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by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



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Batting

National League averages slumping dramatically in '85

Associated Press

There's a hitting slump in the National League this season, and it's being attributed to speed, defense and better overall pitching. "Everybody's trying to analyze it, and it's all guesswork," said Jim Frey, manager of the Chicago Cubs. "But there's no question hitting is down throughout the league."

Besides more speed and better defense, Chuck Tanner, manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates, cites pitchers who have developed fork balls and slip pitches.

The current campaign is at the one-third mark. And with the exception of the St. Louis Cardinals, averages throughout the league are down sharply from the final totals of 1984.

The Cardinals, a team built for speed because of the big park and artificial turf at home, are batting .272. The second team is San Diego with a .263 average. Houston, Cincinnati, Atlanta and Montreal are the only other teams hitting above .250.

Chicago is sixth in the league at

"Everybody's trying to analyze it, and it's all guesswork. But there's no question hitting is down throughout the league."
— Chicago Cubs Manager Jim Frey

.240. The figures then plunge to San Francisco's low of .210. The averages were based on performances going into Tuesday night's games.

Philadelphia led the league in hitting last year with a .266 average, but nine other teams had averages above .250. Cincinnati and Los Angeles finished at .244, a figure that would place those teams in seventh place or the middle of the pack this season.

"It used to be that having a short man in relief was all that most teams felt they needed," said Frey. "But now teams are developing a whole bullpen. In addition to the short man, there are

two righties and two lefties and the managers flip-flop pitchers and pinch hitters without giving it a thought."

Frey also believes there are better defenses in the outfield.

"Because of the Astro-turf surfaces you need more outfield speed and every team has two or three burners in the outfield who can fly," he said.

"Where you once wanted big power hitters in right and left fields, you now have speedsters. They cut down on run production with their defense and don't provide as much batting punch."

"And at some point, you have to start believing the pitching is better. Years ago, when I played, it was a generalization that when the count went to 3-and-1 or 2-and-0 or even 3-and-2, the hitter could expect a fastball."

"But the pitchers today are not giving in to the hitters as much," he said. "Not as many pitchers live with the fastball. They just as soon go with a sinker, a slider, a curve, a fork ball or any kind of off-speed pitch they can throw."

Cards' Herr making a name for himself in NL hitting circle

By JOHN NELSON
AP Sports Writer

What's gotten into Tommy Herr lately? It was a pertinent question, rather innocently posed to St. Louis Cardinals Manager Whitey Herzog.

"He's an intelligent, young ballplayer who's always been underrated," Herzog replied. "He's just hit 70 points under his average all his life."

Herr, 29 years old, came into the 1985 season with a .276 career batting average, precisely what he hit last year. After Monday night's 6-1 victory at Pittsburgh, Herr led the National League with a .373 average. He also had a league-leading 51 RBI, two more than his season-high of 1984, and was a big part of the reason the Cardinals were leading the NL in hitting and runs scored.

The question, then, deserves a better answer than what Herzog offered, especially in light of some of the physical problems Herr has encountered in the past two years.

Beginning in November 1982 with an operation on his right knee, Herr underwent surgery three times on his knees in less than a year. He had surgery on the left knee on March 25, 1983, began the season with the Cardinals, then had another operation on the same knee on Aug. 17, missing the rest of the season.

After 313 at-bats in 1983, however, Herr was leading the league with a .323 average, perhaps an inkling of what we were to see when he was whole again.

Herr has made a minor change in his batting style, moving farther up in the batter's box and closer to the pitcher to try to pick up the ball quicker.

But even he admits this change can't account for the difference in his average. At least "it shouldn't improve my average by 100 points."

It may, however, have helped his on-base percentage, since he has walked 26 times this season. In fact, in 54 games, Herr has failed only twice to get on base via a walk or hit.

The improvement in his average, however, probably results from a combination of factors. One is his position in the batting order, No. 3 behind basestealers Vince Coleman and Willie McGee and in front of Jack Clark.

"Tommy's always been a good ballplayer, very intelligent," Herzog says. "He knows the strike zone, and he's become a better hitter. But he's also hitting behind the two jackrabbits and in front of Jack Clark, and he's taking advantage of it."

Herr wholeheartedly agrees with Herzog.

"Those are pretty accurate assessments," he says. "I'm a better situation hitter. I'm better at looking for certain pitches in certain locations."

With the exception of last year, the switch-hitting Herr always has been a bit better hitter from the left side. One of the most interesting results of his newfound batting prowess is that he is hitting more than 100 points better right-handed this year. His average left-handed is .331; right-handed it's .456.

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