

Astros win 2-1

TANK McNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds

KISSIMMEE, Fla. (AP) — Luis Gonzalez's single in the bottom of the ninth inning scored Gerald Young from second base and gave the Houston Astros a 2-1 victory Wednesday over the St. Louis Cardinals.

With one out in the ninth, Eric Anthony singled to right field off Ken Hill (1-2). Young entered the game to pinch run for Anthony and stole second.



Dodgers set to replace Reds in NL West

By The Associated Press

While growing up in Los Angeles, Darryl Strawberry dreamed about playing for the Lakers. Instead, Darryl is a Dodger and Tommy Lasorda is his favorite cheerleader.

Lasorda has Strawberry and the Dodgers believing they're the best team in the NL West. That means Los Angeles will probably finish first.

The Dodgers also signed free-agent Brett Butler to play center, and then traded right fielder Hubie Brooks to the Mets for left-hander Bob Ojeda. Butler is a marvelous defensive outfielder and five times in his career has scored at least 100 runs.

Just how good the Dodgers really are will depend on the health of pitchers Orel Hershiser

and Tim Belcher. Predictions: 1) Los Angeles. 2) Cincinnati. 3) San Diego. 4) San Francisco. 5) Atlanta. 6) Houston.

Cincinnati Reds

Although the Dodgers will emerge as the favorites, no one will really be shocked if the Reds become the first team to win consecutive NL pennants since Los Angeles in 1977-78.

The Reds revolutionized baseball last season with the formula of Randy Myers, Rob Dibble and Norm Charlton. They may talk too much, but never in baseball history have relief pitchers had such an impact on the outcome of the World Series.

Because of the departure of Danny Jackson, Charlton may end up back in the starting rotation joining Tom Browning, Jose Rijo, Jack Armstrong, Scott Scudder and Chris Hammond. The starting rotation is vulnerable.

The heart of the Reds' offense remains Eric Davis. Despite an injury-filled season, Davis had 24 homers and 86 RBIs. The runs batted in came because he's surrounded by Barry Larkin, Chris

Sabo, Paul O'Neill and Hal Morris.

San Diego Padres

It seems like the Padres made a lot of improvements. After all, how often does a team come up with Fred McGriff and Tony Fernandez in one day. But are they really all that improved?

Joe Carter (24 homers, 115 RBIs) went in the big deal with Toronto, leaving the Padres with some question marks in the outfield. Tony Gwynn, happy Jack Clark is no longer a teammate, is an All-Star in right field and figures to improve on his .309 average.

The Padres can match the Reds and Dodgers on offense, but lose out in the pitching comparisons.

Ed Whitson led the staff with 14 victories and will be followed in the rotation by Bruce Hurst, Andy Benes and Dennis Rasmussen.

San Francisco Giants

The Giants spent \$33 million over the winter to sign Bud Black, Willie McGee and Dave Righetti. It won't be enough, though.

Sure, nobody can match the

middle of the Giants' order of Will Clark, Kevin Mitchell and Matt Williams. But it seems unlikely even Roger Craig can straighten out this tattered pitching staff.

Atlanta Braves

The Braves made two significant free-agent signings over the winter by picking up third baseman Terry Pendleton and first baseman Sid Bream. Pendleton and Bream, most importantly, bring a winning attitude to Atlanta.

Add Pendleton and Bream, to a lineup which includes Rookie of the Year Dave Justice (28 homers, 78 RBIs), Ron Gant (.303, 32 homers, 84 RBIs) and Lonnie Smith (.305), and there's reason to think Atlanta will score runs.

Houston Astros

All you need to know about the Astros is that Craig Biggio and Ken Caminiti are now the star attractions.

Gone from last season's 75-87 team are first baseman Glenn Davis, saves leader Dave Smith and NL ERA champion Danny Darwin. Franklin Stubbs (23 homers, 71 RBIs) and reliever Juan Agosto also left.



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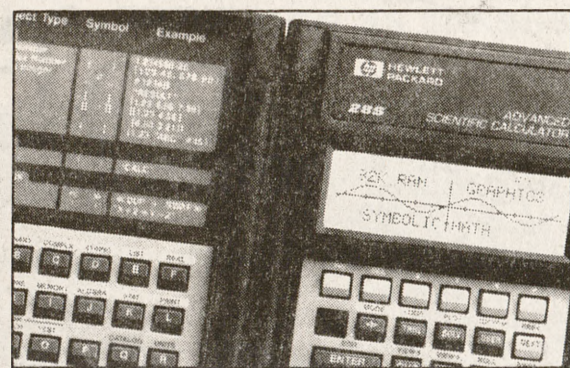
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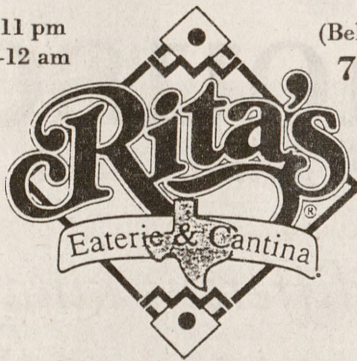
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