

Former baseball fans won't give sport another chance

Baseball aficionados say they won't go back to the ballpark, even though it's the only game in town.

By Nick Georgandis
THE BATTALION

The New Jersey Devils swept the Detroit Red Wings right out of the Stanley Cup Finals Saturday night.

Ten days before, the Houston Rockets defeated the Orlando Magic to win their second straight championship. The end of the hockey and basketball seasons leave America with just one professional team sport for the next two months - baseball.

This seems to be the ideal time for the game to draw back the fans it lost during last year's strike. Players have attempted to win the fans back in little ways, including staying late after games to sign autographs, and throwing foul balls and final outs into the crowd as souvenirs.

Besides Wednesday's NBA Draft and next weekend's Wimbledon competition, no major sporting events are coming up until college and professional football begin in early September.

But the question is: do the fans want to come back?

According to attendance figures released by The Associated Press last week, the answer is a resounding no. The average attendance per game

this season is 23,768, down nearly 8,000 fans per game from last year. This figure represents a 24.8 percent decrease in total attendance.

In fact, every major league team except the Cleveland Indians has a lower home attendance figure than it did last season. The Indians' success in drawing big crowds is being attributed largely to two factors - the opening of the Indians' new stadium, Jacobs Field, and the team's red-hot, 36-16 start this season.

Sports fans at A&M say they are not planning on watching baseball this summer.

"We came here to watch the (Stanley Cup)," said sophomore general studies major James Richard at a local sports bar on Saturday. "After that, I'm just counting the days until football season starts."

Another fan said he doubts the American public will ever accept Major League Baseball as it once did.

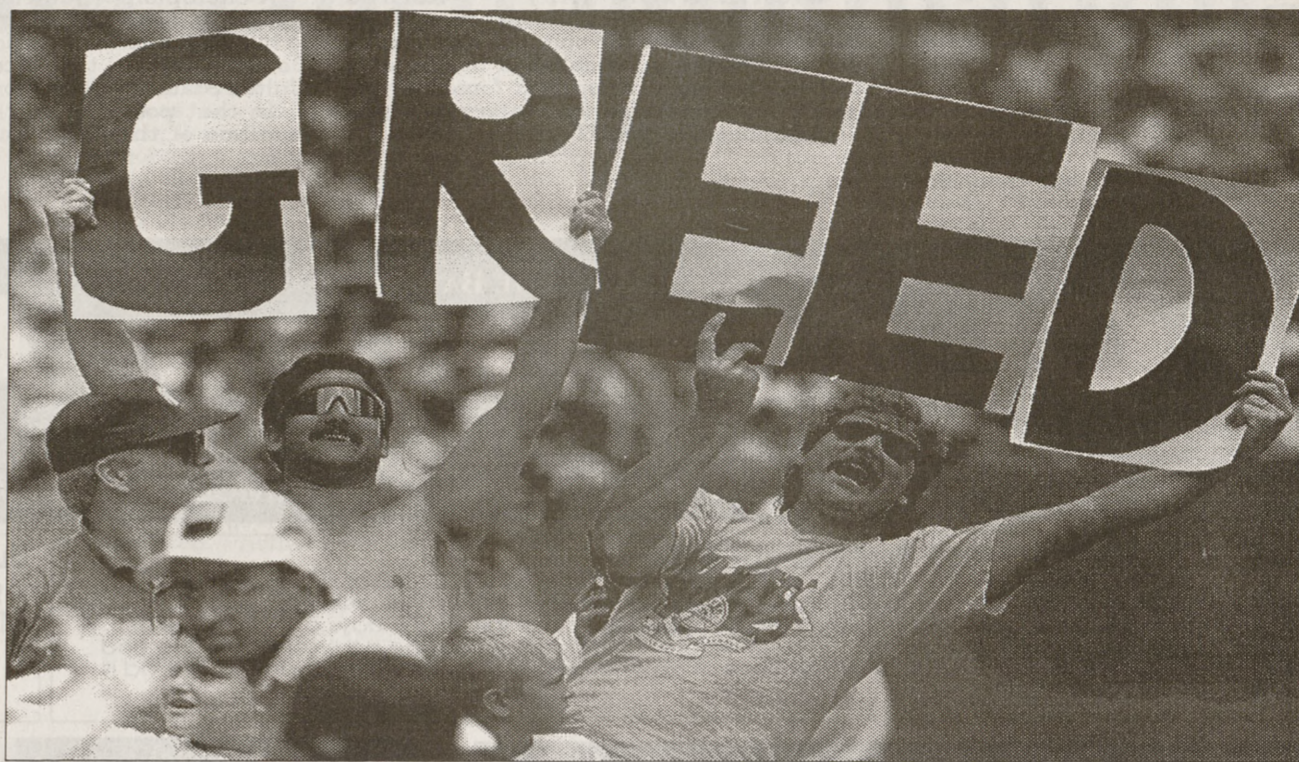
"I don't think the fans will come back to baseball,"

