

(Text of my story on Aaron Judge, ran on NBC Sports Bay Area site on May 25, 2017)

By Joe Stiglich

Long before Yankees rookie Aaron Judge was gracing Sports Illustrated covers and taking part in “Tonight Show” skits, the A’s had visions of the hulking outfielder wearing green and gold.

Oakland was the first team to draft Judge, when he was a three-sport star coming out of tiny Linden High School, about 50 miles southeast of Sacramento.

The A’s took him in the 31st round of the 2010 draft but weren’t able to sign Judge, who was firmly set on attending Fresno State. Three years later, New York grabbed him in the first round of the 2013 draft. Now Judge is the latest Bronx sensation, the major league co-leader with 15 home runs and having shown off his comedic skills by starring in a man-on-the-street skit for “The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.”

On Friday, he’ll face the A’s for the first time when they begin a three-game series at Yankee Stadium. But Oakland’s front office and scouting department long have been familiar with the 6-foot-7, 282-pound right fielder.

Jermaine Clark, the A’s area scout who followed Judge during his high school career, recently dusted off a scouting report he filed back in 2010 on Judge.

“Big kid with a body to dream on,” the report read. “Untapped monster.”

While at Linden, Judge also starred in football and basketball, and he was a dominant pitcher and first baseman. The problem was Linden played in a small league against competition that didn't approach the best prep baseball leagues in California.

Clark recalls entering Judge's information into the A's database.

"I remember putting his schedule in the computer, and none of the schools he was playing registered in our system," Clark said.

But the A's recognized the physical tools. They invited Judge to take part in a workout at the Coliseum leading up to the 2010 draft, an event they plan annually for some of the best draft hopefuls in Northern California.

"He definitely made a good impression," A's scouting director Eric Kubota said. "You'd have to be blind to not see the physicality and athleticism. That's the kind of thing that jumps out on the field. He's bigger and more athletic than any guy he's around."

Still, he wasn't a slam-dunk choice to be taken high in the 2010 draft. In a time when the majority of top baseball prospects grow up as one-sport specialists, playing the game year-round, Judge was a throwback to the athlete who dabbled in multiple sports. Therefore, his skills on the diamond weren't as polished, and his 6-foot-7 height also worked against him.

"The frame was so long that things didn't look so fluid," Clark said.

The A's took a flyer on Judge, as Kubota put it, drafting him in the 31st round but knowing it was a long shot that he would sign. Both of Judge's parents are retired teachers, and a college education was important to them.

So why waste a draft pick on him at all?

“Many of these kids that get drafted late in the draft, clubs don’t have the wherewithal to go sign them,” said A’s special assistant Grady Fuson, who’s heavily involved in the team’s scouting. “But sometimes you take those guys because things change over the summer” regarding a player’s decision-making.

Attempts to arrange a phone interview with Judge were unsuccessful. But over the winter, he discussed the A’s drafting him with The Record newspaper in Stockton.

“I was drafted in high school but made the choice to go to college,” Judge said. “I wasn’t mature enough at that point to get right into minor league baseball. I learned from some great coaches at Fresno. It really helped prepare me.”

The Yankees drafted him with the 32nd overall pick in 2013, a draft that was deep in quality collegiate outfielders. Eight picks before that, at No. 24, the A’s selected Texas high school outfielder Billy McKinney.

“I think in general we’re always looking for the player we like best when he’s available at that pick,” Kubota said. “That’s how it worked out.”

In July 2014, the A’s packaged McKinney along with their top prospect at the time, Addison Russell, and right-hander Dan Straily and traded him to the Cubs for starting pitchers Jeff Samardzija and Jason Hammel, a trade that in hindsight still has A’s fans slapping their foreheads.

Last season, the Cubs dealt McKinney to the Yankees as part of another high-profile trade that landed Aroldis Chapman in Chicago.

How did the A’s and so many other clubs pass on Judge throughout the first round in 2013? Keep in mind that Mike Trout somehow lasted until the 25th pick in the 2009 draft, when the Los Angeles Angels finally scooped him up.

The draft is an inexact science in which some players blossom, some fail, and some wind up starring for other teams. But when Judge takes the field against the A's this weekend, Kubota said he won't be watching through the lens of what could have been.

"I think in general we root for kids from Northern California, we root for kids we drafted," he said. "Ideally we'd love them to be doing it in white spikes, but we're happy to watch them succeed no matter where they're at."