

# A 'Golden' Ruhle Gives Astros Some Fresh Hope

By HARRY SHATTUCK

COCOA, Fla.—Vern Ruhle enjoyed few routine moments for the Houston Astros in 1979. For the veteran righthanded pitcher, it was a season of exciting highs and crashing lows with no in-between.

Ruhle overcame an early back injury to win a job in the starting rotation and, in his first three starts, permitted a total of only four runs. Among those performances was a shutout of Los Angeles.

But his back acted up again and Ruhle underwent major surgery in May. Doctors said he was finished for the season and his career was in jeopardy.

Ruhle refused to believe what he heard. In mid-August, after working diligently, he announced plans to help the Astros in their September pennant drive. "I'm not counting on him," said Manager Bill Virdon but on September 14, after the Astros had lost their second consecutive game to Cincinnati to yield the division lead, Ruhle shut out San Francisco at Candlestick Park to move the Astros within one-half game of first place.

After that, however, Ruhle was hit hard and lost three times in the season's final 12 games. The last defeat, at Los Angeles, eliminated the Astros from the race.

"Those last few games helped me psychologically and I proved that I was healthy enough to pitch, that my back was okay. I wish the results had been different, but I had no strength."

Ruhle is strong enough now. During the off-season, he pitched in Puerto Rico, helping lead his team to the championship and now is trying for the only vacancy in a Houston starting rotation that includes Nolan Ryan, J.R. Richard, Joe Niekro and Ken Forsch.

"It's a challenge but I love it," said Ruhle. "We've got a lot of good pitchers."

All-Star Joaquin Andujar and a host of youngsters are challenging Ruhle for the fifth starting job. A week into spring drills, however, Andujar still was at his home in the Dominican Republic.

Andujar did not endear himself to management last year when, in the final 10 days, he asked to be used as a starter or be traded. He didn't start and General Manager Tal Smith almost swapped Andujar to Pittsburgh for

Bill Robinson, only to have the infielder-outfielder veto the deal.

During the winter, Andujar criticized Virdon sharply because the Astros signed Joe Morgan, now competing with Dominican Rafael Landestoy and Art Howe for the second base job.

Citing immigration problems, Smith originally said Andujar was "blameless." But after the first week, with all other players on hand, Smith said, "We'll have to listen to what Joaquin has to say once he gets here."

"I haven't called him," Virdon quipped. With reference to the pitching staff, he added, "Joaquin won't be hurt; nothing ever hurts Joaquin."

Meanwhile, Ruhle and the others were working overtime to win a spot.

"My arm is strong," Ruhle said. "I pitched nine shut-out innings in the Caribbean World Series two weeks before training started in the Puerto Rican playoffs. I won two games, including the championship game. So I don't think there's any question that my back has healed."

That's good news, for whenever Ruhle has been healthy enough to pitch, he has matched Richard, Niekro and Forsch in dependability. And he's ready for another chance.

**Astronotes:** The manager and star pitcher for the Cuban national baseball team visited Astrotown for a week as part of Houston's exchange program. . . . Donning an Astro uniform for the first time since 1971, Morgan said, "It doesn't seem very long since I left. It feels great to be here. I won't approach this spring any differently. And if I'm healthy and show my quickness, I'm confident there will be a place for me." . . . Ryan recalled his days as a Houston newsboy. "I'm the one who always threw the papers on the front porch," Ryan said. "I had pinpoint control in those days." . . . Veteran lefthander Brent Strom said of Ryan: "I never knew I threw so slow until I warmed up side-by-side with Nolan." . . . Virdon said he probably would keep three catchers, good news for Bruce Bochy, Luis Pujols and Alan Knicely, who are contending for the backup job behind Alan Ashby. . . . Virdon probably will start the season with a nine-man pitching staff, adding a 10th hurler as the season progresses.



Mark Fidrych . . . Promises, promises

## Tigers Listen To Bird's Chirps

By TOM GAGE

LAKELAND, Fla.—Spring training is a time of promise and hope—neither of which has done Mark Fidrych much good for the last three years.

Fidrych always has hoped he would bounce back from arm trouble. In fact, The Bird never has quit promising himself that someday he'll pitch again.

He may not pitch the way he did in 1976 when he charmed the Detroit Tigers with a 19-9 record as a rookie and entertained all of baseball with his antics on the mound. Fidrych doesn't need spectacular statistics to be happy again. Just a steady job will do.

But it's been empty talk till now. The lines were the same . . . The Bird's attitude was good. His arm felt good . . . his velocity was back.

Never mind what you saw out there—Fidrych lobbing the ball and complaining in private conversations with coaches.

Never mind that he covered up his own condition, deceived himself, moped around the clubhouse and tried to bounce back on hope alone.

The Fidrych comeback became an annual hoax. He wasn't close to being his old self. And he still isn't there—but it seems as if he is heading in the right direction.

If the early days of the Tigers' training proved anything beyond the truth of Sparky Anderson's taskmaster reputation, it's that Fidrych is strong again.

"If I didn't know what had happened to him all these years," said new pitching coach Roger Craig. "I wouldn't know he had arm trouble. I couldn't tell by looking at him now. He is loose and comfortable."

Craig quickly became one of The Bird's biggest backers. He is not counting Fidrych out.