William Robinson, a sophomore education major said while watching Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Finals at Bullwinkle's Grill & Bar Saturday. "The strike hurt too many people."

The teams closest to Texas A&M, the Houston Astros and the Texas Rangers, are the perfect case studies of how fans have not returned to baseball.

Ranger first baseman Will Clark quickly distanced himself from Rangers' fans in April when he spoke out against replacement players, saying that he and other major leaguers would "remember the names of those who crossed the picket line."

When the A&M baseball team played Texas Christian at The Ballpark in Arlington - the



AP Photo

Baseball fans express their view of the 1994 players strike with one word during a game. Major League attendance has dwindled nearly 25 percent in the 1995 season.

Rangers' home field - on May 13, the game drew 2,000 more fans than the Rangers-Tigers game the night before.

The Rangers' 31-22 record has put them a game out of first place, and the fans have responded as of late. Texas drew more than 30,000 fans for each of the three weekend games against the Oakland A's.

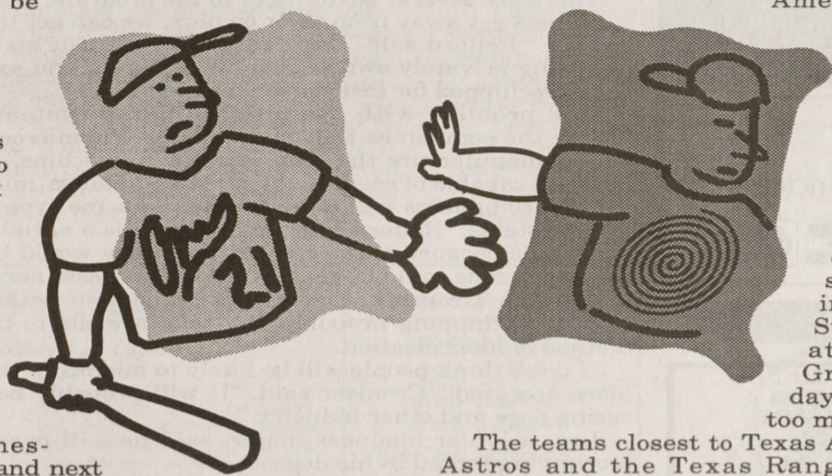
The Astros have struggled to stay near the .500 level, and the fans have shown little interest in the team, especially during the Houston Rockets' re-

cent playoff run.

Attendance at Astros' home games this year is down 120,941 over the first 25 home games compared to last year.

For a game on May 30, the Astros' management gave out 54,000 free tickets to fans as an apology for the strike. While all the tickets were picked up by fans, less than 31,000 fans showed up for the game.

The fans appear to be sending a very clear message to the teams - win, or else.



Astros crush Cubs, reclaim second place

Houston sets a new team-record for runs scored in the 19-6 rout of Chicago.

HOUSTON (AP) — The Houston Astros set a team scoring record and posted the highest run total in the majors this season with a 19-6 victory over the Chicago Cubs on Sunday.

The Astros, who scored in every inning after the third, got nine runs in the eighth inning to break the team record of 18 set in 1971 and matched in 1974. The highest total in the majors this season had been 17 (reached three times).

