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San Francisco Chronicle

Surgery for Kotsay; might miss 3 months

John Shea, Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer
Thursday, March 8, 2007

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(03-08) 04:00 PDT Mesa, Ariz. -- Surgery or no surgery? That has been the question for Mark Kotsay and the A's.

The answer is surgery, meaning the A's will miss their center fielder when they open the 2007 season. Kotsay, who has had a chronic lower-back problem since 2003, said the surgery will be performed today by Dr. Robert Watkins in Los Angeles.

"We have a solution," Kotsay said in a phone interview Wednesday night, adding he'll be out of action eight to 12 weeks. He wouldn't be cleared to begin light rehabilitation until after a three- to four-week healing process.

"There's never 100 percent guarantee with surgery, but hopefully this will be the best option to get me back healthy."

Kotsay, 31, said the surgery is similar to Randy Johnson's, also performed by Watkins, in October. Kotsay has had a herniated disk in his lower back, and spasms have continued to come and go. The latest red flag came three days into camp when the back tightened again, much earlier than normal.

After being examined by A's doctors, Kotsay sought outside opinions on his MRI exam results and was examined by two independent doctors, most recently Watkins, a back specialist for A's shortstop Bobby Crosby.

"It hasn't been fun playing the way I've played the last two seasons," Kotsay said. "You could see the difference. I was not meeting my standard performance. Rather than being in and out of the lineup, hopefully this will allow me to contribute at full strength."

Kotsay met with Watkins in the offseason, but surgery wasn't the preferred option.

"At that point, the plan was to increase my hip flexibility and core stability," Kotsay said. "Obviously, it was very frustrating after three days of spring training to have this happen."

Early in spring training, Kotsay said he wanted to "see if there's something else that can help," though he played down possible surgery. But Kotsay, who wanted to explore all options, was seriously considering surgery and got the third opinion after another doctor didn't fully recommend an operation.

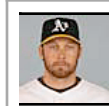
Manager Bob Geren, as is his responsibility, has had to consider the possibility of opening the season without Kotsay.

"I have been thinking about that," Geren said.

Without Kotsay, one of their most respected and best defensive players, the A's will turn to Milton Bradley to play center field, probably flanked by Nick Swisher in right and Shannon Stewart in left. With Swisher in the outfield, Dan Johnson would be the favorite to play first base.

Outfielder Bobby Kielty is sidelined following knee surgery.

Kotsay hit .275 last year with seven homers and 59 RBIs in 129 games. He missed six games in August



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and six in September with back problems. He missed 20 of the final 51 games, but he appeared in every A's postseason game, and his inside-the-park homer in Game 2 of the Division Series led the A's to a 5-2 victory over the Twins.

In July 2005, Kotsay signed a two-year, \$15 million contract extension through 2008.

Piazza improving: Mike Piazza, one day after getting drilled in the left elbow, said the pain and swelling had subsided. He didn't participate in baseball activity but said he might try to take batting practice today if the elbow continues to improve.

"It's just stiff. It feels a little better today. I did have trouble getting to sleep last night," said Piazza, adding he'd have X-rays only if he feels "significant discomfort, but probably not."

Said Geren: "Anytime a guy gets hit and (the prognosis) is day to day, it's good news."

Infielder Lou Merloni sustained a concussion from Tuesday's beaming. He didn't suit up and is expected to miss several days. He was in good spirits and no longer woozy.

"How's the helmet?" he asked a clubhouse worker.

Kennedy struggling: Joe Kennedy, who's supposed to be the No. 5 starter, struggled in a second straight start and was rocked for five runs and eight hits in two innings. Nearly everything he threw, the Cubs crushed. Alfonso Soriano opened with a home run, and teammates also hit balls a long way (four of the next five batters accounted for a double, triple, single and double).

"I think I'm trying too much when I'm on the mound," said Kennedy, who has a 22.07 ERA, having surrendered four runs and six hits in 12/3 innings of his other appearance. "I have to step back and focus a little bit. It's fixable."

The A's lost 9-8, and the game ended when Charles Thomas was thrown out at the plate after Rule 5 draftee Ryan Goleski singled to left.

E-mail the writers at jshea@sfchronicle.com and sslusser@sfchronicle.com.

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