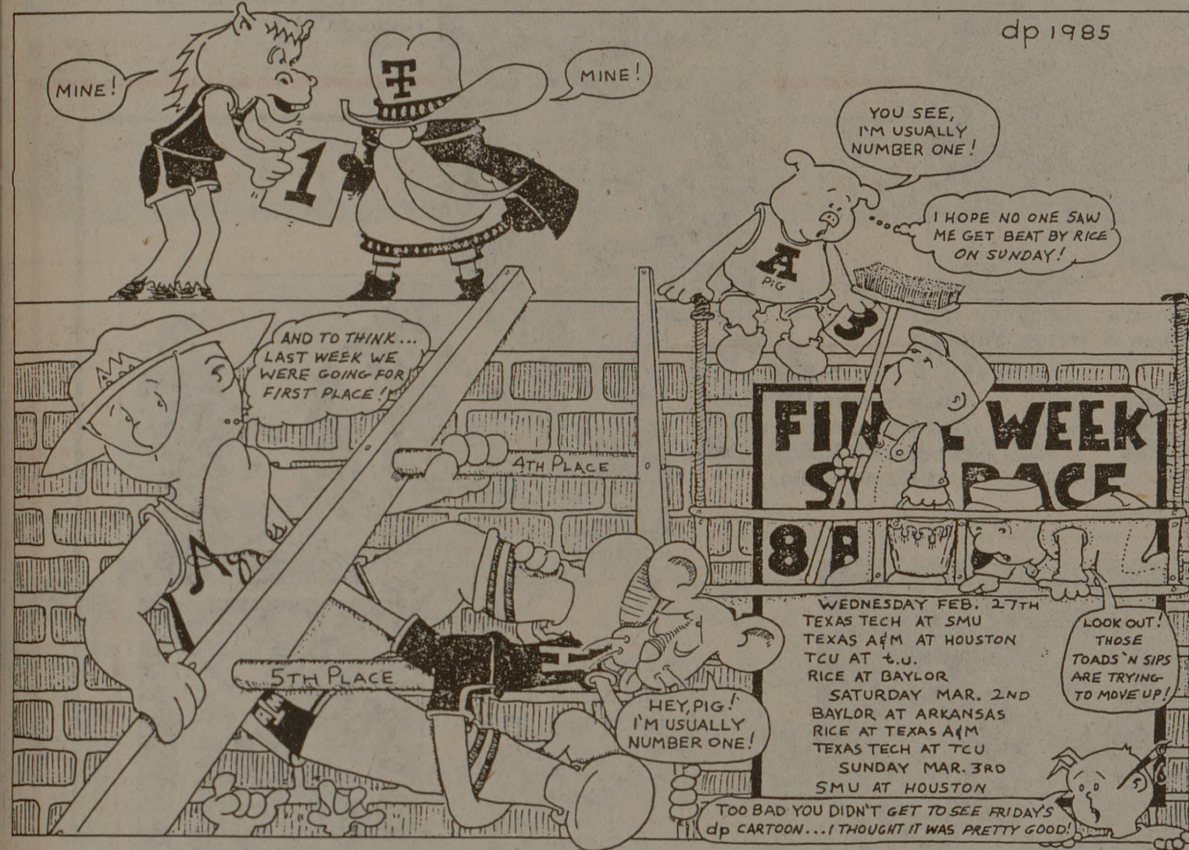


SPORTS



Rangers realize pennant a long shot this season



Associated Press
ARLINGTON — The Texas Rangers, jokingly referred to by some as "Next Century's Champions," opened spring training in Florida last week with cautious realism replacing their usual irrational optimism.

The Rangers have a new minority owner (Gaylord Broadcasting), a new general manager (Tom Grieve), a new starting catcher (Don Slaught), and some new pitchers to help the team that finished dead last in the American League West in 1984.

Manager Doug Rader had predicted a pennant last year, but the Rangers finished 25 games (62-92) below .500. Same old sad cellar song. They were 14½ games behind champion Kansas City in the worst division in professional hardball.

The franchise came to Arlington in 1972 and the Rangers still haven't won a pennant with the end of the century getting close.

The Rangers reached one of their all-time lows in 1984.

They were the 10th worst fielding team in the American League with the shortstops contributing 44 league-leading errors.

Their catching was a laugh with 32 passed balls and 16 errors, dead last in major league baseball.

If you tried to steal a base against Ned Yost, Marv Foley and Donnie Scott, you had an 81 percent chance of making it.

Incredibly, only 19 percent of all base thieves were gunned down.

The Rangers have traded for Slaughter of Kansas City, who had respectable hitting and fielding marks with the Royals. Slaught only threw out about 25 percent of the runners, but that would be a big improvement for Texas catching which automatically turned walks into doubles.

The pitching plans include sending Dave Stewart to the bullpen where the Rangers hope he will sparkle like he did with the Los Angeles Dodgers two years ago.

The Rangers are also gambling on Burt Hooton and Dave Rozema, two journeyman newcomers, as potential starters.

Astros still need power hitter

Associated Press
HOUSTON — The Houston Astros will have a new spring training address and shorter fences in 1985, but they'll still be plagued by an old problem now that the full team workouts have begun in Florida.

The Astros made no off-season trades in their efforts to obtain right-handed hitting power. They failed to sign free agent Sixto Lezcano, once again leaving Manager Bob Lillis to his creative devices in figuring out a starting lineup.

Jose Cruz in left field and Bill Doran at second base at least know the positions they will play and Craig Reynolds is the likely shortstop because of the uncertainty of Dickie Thon's comeback after being struck in the eye by a pitched ball last year.

Terry Puhl is another certain starter but he may be shifted from right field to center field to allow Lillis to platoon Jerry Mumphrey in right field, possibly with Kevin Bass.

After that, the lineup picture gets fuzzy. Lillis may platoon Denny Walling and Phil Garner at third and the first base possibilities include veteran

Enos Cabell, Harry Spilman or Glen Davis. Then there is catching. Lillis flatly says that the catching duties will be decided in spring training. Mark Bailey and veteran Alan Ashby are the front-runners.

Bailey has power potential at the plate and that's a key qualification for Lillis in his search for a steady catcher.

Joe Niekro, Nolan Ryan and Bob Knepper are solid as starting pitchers if they are healthy. Knepper is recovering from knee surgery and Ryan, 38, was slowed by several injuries last season.

The Astros will need to choose fourth and fifth starters from among Mike Scott and Mike Madden, who had inconsistent performances in 1984, and Jeff Heathcock, who is recovering from a serious knee injury.

The bullpen could be Houston's strongest area with Dave Smith, Frank DiPino, Bill Dawley and Joe Sambito as prominent figures.

The Astros have shortened the

Astrodome fences by 10 feet down each foul line and six feet in centerfield to help the power shortage. Astros hitters like it and the pitchers, whose margin for error is shortened, don't.

"It's something they should have done a long time ago," Puhl said.

No one argues about the team's move from their dilapidated training facility in Cocoa, Fla. to a new, \$5.5 million facility at Kissimmee, Fla.

The Astros have started 0-9 and 1-6 over the last two seasons and part of the blame is placed on the lack of practice time caused by flooded practice fields.

The new facility at Kissimmee is a drainage system that automatically goes into operation when it rains. That could help the Astros get off to a faster start this season.

The Astros will host the New York Yankees March 8 in the first game played at the new Kissimmee training site.

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