

Young Twins Pile Up Mistakes

By PATRICK REUSSE

TWIN CITIES—Rookies? You want rookies? Talk to the Minnesota Twins.

During the 1982 season, 15 players officially designated as rookies have played for the Twins. On several occasions, Manager Billy Gardner has started lineups that, including the pitcher, contained eight rookies.

What happens when a team places such a reliance on first-year players?

With the halfway mark of the season approaching, the Twins were operating at a pace that would break the all-time futility mark for a 162-game schedule. That mark was established by the 1962 New York Mets (40-120, two-rain cancellations, 250).

The Twins and their rookies went over seven weeks without winning two games in succession. If the pitching didn't get them, and it usually did, then a lack of hitting would prove to be their undoing.

"I'll bet that one mistake has beaten us in at least 20 games," said third baseman Gary Gaetti, one of the rookies.

The Twins are, in a twisted way, solid evidence that experience wins close games. When its record stood at 16-52 (.235), Minnesota was 0-9 in extra innings, 4-11 in one-run games and 3-12 in two-run games.

Through the gloom, Gardner could see some progress. "Up here, you learn by your mistakes, and we've made enough of them so that we're starting to show improvement," Gardner said. "The most obvious mistakes have been in baserunning and in not being selective at the plate. If there is anything experience will show you, it is that—when you get a pitcher in a certain spot—wait for your pitch. Except for Herbie, we haven't been doing that."

Except for Herbie...

Several of the rookies have been ringing up respectable offensive statistics, but it is Herbie Kent Hrbek, the big first baseman from the Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington—who has stood out from the rest.

Earl Weaver, the Baltimore manager, called Hrbek the best hitter to come into the American League since Eddie Murray. In Minnesota, he has been compared to both Harmon Killebrew—because of his power—and to Tony Oliva—because of his consistency.

During one stretch, Hrbek had a 23-game hitting streak and then a 17-game streak. In his first 55 starts, Hrbek had failed to hit in only four games. And the lefthanded hitter was carrying a .384 average against lefthanded pitching.

"Hitting lefthanders is what has me fired up," Hrbek said. "Now I say, 'If I'm hitting lefthanders, I should kill righthanders.' Ever since I've opened up my stance, I've been decent against lefthanders."

"In California, Rod Carew was standing in the outfield and I asked him, 'What is your basic approach to lefthanders?' He said, 'Open up so you see the ball with both eyes instead of seeing the ball with one eye and your nose with the other.'"

Gaetti, Hrbek's road roommate and closest friend with the Twins, said, "At first, I thought Kent was just hot. After watching him for two months, I decided he was that good. If we keep playing in this ball park, I have a hunch Roger Maris' home run record will fall."

The park—the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in downtown Minneapolis—opened in April, and it has become the American League's launching pad. Of Hrbek's first 15 home runs, 11 came in the Metrodome, although only a couple were obviously aided by the short fence and cozy dimensions in right field.

"If Hrbek stays healthy, he has a chance to hit 400 or 500 home runs," Gardner said. "I usually wait until the end of their second-year before I commit myself on players, but after seeing the way he's handled clubs the second time, I'm convinced."

"He's very capable of leading the league in hitting, too. For a kid that young (22), I haven't seen such a complete player since Al Kaline came into the league and led it in hitting." (Kaline won the batting title at age 20, hitting .340 for Detroit in 1955, his second full season.)

Hrbek's performance has been an amazing contradiction to the Twins in general. His name has been among the league leaders in average (.330 through June 27), home runs (15) and RBIs (49). In recent weeks, he has been attracting national attention. On the Twins' first Eastern trip, Hrbek appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America."

"The phone is ringing all the time," Gaetti said. "I'm sure Kent isn't getting as much sleep as he would like, because reporters are constantly calling in the morning."

It took Rod Carew a decade and a half-dozen batting championships in Minnesota to attain the type of national exposure Hrbek has been getting lately. But Gaetti said the publicity hasn't changed Hrbek, and Kent is hoping that it won't.

"People expect me to do things for them since I'm from around here, but I have to have my free time, too," Hrbek said. "It's more them making you change. I'm still trying to be Kent Hrbek."

Hrbek would like to stay as unchanged as possible. The Minnesota fans, extremely cynical over the failure of the Twins' front office to retain the team's most talented players, already are talking about five years down the road, when they assume Hrbek will be playing elsewhere.

"First of all, it's too early to say I'm going to be good enough to be in demand," Hrbek said. "You can't call me Ted Williams



or Mickey Mantle until I've played for five years and the law of averages takes effect.

