

Royals picked in AL West; Rangers may pose threat

By RICHARD OLIVER
Staff Writer

Predicting the American League Western Division race is like predicting when Muhammad Ali will really retire.

The division is tough, the players are excellent and the teams each have a claim at the title.

Last year's Cinderella story, the California Angels, rode the wings of a brilliant hitting corps and Gene Autry's pocketbook to a division title, only to be manhandled by the Baltimore Orioles in the playoffs.

This year will show an Angel team born from last year's pennant scrap and the loss of their ace pitcher, along with numerous injuries.

The winner this year will be the Kansas City Royals, and here's why:

1) **KANSAS CITY ROYALS** — The Royals enter the 1980 season with a new manager, a new attitude, and some brilliant new, young faces to rejuvenate their lineup. The Royals ceremoniously dumped Al Owens to the Angels for Willie Aikens, a player who in just two short years jumped from the now-defunct Texas Gulf Coast League to the majors, hit 21 homers and knocked in 81 runs for the Angels last year.

His acquisition, along with Willie Wilson, George Brett, Darrell Porter, Hal McRae and Amos Otis forms the Dirty Half-Dozen, enough to strike fear in even the best pitchers. Wilson terrorized the base paths in 1979, stealing 83 bases while hitting .315. Brett, who is the best hitter in the major leagues, hit an unbeatable .329, with 23 home runs, 20 triples, and 42 doubles. He is only one in the fifth major leaguer in history to do more than 20 of each.

McRae (.288, 74 RBI), Porter (112 runs in 81, 101 runs scored and 121 walks) and second baseman Frank White (a junior-league veteran) will lead a formidable offensive and defensive attack.

Dennis Leonard leads a Royals staff that couldn't get its act together long enough to stay in the race last year. Leonard finished only 14-12, a disappointing showing, considering he had won 41 games over the previous two years. Larry Gura, Paul Splittorf, Rich Gale, Renie Martin and Gary Christenson will have to have consistent years to take up the slack for the Royals. Their showings will determine whether they will take on Baltimore in the American League playoffs or watch someone else get plastered once again.

2) **TEXAS RANGERS** — The baseball world has watched for years now as one man has destroyed potentially the finest team in baseball. Brad Corbett, the now-defunct owner of the Texas Rangers, fumbled, bumbled and stumbled through his six-year tenure as owner. He shuffled his lineup, fired and hired managers, ridiculously fouled up a trade which cost his team a chance at the pennant, and was an all-around baseball gambler whose dice were loaded against him.

The Rangers, now owned by Eddie "I'm Mad" Chiles, can now hopefully concentrate on playing baseball. Golden Glover Buddy Bell (.299, 18 HR, 101 RBI) will once again lead the Rangers to a better-than-mediocre season, and perhaps a division title. The best defensive catcher in the game, Jim Sundberg, will bring his bat to life this season, making him the best-balanced ball-player on the team. Richie Zisk (.262), Al Oliver, Bump Wills, and Mickey Rivers will round out the offense, with young Pat Putnam (18 HR, 64 RBI) filling in a once-gigantic hole at first base.

The question mark will once again be pitching. The old-timers heading up the staff will determine the Rangers' success. Gaylord Perry, 41, dissatisfied with the San Diego Padres last year, walked out and ended up in Arlington. Ferguson Jenkins, 36, comes off a 16-14 season in which he

gave up an incredible 40 home runs. Jon Matlack, 30; Doc Medich, 31 and Dock Ellis, 35, round out the veterans. Steve Comar, 26, was 17-12 last year, and the bearded wonder, Jim Kern, 31, was 13-5 with 29 saves. The pitchers are experienced, the batters are tuned and ready, but the Rangers have no depth, and will fall just short, as usual.

3) **CALIFORNIA ANGELS** — Don Baylor, the first DH ever to be a league MVP, is back in that spot again, but the Angels have problems. Star outfielder Joe Rudi is hurt, Dan Ford is hurt, and Rod Carew, who hit a paltry .318 last year, is also hurt.

