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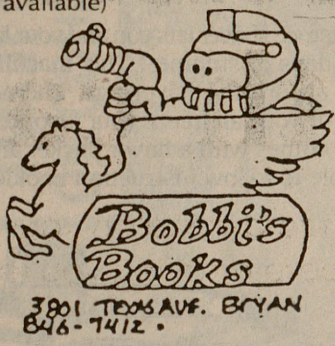
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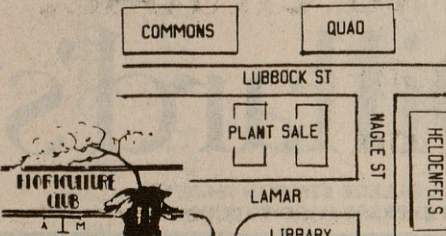
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Suspension of Hatcher would hurt — Lanier

HOUSTON (AP) — The possible suspension of Houston outfielder Billy Hatcher for using a corked bat could be a serious blow to the Astros' chances of repeating as National League Western Division champions, Manager Hal Lanier says.

Hatcher, one of the few Astros who has hit consistently all season, was ejected in the fourth inning of Tuesday night's 3-2 loss to Chicago after his bat split in two, revealing it had been corked.

Umpire crew chief John McSherry said the bat contained 3-4 inches of cork and had been sent to the league office. Katy Feeney, the league's spokeswoman, said it would be several days before a decision could be made on possible suspension.

"I have to stand up for him because the bat wasn't even his," Lanier said. "I'd hate to be without a player of his caliber for any length of time at this stage of the pennant race."

Hatcher is hitting .311, ranks fourth in the NL with 149 hits. He has 11 home runs and 57 runs batted in.

Tuesday night's loss was Houston's seventh in a row, dropping the Astros further behind division leading San Francisco.

Hatcher said all of his regular bats were broken, so he unwittingly grabbed the corked bat in Tuesday's loss.

Lanier backed Hatcher's story. "Putting cork in a bat is not going to help a Billy Hatcher at all because of the kind of hitter he is," Lanier said.

"That is one of the bats our pitchers use to play their silly little games to see how far they can hit the ball in batting practice."

"It just happened to be the same model of bat Billy uses and he was out of bats, so he picked it up."

The incident occurred at a time when the league is looking into the possibility that some batters have loaded their bats with cork or shredded rubber to add distance to their drives.

Howard Johnson of the New York Mets, Pedro Guerrero of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Candy Maldonado of San Francisco have had their bats checked. Managers have the right to ask that one bat per game be confiscated for examination if they suspect tampering.

The Cubs also were involved in incidents involving Johnson and Guerrero.

Hatcher said the bat was one used by Astros pitchers in pregame batting practice. The bat had "No. 45" on its handle, the number of Astros relief pitcher Dave Smith.

Smith declined comment. Chicago Manager Gene Michael, who last week accused Smith of scuffing the baseball, said stiff penalties should be issued.

"Three months suspension without pay, that would deter people from doing this stuff," he said. It was the first such ejection since 1974, when Graig Nettles of the New York Yankees was ejected from a game for using an altered bat.

With Gerald Young on first and no one out in the fourth inning, Hatcher hit a ground ball to shortstop Shawon Dunstan when his bat cracked.

Chicago third baseman Keith Moreland retrieved the bat and showed it to home plate umpire Dana DeMuth. DeMuth then took the remnants to umpire crew chief John McSherry.

McSherry examined the bat, and after conferring with Lanier, called Hatcher out and ejected him from the game.

"We've been hearing a lot about (corked) bats lately, but this is the first one we have seen," McSherry said. "It was hollowed out with a groove and about 3 or 4 inches of cork was inside it."

The slumping Astros started Wednesday night's series finale against the Cubs with a .257 batting average.

"Nothing surprises me in this game," Astros hitting coach Denis Menke said. "But if we were all using corked bats, it hasn't helped."

Connors, Graf, Evert nab wins at U.S. Open

NEW YORK (AP) — Sixth-seeded Jimmy Connors celebrated his 35th birthday Wednesday with a 6-1, 6-4, 6-4 victory over Joey Rive in an opening-round match at the U.S. Open.

"This is no different than the last 18 years," said Connors, the highest-seeded American male at the Open. "I've celebrated my birthday here every year. I'm looking forward to the day when I don't."

In women's play Wednesday, top-seeded Steffi Graf overpowered Bettina Fulco of Argentina, 6-0, 6-3, and No. 3 Chris Evert beat Susan Sloane of Lexington, Ky., 6-1, 6-0.

Connors served extremely well against Rive of Lake Worth, Fla., who is ranked No. 101 in the world. The five-time Open winner connected on 89 percent of his first serves during the match, including 96 percent in the final set.

