

The Mets' Bullfighter

Rookie Phenom **Jefferies** Expected to Be Keystone of Club's Future

By JOSEPH DURSO

NEW YORK—"It's like a bullfight," Dave Johnson was saying, depicting the fine but highly perilous art of turning the double play. "The second baseman is the matador. His left leg is the red flag. You plant it on the bag, and the runner comes sliding in straight for it. He's the bull."

To Johnson, manager of the New York Mets, the opening of the season marked the start of an experiment, perhaps the most sensitive of his six-year reign. It also marked the closing of a seminar that had set the stage for the experiment: a course on how to play second base without getting gored.

He had many bulls in mind, but only one matador: **Gregg Jefferies**, alias "The Kid," the whiz who crashed into the big leagues late last season with his stock of Elvis Presley tapes, his bat and his third baseman's glove and hit .321 with six home runs in 29 games.

The only problem was that the Mets already had two other third basemen. The senior one was Howard Johnson, who has hit 60 home runs in the last two seasons. The junior one was Dave Magadan, who has played in four leagues and hit .300 in all four. So where do you play the phenom without dislocating the entire lineup?

That's how the second-base seminar was born, this spring.

The master was Dave Johnson, who 25 years ago switched from shortstop to second base for the Baltimore Orioles. The pupil was **Jefferies**, who didn't want to change positions. He admitted from the start that he was scared to death of those bulls charging into the bag while he was trying to plant his foot, wave the red flag, handle the throw and relay the ball to first base.

For a while, **Jefferies** wanted no part of it. But Johnson said he would teach his prodigy how to survive in the wild world of slides and spikes. And every day in spring training, Johnson stood next to second base with one of his coaches, Bud Harrelson, a star shortstop for 16 years, and taught **Jefferies** how to make the double play.

"You can practice it in your hotel room," Johnson told **Jefferies**. "Fold a towel, and put it on the floor. That's the base. Now, take the throw from the shortstop, and come across the base. One, two, three. Just like that."

Now, having survived the opening weeks of his first full season at in the big leagues, **Jefferies** says that he has found a home at second base. And Professor Johnson says his pupil has earned high marks on his early report card.

"He started out as a D-plus," said the former second baseman. "He's already a C-plus. He's above average right now. Before the first

third of the season's gone, he'll improve to a B-plus. When I was switching positions, I was a B-plus after half of my rookie season.

"He's still a little crude in his footwork. But he hasn't blown any double plays. You can cover a lot more ground out there than you think, so he's having no problem with range. He's making all the plays. He's got the throwing angles worked out. He's been hitting the ball hard, even when the hits haven't been falling in, so I know he's not brooding.

"I'm very pleased with his performance. It makes it possible for me to put my best offensive team on the field. It makes it possible for me to start my ideal infield: Keith Hernandez at first base, **Jefferies** at second, HoJo at third, Kevin Elster at shortstop."

Behind his ideal infield, Johnson has Magadan and Tim Teufel. So he has a basic infield that's perfectly symmetrical, with two switch-hitters, a righthanded hitter and a lefthanded hitter who's a former batting champion. In reserve, he has a lefthanded hitter and a righthanded hitter.

"I never said I didn't want to play second base," **Jefferies** said after the season began. "But I admitted that my best position was third. I felt more comfortable there. I was afraid I'd get 'clocked' by some baserunner barreling into second and I'd come out of it with a damaged knee and a damaged career."

"But now I feel very comfortable at second. I don't worry about getting hit. In my mind, I'm a second baseman, and that's fine with me."

Don't think it has been one long, smooth success story. In spring training, **Jefferies** went 1 for 21 while learning to play his new position, and everybody raised eyebrows and wondered if the Mets had gained a second baseman but lost a hitter. But **Jefferies** and the manager both defused that issue. Both said that **Jefferies** had been swinging the bat naturally and hitting the ball hard.

A slow start at the plate by **Jefferies** was also part of the reason the Mets scored a National League-low 35 runs in their first 10 games, only three of them victories. While everybody assumed it was only a matter of time until the rest of the Mets joined Darryl Strawberry, who has been carrying the load offensively, and began hitting, no one was pointing a finger at **Jefferies**.

