



Jon Heyman

Insider

Rockies' Helton won't hear early talk of hitting .400

The question is only half finished, and **Todd Helton** jumps all over it like it's an 85-mph fastball bisecting the plate on a day the wind's blowing a gale at Coors Field. "Four hundred?"

mumbles the questioner. "Too early," **Helton** says. "Way too early."

Helton, the unassuming star with the swing as picturesque as Pikes Peak, acts embarrassed to hear that very same question for the 400th time in a week. Is embarrassed. He figures the question doesn't deserve a full sentence for an answer, and punctuates his response with a schoolboy laugh.

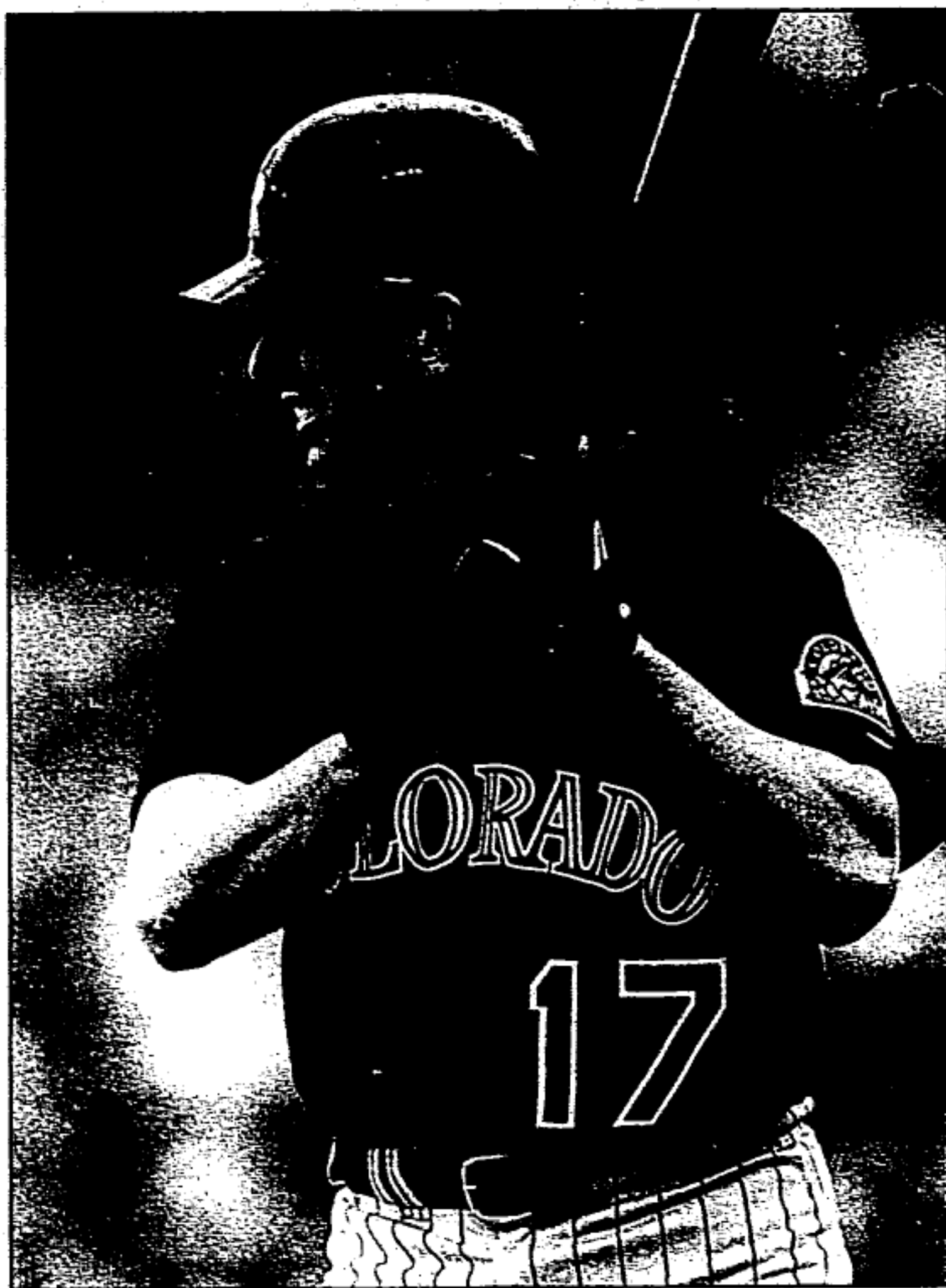
Silly, isn't it, to think that **Helton**, a fourth-year player who has never hit better than .320, could do what Tony Gwynn and Larry Walker and Wade Boggs and Rod Carew and George Brett, and way before them, Joe DiMaggio, failed in a lifetime of swings to do? Silly.

