

Sports

Releasing Cruuuzzz!!! bad decision

By Anthony Wilson
Sports Writer

For the past 13 years, left field in the Houston Astrodome was Jose Cruz's domain. For most of those 13 years, the standing of the Astros played like a sputtering baseball team from hell while Jose cruised along, the model of consistency and excellence.

Viewpoint



Before this season, Astros fans voted Cruz the most popular player in franchise history in a Houston Post readers poll. He is the all-time team leader in games played, at-bats, hits, triples, runs batted in and total bases. He has a .293 career average with 138 home runs, 952 RBI and 288 stolen bases.

But most important, he gave everything he had — physically, mentally and emotionally — every game. When the Astros lost the last game and series to the Philadelphia Phillies in the 1980 National League Championship, Cruz sat on the bench alone and wept over the lost opportunity of playing in the World Series.

Cruz had only two faults in the eyes of his employers. He turned the big four-oh this year, which in the world of professional sports means he could be a Methuselah's kid brother. He also makes \$773,333 a year, which even in the world of professional sports is considered big bucks.

So Astros management, in effect, said, "Well Jose, the past 13 years have been fun, but adios" and decided not to sign Cruz to a contract for the 1988 season.

Big mistake. And for three rea-

sons — Cruz's loyalty, his leadership and popularity and the fact that the man can still play ball.

First the loyalty factor. In his prime, although underrated, Cruz was one of the best players in the game on one of the worst teams in the league.

He easily could have played out his contract in Houston, declared himself a free agent and waited for the million dollar offers to come pouring in from New York, Los Angeles, Kansas City and other perennial playoff contenders.

But he didn't. He stuck with the "Lastros", "Disastros" and all the other cutesy names writers stuck on Houston's last place team. And eventually the Astros and Cruz were recognized as winners, which is all he really wanted.

Second, Cruz is the team's leader and the crowd's favorite. He is the only four-time winner of the Astros' Most Valuable Player Award.

"He's been the franchise," relief pitcher Dave Smith said. "He's been the basis of the Houston Astros.

When I first heard about Houston, he was the only guy I knew."

The fans show their appreciation of Cruz every time he steps to the plate. Along with Dome announcer J. Fred Duckett, they cheer "Jose Cruuuuuuzzzz!!!!!" as that familiar number 25 approaches the batters box.

"I'll always remember my fans," Cruz said. "After all those good years with the Astros, I'll remember the people who were so nice to me. Nobody can ever take that away from me."

Third, Jose Cruz can still contribute to the Houston Astros. Although his numbers dipped to well below his lifetime averages, he still hit .245 with 11 homers and 38 RBI in 119 games.

In the first week of the season, Cruz hit .400 with two homers and five RBI and was named the National League Player of the Week. Since the All-Star break, Cruz has been limited to pinch hitting.

"If you look at my record," Cruz said. "I always do better in the second half. I didn't have a chance to do it this year."

"I don't think we have to give a reason," General Manager Dick Wagner said about the team's decision. "He's had a great career with the Astros, but there comes a time when other people have to be given a chance. Time marches on."

I've got some news for Wagner. No matter how old Cruz gets, he'll always be able to outpitch Buddy Biancalana, Dale Berra and Robbie Wine, all of whom will be given a shot at making the team again in spring training.

In fact, Cruz may be able to outpitch all of them combined.

Needless to say, Cruz was surprised and disappointed in the Astros' decision, but as Wagner said, "He took the news very much like a man."

"I thought they would offer me something," Cruz said. "They offered me nothing. Maybe the reason is the money I make. But I thought they might offer me something for a little less money."

"I just hope to play for somebody next year. I know I can still play."

It's a shame that most teams no longer feel a sense of loyalty to players who devote themselves to their team. The Boston Red Sox would never have refused to resign Carl Yastremski, no matter how old he got.

The New England Patriots have refused to dump veteran quarterback Steve Grogan and all his valuable experience and knowledge of the game. The Dallas Cowboys haven't traded the oldest running back in the league, Tony Dorsett, just because they have a young stud named Herschel Walker in the stable.

And even though Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is cursed with the double whammy of being old and overpaid, the Los Angeles Lakers are still standing by their man.

It's a pity the Astros didn't decide to do the same thing.

"I have nothing to be ashamed of," Cruz said. "I played hard every day and never caused any trouble. It's a shame I can't finish my career here."

It certainly is, Jose.

Second-half stretch leaves Giants on top

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Timely trades, better health and great pitching have made the San Francisco Giants the best team in a division that kept getting worse as the season dragged on.

