

Dominican Teen-Ager Trio Inked by Astros' Florence

HOUSTON, Tex.—The Astros have announced the signing of three 18-year-old free agents, Joe Benjamin, Connie Peterson and Jimmy Davis.

Pitchers Jose Macimo Benjamin and Conrado Arturo Peterson and outfielder Jaime Emanuel Davis were signed in the Dominican Republic by Houston scout Paul Florence.

All three have been assigned to the Astros' Cocoa (Florida State) affiliate.

Astros See Bright Future For Bench-Riding Colbert

By JOHN WILSON

HOUSTON, Tex.—Nate Colbert scored runs more times than he reached first base as a batter last season.

Impossible? Don't forget about pinch-running. Nate is considered one of the bright prospects in the Astro organization. Why shouldn't he be? After all, he batted .000 for one full season in the major leagues.

That's right. Although Nate was with the Astros for the entire 1966 season, he didn't get a single hit. He

didn't get a walk, either. He never gained first base one time from the batter's box.

But he did score three runs. Manager Grady Hatton used him 12 times as a pinch-runner.

In Colbert's defense, it should be pointed out he went to bat only seven times. He struck out four times and made three assorted outs.

Late in the season, Hatton put the 20-year-old first baseman on a waiver list just to pad it out. And he was claimed. Somebody else must like the young man who sat on the bench and has never whacked a major league hit.

Hatton took Colbert's name off the waiver list, since he had no intention of losing him. In fact, he now thinks Colbert may be the long-range answer for Houston's left field spot.

Nobody expects Nate to step into the majors next season. But now that the Astros can option him, he probably will start out in Triple-A ball at Oklahoma City (Coast).

Houston had claimed Colbert out of the St. Louis organization in last winter's major league draft. Therefore, the team had to keep him or offer him back at half the \$25,000 draft price.

Nate Still Greenhorn

The Astros knew Colbert wasn't ready for the major leagues at the age of 19 and with only a year and one-half of professional experience. But they liked his potential and decided to make the sacrifice of keeping a youngster on the bench who wouldn't be able to help much.

At this point, nobody is sorry. Despite his 0-for-7 season, Colbert probably is more highly rated now than when he was claimed.

What is it based on? Batting practice, spring training, workouts, and the Florida Instructional League.

When Colbert temporarily left the instructional league at Clearwater the first weekend in November for reserve duty, he was hitting .269 in 29 games, had hit seven home runs for one of the league's best figures, and was the top runs-batted-in man with 25.

"He could play major league first base in the field right now," Hatton said. "He could have played it this past year. Now we've got to get him the experience at bat and see if he can do what we hope he can."

Demon in Batting Drills

During the season, rival players often asked who Colbert was. To see him in batting practice, one would assume he was one of the team's regulars.

"John Bateman, Dave Nicholson and I hit the ball the farthest in batting practice," Colbert admitted when questioned on the subject.

"He may have hit more out of the park in batting practice than anyone else," publicist Bill Giles said. Manager Hatton and coach Jim Busby concurred.

But batting practice and major

Mays Tied for Third Place In Dome Home-Run Derby

HOUSTON, Tex.—Although he has played only 18 games in the Domed Stadium, Willie Mays is tied for third place for most home runs in the indoor park.

Mays has hit seven homers in Houston the past two years, including his No. 500 and No. 511, which tied Mel Ott for National League lifetime leadership.

Jim Wynn of the Astros has the most Dome homers, 18. John Bateman is second with 11 and Joe Morgan and Lee Maye are tied with Mays at seven.

Willie Stargell hit more than any visitor in 1966. He smacked five. He didn't have any the year before.



Nate Colbert

league pitching are different, as Colbert's 0-for-7 for a whole season attests. Still, it didn't discourage him.

"I don't think I was that much overmatched," he said. "I think if I had gotten to bat more, I could have got some hits. And there were times when other guys went up to pinch-hit against certain pitchers and I really felt like I would have had a better chance against that pitcher."

The main thing that impressed Colbert about major league pitching was the control.

"Some of these young kids down in Florida can throw just as hard as they do up there. Some of them harder than a lot of big league pitchers. But they're wild."

"In the majors," Colbert said, "they can throw strikes any time and not with just one pitch."

Playing Left Field

Colbert has been playing left field in Florida.

"We want him to play both left field and at first base next year," Hatton said. The main thing is that what he has seen of Nate so far has convinced him the St. Louis native can play the outfield.

If Chuck Harrison, the Astros' present hope at first base, ultimately fails, Colbert likely will move back to that spot.

Colbert has mixed feelings about the 1966 season.

"I learned what it takes to play major league ball," Nate explained. "But then it was just a year lost as far as playing is concerned."

Astronotes: Tom Griffin, an 18-year-old righthander from Sun Valley, Calif., impressed Manager Grady Hatton when the Houston skipper made a recent visit to the Florida Instructional League. Griffin was signed last spring. . . . A total of 7,270,086 persons have attended events or made paid tours of the Astrodome since its doors were opened in April of 1965. About 4.75 million of them came to see major league baseball. About 700,000 of these are not in the National League attendance records because they did not pay more than 50 cents for a ticket or they attended the ten exhibition games that have been played under the dome. . . . Four members of Houston's Amarrillo (Texas) team made the Class AA Western all-star team picked by baseball writers. They are infielders J. C. Hartman and Doug Rader, outfielder Leo Posada, and pitcher Don Wilson. Posada was the only repeater on the team. . . . Jim Wynn's wrist still is in a cast from an August 1 injury at Philadelphia. The cast will remain on several more weeks. . . . The Harris County Domed Stadium was the scene of a heavyweight championship fight for the first time on November 14 and an indoor record crowd of 35,460 fans paid a record \$461,290 to see Cassius Clay retain his title with a third-round TKO of Cleveland Williams.