Maybe not. Sure it's a long shot, longer than the shots Andres Galarraga used to smoke at Coors. But consider all that **Helton**, down to .411 after going 0-4 last Saturday against the Brewers, has going for him. That beauty of his lefthanded swing is the big thing (lefties are always the high average hitters and .400 chasers; Gwynn, Walker, Boggs, Carew and Brett are all lefthanded). But it's not nearly everything, or surely someone would have gotten to .400 in the 59 years since Ted Williams, another famous lefthander, hit .406.

The heat has wilted a lot of great hitters. But **Helton**, 26, can take the heat. This is a kid who grew up in Knoxville, Tenn., then went to the University of Tennessee and played quarterback as a second sport. Now that's heat. The modest **Helton—who** says he stopped playing football because "I realized how bad I was"—engineered some big victories, including one over Georgia's Eric Zeier, between the reigns of Heath Shuler and the one-in-a-million Peyton Manning. Then **Helton** became a first-round draft choice of an expansion team. Then he signed for a big bonus, \$890,000. Then he was anointed the one to replace the great Galarraga.

He has answered one question after another in the affirmative. "It has to be an incredible ride," Rockies hitting coach Clint Hurdle says of all **Helton's** been through so early. There's ample reason to think his pupil will exceed expectations. To some degree, **Helton** already has.

Even though he batted .315 and .320 the past two seasons, some viewed these accomplishments skeptically. One highly successful A.L. executive (he won't be named here to spare him some em-



DILIP VISHWANATH/TSN

WAY TOO EARLY: Though **Helton's** had an unusually strong start this season, June is too soon to be talking about Ted Williams-type numbers.

barrassment) was expounding this spring on why **Helton** is the most overrated player in the game. Most of it had to do with Coors Field. "I have to hit on the road to prove to people I can hit anywhere," says **Helton**, batting .322 on the road (and .500 at Coors) through Saturday. Today, the vocal ones are all admirers, who note how **Helton** cares and prepares. The word "throwback" is thrown around.

Helton seemed to be genuinely affected by all the bickering and backstabbing that went on in Jim Leyland's clubhouse last year. So, Hurdle sat with him late last summer at Milwaukee's County Stadium and advised him not to concern himself with outside influences. Just worry about yourself and the opposing pitcher, Hurdle advised him. Still, it's hard not to notice the improved atmosphere this year. General manager Dan O'Dowd remade the team, and **Helton** can't help detecting an improved chemistry. "We have a great bunch of guys," he says. "Everything's upbeat." His bosses love that he keeps a book on pitchers, as do some other Rockies, such as Mike Lansing and Jeff Cirillo. **Helton** says it helps him learn as much

about himself as it does the pitchers.

Truth be told, there's as much thought given to getting him out as anyone in the league now. A National League manager says the best chance is to try to bust him inside or throw him pitches that range from extremely slow to moving backward. Trouble is, you can count on one hand the pitchers who throw inside effectively. Fewer still are those with a great changeup. The only things that might slow **Helton** are his slow feet, maybe the biggest handicap to his batting average.

To this point, there are only theories to pitching him. Nothing is working. Astros manager Larry Dierker might have taken the best approach after he saw **Helton** go 9-for-12 against the Pirates in a series leading up to the Astros' visit to Coors Field at the end of May. Dierker had his pitchers walk **Helton** seven times in three games. They held **Helton** to four hits in seven at-bats.

