

BASEBALL

N.L. WEST

BRAVES

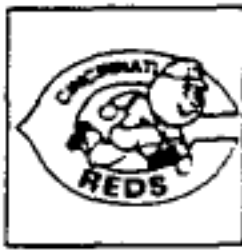


Ron Gant and Jeff Blauser, the Atlanta Braves' middle-infield-in-waiting, began the season at Richmond (International) despite good springs. "I told them I won a World Series at Pittsburgh with Tim Lincecum at shortstop and Phil Garner at second, and they have better talent," Manager Chuck Tanner said. "It's better for them to be playing every day instead of sitting on the bench." The Braves began the season with Damaso Garcia at second and Andres Thomas at short. Although injuries caused Garcia to miss the 1987 season and limited Thomas to 82 games, Tanner began the '88 campaign with only one reserve infielder. Paul Runge beat out Buddy Biancalana, whose contract was sold to the Kansas City organization. . . . Reliever Jeff Dedmon, bumped from the staff by Bruce Sutter's return, was traded to Cleveland for a minor league player to be named. The Braves wanted catcher Todd Pratt, drafted from Boston, but were rebuffed. Dedmon is the fourth pitcher to leave the Braves since last August. He, Doyle Alexander, Gene Garber and David Palmer accounted for 20 victories and 14 saves last year. . . . Paul Assenmacher, a major disappointment last season, pitched his way back into the bullpen picture during the last two weeks in Florida. Rediscovering the breaking pitch that made him effective as a rookie in 1986, he struck out 15 in nine scoreless innings. He and fellow lefthander Chuck Cary had combined for 34 strikeouts in 31 2/3 innings during exhibition play. . . . Top prospects Tommy Greene, Derek Lilliquist and John Smoltz opened the season in Richmond's rotation. Andy Nezelek, who also pitched well in the major league camp, opened with Greenville (Southern). . . . The Braves assigned first baseman Andrew Denson to Greenville for the second straight year. Denson, a first-round draft choice in 1984, hit .219 last season. He is trying to become a switch-hitter, and his first efforts from the left side were promising. "He's doing naturally what we've been trying to teach him to do from the right side," minor league director Henry Aaron said.

The Braves chose to carry an extra outfielder, Terry Blocker, instead of Graig Nettles, who was sold to Montreal for a small sum, believed to be less than \$20,000. Nettles led National League pinch-hitters in runs batted in last year with 23, but the Braves usually had to use a pinch-runner when he reached base, an unnecessary strain on a 24-man roster when there are other competent left-handed hitters on the bench. Ken Griffey has 15 hits and 11 RBIs in 23 at-bats as a pinch-hitter with Atlanta, and switch-hitter Ted Simmons had nine hits and eight RBIs in the pinch last year. Two of Simmons' hits were home runs. . . . Griffey was scheduled to start the regular-season opener in left field. Sometimes Dion James will play left, with Blocker taking his spot in center. The Braves had hoped to go with Blocker in center and James in left every day. Blocker's

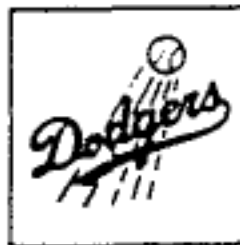
6-for-43 slump in the middle of the exhibition schedule ended that plan, but the Braves kept him for speed and defense. "He'll get his at-bats and playing time," Tanner said. "We're going to bring him along slowly and give him every chance to be successful. He showed us he can go get the ball. He has to sting the ball a little better." If the Braves lead in the late innings with James and Griffey in the lineup, Blocker will go to center and James will switch to left. Albert Hall, who lagged in the center-field race, will be used mostly as a pinch-runner.