Charles, Sold on A's Chances, Takes Himself Off Swap Block

By JOE MCGUFF

KANSAS CITY, Mo.

Last season, six clubs finished ahead of the Athletics. Next year, some of them are going to have to move aside because the Athletics are on the way up. In fact, they may well move into the first division.

The authority for this statement isn't Owner Charles Finley or Manager Alvin Dark. If you guessed it was the ticket manager, you'd still be wrong. This opinion comes from Ed Charles, a veteran member of the playing ranks.

Charles, who is the oldest player on the A's roster in point of service, joined the club in 1962. He suffered through the losing seasons along with everyone else and rejoiced last year when the Athletics started to show marked improvement. If anyone on the roster is qualified to pass judgment on the A's progress, it is Charles.

"The way our young pitching came along last year, I think we have a good chance to finish fifth," Charles declared. "If we could add one big bat in the outfield, we'd really be in good shape. We could cause trouble for a lot of people."

Pitchers Got Their Bearings

"I knew our team was starting to come after the first month of last season. We got off to that terrible start (the A's lost 14 of their first 17), but after a month or so, you could see our young pitching starting to come around. I knew then we were going to be a pretty good team."

"I think we'll keep improving. We'll have (Jim) Nash and (Blue Moon) Odom for a full year and some of our other players will have more experience."

Charles also believes the A's have the benefit of strong leadership. This can scarcely be described as apple polishing because Dark did not play Charles regularly through the first two months of the season and Charles talked as if he were hoping to be traded.

"Al is a smart manager," Charles said. "I was upset when he wasn't playing me, but he didn't know me and he had his problems. I feel I did a good job for him when I got my chance."

Charles readily admitted he had to fight himself to keep from becoming disgruntled and dispirited when he was riding the bench.

Never Pays to Ease Up

"When I was younger and things went wrong, I became rebellious," Charles said. "I felt that way at times early last season. It's easy just to give up and go through the motions. But when you get older, you realize that when you quit bearing down, the only one you hurt is yourself."

"I talked it out with some people whose opinions I respect and I made up my mind that I was going to do the best I could and be ready if I got my chance to play regularly."

When that chance came in mid-June, Charles was more than ready. He quickly developed into the most



Ed Charles

effective hitter in the A's batting order. He finished the season with a .286 average, which ranked second for his major league career. He drove in 42 runs, only 20 short of the team leader, and this was accomplished despite the fact he had only 385 official at-bats.

At the end of the season, Dark said flatly he was planning on Charles as his regular third baseman in 1967.

"I know at one time there was

some talk about trading me," Charles said, "and, in a way, I was kind of hoping I'd be traded if I couldn't play regularly, but deep down inside, I didn't want to be traded. I don't think there are many ball players who ever do."

"I guess one of the reasons is that it's a matter of pride. Then, too, after you've been with a ball club a while, you know everyone and you get to feel you're a part of it. When you're traded, you have to start all over."

Ed Likes Kansas City

"Another factor is that I like Kansas City."

"I make my home here and I've been going to college here."

In addition to pursuing his college studies, Charles is working as a youth recreation director at the Downtown YMCA.

Athletics' Addenda: Jack Aker, the A's brilliant relief pitcher, is now making his home here. Aker is working for the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company. . . . Ernie Fazio, the A's utility infielder, is working for the Metropolitan Construction Co. here. . . . The Athletics established staff lows for runs, earned runs and hits last season. The A's gave up 648 runs, 567 earned runs and 1,281 hits. The previous lows were 704 runs, 635 earned runs and 1,344 hits. . . . The A's staff also posted an earned-run average of 3.55, the lowest in the club's history. It was only the second time the staff had an ERA of less than 4.00.

Legion Chiefs Confer, Set Up '67 Finals for Aug. 31-Sept. 5

By DICK KAEGEL

INDIANAPOLIS, Ind.

National finals for American Legion baseball in 1967 will be held August 31 through September 5 at Memphis, Tenn., it was announced at the organization's sixth annual National Baseball Conference, November 12-13.

George Rulon, the Legion's baseball director, said the eight regional tournaments would be held, August 23-28, with August 20 as the deadline for certifying department (state) champions.

The conference, which has replaced the old system of regional meetings, was attended by delegates from 49 states (Mississippi was absent), plus the District of Columbia and the Canal Zone. Pennsylvania, although not a participant in the national program, was represented here.

During the two-day session at the Legion's National Headquarters Building, the delegates made 16 recommendations aimed at strengthening the youth baseball program in 1967. Details of the recommendations will be announced later, pending approval by members of the National Americanism Commission. The mail vote is expected to be completed by January 1.

Conference speakers included Daniel J. O'Connor, chairman of the National Americanism Commission, and this writer, a staff member of THE SPORTING NEWS, which annually publishes four special sections on American Legion baseball.

Ed Doherty, director of Organized Baseball's umpire development program, spoke at the conference banquet and kept delegates in laughter with anecdotes from his long career, which began with batboy duties for Providence, R. I., in 1914.

Legion baseball, which encompasses nearly 5,000 teams for teen-aged boys, will be entering its forty-second year of competition in 1967.

Rulon said plans have been made to hold the seventh conference of department baseball chairmen on November 4-5, 1967.



George Rulon