Lefthanders used to give **Helton** some trouble. No longer. His first year, he was platooned with Greg Colbrunn to protect him from lefties; then last year he struggled, batting .245 against them. But Hurdle convinced **Helton** of two things: Don't give lefthanders too much credit, and try to hit the ball to center or left-center—"Not exactly revolutionary stuff," Hurdle says. **Helton** is batting .377 vs. lefthanders now.

The best evidence of **Helton's** improvement is the list of his victims. He hit a first-pitch, game-ending home run off Pittsburgh's Jason Christiansen, a double off Arizona's Randy Johnson and a single in his first at-bat this year off Houston's Billy Wagner. "I make adjustments after each swing, after each at-bat," **Helton** says. Those adjustments are causing opposing scouts to take a blowtorch to their previous reports.

The best reason to think **Helton** has a shot at .400 is that the toughest time is behind him. He was dreadful early on in '98 and '99. "The past two years, I've had good second halves," **Helton** says. "I just wanted to start halfway decent."

He entered the season a .240 hitter in April, but he couldn't have been more consistent early this year. He got a hit in 17 of the first 18 games. (The Cardinals walked him three times April 14.) **Helton** batted .337 this April. He followed that by hitting .512 (that's not a misprint) in May. **Helton** took a .421 average into June.

He isn't kidding that he thinks it's "way too early" to think about .400. When asked if he knew about players over the past decade who took a .400-plus average into June, he guessed only "that guy from Toronto" (meaning Tony Fernandez, who took a .391 average into June last year). But as recently as 1997, both Gwynn and Walker were over .400 on June 1. Gwynn finished at .372 and Walker at .366. And in 1993, another "guy from Toronto," John Olerud—also a lefty, by the way—was over .400 as late as August 2 but finished at .363.

One more advantage **Helton** has over the others is his much shorter track record. We really don't know what he's capable of. Still, **Helton** will have none of it.

"Way too early," he says.

