

Texas shares best record in Major Leagues

By Jaime Aron
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ARLINGTON, Texas — The surprising success of the Texas Rangers raises an intriguing question: Is their 18-10 start merely good luck or could it really be the start of something big?

There has to be a good answer because what's happening just doesn't seem to make sense.

This is a team coming off four straight last-place finishes that spent the offseason replacing potential Hall of Famers Alex Rodriguez, Rafael Palmeiro and Juan Gonzalez with self-described "grinders" Brian Jordan, Brad Fullmer and David Dellucci.

Their rotation is headed by a 39-year-old lefty and a right-hander missing a ligament in his pitching arm. They have a reliever who's been out of the majors since 2000.

Yet, so far, it's working. The Rangers went into an off-day Thursday tied with Anaheim for the best record in baseball.

"They've got a nice club," said Tampa Bay manager Lou Piniella, whose team lost two of three to Texas this week. "They play with a lot of energy. It's fun watching them."

Having meaningful games in May sounds silly, but it's progress for a franchise that's been stuck at the bottom of the AL West for good by this point in each of the last four seasons.

As bad as those teams were, all had stretches in which they won at least 18 of 28 games, as this year's club has done. The difference is the timing.

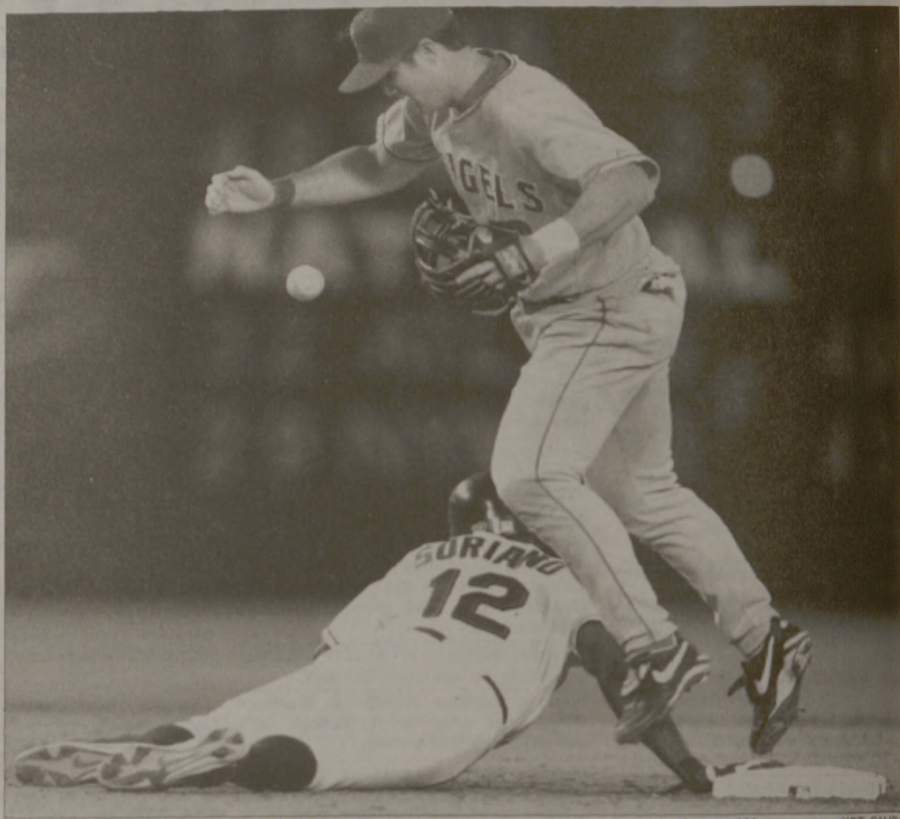
Those clubs did so after they were out of contention, so all their spurts did were avoid 100 losses. By opening this season on a roll, Texas is building confidence and winning back many of the fans alienated by the off-season A-Rod saga.

"We'll see where it takes us," manager Buck Showalter said.

The most encouraging sign is how the Rangers are winning: with quality pitching, sound defense and timely hitting.

They have a 4.08 ERA, second-best in the AL, quite a feat after having a majors-worst 5.67 ERA last season. Only Oakland's vaunted rotation has thrown more innings than Texas' starters, which has made the bullpen more effective. The Rangers are tied for the most saves in the AL and they've lost only one game when leading after the sixth inning.

