

Sweeney down but not out of A's plans

Written by Mark Dukes

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You may have noticed Metro Sports Report is carrying a daily update on its front page of the progress of Ryan Sweeney, the Oakland Athletics outfielder from Cedar Rapids.

Unfortunately in the early part of the baseball season, the updates have been nearly nil with only two pinch-hit appearances.

Sweeney, a regular the past three seasons in Oakland, didn't get his first start of 2011 until Sunday at Minnesota. He was slotted in the No. 5 hole and played right field as Manager Bob Geren sat Coco Crisp.

The A's retooled their outfield in the offseason, obtaining David DeJesus in a trade with Kansas City and Josh Willingham in a deal with Washington. DeJesus is a career .289 hitter. Willingham adds some potential power. Crisp is a veteran switch-hitting leadoff man who can steal a base.

With Crisp cemented in center field, there had to be an odd man out at the corner outfield positions. Sweeney was the one, at least to start the season.

Sweeney has recovered from knee surgery that knocked his 2010 season in half but Geren has taken it slow with him. Sweeney had an excellent spring training, batting .395 in 13 games with a homer. Still, it wasn't enough to supplant any of the other outfielders, putting Sweeney in a reserve role for perhaps the first time in his baseball life.

"He just has to keep working and do the best he can," Geren said last Friday. "His start time was delayed in the spring, so he was only playing every couple of days, but he reacted to it well. His timing was good and he has a real simple swing, so I think he'll adjust just fine."

Sweeney is no slouch himself. In his fourth full season with Oakland, he has accumulated a

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.286 lifetime batting average. Plus he plays excellent defense, as witnessed by his .995 fielding percentage with just four errors and 22 assists in 785 career chances. Quite a player to have on your bench.

Sweeney likely won't get a lot of time as the designated hitter, either. The A's signed free agent Hideki Matsui specifically for that role. Both are left-handed hitters. In all the conversations I've had with Sweeney in person and on the radio, he has always maintained a positive attitude. After all, the odds of playing in the major leagues are long. But once you reach The Show, you want to play.

Sweeney played Sunday and did well. He was 1-for 3 with a walk and a run scored. He stroked a key ground-rule double to left in Oakland's four-run sixth inning, moving Matsui to third. Sweeney later scored.

Less than one-tenth of the season has been played and so much can happen from here. Perhaps Sweeney blossoms in his limited starts. Perhaps one of the other outfielders is injured or doesn't produce. Perhaps Matsui, who will be 37 in June, won't be able to stay in the starting lineup every day. Perhaps Sweeney, who has a one-year contract, becomes involved in a trade.

As unfamiliar the territory is for Sweeney, my bet is that he will become a starting outfielder again very soon, whether it be in Oakland or elsewhere.

BROTHER UPDATE – Sweeney's younger brother Kellen, a second-round draft pick last year out of Cedar Rapids Jefferson, will start this season in extended spring training. Kellen, property of the Toronto Blue Jays, is listed on the roster of the Gulf Coast League Blue Jays. That league doesn't begin play until June 20. The Blue Jays also have teams in the short-season Appalachian and Northwest Leagues.

Sweeney batted .267 with a homer in 16 games with the Blue Jays' Gulf Coast League team signing in late July last summer. He is one of two third basemen on the GCL Jays roster. The other is third-round pick Christopher Hawkins, who hit .255 in 46 games in the GCL last year.

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Former Prairie prep Scott Schebler also is in extended spring training in the Dodgers' organization. He batted .294 in five games in the Arizona League last summer. He signed in August after being drafted by the Dodgers in the 26th round of last June's draft after a standout freshman season at DMACC.