It makes for a difficult time for the Cosmic Cowboys this year. Baylor (120 runs scored, 139 RBI, .296), Second baseman Bobby Grich (.294,

30 HR, 101 RBI), and third baseman Carney Lansford, 23, (.287, 19 HR, 79 RBI, 20 stolen bases) make up a superb offensive team, but the pitching looks dismal.

Angels' ace Nolan Ryan took off for Houston, leaving a staff that compiled a 4.34 season ERA last year, and that same staff is back this year to amaze American League batters. Sorry, Mr. Autry, but money isn't everything, and you can't buy a division title every year.

4) **MINNESOTA TWINS** — Gene Mauch is a brilliant manager, but even brilliance won't help here.

5) **CHICAGO WHITE SOX** — Maybe.

6) **SEATTLE MARINERS** — Really, now.

7) **OAKLAND A'S** — Ha, ha, ha, giggle, snicker. Good luck, Billy.

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Swim trials cancelled

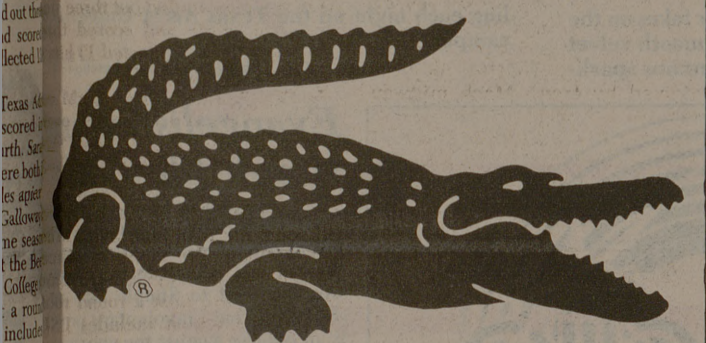
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AUSTIN — The U.S. Olympic International Swimming Committee has decided to cancel the Olympic trials scheduled for Texas Swimming Center this summer, and instead to pick an honorary Olympic team at the AAU National Championships July 27-Aug. 1 in Irvine, Calif.

The diving trials remain scheduled for June 27-July 1 at Texas Swimming Center, however.

"Naturally we would have liked to have had the swimming trials here, it's something we've waited on for over a year and a half," said Steve Berizzi, director of the center.

"But as a former coach, I can understand the viewpoint of the swimmers. It would be senseless to stage the event here under the circumstances."

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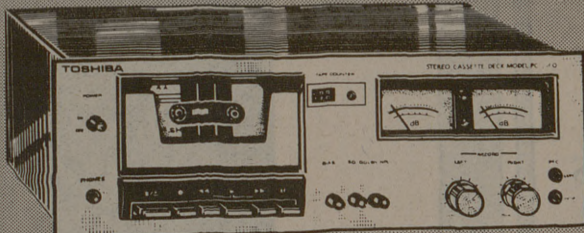


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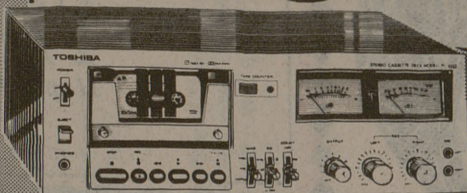
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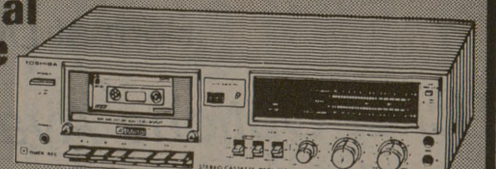


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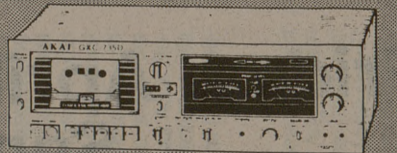
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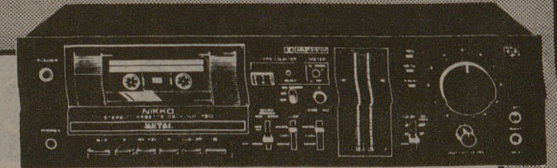
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