"I played quite well," Connors said. "I just wanted to keep my mind on my business."

Graf lost only six points in the first set against Fulco, the No. 55 women's player. It was Graf's first match since gaining the No. 1 ranking in women's tennis last month.

"The last couple of days I wasn't really nervous, but I was anxious to play," she said.

The West German teen-ager had dental surgery last month after winning the Virginia Slims tournament in Los Angeles.

"I didn't play for six days," she said. "I had to go back and forth to the dentist. I hate dentists, but I wanted to play in the U.S. Open and be in good shape, so I had it done."

Evert, who has won the Open six times, eliminated Sloane in 52 minutes.

"It was my first match, and I was fighting nerves," Evert said. "It felt good to get out and play a match. I feel more vulnerable in the early rounds and I usually get sharper by the second week."

In other women's matches involving seeded players, No. 11 Lori McNeil of Houston defeated Radka Zrubakova of Czechoslovakia 6-3, 6-1; No. 12 Bettina Bunge of Monaco beat Mary Lou Piatek of Munster, Ind., 6-3, 7-5; and No. 16 Wendy Turnbull of Australia topped Bonnie Gadusek of Largo, Fla., 6-2, 6-1.

Advancing in men's play were No. 2 Stefan Edberg of Sweden, No. 3 Mats Wilander of Sweden, No. 5 Miloslav Mecir of Czechoslovakia, No. 9 Andres Gomez of Ecuador and No. 12 Tim Mayotte of Bradenton, Fla.

No. 15 Martin Jaito of Argentina was upset by Tomas Smid of Czechoslovakia, 7-6 (7-3), 6-4, 6-2.

Edborg downed Derrick Rostagno of Brentwood, Calif., 6-3, 7-6 (7-0), 6-2; Wilander swept John Ross of Gainesville, Fla., 6-1, 6-1, 6-1; and Mecir beat countryman Karel Novacek 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (7-1).

Rozelle says he could help owners, players avert strike

NEW YORK (AP) — As contract negotiations between players and owners resumed for the first time since Aug. 14, National Football League Commissioner Pete Rozelle said Wednesday he would be willing to get involved to help avoid a strike.

Spokesmen for both the NFL Players Association and Management Council confirmed that talks had resumed at an undisclosed site in the Washington area. In an effort to avoid prolonged wrangling over minor issues, they were limited to small delegations for each side.

Little progress has been made since on either minor issues or the players' principal demand — free agency without compensation.

The union's executive board voted Monday to set a strike date to be recommended to the board of player representatives Sept. 8. The date was undisclosed, but the *Baltimore Sun* and *Washington Times* reported Wednesday that it is after the second week of the season, which begins Sept. 13 with the fourth week as the alternative date.

Rozelle has been largely uninvolved in past labor disputes, including the 1982 strike, which lasted 57 days and reduced the season length from 16 to nine. At that time, the union objected to his participation,

regarding him as a representative of the owners.

Bowie Kuhn, when he was baseball commissioner, did not intervene in the 1981 baseball strike. But Peter Ueberroth, Kuhn's successor, was largely credited with ending the 1985 baseball strike after two days.

Rozelle said in an interview Wednesday that his relationship with Gene Upshaw, the union's executive director, is much better than it was with Ed Garvey, who held that position during the '82 strike. He said he hoped to be able to stay in contact with both Upshaw and Jack Donlan, the executive director of the NFL Management Council and the chief negotiator for the owners.

Rozelle also said he could see disadvantages for both sides if the owners were to go ahead with the season in the event of a strike. Some teams have been offering players they cut \$1,000 to return in the event the union players walk out.

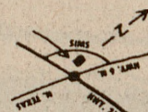
"It would create pressure on players since the games would count toward the Super Bowl and the playoffs," he said. "But from the owners' standpoint, there would have to be refunds on tickets and television if the product is greatly affected by such a move. And I feel it would be."

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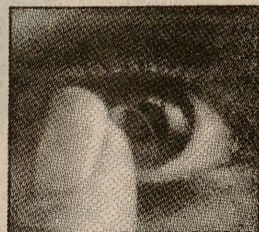
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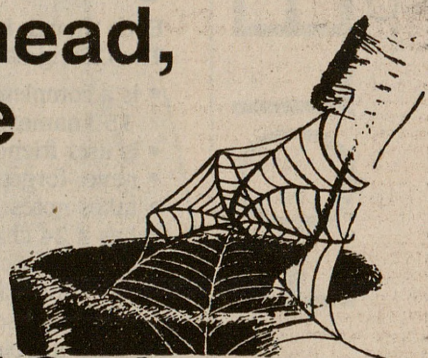
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