

# Belanger, Nearing 37, Has to Fight for Job

By KEN NIGRO

MIAMI—Who are these guys? Maybe Mark Belanger hasn't asked that question before, but then again, there never have been so many people around his position in spring training before, either.

Belanger has been the Orioles' regular shortstop since 1968 and it's hard to imagine anyone else sliding deep into the hole, straightening up and throwing out the runner. At least, it's hard to imagine anyone else doing it like Belanger.

But the 170-pound fielding marvel will be 37 years old in June and he's coming off a season in which he missed six weeks with a pair of injuries—bruised ribs and a pulled calf muscle.

So Belanger found a crowd around shortstop this spring when he reported. Kiko Garcia was there, trying to prove last year's .199 batting average was largely the result of a sore back. Bob Bonner, the touted rookie who led the International League in virtually every fielding category in '79, also was nearby. Bonner arrived on the scene late after almost not making it because of viral hepatitis.

Then there was Cal Ripken Jr., the top prospect in the organization. Ripken is a third baseman, but he's expected to see plenty of action at shortstop during the exhibitions because he played that position in high school. Another reason is that he can hit, and Manager Earl Weaver likes hitting shortstops as much as he likes lefthanded-hitting catchers.

Even Lenn Sakata took some grounders at short. Sakata is primarily a second baseman who figures to make the club as a utility infielder. But Weaver used him a little at shortstop last season and he could be there at times again this year.

The chances of Garcia, Bonner, Ripken or Sakata starting at shortstop on opening day are remote, but Belanger has come to camp with a different attitude this spring.

"I feel I'm out here to win a job from whomever," he said. "I think Earl can go one or two ways—he can take a

look down here, or he can decide right away who his shortstop will be. He's always sort of had his mind made up before, but this is a situation he's never been in before. He has to look now. I don't know a lot of the answers and I don't think Earl does. It really boils down to who does what."

Ideally, Belanger would not like to play in all 162 games, but he would like to be in more than the 113 games he played last season.

"I felt good at the end of last year when I was playing more," he said, "but how I do will determine whether I'll play more. Even if I win the job and hit .220, I'm going to have to win it back. It's the way Earl manages and I understand it. Earl knows what I can do better than anyone."

Belanger batted .279 over the final two months last season to boost his final average to .228. That may not sound like much, but it represented a 61-point increase from the year before, when he hit .167, and it also was his highest average in four years.

The only serious competition to Belanger will come from Garcia, who looked like he was ready to take over as the regular shortstop last spring, but never got untracked.

"Kiko's not a .199 hitter and I expect him to play better than last year if his back is sound," Belanger said. "His back really hurt and he played a lot of times when he shouldn't have."

At the moment, Weaver appears totally unconcerned over who his shortstop will be.

"I don't think we're vulnerable at that position at all," he said. "There's no doubt in my mind Kiko's going to be a much better player this year and I don't care how old Belanger is. I always feel safe when he's my shortstop."

But Belanger knows he has reached that age where he can't feel safe about anything. And he knows he has to start thinking about retirement.

**Bird Seed:** The great Cy Young Award plaque mixup finally was straightened out. When Steve Stone arrived in camp, the Cy Young plaque awaited him, but it turned out to be the wrong one. It bore the name of Steve Carlton, the



Mark Belanger . . . Earl was unconcerned.

National League Cy Young winner. Said Mike Flanagan, a previous Cy Young winner: "Don't worry about it, Steve. You can say you're the first to win the award in each league—the same season." Anyhow, the plaques were delivered to the rightful owners by public relations men Bob Brown of the Orioles and Larry Shenk of the Phillies after a P.R. meeting in Tampa.

Dave Ford and Wayne Krenchicki became the latest Orioles to sign, leaving only three to go—Mark Corey, Dan Logan and Dave Huppert.

# Ivie Eager to Forget, But Will Teammates?

By NICK PETERS

PHOENIX—It was a slow and painful rehabilitation process for Mike Ivie during a dissenion-scarred 1980 season, but the San Francisco first base candidate is eager to make people forget the past. He even showed up for spring training a week early.

Ivie is down to 205 pounds and reports his damaged pinky is 100 percent healed. He hopes teammates will forgive and forget what happened last year. But if they don't, Ivie fig-

ures it's their problem, not his.

"Everyone wants to be accepted," Ivie said, "but I really don't care what people think of me. I don't feel I have to prove myself again. What happened in 1980 is in the past."

But is it? Can some teammates truly forget that a depressed Ivie walked out on them in midseason and again during the final week? Are they willing to forgive if the slugger regains his form, which included a .308 average in '78 and a career-high 27 homers and 89 RBIs in '79?

Apparently not. The Giants are less concerned that Ivie

batted only .241 following finger surgery than by the fact that he quit.