Jeff Bagwell drove in five runs, Derek Bell went 3-for-6 with three RBIs and Brian Hunter was 3-for-5 with four runs scored. John Cangelosi entered the game as a pinch-hitter in the eighth inning and came to bat twice, getting a walk, a stolen base and a three-run homer.

All nine runs in the eighth came with two outs against Bryan Hickerson.

Houston starter Shane

Reynolds (4-5) pitched six innings, allowing six hits and two runs, walking four and striking out seven. In five starts this month he is 3-1 with a 2.64 ERA.

Bagwell, who went 2-for-4 with three runs scored, has hit safely in 20 of 23 games, raising his average 69 points to .252. He had a three-run homer off Chris Nabholz with two outs in the seventh.

Houston took the lead for good in the fifth. Hunter reached on a throwing error by Frank Castillo (6-3) and went to second on Craig Biggio's groundout. Bagwell singled in Hunter with the tying run, and Derek Bell and Derrick May followed with singles for a 3-2 lead.

Astros rookie Orlando Miller, who had been out of the lineup since Wednesday with a sore right shoulder, drove in two runs.

Chicago scored two runs in both the seventh and eighth innings, but the Astros scored two in the sixth and four in the seventh before they got nine more in the eighth.

Hunter extended his hitting streak to seven games. Over that stretch, the rookie centerfielder, is hitting .438.

Astros 19, Cubs 6

Table with columns for CHICAGO and HOUSTON, listing player stats for ab, r, h, bi.

Totals for CHICAGO (100 100 220-6) and HOUSTON (000 132 49x-19).

LOB-Houston 9, Chicago 10. HR-Bagwell (9), Cangelosi (2), SB-Bullett (2), BHunter (9), Bell (16), May(1), Cangelosi (6), SF-Zelle, Biggio 2.

Table with columns for Houston and Chicago, listing player stats for IP, H, R, ER, BB, SO.

SPORTS BRIEFS

Olajuwon, Robinson to head Dream Team III

DALLAS (AP) — Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets, the NBA's MVP, heads the list of 10 players extended invitations to compete for the U.S. basketball team in the 1996 Summer Olympics.

Several sources involved in the selection process confirmed to the newspaper that the core of the team that will represent the country in Atlanta has been selected.

Rod Thorn, the NBA's vice president of operations and is the chairman of the selection committee. When contacted at his home Saturday evening, Thorn refused comment on the report. The Associated Press was unable to reach Thorn on Sunday.

The newspaper said that in addition to Olajuwon, other centers on "Dream Team III" could include Orlando's Shaquille O'Neal and San Antonio's David Robinson.

Forwards could be Utah's Karl Malone, Detroit's Grant Hill, Chicago's Scottie Pippen and Milwaukee's Glenn Robinson, the newspaper said.

Guards invited were Indiana's Reggie Miller, Orlando's Anfernee Hardaway and Utah's John Stockton, according to the report.

The final two spots on the roster have been left open to give the selection committee for USA Basketball some flexibility. Those players - Mavericks guard Jason Kidd will try to earn one of those spots - will be named once the 1995-96 regular season concludes.

The official announcement will be made in late July.

Galarraga hits homers in three straight innings

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Andres Galarraga homered in three consecutive innings to drive in a career-high seven runs as the Colorado Rockies beat the San Diego Padres 11-3 Sunday to split a four-game series.

Galarraga, who reached base safely all five times he batted, lost a chance in the ninth inning to try for his fourth homer when Larry Walker struck out with the bases loaded. Galarraga was on deck.

He became the fourth major leaguer to homer in three straight innings. The last to do it was Larry Parrish of Montreal on July 30, 1978.

Galarraga, hitting only .154 in his last 10 games, saved the most impressive shot for last, hitting a three-run homer off Fernando Valenzuela in the eighth inning that went six rows into the second deck at Jack Murphy Stadium. It was his 12th homer of the year and was estimated at 455 feet.

Strawberry may play minor league game today

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Darryl Strawberry, working out on the day his 60-day drug suspension from baseball ended, hit about 400 balls in batting practice Sunday at the New York Yankees' minor league complex.

