



George Foster . . . Emerging From His Shell to Bombard National League Pitching

Foster Finds a Home as Reds' No. 1 Wrecker

By EARL LAWSON

CINCINNATI—The Reds just had won a game and Joe Morgan, the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1975, was holding court in front of his locker.

As the writers jotted down notes, George Foster, the National League's latest hitting sensation, edged his way into the crowd around Morgan's locker.

Foster, a pad of paper in one hand and a pen in the other, also was taking down quotes.

"You a reporter, too?" asked a writer, kidding.

Foster grinned.

"Yeah," he answered. "I write for the Watts Uprising."

Mid-way in June—the 14th to be exact—Foster hit a ball which landed in the red seats, the top tier, at Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium.

AND, IN DOING SO, Foster became the third member of the exclusive "Red Seat Club," joining teammates Tony Perez and Bob Bailey.

Twice since the Reds moved into the stadium in June, 1970, Perez has reached the red seats with home-run drives. Bailey accomplished the feat in 1970 when he was playing with the Expos.

No other sluggers in the league have accomplished the feat.

Foster's historic homer against the Cubs' was one of two hit by the Reds. Davey Concepcion hit the other one.

"When do you think you'll put a ball into the red seats?" Concepcion was asked.

"When I weigh 220 pounds," answered the Reds' slender shortstop.

"Davey will put a ball in those red seats when an usher leads him up there," said Foster, overhearing Concepcion's remark.

Talking was a Foster who was described recently by the Braves' Ken Henderson as a guy "who was so shy he wouldn't so much as say boo when he first joined the Giants as a rookie."

That was back in 1970.

IT SEEMS that Foster not only has emerged as one of the National League's most feared hitters, but he also has emerged from the shell in which he once placed himself.

Bobby Bonds, hypnosis and a strong religious belief all have contributed to the new "Foster personality."

Bonds was a star when Foster joined the Giants.

"At first," said Foster, "I thought it was a mistake when I found they had me listed as Bobby's roommate."

But, Bonds had recognized Foster's need for companionship, guidance and a confidence builder and had requested that George be assigned his roommate.

"And before I was traded to the Reds early in the 1971 season," said Foster, "I

lived with Bobby's family in 'Frisco."

And, after the 1971 season, even though Foster was no longer a member of the Giants, Bonds took George along when he made speaking engagements.

On a few such occasions, Bonds, who's now with the Angels, managed to lure Foster before a microphone.

"I WASN'T AS frightened as I thought I'd be," Foster now admits. "In fact, it was kind of fun."

This was the beginning of Foster's emergence from his shell. Still, he had a long way to go.

Because, even though Foster joined a Cincinnati club in 1971 which a year later was to win its second National League pennant within a two-year span, he wasn't happy.

Foster wore a Reds' uniform, but he didn't feel as if he were a member of the team. The more he sat on the bench, the unhappier he became. And his disposition didn't improve when he was optioned to the Reds' Indianapolis farm club in 1973.

It was while Foster was with the Indianapolis club that he visited a hypnotist.

Foster admitted to inner feelings of hatred . . . of feeling as if he were being persecuted. Through hypnosis he was able to shed them. Always a deeply religious person, Foster also found God and the Bible as a source of comfort.

"During one season of winter ball," said Foster, "I read the Bible from cover to cover."

"I've got to believe that Foster is the cleanest living athlete in sports," said Reds' Manager Sparky Anderson.

FOSTER, who was leading the league in RBIs and batting .341 in mid-June, doesn't smoke, drink, chew tobacco or even drink coffee.

"The way he takes care of his body," said Anderson, "there's no telling how long he'll be able to play this game."

Even though he's 6-1 and 195 pounds, Foster has a 30-inch waist. This, though, presents problems, especially when he's shopping for clothes.

"My thighs are so big," said Foster, "that I rip out the trouser legs when I get a pair that has a 30-inch waist."

"And," he continued, "when I get trousers to fit my thighs, they have a 34-inch waist. So if they try to take in the waist, I wind up with hip pockets that almost touch each other."

Having a reputation for being deeply religious presents problems, too.