He isn't the marked man, which he seemed to be when he crashed into the lineup last season like a 700-pound gorilla who could play,

Gregg Jefferies went to school on Manager Dave Johnson and earned high marks from the master.

work and sleep anywhere he wanted. Because of **Jefferies**' arrival, Wally Backman was traded to the Minnesota Twins last winter, Howard Johnson was mentioned in trade talks all spring and the "traffic jam" on the infield became the hottest topic in the clubhouse and the marketplace.

But **Jefferies** has survived the bruised feelings, chiefly because his teammates know he can play. He was the Mets' No. 1 pick in the free-agent draft in June of 1985, and he sizzled from the start. He hit .343 in a rookie league, .339 in Class A, .367 in Double A and .282 during a Triple-A "slump" that puzzled and angered him.

But after the Mets promoted him last August 28 and he became the 84th third baseman in club history, he singled and doubled off the Giants' Mike Krukow in his first two at-bats.

In his second game, he played second base and went 3 for 4—a double, a triple and a home run—against the San Diego Padres.

In his second week in the majors, he went 11 for 25 with three home runs, eight runs scored

and nine runs batted in, compiled a .960 slugging percentage in eight games and was named the N.L. Player of the Week. He started 19 games at third base and eight at second before the playoffs, in which he got nine hits in 27 at-bats against the Los Angeles Dodgers. He became the youngest player other than a pitcher to start an N.L. playoff game, and he got more hits than any other first-year player in playoff history.

Then he went home to Millbrae, Calif., and spent the winter with his coach, tutor and father, Rich Jefferies, a high school teacher and baseball coach who has monitored and fashioned his son's career every step of the way. They have worked intensively and almost obsessively, pushing **Gregg** through a relentless regimen of drills—including swinging at baseballs, swinging at softballs, learning not to swing at any balls and swinging underwater to quicken his stroke.

Gregg even sees strategic reasons to shoot pool, almost an obsession and something he has done since childhood.

"My whole family plays pool,"

Jefferies said. "We've always had a pool table at home. It helps your hand-eye coordination."

Then, when baseball's most heralded rookie packed up his 33½-inch, 32-ounce bats and his Elvis tapes and headed to Port St. Lucie, Fla., for spring training, he found Dave Johnson waiting with the second-base seminar.

"The main thing to learn at second base is the pivot in the double play," Johnson said. "Nothing else is difficult. The range to your right and left, no problem. The angle to first base, no problem. The kid's arm is good, but not a cannon, definitely better for second base than for third. The only tricky thing is the pivot."

Although **Jefferies** took his manager's advice and practiced in his apartment, using a towel for the base, the real laboratory was held on the infield every day. That's where **Jefferies** had to solve the mysteries of playing second base. That's where he had to face his biggest fear: that he would reach for the ball, step across the bag and take a shattering blind-side shot from a runner that might ruin his knee—and his career.

"You make the play with a series of steps—one, two, three," Johnson said, dancing across an imaginary bag and catching an imaginary ball. "You plant your left leg on the bag, and the runner slides straight for it. You catch the ball, pivot on your left foot and step across the bag with your right foot. You plant the right foot on the other side, pivot on it and throw the ball while you raise your left leg and the runner slides under it. You're throwing the ball right through him, and he's not knocking you into left field."

"Who taught me? Mostly guys from other teams, like Bobby Richardson of the Yankees," said Johnson, a Rawlings Gold Glove second baseman who played on four pennant winners with the Orioles. "When I was a rookie, I worked with Luis Aparicio, a great shortstop playing his final season. When I was throwing the ball to him, he wanted it in one narrow area and no place else—on the outside corner of the bag. He was that demanding."

Jefferies is a sunny-faced 21-year-old with curly hair and All-American good looks, and he still analyzes his performance every evening with his father, who follows the Mets via his satellite dish.

"We get on the telephone after every game," **Gregg** said. "He tells me I'm swinging good. I feel fine about the whole thing now. I don't even come to the park hoping I'll switch back to third. I think of myself as a second baseman now. And nobody's clocked me yet."

The matador of the Mets winced a little, then added: "Not yet anyway."

