



Warren Cromartie, Ellis Valentine and Andre Dawson . . . Hitting Their Way Into the Hearts of the Expos

# Blue-Ribbon Prizes Flourish in Expos' Garden

By IAN MacDONALD

MONTREAL--Collectively, they are the talk of the National League.

Three young men with astonishingly limited major league experience are patrolling the Expos' outfield on a regular basis with exceptional talents.

Ellis Valentine, Andre Dawson and Warren Cromartie easily could form the Expos' outfield for the next half-dozen years and all have the potential to do so in All-Star fashion.

Alike in that they all are 23 years of age and can hit the ball with a fascinating consistency, the three are different characters.

Valentine is a fun-loving type who is not above showboating for the Montreal fans who have come to love him in just a short time. The 6-4 Californian is blessed with the natural talents to become a super star, but needs prodding to keep on the right track.

Cromartie is an extremely confident Floridian who has been telling everyone for years that he belonged in the big leagues. A level-swinging, line-drive hitter, Cromartie is outspoken in his thinking that the theory which says lefthanded hitters can't hit southpaw pitchers is all wet.

LIKE CROMARTIE, Dawson is a Floridian, but he doesn't talk much. Manager Dick Williams said early in the season, "When Dawson says, 'Hello,' why it's a speech." In the long haul, Dawson might prove the best of the three.

There have been several reasons put forth for the Expos' turnaround from an abysmal 1976 season. Rightfully, much credit has been given to the addition of veteran stars Dave Cash, Tony Perez and Chris Speier. Also, of course, Williams has added a professional touch as manager and has beefed up his coaching staff.

But in attempting to assess how far this current edition of Expos can go and what's in store for the future, it is the young men on the team who mean so much. And high on that list are the outfielders.

Because he had all of 152 days of major league experience when this season began, Valentine is far and away the senior of the trio in that regard. Cromartie had logged 84 days, mostly from joining the inflated September rosters. Dawson was with the Expos for 25 days last September and that represents his sum total in the majors.

Valentine showed in half a season last year what he could do. Recalled July 16 from the Denver (American Association) Bears, Valentine hit .285 while playing regularly for the balance of the year. Though he played in only 88 games, Valentine was fourth among the league's outfielders in assists with 12. Ellis stole successfully in his last 14 attempts.

The son of an outstanding athlete from

Helena, Ark., Valentine played every position at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, but mostly he was considered an outstanding pitcher.

"YEAH, ELLIS SAID as he bared glistening teeth with his patented grin, "I kinda fashioned myself after Bob Gibson. He was my idol. That's what I wanted to be, another Bob Gibson.

"I played every position, though. Well, I didn't catch. I didn't like the idea of getting behind the plate.

"But I would start the games at shortstop or third base or in the outfield and then they'd bring me in to pitch. It was fun.

"I had the strong arm and I could blow the ball past people."

Valentine was by-passed in the first round of the 1972 draft. Would-be bidders were frightened off because the youngster had suffered a broken leg in his senior year.

After the accident, Valentine stopped pitching. "I couldn't come down hard on my left leg. I played a lot of first base in my senior year so that I didn't have to run as much."

The Expos' director of scouting, Danny Menendez, remembers that there was serious concern about Valentine's leg.

"It took a long time healing," Menendez recalled. "There was doubt about how well he was going to be able to run and also about how it was going to affect his hitting.

"That's the only reason that nobody drafted him in the first round. We were fortunate to get him in the second round."

VALENTINE'S statistics did drop in that senior year. Then again, he hardly could have been expected to improve. As a junior, he hit .542.

The pitching experience came to the fore when the Expos moved Valentine to the outfield to avoid possible collisions at first base. It didn't take long for everyone in the organization to realize that his arm was something special.

"I always could throw," Valentine said with a chuckle. "I was throwing footballs, baseballs, rocks, bottles, it didn't matter. It was just something to do when we were kids, having rock fights, just having fun—enjoying the physical fun of throwing things."

Williams expressed amazement at Valentine's arm after just a few weeks of his first season back in the National League following managerial roles at Oakland and California.

"They don't take chances against him," Williams commented. "That's some kind of respect for a man who's only been in the league for half a season."

Williams compared Valentine's arm with that of such great gunners as Roberto Clemente and Carl Furillo. Valentine blushed at the comparison.

"THE WORD IS around the league," said Ted Simmons, the hard-hitting catcher of the Cardinals. "People don't try to take the extra base on him."

Valentine was the Expos' representative on the N.L. All-Star team and he was no token choice. Ellie jumped over the .300 mark on April 27 and hasn't dipped below all season. He was hitting .340 on June 13 and at the All-Star break he was the fourth-ranked

hitter among the outfielders in the league.

Cromartie is so confident that he comes off as something of a braggart. He knows he can hit and isn't afraid to tell anyone. He has been doing just that for years.

