

Astros' Collins eager to do his job

□ This is the first year the Houston skipper has not had to worry about a strike.

HOUSTON (AP) — Terry Collins finally gets to manage the Houston Astros with baseball his only concern.

No players strike, no replacement players, no sleepless nights and no major holes to fill as the Astros move closer to the beginning of spring training.

City leaders have heeded owner Drayton McLane's warning that he needs to average 30,000 attendance to keep the team in Houston and not ship it off to Virginia after this season.

McLane has invested heavily in a marketing campaign that features television spots from former President and Mrs. George Bush, Clyde Drexler and Hakeem Olajuwon.

All-star second baseman Craig Biggio elected to stay in Houston, ignoring the lure of free agency, and was aided by

first baseman Jeff Bagwell, who agreed to restructure his contract to keep Biggio.

Collins literally worried himself sick last season. Now all he needs to do is win a pennant.

Collins has a decision to make in left field, how to replace reliever Dave Veres and he must also hope that starter Darryl Kile recovers from the worst season of his career.

"We feel our pitching rotation is intact," Collins said. "For the two years I've been here, we've felt all along that it's good enough, it's strong enough. We just have to get Darryl going again. That's the key."

Kile, who pitched a no-hitter in 1993 and was second on the staff with nine victories in 1994, slumped badly last season. He finished with a 4-12 record, a career high for losses, and a 4.96 ERA.

He made four starts in Class AAA Tucson, where his ERA was

a gaudy 8.51.

Collins also is sticking with Greg Swindell, who was taken out of the rotation last September. Swindell's ERA has not been below four in his three seasons in Houston and jumped to 4.47 last season.

The Astros have several young pitchers ready to make the leap, but Collins has been swayed by experience.

"We're in a situation where we think we can contend," Collins said. "You are going to contend with the veteran guys. We've got Doug Brocail, Donne Wall and some young guys. You don't want to put added pressure on the younger guys."

Collins' major pitching problem will be replacing the 72 appearances and 103.1 innings pitched by Veres, who was traded to Montreal for third baseman Sean Berry.

"The biggest area of hope is that Anthony Young (acquired in

the off season) can fill that role and one of the keys also will be the health of John Hudek," Collins said. "We think he's fine but until we get in a game situation where he's letting it go; that's the only way to determine anything."

Hudek was the Astros' closer until he had surgery last July to remove a rib that was causing circulation problems in his pitching arm.

The Astros are set in the infield with Biggio, Bagwell, Rick Wilkins catching, Orlando Miller at short, Berry at third and Derek Bell in right field and Brian Hunter in center field.

Left field is the only position Collins can't pencil in one name — it could be two. He may platoon Derrick May and James Mouton, which would not be all bad because it would get another lefthanded batter in the lineup.

"I have no problem platooning," Collins said. "Derrick did a tremendous job for us and we know that Mouton brings great footspeed and he's coming around offensively."



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Rangers' late goal forges tie with Stars

□ Luc Robitaille's power play with 2:14 left knotted the game between New York and Dallas Wednesday.

DALLAS (AP) — Luc Robitaille's power-play goal with 2:14 remaining in regulation lifted the New York Rangers into a 1-1 tie with the Dallas Stars Wednesday night, keeping the Rangers unbeaten in 1996.

Stars goalie Allan Bester was on the verge of his first NHL shutout in more than seven years before Robitaille tied it. Robitaille took a goalmouth feed from Alexei Kovalev and beat Bester while Dallas' Joe Nieuwendyk was in the penalty box.

The Rangers, 5-0-4 in January, thought they'd notched the tying goal 10 seconds before Robitaille's 15th of the season but referee Don Koharski ruled that New York's Ray Ferraro had intentionally directed the puck into the net with his skate.

Bester, signed from the Orlando Solar Bears of the International League on Jan. 21 after Stars goalies Andy Moog and Darcy Wakaluk were both placed on the injured list, made 27 saves to improve his record to 3-1-1.

Until he was signed by the Stars, the 31-year-old Bester had not played in the NHL since the 1991-92 season. Bester hasn't had an NHL shutout since Jan. 9, 1989 for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Bester kept the Rangers scoreless when he stopped Adam Graves on a point-blank shot with 6:52 to play. Bester came up big again while the Rangers skated four-on-three, denying Pat Verbeek from the left circle with 2:28 left in regulation and also denying Kovalev from the right circle with 1:12 remaining in overtime.

Rangers goaltender Glenn Healy was Bester's equal, stopping 22 shots. The Rangers are 10-1-5 in their last 16.

Dallas was 1-6-2 in its last nine home games but the Stars are 3-1-1 in their last five.

The Stars got the game's first goal at 13:59 of the second period on defenseman Kevin Hatcher's fourth in as many games.

The Rangers had killed off a two-man disadvantage for 35 seconds before Stars left wing Benoit Hogue set up Hatcher's 12th.

Hogue took possession in his own zone, steamed up center ice and left a drop-pass for Hatcher, whose 30-foot blast beat Healy to the stick side.

Hogue also continued to the net and provided a screen for Hatcher's shot with a minute left on the power play.

The point was the first in a Dallas uniform for Hogue, making his Stars debut after being acquired Sunday in a trade with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The teams managed a total of only nine shots, five by the Stars, in the scoreless and tight-checking first period.



Football impostor Weaver meets with UT officials

□ The 30-year-old man and his lawyer met with UT and NCAA compliance officers.

AUSTIN (AP) — A 30-year-old man who used a false identity to bluff his way onto the University of Texas football team has met with school officials who are reviewing the case.

Ron Weaver and his lawyer met with UT compliance director Leroy Sutherland, university legal counsel Patricia Ohlendorf.

Ohlendorf is an NCAA representative in Los Angeles this week, school officials said Wednesday.

"The meeting was cordial and beneficial for all parties concerned," Sutherland said.

"This remains a criminal investigation, so we are not at liberty to discuss the individual issues.

"But, from our point of view, I can say that most of the university and NCAA issues surrounding his enrollment, recruitment and participation have now been resolved to our satisfaction."

Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds has indicated the school likely won't try to recover the cost of Weaver's scholarship, estimated at more than \$6,000.

"From the university's standpoint, we are rapidly moving toward a resolution in this case," Dodds said. "Many of our questions have been answered and we are anxious to

wrap this up and move on."

School officials had accused Weaver of placing bets on sports with a bookie for two members of the football team.

But Dodds said that incident was isolated and the players involved were suspended.

"Again, I must emphasize that we are confident we followed every proper NCAA and University of Texas procedure in recruiting and admitting (Weaver)," Dodds said. "I am confident the NCAA will clear us of any wrongdoing when the case is concluded."

After exhausting his eligibility at Sacramento State, Weaver used the Social Security number of an acquaintance from Salinas, Calif., to

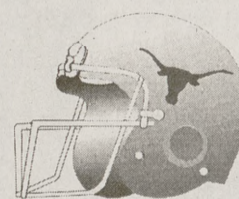
take the identity of 23-year-old Ron McKelvey and play two years at a junior college in Los Angeles before transferring to Texas last year.

Authorities have said they are looking into possible violations including Social Security fraud, forgery and mail and wire fraud.

Calls to Weaver's residence in Los Angeles weren't immediately returned. Weaver's scam was uncovered on Dec. 31, 1995, the day the Longhorns were set to play Virginia Tech in the 1995 Sugar Bowl.

Weaver played sporadically during the 1995 season, mostly on special teams and during the second halves of games whose outcomes had already been decided.

Mackovic partially blamed Weaver's scam with the Longhorns' loss that night.



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