

What went wrong?

Montreal Expos overdosing on question marks

Battalion Staff
MONTREAL — The Montreal Expos, gifted merely with talent, died suddenly and easily in the September pennant race. The autopsy has disclosed only an overdose of question marks. "What's wrong with us?" they ask themselves, but have no answers.

The Expos, eliminated officially from the National League East Division race on Monday, could not muster their power hitting or their formidable pitching down the stretch for

the second consecutive year. Failure to win in the clutch has raised more questions about their team character than their ability.

"I don't know what it's going to take to bring a winner here, but it's going to be tough from here on in because we're going to have a tag on us," said all-star catcher Gary Carter, who was loudly booed during a home-stand last week as Montreal bowed out of contention.

Centerfielder Andre Dawson also is mystified.

"We have a lot of people on this team who led their departments in statistics but I can't figure out what the solution is," said the MVP candidate, who set club records in home runs and RBI.

"If I knew the answer," he said, "I'd try to do something about it" and added that "there is definitely some spark missing on this team."

"Something missing," seems almost a consensus among the Expos in the two seasons since Montreal snuck into the NL playoffs in the strike-shortened 1981 campaign.

The "something" may be intangible — that blend of leadership, team spirit and a sense of common cause that characterizes most winning teams.

The Expos have virtually all the physical ingredients — excellent starting pitching, good relievers, the league's best leadoff man in Tim Lincecum, and power hitting from both sides of the plate.

In 1983, however, they led the league in stranded runners, got spotty relief pitching and failed to solve infield defensive problems inherited from the previous year.

Power-hitting Al Oliver at first base was never a golden-glove candidate, but the Expos also suffered in the middle as the game of musical chairs which began in 1982 continued with Chris Speier, Doug Flynn, Bryan Little and, later Manny Trillo, taking turns at second base and shortstop.

But their lineup was expected to overcome such weaknesses.

In 1983, the Expos were the only NL club with three 15-game winning starters, Steve Rogers, Charlie Lea and Bill Gullickson. They had the undisputed best catcher in Carter, the best outfielder in Dawson and best base-stealer in Raines.

They had left-handed power in Oliver and right-handed power in Tim Wallach, Carter and Dawson. They had an excellent reliever in Jeff Reardon and picked up reliable second baseman Trillo for the pennant stretch.

And they lost. Again.

"I can't put my finger on why we didn't win this year," said Raines, who rebounded from a drug problem to have his strongest big-league season in 1983.

"I've been asked that many times."

As the Phillies and Pirates pounded Montreal's 1983 playoff hopes into dust last week, even manager Bill Virdon was nonplussed.

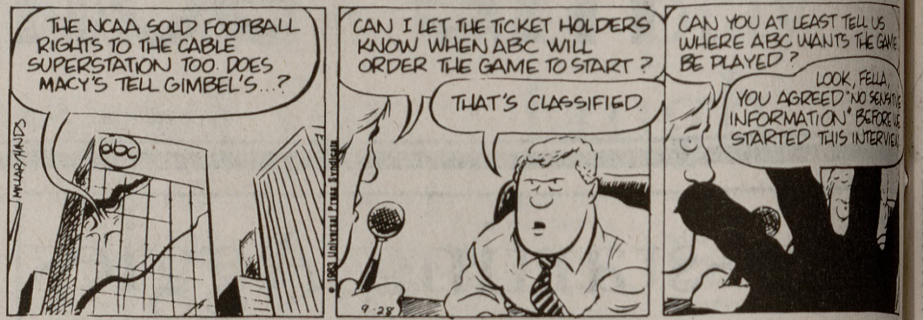
"We came up short this year but next year will be better," said Virdon, sounding agonizingly familiar to Montreal fans.

For Oliver, whose runs-batted-in dropped from a club record 109 to the 70s, a lack of clutch hitting was key.

"We lacked consistency from an offensive standpoint," said Oliver, rumored to be on his way elsewhere after a two-year stay in Montreal.

