

'Fifth-Wheel' Menke Rolls As Astro Cog

By JOHN WILSON

HOUSTON, Tex.—When Denis Menke went to spring training this year, he was kind of a fifth wheel for the Astros' infield.

His No. 1 value was that he was the back-up man at shortstop in case the untried Hector Torres failed to come through. But he was also the extra man to support whatever position needed help.

Going into the final month of the season, the situation has changed considerably.

"He's just the MVP," said coach Buddy Hancken, meaning the most valuable Astro. And, indeed, if the writers' vote for that annual award were taken at the moment, Menke likely would be the winner.

For most of the season, the Astros' infield play has been the best the team has ever had. And the solid, versatile Menke is responsible, to a large extent.

Second baseman Joe Morgan was injured in the fourth game of the season. Julio Gotay replaced Morgan. But Menke soon took over and has done a commendable job. So good, in fact, that there is talk of moving Morgan to the outfield next year.

Top Defensive Player

But besides Menke's play in the field, he ranks only behind Rusty Staub and Jim Wynn in RBIs. This was an unexpected bonus.

Menke's value has been accentuated by the ability to put him in the lineup at any spot needed.

"I think I started three games at third base," he said, running his mind back over the season. "And I started two at first base."

He also played shortstop 18 games when Felix Torres was having a few early problems or was sidelined with a pulled leg muscle.

But when Torres found himself finally, it left Menke to concentrate as a second baseman. He has exceeded expectations.

"The most I'd played second base was a couple of months one season when (Frank) Bolling was hurt with the Braves," Menke said.

"When the season started, I said I felt more natural at shortstop. That was because I had played there most. But now, I think I could do the job out there."

Was he just talking about infield positions. "No, the outfield, too," Menke said.

"He has done a terrific job for us," coach Mel McGaha commented.

Confidence Comes Back

And another coach, Salty Parker, said, "He has reestablished himself. He got his own confidence back and he helped the kid." Torres, of course, is "the kid."

The reason there might have been a need for Menke to restore his own confidence was the business of his trade from Atlanta, and the reported reason for it.

Menke read that Atlanta's Paul Richards said the team had to have a shortstop if the Braves hoped to move up in the standings. Menke was playing short for the Braves. It was the bitterest thing Denis had been called on to swallow in baseball.

So he reported to spring training a week ahead of schedule and has never let up.

Menke doesn't know what the Astros' plans will be next spring. He hopes he doesn't start out again as their utilityman.

"I feel like I've played well enough to rate a job as a regular," he said.

As for second base, he said, "I



Denis Menke

would say it is the easiest of the infield jobs. You don't have the long throws and you don't have to charge as many balls. The only tough play is on the double play."

Menke has taken his share of spills at turning the double play. But he has escaped any kind of injury that would take him out of the lineup. And he has done an excellent job of relaying the ball to first base on the tough play.

Menke has been one of the big plus values for the Astros for the 1968 season.

Astronotes: Torres had an 0-for-19 string that dropped his batting average to .221 before he singled in the first inning of a game against the Dodgers. . . . Doug Rader remained at home to try to shake a bronchial infection as the Astros left on a 17-day trip. . . . In nine of Steve Shea's first 13 relief appearances, he got either a win, loss or save. . . . Denny Lemaster went 13 days between starts while getting over a sore shoulder. . . . John Buzhardt had not given up a home run in his first 71½ innings this year. . . . Larry Dierker, Pat House, Morgan and Torres all have birthdays in September.

Buzzie Sees 'Another Alston' in Gomez

By PAUL COUR

SAN DIEGO, Calif.—Someone asked Buzzie Bavasi what endeared him about Walter Alston as the Dodger manager for 14 years.

Bavasi reflected a second, then replied with a faint smile, "Winning."

And Bavasi sees in Preston Gomez, his choice to manage San Diego's first major league baseball club, the makings of another Alston.

"Preston's a lot like Alston in many ways," said Bavasi, president and part-owner of the new National League expansion club. "He'll get things done in a quiet sort of way."

Gomez, a 45-year-old native of Cuba, was in his fourth year as Dodger coach under Alston when tapped by Bavasi, the ex-Dodger general manager. Gomez was given his release by the Dodgers to accept the San Diego post.

Alston, who won six pennants and four world titles with the Dodgers, is one of five managers Gomez singled out for admiration when asked if he'd pattern his managing after anyone.

"I'd say Walter Alston is No. 1 when it comes to handling men," said the nattily-dressed Gomez, who speaks with a strong Latin accent. "I admire Leo Durocher for his quick-mindedness, Harry Walker for his gambling on the field, Bob Skinner for the running game he advocates and Gene Mauch for his strategy."

He's Willing to Gamble

Gomez left the impression, however, that he won't copy anyone, but will be his own manager.

He describes himself as a manager "who won't be afraid to gamble."

Speed is the necessary ingredient, obviously, said Gomez, for a gambling game.

"You can't gamble without it," he continued. "With our big park (San Diego Stadium), we're going to try to go for the running game. We should be able to pick up some pretty good players in the expansion draft. The main thing is to be strong up the middle (catching, second base, shortstop and center field)."

"We should wind up with some pretty good pitchers. I'll recommend we go for young players. In two or three years, we can build a pretty good ball club around those fellows. We may have eight or ten established players. From the 20 or so younger ones, we can build for the future. There were the Jim Fregosis and Dean Chances in the last expansion draft and there'll be some just like them in this one."

