

# Cerone Hits Jackpot As Steinbrenner Fumes

By PHIL PEPE

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.—When the arbitrator, in his ultimate wisdom and generosity, awarded Rick Cerone a one-year contract for 1981 calling for \$440,000, it set off a chain reaction that makes the young catcher the latest New York Yankee to lock horns with club Owner George Steinbrenner.

Because Cerone submitted his case to salary arbitration, Steinbrenner questioned the catcher's loyalty and his desire to remain with the Yankees. Cerone, on the other hand, was perplexed and somewhat embarrassed by his new salary. He had come to the Yankees from Toronto in a big trade after the 1979 season, carrying a salary of \$50,000 and the burden of trying to replace the late Thurman Munson.

To help relieve that burden, the Yankees had upped Cerone's salary to \$120,000. For his part, Cerone produced a .277 average, 14 homers and 85 RBIs, second high on the club, in a wonderfully productive season.

Cerone liked New York and New York liked Cerone, and discussions began in an effort to get the catcher a long-term contract. But when negotiations broke down, Cerone had no alternative but to submit to arbitration. His request was \$440,000. The Yankees countered with an offer of \$350,000. And the arbitrator ruled in the player's favor.

"I would have been happy if I'd lost," Cerone said. "I kept thinking, even if I lost, they still have to pay me \$350,000. I don't know what it means to be making that much money. I have no conception of money. I came from nothing. All my life, we lived on the second floor of an apartment building, in a rented apartment. What do I know about all that money?"

Cerone said he was hurt by Steinbrenner's remarks because he believes the Yankee owner was "misinformed."

Through his agent, George Kalafatis, Cerone had asked for a deal commensurate with what Darrell Porter got from the St. Louis Cardinals—\$3.5 million for five years. He felt his age (25), the kind of season he had and his willingness to sacrifice free agency justified such a request. The Yankees countered with \$2.5 million for five years and Cerone turned that down.

At that point, said Cerone, he tried to talk to the Yankees about a one-year deal, but they would not listen. That's when he was left with no choice but to go to arbitration.

"I never even talked to George," said Cerone. "We only talked to (Vice-President) Cedric Tallis. I really didn't want to go through with (arbitration). I kept thinking they were going to come back to us and work it out. The night before the hearing, I was very upset. I kept thinking, 'I don't know why I'm doing this.' But I had no choice. If they had offered me the figure they took into arbitration for one year, I would have signed. But they never made me a one-year offer and that's why I say George is misinformed."

Cerone said he even went to Tallis before the hearing and said, "Let's compromise on the difference and not go through with this."

But, according to Cerone, Tallis replied, "There is no compromise."

"I'm not a greedy player," Cerone insisted. "I don't want to get a slap in the face from the public because I don't think I deserve it. And I'm not looking for controversy. In fact, that's the part that bothers me the most."

"Everyone knows I grew up a Yankee fan and I always wanted to be a Yankee. I still do. I wouldn't do anything to hurt my chances of staying a Yankee."

Cerone's one fear is that Steinbrenner will hold a grudge

over the arbitration thing and make dealing with him in the future that much more difficult. He could become eligible for free agency after the 1982 season, which could mean another arbitration case next year, unless the two sides agree on a long-term deal.

"It still may work out this year," Cerone said. "I hope so. I would like to get it done. I just hope he (Steinbrenner) does not hold a grudge because I really don't think it's justified. George has always taken care of his people and this organization has treated me so well. I want to stay here and I hope they want me to stay here. If they're interested in signing me to a long-term deal, we're willing to listen."

"But I'm not going to worry about it. I've got enough to worry about hitting a baseball and catching it. It's over. Now I just want to go out and play ball and have a good year and help the Yankees win."

**Yankee Doodles:** To make room on their 40-man roster for free agent Bill Castro, the Yankees sold minor league infielder Rafael Santana to the Cardinals on a conditional basis. . . . Gene Michael, who wore No. 17 for years as a player, will wear No. 11 as a manager. It's Fred Stanley's old number and Michael chose it rather than ask Oscar Gamble to give up No. 17.

Jim Spencer, invited to the early camp after an off year in 1980, showed he means business by reporting at 204 pounds, 12 under his 1980 playing weight. . . . Don Gullett postponed his trip, and his empty triumph comeback, because the weather in Florida was not good. He said he would wait until the weather warms up before driving down from his old Kentucky home and trying, one more time, to work his way back into the form that made him one of the most successful active pitchers with more than 100 decisions.



Rick Cerone . . . Money in the bank.

