

A's News Clips, Tuesday, October 4, 2011

For Billy Beane, career options coming into view

Bruce Jenkins, San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco -- Billy Beane says he's staying in Oakland, that he's expecting to hear soon from Major League Baseball on the San Jose/stadium issue, and all of that sounds great - until it isn't.

What if no word is imminent, as a source close to MLB told The Chronicle? Or what if it's the worst possible news? Does Beane continue "rotting in baseball jail," as Fox Sports' Ken Rosenthal described it so well? If Beane really wants to further his career, his options are growing by the day.

The departure of Angels general manager Tony Reagins presents a potentially intriguing option for Beane, who grew up in San Diego and loves the Southern California atmosphere. Mike Scioscia effectively runs that operation, and Beane isn't wild about headstrong managers, but they would form a potent combination - about as good as it gets - if Beane allowed Scioscia (and owner Arte Moreno) room for discussion.

This wouldn't be Lew Wolff's idea of fun, letting his general manager move south within the division, but the A's owner is on record saying he would "never inhibit anyone from bettering themselves" over contractual matters.

The plot thickens in Boston, meanwhile, sources claiming that GM Theo Epstein is seriously considering the Chicago Cubs' vacant job. And why wouldn't he? The Red Sox have grown stale, Epstein is an established New England legend after presiding over two world titles, and the Cubs present the biggest challenge in the game.

The Red Sox are big on statistical analysis - a stance old-school manager Terry Francona privately detested, before he departed last week - and if Epstein leaves, they'd be looking at two prime candidates: Beane and Tampa Bay's Andrew Friedman, said to be willing to move.

What happens in the coming weeks could shape the game's immediate future, with a long-lasting impact beyond measure. Even if the A's San Jose plans (still a pipedream) move forward, at least three years would pass before they actually played a game there. From this standpoint, "baseball jail" sounds like a rotten alternative.

Postseason notes

-- In a driving rainstorm at Yankee Stadium on Sunday night, water dripping down his sleeveless arms, Jose Valverde got the save for Detroit, then announced that the series was "over." Working the ninth inning at home Monday night, he blew a fastball past Derek Jeter to end the game. Valverde owns this series, and A.J. Burnett - symbol of the Yankees' flawed rotation - won't be able to reclaim it.

-- The Tigers' Justin Verlander threw a 101 mph fastball in the eighth inning, and TBS' Ron Darling said what many were thinking: "Not since Nolan Ryan have I seen anything like this - this late in the game."

-- If you're wondering about the Brewers' arms-outstretched gesture after a key hit (or throw, in Ryan Braun's case), they're in "beast mode." Prince Fielder stole it from one of his favorite movies, "Monsters, Inc." and it has become a symbol of the club's whimsical manner. "A team-camaraderie thing," Nyjer Morgan said.

-- Most of the big-payroll teams are set at first base and unwilling to spend crazily on a designated hitter, so you wonder: Why wouldn't Fielder stay in Milwaukee? It's an excellent team, he has iconic status, everything works. Ask Boston's Carl Crawford what it means to trade common sense (in his case, signing with the Angels) for money.

-- Among the issues revealed in Boston regarding the team's fractured clubhouse: Members of the rotation were drinking beer on days they weren't pitching. If that's a problem, just shut down the whole game. We're talking about grown men here.

-- One of the most ridiculous quotes of this or any other baseball season: Adrian Gonzalez claiming it was "God's will" that the Red Sox staged the biggest September collapse in history. He also claimed the Sox were damaged by playing too many Sunday night games on national television. Good grief. After that, Aubrey Huff sounds like General Patton.

Willingham nominated for Hank Aaron Award

Award is given annually to best offensive player in each league

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

Underachieving offensive performances plagued the A's for much of the 2011 season, particularly in the first half when they were left buried in the American League West.

Few bright spots emerged from the lineup, one that was made over during a busy offseason in the midst of several transactions that brought aboard a handful of new players.

But one fully lived up to expectations.

Josh Willingham, brought in via trade from the Nationals, was essentially Oakland's lone consistent power provider, leading the club both in homers (29) and RBIs (98) in what was arguably the most productive season of his eight-year career.

