



Hal McRae . . . Opportunity in New Spot.

McRae: Man in the Middle Of Reds' Outfield Problems

By EARL LAWSON

CINCINNATI, O.—It was during the last week of spring training that Sparky Anderson admitted outfield defense could be a problem for the Reds, until the return of Bobby Tolan on a regular basis.

"It's the corners that worry me," said the Red manager, meaning right and left field.

Anderson's original plan called for right fielder Pete Rose to play center while Tolan recuperated from surgery performed after he tore an Achilles tendon in early January. Bernie Carbo, a left fielder last year, was to replace Rose in right. And Hal McRae, who platooned in left with Carbo last year, was to remain in left this season on a regular basis while Tolan mended.

A few days after expressing his concern about the club's outfield defense, Anderson announced a new alignment.

"Rose," said Sparky, "will remain in right field and Carbo in left. I'll play McRae in center and hope he can do the job adequately."

"This way," explained Sparky, "only one player will be in an unfamiliar position instead of two."

McRae reported to camp this spring a sleek 165 pounds. And he's running almost as well as he did before he broke a leg in winter ball in the fall of 1968.

This is the big reason why Sparky is gambling McRae will do an adequate job in center field. "I hated to move Rose," said Sparky. "He's a great right fielder."

"Carbo has the arm for right field," pointed out Sparky. In fact, Bernie's throwing arm is the strongest among the outfielders.

"But," emphasized Anderson, "if you haven't played much right field, you can get a little fouled up on those slices off the bats of righthanded hitters."

"Somehow or other," continued Sparky, "those slices seem to give right fielders more trouble than the slices to left off the bats of the lefthanded hitters."

Merritt Still Question Mark

Pitching also was of major concern to Anderson when the Reds began spring training. After all, two of Sparky's four starters, 20-game winner Jim Merritt and rookie sensation Wayne Simpson, were nursing arm miseries when the 1970 season ended.

With the season's opener at hand, Merritt still was a question mark since he hadn't pitched an inning in either an "A" or "B" game during the exhibition season.

However, Simpson apparently removed the question mark after his name when he teamed up with Gary Nolan to blank the Cardinals in a "B" game March 23.

"This is the happiest I've been in a long time," exclaimed Simpson after he reeled off three hitless innings.

No longer is the 6-3, 215-pound righthander worried about the shoulder miseries which sidelined him last year after he won 14 of his first 17 decisions.

"I'm 100 percent confident now," said Simpson after his hitless outing against the Cards. "I really felt strong. I was throwing as hard as I can and I wasn't worried a bit about my shoulder."

Simpson walked three during his three innings. "But," he pointed out, "I still don't have my good rhythm. When I get it, I'll add a foot to my fast ball."

As the Reds faced the opener, Anderson had any number of reasons to smile, despite a 9-12 won-lost record after 21 Grapefruit League outings.

For instance, there was the .409 batting mark Tommy Helms owned after rapping out three hits during a 10-5 victory over the Dodgers March 25 at Vero Beach.

"Heck," quipped Tommy, "I could do this every spring if the club would just give me the money I want a little sooner."

This is the first spring since joining the Reds that Tommy reported on time. The only other spring he didn't hold out was the year of the player strike and no one reported on schedule.

Newcomers to Slugging Crew

One of Helms' three hits in that game with the Dodgers was a homer, one of two hit in the game by a Red player. Surprisingly enough, the other homer was struck by Woody Woodward.

Last year the Reds socked 191 homers. Woody and Helms had one apiece. And the homer Woody hit was his first in a major league career which dates back to 1963, when he was a bonus baby with the Braves.

Red coach Alex Grammas, more than slightly awed, estimated Woodward's homer carried at least 450 feet.

"I told Woody," said Alex, "that if anyone ever should ask him what's the longest ball he ever has hit, he shouldn't give it a thought. He'll never top that one."

There could be a reason Helms, who batted only .237 last year, is hitting well this spring. At the suggestion of coaches Ted Kluszewski and Grammas, Helms has shortened up his swing.

"My wrist never has been as strong as it was before I broke it in 1968," pointed out Tommy. "So maybe by shortening my stroke I'm compensating for some of the quickness I've lost in my swing."

Until two years ago, Tommy was a .280-plus hitter.

Red Hots: Johnny Bench socked a pair of two-run homers, his first of the spring, as the Reds knocked off the Red Sox March 26 at Tampa. Milt Wilcox, the Reds' 20-year-old righthander, blanked Houston the first seven innings in an 8-4 victory March 24. This was a Wednesday. A couple of days earlier, Wilcox' wife casually remarked to him, "Honey, you'd better make the team because Monday I'm driving to Cincinnati." "She sure sounded as if she plans to live in Cincinnati this season," said Milt, "and I'd hate to think I could be living in Indianapolis."

Anderson is hoping either Greg Garrett or Joe Gibbon can replace Don Gullett in the bullpen to free the young lefty for starting assignments. Gullett had Sparky raving after a six-inning stint against the Phillies in a March 26 "B" game. "For five innings, Don was untouchable," said Anderson. "He impressed me more than he did the day last summer when he struck out eight Mets in four hitless innings at Shea Stadium. Don was overpowering that day. Against the Phillies, he was a pitcher. He had the good breaking pitches to go with his fast ball."

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