"I was told there had not been much life to his pitches," said Craig. "That's not the case at all. He's throwing some pitches in batting practice that he should save for a game."

"Subconsciously, he is still dropping his arm at times. Pitchers coming back from a sore arm have a tendency to hold back like that."

Craig added, "I'll admit that when he reported he was lobbing the ball. He got it popping pretty quickly, though."

"I don't want to get overenthusiased, so I'm not going out on a limb. But I like what I've seen."

Fidrych was scheduled to take a regular turn this spring. Even though he's won only eight games in three years, The Bird has been confident.

"I feel a lot better this year," Fidrych said. "I think I could really open up. There is no pain, no trouble. I just want to pitch."

Maybe the empty talk is over.

**Tiger Tales:** John Hiller appeared to have been dealt a setback early in camp when he pulled a groin muscle. "We'll hold him out five days," said Anderson. Hiller bounced back after one day. . . . Jason Thompson reported 10 pounds under last year's weight.

Tim Corcoran was gone but not forgotten in 1979 after being sent to Evansville (American Association). He hit .338 and earned another crack at the 25-man roster. "You don't toss out an average like that," Anderson said.

Fidrych, Mark Wagner and Dave Rozema were among the players bicycling 2½ miles to Marchant Stadium each day. . . . Lance Parrish will be hitting cleanup against lefthanders but the new batting order doesn't please all the Tigers. Thompson will be hitting eighth against southpaws and isn't too happy. . . . Only one pitcher, Dan Schatzeder, was taking batting practice. "I might use him as a pinch-hitter some time," said Anderson. "I know what kind of hitter he is." Schatzeder hit .216 with one home run for Montreal last year. Despite the low average, Anderson was impressed.

## Quiet Mulliniks—a Royals Sleeper?

By DEL BLACK

FORT MYERS, Fla.—If not forgotten, then Rance Mulliniks could be dubbed the "other" player in Kansas City's only major trade of the off season.

First baseman Willie Aikens was the player the Royals sought. They acquired him in the swap that sent right fielder Al Cowens to the California Angels. Thrown in were two reserve shortstops, Mulliniks going to the Royals and Todd Cruz to the Angels.

In addition to Cowens and Cruz, the Royals had to promise the Angels a yet unidentified player, probably a young pitcher.

Mulliniks has remained about as quiet as the "player to be named later." Yet, he is going about his duties in the Royals' camp at Terry Park. The 24-year-old infielder is happy to be with the Royals, now that the shock has worn off.

"I was shocked when the trade was made," he said. "I was shocked because there hadn't been any talk out there that the Angels had anything working with Kansas City. But I am very happy to be with this club. They're an excellent organization and they're going to be a contender for a long time."

The Royals were somewhat surprised that the Angels were willing to part with Mulliniks, especially since the 1979 American League West champions had to give up shortstop Jim Anderson in the deal that brought them pitcher John Montague from Seattle.

With Campy Campaneris already on the scene, the Angels signed free-agent Fred Patek, who'd left the Royals, and protected themselves with the addition of Cruz.

At one time, when he was 21, Mulliniks was touted as the shortstop who fit into California's plans. That was 1977, when he played the position in 78 games, batting .269.

But Mulliniks slipped at the outset of the '78 season and was dispatched to Salt Lake City (Pacific Coast) after batting only .185 in 50 games.

"It was a combination of things," Mulliniks said when asked why he fell from favor with the Angels. "I just didn't get off to a good start in '78. Then I got hurt (hip injury). So the year wound up a total loss."

"Last year, they wanted to change my swing a little bit. I tried and it didn't work, so they sent me back to Salt Lake. I went down there and did real well."

The lefthanded-swinging Mulliniks, who appears destined for backup duty to U.L. Washington at shortstop, hit .343 at Salt Lake City.

Mulliniks won't second-guess the Angels for their decision.

"They did what they wanted to do," he said. "I knew I probably would be traded. I am tickled to death to go to a club like Kansas City."

Reminded that Washington won the job as the Royals' shortstop late last season, beating out Patek and Cruz, Mulliniks said:

"Anywhere you go, you've got to prove you can play. I can't ask for more than an opportunity to win the job. If I play to my potential, I'm confident I can contribute."

The Royals insist that inviting free-agent Dave Chalk, another former California infielder, to camp is no reflection of Mulliniks' status.

"We want to look at Chalk because he's a righthanded hitter with major league experience," said General Manager Joe Burke.

**Royalties:** Pitcher Steve Busby encountered another injury on his seemingly endless trip down the comeback trail. The 30-year-old righthander underwent arthroscopic surgery on his left knee to assess the damage to the kneecap. Busby, who was impressive in early camp, won 56 games between 1973 and 1976 before needing shoulder and knee surgery.

Busby was expected to battle for a place as either a spot starter or long reliever. Manager Jim Frey said he prefers a nine-man staff. Expected to be the top five starters are Dennis Leonard, Paul Splittorff, Larry Gura, Rich Gale and Craig Chamberlain. Other candidates for the remaining four spots are Renie Martin, Dan Quisenberry, Marty Pattin, Ed Rodriguez, Gary Christenson, Randy McGilberry, Mike Morley and Bill Paschall.

Outfielder Luis Silverio has shown progress after reinjuring his right knee early in camp. Silverio missed all of the 1979 season after undergoing surgery on the knee at the close of spring training.