

Larkin Resumes Pursuit of Greatness

By HAL McCOY

CINCINNATI—When Barry Larkin was a Cincinnati Reds rookie in 1986, he was in awe of the Wizard of Oz. Ozzie Smith was his idol and the reason Larkin wanted to be a shortstop.

"When we played St. Louis, I couldn't do anything," Larkin said. "I watched everything he did, on and off the field. And I wanted to impress him so much that I tried too hard."

In fact, Larkin requested uniform No. 1, hoping to duplicate Smith's, and was told, "Well, son, that number is retired. It belonged to Fred Hutchinson."

Larkin didn't say anything aloud, but wondered, "Who's Fred Hutchinson?" Larkin didn't know Hutchinson was a former manager of the Reds, because Larkin wasn't much of a baseball fan as a kid—even though he grew up in Cincinnati. He knew who Dave Concepcion was, but only because his mission was to supplant Concepcion as the Reds' shortstop.

"I never listened to games on the radio or watched them on television," Larkin said. "My brothers and I were too busy playing whatever sport was in season."

The Larkin family is an all-sports family. Older brother Mike was a football star at Notre Dame and played in the National Football League. Younger brother Byron was a standout basketball player at Xavier University in Cincinnati and played briefly in the Continental Basketball Association.

Barry played defensive back for Gerry Faust's legendary football program at Cincinnati's Moeller High School, and Larkin attended the University of Michigan with plans to play both football and baseball.

However, the thought of Big Ten Conference tight ends bearing down on him gave the 6-0, 185-pound Larkin second thoughts and he focused solely on baseball—a fortuitous decision.

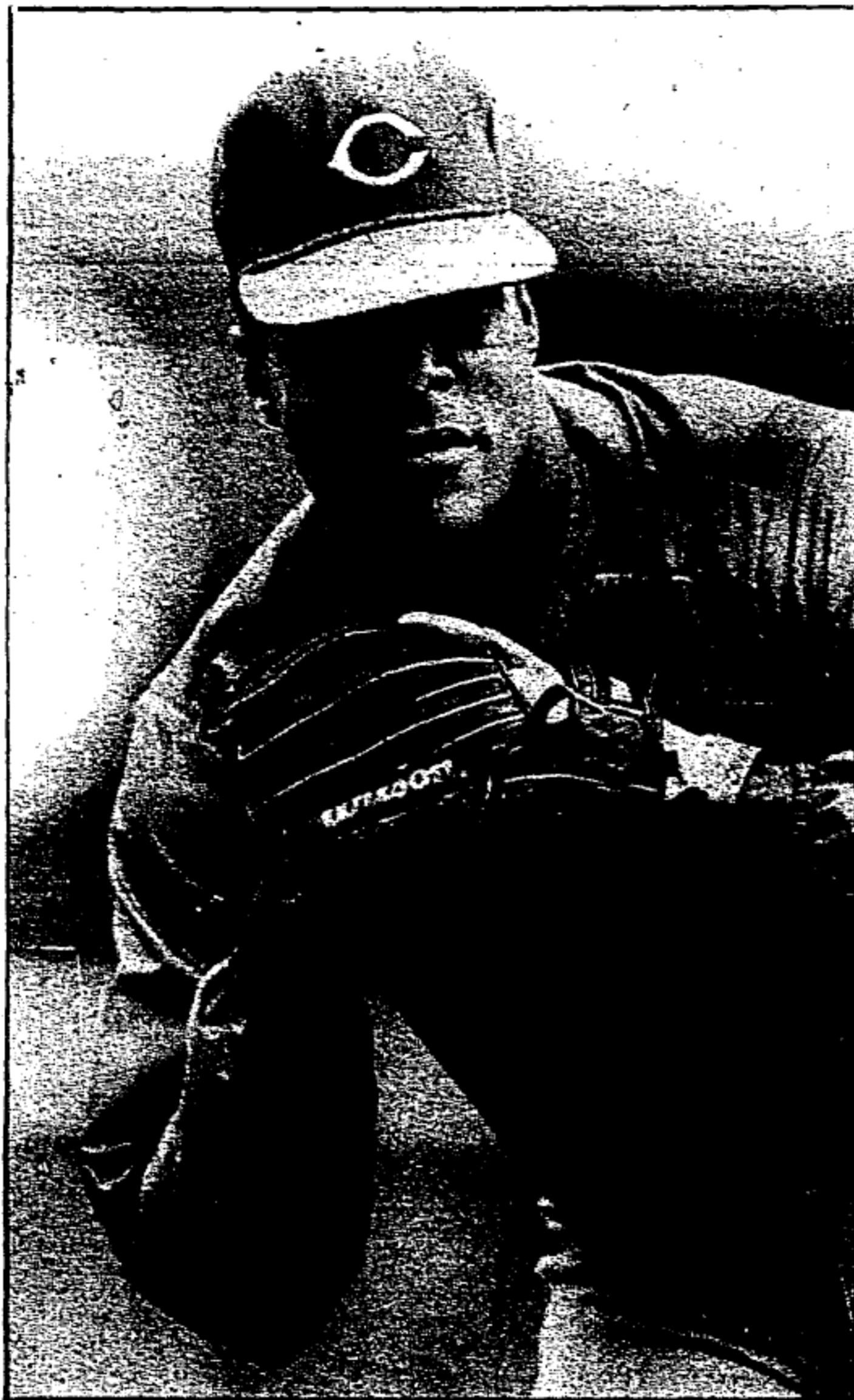
Larkin was the first baseball player to be named the Big Ten's Most Valuable Player two times, and he twice earned All-America honors. After compiling a .361 average during three years at Michigan, he signed with the Reds as the club's No. 1 draft choice in 1985.

