

## COVER STORY

# Just Call Texas Trio th

## Palmeiro, Sierra and Franco a Potent Combo

By PHIL ROGERS

ARLINGTON—In the old days, Roger Clemens loved his twice-a-year trips back to Texas with the Boston Red Sox. It was a midsummer vacation, courtesy of the gracious hosts in the white uniforms.

Clemens' family came up from Houston, along with friends from the University of Texas. The Rocket Man's only problem was getting enough tickets for all to see him once again execute the lowly Texas Rangers. Heck, in Clemens' first five years with the Boston Red Sox, he had come closer to a no-hitter than a defeat at Arlington Stadium.

Times have changed.

Clemens' first hint came in a duel with Nolan Ryan on April 30. He cruised into the eighth inning with a 1-0 lead, ready to raise his career record against the Rangers to 5-0. But then something happened. With a man on first base in the eighth inning, Rafael Palmeiro pulled a 2-and-2 fastball off the right-field foul pole to give Texas a 2-1 victory.

Back at Fenway Park on June 21, Clemens took a 3-0 lead into the fourth inning, never imagining that the game would end up as a crushing 10-4 loss for him and the Red Sox. Six of the 12 hits Clemens allowed in 5½ innings that night, including a pair of doubles by Ruben Sierra, were from the middle three hitters in the Rangers' order.

Clemens fared no better a month later in Texas, this time giving up all of the runs in an 8-1 loss July 18. **Julio Franco** was the primary tormenter this time, driving in three runs with a double and triple.

Even in Clemens' lone victory over Texas this season, a 7-6 decision May 5 at Fenway, the Rangers reminded him that he's no longer bulletproof. Palmeiro and Sierra had doubles in that game.

Hard as it is to believe, the Nos. 3-4-5 hitters in the Rangers' batting order were sorry to be finished with Clemens for the year. The trio of Palmeiro, Sierra and Franco hit .325 against him, with a slugging percentage of .600.

Rocket Man? More like rocket fuel.

"The hitters we had in the past were good hitters, but **Julio** and **Rafael**, those are two guys who can hit the fastball," Rangers Manager Bobby Valentine said. "That was missing around here."

Clemens is hardly the only American League pitcher who has felt the wrath of Palmeiro, Sierra and Franco, the Rangers' "Artilleria Pesada," or heavy artillery. That's Edwin Correa's name for the most productive 3-4-5 combination in the majors.

Palmeiro, Sierra and Franco answer to other names, most notably "The Three Amigos." While that Steve Martin movie title has been used before, most recently by the Denver Broncos' receiving corps, plans were under way to market a poster of the Rangers' trio under

that name.

The trio has also been called "Young Guns," a reference to the 27-year-old Franco's standing as elder member. Palmeiro won't turn 25 until September, and Sierra, at 23, was the youngest player in this year's All-Star Game. Then there's "The Islanders," which refers to their roots in different parts of the Caribbean.

**Franco** grew up in a real baseball hotbed, San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic, while Sierra was schooled in the art of hitting a curveball at the Roberto Clemente Sports City in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Palmeiro left Cuba with his family at the age of 6 and was denied a spot on the 1984 United States Olympic team because he

was not a U.S. citizen. He went through naturalization proceedings last year.

All three speak both Spanish and English, although only **Franco** among them appears truly comfortable speaking with more than his bat. He has become the unofficial spokesman for the group. It was **Franco** who predicted in spring training that Sierra could have an MVP year—"if he just does what he's supposed to"—hitting between Palmeiro and Franco. **Franco** also has conducted informal seminars in the mentality of hitting, setting the tone for a relationship that benefits all three.

"We talk all the time, discussing what pitchers are going to try to do in situations, and we help each

other out," Sierra said. "If we see something wrong, we don't let it pass. We let each other know and make an adjustment. We push each other."