"He's obviously very important to the offense and the middle of the lineup, he gets big hits," A's manager Bob Melvin said. "He's the guy we count on to drive the ball out of the park, and he's had a terrific year."

Easily the A's MVP, Willingham can now win more than an in-house honor, as he has been recognized as a candidate for this year's American League Hank Aaron Award.

This coveted honor is awarded annually to the best overall offensive performer in both the AL and National League. Originally introduced in 1999 to honor the 25th anniversary of Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's all-time home run record, the Hank Aaron Award was the first major award to be introduced in 30 years.

Fans began voting for the award on MLB.com on Oct. 3. Voting concludes on Oct. 9.

Willingham, if selected, would join this list of winners: Jose Bautista and Joey Votto (2010); Derek Jeter and Albert Pujols (2009); Aramis Ramirez and Kevin Youkilis (2008); Alex Rodriguez and Prince Fielder (2007); Jeter and Ryan Howard (2006); David Ortiz and Andruw Jones (2005); Manny Ramirez and Barry Bonds (2004); Rodriguez and Pujols (2003); Rodriguez and Bonds (2001-02); Carlos Delgado and Todd Helton (2000); and Manny Ramirez and Sammy Sosa (1999).

Willingham, though shy in numbers next to the likes of Bautista and Robinson Cano, was one of the league's best in the second half, ranking near the top of multiple offensive categories, including home runs and RBIs. He provided numerous clutch hits, hitting above .300 with runners in scoring position.

"They brought him here for obvious reasons," teammate David DeJesus said. "He's a guy that can hit for power, can give you those home runs and RBIs, and there hasn't been a guy whose done more for the team this year."

"I know everyone, including myself, wishes they could have contributed a bit more here this year, and it's hard not to wonder where we'd be if we were more consistent. But Josh has been in there, day in and day out, giving the offense life."

"He's been unbelievable," pitcher Gio Gonzalez said. "You can't ask for more than what Josh has given us. He's constantly driving in runs for us. He's been big, real big for this team."

A's 2011 organizational review

By Jonathan Mayo / MLB.com

At the start of the 2011 season, MLB.com unveiled Top 10 prospect lists for all 30 Major League organizations on Prospect Watch. Over the course of the season, those lists changed due to graduations to the big leagues, trades and performances. With the season completed, MLB.com will review how the prospects on those lists fared in 2011.

Grant Green had heard the talk pretty much from the start of his professional career. The 2009 first-round pick out of University of Southern Calif., had grown accustomed to people questioning his ability to stay at shortstop long-term. There's little question he used that as motivation, wanting to prove to people he could stay up the middle.

He's still playing up the middle, but there's no question he had to swallow some pride when the A's asked him to move to center field in July.

"I think with every position change, you feel this way," Green said about the initial hesitation about the move. "It went alright. The main difference is route-taking. I had some balls early on [that were tough]. And the boredom out there, not being able to talk to anyone."

Moving Green to the outfield wasn't so much about his inability to play in the infield -- he had made good strides there -- but rather about who was in front of him. Cliff Pennington has established himself as the shortstop in Oakland. A move to second -- the shift most saw in Green's future -- isn't an option now that Jemile Weeks has taken over there.

Even with that reality, being forced to move can be a bitter pill to swallow. But getting on the phone with general manager Billy Beane to hear the explanation made for a much smoother transition.

"They reinforced to me that this was the quickest way for me to get there," Green said. "They have Pennington and Weeks, so there's a logjam. It's the best way for me. Hearing that from the general manager settles your thinking down."

To Green's credit, learning a new position on the fly did not hurt his offense. In fact, Green hit better in the second half of the season as he was playing center field. Near the end of April, Green was hovering around .200. A 13-game hitting streak lifted him to .290 while he was still playing short. But his best month came as a center fielder, when he hit .342/.362/.459 in August, proof that Green was able to eventually not dwell on a poor plate appearance with the extra idle time in the outfield.

"At first, if I didn't get a hit, I'd think about every at-bat," said Green, who hit .294 with six of his nine homers in the second half. "But I think my numbers went up when I moved to the outfield. I'm more happy with how poorly I started and then how I ended up. I knew I could only go up from there."

Top 10 review

When the 2011 season began, all but one of the system's Top 10 prospects were hitters. That didn't change at season's end, largely because only one player -- No. 5 Weeks -- graduated from the list.