Strawberry is scheduled to hit against Scott Kamieniecki, another injured Yankees teammate, on Monday morning. He may then play in an afternoon Gulf Coast League game between rookie teams of the Yankees and the Toronto Blue Jays.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing what he can do," said Yankees second baseman Pat Kelly, in Tampa on an injury rehabilitation assignment. "He wants to prove to everybody that he's back and that he can still perform at this level."

Hunter brings normalcy to lethargic Astros

The Houston Astros have never been a normal team.

They had a franchise before they had a stadium, hastily constructing Colt Stadium to house their young team in 1962. They once had a rain-out at The Astrodome. One of their players has the ignominious feat of becoming the first major-league pitcher to lose a no-hitter.

This season, the Astros may have one-upped themselves in weirdness. Their best player right now, a man who has set the basepaths on fire in his short time in the majors, did not even start the season with the team.

His name is Brian Hunter, and he is the best leadoff hitter the Astros have had since ... well, ever.

His major-league career is only 52 at-bats old, but Hunter already has established himself as one of the most well-rounded players in the National League. He does not seem to have any limits in his ability, and he has put the Astros in plenty of positions to score runs.

Through Saturday night, Hunter was hitting .321, with eight stolen bases in 10 attempts and 11 runs scored in barely a dozen games. Over a



NICK GEORGANDIS, SPORTS EDITOR

full season, those numbers extend into 100 stolen bases and 130 runs scored.

Not bad for a rookie.

The center field region of the Astrodome can look pretty imposing to anyone, especially to a rookie straight from the Astros Triple A farm club in Tucson, Ariz. The centerfield fence at the Dome is 400 feet from home plate, so there is plenty of room out there for a rookie to make a big mistake.

Through his first 15 games, Hunter has not made an error, and has run down so many would-be extra base hits that the Astro followers have lost count on how many runs he has saved.

Steve Finley, the Astros' centerfielder from 1991-94 was a solid player but lacked Hunter's cannon of an arm.

In his short stint in the big leagues, Hunter has cut down runners at second, third and home, killing potential rallies every which way he can.

The best thing about Hunter is that his arrival in Houston shows that the deities of baseball have forgiven the Astros' management for what may be the worst trade in baseball history.

During and after the 1990 season, manager John Mc-

Mullen and general manager Bill Wood decided the time had come to purge the Astros and begin the rebuilding process.

Astro standbys Glenn Davis and Bill Doran were traded for prospects, while other players drifted away from Houston as free agents.

The Astros wanted young players, lots of them via trades, and acquired such players as Finley, Jeff Bagwell, Pete Harnisch and Curt Schilling. As the 1991 season drew near, the Astros had only one real catcher on their roster, former Olympian Scott Servais. For whatever reason, the team officials decided they would also need a left-handed catcher to complement Servais.



Hunter

the starting centerfielder for the Cleveland Indians, the best team in baseball.

He's hitting .330 and is second in the American League in steals with 17. Last season, he and

teammate Albert Belle played demolition derby with opposing pitchers all season long.

Lofton hit over .350 and was among the league leaders in at-bats, batting average, hits, doubles and stolen bases. Meanwhile, Taubensee was traded by the Astros to Cincinnati for another minor leaguer.

Had it not been for the blossoming of Bagwell into the National League Most Valuable Player last season, Astro fans probably would have rioted every time Indian highlights came on.

The Astros leadoff man last year was James Mouton, who after a spectacular Opening Day performance, watched his batting average plunge into the .220s.

The Astros' win over the Cubs Sunday typified Hunter's presence on the team. He went 3-for-5, scored four runs, drove in another and stole a base as the Astros set a new team record for runs scored as they bashed Chicago 19-6.

Hunter is young, fast, smart and can hit the ball like a rocket. True, attendance is still way down at The Astrodome, but Hunter's presence could change all that, just like the Japanese pitcher Hideo Nomo has done in Los Angeles or the new Jacobs Field has done in Cleveland.

Suddenly, that shooting star symbol fits the Astros just right.