G. M. Eddie Leishman was in agreement with Bavasi that Gomez was the man the Padres wanted.

"We considered others, but Preston is the man we wanted most," said Leishman. "He's my kind of manager."

Gomez said he'll be a strict manager in the sense that he'll have rules and enforce them.

"A manager has to have the respect of his players and he, in turn, returns that respect," said Gomez. "You have to have rules, and it's no good if you don't get players to abide by them."

Gomez and Bavasi are realistic about the Padres' chances in their maiden season.

Tough Row to Hoe

"There's no use kidding ourselves," said Bavasi. "We're going to have it tough for a couple of years. We're going to try not to take ourselves too seriously for a while."

"We're going to have some fun. The Mets had the right idea. They capitalized on their lack of success and were the brunt of a lot of jokes and people came out to see them get beat."

By an overwhelming mandate of the fans, San Diego will keep the nickname of Padres. A poll favored its retention by a vote of 4,940 to 177.

Gomez' hiring August 29 was the second major organizational move in three days by Bavasi.

Earlier, he selected a radio-television broadcasting team of Jerry Gross, Frank Sims and Duke Snider.

Snider, the former hero of Brooklyn, will be the color man. Gross and Sims, veterans of broadcasting, will handle the play-by-play. Gross was formerly on the announcing staff of the Cardinals and Sims broadcast for the Phillies.



Preston Gomez (left) and Eddie Leishman

Fairly Speaks Louder With Bigger Stick

By BOB HUNTER

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — Traditionally, September is referred to in the clubhouses and around the batting cages as the month of the salary drive for the players.

This year, however, September has taken on added significance, with players in both leagues making their "protective" drives, battling to get their names on the 15-man untouchable list so they cannot be drafted by one of the new expansion teams.

One of these is **Ron Fairly**. Now the dean of the Dodgers, with the exception of Don Drysdale, who traveled with the franchise from Brooklyn, **Fairly** is making his usual late-season spurt to catch the eye of the "judges" like a race horse.

September Streak Hitter

The way the club has fared this season, Ron's late spurt won't mean anything—except to him personally—but two years ago it meant a pennant for the Dodgers on the last day of the season.

He drove in 22 runs during September to cannonade the club to the National League championship. The All-America Boy had 31 hits in 78 at-bats for a .391 average, which included eight doubles and five homers.

Right now, **Fairly** is on a .385 binge, as he does what comes naturally to him each September.

While it's probable Vice-President Fresco Thompson and the brass already had placed **Fairly**

on their tentative 15-man protected list, the sizzling finish won't mar his chances of staying but, at the same time, it will highlight him to the expansion clubs.

Fairly is a hometown boy with a beautiful suburban mansion and deep-set family ties in Los Angeles.

In addition to owning an elegant home, **Ron** also owns a classic swing, one so classic and smooth that one wonders how he ever gets into a slump.

The fact, of course, is that **Fairly** is a streak hitter, and the consensus seems to be that he hits his low streaks because of impatience.

"I guess I just get so anxious. I fail to wait on pitches like I should when I'm going bad," analyzed the red-head, who is a slick-

Ron Accepts Bad Years As Expected Experience

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—**Ron Fairly**, whose last two years have been below his career average of .265, although he led the Dodgers in runs batted in last season, takes a philosophical view.

"I guess it was just my turn to have lousy years. Anyone wearing a uniform is going to experience it."

"It's only the exceptional player who doesn't. No, I should say the lucky player."

er both at first base and in the outfield.

What brought him to life in mid-August, however, was a new 36-ounce, 36-inch bat given to him by Houston's Jim Wynn on August 19. That's the date, coincidentally, **Fairly** started his surge, a couple of weeks earlier than usual.

"I had been swinging bats which weighed from 32 to 34 ounces," explained the 30-year-old outfielder, "and I just don't think it was enough wood."

Good Arm and Glove

Fairly, who has an outstanding arm to complement his defensive skills, is almost certain to surpass his watered-down 1967 average of .220.

When **Fairly's** bat is hot, he hits the lefthanded pitchers as well as the righties, and Walter Alston leaves him in there all the time. Adversely, when he's cold, they all get him out, although he has had stretches when he was murdering the ball, but the outfielders were catching his "homicides."

Ron, who hit .286 since the All-Star intermission, has added value to the Dodgers because of his ability to play two positions well. While he's a right fielder, his defense is so good that Alston has used him in center field in emergencies.

Dodger Dope: Drysdale took a

shot of cortisone in his right shoulder the first time in his career after pitching against the Giants August 24. Big D said the shoulder had been bothering him for about a month, and aside from missing his next turn, his immediate future with the Dodgers was uncertain.

After losing three in a row, although pitching well, Don Sutton defeated the Astros, 4-3, August 26. . . . The Dodgers lost eight in a row, matching their longest skid of the last two seasons, then ended it with a 5-4 win over the Giants August 25. . . . Attendance is only about 80,000 below last season. . . . Tom Haller continues to maintain his niche in the Top Ten with a .290 average.

Jim Lefebvre started his second game in left field against the Astros August 27. The switch-hitting infielder may be shifted to the outfield next season. . . . Paul Popovich's ninth-inning sacrifice fly beat Juan Marichal and the Giants, 5-4, August 25. . . . Wes Parker, sidelined with ulceritic tonsillitis for a couple of weeks, re-joined the team for its semi-final trip. . . . The Dodger Booster Club feted the players at their annual party August 31 at the Sheraton-Palace in San Francisco. . . . Al Ferrara will play in the Arizona Instructional League this winter to strengthen his broken ankle.