TSN

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THE WAY TO

Ty Cobb
.420 1911
.410 1912
.401 1922

Joe Jackson .408 1911

Rogers Hornsby .401 1922
.424 1924
.403 1925

Ted Williams .406 1941



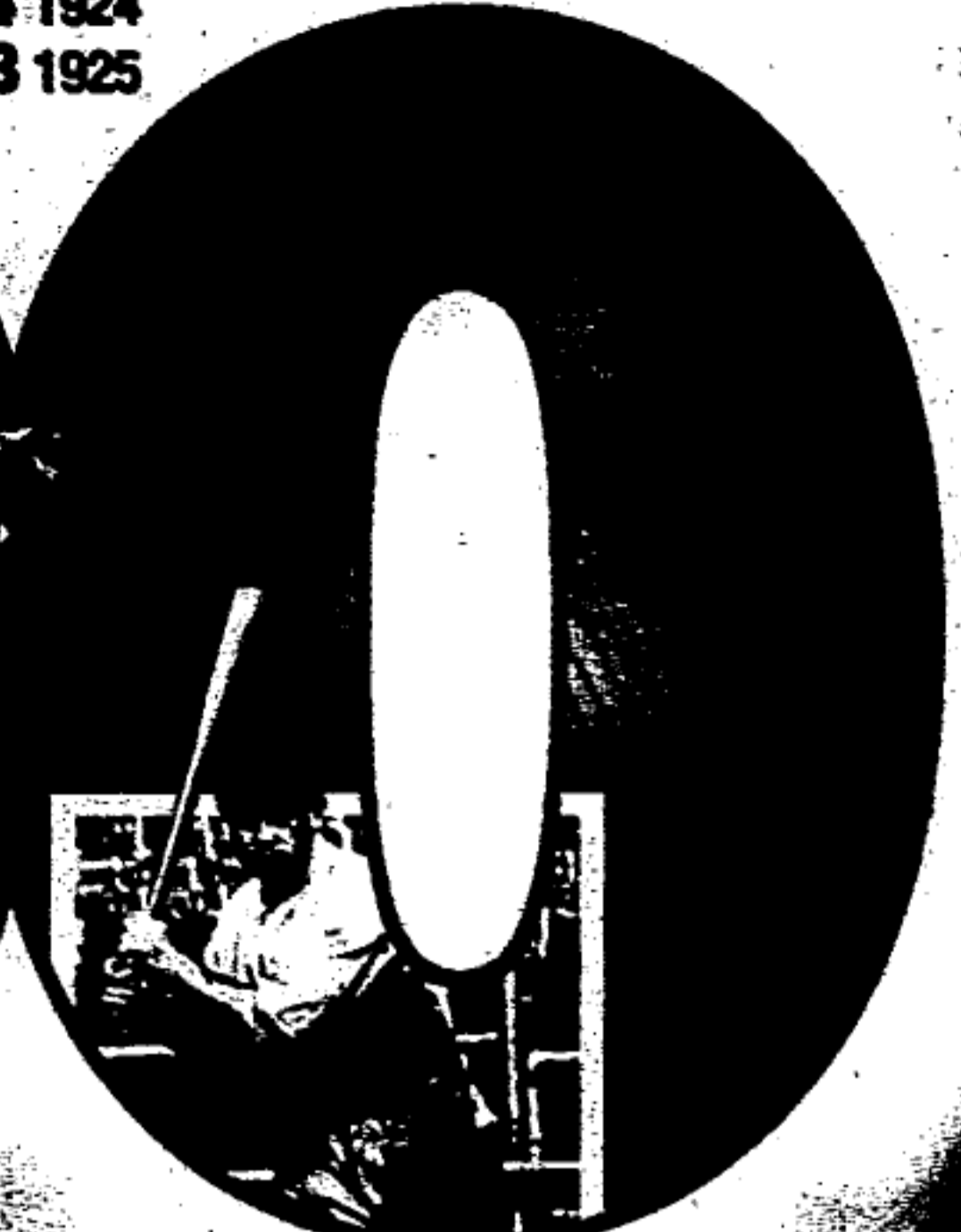
Napoleon Lajoie .422 1901



George Sisler .407 1920
.420 1922



Harry Heilmann .403 1923



Bill Terry .401 1930

As **Todd Helton** enters the season's final month, TSN lays out his road to the magic mark *By Michael Knisley*

The long, narrow box next to **Todd Helton**'s locker at Coors Field holds three bats, his latest shipment of Louisville Slugger lumber, each 34½ inches long and weighing 32 ounces. The company's name and logo are on the side of the box, and on the end, the opened end, is a hand-written message in magic marker: "**Helton**, Go Deep."

But check the mailing label. The box, and the bats, weren't sent straight from the factory in Louisville. The return address is Buffalo, N.Y.

The message, as well as the bats, are from Jeff Manto, who began the season with Colorado but was designated for assignment in late April and is now playing Class AAA ball for Buffalo in the Indians' organization.

Right now, as August gives way to September, the most important person in Helton's mesmerizing bid to become the first player to hit .400 in 59 years—other than **Helton** himself, of course—may be Manto. If **Helton** achieves the baseball immortality that a .400 batting average will bring, he'll do it swinging a Jeff Manto-model bat.

"Have you ever heard of a guy in Triple-A sending bats to a guy in the big leagues?" **Helton** says. "This is probably the first time. The factory won't send me any of his bats, so I have to go through him. And I've only got three left."

The factory, of course, happily will send along a fair share of **Todd Helton-model** bats, but what good are those if **Helton** won't use them? No, a bat has to be right, has to be perfect, has to communicate with its hitter, and the **Helton** model, which is a half-inch shorter, apparently isn't talking these days.

The Manto model, meanwhile, is saying such sweet things. It isn't unlike Harry Potter, the child sorcerer in the enormously popular J.K. Rowling novels, finding the perfect magic wand. After all, Mr. Ollivander tells Harry in the first book, "The wand chooses the wizard."

