

BASEBALL

A Reds Throwback Steps Forward

Chris Sabo Is Making Them Forget About Buddy Bell in Cincinnati

By HAL MCCOY

CINCINNATI—He drives a five-year-old Ford Escort and shudders at the thought of charging for an autograph. He has no use for jewelry. He suspects he is overpaid, although he played in the All-Star Game and his salary is the major league minimum. He's a rookie, of course, but one whose ego may never match his bank account. **Chris Sabo**, the Cincinnati Reds' third baseman, is as humble as Underdog.

At the All-Star break, **Sabo** ranked fourth in the National League in batting (.312), third in stolen bases (28 in 35 attempts) and first in doubles (32). He had scored 46 runs and batted in 35. He had hit 10 homers and made only eight errors.

A 26-year-old who had never played in a major league game and wasn't expected to be on the Reds' opening-day roster is now the leading candidate for N.L. Rookie of the Year.

Sabo showed up for spring training with modest hopes. "I'm just here to make the club, win a utility spot," he said. His stock soared when he got hot toward the end of the exhibition season while Buddy Bell was recovering from late-winter knee surgery. Bell wasn't ready for the opener, and **Sabo** got the call.

"Buddy Bell is still the third baseman," **Sabo** said. "No matter how well I do, he should get his job back. He is important to the Reds, and nobody should lose their job because they're hurt."

But that's what happened. **Sabo** started fast and accelerated. Bell, a Cincinnati native whom the Reds were touting for a Gold Glove only a year ago, became expendable and was traded to Houston on June 18 for a minor league player to be named.

Manager Pete Rose calls **Sabo** a throwback, a reincarnation of players who liked to get their uniforms dirty.

"He loves to play—and it shows," Rose said. "He approaches the game the way you are supposed to, the way it seems like everybody did 15 years ago. There is nothing phony about him. He hustles his butt off whether he is 4 for 4 or 0 for 4. You almost love to watch him make an out, because he hates it so much."

As a youth in Detroit, **Sabo** stopped pucks for two national championship hockey teams and dreamed of playing in the NHL. But it was baseball that took him to the University of Michigan, where he won All-America honors. The Reds drafted him in the second round in 1983.

Sabo's minor league career was forgettable, really, but his face is one you could never forget. He wears a flattop and, when he plays, goggles of the kind Kareem Abdul-Jabbar made famous. As soon as Rose saw him, he began calling him Spuds.

"Paint a black spot on his eye and he looks just like Spuds MacKenzie," Rose said, referring to the



Humble Chris Sabo started fast and accelerated in Cincinnati.

dog in the beer commercials.

Sabo is extremely picky about his hair. Once this season he left a barber's chair in mid-cut because he was unhappy with how the work was progressing.

Rose said, "Can't you just picture what people in Atlanta thought, seeing the Rookie of the Year stomping through a mall with half a haircut, then walking into another barber shop and asking, 'How much for half a haircut?'"

As for the eyewear, Cincinnati sporting goods stores can't keep goggles in stock because of young **Sabo** imitators, some of whom the player saw while visiting southwestern Ohio baseball camps.

The real story will be when the parking lots around Riverfront Stadium begin to fill up with used Escorts. "I love that car," **Sabo** said of his model, which has 80,000 miles on it. "Guess I'm gonna have to trade it in soon, probably on a Jeep."

Rose laughed and said, "He'll probably have that same Ford Escort in five years, but he'll be towing it with a Mercedes-Benz."

Sabo could swing a luxury car now. The minimum salary in the

major leagues is \$62,500.

"That's good money for what I do," **Sabo** said. "What I do isn't that important in the world. What's so great about being a baseball player? That's nothing special. Being a plumber, now that's important."

Sabo's father, Walt, is a plumber for Detroit's water treatment department.

"My father worked hard all his life, still does," **Sabo** said. "That's where my work ethic comes from. He taught me to work hard and always told me, 'As long as you work hard and are a producer, somebody out there will always want you. We go to New York and I see guys on the street begging for quarters. Those are guys who didn't produce, able-bodied guys who can work. Hey, even if you have to take a minimum-wage job, I think you should try to be good at it.'"

