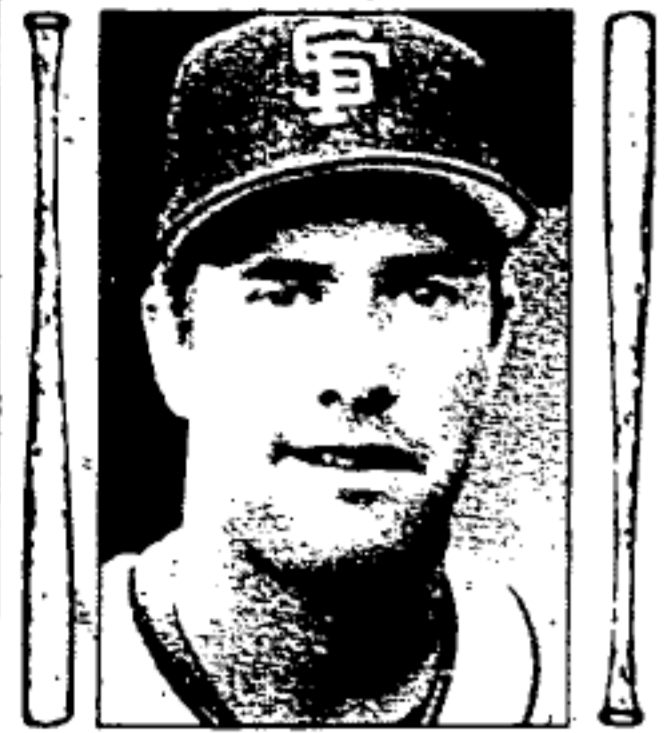


N.L. WEST

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS



Will Clark

A sign above Will Clark's locker in the San Francisco Giants' clubhouse at Candlestick Park indicates the third-year first baseman's confidence. "Once you realize I'm God," the inscription reads, "we'll get along fine."

The message is whimsical, of course, but who's to argue that Clark isn't godlike in a baseball sense? His flair for the dramatic, his performance under pressure and his enormous potential at age 24 stamp him as the National League West champions' most indispensable player.

It isn't even close, though an informal clubhouse poll showed a trickle of support for the leadership of Jeffrey Leonard and Bob Brenly, the talent and versatility of Mike Aldrete and the defensive wizardry of Jose Uribe.

"I regard a lot of our guys as indispensable," Manager Roger Craig said, "but if I had to pick one, it would be Will Clark. In addition to his natural ability, he has the charisma that puts people in the ball park."

Clark has thrived ever since his first major league swing. It occurred at the Astrodome on April 8, 1986, after the No. 1 draft choice was installed as a starter following just 65 games of professional experience, that in the Class-A California League.

Wham! A home run off a Nolan Ryan fastball. One week later, in his first game at Candlestick, Clark homered off the Astros' Bob Knepper.

An instant hero, the two-time All-America irritated some teammates with his cockiness, yet backed it up at the plate. Brenly soon nicknamed him "Will The Thrill."

Clark was heading for a decent rookie season when he suffered a hyperextension of his left elbow June 3 in Montreal. Seven weeks later, he returned with a flurry of hits and batted .310 the rest of the way for a final .287 average.

The injury notwithstanding, Clark, voted the outstanding amateur baseball player in the U.S. in 1985, was mildly disappointed with his performance. He bulked up with a winter conditioning program in his native New Orleans and showed up last spring with newfound determination and strength.

Leonard and Candy Maldonado carried the club in the early going, but Clark, scoffing at the sophomore jinx, showed his stuff when the race heated up. On June 9 in Cincinnati, one night after the



First baseman Will Clark's poise under pressure makes him the player the Giants could least afford to lose.

Reds erased a 6-0 deficit and extended their division lead to three games, he batted in four runs and scored three in a 10-2 romp.

After the Reds built a 4½-game lead by winning the first two games of a series at Candlestick two weeks later, Clark's drive to center field in the bottom of the ninth inning produced a 7-6 victory.

There were more heroics against St. Louis in a Candlestick doubleheader July 26. Clark won the opener, 6-3, with a three-run homer in the 10th, and cracked a game-winning solo homer in the fifth inning of the second game.

On August 10, following a dramatic four-game sweep of the Reds at Candlestick, Clark's upper-deck homer in the bottom of the ninth stunned the Astros, 6-5. The shot came during a streak of nine straight games in which Clark had at least one RBI; a tear that tied a San Francisco record shared by Willie Mays, Willie McCovey and Orlando Cepeda.

