

Ernie Banks Played His First Game at 17

He Favored Other Sports in His Youth

Connie Johnson Urged Sox to Grab Him; Matthews Quick to Outbid Rivals

By JOHN C. HOFFMAN
CHICAGO, Ill.

It is all very clear now, but early in 1953 when Connie Johnson, a tall righthanded pitcher who is back with the White Sox again, seemed more interested in the career of Ernie Banks than his own, it was difficult to explain.

Johnson implored Paul Richards, then field boss of the Comiskey team, to have White Sox scouts look at a 22-year-old shortstop with the Kansas City Monarchs.

"He's a major league player right now," Johnson told Richards. "He can't miss."

"I was more interested in finding out if Johnson could help us," laughed Richards. "But he kept insisting that we look at Banks. So I called our Chicago office from Washington and told them about the boy."

"It was hard to figure out why Johnson was so insistent about Banks. They weren't related or even close friends."

It is now two years later. Banks is not with the White Sox, nor is he with the Yankees, who might have had first search on him if they had been more alert, but he is a member of the Cubs and probably the best shortstop in the National League, if not in both leagues.

Compared With Eddie Miller

"He's the greatest shortstop I've seen come into the league in my time," says Clyde McCullough, the veteran Cub catcher.

"I'd compare him with Eddie Miller, who played with the Reds," continued Mac, "and many people think he was the best ever in the majors. I'd say he's as good as or better than Marty Marion was with the Cardinals and certainly he's a better hitter."

To Tom Gordon, business manager of the Cubs' farm club at Macon, Ga., goes the credit for having called the attention of the Chicago club to Banks. And to Wid Matthews, director of player personnel, must go the credit for having persisted in the chase which ultimately wrested the spectacular shortstop from the White Sox and Yankees.

"I'm no baseball expert," Gordon wrote Matthews, "but this kid looks like a natural. He looks great."

Matthews immediately dispatched Scouts Vedic Himsl, Jimmy Payton and Ray Blades to watch Banks with the Kansas City Monarchs. All were enthusiastic. Came the day after Labor Day in 1953 and Matthews himself saw Banks in an all-star game in Comiskey Park, right under the very noses of White Sox officials and scouts.