Adding to **Sabo's** everyman profile is his refusal to wear gold chains or diamond-studded rings. "I didn't even wear a watch until this year when I started getting so many for appearing on 'Star of the Game' shows," he said.

Times were harder in the

gathered around his Escort.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"We know you're **Chris Sabo**," one person said. "We saw you go into the restaurant, and we wanted to see you up close."

Sabo signed autographs for everyone. Free.

"I can't understand the principle of guys going to autograph shows and charging for their autographs," he said. "Hey, if anybody wants mine, I'll sign. Just come up to me and ask. Charging for your autograph is ridiculous."

At the All-Star Game, **Sabo** didn't want autographs, but he did want to talk to some players. Like a good rookie, though, he didn't speak until spoken to.

In fact, he didn't take infield practice. He stood in the outfield while Bobby Bonilla and Vance Law worked out at third base. "I didn't want to bother them or get in their way," he said. "They were ahead of me."

Sabo was thrilled when Darryl Strawberry and Will Clark talked to him first.

"Strawberry, a real cool guy, actually called me Spuds," **Sabo** said. "That was great. Bob Knepper's son, Jacob, was looking at all my Spuds MacKenzie dolls and sweat-shirts. I told him to take anything he wanted, but he didn't."

"Andy Van Slyke asked me for one of my bats, and I said, 'Sure, take all you want. Take 'em all if you want to.'"

It was easy for **Sabo** to talk with his National League heroes, but the American Leaguers were different.

"I wanted to talk to Don Mattingly," **Sabo** said, "and I got within 10 feet once, but I just didn't have the nerve to say anything. I'm a rookie and I have to be introduced. I wanted to talk to Alan Trammell, too, but he looked as if he didn't want to be bothered."

As the All-Star Game moved into the middle innings and Manager Whitey Herzog still hadn't used **Sabo**, Cincinnati fans began to chant his name. **Sabo**, naturally, hung his head in embarrassment.

Finally, he was inserted as a pinch-runner in the seventh inning. He stole second base, and fans booed when he wasn't left in the game.

"Hey, I did my thing. I got to play and I stole a base, put myself in scoring position," he said. "I'm a rookie, you know."

Immediately after the game, **Sabo** appeared on some local television shows. While he was being interviewed on the field, fans again chanted his name.

"That was neat," he said. "Women were blowing me kisses and throwing roses at me. I thought I was Paul McCartney."

"I'm just glad the people in Cincinnati appreciate the way I play. I just play hard, give it my best. I come to the park, play, go home, come back and play the next day. It's that simple."

When told he would be featured in THE SPORTING NEWS, **Sabo** couldn't understand why but said, "Really? That'll be neat."

minors. During spring training one year, coaches noticed **Sabo** was uncharacteristically lethargic. They checked up on him and discovered he was leaving camp at night to work at McDonald's. "Just trying to make a buck," **Sabo** said.

Now other people are already trying to make a buck off **Sabo**. Everyone, it seems, can offer a "financial opportunity."

"They must think I'm stupid or something," **Sabo** said. "I think they're stupid for making too big a deal out of everything I'm doing."

The attention mushroomed once **Sabo** became an All-Star.

"The day after it was announced I made the team, the phone started at 6 a.m. and didn't stop all day," he said. "You know how many calls I got? Fifty-seven. And maybe ten were from friends or people I wanted to talk to. I'd no sooner hang up the telephone and it would ring again. I finally started screening the calls with an answering machine and my tape filled up. That's the first time that ever happened."

Sabo left home to eat lunch at a restaurant. When he walked to the parking lot afterward, a mob was

BASEBALL

Padres' Hurlers Ground the Opposition

SAN DIEGO—The pitching staff that last year led the National League in walks (602) and home runs allowed (175) led the league in shutouts 23 days into the 1988 season.

"Unbelievable," said pitching coach Pat Dobson, mastermind of the San Diego Padres' recent string of 37 scoreless innings, three short of the club record.

