

Sweeney adjusting to new role with A's

Written by Jim Ecker

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CHICAGO -- Ryan Sweeney is married to a nursing student from northern California, he's getting paid \$1.4 million to play the game he loves and his surgically repaired knee is fine.

Life is good for the Major League outfielder from Cedar Rapids, except for one thing. He's not getting to play on a regular basis for the Oakland A's this season, so for the first time in his life he's been a spare part who mostly sits on the bench.

"I've never really been in a backup role, so it's new to me," Sweeney said Tuesday before the A's played the Chicago White Sox at U.S. Cellular Field. "I'm just trying to take extra swings and do whatever I can to try and stay sharp at the plate, because it's not easy."

Sweeney, 26, cracked the starting lineup Tuesday, only his second start in 11 games. He walked in his first two at-bats, then got yanked for a pinch-hitter in the top of the fifth when Chicago Manager Ozzie Guillen brought in a left-handed pitcher to face the left-swinging Sweeney with runners at first and second with two outs. The pinch-hitter (Conor Jackson) grounded out to end the inning.

Sweeney is hitting just .200 (1 for 5), but he's walked three times and his on-base percentage is a healthy .500.

Sidelined by surgery in 2010

Sweeney was Oakland's starting right fielder the past three seasons before a knee injury ended his 2010 campaign, but he moved to left field Tuesday as Oakland Manager Bob Geren shuffled his lineup to give Josh Willingham a night off.

Sweeney had surgery on July 30 to repair the patella in his right knee and has the scar to prove it. Oakland traded for Willingham and David DeJesus to solidify its outfield during the offseason, making Sweeney the odd man out. Willingham, DeJesus and Coco Crisp have gotten most of the playing time so far.

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"Maybe if I would have stayed healthy all year last year, I might not be in this situation," he said. "But I can't really look at that. I just needed to get it (the surgery) done."

"I feel like I didn't do anything to necessarily lose my spot," he said. "It's not like I played bad or anything, I just had that surgery and they signed these guys. It's baseball. There are new guys coming and going all the time."

Sweeney hit .294 with one home run and 36 RBIs in 82 games last season. He's a career .286 hitter with 13 homers and 144 RBIs in 367 games over the course of six campaigns.

Willingham and DeJesus, the new outfielders, are both making \$6 million, matching the top salary on the club. Crisp is making \$5,750,000, which ranks fourth on the team. Sweeney is sitting at \$1.4 million, which means the A's have less money invested in the youngest member of that outfield group.

Sweeney didn't like losing his starting job to Willingham and DeJesus, but understands the business side of the game. "Obviously when you get guys that are their caliber -- you trade for them -- I think the team obviously had to play them, because they traded other good guys to get them on the team and they're a big part of the offense," he said.

Sweeney "looks great," Geren says

Geren said he plans to give Sweeney as much playing time as possible. Five of Oakland's outfielders missed time with injuries in 2010, and Geren said he thinks Sweeney will play a significant role over the course of the 162-game season, especially if injuries strike again.

He said he thinks Sweeney has rebounded well from knee surgery.

"He looks great," Geren said before Tuesday's game. "He looks stronger in the lower half, he's showing more power in batting practice. And one thing about him, he got a late start in spring training because of his legs. It didn't seem to hurt his timing at all with the bat, either."

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Sweeney eased into spring training to make sure his right knee was strong, then hit .395 in 13 games to prove he was ready. "I felt great in spring training," he said. "My swing felt good."

The season began and he sat on the bench for the first eight games, reduced to two pinch-hit appearances (0 for 2) and a chance to pinch-run on one occasion for designated hitter Hideki Matsui.

Sweeney started his first game of the season Sunday in Minneapolis and helped the A's win the ballgame by going 1-for-3 with a double, run scored, a walk and an outfield assist.

Sweeney insisted he can play on an everyday basis, if called upon. Oakland's trainer spreads an anti-inflammatory substance on Sweeney's right knee before games and Sweeney wears a light brace on the knee to keep it warm, but he said he's healthy and ready to play all the time.

"Yeah, I'd be fine," said Sweeney, who graduated from Xavier High School in 2003. "I was a little sore two days ago after my first game in Minnesota. That's just normal stuff. You get through that after you play a few games."

Sweeney wants to play every day

Sweeney has now started twice in three days, after not starting the first eight games.

"Right now he's not actually an everyday player, but I'm going to give him as much as I can," Geren said. "And I know during the course of the year, if somebody gets dinged up here or there, he's going to get plenty of opportunity to be a pretty regular player."

"He wants to play every day, but understands where he's at right now," Geren said. "He's working hard and he's being patient."

Sweeney has proved to be an exceptional defensive outfielder in the big leagues. He's committed only four errors in 352 games for a .995 fielding percentage in 785 chances.

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Sweeney is 6-foot-4 and 225 pounds, but he's yet to hit with much power with just those 13 homers in 367 games. He's mostly a line-drive hitter, with power to the gaps for doubles.

"Who knows" what the future holds

Sweeney is not eligible for free agency until after the 2013 season, so unless he's traded he'll be a member of the A's and will have to accept whatever role he's given. The A's have traded some of their top players in midseason in recent years after falling out of playoff contention, but Sweeney expects the A's to compete for the division title and keep the team intact.

"Who knows what's going to happen," he said. "Only the upper management knows that. You just have to be ready when it's your time to play."

Sweeney and his wife, Natasha, were married in November 2009. She's a nursing student at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, where the couple owns a home, but she plans to finish her degree this December and join Sweeney on a full-time basis.

Natasha drove to Minneapolis with Sweeney's parents for the three-game series this past weekend and plans to fly to many of his games on weekends. They are thinking about buying a home in Arizona, but that remains to be seen.

Sweeney has no complaints overall, but he'd definitely like to get more playing time and get back in the swing of things.

"The main thing is trying to keep your timing," he said. "Playing once a week, balls you might hit when you're playing every day are a lot harder to hit. It's tough to hit those same pitches when you haven't stepped in the box against 97 mph in a couple of days."

Sweeney had a quality at-bat in the top of the second inning. He led off the inning and walked on nine pitches, fouling off a pair of two-strike pitches to earn the free pass. He took off from first base on a 3-2 pitch and scored on a double to left-center by Mark Ellis, giving the A's a 1-0

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Sweeney led off the fourth inning and walked on a 3-1 pitch, but was stranded at second base. He was scheduled to bat again in the fifth, but Geren used Jackson as a pinch-hitter, ending Sweeney's night.