



Will he? ... or won't he, return to San Francisco, that is.

The Thrill's out of it

With the thrill of the season over, the question now for Giants' fans is: Is The Thrill going to be gone forever?

The Thrill, a.k.a. Will Clark, is eligible for free agency, and there is considerable doubt whether he will be back with the organization next year. Negotiations broke off early in the season and are set to resume this week. Clark is in the final year of a four-year, \$15-million contract that paid him \$4.25 million in 1993. The Mets, Rockies and Orioles are among the teams who could have interest in bidding for Clark.

What the Giants must decide is if his subpar numbers the past two years are an aberration, or a trend. Clark hit .300 in 1992, but with just 16 homers and 73 RBIs, his lowest totals since his rookie season. His power numbers this year were nearly identical. Clark insists, "Next year is going to be totally different."

They must decide if his possible replacements, rookie J.R. Phillips or veteran Todd Benzing, can do a comparable job at a greatly reduced rate.

More than anything, they must decide if they can afford to shell out the anticipated \$5 million a season it will take to retain Clark, in light of a payroll that is set to skyrocket based on the Giants' runaway success this season. Put slightly differently, they will weigh whether they can afford, from a marketing and public relations standpoint, not to retain Clark, who remains a highly popular and visible player.

"It's safe to say the fans and I have always had a good understanding," Clark says. "I've thoroughly enjoyed the support they've given me, especially this year, which has been very trying. I appreciate their support more than they understand."

Giants Manager Dusty Baker is convinced that Clark can retain his former level of play. When he re-inserted the hobbling Clark back into the lineup during a series in Houston, he told him, simply, "We need you."

"What's going on with Will is that water seeks its own level sooner or later," Baker says. "The bigger the game, the better he plays. He's been that way his whole life. Why would he change?"

—LARRY STONE

he says. "Frank Thomas is only 25. I feel sorry for all the younger managers because they're going to have to catch his act for a long time."

"He reminds me of Willie McCovey. Big, like McCovey, but wider."

Sparky talks about Thomas at every opportunity.

"What I like about him is he's steady," Sparky says. "He doesn't have big flashy days, like the guy with St. Louis." The reference is to Mark Whiten. "(Whiten) hit four home runs and drove in 12 runs in one game. They won 15-12. I'd throw that out. That doesn't mean anything."

"One day is all that it was. I call them 'dream days' for agents. But Thomas is a dream for the ballclub. He builds up his numbers day by day. It's like watching a sky scraper go up. One floor at a time."

White Sox batting coach Walt Hriniak, an old pro, usually is reluctant to talk about star players but makes an exception on Thomas.

"Frank has a chance to do things that are really exceptional," Hriniak says. "He uses the whole field, hits home runs, walks and hits for a high average. And he loves the pressure. What more can you say?"

Perhaps equally remarkable is Thomas' knowledge that he must not be overly impressed by his press notices. Soon after he joined the White Sox, he took a strip of tape, penciled the initials D.B.T.H. and fastened it above his locker. It stands for "Don't Believe The Hype."

During the last three seasons he has batted .319, with 97 home runs and 352 RBIs. That's not hype. That's fact. ♦

Jerome Holtzman is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Not .400; above average

By JAY GREENBERG

No pendulum swings with an arc more precise than does John Olerud.

"In almost every aspect of hitting, John's on the mark," says Larry Hisle, the Toronto Blue Jays' batting coach. "He is perfectly balanced. His center of gravity between his two legs is ideal. He rocks back a couple of inches, according to the book. He gets a large push off the back leg."

"He rotates the lower half of his body, the part that enables him to hit for power, perfectly. His bat path to the ball is exactly where it should be. The rotation should be stopped when he makes contact and he does that well."

Subjected to such stringent quality control, the balls come off the American League batting titlist's assembly line in uniform line drives. Outside pitch to left, inside pitch to right. Over the plate, over the pitcher's head. "It's not a matter of if," Hisle says. "It's where."

