

# Three for the Show

**The Rockies' terrific trio of Walker, Burks and Bichette—all offensive behemoths at one time or another—could wreak havoc on N.L. pitchers this season if they click in unison**

BY JACK ETKIN

Their collective output is intriguing, a sky's-the-limit possibility for terrorizing National League pitchers. Larry Walker, Ellis Burks and Dante Bichette have had prolific seasons. They just haven't had them together.

What if the three members of the Rockies' outfield avoid injury? What if each is able to get 600 at-bats? What if they start clicking in unison and spur each other as it becomes apparent there's no better outfield in baseball?

What if...  
"It could be a special year if we all stay healthy," Bichette says. "If you look at the potential with the stolen bases, the home runs, the RBIs, hitting for average—all of that combined. Definitely with the offensive era we're in right now, we could do some things that haven't been done."

Imagine an outfield where each member hits 35 home runs, maybe even 40, steals 30 bases, drives in 100 runs, scores 100 and averages .300. Imagine an outfield where no one is a defensive liability. Imagine.

"On an everyday basis, you don't see that from three guys," manager Don Baylor says. "You see it in an All-Star Game. They could be a very special group if they're all healthy at the same time."

And, so far, that has been a very big if. In 1995, Burks was recovering from wrist surgery the previous September, bothered by hamstring problems while batting only 278 times. In 1996, Walker suffered a broken collarbone in June, an injury that in essence ended his season. And Bichette underwent reconstructive knee surgery last October. The Rockies expect him to be ready to start the season April 1, but Bichette knows it will be a couple of months before he is fully confident about his knee.

Regardless, Burks, Bichette and Walker are expecting what might finally come to pass in their third season together.

"That thought's been crossing my mind all winter," Burks says, pausing to think back to the long rehabilitation periods as well as the possibilities for the future. "I'm sure we all could use a little extra work defensively because I know I can. I'm sure there's better defensive outfields, but a whole healthy season I can't see a better offensive one."



Color Rockies' trio all click, (from top) Bichette, Burks and Walker potentially could be one of baseball's most powerful outfields.

Last week in an empty Hi Corbett Field in Tucson, Ariz., Bichette ran from home to first base in 4.2 seconds, which is average major league speed. Yet it makes him wonder what he, Burks and Walker might accomplish. "I think potentially we've got a chance to be the best outfield in the major leagues," Bichette says. "I think we should strive to be that."

First baseman Andres Galarraga, who turns 36 in June, has proved that any hitter fortunate enough to play half his games at Coors Field can keep time at arm's length. Bichette, 33, Burks, 32, and Walker, 30, haven't caught a glimpse of the twilight—yet.

Unlike Bichette and Burks, Walker is coming off a season that began promisingly but turned into a summer of torment. He was hitting .283 with 14 homers, 43 RBIs and was 12-for-13 in stolen-base attempts when he spun into the wall June 9 at Coors Field, breaking his left collarbone. He missed 60 games, played two weeks when he returned but strained the shoulder in a collision at second base with the Reds' Barry Larkin. Walker batted 13 times after August 28, finished the season as a defensive replacement in right field and hit .276 with 18 home runs and 58 RBIs in 83 games.

That was a long fall from 1995, when Walker signed a four-year contract with the Rockies that guaranteed him \$22.5 million, then hit .306 with 36 homers and 101 RBIs.

"I've got a lot to prove this year," Walker

says. "Not only to myself, because I'll never make myself happy no matter how good I do. I've got a lot to prove to the city of Denver and the fans."

Walker's plans to work with a personal trainer in the offseason ended in October when he slipped on a rock while fishing and separated his right shoulder. Instead, Walker worked with Mark Wilbert, the Rockies strength and conditioning coordinator, with the emphasis on getting his shoulder in shape for spring training.

Those who know Walker well sense more determination, an almost maniacal resolution to succeed. "I want to win and want to do well," he says. "I know it's there. It's just a matter of doing it."



Burks thrived last season when he played left field, and his deficiencies in center in '95 were at the root of Baylor's decision to realign his outfielders. Burks will start in center if Bichette isn't ready to start the season. He can expect to move to left in the late innings when Quinton McCracken comes in as a defensive replacement for Bichette.

"I never have doubted myself," says Burks, who knows he will be scrutinized in the Coors Field's vast center field. "People are always going to put doubt on you. They're going to say, 'OK, this guy's 32 years old. He didn't play center field well in '95. Moved him to left, he had a great year in left field. Can he go back to center field and do the job?'"

Prodigious best describes Burks' '96 season. He hit .344 with 40 homers, 128 RBIs

and 32 stolen bases and led the N.L. in runs scored (142), slugging percentage (.639) and total bases (392). Hank Aaron in 1963 is the only other player with at least 200 hits, 40 homers and 30 stolen bases in one season.

"You don't ever want to go backward," Burks says. "You always want to excel. That's a great motivational thing right there for me. Coming off last year, people always say, 'Well, what can you do better than you did last year?'"

Bichette was so disgusted with his inability to plant his left leg and throw or stop and cut sharply in the outfield that he opted for reconstructive knee surgery.

"I hope I can take my game to another level, and it's going to have to be defensively," Bichette says. "I want to be a positive in the outfield, someone you want out there, someone that's going to help the club instead of someone who's out there because he can hit."

Not that there were any drastic drops offensively. Looming surgery didn't prevent Bichette from joining Burks at the 30-30 level in home runs and stolen bases. Bichette hit .313 last year with 31 home runs and reached career highs in RBIs (141), runs scored (114), hits (198) and, yes, stolen bases (31).

"Last year was a stalemate," Bichette says. "There was improvement for me in some areas. I put up some career numbers but only because we played a full season (for the first time since 1993). I felt I kind of leveled off last year instead of improving like I did the first three years here."

So Walker, Burks and Bichette are aiming for individual heights that this season could produce an aggregate impact, a year where the stupendous whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

"But as we all know, it's tough to keep all three of us healthy and in the lineup," Bichette says. "One wrong move can ruin a season for somebody."



You can't count on these things. You can only talk about 'what if,' which doesn't mean a whole lot right now."

Jack Etkin covers the Rockies for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver.

## Power pack

What if Burks, Bichette and Walker put together, in one year, the kinds of numbers they had in their best seasons? You would have an outfield that could potentially produce 116 home runs and 357 RBIs. Warning: The following material may be unsuitable for the viewing of National League pitchers.

Name	Best season	The numbers
Ellis Burks	'96 Rockies	40 HRs, 128 RBIs, .344, 211 hits, 32 SB
Dante Bichette	'95 Rockies	40 HRs, 128 RBIs, .340, 197 hits
Larry Walker	'95 Rockies	36 HRs, 101 RBIs, .306, 151 hits

## The skinny

Joined Hank Aaron as the only players with at least 200 hits, 40 homers and 30 stolen bases in one season. Was a one-man SportsCenter highlight package that season. Enjoyed a power surge in his first season at Coors Field.