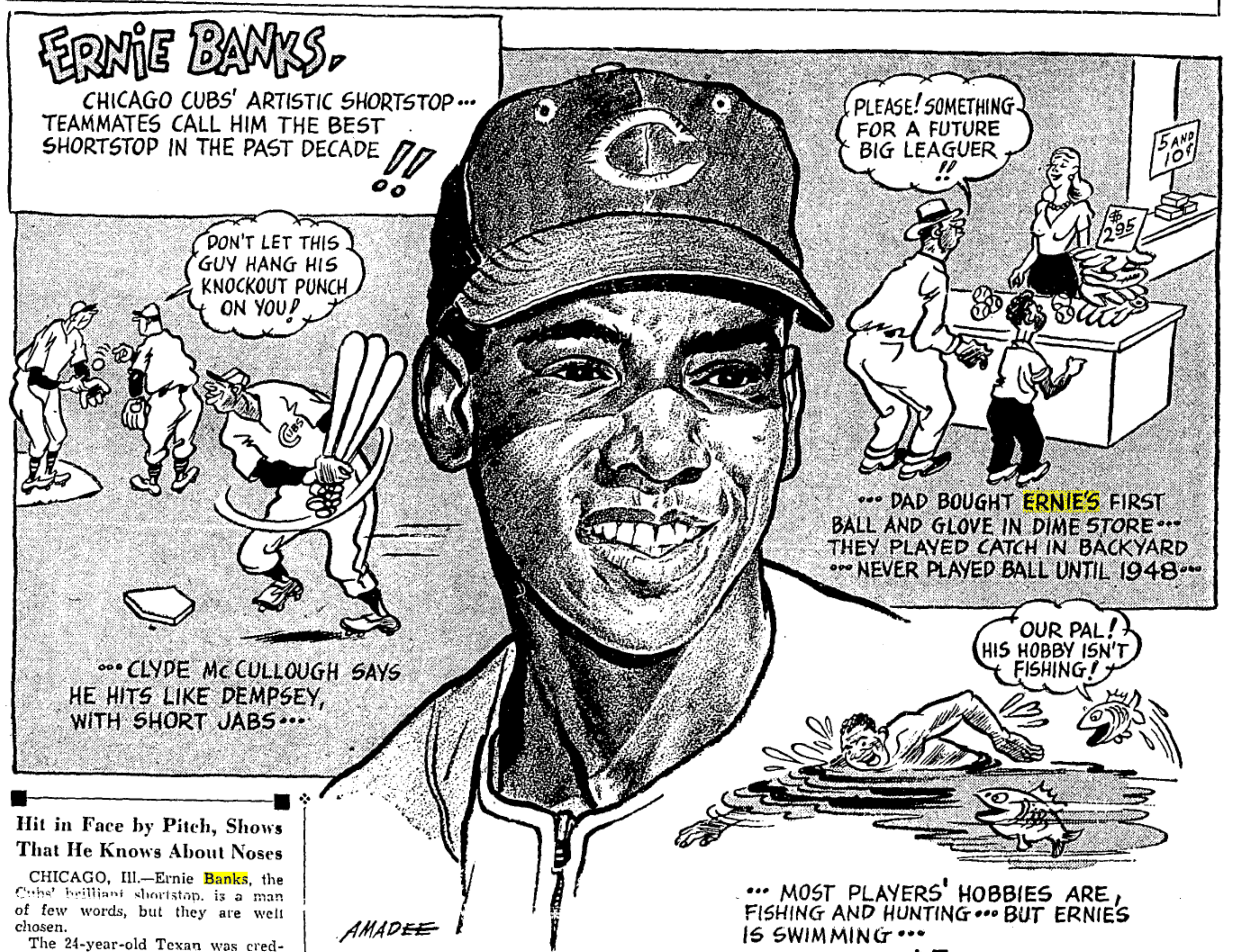
"Take It or Leave It" Bid

At the time Banks was batting .300 for the Monarchs. Matthews liked what he saw and immediately contacted Tom Baird, owner of the Monarchs, at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. From Baird, Matthews learned the White Sox and Yankees would be given first choice on Banks because the Monarchs were playing some games in Comiskey Park and Yankee Stadium and they felt obligated to them.

But none of this served to discourage Matthews. He gave Baird what amounted to a "take it or leave it offer." The Cubs would buy Banks and an 18-year-old pitcher named Bill Dickey for \$35,000. The offer must have sounded good to Baird, because nothing specific had come from either the White Sox or Yankees and for all he knew maybe they weren't even interested.

At any rate, it came to be a sore spot with Richards, who said he never could find out whether his bosses had properly scouted the young phenom or, if they had, what their findings were. Baird, however, accepted the Mat-

Cub Shortstop's Story From Kid Days



Hit in Face by Pitch, Shows That He Knows About Noses

CHICAGO, Ill.—Ernie Banks, the Cubs' brilliant shortstop, is a man of few words, but they are well chosen.

The 24-year-old Texan was credited with the squelch par excellence on June 25 after he had been plunked on the top of his nose near the forehead over the left eye by a pitch thrown by Pittsburgh's Ronnie Kline in Wrigley Field.

Banks hit the dirt, momentarily stunned, and the whole team rushed in to find out if the shortstop had been seriously hurt. Eventually, Banks picked himself up and made a move toward first base.

"How do you feel?" asked Manager Stan Hack.

"All right, and you're not going to take me out," said the durable youth.

Banks remained in the game and there was a lot of kidding about it on the bench after everyone was satisfied the shortstop was all right. And one of the hecklers was Hank Sauer, who good-naturedly suggested that Banks should make an effort to keep his nose out of the way of fast balls.