Weeks graduated with honors, of course, hitting .303 with 22 steals over 96 games and making a late case for Rookie of the Year consideration. There were a few other bats who hoped to make larger contributions in Oakland, namely No. 2 Chris Carter and No. 10 Michael Taylor. Both spent some time in the big leagues, but a grand total of fewer than 100 combined at-bats falls short of expectations.

The lone arm on the list, Ian Krol, had a completely lost season, due both to injury and a suspension. The lefty is just 20 years old, however, and has time to get things headed back in the right direction. The A's looked to address some of that lack of depth when they took Sonny Gray out of Vanderbilt with their first-round pick last June. Gray is an advanced college arm who will likely jump on the fast track to join that young staff in Oakland soon.

A's top 10 prospects

A look at how the A's Top 10 Prospects list looked at the beginning and end of the 2011 season:

No.	Preseason	Postseason
1.	Grant Green, SS	Green, OF
2.	Chris Carter, 1B	Choice
3.	Michael Choice, OF	Carter

A look at how the A's Top 10 Prospects list looked at the beginning and end of the 2011 season:

No.	Preseason	Postseason
4.	Ian Krol, RHP	Cabrera
5.	Jemile Weeks, 2B	Shipman
6.	Yordy Cabrera, SS	Nunez
7.	Max Stassi, C	Taylor
8.	Aaron Shipman, OF	Stephen Parker, 3B
9.	Renato Nunez, 3B	Stassi
10.	Michael Taylor, OF	Krol

Players in bold were removed from the list after reaching the rookie eligibility threshold.

Organizational Players of the Year

MLB.com's Preseason Picks

Grant Green, SS: It seemed like Green would walk away with his second straight Hitter of the Year honor, but while he finished strongly, his overall season wasn't award-worthy.

Ian Krol, LHP: He was supposed to own the California League and even earn a promotion, but instead he was hampered by injury and then suspended because of inappropriate comments on Twitter.

MLB.com's Postseason Selections

Michael Choice, OF: Critics may not love the 134 strikeouts in 118 games, but the 2010 first-rounder's 30 homers and 82 RBIs in his first full season placed him second in both categories in the system. He topped the California League in homers and finished fifth in slugging.

A.J. Griffin, RHP: The 13th-rounder from the 2010 Draft made stops at all four full-season A's affiliates in his first full season, finishing second in the system with his 3.47 ERA and tied for the lead with 156 strikeouts. He even won a pair of games for Stockton in the California League playoffs.

Price is right for Melvin's Athletics

Mychael Urban, csn.com

The fairly easy conclusion reached by those who've been connecting the easy-to-connect dots is to suggest you go ahead and place your bet on Bryan Price being the next Oakland A's pitching coach.

Price, for those of you who don't know enough about the dots to connect them, is, for lack of a better term, A's manager Bob Melvin's main man. They worked as manager-pitching coach with the Mariners, and they encored with the Diamondbacks. Worked out fairly well, too.

So when the A's announced last week that they were giving Ron Romanick a gold watch and walking papers after his first year as Oakland's big-league pitching coach, well ... duh.

Cue the Price rumors. In fact, get the press release ready. Despite the fact that Price is currently under contract with the Reds for another season, it'd be an upset if the man is not in Green and Gold next spring.

Where does that leave Romanick? To be determined. Good man, he. Well-respected. Innovative in some ways.

Yet new managers reserve the right to name their own staffs, and Melvin has an obvious comfort level with Price. Kudos to A's general manager Billy Beane for not getting in the way of that.

What's that, you say? The A's pitchers love Romanick? They performed well under his tutelage? Dismissing him is straight cold?

Have you followed Beane? If he had an ounce of sentimentality in his blood, Carlos Pena would still be at first base and Eric Byrnes would be in left field.

They aren't. So Romanick is gone. So is hitting coach Gerald Perry -- again -- and if someone can please explain with a modicum of sanity why he was brought back after such a miserable first stint, Twizzlers for all.

Price will be in the East Bay before long. If the Reds play hardball and make him stick to his contract, it won't be until 2013. But Melvin can wait. That's the beauty of a three-year deal.

He probably won't have to wait, though.