## McWilliams, Hanna to Duel For Braves' Lone Vacancy

By TIM TUCKER

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.—Manager Bobby Cox's voice is almost apologetic, almost like that of the personnel director telling the eager job applicant there are no openings.

"Really," said Cox, "someone will have to have a terrible spring to lose a spot. We're getting like a lot of the really good clubs that go to spring training every year with no more than one or two jobs open."

The Braves reported to spring training with such a stable personnel situation that their seven weeks here promised to be downright boring. All indications were that 24 of the 25 jobs were taken.

Cox was reluctant to say how many jobs were open. But, with some prodding, he admitted nine of the 10 spots on the pitching staff were "probably" taken and that six infielders, three catchers and six outfielders had running starts on jobs.

That would leave one opening—the 10th spot on the pitching staff. But that could be an interesting battle, with Larry McWilliams and Preston Hanna fighting to stay on the staff and minor league phenom Ken Dayley fighting to make it.

Despite the apparent stability of the roster, there are two major tasks confronting Cox:

"The most important thing we've got to do," Cox admitted, "is get our starting pitching rotation arranged."

Cox, who prefers a five-man rotation, sees Phil Niekro, Gaylord Perry and Tommy Boggs as three of his starters. He likes newcomer John Montefusco as a fourth starter—"I wouldn't be surprised if he wins 15 games," Cox said—and he mentions McWilliams, Hanna, Rick Matula and Dayley as candidates for the fifth starting assignment.

"The other thing we've got to do," Cox says, "is decide on a leadoff hitter. We have several people who could fill the role."

The leading candidate is Claudell Washington, the Braves' expensive free-agent acquisition who will play right field. Cox also will look at Glenn Hubbard, Rafael Ramirez and Gary Matthews.

Cox arrived here in mid-February with Bruce Benedict as his starting catcher, Chris Chambliss as his first baseman, Hubbard as his second baseman, Ramirez as his shortstop, Bob Horner as his third baseman and Matthews, Dale Murphy and Washington as his outfielders from left to right.

Also assured jobs are catchers Biff Pocoroba and Bill Nahorodny, infielders Luis Gomez and Jerry Royster and outfielders Terry Harper, Brian Asselstine and Mike Lum.

Assured spots in the bullpen are Rick Camp, Larry Bradford, Gene Garber and Al Hrabosky.

Cox, encouraged by the novelty of a set team, is convinced his fourth Atlanta club will be a season-long contender.

"As far as I'm concerned, we proved last year that we are a contender," Cox said. "I know I said the same thing last spring. But I don't have any doubt this is the best ball club we've had since I've been here."

"We have much better depth on our pitching staff than we had last spring. We've made a lot of changes over the past couple of years, and I think everything is ready to fall together."

**Wigwam Wisps:** Matthews reported to spring training, his six-week-old request for a trade unfulfilled. "I'll just play this season like I've always played and then see what happens," said Matthews, who is eligible for free agency after the season. . . . The Braves went to spring training with all their players under contract. . . . The Braves released pitchers Bo McLaughlin and Craig Skok, former major leaguers who pitched last season at Richmond (International).

## Castro a Yank, Davis Could Go

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.—The signing of free agent pitcher Bill Castro by the Yankees was like seeing a robin outside your window—harbinger of things to come. It must be apparent that with Goose Gossage, Ron Davis and Doug Bird already on their roster, the Yankees have no need for another righthanded reliever unless he is the forerunner to another deal.

There was speculation that the signing of Castro made it likely the Yankees would deal Davis, highly desirable because of youth and experience and success as a short reliever. He could be the main attraction in bringing the Yankees the righthanded starter they need from the Cubs (Rick Reuschel), Blue Jays (Jim Clancy), Expos (Steve Rogers) or A's (any of their five starters).

Davis, 25, has put together two excellent years as a reliever, winning 23 games, losing five and saving 16. The Yankees would be reluctant to part with him, but

getting a righthanded starter to go along with their lefty corps of Tommy John, Ron Guidry, Rudy May and Tommy Underwood may be a higher priority.

Castro signed a two-year contract worth \$325,000 with an option for a third year. He comes off a 2-4 record with eight saves and a 2.79 ERA for the Brewers in 1980, when he worked 84 innings, the most he has logged in the big leagues. He is a six-year veteran, just turned 27, who shows a career record of 25-23 with 44 saves.

"He's a pretty good pitcher," said Manager Gene Michael. "He's not a strikeout pitcher, but he knows how to pitch."

Michael said he was not thinking of Castro as a starter, but said that Davis might get a look as a starter. However, that is unlikely since most Yankees say Davis does not have enough pitches to start. It seemed logical to assume that Davis would be on his way elsewhere before opening day.

—PHIL PEPE