Certainly the Jays never suffered much anxiety about the "when" part. A franchise that has won five division championships in nine seasons obviously has identified more than its share of prospects, but it has encountered few inevitabilities such as Olerud. When the



Slow foot, fast bat: Because he lacks footspeed, Olerud never believed he had a shot at .400.

rest of baseball found two good reasons not to lift the bat off its shoulders to draft and sign such an obviously gifted player, the Jays kept fouling off pitches in 1989 until they got their man.

Not that Dr. John Olerud, a dermatologist and former minor league catcher, and his wife, Lynda, ever threw the suitors any curveballs. John Jr., like the Sr., is as straight as an Adirondack and as level as one of his swings, so when he maintained he was going to play his final year at Washington State, most clubs bought it.

Of course, most wanted to believe Olerud, too, because it saved them a decision. Five months before the Jays risked a third-round draft choice on Olerud, he had collapsed while jogging during a WSU workout. When tests failed to identify a problem, Olerud resumed physical activity, but a colleague of Dr. Olerud urged him to find a doctor who would look further. Olerud went to the University of Washington Medical Center, where an X-ray taken from another angle finally showed an aneurysm.

Olerud, a strapping 6-5, 210-pounder, wound up in bed looking like a 21-year-old Don Zimmer, but before the six-hour operation, he was hardly shorn of hope. While brain surgery may not be as difficult as making out a good Padre lineup, it's a little more complicated than soaking a blister in pickle brine. Nevertheless, Dr. H. Richard Winn was reassuring all along that Olerud's aneurysm, which stood a 50-50 chance of suddenly killing him if not removed, was in a much more reachable place than most Dennis Eckersley sliders.

See, when you know the background, Olerud seems a lot less out of nowhere than from a mad scientist's laboratory. It's wilder than science fiction to see someone identified as so special through his formative years turn out so completely without pretense.

Four years into his major league career Olerud still looks like he's going to start crying if Roger Clemens comes inside, but those doleful eyes can read the worry lines in the pitcher's forehead from 60 feet away. Yeah, he may still look like a kid, but Olerud has always been very mature for his age with a bat in his hand.

"When a guy is pretty much under control mentally and physically, it's just a matter of time until things work themselves out," Jays G.M. Pat Gillick says. The Jays used Olerud as a D.H. in his first full season, then made room for him at first base when they sent Fred McGriff to San Diego in the astoundingly successful deal that brought Robbie Alomar and Joe Carter to Toronto.

Physical laws rarely have failed Olerud when he swung early in counts, but in his first three full seasons, he too often forgot. Nice guy that he is, he had always figured that hitting 0-2 was the only way to make it fair for those college pitchers. In the majors, he wound up waiting for something the pitchers knew better than to throw at 0-2.

This year he started swinging from the first pitch of the first exhibition game. By August, he still hadn't stopped. In the 52 seasons that have transpired since Ted Williams was the last man to hit .400 for a season, only George Brett and Olerud have been over that mark in August.

Olerud was so remarkably sane during the chase that one suspected that Dr. Winn had performed a two-for-one: the clot and a lobotomy. Olerud believed all along that his utter lack of footspeed made .400 an impossibility, so he didn't build the quixotic goal up in his mind. Instead of becoming caught up in being all-time, Olerud concentrated on one at a time. "If you keep thinking about (hitting .400), you start thinking, 'I've got to have two hits tonight,'" he says. "I don't want to go up there thinking about not making outs. I just want to try to hit the ball hard every time up." He became either tired or human in September.

He finished at .363, with 200 hits, 54 doubles, 24 homers and 107 runs batted in. A little short of his eventual destiny of 1.000 maybe, but still pretty good for a man with no pulse. ♦

Jay Greenberg is a columnist for the Toronto Sun.

The wait is finally over

By BILL BROWN

John Kruk sits by his locker three hours before the game with a cigarette and coffee while he tries to locate all of the incidental costuming — the Lycra pants, elastic sleeves, knee pads, ankle guards and shin protectors — that must be worn or affixed underneath his uniform.

