

sports

1980 to be year Astros do it all

By RICHARD OLIVER
Staff Writer

For years now, the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Cincinnati Reds have watched as the Houston Astros went through one rebuilding phase after another.

Each year the Astros showed promise, only to either fall barely astray of their goal or flop miserably through another dismal season. Last year, however, the Reds and Dodgers glanced fervently over their shoulders only to find the Astros weren't there. Looking ahead, they saw a nice view of a bunch of red, burnt orange and yellow posteriors breaking away from them.

As the 1980 season begins, however strike-torn it may be, the National League West shapes up to be one of the biggest dogfights in the major leagues.

Here are my predictions for the National League Western Division:
1) **HOUSTON ASTROS** — Astros' Manager Bill Virdon and General Manager Tal Smith both entered the Houston picture in 1975 telling the Houston fans to be silent and patient, because their long-promised pennant was on the way, at last. That time may have come.

Smith's over-the-years harvesting of Jeff Leonard, Nolan Ryan, Joe Morgan, Alan Ashby, Craig Reynolds and notably, Bill Virdon, have molded the club into respectability.

The progress of Joe Niekro, J.R. Richard, Terry Puhl, Joe Sambito, Art Howe, Enos Cabell and Jose Cruz will be factors in this season's run for the prize. The excuses are spent, it's time for action. If he comes through this year, the Astros will be unstoppable.

2) **LOS ANGELES DODGERS** — The Dodgers last year suffered through a sub-.500 season for the first time since 1968, and finished 1 1/2 games behind Cincinnati.

Reggie Smith, the "everything" player of L.A., sat through a frustrating season of injuries, and a weak pitching staff allowed an excess of runs. The Dodger hitting corps, already slumping, was forced to press for more run production to compensate for the pitchers' weakness, resulting in deeper slumps. All of this added up to a losing season.

The biggest problem, however, lay in the bullpen, so the management wheels went to work, acquiring Dave Goltz from the Twins and Don Stanhouse from the Orioles. Jay Johnstone came over from the Phillies to solidify the Dodger outfield that has been beset by injuries to Smith and centerfielder Rick Monday, another key figure for L.A.

The Dodgers are back, with mainstays Davey Lopes, superstar Steve Garvey, and Ron Cey rounding out the infield. Burt Hooton, Texas A&M University graduate Doug Rau, Rick Sutcliffe and Goltz provide the pitching strength.

3) **CINCINNATI REDS** — Much to the surprise of most sports writers and fans, the Cincinnati Reds wrested the Western division title away from the Dodgers last year, leaving the L.A. Blue stomped and battered 1 1/2 games behind. This year's Cincy team shows a slightly different look, but a rejuvenated Tom Seaver. The question is, can the Reds' pitching carry a team whose hitting is faltering? I don't think so.

The Dodgers came out on the short end last year in head to head to combat with the Reds, but this year's L.A. team is more powerful, and that along with the improving Astros should give the Reds trouble.

The Reds have pulled off miracles before, though. Last year, they lost Pete Rose to the Philadelphia Phillies, and most fans thought all was lost. Ray Knight, however, filled in Rose's shoes handily and is now acknowledged to be one of the finest infielders around.

All in all, the Reds' pennant hopes ride once again on the shoulders of regulars Seaver, George Foster and Johnny Bench. The Reds' starting pitchers are only challenged by Houston's, and Foster and Bench may come through with fine seasons once again. These factors could make the race very interesting, but along the stretch, the lack of pitching depth may cut off the Reds hopes.

4) **ATLANTA BRAVES** — In perhaps the most surprising pick of all, I think the Braves may have just what it takes to surprise some people this year. Although "what it takes" may only vault them from last year's showing in the cellar of the league to this year's fourth position, the bats and improving pitching cannot be ignored. With Bob Horner finally relaxed at the plate after his famous contract disputes, the Braves may have a claim to respectability. Horner is referred to by Sports Illustrated as "the power hitter of the '80s."

