

## A.L. WEST

## MINNESOTA TWINS



Jeff Reardon

In 1986, key members of the Minnesota Twins had these outstanding seasons: Gary Gaetti, 34 home runs and 108 runs batted in; Kent Hrbek, 29 homers, 91 RBIs; Kirby Puckett, .328 average with 31 homers; Bert Blyleven, 17 victories; Frank Viola, 16 victories.

Trouble was, the Twins fell out of the pennant race before anyone had a chance to check the standings. Minnesota finished 71-91, just 1½ games from the cellar, in the American League West. The Twins had the offense, but the bullpen was virtually nonexistent.

"We had a lot of significant performances in 1987, but the most significant difference on the field, no question, was Jeff Reardon," said Andy MacPhail, executive vice-president/general manager of the Twins as he recapped the world championship season.

The Twins acquired Reardon from Montreal in February of '87 for pitcher Neal Heaton, catcher Jeff Reed and two minor leaguers. It was a high price, but Reardon's 31 saves proved invaluable. He was and still is, the one irreplaceable member of the Twins.

Reardon was on the mound for the team's three biggest moments of the '87 season—when the Twins clinched the West Division title in Texas, when they won the A.L. Championship Series in Detroit and when they defeated St. Louis in Game 7 of the World Series.

"I knew that if I could have a normal year, I could help," said Reardon, who had a total of 76 saves in '85 and '86. "What a highlight it was to be in there all three times. In '81, I was out there when the Expos clinched (a second-half title in the strike-shortened season) in the next-to-last game. To have it happen three times in a month like that is unbelievable."

The 1987 season wasn't always so smooth for Reardon, though. He got off to a horrible start, enduring one stretch in which he gave up five home runs in four games. In May, his earned-run average had ballooned to more than 10.00.

"I'm different from most people in that I let a bad game bother me a lot," Reardon said. "I don't go home and beat my wife and kids, but I get very down on myself."

He hit rock bottom as he surrendered a grand slam to Mike Pagliarulo in losing to the Yankees on May 9.

"I'd have to say that was the low point," Reardon said. "But the next night Les Straker had pitched a fabulous game and Kelly (Twins

Manager Tom Kelly) put me in for the exact situation against Pagliarulo. I popped him out and that pretty much straightened me out."

Reardon was virtually unhittable down the stretch, once saving four games in five nights in September. He received more votes for Most Valuable Player than any pitcher in either league. Reardon wound up 8-8 with a 4.48 ERA to go with the 31 saves. In postseason play, he won one game and saved three.

"When you get in a streak like that, you have a helluva lot of confidence," said Reardon, who recently signed a \$1.15 million contract extension. "When you get like that, usually it will take a cheap hit to beat you. I've had those streaks during my career. Of course, I've pitched so many games in relief. Once I started the season with a stretch of 21 innings without allowing an earned run.

"I wish I hadn't started so badly last year, giving up all those runs and home runs. But over my last 50 appearances I had a normal year."

That's all the Twins want from him in '88—a normal year.

"People ask me what we can do for an encore and I say we can win it again," Reardon said. "Even baseball people, general managers, think we were lucky. How many games do they want us to win in the playoffs and World Series? What do they want, best 21 out of 40?"

"We won the League Championship Series in five games and the World Series in seven. What else can we do?"

Well, as Reardon suggested, they could do it again.

TOM POWERS

## KANSAS CITY ROYALS



George Brett

The Kansas City Royals' first full-squad workout of spring training had just ended when George Brett contemplated how he'd spend the rest of the afternoon.

Hmmm . . . It was too late to sneak in a round of golf, too nice of a day to sit in the clubhouse and play cards, and sitting around the swimming pool would be a bore.

Brett decided to throw away a few bucks at the amusement park at Baseball and Boardwalk, the Royals' new facility in Baseball City, Fla. He would check out the Hurricane, the park's roller coaster.

Can you imagine the look on General Manager John Schuerholz's face had he glanced out his office window and seen Brett whipping around the wooden tracks?

That's hardly the kind of activity Schuerholz wants to see from the man deemed most responsible for the fate of the 1988 Royals.

The Royals have acquired a



The Twins' bullpen was virtually nonexistent until the acquisition of Jeff Reardon in February of '87.

long-needed shortstop, Kurt Stillwell, and added pitching depth with Floyd Bannister and Ted Power. The arrival of Gary Thurman should strengthen the left field position.

But all will go for naught if No. 5, George Brett, is not in the lineup every day.