The Giants already have ensured a tie for their first National League West title since 1971 and sought to clinch it Monday night with a victory in San Diego or a loss by second-place Cincinnati to Atlanta.

"We've had enough help from other clubs this season," San Francisco Manager Roger Craig said. "We're going to win it."

The Giants are now playing like winners, and the inability of any other contender in the West to win after the All-Star break gave them the chance to finish first.

Cincinnati, which threatened to run away with the division earlier this season, was torn apart by clubhouse bickering and owner Marge Schott's meddling. Even Pete Rose could not help the Reds from sinking below .500 and only this week did they surface above the break-even point.

Houston, the 1986 division champions, never put anything

together and was killed by lack of offense. Nolan Ryan is having one of his best seasons ever, but no run support has left him with an 8-14 record.

The Los Angeles Dodgers also can't score. The Dodgers appeared headed toward their first finish in last place since 1905 until Atlanta and San Diego struggled. The Braves never showed anything while the Padres could never overcome their 12-42 start.

That left the West wide open for the Giants, who played their best ball when it mattered most.

On Aug. 7, they were 53-55 and in third place, five games behind Cincinnati. That was the day outfielder Candy Maldonado was activated from the disabled list, marking the first time since the end of the 1985 season the Giants did not have someone out of action.

Since Maldonado's activation, San Francisco has gone 32-15 and picked up 12 games in the standings.

"This has been a special year," said Maldonado, who has driven home 35 runs in 42 games since returning.

Twins ready to clinch AL West against Texas

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Heading into the final week of the season, the American League West-leading Minnesota Twins were in good health both physically and mentally.

Knuckleballer Joe Niekro, who missed his start Sunday because of a hip injury, was scheduled to start Monday's game at Texas against the Rangers.

Leading home run hitter Kent Hrbek, who missed much of the last two weeks with an abdominal injury and a virus, officially proclaimed himself fit Sunday with a tape-measure homer, his 34th of the season.

Manager Tom Kelly has kept fatigue to a minimum, as only Kirby Puckett, Gary Gaetti and Tom Brunansky will have played more than 150 games by season's end.

Mentally, the Twins are also on top of their game.

They went 7-2 on their final homestand to finish their home season with a 56-25 record at the Met-

rodome, the best home showing in the majors.

They went on the road Monday comfortable in the knowledge that they needed only one victory in their last six games — or one Kansas City loss during that span — to clinch their first AL West title since 1970.

"The Rangers swept us last time we went down there (June 26-28) ... but that was a long time ago," Al Newman said. "When they came in here on this homestand, we swept them and that's got to get us a little respect from them."

Asked about his possible pitching rotation for the AL Championship Series, Kelly only said: "I'm worried about winning a ballgame in Texas. After that, I'll worry about other things."

Tuesday night, Kelly will start ace Frank Viola, 17-9. Viola, with a 69-48 record since 1984, is the winningest left-hander in the majors over the last four seasons. He'll be shooting for his third 18-victory season.

NL East a three-team race; Cards still in front

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Heading into the final week of the season, St. Louis Manager Whitey Herzog has a lot of concerns.

Not being able to finish off New York or Montreal in the National League East isn't one of them.

The first-place Cardinals have a magic number of five and play their final seven games of the season at home — four against the Expos and three against the Mets.

On July 23, the Cardinals led the Expos by 9½ games and the Mets by 10½ despite being without ace left-hander John Tudor, who was out with a broken leg.

Tudor is back and has won six straight, but slugger Jack Clark has

been out of the lineup for most of September with a sprained ankle.

"I'm concerned because we don't have Jack Clark," Herzog said. "I'm concerned because we're not hitting. But there's not a lot I can do about it. Just put them out there and play."

The second-place New York Mets started a three-game series in Philadelphia Monday night, trailing the Cards by 2½ games.

The Cardinals have a record of 35-34 since the All-Star break and are 12-13 for the month of September.

"I thought they played over their heads in the first half," Mets Manager Davey Johnson said after New York's victory over Pittsburgh on Sunday.

The Expos have won 10 of 14 games with the Cardinals this season and all they wanted to do was arrive at Busch Stadium for Tuesday's doubleheader with a chance.

The Cardinals gave the third-place Expos that opportunity Sunday by dropping a 7-3 decision to Chicago while Montreal beat Philadelphia 5-3 to move within three games.

"Ideally, I would like to have been two down going into St. Louis," Montreal Manager Buck Rodgers said. "But the bottom line is that we've got to win (in St. Louis). The brass ring is out there. We got to grab it."

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