His stay in the minors was brief—only 175 games. He spent half a season at Double-A Vermont (Eastern) and 103 games in 1986 at Triple-A Denver (American Association), where he hit .329 before the Reds summoned him to Cincinnati.

The goal to become the next Ozzie Smith wasn't yet realized, however. The Reds had another young shortstop, Kurt Stillwell, and the club decided to make one of them a second baseman. Larkin was the choice.

He did it because he is soft-spoken and cooperative, but he didn't like it. In his mind, he knew he'd still be a shortstop.

"That was what I always told myself," he said. "Concepcion



This could be the season that Barry Larkin supplants his idol, Ozzie Smith, as the league's number one shortstop.

was near the end of a great career, and I wanted to replace him. I want to play as long as he did with the Reds, and I wanted to be known as the Reds' best all-time shortstop."

Eventually, the Reds realized that neither Larkin nor Stillwell was a second baseman, and something had to be done, so Stillwell was traded to Kansas City during the 1987 season.

Not only did Larkin take the reins as the Reds' shortstop, he claimed Stillwell's number (11), the closest Larkin could get to Smith's No. 1. And in a kind gesture, Stillwell gave Larkin a gold necklace that featured the number 11.

Larkin quickly blossomed as the regular shortstop, hitting .296 with 12 homers, 56 runs batted in and 40 stolen bases in 1988.

And he was even better in 1989... for half a season.

At the All-Star break, Larkin was battling Padres outfielder Tony Gwynn for the National League batting title. He was hitting .340 when he was named to the N.L. All-Star team for the second straight year. During the "skills" competition on the day prior to the game in Anaheim, Calif., Larkin uncorked a relay throw, and something ripped in his arm. It was a tear of the me-

dial collateral ligament in his right elbow.

Gone was the chance for a batting title. Gone was his chance to play regularly for the remainder of the season. He returned in September, but made only a few pinch-hitting appearances. He hit .342, but didn't qualify for the batting championship because he had only 325 at-bats.

Larkin still grimaces when he recalls the injury. Doctors said he had come within a centimeter or two of suffering irreparable harm, a career-ending injury.

"It was only my third throw," he said. "As my arm followed through, I heard it—a pop, a loud pop."

At first, he was told he'd be out maybe seven to 10 days. "Just seven to 10 days," he said, shaking his head.

The comeback actually amounted to seven months of hard work, including a steady regimen of weight lifting and stretching exercises.

During the winter, Larkin knew his elbow was healthy, but the Reds wanted to be certain before they signed him to a one-year contract for \$750,000. They called Larkin to Riverfront Stadium on a cold January day, and members of the front office—including Owner Marge Schott—

stood deep in the bowels of the chilly stadium and told Larkin, "Show us you can throw."

"I had to convince 'em before I signed," Larkin said. "I showed them my arm was fine. I broke the webbing out of the glove of the guy I was throwing to."

During spring training, Larkin made all the plays and all the throws, and he proved that his batting eye was still sharp. He gave every indication that he was ready to resume his pursuit of greatness.

"I haven't played competitively since the All-Star break," he said. "It has been eating at me for a long, long while. Then we had that stupid 32-day lockout and it was driving me crazy."

