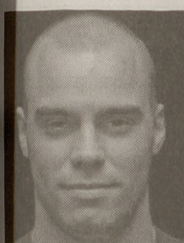


SPORTS

THE BATTALION

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For major league Texas teams it's hit or miss



SHAWN MILENDER
SPORTS COLUMNIST

If one has been keeping track of the Major League Baseball season locally, he would have to be deaf to miss the rumblings. The Houston Astros — or the Dis-Astros, or the LeAstros, or the Lastros — depending on your favorite moniker for them — have given new meaning to the term “underachieving.”

The season had a promising start. Arguably the best starting pitcher rotation in the big leagues complemented a lineup that had some decent pop from No. 1 through No. 8. When the Astros raced out to a 24-15 record and the division rival Chicago Cubs stumbled out of the gate, it seemed the Astros had to do was outlast the usual suspects like the Cardinals and Reds to bring a title home to Houston.

But then the injuries hit, and the flow of runs was choked to a trickle. The non-contenders turned out to be legitimately better than expected. The Astros were facing reality: This team is too old and injury-prone to contend seriously for the National League central division.

When 36-year-old first baseman Jeff Bagwell's arthritic shoulder turned him into a \$16 million doorstop with no throwing arm, the rest of the lineup was dragged down with him.

Suddenly, Adam Everett was exposed for the bush-league hacker he is. No one was on base to set the table for power hitters like Lance Berkman and Jeff Kent. Richard Hidalgo, after a torrid month of May, cratered so dramatically he was traded to the Mets for a bucket of baseballs and an extra batting practice cage.

With pitchers Wade Miller, Tim Lincecum, Andy Pettitte and Roy Oswalt all spending time out of the rotation, a once-promising group of seasoned veterans was turned into a loose confederation of spares who are captained by the only Astro carrying his own weight, an increasingly frustrated Roger Clemens.

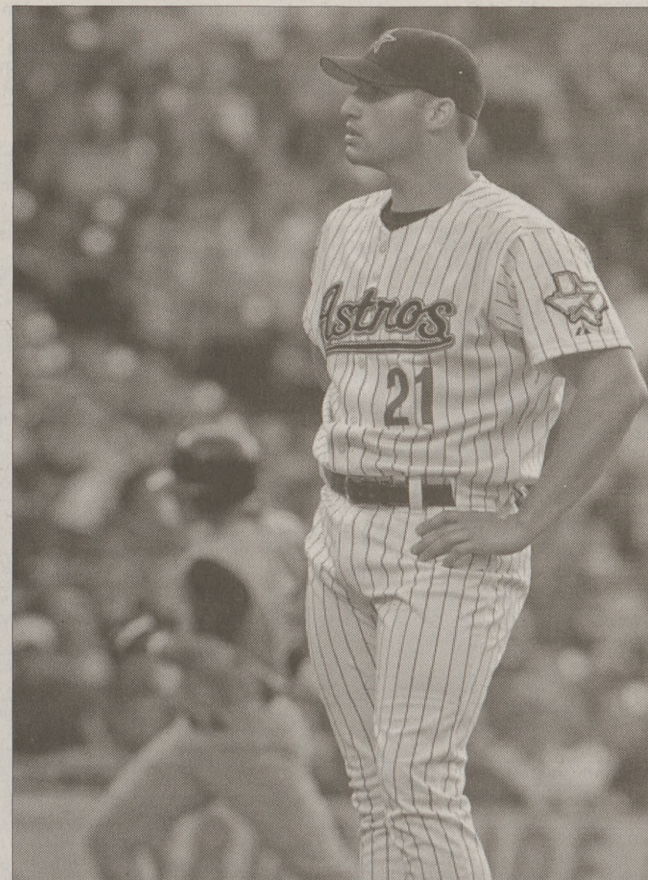
Even the addition of Kansas City center fielder Carlos Beltran failed to light a fire under the Astros. The only hope left for their fans is that new manager “Scrap Iron” Phil Garner can somehow get them to do the little things right and eventually play to their potential.

Currently the Astros sit a game under .500 and 5 1/2 games out of the wild card race, with the recent dubious and embarrassing distinction of helping snap the crummy Arizona Diamondbacks' 14-game losing skid Monday night, a feat on par with being the only team in the NFL to lose to the Cowboys when they went 1-15 in 1989.

Fortunately for Texas baseball fans, one team in the state is making them proud. The Texas Rangers are the opposite of almost everything about the Astros: They're young, overachieving and on the rise after years of floundering under the weight of huge super-



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While the Texas Rangers have been unexpectedly successful this season, the Houston Astros haven't quite experienced the same success due to problems on and off the field. Left: **Gary Matthews**, right, is congratulated by teammate **Mark Teixeira** after hitting a three-run home run Monday night. Right: **Andy Pettitte** stands on the mound as the Diamondbacks' **Scott Hairston** rounds the bases after a home run on Monday.

star contracts. They're what the Astros want to be, which is a dramatic role reversal from as recently as last season.

