't so prone to romantic imaginings. They've seen too much, they recognize all the ways things can go south.

So it is that when he stands in front of his locker and laughs as easily as he does about the season ahead, he gives off the aura of someone who knows something but hasn't quite figured out how to express it, let alone prove it.

"I think the only way I can explain it is that you get a feeling when you see everyone walking around like they know they belong, like they know they have an important place on a roster. Last year, guys like (Trevor) Cahill, (Gio) Gonzalez, (Brett) Anderson looked like they could, but they didn't really carry themselves like they knew it. Now they do. They know it, and we know it. Now we have to go do it."

And that's still the hardest part of all. Which is why expectations really are cobra venom. If the moment hits when everything comes together, as it did in Arlington in San Francisco, it's perfect. But if it turns out to be a false positive . . . well, you know.

Mark Ellis knows the difference. At least he thinks he does. This year will prove how much he knows, and how much he still has to learn.

Contraction's not the answer for MLB

Ken Rosenthal, foxsports.com, 2/24/2011

Fans of the **Oakland Athletics** and **Tampa Bay Rays** need not worry. But don't be surprised if the "C" word — contraction — returns to the baseball lexicon soon.

I'm already hearing rumblings that certain big-market teams want to drop the A's and Rays, even though the idea stands little chance of actually becoming reality.

The players union, sources say, would regard any proposal to eliminate 50 major-league jobs as an act of war. Which, at this moment, is about the last thing the game needs.

Baseball's labor outlook is not nearly as gloomy as those of the other major professional sports in the U.S. In fact, virtually no one in the game envisions a work stoppage when the current agreement expires Dec. 11.

Still, a major battle is brewing over revenue sharing, baseball's method of rich teams helping the poor. Contraction would be an extreme solution, but one that addresses the big-market concern: Why keep struggling clubs afloat?

"At some point, if you don't want to worry about teams in minor markets, don't put teams in minor markets or leave teams in minor markets," **New York Yankees** co-chairman Hank Steinbrenner told reporters Sunday.

While Steinbrenner did not explicitly say the "C" word, he was either talking about contraction or relocating teams such as the A's and Rays to larger markets. I'm guessing that putting a third club in the New York metropolitan area is not what he had in mind.

Steinbrenner might be the Yankees' crazy uncle, not to be taken seriously, but he is hardly alone in his complaints. A far more respected executive, **Boston Red Sox** president Larry Lucchino, also called for reforms to the current revenue-sharing plan this week, with no mention of contraction.

The Yankees contributed about \$130 million between revenue sharing and luxury tax last season, the Red Sox about \$86.8 million. Eliminating the Rays and A's, both of whom face severe ballpark concerns, would remove two leading revenue-sharing recipients, reducing the burden on the big-money teams.

And the plan would not necessarily end there. The **New York Mets** and **Los Angeles Dodgers**, two of the game's marquee franchises, soon might require new owners. It's only speculation, but connect the dots: the Athletics' Lew Wolff could use his buyout money to purchase the Dodgers. The Rays' Stuart Sternberg could do the same to acquire the Mets.

The A's issued a statement last month saying Wolff had "no interest whatsoever" in buying the Dodgers. However, the game of ownership musical chairs would be right out of Commissioner Bud Selig's playbook. In 2001, John Henry sold the **Florida Marlins** to buy the Red Sox, Jeffrey Loria sold the Montreal Expos to buy the Marlins and MLB took over the Expos.

Those transactions stemmed from the sport's first attempt at contraction, the elimination of the Expos and **Minnesota Twins**. A court ruling in Minnesota foiled the plan, and both franchises eventually grew much more robust — the Twins at Target Field, the Expos in Washington, D.C. as the Nationals.

The A's are not in as dire a position as those teams were. A move to a proposed new ballpark in San Jose would rescue the franchise, if only baseball would get its act together and cut a deal with the Giants to relinquish their territorial rights to the area.

The Rays, on the other hand, have nowhere to go — no new ballpark, no new market where they clearly would be better off. Making matters more difficult: Bob Dupuy, the former baseball executive who excelled at resolving ballpark and ownership issues, resigned last September.

The whole thing is a shame.

The Rays, unlike, say, the Pirates, are proof that the system works for low-revenue clubs that are managed properly. The team is coming off two postseason berths in three years despite playing in baseball's toughest division, the AL East. Yet, its attendance at Tropicana Field last season ranked only 22nd in the majors.

A threat of contraction probably would not rally the community to build the Rays a new publicly financed ballpark; the economy remains too unstable, the franchise's popularity too limited.

Such a threat would, however, change the tenor of the upcoming labor negotiations, raising the tension considerably. Yes, the owners always could pull back to extract other concessions, but if the A's can be saved, why risk a work stoppage to eliminate one troubled franchise?

The answer is to get the A's to San Jose and help the Rays find some better alternative — be it in Tampa or Orlando, San Antonio or Charlotte, whatever market makes the most sense. Healthy franchises are in the best interests of all parties, generating greater revenues, leaving fewer teams to subsidize, raising player salaries.

A third team in New York and/or second team in New England actually would be the best pure economic solution, undercutting the spending power of the Yankees, Mets and Red Sox, but each of those clubs would balk at increased competition within its market.

I don't know how to salvage the Rays. I don't know how to fix revenue sharing. But I do know this — the "C" word is a fighting word in labor negotiations.

Baseball should think twice before going there.