"You're always under close scrutiny," pointed out Foster. "People are always looking or waiting for you to do something wrong so they can point an accusing finger."

Foster, although 28, is one of the few sin-

gle players on the Reds.

"PEOPLE ASK ME if I'm a confirmed bachelor," said Foster.

"Yes," is his standard answer to the question.

"If you don't answer yes," said Foster, "then people are always prying . . . trying to find out whether you're going with anyone special and what's her name."

Foster isn't ruling out the possibility of marriage. But he claims he has no immediate plans.

He as much as says, though, that if he does marry, his wife will match his image. She, too, won't smoke or drink.

"And I would want my wife to be a career woman . . . be able to contribute to a community . . . to make her own living if it became necessary," said Foster.

It could be Foster has seen too many of his friends and acquaintances in sports "taken."

Foster recalled how as a youngster, just out of high school, an attempt had been made to use him.

"I WAS OFFERED a scholarship at a big southern university," said Foster. "I turned it down when I learned that the offer was made only because an attempt was to be made to integrate the college."

Foster laughed.

"The only integration I'm doing now," he said, "is with bats."

With that, Foster waved a hickory-stained Louisville Slugger in the air.

The black bat has become his trademark. More and more of them are showing up lately in bat racks around the league. It could be the harsh treatment Foster is giving opposing pitchers these days is a primary reason for the gain in popularity of the black bat.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Foster claims that karate is another partial explanation for the success he's experiencing at the plate these days.

Foster dabbled in karate a couple of years ago.

"I got into it a little more seriously this past winter," said Foster. "It's great for improving the coordination of hands and eyes. It helps to keep your muscles supple, too."

FOSTER DOESN'T have any designs on becoming a holder of a black belt.

"I take karate lessons because I think it'll make me a better ballplayer," he said.

"Of course," he added, "knowing the fundamentals could be very helpful if there should come a time when I need to protect myself against bodily harm."

But, as for breaking boards, forget it.

That's not for Foster. But if learning karate will help him break up a few ball games, he's all for that.

Foster lives in Hawthorne, Calif., outside

of Los Angeles. He likes it when the Reds play in L. A. because it gives him a chance to visit his mother and dad.

Teammates Ken Griffey, Dan Driessen, Ed Armbrister and Tony Perez like those Los Angeles visits, too.

That's because Foster's mother always has them out to the house for some good home cooking.

"Soul food," said George, smiling. "Driessen can really put it away."

A lot of pitchers look upon Foster as somewhat of a "hot dog" because he invariably steps out of the box after each pitch.

FOSTER, THOUGH, denies that he's attempting to aggravate the pitcher.

"I just want time to collect my thoughts," said Foster.

Twice umpires have called strikes on Foster after he stepped out of the box.

"It happened once during the World Series last year," he pointed out, "and once this spring. I'm more careful now."

Only one pitcher, Andy Messersmith, has yelled at Foster.

"And," said George, "all he said was, 'Are you ready yet?' after I stepped out once this year."

Karate wasn't the only sport Foster took up during the off-season. He also started to play some golf and he learned to swim.

"Learning to swim was a little harder than I thought it would be," said Foster. "I learned, though, because we were competing in the superteam event in Hawaii. Swimming was one of the events. If I was needed to compete, I wanted to be ready."

Foster also plans to take up tennis.

"Eventually," said Foster, "when I'm through playing baseball, I'd like to work with kids. So the more I know about different sports the more I can help them."

YOU LOOK AT Foster today and it's hard to believe that he once was so skinny that he was too embarrassed to step on the scales to weigh in as a halfback on a Pop Warner League football team when he was a 12-year-old.

In those days, too, Foster played Little League baseball. Dave Kingman, the New York Mets' 6-6 slugger, was in the same league.

"Kingman hit 20 homers and I hit five one summer," said George.

"I may catch up with him some day in homers," added George, grinning, "but I don't think I'll ever catch up with him in height."

That's the Foster humor emerging again. But while he's conquered his shyness, Foster still would rather let his bat do most of his talking.

And so far this season, the bat has been quite vocal.