

BASEBALL

Breakup Doesn't Hurt McGwire's Play

PHOENIX—Mark McGwire doesn't linger on the subject of his divorce. He admits to it, then prefers to talk about other things. **McGwire** did say that the breakup of his marriage had no effect on his work at first base for the Oakland A's last season.

Mark and **Kathy McGwire** are in the final stages of divorce proceedings that began last year. The A's slugger gave Manager Tony LaRussa a lot of credit for helping him get through the difficult summer of 1988.

"It wasn't distracting," said **McGwire**. "I had a talk with Tony and I asked him to watch me very carefully. He complimented me for my ability to separate my life off the field from my life on the field."

Rumors that McGwire's marriage was in trouble circulated in the A's clubhouse through most of last season. The couple tried several times to work out problems, but finally sought a divorce.

"It's done," said the 1987 American League Rookie of the Year. "I got the divorce. Kathy and I are very good friends and we have a beautiful child. We're going to see each other the rest of our lives because we have Matthew."

The McGwires' son was born at the end of the 1987 season. **Mark**, who had already amassed 49 home runs, most ever by a rookie, passed up a chance to reach the half-century mark when he left the team before the final game of the season to be with Kathy during Matthew's birth.

"I love my kid to death," **Mark** said. "We're going to make it a positive thing where he can grow up in two households."

LaRussa said he was impressed with the way **McGwire** handled himself while dealing with his personal problems.

"**Mark McGwire** has shown in his first years that he is amazing," said LaRussa. "He's one of the amazing A's; he's just a strong



Mark McGwire

guy mentally."

LaRussa didn't take any credit for helping **McGwire** through a difficult '88 season.

"All of what he did, he did because he handled himself very well," said the manager.

Those who suggest that **McGwire** didn't have such a great second season should take another look at the bottom line. McGwire's .289 batting average, 49 homers and 118 runs batted in as a freshman left him with a tough act to follow. No longer a new face to pitchers, **McGwire** batted .260 with 32 homers and 99 RBIs last year.

"When you look at consistent run production, he had a great year," said LaRussa.

McGwire refuses to make ex-

cuses for his output in 1988.

"I think I had a pretty darn good year," he said. "I was third in the league in home runs, in the top eight in runs batted in and second in the league in game-winning RBIs (with 20).

"I think people looked at me more for what I didn't do compared to 1987. I don't think that's fair."

There were also those who found **McGwire** to be more standoffish in his second year than in '87, when he tried to satisfy all interview requests. **McGwire** was available last season, but on his own terms. All he asked for was time alone, to prepare for a game that is demanding both physically and mentally.

"I didn't want to do anything unless it was scheduled before a game," **McGwire** said. "I did so much in 1987 that I had to stop in 1988 and get ready for games."

The 6-5 redhead also limited the time he spend at card shows and other engagements in the off-season, instead devoting most of the winter to preparation for '89.

"I wanted to stay at home; I didn't want to be away from my son that long," **McGwire** said. "We do so much traveling all year long, the last thing I wanted to do was fly back East."

McGwire, whose '89 contract will pay \$425,000, with another \$75,000 possible in bonuses, said he hopes to improve this season.

"There is always room for improvement, definitely as a hitter," he said. "My first year I hit more balls to right center and I didn't do that last year as consistently."

And **McGwire** said he would just as soon stay out of the spotlight, adding that he was happy last year when Jose Canseco drew most of the attention by putting together an MVP season.

"With the team doing well and (with) Jose, it took a lot of the media attention away from me," said **McGwire**, "which I enjoyed."

KIT STIER

Parrish Up to Challenge

MESA, Ariz.—Another catcher, perhaps a younger player, might not be so eager to replace ageless wonder Bob Boone, who left the California Angels in the off-season. But Lance Parrish, who has the unenviable task of filling Boone's shoes, won't mind whatever comparisons may be made.

"Look at it this way: Bob Boone was probably one of the greatest catchers in the game, and the Angels still were under .500 the last two years," Parrish said. "I don't think you're going to see a drop-off. I've proven over the years what I'm capable of doing."

But little of that proof came during the 12-year veteran's two seasons in the National League, with Philadelphia in 1987 and '88.

Derailed by the transition from the American League, where he spent 10 years with the Tigers, and bothered by miscommunication with the pitching staff and fan criticism, Parrish posted a .230 average with 32 homers and 127 runs batted in in his two seasons with the Phillies. Those numbers hardly matched Parrish's record as a perennial All-Star in Detroit.

Unhappy in Philadelphia, Parrish was sent to the Angels for minor league pitcher David Holdridge in October. Even if he hadn't been traded, Parrish most likely would have left the Phillies via new-look free agency, the same route that Boone took to Kansas City.