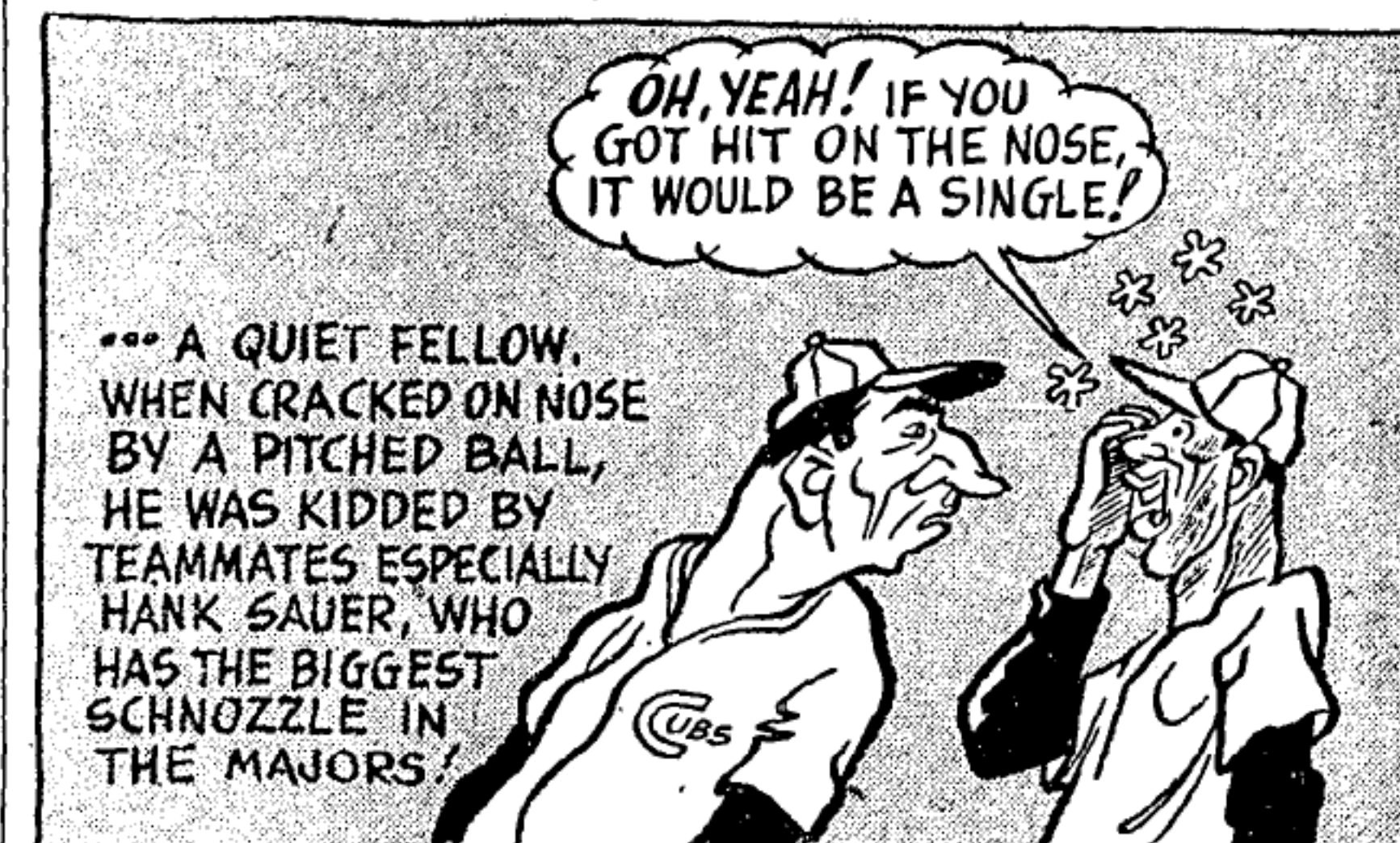
"True enough," grinned Banks, "but if you had been hit on the nose it would have been a single."

Sauer has a schnozzle that out-durante's the nose of the popular comedian.

Matthews bid and negotiations were to be completed the next morning in Chicago's Persian Hotel, where Banks and Dickey were staying. Baird instructed the two boys to be in the lobby of the hotel at 7 a. m. the next day. Neither knew what was up until the Monarchs' owner had escorted them to Wrigley Field, where the papers were signed and Banks and Dickey became Cubs. Dickey is now in the team's minor league farm system.