The Rangers have done it mainly with offense, just like they have to. Their starting rotation is suspect at best; atrocious is probably the best word to describe it. They've managed, however, to squeeze another all-star quality year out of unfrozen caveman Kenny Rogers and received unexpected quality performances from young pitchers like Ryan Drese who is 6-0 at Ameritrust Field and Francisco Cordero who has 30 saves.

Mark Teixeira proved to be the talent everyone thought he'd be. Teixeira, along with proven all-star Hank Blalock and newcomer Alfonso Soriano have teamed with role players like David Delucci, Laynce Nix and Kevin Mench to keep the Rangers in first place far longer than even the most ardent fan could have hoped.

The Rangers could go 0-66 from here on out and manager Buck Showalter would be able to call it a successful season with the 18th biggest payroll in the majors. Conversely, for the Astros and the 12th highest payroll to redeem their season, they may just have to run the table.

SPORTS IN BRIEF

Texans sign Anderson

HOUSTON (AP) - The Houston Texans signed sixth-round draft choice Charlie Anderson on Tuesday, meaning only two of their nine selections remained unsigned.

Anderson, a defensive end at Mississippi, will compete for a roster spot at outside linebacker. One of the Texans' two first-round picks, Jason Babin, is making a similar transition.

As a senior last season, Anderson led Ole Miss with 5 1/2 sacks and had a career-high 54 tackles. He played in every game of his four-year collegiate career.

Terms of Anderson's deal were not immediately available. Only safety Glenn Earl and cornerback Vontez Duff remained unsigned.

Cowboys cut Hutchinson

IRVING (AP) - The Dallas Cowboys waived Chad Hutchinson on Tuesday, ending their experiment of trying to turn the former big-league pitcher into a starting quarterback.

Hutchinson's release has been expected all offseason, especially after an unimpressive performance in NFL Europe. The Cowboys have four other quarterbacks on the roster and coach Bill Parcells said he didn't plan to take five to training camp, which opens Friday in Oxnard, Calif.

Dallas' other quarterbacks are Carter, Vinny Testaverde, Tony Romo and rookie Drew Henson, another former college star who is trying to make it big in football after giving up on pro baseball.

Athens bolsters security; no-fly zone planned

By Derek Gatopoulos
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Athens will impose a no-fly zone over the city a week before the Olympics and has drawn up contingency plans to shoot down hijacked planes that could be used in a Sept. 11-style attack, a senior Greek air defense official said Tuesday, as authorities received U.S. scanners to check cars and trucks.



THANASSIS STAVRAKIS • THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Greek air force radar operator inspects a missile launcher near Athens on Tuesday.

“The threats we’re considering include renegade aircraft, missiles ... gliders, kites, remote-controlled planes, unmanned craft and others,” Air Force Brig. Gen. Dimitris Mandilis told The Associated Press. “Any order to engage and shoot these down rests with the government and a committee headed by the prime minister.”

Air defense systems have been placed around the Athens area, including U.S. Patriot missile batteries, together with French and Russian systems, defense officials told AP. The Patriot sites, three around Athens, two in the northern city of Thessaloniki and one on the Aegean Sea island of Skyros were placed on alert July 1; the status will not change until Oct. 5.

With less than three weeks before the Aug. 13 opening ceremony, the most costly security plan in Olympic history is gradually taking shape with some police spyware going into full-time operation.

More than 290 street cameras, three helicopters and a 200-foot blimp, mounted

with cameras, began Olympic patrols to monitor major roads and areas near venues.

Images and sound from the cameras and a dozen surveillance vans are fed into a command center, under a \$312 million system developed by San Diego-based Science Applications International Corp., or SAIC.


The two mobile X-ray scanners, on loan from U.S. Customs, will be used to check for possible explosives in cars, trucks and cargo. The equipment is part of a bilateral agreement reached last month to strengthen seaport protection.

Security is costing Athens a record \$1.5 billion and will involve 70,000 police and soldiers. The truck scanners, each worth \$7 million, were loaned to Athens because technology procured by Greece will not be ready in time for the games.

“This is an important interagency effort,” said Scott Blackhall of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection. “It ends a weeklong intensive training program using the mobile X-ray technology.”

Trucks headed to the Olympic Village and venues will be scanned by the vehicles based at a new facility at Aspropyrgos, a town west of the city center. The scanners, with an extending arm mounted on a command vehicle, are designed to detect guns, explosives, drugs and people. Trucks can be checked in about three minutes, officials said.

“Truck safety is a crucial issue,” said Vassilis Stavrinou, secretary general of the Finance Ministry in charge of Greece's customs. “This provides a shield against illegal and terrorist actions and speeds up the inspection process.”



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