

'Bumblebee' Putting Sting in Oriole Attack

By LOU HATTER

BALTIMORE—Bullet Al Bumbry is a man in a hurry. Even when he hits a home run, the Oriole rookie circles the sacks in the style of an NCAA 100-yard dash finalist.

No "Cadillac trot" for Alonza. At everything, the 5-8 outfielder accelerates like a streamlined Offy-Eagle in the Indianapolis 500.

Not since the 1963-67 Luis Aparicio era has anyone generated such fan frenzy here as Bumbry on the base paths. Along with Rich Coggins, a look-alike freshman running mate, he has introduced an exciting on-the-double dimension to Baltimore baseball.

As the Birds launched a 10-day home stand that would extend through July 11, the Orioles' irrepressible comet had swiped 10 bases as a part-time player and hastened for a club-leading seven triples.

But that's not all. He also was threatening to shed platoon status following a June batting spree (29-for-82) which had inflated his average by 34 points to .308—second ranked on the team to Paul Blair.

BUMBRY plays the game under the philosophy that there isn't a moment to lose. For good reason, too. At age 26, he figures that too much of the future already is behind him.

Less than two seasons ago, through no fault of his own, the speedy Fredericksburg (Va.) native was laboring for recognition in the Class A bushes. Time appeared to be running out, even then.

His late start traced initially to four years at Virginia State College, where Bumbry played no baseball until his senior semester. He had been attracted to the Petersburg (Va.) institution on a basketball scholarship after averaging 32 points per game as a fast-break high school cage star.

Then, as an obscure 11th-round free-agent Oriole draft selection, he made an abbreviated and undistinguished diamond debut in 1969 with the Birds' California League farm at Stockton.

TWO MONTHS later, 1st Lieutenant Al Bumbry's fledgling baseball career became a two-year U.S. Army career.

He spent the last 11 months of that interlude keeping his batting eye sharp dodging missiles and bullets as a combat platoon leader in the booby-trapped Vietnam jungles.

Since swapping khaki for flannel, however, the 175-pound protege of Baltimore scouts Dick Bowie and Walter Youse has embarked swiftly on an ascent as meteoric as his flying feet.

After joining Aberdeen in 1971, Bumbry assaulted Class A Northern League pitching at a .336 clip. He scored 68 runs, drove in 53 and stole 34 bases in 66 games.

An impressive spring training earned promotion last year to Double A Asheville. Following a .347 start in the Southern League ranks, a significant break last May finally came Alonza's way.

A SEVERELY spiked hand disabled Coggins at Rochester. The desperate Red Wings summoned Bumbry, already labeled "the fastest man in the Oriole organization."

"Bumblebee," as he has been nicknamed in tribute to the blinding swiftness with which Al intimidates rival pitchers and infielders, became an instant sensation.

Not merely did he swipe 22 sacks in 25 attempts, but beat out routine grounders galore. Including a seven-hit twin-bill production vs. Peninsula, Bumbry also concluded with 150 hits for 108 games to annex the International League batting championship with a .345 average.

His 15 triples likewise were unmatched in the Triple A circuit. He socked 29 doubles, was acclaimed the Int's Player of the Year and won a silver glove award for defensive excellence. The award means he was selected to THE SPORTING NEWS all-star minor league fielding team.

STILL, with the Orioles' top-heavy outfield talent, Bumbry did not figure in Baltimore's

1973 future when spring training began.

"In my winter book, it was our plan to open the season without him," Manager Earl Weaver acknowledged.

Although another trip to Rochester appeared inevitable, Al's pure ability and contagious enthusiasm changed all that. If there was any doubt, it was erased in Miami, Fla., last March 14.

With three hits, two runs batted in, a walk and stolen base, plus two pegs from left field that nailed Minnesota runners at home and second base, Bumbry almost single handedly

defeated the Twins, 4-3. He wound up the exhibition campaign at .333 to top all but one part-time handyman.

