Revived Cookie Puts Frosting On Kansas City Keystone Cake

By JOE McGUFF

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — It was the ninth inning of a game between the Royals and the Twins. Minnesota had runners on first and second with one out. Tony Oliva hit a ball in the hole between first and second. Gail Hopkins, the Kansas City first baseman, lunged for the ball but couldn't reach it. The crowd groaned in anticipation of a hit.

Cookie Rojas, who had been playing Oliva around toward second, came racing across the infield. Suddenly the crowd realized he was within range of the ball. Rojas made the pickup, whirled and threw to Ted Abernathy at first. Oliva was out.

Instead of having a run home and runners at first and third, there was two out, with runners at second and third. Abernathy then fanned Harmon Killebrew.

Rojas' play may well have saved the game, but it was only one of many big plays he has made for the Royals this spring. A year ago, baseball men were writing Rojas off as a has-been. Today, he looks like the Rojas of old. Seldom if ever have Kansas City fans seen second base played as Rojas is playing it.

Jerry Lumpe generally has been regarded as Kansas City's all-time best second baseman. He was a good hitter, made the double play well and was sure-handed, although he did not have great range. Dick Green had several good defensive years when the Athletics were in Kansas City, but he was not as adept as Lumpe in making the double play. So far this season, Rojas has displayed greater range than any second baseman Kansas City has had and his ability to make the double play is outstanding.

Not only is Rojas playing well in the field, but he started off the season as one of the Royals' most productive hitters. A year ago at this time, almost everyone had given up on Rojas.

Standout With Phils

Cookie had an outstanding career with the Phillies and in 1969 was voted the Phillies' all-time best second baseman. It was also during the 1969 season that the Phillies began phasing Rojas out of his job, or at least so it seemed to Cookie.

"My last year at Philadelphia I played all the time up to the All-Star break," Rojas recalled. "I was hitting about .275, which is my normal average. The Phillies decided they weren't going any place, so they started using kids. I told John Quinn (general manager of the Phillies) that if they weren't going to use me, I wanted to go to another club.

"Some guys have the ability to sit on the bench and then go back in and play. I don't have that kind of ability. I'm the sort of ballplayer who has to play every day to be at my best."

Rojas got his wish to be traded. He went to the Cardinals along with Richie Allen, but he found that life with the Cardinals was even worse than it was with the Phillies. When Mike Shannon became ill in spring training, the Cardinals had to find another third baseman. Although Rojas can play anywhere in the infield, he was passed over. At that point, he concluded he would not be playing much for the Cardinals. His conclusion turned out to be distressingly correct.

By mid-June, he had appeared in 23 games and had batted 47 times. He was hitting .106. The only area in which Rojas was showing much progress was gaining weight. His inactivity caused him to pick up about 10 pounds. People in the National League were talking solicitously about Cookie Rojas being all washed up.

Waived by N. L. Clubs

The Cardinals asked waivers on Rojas. No one claimed him, so the Cardinals were free to make a deal for Rojas in the American League. They sent him to the Royals in exchange for Fred Rico, a minor league infielder-outfielder. It is one of those experiences that is hard on the ego, especially for a man of Rojas' pride.

Rojas did a good job after joining the Royals, but his excess weight slowed him down and he was handicapped because he did not know the hitters in the American League. This year, Rojas is 10 pounds lighter and he is thoroughly familiar with the hitters.

Rojas said he never did have the feeling that he was washed up, even in the depressing days when he was

sitting on the Cardinal bench. "Age doesn't have anything to do with it," Rojas said. "Maury Wills and Luis Aparicio are still playing and they are in their late 30s. Willie Mays is still hitting home runs and he is 40. Last year, my weight was up and there were balls I didn't get to. A body is built for a certain amount of weight and you can't play well if

you go over that. "I heard people saying that Cookie had slowed down. I heard that many times, but I never was a fast runner. My ability to play second base came more from knowledge of hitters than from speed and I was at a disadvantage here since I was coming into a new league.