Just like that, Manto's bat simply seemed to choose **Helton**. And when it did, it was as if red and gold sparks flew from the bat just as they do from the holly-and-phoenix-feather wand Harry finds in Diagon Alley. The first time **Helton** used the Manto-model bat, he went on a 13-for-20 rampage in late May. And recently, when he began to take it to the plate again, he blazed his way through a road trip (St. Louis, Montreal and New York) with 19 hits in 29 at-bats.

"I go through really bad periods when no bat feels good in my hands," **Helton** says. "And that means so much to me. I like a bat that feels good in my hands. When Jeff went back to Cleveland, his bats were left behind. So I picked one up in May, and, boy, did it feel good."

But, of course, Manto's leftover bats didn't last, and **Helton** went back to his own model. Not that he wasn't successful with it. As the week started, he was hitting .394—which means there haven't been *any* extended slumps this season—but when August began, the **Helton** model seemed to lose that lovin' feeling again.

"I struggled, and I struggled," he says of a stretch in which he went 2-for-11 against the Cubs at the end of July and then had "only" three hits in an early-August series against Pittsburgh. "Finally, I said, 'I've got to get some more Jeff Manto bats.' I called him and said, 'Send 'em!'"

So here they are, newly arrived and next to his locker and about to play a starring role in a September drama that may be every bit as compelling as the Mark McGwire-and-Sammy Sosa assault two years ago on baseball's home run record.

Can he do it? Can he become the first player to hit .400 for a full season since Ted Williams hit .406 in 1941? **Helton** probably will need some Harry Potter-like magic to pull it off.

Unfortunately, we can't analyze magic. But we can take a hard look at the who, what and where-of the September ahead that may determine the fate of Helton's quest.



Friday-Sunday, September 1-3 Milwaukee at Coors Field

This year: In six games, Helton is hitting .423 against the Brewers. Even Jeff D'Amico and his 1.94 ERA have felt the sting of his swing. Helton had a pair of hits, including a home run, against D'Amico on July 30. The only Brewer in the rotation to stop him this year is former teammate Jamey Wright. Helton is hitless in five official at-bats against Wright.

Hidden factor: Larry Walker still will be on Colorado's disabled list, which means the Brewers will have more opportunities to pitch around Helton. Walks, though, won't hurt his average, so Helton needs to be extra-patient at the plate.

Prognosis: This series won't put him off the track leading to .400, especially not when it's being played in Denver. Helton's batting average at home this year is .425, and 19 of the Rockies' final 29 games are at home.

Quote: "I'm going to walk him every chance I get. It's his own fault for being so good. He's not going to get pitched to. Put him right up there with (Mike) Piazza and Barry Bonds and those guys. Just go up there and take your walks. I tell you what: I ain't pitching to him." —*Braves RHP Greg Maddux*

Monday-Wednesday, September 4-6 Chicago Cubs at Coors Field

This year: The Cubs are Helton's worst nightmare. In six games, he has two hits in 22 at-bats (.091). The only starter who's given up a hit to him is LHP Daniel Garibay.

Hidden factor: The ex-Rockies Factor. Cubs manager Don Baylor knows Helton well from his days managing in Colorado, and part-time catcher Jeff Reed, who also played with Helton in Denver, is familiar with his swing, too. Hey, at least it's a theory to explain that .091. Says Helton, smiling: "I guess I'm intimidated by Baylor in the other dugout. I liked it when he was in my dugout. But I will try to prove that theory wrong."

Prognosis: If Helton begins to press, this is the series in which it will happen. He knows he hasn't hit the Cubs. He desperately will want to in these games.

Quote: "I saw it from Day One. He constantly squares the ball, even if it's a foul ball, even if it's in the cage. The ball is never off the stick. It's something you notice the first time you watch him. For me, it was like 'Oooh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.' To see what he's doing right now, I can't expect him to do anything other than keep hitting the ball the way he has been." —*Teammate Jeffrey Hammonds*

Friday-Sunday, September 8-10 Los Angeles at Coors Field

This year: The Dodgers have pitched Helton tougher than any team on Colorado's September schedule except the Cubs. He's 3-for-19 (.158) in six games, with the hits coming against RHP Chan Ho Park, LHP Carlos Perez and RHP Eric Gagne. He's 0-for-5 against RHP Kevin Brown, and he hasn't faced RHP Darren Dreifort this year.