TANK McNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Pokes search for back to fill McSwain's place

United Press International
DALLAS — The Dallas Cowboys have a help wanted sign out these days: "Needed — one running back. Will probably have to do special teams duty. Chances of playing full-time remote."

So far there have been no takers, at least none the Cowboys feel are worthy.

The Cowboys find themselves in need of running back help since rookie Chuck McSwain has been lost to the team because of a damaged tendon in his right hand. McSwain gained attention during the exhibition season by scoring twice in the final minutes to bring Dallas a comeback win over the Miami Dolphins.

With McSwain gone, the Cowboys have just four ball carriers on their roster and one of those, Tony Dorsett, has an assortment of nicks and bruises.

"We haven't been able to find a running back at this point," Dallas coach Tom Landry said Tuesday.

"It's a little tougher to get a player than it used to be," he said. "Basically anybody who has any experience in our league is tied up by the United States Football League."

Dallas, however, was a little more fortunate when it came to finding a backup middle line-backer.

Scott McLean, a rookie who was backing up Bob Breunig at that spot, required knee surgery after an injury in Dallas' win over New Orleans last Sunday.

In the same game Bob Breunig injured a knee and is currently listed as questionable for the Cowboys' meeting with Minnesota next Sunday.

Fortunately for the Cowboys, Breunig's former backup, Bruce Huther, just happened to be in town finishing work on his masters' degree.

Huther played with both Cleveland and Chicago after being traded by Dallas before the 1981 season, but the Bears did not invite him back to train-

ing camp this year.

"We are fortunate to have Bruce back," Landry said. "He was right here in Dallas." He added that Huther "could give us in our defense this week, when probably nobody else could."

The Cowboys have a host of walking wounded going into the Minnesota game, including tight end Doug Cosbie, center Tom Rafferty and safety Dennis Clinksdale.

"We haven't been as lucky with our injuries as we have on the field," Landry said.

Luck played a key role in Dallas' 21-20 win over New Orleans, a game in which the Cowboys turned the ball over six times in the second half.

"We will be working with the offense this week," Landry said. "But we are always working on it. The offense has done it before and they will do it again." "It just wasn't a very good game for the offense."

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New conference forms in Texas

United Press International
THIBODAUX, La. — Five schools from Texas and Louisiana have formed a new NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletic conference, Nicholls State University officials announced Tuesday.

The Gulf Star Conference's charter members are Nicholls State, Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, and Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches.

Stephen F. Austin President William R. Johnson was elected first president of the league during a Monday meeting in Houston. He said competition will begin with the 1984-85 athletic season.

Officials said men and women will compete in the new conference, which tentatively plans eight men's and four women's championships.

Men will compete in football, basketball, baseball, tennis, golf, cross country and outdoor track. Women will compete in basketball, volleyball and softball and tennis.

Officials said football and men's and women's basketball are the only mandatory sports. All teams will compete at the Division I level, with football competing at the Division I-AA level.

Officials said Nicholls State and Southeastern Louisiana currently are Division I schools and Southwest Texas State will be reclassified as Division I on Sept. 1, 1984. Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin have initiated procedures to gain Division I status.

The three Texas schools currently are playing their final season in the Lone Star Conference, a Division II league. Nicholls State is a member of the Trans America Athletic Conference, and Southeastern Louisiana is independent.

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Oiler rookie reactivated

United Press International
HOUSTON — The Houston Oilers Tuesday returned rookie free agent Brian Sochia to active roster for Sunday's game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, a spokesman said.

Sochia, 22, a 6-foot-3, 225-pound defensive end, had been on the injured reserve list since Aug. 30. He suffered a sprained left knee and left ankle in his final 1983 preseason game against Dallas.

He is expected to bolster the Oilers' defensive pass rush in their game Sunday against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Now you know

United Press International
A green turtle has laid 1,800 eggs in a lifetime but only three will survive long enough to breed.