On September 4, with the Giants in control of the division, Clark blasted a homer in the bottom of the 10th for a 3-2 victory over the Phillies.

When San Francisco buried Houston, 7-1, on September 16, Clark hit two home runs. He finished the season with 35, the most by a Giant since Bobby Bonds hit 39 in 1973. And with a .308 average, he became the first Giant to bat .300 and hit 30 home runs since McCovey in his MVP season of 1969.

The best measure of Clark's indispensability was his work against second-place Cincinnati: nine homers, 23 RBIs and a .443 average. Against defending champion Houston, he had seven homers and 14 RBIs.

Thus 46 percent of his home runs

and 41 percent of his RBIs were against the Giants' chief competitors.

For an encore, Clark batted .360 in the National League Championship Series. His poise under pressure makes him the player the Giants could least afford to lose.

NICK PETERS

CINCINNATI REDS



Eric Davis

The best clue as to the value of Eric Davis to the Cincinnati Reds is that last year the team was shut out four times in the 129 games he played and three times in the 33 he missed.

Davis becomes even more important this year in the absence of Dave Parker, traded to Oakland in the off-season. In four full seasons with the Reds, Parker hit 107 homers and batted in 432 runs.

Davis was awesome in the first half last year as the Reds clung to the National League West lead. At the All-Star break, he had 27 homers, 68 RBIs and 33 stolen bases. Injuries limited him to 10 homers, 32 RBIs and 17 stolen bases in the second half, and the Reds fell out of the race as their

offense lost more than a run per game—and one of its most exciting elements.

"My favorite thing is stealing second and third," Davis said. "Everybody is trying to prevent you from doing that. You get the other team's coaches and managers mad, and you disrupt the pitchers and infielders."

Power and speed are not the center fielder's only gifts. Four times he leaped above walls to avert home runs. Jack Clark, robbed in back-to-back games, said, "Davis is the Ozzie Smith of the outfield."

As Manager Pete Rose has said, "He can beat you with a home run, he can beat you on the basepaths and he can beat you in the outfield. What's left?"

Former Cincinnati batting instructor Billy DeMars worked diligently on Davis' stroke in his formative days in the majors.

"Quickest hands I've seen in my years around the game," said DeMars. "It takes great strength to be as quick as he is. He looks skinny (6-3, 175), but he is a powerful man. God, to have that kind of power and bat speed and be the fastest runner in the league."

"I won't be surprised by anything Eric does in this game," Rose said. "It's a matter of what kind of standards he'll set for others. He can be as good as he wants to be and make as much money as he wants to make. I leave him alone. Put a bat in his hands, a glove on his hand and spikes on his feet and watch him go."

"One Eric Davis comes along every 50 years," Parker said last year. "They should make the rest of us pay to watch him. His potential is unlimited, and when I retire I'd like to be his agent."

Rose knows it is imperative that

he write Davis' name on the lineup card often if the Reds are to win the National League West title.

"He helps you win even when he goes 0-fer," Rose said. "He has world-class speed, great leaping ability, an unbelievable throwing arm and tremendous bat speed. He had a 5-for-47 slump at one point last season, but he found other ways to help. He always does."

"Some guys are on an emotional roller coaster, but I never get too high or too low," Davis said. "I maintain a steady personality, no matter how good things are going or how bad they are going."

HAL McCOY

HOUSTON ASTROS



Bill Doran

Even now, Bill Doran recoils when the assertion is made that he is the leader of the Houston Astros. He considers himself just a guy who plays hard and hates to lose.

But those qualities, plus a durability not often found these days, have turned Doran from a solid little second baseman into the Astros' most indispensable player. If he were sidelined, the team would be without not only one of its most productive players, but also its heart, soul and guts.

Last season, the Astros never found out what it was like to be without Doran. He played in all 162 games, batting .283 with 16 homers, 79 runs batted in, 31 stolen bases and 13 game-winning RBIs. And that only begins to tell the value of the 29-year-old Cincinnati.

"There's no question, at least in my mind, that Billy Doran is the best second baseman in the league," said Manager Hal Lanier. "You look at all the little things that he does for us, in addition to the things that you can see, and he doesn't have to take a back seat to anyone."

Doran's glove certainly is not one of the little things Lanier was talking about. Although Chicago's Ryne Sandberg won the Rawlings Gold Glove last year, Doran led National League second basemen in fielding with a .992 percentage. He made only six errors in 737 chances.

Although Doran's hitting, fielding and basestealing are worthy of an All-Star selection—an honor he has never been awarded—it is his attitude toward the game that causes people who watch him every day to extol his worth.