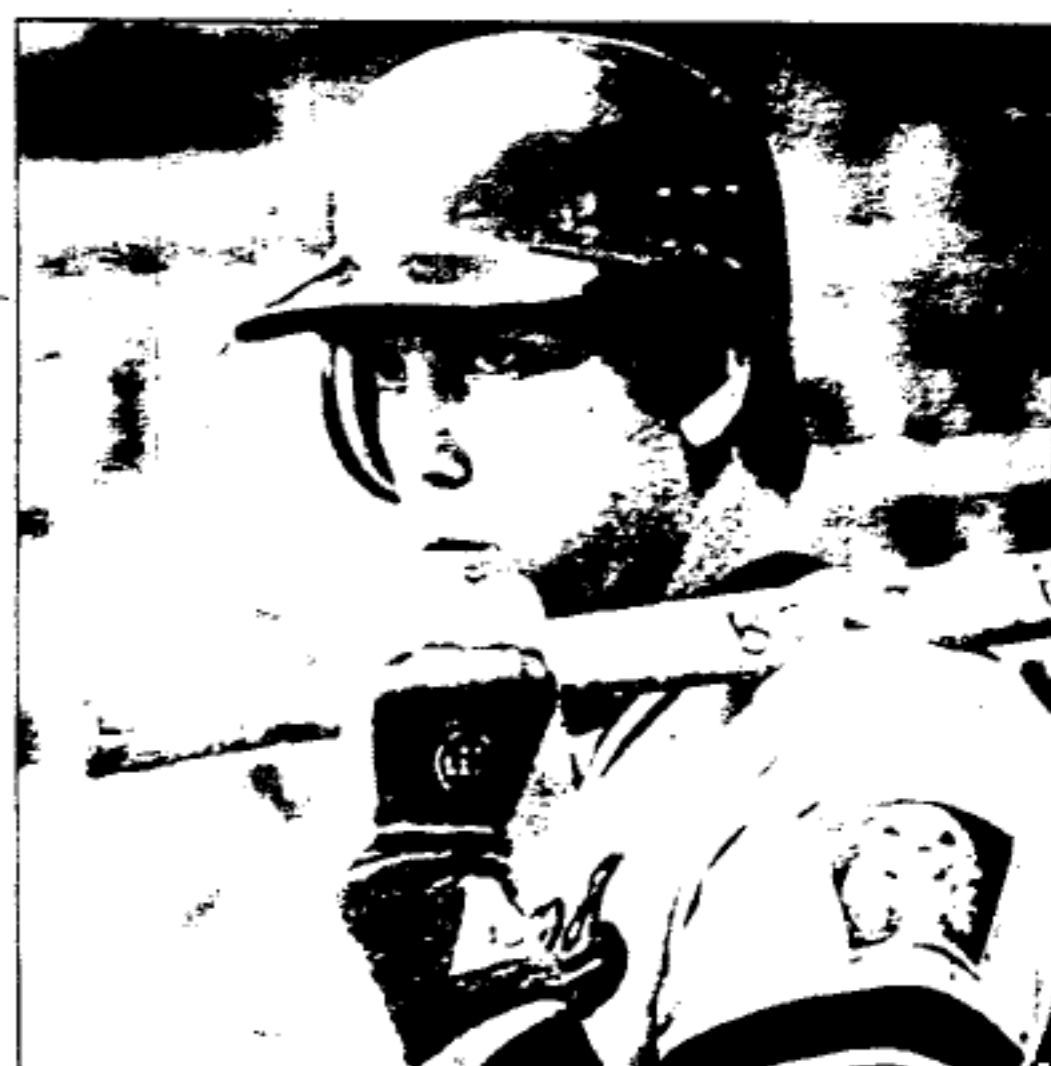
"But, if I do well, I'd definitely love to stay here the rest of my life. I haven't found a place I like better. I'll make sure the money is what I'm worth, but I want it to happen here. I hear all the time that George Steinbrenner (New York Yankees owner) will have me in a couple of years. The only way he'd get me is if he came here and coached."

Hrbek's arrival as a star is a contrast to the struggles of his pal, Gaetti. Both Hrbek and Gaetti had excellent spring training performances, and they entered the season with similar expectations. On opening night in the Dome, Hrbek had two singles and two RBIs. Gaetti hit two home runs, was thrown out at the plate trying for a third (inside-the-park) and drove in four runs.

From that meteoric start, Gaetti slipped to the point the Twins were talking about sending him back to the minor leagues. Even when he reached nine home runs, there was talk Gaetti would be sent to Triple A.

Gaetti's average has remained around .200, but that talk has started to subside. When someone produced the statistics that, in his first season at Philadelphia, Mike Schmidt batted .196, with a strikeout every 2.7 at-bats, the Twins seemed to get over their disappointment in Gaetti, and Gardner re-inserted him at third base.

Like his manager, Gaetti believes the toughest thing for a rookie hitter is to be selective in RBI situations. "I've cost myself plenty this year by being overly anxious," Gaetti said. "But I'm learning. I think we're all learning. It would be nice if we could all have the consistency of Kent, but he's a special case. I'm just hoping that, if he happens to cool off, I'll have made the adjustment by then, and I'll get hot. The young players on this team do have a strong feeling of togetherness."



Kent Hrbek (above right) hit the major league scene with a bang, while Gary Gaetti has struggled but shown promise.

In addition to Hrbek at first base and Gaetti at third, five other positions—catcher (Tim Laudner), shortstop (Ron Washington), center field (first Jim Eisenreich and now Bobby Mitchell), right field (Tom Brunansky) and designated hitter (Randy Johnson and Jesus Vega) are being filled by rookies.

Eisenreich, troubled by a nervous disorder since late April, was placed on the disabled list for the second time June 18. That left the Twins with 12 rookies on the 25-man roster.

The first big league season has not gone well for Gaetti. Laudner, Mitchell, infielder Lennie Faedo and pitchers Paul Boris, Terry Felton and Frank Viola. Two other rookies—pitcher Pete Filson and outfielder Randy Bush—came to the Twins and, after short stays, returned to Triple A.

Washington is the Twins' most unlikely rookie success story. When the Twins traded shortstop Roy Smalley to the Yankees in April, one of the advertised reasons was to make room for Faedo. But when Faedo struggled at the plate and in the field, Gardner inserted Washington, a 30-year-old career minor leaguer.

Washington has held his batting average around .290, and his play in the field, while sporadic, occasionally has been spectacular.

The Twins have proven that putting a dozen or more rookies on the same team virtually guarantees defeat. For sure, the 1982 Twins are an endorsement for the value of experience.

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