"We know it, the front office knows it, the fans know it," catcher Jamie Quirk said. "We need George to win. If he's not healthy, and sits out a lot of games, we won't win."

"It's as simple as that."

Perhaps the best illustration of Brett's value came last season, when several Royals—namely Danny Tartabull, Kevin Seitzer and Bo Jackson—exceeded expectations, but the Royals failed to make the playoffs because Brett missed 46 games as he spent two stints on the disabled list.

"He's so dynamic, so strong, so capable," Schuerholz said, "that we have to rely on him. You've got to have a few good players to have a shot at the World Series, but you also have to have that great player. George is that player."

"And it bothers me because I don't think the world really understands and appreciates how good he is. If you could pick any player to start a franchise, how could you not pick George Brett?"

It may be unfair to tie the success of the club strictly to Brett's performance, but it's a fact of life.

"He knows that he has to be in there for us to win," pitcher Mark Gubicza said, "but when the pressure's on, that always seems to be the time that he responds. Everyone talked about Bo and Tartabull and Seitzer last year, and I don't think George had any pressure."

"This time, he has the pressure, and he knows he has to pull us through."

Ever since Brett hit .333 in 1976,

he has been considered the main cog in the Royals' machinery. Brett revels in being the man in the pressure cooker.

"I know the expectations are high for me," Brett said, "and I know what the importance of my performance means to the team."

"I don't mind it. I take it as a compliment. It's been my job since 1977, when people said, 'If he's healthy, he's going to hit .320 with 20 homers and 70 RBIs.' Those expectations have increased every year, but I know I've just got to stay in the lineup every day."

Brett has vivid memories of the pressure moments in which his clutch hitting has become Royals legend. For instance:

■ October 11, 1985: Brett went 4 for 4, with two homers, four runs scored and three RBIs in a 6-5 victory over Toronto in Game 3 of the American League Championship Series. If the Royals had lost that game, they would have been down three games to none and probably couldn't have advanced to the World Series.

■ October 10, 1980: Brett hits a monstrous home run off Goose Gossage at Yankee Stadium to give the Royals a 3-0 sweep of the League Championship Series and send the club into the World Series for the first time.

■ October 6, 1978: Brett hit three homers off Catfish Hunter in the third game of the 1978 A.L. Championship Series.

■ April 10—October 5, 1980: Brett, in his quest to hit .400, wound up with a .390 batting average, highest mark in the majors since Ted Williams hit .406 in 1941.

"Of anyone in the game, he's the best hitter in a critical situation," Schuerholz said. "He goes to a higher level when necessary, and not a soul can keep up with him."

If healthy, Brett's numbers will fall in line. Never in his 14-year ca-

reer has he failed to hit below .300 when he played in at least 128 games.

"I used to be mentioned as one of the game's best players—guys who were franchise players," said the 34-year-old Brett, who has suffered through back-to-back .290 seasons. "I was mentioned as one of the best four or five players in the game. Now, it's like I'm an also-ran."

"Now, it's (Don) Mattingly (George) Bell, (Wade) Boggs and (Eric) Davis. I want to get in the same category again. I want to be in that same paragraph. I don't want to be two paragraphs below—or two paragraphs above."

"I want to be back. And I will be back."

BOB NIGHTENGALE

## OAKLAND A's



Carney Lansford

Perhaps it is Tony LaRussa, manager of the Oakland A's, who pays get-no-respect third baseman Carney Lansford the highest compliment.

"When you look and can say that his biggest problem is that he is playing too hard, that's a helluva statement to make," LaRussa said of the one man the A's could least afford to be without. "He goes hard, hard, hard and I wouldn't want to change him."

When the A's got into a pennant race last season, really for the first time since Lansford joined the club in 1983, it was Lansford who quietly assumed leadership—on the field and in the clubhouse.

LaRussa, who formerly managed the Chicago White Sox, had admired Lansford for several years from the opposing dugout.

"He is one of those guys on the other side you give grudging respect to because he is always playing so hard to beat you," LaRussa said.

LaRussa said he always wondered what it would be like to be on the same side as a player with Lansford's intensity.

"You don't know for sure," LaRussa said. "Sometimes you get together with a guy and there is a little phoiness. Not Carney. He is that and more. He's a pro's pro."

To have watched Lansford go about his business last season makes it easy to understand why he earned such high praise from his manager.

Lansford had a championship feeling last spring and was bitterly disappointed with the third-place finish. Certainly the A's had more than their share of injuries, but Lansford also believed the A's might have fared better than an 81-81 mark had they applied more elbow grease.

"We've got to go out and play every day and grind it out," Lans-