"He never quits, no matter what," said shortstop Craig Reynolds. "He never lets anybody else let up, because of the way he plays the game. You can't watch Billy play as hard as he does every game and not want to reach down deeper, too."

Each season, Doran leads the

Astros in dirty uniforms and broken batting helmets. His uniform gets dirty because he often dives for ground balls and slides hard into bases. The helmets fall prey to Doran's hair-trigger temper after he fails in a clutch situation.

"With other guys, you might think throwing a helmet is done only for show," said outfielder Billy Hatcher. "With Billy, you know he's so intent on doing good that he's awfully upset when he doesn't."

This year, Doran will be even more important to the Astros' chances in the National League West. After batting first or second most of his five-year career, Doran will be in the No. 3 spot behind Gerald Young and Hatcher.

Lanier went to that lineup last August after Young proved he could handle major league pitching. Doran's .360 average and 20 RBIs that month proved he could handle hitting third.

"I think he'll be a great No. 3 hitter," said Lanier. "He's got enough power (48 career homers) and is a good RBI man because he makes contact (169 strikeouts in five seasons).

"Plus, you know he won't give in to a pitcher. He'll battle and battle and battle."

Just as he does in every inning of every game. The Astros are not a team of superstars. They must go full steam to win. Doran sets that pace.

NEIL HOHLFELD

"He's the franchise," Manager Chuck Tanner said of Murphy. "If we don't have him, we're not building anything at all."

Over the last 10 years, Murphy ranks second among major league players in homers (308) and fifth in RBIs (904). He has scored 110 runs per season over the last five years.

Only Rickey Henderson (115) has done better.

Murphy has hit at least 36 homers and driven in at least 100 runs in five of the last six seasons. Last year, with 44 homers, he drove himself in almost as often as teammates did.

"It would be a different team

without him," pitcher Zane Smith said. "I don't think there would be too many people watching us play."


Murphy was voted the Most Valuable Player in the National League in 1982 and '83. A case could be made that he deserved a third award last year.

The winner, the Cubs' Andre Dawson, produced 178 runs (runs scored plus runs batted in minus homers). Murphy produced 176 runs and finished 11th in the balloting.

"He was the MVP just as much as Dawson," Tanner said.

(Continued on Page 32, Column 1)

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ATLANTA BRAVES



Dale Murphy

Dale Murphy is the foundation of a rebuilding team and a human security blanket for young players. He is the Atlanta Braves this year.

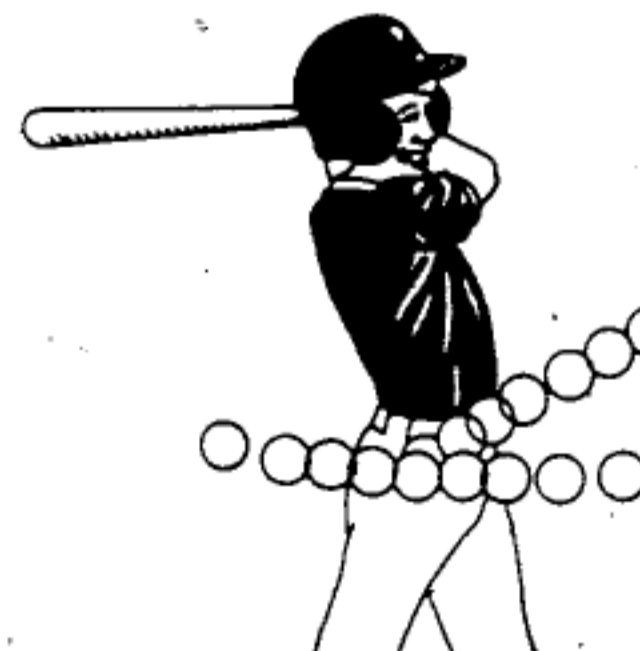
"Having Dale means we have a chance to win. It's as simple as that," pitcher Rick Mahler said. "It's a credit to Dale that he had the loyalty to re-sign in the situation where the Braves are."

Murphy bypassed free agency and signed a guaranteed three-year contract worth \$6 million last November.

"I wanted to work things out here," he said. "I saw (free agents) moving around, and that's great and good. They did what made them happy. I did what made me happy. I like the direction we're going in."

Murphy, who turned 32 on March 12, is Atlanta's oldest projected starter. With 10 years in the majors, he has more experience than Dion-James, Ron Gant, Andres Thomas, Albert Hall, Terry Blocker, Paul Assenmacher, Chuck Cary, Kevin Coffman, Tom Glavine and Peter Smith combined. All are expected to play for the Braves this year.

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