The talents of the three complement one another. Palmeiro, a left-handed hitter, sprays the ball to all fields, seldom strikes out and will take a walk. Sierra, a switch-hitter, has power from both sides of the plate to go along with sheer speed and an uncanny balance that enables him to recover even when he's been fooled by a pitch. **Franco**, a righthanded hitter, puts the ball into play with stinging line drives and had shown power with 10 home runs in his first 61 games.

"Raffy's more of a line-drive hitter, and a better contact hitter," hitting instructor Tom Robson said of Palmeiro. "Ruben and **Julio** are

similar. It looks like **Julio** is more disciplined but he's pretty free-swinging, too. He takes pitches early in the count, and Ruben doesn't. Ruben swings more for power, while **Julio** will go with pitches."

Palmeiro, Sierra and **Franco** each has led the American League in hitting at one time this season. Palmeiro was hitting .361 on May 29, but had skidded to .299 on July 19.

**Franco** and Sierra, both in the starting lineup at the All-Star Game, have battled for the league RBI lead since May, with **Franco's** three-RBI night against Clemens giving him the latest edge, 69-66.

Through that game July 18, both Sierra and **Franco** were listed among the A.L. leaders in eight offensive categories, including batting average, RBIs, hits, doubles, total bases and slugging percentage. Sierra was listed in 10 categories overall. His 51 extra-base hits (including 14 homers) were second only to San Francisco's Kevin Mitchell in the majors.

"They would all be hitting .330 with a little luck for Raffy," Robson said. "Raffy's hit the ball real hard with a lot of outs. It seems like every night he gets one hit and has two ropes that are caught. If you just looked at the films from the last month, I bet there are 30 to 40 balls he's hit right on the screws. If 10 or 12 of those fall, he's hitting what the others are hitting."

Before Rangers General Manager Tom Grieve marched through Atlanta last December, Sierra, Franco and Palmeiro were not playing in the same division, let alone for the same team.

Grieve went to the winter meetings looking for a legitimate hitter as the Rangers' run production fell from 823 in 1987 to 637 last year.

Grieve came back with two hitters. He landed Palmeiro in a nine-play-

er deal that sent lefthanders Mitch Williams, Paul Kilgus and Steve Wilson to the Chicago Cubs and picked up **Franco** in a three-for-one swap with the Cleveland Indians.

It didn't take Valentine long to picture the effect those two could have as bookends for Sierra, the organization's prodigy. Sierra joined the Rangers in 1986 at the age of 20. In each of his first two full seasons in Texas, he was voted the club's player of the year.

Sierra hit 69 homers before his 23rd birthday. Only 13 others have had so many homers in the majors at such a young age, including Hall of Fame sluggers Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Mickey Mantle, Jimmie Foxx and Joe DiMaggio.

But even with such success, there was a feeling that Sierra had shown only a fraction of his potential. Those who have known him the longest have always seen a special player. They also saw a survivor who rose above the crime-ridden Jardines Selles housing projects in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, where he grew up.

When the Rangers visited Puerto Rico to play in the Roberto Clemente Series this spring, Sierra would only drive through his old neighborhood. He did not stop. He told of how his mother was away visiting a brother imprisoned on drug charges. Sierra called himself lucky.

Baseball was his ticket away from those troubles. He began playing sandlot games with two of the late Roberto Clemente's sons at the age of 10 and was steered into the newly established Roberto Clemente Sports City program. His talent and well-being were a concern of many people, including Vera Clemente, Roberto's widow.

During a visit to the All-Star Game, Mrs. Clemente said that Sierra was "like a son." He has become more than that to the people of Puerto Rico, who expect him to follow the Clemente legend both on and off the field.

"In Puerto Rico, more than anywhere else, the reference point in baseball is Clemente," said Luis Mayoral, a San Juan sports journalist and coordinator of the annual Clemente Series. "Emotionally speaking, Ruben is the first product of the Roberto Clemente Sports City to play in the major leagues."

"He has a striking facial resemblance to Clemente. He plays right field. And he wears No. 21. Even for people who know nothing about baseball, that makes Ruben special to them. The people identify with him because he is from a poor family. What he does, he does for Puerto Rico, not just Ruben Sierra."

