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"On The Bend" in Bryan

Tuesday, April 30, 2002

# Irabu fills hole as closer for Rangers

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — The Texas Rangers always thought they would have a strong closer. They just did not realize it would be Hideki Irabu.

With Jeff Zimmerman on the disabled list and John Rocker having failed in his chance to be the Texas closer, Irabu was thrust into his new and unexpected role. And his performance is making a difference.

"The thing that has happened in the last couple of weeks is that Irabu has pitched like Zimmerman would pitch," said Rangers manager Jerry Narron. "It will be interesting to see if he can sustain it like Zimmerman does."

Texas has won consecutive series for the first time this season, taking two-of-three games from both Cleveland and Toronto. Irabu had a save in all four of those wins, twice getting saves on consecutive days.

The Rangers were off Monday before beginning a six-game road trip against the two teams they just beat at home.

Irabu has converted five-of-six save chances since becoming the closer April 17, the day after the Rangers assigned the struggling Rocker to Triple-A Oklahoma.

"Now that this role has been given to me, and even though this is the first time for him to do this, I think it's a very exciting job," said Irabu through his Japanese translator. "I want to continue to develop myself as a closer. I like this role."

When Irabu signed a minor league deal with the Rangers, he did so hoping to make

the team as the No. 5 starter. He had just 14 starts the previous two seasons in Montreal, where three extended stints on the disabled list led to his release.

A series of spring training injuries to starters Chan Ho Park, Kenny Rogers, Dave Burba and Ishmael Valdes prompted Texas to keep 13 pitchers, including Irabu as a spot starter and long reliever.

"He's doing a great job in that role in the fact that he throws strikes... psychologically, that's great for our club."

— Jerry Narron  
Texas Rangers manager

Zimmerman, whose 28 saves last year included a team-record 17 straight at the end of the year, has not pitched because of tendinitis in his right elbow. The injury has healed slowly and could require surgery.

Rocker was 0-1 with one save in three chances and a 9.53 ERA before he was recalled last week from the minor league assignment to which he never reported. Opponents were hitting .407 against the left-

hander, who had nine strikeouts in 11 innings but had allowed 11 hits, four walks.

Irabu, who was 0-2 with a 6.53 ERA in his two starts for the injured closer, excelled out of the bullpen. In the last week, he allowed just one hit.

"He's doing a great job in that role in the fact that he throws strikes," Narron said. "Psychologically, that's great for our club."

Bill Haselman, filling in for the past as a starter where you can't believe Irabu's history as a starter, revealed his role.

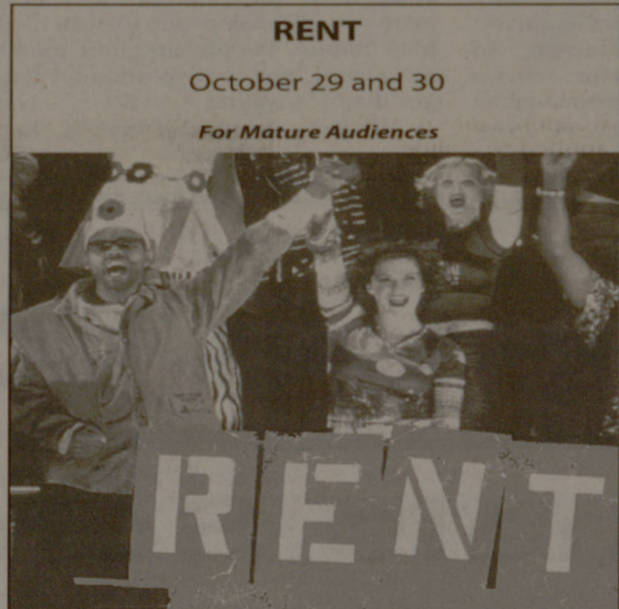
"When you go into a role like this, you've been in enough times to know our guys have confidence in you when he comes in. He's not going to let himself. Psychologically, that's great for our club."

Irabu had 11 saves in nine starts in Japan before signing with the Yankees in 1997. He never had a major until this season, when he had relief appearances in 10 games, less than he had in his previous 74.

"I'm trying to study, learn a little role and develop as a closer," Irabu said. "But I didn't even have time to see players because it suddenly came."

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