Texas also has turned the most double plays in the majors and is near the bottom in errors. That's tremendous considering short-stop Michael Young is moving from second base and second baseman Alfonso Soriano has long been considered a defensive liability.



Texas Ranger second baseman Alfonso Soriano is safe at second as Anaheim Angels second baseman Adam Kennedy mishandles the ball during their game at the Ballpark in Arlington on April 12.

At the plate, the Rangers no longer wait for A-Rod, Juando or Raffy to put a ball into the bleachers. They've returned to NL-style fundamentals like quality at-bats and aggressive baserunning.

The result: A .308 average that's 21 points higher than any other team in the majors with the most hits and total bases. And they're still fifth in homers.

"We knew we had to find a way to score runs better," said Young, who leads the majors in hits (46) and multihit games (17).

If there's a secret to the team's success, it's their chemistry.

Showalter said teams can win without it, but he's never seen a losing team that enjoys being around each other as much as these guys do.

"We've got a good mix of young guys and veterans," Jordan said. "We're just having fun."

The new atmosphere has been noted by everyone from team executives to dugout security guards. Holdover players have told the newcomers they can't believe the change, although they preface public comments with phrases like, "Nothing against the guys we had last year, but ..."

"Everybody gets along and is on the

same page," Young said. "That kind of kick-starts everything."

Losing the moody superstars certainly helped.

With no leader designated by his big contract, all players are comfortable razzing each other and speaking up. There's even a kangaroo court, something that never worked under the previous social structure.

The new veteran core may not have big names, but they do have good track records. Dellucci and Rod Barajas won the World Series with Arizona in 2001 and Dellucci returned to the Series last year with the Yankees. Fullmer was on Anaheim's championship team in 2003 and Jordan reached the Series in '99 with Atlanta.

All noticed similar ingredients in Texas this spring. Showalter had them explain it to their teammates before the opener in what may prove to be a pivotal serious moment for this group of cutups. Dellucci had the line that Showalter said "hit everyone in the face."

"We can be remembered as the 2004 Rangers or by something much stronger—the Rangers team that turned everything around," Dellucci told them.

They're off to a great start.

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Equestrian
Continued from page 1B

all those girls deserve to be in the ring," Rawson said. "You have to be mentally ready for just about anything."

Ten Aggies will also be competing for individual championships, which are not related to the team competitions. Senior English rider Beth von Brecht will be participating in the championships for the third time in her collegiate career. Brecht said she believes her previous rides and experiences will help her in obtaining her first championship trophy.

"I'm really not feeling nervous at all," Brecht said. "But then again, I'm not at Tennessee yet, so I may feel just a little different when we get there."

Another rider who understands riding under pressure is senior western rider Ashley Shiffler. In last year's competition, Shiffler was the last rider in the last event. She had to place at least second for A&M to come from behind and clinch the championship. Fate obviously played her way, as she earned second place.

"Actually, I am a little scared after last year," Shiffler said. "It means that I have to do equal or better than (last year) somehow."

With finals looming on the horizon, it may seem hard for the Aggies to maintain the mental focus that Rawson said is so important. Many, however, said they are focused on winning the championship for A&M.

"As bad as it sounds, I would rather have a national trophy than a 4.0," Shiffler said.

Olympics
Continued from page 1B

came from an unusual source, former Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz. The winner of seven gold medals in 1972 told the BBC last week he could see circumstances that would force the United States to pull out.

"I would say that about six months ago it was highly unlikely," Spitz said, "but each day as it goes on with current world affairs it becomes more probable than not that ongoing conversations will take place as to how important it is to put athletes in harm's way."

The decision by Carter in 1980 to keep the U.S. team home because the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan was severely criticized in the Olympic movement. The Soviets retaliated in 1984 by boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics.

Nine-time gold medal sprinter and long jumper Carl Lewis was one of those who had to stay home.

"Absent some clear and present danger, we should never take that course of action again," Lewis said. "Our athletes have been training for much of their lives for this very special moment. Let's not take that away from them."

Three-time judo Olympian Jimmy Pedro agreed.

"We've lost the fight for freedom if we give in," he said.

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