"I think I am playing as well right now as I ever did. I feel I am as good as I was in '64 and '65. I decided to play winter ball for the first time in two years and this helped me get my weight down."

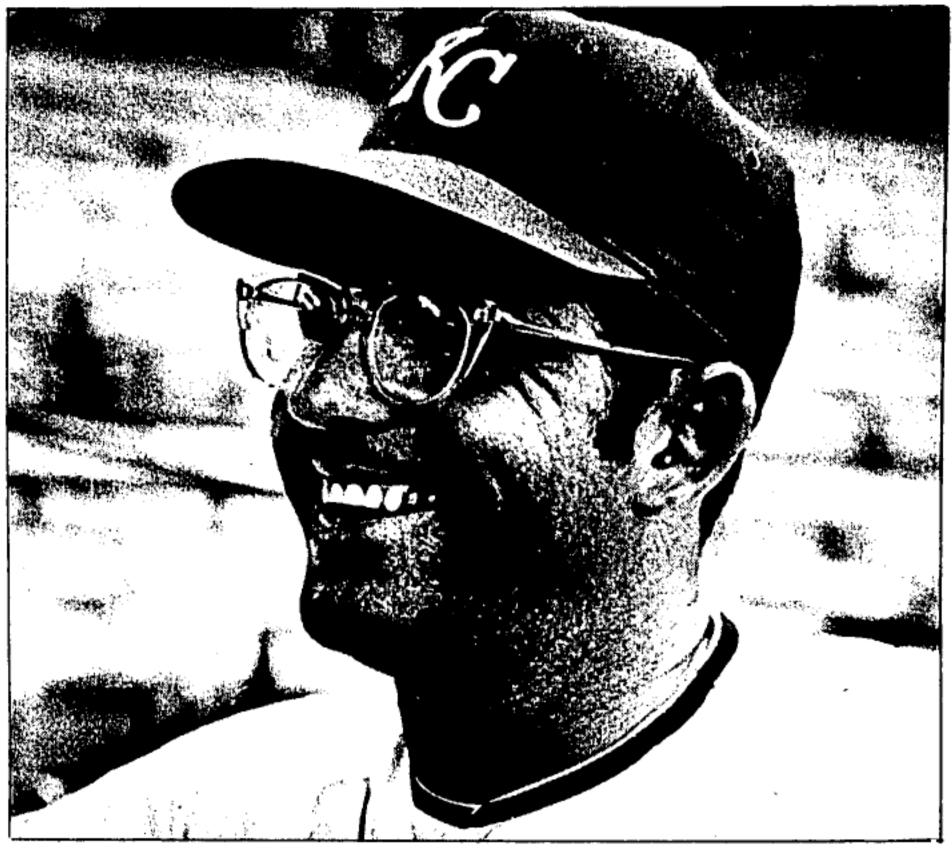
Rojas set no particular limit on how much longer he

will play.

"I'll play as long as I don't embarrass myself or the

fans," Rojas said. "I know youth is going to take over eventually, but I want to keep playing until the day comes that I think I can't do it. Then it will be time to step out and give the younger players the benefit of what I have learned through the years."

Royals' Roundup: Catcher Buck Martinez was optioned to Omaha (American Association). He was sent out to make room for Mike McCormick, 32-year-old southpaw who was signed after being given a tryout with the Royals. Cedric Tallis, the Royals' executive vice-president and general manager, said McCormick was signed because the Royals felt they needed more lefthanded pitching. McCormick posted a 50-37 record over the last four seasons. Tallis said Martinez was sent back to Omaha so he could get more work. "With his military duty and the large number of righthanders being used against us, it didn't appear Martinez would get as much duty as we wanted him to have," Tallis said. . . . The Royals drew a crowd of 32,728 for their season opener, the largest crowd ever to see them play in Kansas City.



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