On April 22, in a 3-1 victory over Houston, Jimmy Jones and Mark Davis held the Astros scoreless after the third inning. The next night, Ed Whitson, Lance McCullers and Davis combined to shut out Houston, 4-0. The day after that, Andy Hawkins threw a one-hitter in a 3-0 victory over the Astros. Then Eric Show scattered 10 hits in a 1-0 triumph over St. Louis, the Padres' fourth shutout in 17 games. The streak was finally broken in the fifth inning April 27 when the Cardinals' Tom Brunansky nailed Jones for his first N.L. homer.

During the streak, San Diego pitchers walked just six batters and the fielders pulled off eight double plays. Overall, the staff had yielded 47 walks, fewer than all but two N.L. teams, and the club had a league-leading 20 twin



Jimmy Jones

killings.

The pitchers were doing just what Dobson had stressed in

spring training: keeping the ball down, forsaking the strikeout for the grounder.

"By working for the ground balls, they will never get deep enough into the count to walk the batter," Dobson said. "We have a lot of guys swinging on our first or second pitch, and that's good."

Hawkins had a 6.75 earned-run average before he defeated Houston, whose only hit was Bill Doran's seventh-inning single.

"I wasn't thinking no-hitter. I was just thinking strikes, thinking ground balls," said Hawkins, who, plagued by a sore shoulder, went 3-10 last year. "This is my way of showing people that I'm not just a fourth or fifth starter on this team."

Show also felt somewhat reborn after his shutout, which followed an 0-3 start in which his ERA was 8.36.

"I was concentrating, thinking only about my job, not letting them beat me on the long ball or the dumb mistake, and it worked," he said.

"My bottom line with the pitchers," said Dobson, "is keep the ball down and you will keep the club in the game."

BILL PLASCHKE

'Best Team' Is Showing Worst Side at the Plate

SAN FRANCISCO—The San Francisco Giants scoffed at the no-repeat jinx during spring training, yet there they were on April 27, struggling for runs, playing losing baseball and groping for respectability in the National League West.

Manager Roger Craig, ever the optimist, wasn't about to panic a mere three weeks into the season. But five shutout losses in the first 19 games created some furrows in his brow.

"As bad as you hate to see it, every club goes through this," Craig said. "It's frustrating as a manager to sit there and not be able to produce anything. The problem is we're just not hitting."

The Giants were definitely in a rut during a four-game losing streak that dropped their record to 9-10. San Francisco was limited to five hits in each of the last three games in that slump. The team batting average fell to .237, ninth in the league.

When Pittsburgh's John Smiley and Jim Gott combined for a 2-0 shutout April 26, it extended the Giants' string of scoreless innings

to 19. Over a span of 33 innings, they'd managed but three runs and 18 hits. Their average run total for the season was 3.6 per game. And the offense was supposed to perk with Brett Butler leading off.

Actually, Butler was doing his part. Although he had scored only eight runs and been caught on five of his six attempts to steal, he had reached base 30 times. Time and again he was stranded as a lack of timely hitting wasted excellent pitching.

"It's almost comical," Butler said. "We've got the best team in baseball—we know that. We just have to go out and do it. Our problems are magnified because we did so well last season, but we'll come out of it and someone will pay."

"This club does not have a defeatist attitude," Craig said. "It will keep scratching and clawing. We went through something like this last year, too, and we snapped out of it. We'll bounce back again. This is not a 500 ball club."

NICK PETERS

Spuds'll Take the Work

CINCINNATI—When infielder **Chris Sabo** forced his way onto the Cincinnati Reds' roster with a superb spring, it was expected that the 26-year-old former University of Michigan All-America would be a reserve. Then Buddy Bell went down with a slightly torn ligament in his left knee, leaving third base to a rookie.

"Thank God Spuds is doing so well," said Manager Pete Rose, using the nickname he hung on Sabo because of his resemblance to Spuds MacKenzie, a likeness enhanced by the player's flattop and goggles. "You couldn't write a script and ask Sabo to do more. He's running (8 for 9 in stolen bases after 18 games), hitting

(.300 average and four homers) and making all the plays. He's inspiring with his dogged hard work—and he's funny."

Sabo's teammates rolled on the clubhouse floor when they discovered that he had walked out of an Atlanta barbershop halfway through a trim because he was upset with the stylist's work.