Banks was an immediate success with the Cubs, but not before he had proven his ability. The Cubs still hadn't given up on Roy Smalley, who was in his sixth season with them, and they were planning to have a second look at Gene Baker, their shortstop from Los Angeles, in the 1954 spring training camp.

As fate would have it, however, Banks would change all that. He played ten games with the Cubs at the tailend of the 1953 season and batted .310. His fielding left nothing to be desired. The Cubs were so sure of the youth then that they traded Smalley to the Braves for Dave Cole, March 21, 1954, even before the season start-



ed, and Baker became the team's regular second baseman instead of its shortstop.

Banks played every inning except one of every game in 1954, batted .275, hit 19 home runs and drove in 79 runs in his first full season in Organized Ball. The Cubs would not need another shortstop for at least ten years. In his sophomore season, then, the artistic young infielder had improved so much that he was selected to the National League All-Star team and his teammates were calling him the best shortstop in the past decade, if not longer. By midway of the 1955 season, too, Banks had equalled his total home run output of 1954 and if he could maintain the pace he would drive in 100 runs or more.

Through it all, Banks was the same unostentatious kid he had been before all this acclaim had come his way.

"I don't know where we'd have been without him last year," said Manager Stan Hack, "and I know we wouldn't be where we are now without him this season. He's a very great ball player. That's all there is to it."

Together, Banks and his roomie, Baker, comprise the National League's best second base combination and it was only natural that Manager Leo Durocher should have selected Baker as an All-Star second baseman after the fans had voted Banks as their favorite shortstop.

The meteoric rise of Banks is even more fantastic than the events of his short major league career would sug-

gest. He never played baseball, as such, until 1948.

Ernie's father, Eddie, currently a Dallas grocer, was the one who started the youngster on the career that was to make him famous. Eddie had been a catcher and pitcher with the Dallas Black Giants in his younger days and he was eager that his boys follow in his footsteps.

Five-and-Dime Equipment

The elder Banks bought a \$2.95 glove and a couple of baseballs in the five-and-dime store in Dallas and he would coax his ten-year-old son to play catch with him in the back yard.

"I wasn't too much interested in baseball then," confesses Ernie. "But dad would toss nickels and dimes my way and I didn't need much more persuasion."

"As I remember it, I was more interested in softball, football, track, swimming and basketball. We didn't even have a baseball team at Booker T. Washington High School."

During his high school days, Ernie was a good student and in his spare time he was captain and end on the football team, captain and forward on the basketball team and he could high-jump five feet, 11 inches. He also was a 54-second quarter miler in track.

And so, in 1948, when Ernie was 17 years old, he still had played no baseball except what little throwing and

His Punch Like Dempsey's, Says Teammate McCullough

CHICAGO, Ill. — Clyde McCullough, veteran Cub catcher, says that Ernie Banks hits a baseball with the same power that Jack Dempsey delivered a punch.

"Banks doesn't swing the bat around very far, but he is quick and he has strong wrists," said McCullough. "This way he can usually take a little time to judge a pitch."

"Ernie doesn't look powerful, but he's strong and wiry. He has big hands, long fingers and supple wrists. He has wonderful rhythm, too. He does everything a ball player should do, off or on the field."

"In the field every hop of the ball is a good one for Ernie, because he's always in the right position."

"He can afford to play deeper than most shortstops because he has a strong, accurate arm and he can get over quickly to cover second base."

catching he had done with his father in the back yard. He was playing softball on the Booker T. Washington campus one day, however, when he was approached by a stranger who said his name was Bill Blair.

"Would you like a tryout with the Amarillo (Tex.) Colts?" Blair asked him.

Banks said he would have to get his mother's permission. That night she gave her consent and Ernie's father was elated. This was something he had hoped for. That same night Ernie, Blair and another Dallas youth, Marvin Hickman, were off to Amarillo. Actually, Ernie was on his way to the big leagues, though he says now he thought little of it at the time.

"I had seen some of the big league teams play exhibitions in Dallas," said Banks. "And I had admired such players as Phil Rizzuto, Pee Wee Reese and Marty Marion. But I never thought I'd ever be a big leaguer."

In 1949 Banks said he saw Chico Carasquel play with the Fort Worth team

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4, COL. 1)