Hidden factor: The Dodgers can't stack the deck against Helton like most teams. As a matter of course, Helton sees situational relievers earlier in games than other hitters do, and he faces a lefty-lefty matchup from the sixth inning on in nearly every close game. But the only lefty on L.A.'s staff is Perez.

Prognosis: Because this series is in Coors Field, Helton should fare better than his .158 season average to date against the Dodgers. He'll have to. He faces them again the next weekend in Los Angeles.

Quote: "He's seeing the ball about as well as anybody I've ever watched. He's looking for location, and then just being quick with a quiet body and a real quiet approach to his swing. If you get the ball middle away right now, he just kills it. He stays back through it now on the offspeed stuff, the breaking balls. He's not up there thinking fastball, fastball, fastball. He's hitting what he sees." —*Cardinals' advance scout Joe Sparks*



CLIFF GRASSMICK FOR TSN

**Monday-Wednesday, September 11-13
San Diego at Qualcomm Stadium**

This year: Helton has slaughtered the Padres. If he finishes over .400, he can thank starters RHP Adam Eaton (3-for-4 in two games), RHP Matt Clement (2-for-2) and RHP Brian Meadows (2-for-3 and since traded to Kansas City). *In toto*, Helton has hit .519 against San Diego, including .600 in four games at Qualcomm.

Hidden factor: The out-of-contention Padres should be in call-up mode for this series, which means they may be throwing minor-leaguers at him. Since one of his strengths is his devotion to scouting, he could struggle against newcomers.

Prognosis: He won't.

Quote: "He has the deadest head in baseball. No matter what he does, even when he lifts his foot and puts it down, his head does not move. When he takes his swing, the only thing you see is the top of his helmet ... He's got the Tony Gwynn ability. I think, to pick up a ball, I think he will hit .400." —Atlanta (and former San Diego) hitting coach Merv Rettenmund

**Thursday-Sunday, September 14-17
Los Angeles at Dodger Stadium**

This year: See September 8-10.

Hidden factor: Where the Dodgers stand may determine the quality of pitching Helton sees. If they're still in contention, they'll care. If they're not, he gets the edge.

Prognosis: This series could be a big stumbling block. It's in a pitcher's park in a media cooker. Still, he has hit .362 on the road this year.

Quote: "I don't know if he can do it, but I tell you what: He's taking me to places that I haven't been in a long time, just watching him. His work ethic, the joy of playing the game. ... I got to watch George (Brett) chase .400, too, and Todd has the same passion and respect for the game I saw in George." —Rockies hitting coach Clint Hurdle

**Tuesday-Thursday, September 19-21
San Diego at Coors Field**

This year: See September 11-13.

Hidden factor: Don't count on RHP Trevor Hoffman to keep him from .400. Even one of the best closers in the majors throws up his hands when he faces Helton, who is 3-for-3 (two doubles) against him this year.

Prognosis: If he's just below .400 when this series starts, he'll be just above it by the time it ends.

Quote: "Todd Helton might be the best-looking hitter I've ever seen since George Brett. I just watch him now. I don't even watch our pitcher. I just watch him, just focus in on him. He is so smooth. Every swing is good. This guy seems like he hits a line drive every time he swings the bat. Boy, I wouldn't bet against him hitting .400. I ain't joking." —Braves manager Bobby Cox

**Friday-Sunday, September 22-24
Florida at Coors Field**

This year: No contest. Helton is hitting .458 in six games. He's roughed up every Marlins starter he's faced except RHP Reid Cornelius, who held him hitless in two at-bats last month. RHP Chuck Smith and RHP Alex Fernandez each gave up three hits to him.

Hidden factor: Fernandez is done for the year, so Helton can't feast on those pitches again. This should be another series in which he'll see arms he doesn't know.

Prognosis: He makes hay. A big series here will set up a dramatic final week.

