

AL West Angels may give Oakland a run for its money

The American League West saw changes to deals in the offseason in the wake of the top-selling book "Moneyball"

By Bill Madden
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One year later, it is a whole different kind of "Moneyball" they're talking about in the American League West.

Last year at this time, the soon-to-be-best-selling book "Moneyball" — in which Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane is depicted as an anti-scout genius — was just beginning to cause a buzz throughout baseball. Beane's A's were coming off their third straight trip to the postseason and the wonder of it all was that it was accomplished with a payroll of barely \$50 million.

Beane's payroll hasn't increased much this season, either — especially with the departure of 2002 AL MVP shortstop Miguel Tejada — but the Anaheim Angels' has.

Considerably. New Angels owner Arte Moreno shelled out \$146 million over the winter for free agents Vladimir Guerrero, Bartolo Colon, Kelvin Escobar and Jose Guillen. At the same time, Beane's A's lost two key components from their 2003 division championship team, Tejada and closer Keith Foulke, and traded another, catcher Ramon Hernandez, for financial reasons.

It would therefore appear as if money has brought about a dramatic shift in the balance of power in the AL West.

Mind you, the A's still figure to be a force, if only because of their vastly superior trio of pitching aces, Tim Lincecum, Barry Zito and Mark Mulder. Their No. 4 starter, Mark Redman, acquired from the World Champion Florida Marlins, was a 15-game winner in '03.

But even though the A's owners stepped out of character and locked up third baseman Eric Chavez for six years and \$66 million in spring training, the cost-control measures undertaken over the winter may have reduced the A's to also-ran status.

For one thing, Arthur Rhodes, the career set-up man signed to replace Foulke, has never demonstrated a closer mentality in pressure situations. And while rookie shortstop Bobby Crosby put up some impressive power numbers (22 HR, 90 RBI) at Triple-A Sacramento, the A's are asking him to replace Tejada's considerable offensive production, which is asking a lot.

Beane is banking on a big comeback from Jermaine Dye, and career offensive seasons from offseason acquisitions Mark Kotsay and Bobby Kielty in the outfield, which is also asking a lot.

On the other hand, the Angels have added the potential of 50-plus homers with Guerrero and Guillen. And with Colon and Escobar joining their rotation, the Angels find themselves being one of the very few teams in baseball with a surplus of starters this spring.

The team to watch in this division is the Seattle Mariners, who made major improvements over the winter and can expect an encore from their fast-developing young starting pitchers, Joel Pineiro, Ryan Franklin and Gil Meche. That trio combined for 42 wins in their "coming out" 2003 season — only three fewer than Hudson, Zito and Mulder. With veterans Jamie Moyer and Freddy Garcia, the Mariners' rotation is as deep in quality as any in baseball. New GM Bill Bavasi made some excellent free-agent signings — closer Eddie Guardado, third baseman Scott Spiezio, left fielder Raul Ibanez and infielder Rich Aurilia — that addressed most of the Mariners' off-season needs. Worrisome, however, is the age of this team — regulars Bret Boone, Edgar Martinez, John Olerud and rotation ace Moyer are all 35 or older — and that showed in the M's late-season fade last year.

Once again, Buck Showalter's Texas Rangers will finish last in the AL West, only this time without Alex Rodriguez.

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