

Sweeney excited about bigger stage in Boston

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Boston Red Sox think Ryan Sweeney is a perfect fit for Fenway Park and tried several times in recent years to grab him.

They finally got their man Wednesday night.

"They said they'd been wanting to get me and excited to have me. So that's good," Sweeney said Thursday after a workout in Cedar Rapids.

Sweeney did not appear especially wanted in Oakland last season when he received spot duty as the fourth outfielder, but he has a good chance to be the starting right fielder in Boston this year for a playoff contender with a powerful lineup.

Sweeney, 26, is going from a struggling franchise to one of the best teams in the major leagues. Oakland, a cash-starved club, finished 74-88 last season and averaged 18,232 fans at its cavernous ballpark. Boston, one of the richest teams in baseball, went 90-72 last season and averaged 37,703 spectators at cozy Fenway Park.

The Oakland Coliseum attendance was 52 percent of capacity this past season, whereas Fenway was filled to 101.7 percent, according to Major League Baseball.

"Basically you're going from one extreme to the other," said Sweeney, a 2003 Xavier High School graduate. "It's going to be fun playing in front of a sold-out crowd every single night.

"To be able to be part of a team like that, and with the lineup they're putting together, it's going to be fun."

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Sweeney was part of a five-player trade that featured Oakland relief pitcher Andrew Bailey, who comes to Boston as the new closer to replace Jonathan Papelbon (now with Philadelphia). Sweeney and Bailey are good friends.

"He's got a little more pressure on him than I do," Sweeney said, laughing.

Sweeney said he had no idea the Red Sox wanted him or that he'd be traded this offseason. "Not at all," he remarked. "I knew that Boston wanted Bailey, but I didn't know that my name was involved in anything."

He learned about the trade Wednesday night. "About 10 minutes before everybody else," he said.

He'd received a message Wednesday night to call Oakland's assistant general manager, which naturally raised his curiosity. He tried to find out what was going on.

"I called my agent, and he didn't know anything about it," Sweeney said. "The assistant G.M. said that everything was going well, but we traded you to Boston with Bailey."

"I was surprised. I had no inclination. Being in Oakland the last four years, granted I probably knew the time was going to come eventually, but I didn't know that it was going to be so soon."

"Anytime you get a GM or an assistant GM calling you on the phone, it usually means you're going somewhere else."

Sweeney made \$1.4 million last season, which is a relatively low figure for someone who has been in the Major Leagues since 2006. He's a career .283 hitter and an excellent fielder who probably would have commanded a higher salary on the open market in future years, which may be why Oakland traded him now.

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Sweeney said his agent will negotiate a contract with the Red Sox on his behalf.

Sweeney is a big, powerful man at 6-foot-4 and 225 pounds. He's never hit for power in the big leagues, but he has a line-drive bat and is looking forward to playing at Fenway Park and taking a few pokes at the Green Monster in left field, even though he's a left-handed hitter. That's what the Red Sox have in mind.

"They love the way I hit," he said. "With me hitting the ball to the opposite field a lot and having that Monster being closer in, a lot of those balls that were caught at the wall or were caught on the warning track in Oakland will be off the wall now.

"Hopefully I'll hit a lot more doubles and drive balls in the gap and maybe hit a few more homers. We'll see."

The Red Sox hit .280 as a team last season, second-best in the majors, and feature a lineup with Dustin Pedroia, Carl Crawford, Jacoby Ellsbury, Adrian Gonzalez, David Ortiz, Kevin Youkilis and Marco Scutaro. Sweeney figures he'll hit in the bottom part of that lineup, but anticipates having numerous chances to drive in runs.

The Red Sox feature Ellsbury in center field and Crawford in left field, but right field appears to be wide open heading into the 2012 campaign. J.D. Drew just finished a five-year, \$14-million contract in Boston and apparently will not return after hitting .222 with four homers and 22 RBIs.

Ryan Kalish, Che-Hsuan Lin and Darnell McDonald are listed as right fielders on Boston's 40-man roster along with Sweeney. None of them are established major leaguers.

"I talked to the G.M. (Ben Cherington) and he said 'We want you to hopefully play right field,'" Sweeney related. "I don't know who else is in the mix for an outfield job. But like I said, they've been wanting me for awhile and want me to play right field."

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Cherington confirmed to reporters that the Red Sox have sought Sweeney in trades before. "We expect Ryan Sweeney to be a big part of our outfield next year," he said. "He can play right field and he's a good defender."

Sweeney said he's played all three outfield spots on trips to Fenway Park and feels comfortable in each position, including left field with the Green Monster at his back. He also said he's been treated fairly by Boston fans over the years, with no problems.

"Obviously they're passionate fans and they care a lot about baseball and they care a lot about their team," he said. "It's like anywhere, but they have a lot more people come to their games."

He's looking forward to his first series in Boston against the New York Yankees, who are Boston's arch-rivals. "It's going to be crazy," he said. "It's going to be exciting to be on that side of the ball."

Bobby Valentine, Boston's new manager, called Sweeney Wednesday night and welcomed him to the club. "I talked to him for a little while," Sweeney said. "He seemed like a great guy and I'm looking forward to meeting him."

Valentine has replaced Terry Francona, who won two World Series championships with the Red Sox in 2004 and 2007 but failed to make the playoffs the last two years.

Sweeney and his wife, Natasha, will be moving from Oakland to Boston in the near future. Natasha has finished her nursing degree and the Sweeneys will be heading east.

"It's a great opportunity," he said. "I hope I can take advantage of it. I'm not going to try and put any pressure on myself, but it's a bigger stage now playing in Boston."