When does .400 start?

If Todd Helton finishes the season with a batting average of .398664, the books will say he hit .399. No one will care that Helton really wasn't a .399 hitter.

It makes perfect sense to round off batting averages. It has been done forever. They're much easier to read, to say, to remember.

You're never going to hear this: "Man, Helton surely was great that year he hit .398664."

But if Helton's final average is a single point higher, the rules change. If he finishes at .399664, he will not be a .400 hitter. He'll be a .399 hitter.

"You have to hit .400 to hit .400," says Seymour Siwoff, president of the Elias Sports Bureau, the official stats keeper for the major leagues. "Numbers are rounded off for convenience. A number of this significance would not be rounded off."

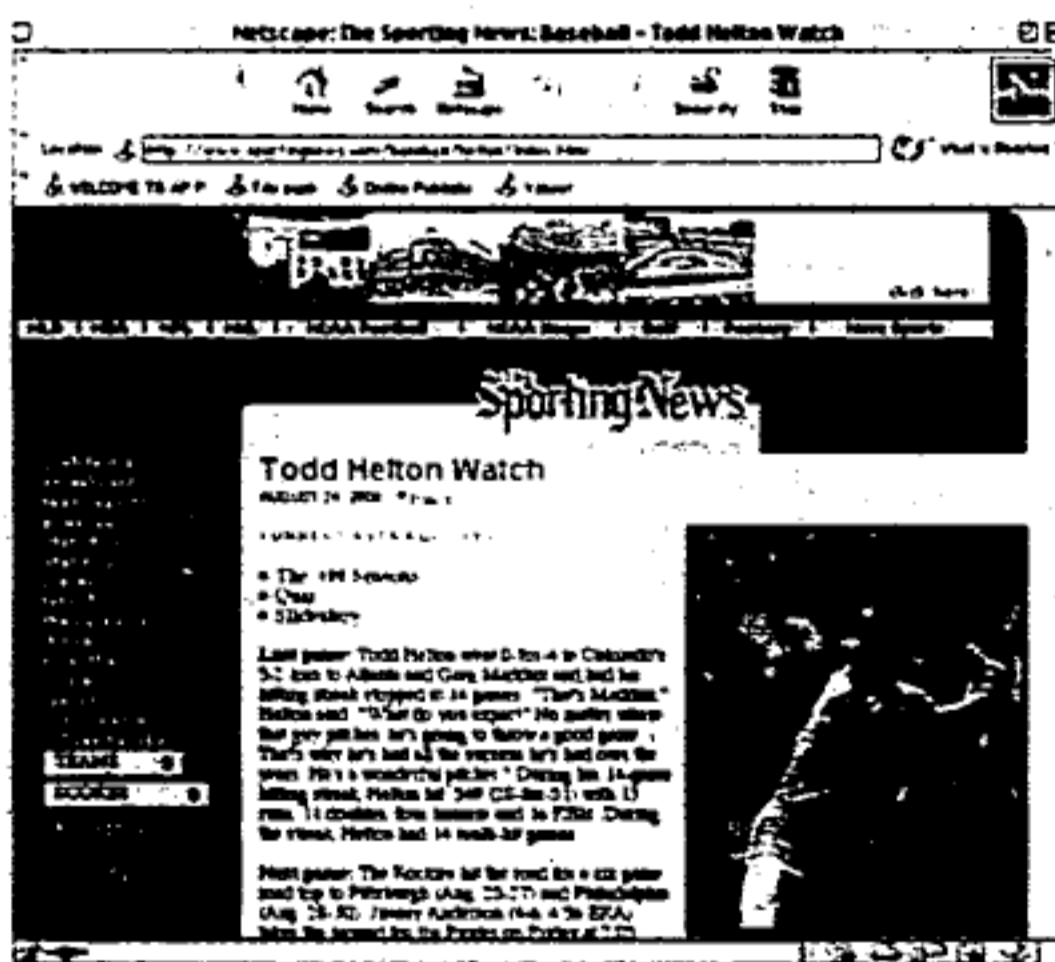
Ted Williams created part of his legend when he refused to sit on the last day of the 1941 season when he was batting .3995535. He was given the choice because everyone figured he had nothing to gain by playing. He would be a .400 hitter if he sat. Williams went 6-for-8 in a doubleheader and wiped out all doubt with an average of .406.