Darrell Evans, who would like to play first base if newcomer Enos Cabell wrests the third base job from him, says of Ivie: "Mike has got to prove himself. Enos and I have proven we can play 160 games, Mike hasn't."

Another veteran adds: "I can't excuse or accept what Ivie did. I hope he gets off to a good start, so we can trade him and get something good in return. I wish him well, but we can't depend on him."

Ivie harbors no resentment and is confident he'll be at first base on opening day. His optimism is based on the healing of his right little finger, which he slashed while cleaning a hunting knife in December, 1979.

"The finger is well and I've been working hard to get ready for this season," Ivie noted. "A friend runs the American Fitness Center near my Atlanta home and I began a weight program with him after last season."

"I did what I had to do last year. If I had it to do over, I'd do the same thing. It was the first injury I ever had where I couldn't swing a bat. It was a terrible year and I didn't play like I can play."

Ivie feels good about himself and about new Manager Frank Robinson, who went out of his way during a speaking engagement in Atlanta to have a chat with Ivie.

"Mike is a big key to our ball club," Robinson said. "He can make it go. We got together in Atlanta because I wanted to get a feel for him. I came away with a positive feeling. He's very enthusiastic and eager."

"No, I won't treat Mike the same as everyone else. Everyone is different. I realize Mike is more likely to respond to a pat on the back than a kick in the butt. I also won't move him around much. I think it would be best for him to concentrate on first base."

**Gi-antics:** After five days of camp, outfielder Jesus Figueroa still was missing, apparently held up by visa problems in the Dominican Republic. "It doesn't bother me," Robinson insisted. "He has to make the club, so he's only hurting himself." . . . Lefthander Bill Bordley was to undergo a second elbow operation March 13 in Los Angeles. The pitcher had torn ligaments repaired in October, but there was pain and swelling as soon as he resumed throwing. He will have a tendon removed from his leg and placed in his elbow, similar to Tommy John's operation. "It will be a lot harder for me down the road—the realization hasn't set in," said Bordley, who is out for the season.

# Putnam to Get Full-Time Duty

By RANDY GALLOWAY

POMPANO BEACH, Fla.—There had been off-season suggestions from the Texas Rangers organization that new Manager Don Zimmer rearrange personnel at a few positions.

Of special interest was the consideration given to moving Al Oliver to first base and making Pat Putnam the designated hitter.

At first thought, Oliver said he would consider such a shift, but later he balked at the idea. Putnam opposed it from the start.

But the issue never came to a head. Three weeks before camp opened, Zimmer decided Putnam would stay at first and Oliver in left field.

So there's peace and harmony in Pompano Beach. But that was just half the good news for Putnam. He's now the full-time first baseman. He no longer will sit when lefthanded pitchers are on the mound.

"I've been waiting two years to hear a manager say that," said Putnam. "I couldn't be happier."

The Rangers open the regular season with a three-game series in New York. The Yankees are almost certain to start three lefthanders.

"Putnam starts every one of those games, too," said Zimmer. "It's not going to make any difference anymore who the other team is pitching. Pat will be in the lineup."

Of course, Putnam's bat has long been considered a hot Ranger property. But after two big league seasons, it's still a case of untapped potential. He won Rookie of the Year honors in '79 on the strength of 18 homers and a .277 batting average, but last year he got away to a poor start and

never recovered.

"Certainly I wasn't satisfied with last year, although I don't think I was as bad as a lot of people seem to think," said Putnam. "But I never felt I hit up to my capabilities in my rookie year, either. But in neither case should I be blamed for it. There's no way this team is going to find out what I can do until I play every day. I can't sit around for three or four days, then jump in and start hitting."

Once the season starts, Putnam is not expecting immediate miracles when he faces a lefthander, particularly the likes of Tommy John or Ron Guidry, two Yankee lefties he'll see in April.

"I've got complete confidence I can handle the lefties as well as the righthanders, but I'm gonna be like a rookie up there because these guys I haven't seen," he said. "I'm still in the learning process where lefthanders are concerned."

**Rangers Roundup:** Mark Wagner, who'll be in a fight with Mario Mendoza for the starting shortstop job, suffered a broken nose on the first day of training, when struck by a ground ball. Wagner was out for only a day, although two black eyes remained for a week. . . . The new power alley fences at Arlington Stadium were remeasured and the distance found to be 380 feet, not 383. For the past seven seasons it had been 370 feet.

Paul Richards, troubleshooter for Eddie Robinson, is working with catcher Jim Sundberg on how to handle the knuckleball. Charlie Hough ate him up with it last year as Sundberg, winner of five straight Rawlings Gold Gloves, was charged with nine passed balls when Hough was pitching.