"He walked from one barber shop to another," Rose said. "Can you imagine baseball's rookie of the year walking through a mall with half a haircut, then walking into another shop and asking, 'How much for a side of haircut?'"

Sabo didn't pay the first barber. "He screwed it up. I'm not gonna pay for something that's done bad. It'll take two weeks to grow out so I can get it done right," Sabo said.

Some folks wonder what will happen when Bell is healthy.

"I'm happy to play," Sabo said, "but I'm just filling in until Buddy gets better. I play hard and try not to hurt the team."

Early one day in batting practice, Rose watched Sabo taking ground balls. "I'll bet he has taken 200 today already. The guy never stops. He'll run through a wall to score a run."

Sabo said, "Hey, we're only at the park 4½ hours a day for eight months a year. People in auto factories work 10 hours a day all year long, so I think I can work 4½ hours as hard as I can. Besides, I like to work hard."

"My father (Walter) worked hard all his life. Right now, he is a plumber for the Detroit Waste Water Treatment plant. He always told me, 'Work hard, be productive and you'll always be wanted.'"

HAL MCCOY



Chris Sabo

L.A. Bullpen Gives Lasorda a Boost

LOS ANGELES—Upon examining the events of an April 24 game in San Francisco, one understands what Tommy Lasorda, the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, means when he says his club is different in 1988.

Lasorda gave the redoubtable Fernando Valenzuela the hook although (a) Fernando had his first shutout of the season cooking, (b) he'd allowed only five hits in 7½ innings, (c) he was working on nine days' rest because of a string of rainouts and (d) the Dodgers were leading, 4-0.

Jay Howell trudged in from the bullpen—yes, the Dodgers apparently have one this year—and, on a 3-and-2 pitch with the bases loaded, struck out San Francisco slugger Will Clark, who was appearing as a pinch-hitter.

Howell then retired the Giants in order in the ninth to preserve the Dodgers' third consecutive victory, their fifth in six games and, for the season, their 11th in



Jay Howell

15.

Asked what he thought the four-up, four-down performance might do for Howell's confidence, Lasorda blurted, "His confidence? What about my confidence?"

The save was the first of the season for Howell, the newcomer from the Oakland Athletics, who was unscored on in his first four appearances.

Whenever Lasorda talks about Valenzuela, which is often, he mentions Fernando's durability, how he always goes to the post and how, once there, he prefers to stay. Lasorda then will punctuate his remarks by saying, "Fernando doesn't even know we have a bullpen."

Until this year, Valenzuela had no reason to think otherwise. But two off-season acquisitions have improved what was the National League's worst relief corps the last two years.

"Those guys are doing a pretty good job," Valenzuela said of Howell and Jesse Orosco, who had three of the Dodgers' six saves in the first three weeks. "I don't want to say we have the best bullpen, because everybody is human; everybody makes mistakes. But so far they've done the job."

GORDON VERRELL

Andujar Keeps D.L. Spot

HOUSTON—Joaquin Andujar's long-awaited return to the Houston Astros was pushed back again when cartilage was removed from both sides of the 35-year-old pitcher's right knee April 26.

Andujar, who signed with the Astros as a free agent last winter, suffered a twisted knee on the final pitch of a tune-up in the bullpen April 23. He was testing the strained muscle in his side that caused him to go onto the disabled list April 14.

"Somebody must be sticking pins in a voodoo doll of the guy," said Manager Hal Lanier. "His side was doing better, and we

were about to make a decision about bringing him off the D.L. Now this happens."

The knee injury was the latest in a succession of ailments that have dogged Andujar since the start of the 1987 season. While with Oakland last year, he was on the disabled list four times with forearm, elbow and hamstring injuries. He appeared in only 13 games, none after August 3, and pitched a career-low 60 innings.

The muscle in Andujar's side was injured while he was taking batting practice during the first week of the season. The knee injury is expected to keep him from



Joaquin Andujar

pitching until at least June 1.

"We'll just have to wait and see where he's at in a few weeks," said Lanier. "It's a shame because Joaquin said his side didn't hurt at all. We're just fortunate we have enough pitching depth to survive something like this."

NEIL HOHLFELD