"He's the fastest player I can ever remember playing for me," enthused Weaver, who has been managing since 1956, including a dozen years in the minors. "And he can bunt, as well as hit the ball off the left field wall. In so many ways, he has shown to advantage and expands our thinking so much."

MORE recently, as the 1973 campaign entered July, Bumbry had cleared the fences in left and right during a three-game stretch at Detroit, boosting his home-run total to an unexpected five.

Although he stroked 10 last season in the minors, home runs have not been the stocky little rocket's bag, especially opposite-field homers. His swiftness at motoring from home plate to first base out of the lefthanded batter's box in a clocked 3.4 seconds is something to behold.

Curiously, Bumbry was not always a southpaw swinger. He batted right at Ralph Bunche High School in King George, Va., until a freak accident caused him to swing around to the other side.

As a 15-year-old high jumper, Bumbry fractured his left wrist when he landed in a prep jumping pit that was inadequately padded. The break eventually mended, but the wrist still hurt when baseball claimed the youthful track star's multiple talents. So Alonza taught himself to hit lefthanded. It has been a blessing in disguise ever since.

DURING Baltimore's last visit to Milwaukee, Bumbry legged a routine 12th-inning roller to short into his fifth hit of the game—tying a club record. It was the prelude to the decisive hit of a 4-3 win.

Ten days earlier, Al was not content merely to accept first base when Ranger shortstop Jim Mason booted his grounder. As the baseball trickled into shallow center, Bumbry streaked alertly all the way to second, beating Elliott Maddox' throw with a nifty fall-away slide.

Moments later, the quick-as-a-hiccup Oriole flashed home with the only run of a 1-0 success on Tommy Davis' hit. It was pure Bumbry old college try, exhibit A.

The Bird Cage: Dave McNally unfurled a club-record 27th career shutout, June 27, when he blanked the Yankees, 4-0, on a 10-hitter. He previously shared the all-time Oriole horse-collar high at 26 with Milt Pappas, now a Cub. . . . Four days later, the veteran southpaw tossed a more artistic six-hitter, only to absorb a 1-0 defeat from Detroit. It was the fifth time McNally had been blanked, and three were by 1-0. . . . For the first time this year, Baltimore blasted four homers while demolishing Detroit, 9-2 June 29. Bumbry and Boog Powell each connected once and Earl Williams whacked two. . . . Jim Frey rejoined the Oriole coaching staff July 2, following recuperation from surgery on his left eye for the removal of a tiny fragment of glass. Frey's glasses were shattered three weeks earlier by a Bumbry batting practice liner.

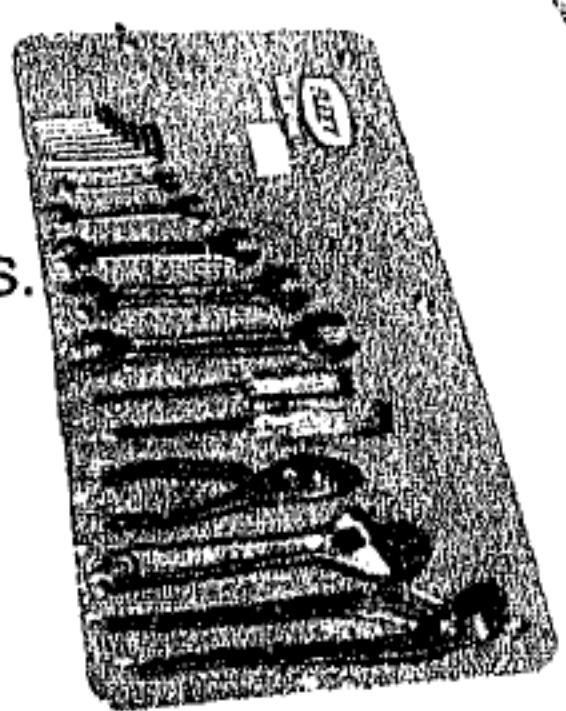


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