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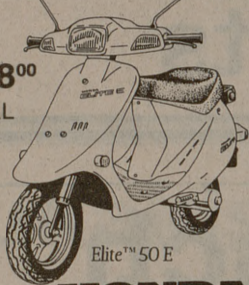
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Reserve wields big bat

ARLINGTON (AP) — Curtis Wilkerson bats ninth in the Texas Rangers lineup, but he's by no means an automatic out.

From Little League on up, the last spot in the batting order is usually reserved for the weakest hitter. But Wilkerson is Texas' leading hitter, with 30 hits in 80 at-bats for a .375 average.

"I like batting ninth," Wilkerson said Tuesday. "I've been batting ninth pretty much my whole career. I've led off a few times, and batted second, but I'm comfortable batting ninth."

If he had enough appearances, Wilkerson's average would rank him second in the American League. But as a role player, he shares time with Jerry Browne at second base.

Wilkerson can play second base, shortstop or third base and was the Rangers' rookie of the year in 1984, a year after he was the American Association all-star shortstop.

In Texas' recent series at Chicago, Wilkerson went 4-for-5 at the plate, doubling three times, driving in three runs and scoring three times against the White Sox.

"I think that has to rank as the best game I've ever had," Wilkerson said.

"He's still a young player who con-

tinues to improve," Texas manager Bobby Valentine said. "He's leading the team in batting. He's had some real quality at-bats for us."

Rangers batting instructor Art Howe said Wilkerson has done "everything we could have asked, and more."

"He's doing fantastic," Howe said. "He's hitting almost .400, and you can't ask for much more than that. Plus, he plays all the infield positions well."

When Howe was appointed to the Rangers coaching staff in 1985, Wilkerson was the team's regular shortstop. Texas then acquired shortstop Scott Fletcher, who promptly became one of the team's leading hitters and took over the starting job.

"Wilkerson deserves a lot of credit," Howe said. "He's had to adapt to a parttime role, and he's done very well. It's more a mental adjustment than anything else, but a lot of players can't handle it."

"That he's hit as well as he has, not playing everyday, is amazing. It's hard to hit well when you're not playing regularly. Once he learned to accept the role mentally... he made up his mind he was going to be the best he could, and as he began to do better, he earned more time."

Wilkerson can turn a double play

"as well as anybody in either league. He's got lightning-fast hands. He's got."

"In fact, that's his defensive ability, if any. He's too fast. He's at the ball sometimes."

Tom Robson, the Rangers' assistant batting instructor, said Wilkerson has improved at the plate by recognizing what he can and cannot do. "He doesn't try to do things he can't do," Robson said. "He's figured out his approach to hitting, knows now what the pitcher is trying to do against him."

"The thing he has to continue to work at is to keep a good attitude when he's not playing, so when he does get his chance, he can go out and do a better job. Later, he earned more playing time because of the way he's been hitting."

Wilkerson is in his fifth major league season and eighth year in school in Dinwiddie, Va., in 1980.

"My first few years, I struggled at the plate," Wilkerson said. "I was switch-hitting in 1980, and it took me a while to come around."

"Some people peak early, some late. I'm peaking at the age of 27."

Lemieux ends Gretzky's 8-year MVP streak

TORONTO (AP) — Pittsburgh center Mario Lemieux ended Wayne Gretzky's eight-year reign as the NHL's most valuable player when he was awarded the Hart Trophy on Wednesday night.

Lemieux, who also snapped Gretzky's seven-year hold on the league's scoring championship, beat out the Edmonton Oilers' star center and his teammate, goaltender Grant Fuhr, for MVP honors in voting by

the Professional Hockey Writers Association which was announced at the league's awards ceremony.

Fuhr won the Vezina Trophy as the league's top goaltender. Boston's Ray Bourque was a repeat winner of the James Norris Trophy as the league's top defenseman.

Calgary's Joe Nieuwendyk won the Calder Trophy as the NHL's top rookie.

Montreal's Guy Carbonneau won the Frank J. Selke Trophy, given to the league's top defensive forward, and teammate Mats Naslund won the Lady Byng Memorial Trophy given for skillful and gentlemanly play.

Detroit's Jacques Demers became the first repeat winner of the Adams Trophy, given to the league's top defenseman.

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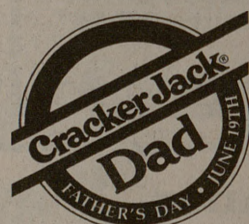
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