

Friday, May 6, 2005

### Reggie Sanders - but I'd prefer Dan Johnson

Follow this link for a post at Athletics Nation that mentions this rumor mentioned by Mychael Urban, A's beat writer for MLB.com, author of a book about Oakland's former Three Aces, and creative name speller.

For those who don't like links, the rumor is this: the A's would send Eric Byrnes and a "low-level prospect" to St. Louis for Reggie Sanders. The idea would be to solve Oakland's power-hitting woes.

Does this make sense for the A's?

(All stats in this analysis are either Davenport Translations or Equivalent stats, so as to create a level playing field between Sanders and Byrnes.)

Sanders is 37 this year, Byrnes is 29. Byrnes has put up slugging percentages of .475 and .480 the last two years, and is projected by PECOTA (weighted mean) for .473 this year; the same numbers for Sanders are .577, .472, and .496. Sanders is off to a .485 slugging start to this year; Byrnes's number is a paltry .360. Sanders makes \$2 million this year and \$4 million next year; Byrnes makes \$2.2 million this year and is unsigned for next (he's arbitration-eligible but not free-agent-eligible). (Salary data is courtesy of the fantastic Hardball Dollars site, taking over where Dugout Dollars left off.)

With the salaries essentially even (and, if Byrnes has a good year, likely to be essentially even next year as well), the trade would essentially be the "low-level prospect" for a boost of .010 to .030 slugging points. On the other hand, the upside is a little higher in Sanders's case than Byrnes, which is surprising, given their ages: Byrnes's 90th percentile PECOTA slugging is .535; Sanders's 75th percentile PECOTA slugging is .531. Because of his age, you've probably guessed, without me quoting numbers, that Sanders's downside is much lower than Byrnes's.

You might assume that Sanders isn't going to hit that downside, though, because he'd probably already be showing signs of done-ness: his current .265 isolated slugging, needless to say, isn't a sign of done-ness. On the other hand, he's hitting .228. The reduction in batting average doesn't seem to be coming from a lack of contact, though: his strikeout rate is actually down from last year.

If the A's need an injection of power, then, I think Sanders would not be a bad target, assuming, of course, that the low-level prospect isn't really a top-shelf low-level prospect. I'd figure Billy Beane would try to sell Sanders off at the end of 2005, or even at the trading deadline, if the A's are out of it, either capitalizing on a good year to sell high or else dumping his contract if he looks done.

Of course, the question begged is whether the A's need an injection of power. Sure, 19 homers is pitiful. Yes, the A's have the lowest slugging percentage in the American League, lower than the on-base percentage of four different teams. No, the problem can't be explained away by their ugly batting average, because their isolated slugging of .106 is also the worst in the league. All of that said, though, do the A's need new players, or do the players they have need to play better? You have to believe that Byrnes, Erubiel Durazo, and Eric Chavez, as will Nick Swisher and Bobby Crosby when they get back from their owies, will all hit far better than they have. Also, remember that Oakland was already punting power at first (Scott Hatteberg), second (Mark Ellis, though Keith Ginter was supposed to give some relief there), center (Mark Kotsay), and, especially, catcher (Jason Kendall), and it's not one of those positions that's being upgraded: it's a position from which power was already supposed to come.

You start to get the feeling that Scott Hatteberg is something of a sacred cow around Oakland. If the team really wants to shake things up, why not bring up Dan Johnson and let him hang around first base for a while? Let Hatteberg get a start or two a week and be a nice OBP source off the bench. The A's have the perfect opportunity to do this now that Swisher is hurt. Instead, they got scared, I guess, about having "only" four outfielders, and pulled Jermaine Clark up.

Johnson is 25, so it's getting close to "now or never" time, his PECOTA mean projection has him hitting .347/.452 OBP/SLG, and his upside, even this year, is great: his 90th percentile projection is .394/.528 OBP/SLG.

It's been the rare A's move that sabermetrically-minded fans have moaned about, but the Scott Hatteberg signing and subsequent relegation of Dan Johnson (and Graham Koonce, even) to secondary, "Sorry, no chance" status has been

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infuriating. This team is supposed to be the one that's closest to a meritocracy in the whole game, and our reward for that is a first baseman with a sub-.700 OPS? Ouch.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 20:53

Another great comment, Klutts.

I've always hoped Melhuse would get more at-bats, but the A's seem determined to not really give him much of a shot to settle in and hit some. Sure, that's the nature of a backup catcher, but still, he's got to be better than what Kendall is doing, right?

Anonymous on May 9 2005, 15:11

You're right on about the Hatty/sacred cow idea. When Tejada and Hernandez were manning SS and C we were getting some power from traditional defensive positions. With Crosby's injury (and inevitable slow recovery) and now Kendall taking over for Ramon we're no longer able to absorb the power drain from 1B. I think 2 moves I would make would be, first, to give Melhuse more ABs vs. RHPs (indeed almost a platoon type situation), and to exchange Thomas for Johnson. The latter move will enable Thomas to hopefully regain his hitting stroke and obviously add more punch to the lineup. Since the A's rarely substitute Thomas late in the game anyway, the loss of his defensive value is slight.

Against RHPs:

Kotsay  
Ellis  
Chavez  
Durazo  
Hatteberg 1B  
Johnson LF  
Kielty  
Melhuse  
Scutaro

Against LHPs

Kotsay  
Ellis/Ginter  
Kielty  
Chavez  
etc.

Everything to be reevaluated upon the return of Crosby and Swisher in mid-june or so.

Anonymous on May 9 2005, 12:59