

the sports

# Pennant fever hits Houston

United Press International  
HOUSTON — Manager Bill Virdon is enjoying but not promoting the early-season pennant fever being produced by the Houston Astros' fastest start in their history.

"I've seen this happen before," said Virdon, a former player and major league coach for most of the last 24 years. "I've seen this happen to clubs that weren't that good. And I've seen them faint."

In 1957 (Pittsburgh Pirates) pitcher Dale Long had a good streak and we were 30-20 and in first place. We ended up in last place.

"But that club," Virdon added, "was not nearly as far along as this club is. I think what we've done so far this year means something."

A three-game sweep over Pittsburgh in the Astrodome this weekend boosted Houston's record to 12-4 and maintained the Astros' two-game lead in the National League West.

The low-key Virdon pointed out, following Houston's 3-2 win Sunday, that all three wins were by one run

and were keyed by Pirates fielding errors.

"If we were this hot with this kind of lead in September, I'd be real excited," he said. "I watch the wins and losses (of the other division teams). I'm not concerned with how many games they are behind. We don't have a magic number yet."

Houston fans, who paid for 88,760 tickets in the weekend series, are looking ahead to a point nearer than next year for the first time in years.

"They're excited? I'm excited," said Astros lefty reliever Joe Sambito, whose two-thirds innings of work Sunday earned him a second save and kept his ERA at 0.00 through 8.2 innings.

Right handed reliever Joaquin Andujar, a 1977 all-star pitcher who last year suffered from minor injuries, is another reason for the present success. He allowed one hit in one and one-third innings Sunday for his second victory in two days.

Those two Astros, Andujar and Sambito, have pitched 26 innings this season. In that time they have allowed nine hits and one run.

To this point," said Virdon, "our pitching has been sensational. It could not have been any better."

Sambito acknowledged that the difference between winning and losing streaks is fragile.

"Last year we would play tough until we would make an error late in the game," he said. "This year the other team is doing it. Once it starts, you build confidence and momentum."

An error by Pittsburgh shortstop Tim Foli on Bob Watson's hard ground ball in the eighth inning Sunday allowed Craig Reynolds to score from second base and break a 2-2 tie. Reynolds had doubled with one out for Houston's fifth extra-base hit of the game.

In the two previous games against Pittsburgh, each won by Houston 5-4 in the tenth inning, Pirates' third basemen made critical errors. Phil Garner's wild throw allowed the winning run to reach base Friday, and on Saturday Dale Berra's missed pop up allowed Houston to move its

winning run into scoring position.

Andujar, one of three Astros pitchers with 3-0 records, won Saturday's game with two and one-third innings of no-hit ball. He is surprising Virdon after having been counted on as a fifth starter and not as an everyday reliever.

"I am surprised that he has been this consistent," Virdon said.

Cesar Cedeno's sacrifice fly in the first inning and back-to-back doubles by Cedeno and Watson in the sixth provided Houston's runs Sunday. But Pittsburgh matched the Astros with a run on a passed ball and a run on two doubles by Willie Stargell and John Milner.

The Astros have not been in first place this late in the season since they were tied for first place on May 25, 1973. The team began the 1972 season 11-5 for the previous fastest start.

First baseman Bob Watson played for those teams as well as many losing Astros squads.

"This is the best team we've put together," Watson said. "It seems like the components are here. No one is playing that spectacularly, but each individual is making a contribution."

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# Spurs need one more

United Press International  
PHILADELPHIA — The San Antonio Spurs did what they wanted to do and are now in a position to wrap up their NBA Eastern Conference semi-finals series with the Philadelphia 76ers Thursday night on their home court.

The Spurs came to Philadelphia thinking they could win one of two games. They achieved their goal Sunday when George Gervin's 32 points led them to a 115-112 victory and a 3-1 advantage in the best-of-seven series.

But San Antonio coach Doug Moe, whose team has never won a league playoff series in two previous years, knows it's not over yet.

"You can be in the driver's seat but still have an accident," Moe said. "The big thing we have to guard against is overconfidence. I'm thrilled to win, the players are thrilled to win, but I think they realize it's not over."

Still, the Spurs are in the enviable

position of only having to win one of their next three games — two of them being at the noisy HemisFair Arena, where they won the series' first two contests last week.

But James Silas, who combined with Gervin for 21 points of 33 San Antonio points in the fourth quarter Sunday, says the Spurs have seen the last of Philadelphia this season.

"We've got to take the games one at a time but I predict we'll finish off Philly at our place," said Silas, who also had predicted his team would gain a split in two Philadelphia games. "We complement each other so well and we're thinking positively all the time."

The Spurs, who lost by eight points in Game 3 of the series last Friday night, bounced back behind Silas and Gervin, who had six key points down the stretch to quiet every late Sixer rally.

Forward Larry Kenon also played a valuable role in the victory with 23 points, nine rebounds, six assists and an excellent defensive job on Julius Erving.

"I played him off the ball and tried to keep them from getting him the

ball," said Kenon, a former teammate of Erving's in the American Basketball Association. "I didn't think playing him took anything away from my offense. People talk about who covers me, but I feel no one can stop me for the whole game."

Erving, who had a single field goal at halftime and needed 10 points in the final 3:48 to finish with 15, says it's up to his team to play with more intensity or face an early spring vacation.

"We have to hold them to only one shot the next game because they shoot the ball exceptionally well in their building," he said. "We have to play with greater intensity but the intensity level tends to rise anyway as the games get bigger. It can't get any bigger for us, going into their building down 3-1."

Philadelphia's big gun Sunday was rookie Maurice Cheeks, who scored a career-high 33 points and added nine assists and six steals. But they'll need scoring help for Cheeks Thursday from Erving and Darryl Dawkins, who scored 13 points before fouling out with 4:11 left to play.

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# Rangers win

United Press International  
ARLINGTON — Doyle Alexander, who had not lasted more than five innings in his first three starts, combined with Jim Kern Monday night to throw a three-hit shutout and give the Texas Rangers a 5-0 victory over the Toronto Blue Jays.

Al Oliver, who has had at least one hit in each of Texas' 13 games, singled twice and scored in the Rangers' three-run first inning. Alexander, 40, lasted six innings, gave up all three Toronto hits and was helped by a club record-tying five double-plays.

Toronto starter and loser Jim Clancy, 1-3, walked Billy Sample with one out in the first and Oliver singled in the third. Buddy Bell's potential double play grounder went between the legs of Toronto second baseman Dave McKay, allowing Sample to score. Richie Zisk drove in Oliver with a single and Bell scored on a sacrifice fly by Oscar Gamble.

Singles by Gamble and Jim Sundberg, followed by a sacrifice fly by Nelson Norman accounted for a run in the fourth. Texas scored in the eighth on a triple by Bell and a sacrifice fly by John Ellis.

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