His body language sends a warning: Bad Johnny is in a foul mood. The lower-back strain that will keep him tied to the bench for this game, the final date of the regular season, could linger throughout the postseason and he knows it.

"It's not a weight thing," he growls. "It has nothing to do with my weight. Nix that angle right now."

"It took me eight years to get here, so only death will keep me out of the lineup in the playoffs. It's a back thing. You never know. I could wake up feeling fine tomorrow. Then again, I might not wake

up.”
Kruk, the Phillies' earthy and self-deprecating first baseman, keeps picking up various articles of clothing and dropping them in piles. He doesn't get dressed or do much of anything with great haste. His movements slow and tortured, he winces while he works.

A three-time All-Star, Kruk went into this season as a model of consistency. He had a .297 career average in the first half of the season, a .297 career average in the second half. But he'll never look the part of a model.

Asked why he doesn't join the team stretch before batting practice, Kruk contorts his face like he's been touched by a hot iron.

"My body doesn't stretch," he says without apology.

"You are an idiot," he tells me as he finally discovers his favorite red socks.

When he is in a mood to talk, however, he plays it simple. But if you buy the "Aw-shucks-I'm-just-a-good-ol'-boy-from-West Virginia act," you've been taken for a ride in the country.

As long as he was batting around .350, which he did for the first three months of the season, Kruk was the big guy who played hurt and played hard every night.

But one of the worst skids of his career (he went 20 for 100 in one stretch) saw Kruk's batting average plunge from .347 on August 8 to .316 on the final day of the season.

Naturally, the old doubts about his physique and training habits returned. I even dared to complain in print that Kruk spent too much time hanging out in the trainers' room after games, when he should be in the clubhouse entertaining questions from scribes trying to scratch out a meager existence of their own.

That critical piece of advice earned this writer a full-blown airing from outfielder Pete Incaviglia, who was outraged that a reporter would take shots at a guy batting over .300 for a first-place team.

Just the memory of it inspires me to make a transition to another subject. Something happy and upbeat.

"It's been a long wait," Kruk says of making it to the playoffs. "You'd like to think that every once in a while you'd sneak into one."

Well, the Phillies did go from worst to first.

"This time a year ago, mentally, it didn't matter," Kruk says. "You could go out there brain dead. Now you go out there with a job to do, and you do it realizing that you're under a microscope."

Of course, as far as Bad Johnny is concerned, the eye behind the microscope is attached to an idiot.

Bill Brown is a TSN correspondent who covers the Phillies for the Delaware County Times.



standable. As soon as the Braves acquired McGriff from the San Diego Padres' garage sale, he was identified as not just another fine offensive player, but a figure capable of changing the course of history. All hail Fred, who had hit more home runs over the past five seasons than any man living.

On July 20, the Braves trailed the San Francisco Giants by nine games. All that happened Before Fred, when the Braves bobbed along in the Giants' backwash. After Fred, it got serious.

"Atlanta forgot its dubious relationship with fire and celebrated that day as when the race for the West really began. McGriff's impact was sudden and striking. He produced three home runs and five RBIs in his first two days as a Brave, six home runs in his first 35 at-bats. An offense that once had a nasty cough began averaging nearly three more runs per game. McGriff had done no less than throw the switch on a run-scoring cyclotron.

Of all the testimonials to this found treasure, perhaps the most meaningful comes from the man he displaced at first. All Sid Bream, a player of some renown, could do was tip a cap and quietly step aside.

"He changed a lot of attitudes," Bream says. "That was something we needed. I'm not saying it couldn't have been done with the people we had, but he was the guy who did it."

There was an idea floating about that the Braves had only rented McGriff for this one run; that to trim a monstrous payroll he would be traded once this season's work was done. Countering that theory is that the Braves had begun experimenting with top first base prospect, Ryan Klesko, in the outfield.

So immensely popular has McGriff become that Georgia citizens pay him the highest compliment whenever "Crime Dog" appears. They bark at him. Such a figure can not be easily disposed of.

McGriff holds the right to ask for a trade at season's end, but where would he go?