"When the injury hit, I was in such a great groove, and that made it all the more frustrating to sit and watch. You can only be a bench cheerleader for so long. I wanted to make road trips, but they wouldn't let me because they were afraid I'd try to throw. This is my game, my life, and I wanted to be out there playing."

Larkin, who will turn 26 on April 28, has earned a spot on THE SPORTING NEWS N.L. Silver Slugger team the past two years and draws high praise from teammate Eric Davis.

"He is a righthanded Tony Gwynn," Davis said. "It's only a matter of time before the batting title is his because he has great bat control. He hits balls where they are pitched, uses all the fields, and he has pop, too. He is already the best-hitting shortstop in the league, and I'm not so sure he isn't better than Smith now in the field. I like his quiet determination and his quiet leadership—leadership by example."

During Larkin's absence in '89, the Reds initially called up Jeff Richardson to play shortstop and then acquired Mariano Duncan to fill the void. With Larkin back, Duncan has been moved to second base.

"I've always said Barry is the best," Duncan said. "It's too bad he was hurt, but it was something to watch him sit in the dugout and pull for everybody, including me, when you knew he was dying inside."

Late in spring training, Richardson was relieved to learn that he had been traded to Pittsburgh.

"This is good for me," Richardson said. "I'm a shortstop—that's what I want to be. But Barry Larkin is only the best in the world, and it wouldn't be realistic of me to think I could come to camp, have a great spring and beat him out. No way. I thought about coming to camp and trying out for third base or second base... or pitcher. Anything but shortstop, because that will belong to Barry Larkin for a long, long time."

Larkin hopes he makes the All-Star team again—many, many times. But would he participate in another skills competition?

"No way," he said. "That's over. I won't even watch it. And I don't think the team would let me. I won't ever get hurt that way again."

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disease. It's not that I don't respect anyone here, but it's my career and I want a second opinion. I don't want any mistakes. I want to know. The arm feels OK, but I know there's a disturbance.... With the loss of Downs, the Giants moved lefthanded rookie Russ Swan into the rotation.

Downs' injury was one of many physical ailments that plagued the Giants during spring training. "I'm the only manager in history who doesn't have to cut his squad," Manager Roger Craig said.... Utilityman Chuck Jackson suffered a fractured bone in his left hand when he dived for a fly ball April 2. He was placed on the 60-day disabled list.... Catcher Terry Kennedy suffered a strained left quadriceps while hitting April 1, and his availability for the early part of the season was in doubt. Right fielder Kevin Bass suffered a pulled right hamstring during the same game, but was making a quick recovery.

Kevin Mitchell suffered a severely sprained right wrist while taking batting practice April 6 and was expected to be sidelined for at least a week. "It's a tough blow, but hopefully it won't be any longer than that," Craig said.... Mitchell had a cyst removed from below his left armpit April 3, and later that day collected three doubles in an exhibition game against the Cubs.

Trevor Wilson failed in his spring opportunity to replace Craig Lefferts, who signed as a free agent with the Padres, as the lefthanded closer. Wilson was sent to Phoenix (Pacific Coast) after compiling a 13.50 earned-run average during the exhibition season. The Giants asked Wilson to work on a new delivery, but he declined. "I'm going back to what I did before," he said. "I've got to do my own thing."

To fill out their roster, the Giants claimed outfielder Brad Komminsk on waivers from the Indians, signed veteran outfielder Rick Leach and acquired righthander Andy McGaffigan from the Expos for a player to be named.

Dodgers Tap Wells As Relief Prospect



The Los Angeles Dodgers, in desperate need of a lefthanded reliever, hope that Terry Wells develops into a

contributor in that role. Wells, acquired from the Houston Astros for first baseman-outfielder Franklin Stubbs, has a history of wildness, but the Dodgers like his arm. The 26-year-old Wells, who was 0-5 with a 5.77 earned-run average last year at Tucson (Pacific Coast), has a 30-32 record and 4.51 ERA to show for his five years in the Astros' chain.

The Dodgers have been searching for a lefthanded reliever since Steve Howe was released in 1985 after a recurring drug abuse problem. In the 4½ years since Howe was released, only 24 saves have been recorded by Dodgers lefthanders.

The three lefthanded relievers in camp who had big league experience—Pat Perry, Ray Searage and Mike Munoz—had compiled a total of 17 major league saves. And Perry, who had shoulder surgery