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Rangers look to quench winning thirst with youth

POMPAÑO BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Ponce de Leon once searched this land of swamps and suntan oil for the Fountain of Youth. More than 200 years later, the Texas Rangers believe they've found it. They are young, talented and eager, these new Rangers. They are excited and confident. So, however, were David Clyde and Jeff Kunkel, names that prompt haunting questions for the Rangers, who are preparing to leave spring training with their greenest team. The Rangers open the season April 8 at home against the Toronto Blue Jays.

How young is too young? At what point is a young man ready to face the pressures of playing major league baseball? Projections of manager Bobby Valentine's 24 players show seven under the age of 25. Seventeen are under 30. At least six will be rookies. Three others have less than a full season in the major leagues.

One member of the starting pitching rotation, Jozse Guzman, is 22. Another, Bobby Witt, is 21. And a third, Edwin Correa, is 19. "They're still learning how to shave," Valentine said. "We're going to have young guys, but, age-wise, I think we have close to perfect balance."

"We have (for starters) one old guy in Toby (Harrah, 37). We have three real young guys in Oddibe (McDowell, 23), Pete (Incaviglia, 22) and Boo (Steve Buechele, 24). Then there's Larry Parrish, 32;

Gary Ward, 32; Pete O'Brien, 28; and Curtis Wilkerson, 24, who are "all just where you want them to be — experienced, but not over the hill. They still have their best years in front of them," Valentine said.

But how do the Rangers avoid the pitfalls that ruined Clyde's potentially outstanding career and delayed Kunkel's?

Clyde was an 18-year-old wide-eyed left-hander out of Houston

ply too young from an emotional standpoint. He may be too young even now.

Clyde was in over his head, general manager Tom Grieve said.

"There was no question he was too young. I'm not so sure Kunkel was. We may have overestimated his emotional stability, but at least part of the problem was that he was beaten down (by manager Doug Rader)," said Grieve, who played with Clyde in 1973.

"Baseball is a very humbling game," observed Kunkel, who left Pompano Beach Saturday to report to the Rangers' minor league complex at Plant City, Fla. "You're going to fail seven out of 10 times, even if you're good. This time, failure meant more than just college, or a minor league game."

"The way the circumstances were handled was wrong. I just didn't have the support of the manager. It was more him looking to save his own job. I didn't know how to deal with failure at that level, and I didn't have anyone to turn to."

Rangers pitching coach Tom House has assured his young proteges that that won't be the case this season.

"When are they too young?" asked House. "When they don't have a support system in place. When they have nowhere to go. When they can't be supplied with the why. We WILL supply the why."



Westchester High School who wasn't emotionally ready for the major leagues. The pressure and the lifestyle never gave him a chance.

Kunkel was 22, a college graduate with a full year of minor league ball when the Rangers summoned him to try and salvage a dying season in 1984. He has yet to recover from that hectic three-month experience.

"Some guys are 30 and can't deal with big-league pressure," Parrish said. "Dave Hostetler never could. It really doesn't depend so much on age as it does personality and emotional makeup."

He added, "Kunkel is the classic example. Two years ago, he was sim-

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