The key acquisition over the winter for the Braves was Chris Chambliss. Chambliss slammed 19 home runs for the Yankees last year while seeing only partial action. His bat along with Horner's (33 HRs), Garry Matthews (27 HRs), and Dale Murphy's (21 HRs), may add up to a few victories, despite the pitching performances.

Cowens leads Celtics past Rockets, 119-101

United Press International
BOSTON — Dave Cowens scored eight of his 17 points in a 2:52 span opening the fourth quarter Wednesday, as seven Boston Celtics scored in double figures for a 119-101 win over the Houston Rockets in the first game of their NBA quarterfinal play-off series.

Game two of the best-of-seven series will be Friday night at Boston Garden.

The Celtics held an 84-78 lead entering the final period when Cowens went on his tear. Held to just two points in the first half after foul trouble, he began a 10-0 Boston surge with a jump shot from just inside the three-point stripe.

The Boston captain then converted a Chris Ford feed, and after a

Ford runner, tossed in a scoop shot and a lay-up rebound to give Boston a commanding 94-78 lead with 9:08 to play.

The Celtics built the lead up to 21 points, 109-88, on a backwards dunk shot by Cedric Maxwell to seal the victory.

Boston, which had beaten Houston in all six previous games this season, got 19 points from Ford, 9 in the third quarter. Maxwell and rookie Larry Bird each had 15 while M.L. Carr added 13, Rick Robey 11 and Nate Archibald 10.

Houston was led by Moses Malone's game high 27 points, while Calvin Murphy added 23 and Robert Reid scored 15.

The Celtics, shooting a blistering 64 percent, moved to a 39-23 lead at

the end of the first quarter. Bird hit six of seven shots in the quarter for 13 points and his 3-pointer gave Boston its biggest lead of the period, 37-19, with 1:27 left.

The Rockets hit only 38 percent of their floor attempts, with Malone and Murphy held to just one field goal apiece. Boston cooled off in the second half, hitting just 37 percent, allowing the Rockets to get back into the game.

With their five starters on the bench, the Celtics reserves, led by Gerald Henderson and Robey, built up a 59-40 lead with 3:26 left in the half.

But Houston went on a 16-2 spree, capped by a 3-pointer by Murphy at the buzzer to close to within 61-56 at halftime.

Rangers take on Yankees

United Press International
ARLINGTON — The Texas Rangers and New York Yankees, both of whom went through a season of disappointments in 1979, open the confused 1980 season against each other today.

Jon Matlack, who put together a super spring before the exhibition was halted by a player walkout, will

open the season for Texas while New York will counter with Ron Guidry.

Despite the attractiveness of the opening, four-game series, Rangers' officials said none of the games were sellouts. Ticket activity was curtailed sharply because of stalemated negotiations between players and owners.

The Rangers, known throughout their eight-year history for their squabbles, managed to become embroiled in one on the eve of the season.

Shortstop Nelson Norman, a

second-year player who took over as a starter last season, left the club after the strike was called and has not been seen since by Manager Pat Corrales.

So Corrales announced he was taking Norman out of the opening day lineup and substituting Pepe Frias, a veteran of seven seasons with Montreal and Atlanta.

Texas, hoping to battle California and Kansas City for the American League West crown, has what Corrales calls the best team in the history of the franchise.

Metcalf, Aggies land guard

United Press International
Southern Methodist coach Dave Bliss today signed two of the top high school basketball players in Texas today and Texas A&M landed a leading guard to replace the graduated David Britton.

Wednesday was the first day NCAA schools could sign basketball players to scholarship agreements.

Bliss, who took over at SMU only a little more than a month ago, signed Kirk Lundblade of Plano and John Briggs of Highland Park. Both are 6-7 forwards.

Briggs averaged 18 points and 14 rebounds during the year.

Texas A&M coach Shelby Metcalf, whose Aggies made it to the NCAA regional semifinals before losing to eventual champion Louisville, signed guard Reggie Roberts of McKinney.

Roberts, 6-2, averaged 23 points a game and seven assists.

"He has got exactly what we're looking for in a replacement for David Britton," said Metcalf. "He has good speed, good quickness and good jumping ability."

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