"Atlanta is a great place. It is probably the second best for me other than playing in Tampa, and there's no team there," he says. "But I know that it is a business and at the end of the season, I'll sit down with (G.M. John) Schuerholz and see what the plans are."

Once more, the Braves will be asked to protect their new-found masterwork.

Steve Hummer is a columnist for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Down the stretch: After his All-Star Game appearance, Kruk "slumped" and hit only .274.



On fire: The Braves took off after McGriff joined the team on July 20.

A Brave move

By STEVE HUMMER

It was either a first baseman or a rare first edition on display that fiery July evening at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. Obviously, Fred McGriff was considered precious, irreplaceable. Otherwise, why would the Braves have assigned two security guards, one for each elbow, to McGriff on his first day on the new job?

Ex-presidents and Egyptian treasures don't get this kind of protection.

"I went to the bathroom, and they were there. I went to the training room, and they were there, too," McGriff says, still amazed. The threat was a local media armed with state-of-the-art recording devices.

Whatever overreaction there was at the beginning was under-

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2 Wm. Hertenstein	Mt. Vernon, IL	38897
3 Larry Goldstein	Commack, NY	38835
4 Ben Danner	Newberg, OR	38797
5 Barry Packer	El Cajon, CA	38758
6 Andrew Dempsey	Quakertown, PA	38687
7 Mick Schwee	Herndon, VA	38326
8 Randy Sanford	Chippewa Falls, WI	38282
9 Charles Maly	Norfolk, NE	37966
10 Wm. Boersma	Prairie Village, KS	37883

MID-SEASON CHALLENGE

1 Dan Polissano	Westland, MI	14571
2 Dan Polissano	Westland, MI	14432
3 C. Woll / C. Miller	Broad Brook, CT	14350
4 Scott Lasky	Binghamton, NY	14246
5 J. Janas / E. Heise	Amherst, NY	14163
6 David Sibley	Signal Moun't, TN	13952
7 Tom Banks	Cupertino, CA	13893
8 David Berman	Miami, FL	13891
9 Barrie Green	Oakland, CA	13874
10 Jeff Kelley	Bloomington, IL	13871

Hockey Free Agents
that can be claimed after 9AM on Friday, October 8th and before 11PM on Thursday, October 14th and be on your team for games starting Friday Oct. 15th.

P	ID	Player/Team	Salary
G	19	Grant Fuhr, Toronto	\$2,270,000
C	108	Adam Oates, Boston	\$2,230,000
W	336	Kevin Dineen, Philadelphia	\$1,630,000
W	428	Jocelyn Lemieux, Chicago	\$780,000
D	613	Al Iafrate, Washington	\$1,730,000
D	707	Rick Zombo, St. Louis	\$560,000

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Football Free Agents
that can be claimed after 2 PM on Tuesday October 12th and before 11PM on Sat. October 16th and be on your team for week 7 games.

P	ID	Player/Team	Salary
K	25	Greg Davis, Cardinals	\$1,770,000
Q	111	Troy Aikman, Cowboys	\$2,270,000
RB	246	Eric Metcalf, Browns	\$860,000
RB	255	Harvey Williams, Chiefs	\$740,000
TE	408	Shannon Sharpe, Broncos	\$1,140,000
WR	502	Jerry Rice, 49ers	\$1,980,000
WR	574	Kelvin Martin, Seahawks	\$680,000

Overall Leaders thru Week 4

1 Don Hunt	Orlando, FL	20579
2 Chris Hartmetz	Independence, KS	20569
3 Michael Wilson	St. Louis, MO	20505
4 Paul Benedetto	Brooklyn, NY	20346
5 Mark Drexler	Oakland, CA	20207
6 Dave Anderson	Harrisburg, PA	19860
7 Hicks / Hardesty / Payne	Owensboro, KY	19786
8 Doug Wellins	Elmwood Park, NJ	19759
9 Buckmaster / Jensen	Port Angeles, WA	19622
10 M. Siegal / J. Kerner	New York, NY	19533