REDS



After watching rookie third baseman Chris Sabo play a couple of B games at shortstop, Pete Rose, the Cincinnati Reds' manager, decided to keep him instead of infielder Angel Salazar, obtained over the winter from Kansas City. "Sabo plays shortstop real well," said Rose. "He is a lot like me. He looks unorthodox, but he catches the ball and throws it. He'll run through a wall for you and kill somebody to score a run." Sabo, 26, was Nashville's MVP last year despite missing the last half of the American Association season after knee surgery. . . . When the Reds broke camp March 31 to play exhibitions in Nashville and Louisville, third baseman Buddy Bell (knee) and reliever Frank Williams (shoulder) were left behind to test their injuries in games with and against the team's minor league clubs. . . . Pitcher Pat Pacillo, sent to the minor league camp for reassignment, skipped three days before he reported. "With a slightly lightened wallet," said General Manager Murray Cook, who persuaded Pacillo to accept the decision. . . . The Reds released lefthander Guy Hoffman, 9-10 in 22 starts and 14 relief appearances last season. . . . A touching scene unfolded between Barry Larkin and Kurt Stillwell before an exhibition game between the Reds and Royals at Baseball City, Fla. Stillwell, beaten out for the Reds' shortstop job by Larkin last year and traded to Kansas City during the off-season, removed a gold charm from his neck. "Here, wear this," he said, giving it to Larkin. "I don't need it now. And good luck." The charm was an 11, Stillwell's old number, which Larkin now wears. Larkin immediately put the charm around his neck.

DODGERS



The Los Angeles Dodgers released veteran first baseman-outfielder Len Matuszek, who still hadn't fully recovered from a foot injury that required surgery a year ago. Matuszek's \$215,000 contract was not guaranteed. . . . The Dodgers demoted eight players to Albuquerque (Pacific Coast). They were outfielders Ralph Bryant, Mike Devereaux and Jose Gonzalez, infielders Mariano Duncan, Mike Sharperson and Craig Shipley, pitcher Mike Hartley and catcher Gilberto Reyes. "I don't know what I have to do to get noticed," said Shipley, who was batting .611 (11



Roberto Alomar . . . Two-towel cry.

for 18). Bryant said, "What good is it to have power if you don't have a chance to use it?" . . . With three games remaining, the Dodgers had equaled their largest victory total in an exhibition season in their 31 years in Los Angeles. Their 19-9 record matched the mark of the 1975 team. . . . Danny Heep was batting .500 (21 for 42) through March 29. . . . Fernando Valenzuela's spring earned-run average jumped from 1.05 to 4.50 with two rocky outings against Boston and Kansas City. . . . Mike Davis missed two weeks because of a sprained ankle. He had only three hits in 24 at-bats. . . . Gordie Hershiser, Orel's younger brother, was scheduled for elbow surgery March 30. The younger Hershiser was 1-6 last year at Vero Beach (Florida State).

ASTROS

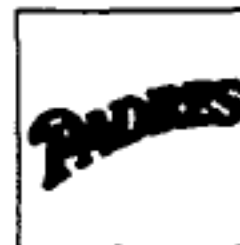


The Houston Astros released reliever George-Frazier on March 29, ending a brief and costly experiment. Frazier, a free agent who pitched for Minnesota last season, was guaranteed an estimated \$150,000 for the exhibition portion of the season. Lacking his best sinker, he allowed 17 hits and six earned runs in 9 2/3 innings. . . . Outfielder Steve Henderson, who started the spring in the Astros' minor league camp, had six hits and five RBIs in three varsity games after being brought up for a look. Henderson, 35, hit .289 with Oakland last season, but the A's did not offer another contract. The Houston native contacted the Astros about a minor league job and wound up in position to win a spot with the major league team as a righthanded pinch-hitter. . . . Henderson's emergence spelled the end for outfielder Reid Nichols, who was released March 27. Nichols, also a righthanded hitter, was invited to camp as a non-roster player. "The things we wanted to

see, we just didn't see," said Manager Hal Lanier. Said Nichols: "Being released here might not be such a bad thing for me. I didn't figure to get more than 50 or 60 at-bats with the outfield they have."

Reliever Charley Kerfeld opened the season on the 15-day disabled list because of a sprained muscle in his neck and shoulder. Kerfeld pitched effectively in exhibitions, but the velocity of his fastball declined because of the injury. . . . Right fielder Kevin Bass missed more than a week of the spring season because of a sore hamstring but was expected to be ready for the opener. . . . Lanier experimented with Bill Doran as the cleanup hitter against lefthanded pitchers, dropping Glenn Davis to the fifth spot. . . . Catcher Craig Biggio, the Astros' top pick in last summer's draft and the outstanding rookie in camp this spring, was sent to Tucson (Pacific Coast). Despite having only half a season in Class A under his belt, Biggio almost jumped from Seton Hall to the majors in one year. "He couldn't have made a better impression on us this spring," said Lanier. "His dedication, his aggressiveness and his enthusiasm are things you can't teach. I told him never to lose the enthusiasm he has right now. It just wouldn't be best either for Craig or the organization to keep him as a backup catcher at this stage. But if something happens, it's a pleasant thought to know we have him down there. I think he can handle it up here, but he needs to be playing all the time." Biggio hit .333 in exhibitions and impressed several veteran pitchers with his ability behind the plate.