"Oh yeah," Cromartie readily agreed when asked if he was not rather cocky for a first-year man who had just three years of experience in Organized Ball.

"I've been like that all my life," he said. "Somehow I always could hit. That's been my thing. I love to do it and I work at it.

"Just because I believe I can hit doesn't mean that I think I know all the answers. I know that I don't. I'm willing to learn.

"But I think that because I can do it, I work harder at it. That's just the way that I've been brought up. I've always been able to hit to different parts of the field."

THE OPPOSITION has difficulty defending Cro because he sprays line drives and sharp bouncers in all directions. He credited his dad Leroy for some early tutoring.

"My father was the recreation director for the City of Miami," Cromartie explained. "He had Little League, Pony League, Senior League and all of those under his direction."

The senior Cromartie helped the youngsters with fundamentals before they got into organized games.

"He started me off on the tee (hitting a ball off a waist-high prop)," Warren said. "Everybody should start that way. It develops a perfectly level swing. I'm going to start my boy off that way, too."

Christopher Lee Cromartie is just a little over a year old right now. It'll be some time before the tyke can use a hitter's tee. In fact, he could probably get by with an overgrown golf tee.

His mom, Carole Ringuet, is a French-Canadian who met Warren while he was tearing up the Eastern League with Quebec City in 1974.

The superbly conditioned Cromartie had a high value on his hitting potential way back in his days at Jackson High in Miami. That's the reason that he spurned the offers of four teams and attended Dade North Junior College before the Expos made him their top choice in the secondary phase of the 1973 draft.

"IT WAS STRICTLY financial," said Cromartie, who despite his limited major league status hired former football great Nick Buoniconti as an agent last winter. "My father and I had a figure that we felt I should get. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to accept a scholarship at the University of Arizona if we didn't get what we wanted from the Expos."

His confidence oozed forth again when he said, "I would have been in the majors by now no matter which way I would have gone."

Dawson's story is startling in its success. The young man had just 643 minor league at-bats when he was called up last September. In 1975, he hit .330 in the rookie Pioneer League with the Lethbridge team.

Skipping Class-A ball, Dawson opened the '76 season with Quebec City. By early June, he had eight home runs and 27 RBIs while

hitting .357.

Elevated to Denver, Dawson added 20 homers and 46 RBIs while hitting .350.

ANDRE IS THE eldest of eight children who have grown up or are growing up on the south side of Miami. Pressed, Dawson says that his mother raised him by working long hours as a short order cook and that they lived in a low-income housing project.

Dawson's mother was divorced from his stepfather when Andre was 12. When he started to make money, he helped out and last year when his mother had a malignant tumor removed, he became the sole source of income for her, his seven brothers and a nephew who lives with them.

"I do feel it's my job to contribute as much as I can," Dawson said. "I was making enough when she got sick to send some money home to take care of the rest and have enough left to take care of myself. I do love everyone in my family and, if that's the purpose the money is going to serve, that's what I want."

Dawson was the 250th choice in the 1975 summer draft after graduating from Florida A&M. Though he hit for average at school, he did not have many home runs. In pro ball, the homers started coming.

"The pitching is better in the pros," Dawson admitted. "A lot of pitchers in college don't have any idea where they are throwing the ball. Once the pitchers did, the chances of hitting were better. I had more opportunity to swing."

WHILE VALENTINE had won his job with that fine second half last year, Cromartie and Dawson won their chance in spring training. Cromartie hit .375 in the Grapefruit League and Dawson .307.

Cromartie started hitting from the start of the season. He led the league in doubles from May 18 until July 17.

Dawson started slowly. In fact, he was 1-for-18 through his first five games. Williams started spelling him and then he began playing regularly on May 29.

From June 10 through the end of July, Dawson boosted his average from .230 to .290.

As a unit, the three were averaging .296 through August 3, ranking them third among the league's outfielders, behind the Pirates' Bill Robinson, Al Oliver and Dave Parker and the Reds' George Foster, Cesar Geronimo and Ken Griffey.

There are defensive lapses and downright weaknesses. Cromartie has a nasty habit of swatting at fly balls with one hand and has lost a couple. Dawson isn't aggressive enough in center field. Valentine sometimes shows off his marvelous arm by throwing over the cutoff man.

Williams writes off their miscues as due to a lack of experience.

"They simply haven't played that many games," Williams said.

Unless a lot of people are very wrong, these fellows will be playing a lot of games in the future and hopefully for the Expos' cause as a unit. Had he played a full season last year, Valentine might have been Rookie of the Year. Dawson and Cromartie may well fight for that honor this season.

## On The Cover

The "outfield of the future," Warren Cromartie, Ellis Valentine and Andre Dawson faced the camera before a recent game at Olympic Stadium in Montreal.