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Catalanotto eyes race

Rangers' left fielder on track to contend for AL batting title

ARLINGTON (AP) — Frank Catalanotto was not expected to be an everyday player for the Texas Rangers this season. As a utility player, he was only rarely expected to play in the outfield.

Now Catalanotto is the starting left fielder for the Rangers — and about to be in the thick of the AL batting race.

Catalanotto has the AL's longest current hitting streak at 12 games and is hitting .341 through 396 plate appearances — 10 away from qualifying to be among the league leaders.

Once Catalanotto catches up, he'll be closing in on Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki (.347), the AL's top hitter, and Cleveland's Juan Gonzalez (.344), a two-time AL MVP for the Rangers.

"I really can't explain it," Catalanotto said. "Playing every day, you just get more comfortable, and that's basically what it's been for me. I always knew I was a .300 hitter, but to be hitting this high, I didn't know about that."

Catalanotto's primary role last season — after coming from Detroit in a nine-player deal that sent Gonzalez out of Texas — was as a backup infielder and pinch-hitter when he hit .291. He played 103 games, making 66 starts at second base, DH and first base while also going 10-for-28 (.347) as a pinch-hitter.

Former manager Johnny Oates gave Catalanotto limited

work in the outfield during spring training this year just to increase his versatility.

But it was not until three days after Oates resigned that Catalanotto played in the outfield. When Ruben Mateo complained of headaches and dizziness before a May 7 game against the Chicago White Sox, new manager Jerry Narron started Catalanotto in right.

Then Chad Curtis was sidelined by a pulled right

hamstring, and Ricky Ledee was out because of arthroscopic surgery on his left knee. Mateo struggled so much hitting that he was sent back to the minors and eventually traded, then left fielder and leadoff hitter Rusty Greer went on the disabled list June 12 because of a pulled left hamstring.

As a result, Catalanotto has started 48 games in left and 14

in right — even with Ledee and Curtis healthy again.

"The big thing is that he's just gotten a chance to play and he's taken advantage of it," Narron said.

Catalanotto is hitting a majors-best .453 (43-for-95) in August, even after going 1-for-9 in the Rangers' 18-inning win against Boston over the weekend. His fourth-inning single Sunday extended his hitting streak and snapped an 0-for-10 slump at the same time.

Another reason Catalanotto was behind in the batting chase was that he often sat against left-handed pitchers. Narron now has the confidence to put Catalanotto into the lineup no matter who he faces.

"I've really started to get used to playing every day," Catalanotto said. "When I'm not in the lineup and I have to come in and pinch-hit, it's almost foreign to me now."

This is the final year of Catalanotto's contract with the Rangers, and he's not sure about his future.

Greer, who had season-ending back surgery Aug. 3, is signed through 2004. His return could displace Catalanotto, or the Rangers could utilize Greer as a DH and part-time first baseman.

"I really haven't thought about it," Narron said. "You don't even know exactly what the makeup will be of this club next spring. But Catalanotto will get a lot of playing time next season. A lot."

"I really can't explain it. I always knew I was a .300 hitter, but to be hitting this high, I don't know about that."

— Frank Catalanotto
Texas Rangers left fielder

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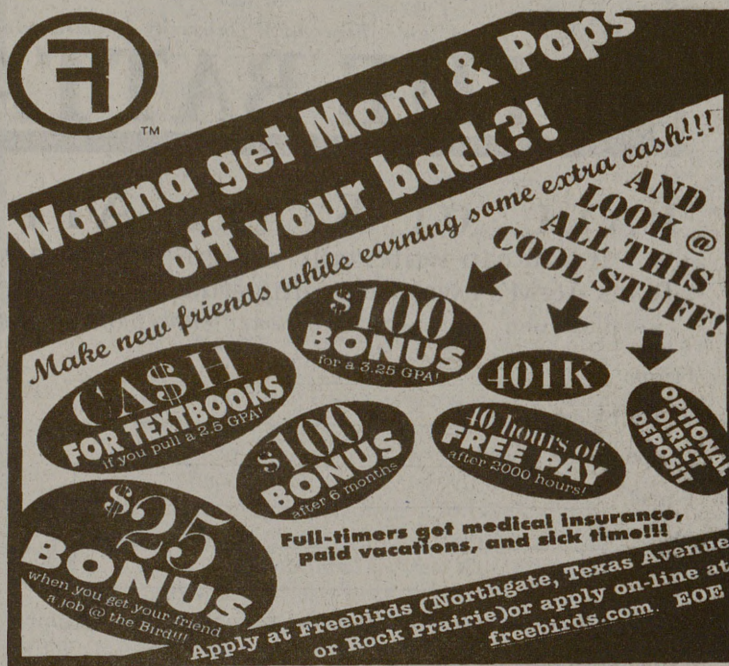


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