Or actually, an average of .4057017.

—Stan McNeal

FOLLOW THE QUEST

Todd Helton is so hot, he's got his own area on TSN's Web site. Besides the latest news on Helton's quest to hit .400, you can read about the Rockies' upcoming opponents, take the .400 quiz and learn all about the club of .400 hitters. To get there, point your browser to www.sportingnews.com/baseball



Quote: "I'd definitely rather face somebody I've seen before. If they bring some guy up who throws 97 and has no idea where it's going ... no, I wouldn't look forward to that. But if he's just your regular righthanded Joe that they're putting out there, that'd be fine with me." —Todd Helton

**Monday-Thursday, September 25-28
Arizona at Coors Field**

This year: He's below-average against the Diamondbacks, batting .281 in nine games. He has handled LHP Brian Anderson (3-for-8), and has survived against LHP Randy Johnson (1-for-4) and RHP Armando Reynoso (1-for-5). He hasn't faced RHP Curt Schilling.

Hidden factor: He won't have to face LHP Omar Daal (traded to the Phillies for Schilling), against whom he has never hit well (3-for-16).

Prognosis: This series won't hurt Helton's average as much as you might think. Why? If the Rockies face Johnson, Helton won't play. Manager Buddy Bell says that's the one game his first baseman will get off in September.

Quote: "You don't see him take lunges at the ball. He's got his feet under his body all the time, and that makes it tough to read a guy."

He stays on the ball, and it keeps him from taking funny swings. It's hard to read a guy like that."

—Braves RHP John Burkett

**Friday-Sunday, September 29-October 1
Atlanta Braves at Turner Field**

This year: In six games, Helton is hitting .292. But he went 4-for-11 (.364) in the Rockies' only other trip to Atlanta this season. He has figured out RHP Kevin Millwood, who gave him trouble until this season, by going 4-for-5 in two games this year. Maddux is tough on him (1-for-6). Helton is 1-for-3 against LHP Tom Glavine, 1-for-2 against RHP Andy Ashby (with Philly) and 0-for-2 against Burkett.

Hidden factor: If the Braves have clinched their playoff spot, how much of an edge will they take to the mound?

Prognosis: If Helton needs hits and Atlanta is playing to stay ahead of the Mets, he's in trouble. He'll be walked at least twice a game. But this much we know: He'll be in the lineup, even if he has a chance to lose it all. Read on.

Quote: "If he's hitting .401 going into the last day of the season in Atlanta, he will play. I think he has a better chance of hitting .403 from there than .399. That's how much I think of this kid." —Rockies' manager Buddy Bell

TSN

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Putting .400 under the microscope

		Through August 31			Full season			After August 31		
		AB	H	AVG	AB	H	AVG	AB	H	AVG
1901	Napoleon Lajoie	431	186	.432	543	229	.422	112	43	.384
1911	Ty Cobb	473	199	.421	591	248	.420	118	49	.415
1911	Joe Jackson	452	185	.409	571	233	.408	119	48	.403
1912	Ty Cobb	461	190	.412	553	227	.410	92	37	.402
1920	George Sisler	488	193	.395	631	257	.407	143	64	.448
1922	Ty Cobb	452	181	.400	526	211	.401	74	30	.405
1922	George Sisler	504	211	.419	586	246	.420	82	35	.427
1922	Rogers Hornsby	488	190	.389	623	250	.401	135	60	.444
1923	Harry Hellmann	400	159	.398	524	211	.403	124	52	.419
1924	Rogers Hornsby	465	202	.434	536	227	.424	71	25	.352
1925	Rogers Hornsby	430	167	.388	504	203	.403	74	36	.486
1930	Bill Terry	518	210	.405	633	254	.401	115	44	.383
1941	Ted Williams	383	156	.407	456	185	.406	73	29	.397