PADRES



Tony Gwynn returned to the San Diego Padres' lineup just two weeks after surgery on a tendon in his left index finger March 11. The operation was supposed to sideline the outfielder for four to six weeks, but he was back in action March 25 against Seattle. He played five innings, went 1 for 2 and recorded an assist with a good throw. "I'm not surprised," said Gwynn, who was playing nine innings by March 28. "I wouldn't have had the surgery if I thought I couldn't open the season, no matter how painful the finger. I hope all the Mr. Scepticals and Mr. Know-It-Alls are feeling funny now." After 10 exhibition games, five of which followed the operation, Gwynn was batting .458.

Chub Feeney, the Padres' president, overrode Manager Larry Bowa and sent 20-year-old second baseman **Roberto Alomar** to Las Vegas (Pacific Coast) for his first Triple-A experience. While Bowa was downcast, Alomar curled up in a training room and wept into two towels for 30 minutes. The rookie hit .360 and batted in nine runs in 15 spring games. He was sensational in the field, too. "They tell me if I play good, I make the team, and now I'm off. What more can I do?" asked Alomar, son of third-base coach Sandy Alomar. Feeney's decision was guided by recent history. The Padres opened the 1986 and '87 seasons with second basemen straight from Double A. Both of them—Joey Cora and Bip Rob-

erts—are back in the minors. "We aren't going to rush this one," said Feeney.

The Padres' starting rotation, at least for the start of the season, is Ed Whitson, Andy Hawkins, Eric Show, Jimmy Jones and Mark Grant. Bowa said the pitchers were placed in that order so as to obtain the most favorable matchups against the first two opponents, Houston and San Francisco. Eric Nolte, who ended last year in the rotation, was sent to the bullpen to find his control. He walked 15 in 23 2/3 spring innings. . . . Joining Nolte will be righthander Candy Sierra, a 21-year-old who eventually will become a starter. Sierra surprised many by having the best spring of the Padres' pitchers. In 19 innings, he struck out 15, walked five and allowed just two earned runs. A curveball specialist, he has had elbow problems the last two seasons and was just 8-5 with a 3.95 earned-run average for Wichita (Texas) last year. Sierra's stock rose when elbow tendinitis forced lefthander Dave Leiper to open the season on the disabled list. . . . Rookie Shawn Abner, who was battling Shane Mack for the final outfield job, went 10 for 18 in a seven-game hitting streak that raised his spring average to .320. Known for speed and hustle, Abner ran so hard to catch one fly ball that he momentarily became stuck in a fence at the Angels' stadium in Palm Springs, Calif.

GIANTS



The San Francisco Giants' biggest concern entering the season was Jeffrey Leonard's health. The oft-injured outfielder was hobbled by a strained left arch and a pulled left quadriceps. A bone scan of the arch March 28 was negative, but Leonard aggravated the quadriceps injury that night as he ran to first base while serving as the designated hitter in a game against Oakland. . . . Second baseman Robby Thompson missed a few games with a groin pull but was expected to play opening day. . . . With five exhibitions remaining, the Giants were batting .301, topped by Mike Aldrete's .403. The team had eight home runs, six off Oakland pitching. . . . Leadoff hitter Brett Butler reached base in 15 consecutive starts before he was stopped by the Cubs on March 27. A crowd of 5,366 that day established a new Scottsdale Stadium attendance record. . . . Righthander Jon Perlman was trimmed from the Triple-A roster. "It's because he's 29 and we have too many young arms," said Ralph Nelson, the Giants' assistant general manager. . . . Veteran righthander Moose Haas, limited by arm trouble to 21 appearances with Oakland the last two seasons, was progressing well in his tryout with the Giants. "I can air it out," Haas said after a March 29 workout. Next is an extended training period and then perhaps a minor league contract. "Maybe he'll turn out to be another Joe Price," said Manager Roger Craig, referring to last year's reclamation project. . . . Catcher Bob Brenly had a lousy spring as a hitter but was lucky in the club's NCAA basketball pool, landing three teams in the Final Four.