"It was either here or back to Detroit," said Parrish. "But if it was the Tigers, it would've meant again packing up my family (already settled in Yorba Linda, a suburb of Anaheim). It was just so much easier this way."

Parrish appeared headed to



Lance Parrish

the Angels after the 1986 season. Then the owners' collusion restrained free-agent movement. At the time, however, the Angels claimed that it was Parrish's lower-back problems that kept them from signing him.

"That was a very convenient excuse for a lot of teams," Parrish said. "It started with the Tigers making an issue out of the back to hold down my salary."

"It's a problem I'll have to face my whole career, but I know how to handle it. I just have to keep doing my therapy."

Although back problems may prevent Parrish from matching Boone's standards defensively, he does not have a peer among catchers when it comes to offense. In nine full seasons with the Tigers, he averaged 24 home runs and 78 RBIs.

"I feel like I'm very capable of getting back to my previous numbers," he said. "You can't have a career year every time out. But I know what I'm capable of accomplishing."

TOM SINGER

Incaviglia Hopes to Cut Down on KOs

PORT CHARLOTTE, Fla.—Pete Incaviglia's winter tutorial with Manager Bobby Valentine paid off in the early days of the Texas Rangers' exhibition season. It took him 10 plate appearances before his first whiff of the spring.

For Incaviglia, that's progress. After all, the outfielder has averaged one strikeout for every 3.2 plate appearances in his three-year career.

"That's what I'm striving for, to cut down on my strikeouts," Incaviglia said. "Right now I'm doing something new, trying to make more contact, and it's just a matter of getting my timing down."

This winter, Valentine worked with Incaviglia on shortening his stride into the pitch. Valentine said Incaviglia had taken about 20 inches off his stride, cutting it by more than half by going from 36 inches to about 16.

"It's going to keep his head still and get his bat through the zone quicker," Valentine said. "He's



Pete Incaviglia

going to be able to see the bad pitches sooner."

In an exhibition game against Detroit early in the spring, Incaviglia singled to right field on a pitch from Doyle Alexander that was high and inside.

"He has swung through that pitch 1,000 times," Valentine said. "He got a base hit on it today."

Incaviglia recognizes the need to cut down on his strikeouts.

With 153 in 418 at-bats last year, he shared the American League dunce cap with Milwaukee's Rob Deer. Moreover, his 116 games were the fewest played by an A.L. strikeout leader since Pat Seerey struck out 102 times in 105 games in 1948.

In addition to decreasing his strikeout total, Incaviglia has set other goals.

"I'm trying to be shorter and quicker. My goal is to hit .300 and drive in 100 runs," he said. "If I do that, I'll probably hit 30 to 40 homers. That will make a big difference in the win-loss column. I'll help the ball club more by doing that than by hitting 45 homers and hitting .250."

Incaviglia also hopes to walk more.

"It's important to the team that I get close to 80 or 100 walks," he said. "Then if I can cut my strikeouts down from 160, to 90 or 100, it's going to make a difference in the win-loss column."

PHIL ROGERS

Sox Want Pitching Strike

SARASOTA, Fla.—Sammy Ellis wants his pitchers to go on strike. The new pitching coach for the Chicago White Sox is preaching strikes, especially with the first pitch.

Ellis wants the first pitch to every batter to be a strike. He would like it to be a quality strike, but that isn't important, as long as it's a strike.

Ellis has even compiled computerized data to help his pitchers see how greatly first-pitch success affects the outcome of an at-bat.

Statistics from the 1988 season show that batters have a .214 average when the first pitch is a strike, while they have a .301 average when the first pitch is a ball. The on-base percentage of batters who are thrown a strike on the first pitch is .052.

"Your chances of giving up a hit if your first pitch is a strike are slim," said Ellis. "And I'm sure guys with great stuff have even better statistics than those."

In every meeting with his pitchers, Ellis stresses the point, especially to the youngsters. He notes that last season, only four teams in the league gave up more than the 533 walks allowed by the White Sox.

"We're trying to eliminate their fear of throwing a first-pitch strike," Ellis said. "We tell them that if they get their brains beat out, make it early in the count and not late in the count when you have to throw strikes."

"We know in the long run they'll be ahead of the game. And everyone knows the defense is better and more alert if you throw strikes."

The idea is being stressed throughout the organization.

"Only guys who throw strikes will pitch for the White Sox," Ellis said. "We're not going to call up any guys who can't throw strikes."

Ellis doesn't even mind that opposing teams will read about his intention to make his pitchers open with strikes.

"I don't care if they know it," Ellis said. "I wish every writer in the nation would write about it. They'll all know it after we go around the league once anyway."

Ellis thinks the statistics will hold, even if the opposing hitters know when a strike is on the way.

"Don't forget," he said, "it could be a curveball. We don't care what pitch he throws, as long as it's a strike."

DAVE VAN DYCK