

The Battalion Classifieds

Reflections

by Richard Oliver

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Ah, the Houston Astros are at it again. The kings of the ulcers are wading through another "wait and see, we'll start up pretty soon" season that is indicative of their past efforts.

Not that I'm counting them out, but I do have my doubts sometimes. Not to mention a few questions.

Before the season started, I put my head on the block and predicted the Astros would leave Cincinnati and Los Angeles reeling in their burnt orange, blue and white wake and sweep to a Western Division victory.

They seem to be doing everything to prove me wrong. I was convinced the Houston hierarchy would be attentive enough to notice the gaping hole in the Astros' bats and do something to rectify the matter, but the home run king every Astro fan fantasizes about has not materialized.

Not that the team hasn't had their chances. The Pirates' Bill Robertson was eager to take off for Houston several times, but got tired of waiting and signed with Pittsburgh instead.

Bob Horner, humiliated by being relegated to the minors earlier this season by the Atlanta Braves, turned his back on Ted Turner and the organization and demanded to be sent to a team that would appreciate him. The Astros, a team bubbling with speed, pitching and pennant desire, would have been an ideal spot for a player who is liable to rot in last place forever with the Braves. Houston certainly would have appreciated him. But Houston General Manager Tal Smith nixed that trade before it even was considered.

Many fans have noticed miserably the performance of multi-million-dollar hurler Nolan Ryan, obtained in the off-season free-agent market from the California Angels. Ryan, known for his blazing fastball and

ability to draw crowds, has certainly thrown fastballs and lured quite a few people to the Astrodome. His 2-4 record hasn't helped the club much.

Last week, the Astros took their new road uniforms to New York and Philadelphia and came back with a 2-4 record. Prior to that trip, the team had lost six straight games and surrendered its hold on first place.

There are, believe it or not, signs of improvement, however. His troubles seem to be subsiding. He's thrown three respectable games in a row, but two have been losses. In between those two he has completely shut down the Phillies on four hits, 3-0. Many a heart quivered at that performance.

Cesar Cedeño, the "Is he or is he" center fielder for the Astros, batted in almost every differentiation on the batting order but last has responded to this juggling by boosting his batting average to .300. Most critics agree the Astros' success still hinges on the performance of slender Cedeño, and thus far he's performed.

Manager Bill Virdon allowed Cedeño to play center field again after a season at first base. Cedeño has responded with seven fine catches and consistent fielding. Regardless of where Virdon decides to bat Cedeño, and regardless of how much of the usual criticism Cedeño gets, he will still be the driving force behind any success the team has this year.

All in all, the first few weeks of the strife-torn 1980 season have told about the Astros as a team. The team is still weak, but the pitching staff is still incredibly consistent.

The bullpen has been boosted by the arm of surprising Frank LaCorte, 34, whose effectiveness has off-season road of slightly-below-par year for starter Joe Sambito.

Once again, the race looks to be with Los Angeles throwing a cog into the expected Houston battle for the flag. The smoke clears, I still feel Houston will come out on top, but it won't be easy.

Virdon knows the weakness of his batting order, and the pressure thus placed on his bullpen but he's also a shrewd manager who knows what needs to be done to bring his team out of the doldrums.

Expect surprises, expect less juggling, and expect slumps. It's too clear once again that Houston isn't going to muscle its way into playoffs — they're going to earn their way in.

Astros win, 4-3

United Press International
Jose Cruz singled to drive in Craig Reynolds from second base with two out in the eighth on Tuesday night, helping the Houston Astros to a 4-3 victory over the Diego Padres.

Reynolds started the eighth drawing a one-out walk off Padres pitcher Rollie Fingers, 5-5. With two outs Reynolds stole second and scored easily when Cruz's grounder drove a diving Ozzie Smith at short.
Enos Cabell's run-scoring triple the sixth inning tied the score after Jeff Leonard's two-run error gave Houston a 2-0 lead in the fourth. Astros reliever Frank LaCorte, 3-0, picked up the win allowing only one walk over the two innings.

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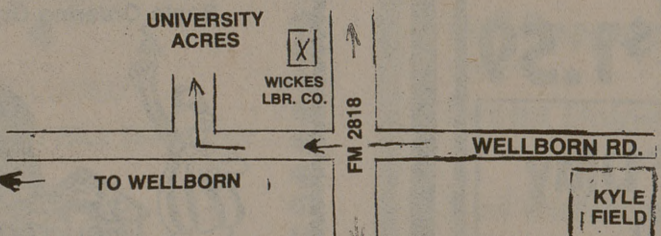
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