Sierra seems torn between emulating Clemente and wanting to be his own person. He says the comparison is an honor, but originally chose to wear No. 3 in the major leagues because he thought Clemente's 21 would place too much pressure on him. It took intervention by Valentine to get him to make the change.



**JULIO FRANCO**

Franco shed the bad news label he picked up in Cleveland to become a good influence on Ruben Sierra.



## COVER STORY

## e 3-4-5 Amigos

"People say it (that he's like Clemente), and it is an honor," Sierra said. "But I want to be Ruben Sierra. I want people to say I play like Ruben."

No one has ever complained about that. When Sierra's production dropped from 30 homers and 109 RBIs in 1987 to 23 homers and 91 RBIs last year, he told Valentine he planned to spend the winter in a San Juan gym, lifting weights to become stronger. He reported to spring training weighing 16 pounds more than in '88, and it seemed to be all muscle.

Sierra also has benefited from his relationship with Franco, who assumed a tutor's role. They are inseparable in the gym and on the bench. Franco, labeled as bad news during his six years in Cleveland, vowed early that he wanted to help Sierra avoid the mistakes he had made.

"Ruben was an outstanding player when Julio got here," Valentine said, "but Julio has provided a real steadying influence."

Sierra agreed. "Everything he says," said Sierra, pointing to his head, "I put right up here."

Sierra hit .244 before the All-Star break last year, but this year was batting .330. He would have hit for the cycle April 12 in Milwaukee if not for a questionable scoring call.

Tony LaRussa, the Oakland A's manager who was in charge of the A.L. All-Stars, said it was an easy choice to pick Sierra as the replacement in right field for Jose Canseco, who was voted into the

game by fans but was unable to play because he was not recovered from a wrist injury.

"Sierra has been a premier player all year in all facets of the game," LaRussa said. "He drives in runs, hits for average and plays well in right field. That was an easy call."

But a midseason election to pick the Rangers' top player would not have been easy to call. Catcher Jim Sundberg believes Franco was the biggest key to Texas' finishing the first half 47-39, its best first-half record since 1983.

"Franco is really our MVP," Sundberg said. "He hits behind Ruben and doesn't see as many good pitches as Ruben does. And Franco deserves even more credit for being such a great influence on Ruben."

Franco was called a lot of things during his days in Cleveland, but "a good influence" was not among them. His new standing in the clubhouse must come as a shock to former Indians G.M. Joe Klein and the others who hunted Franco down when he twice was AWOL from games.

"I'm a new guy," Franco said. "I learned that God gives you talent, but you still have to be on time and do what the manager says. You can't let your ego control you. Spanish ball players have reputations for egos that go too far. In Cleveland, I never used to shut up. The mouth always gets Latinos in trouble. Julio is not going to break rules in Texas."

Grieve had heard his share of Franco stories before he traded Pete O'Brien, Jerry Browne and Oddibe McDowell to the Indians for Franco. Grieve figured that even if there were some potential headaches, Franco still was bringing along a career .295 batting average.

"I made a point that I was not going to judge Julio Franco based on the stories of the past, and what I see is a young player who has matured quite a bit," Grieve said. "He's a great influence on Ruben. He's talking baseball with him all the time. He's serious about playing the game, but he shows that you can have fun, too. It's exactly what we needed."

Red Sox Manager Joe Morgan paid Franco a compliment after Julio had tripled and doubled against Clemens on July 18.

"That Franco's dynamite," Morgan said. "God, he's a tough out. I'd have to say he's the toughest out in the league right now. Tougher than (Kirby) Puckett, anybody else."

While both Franco and Sierra signed professional contracts when they were 16, Palmeiro chose a different route to the major leagues. After playing at Miami's Jackson High School, he elected to go to Mississippi State.

He formed a potent 1-2 combination with Will Clark there, flashing the potential that had caused his father, Jose Palmeiro, to push him toward a baseball career from almost the time he arrived in the United States. Palmeiro's family left Cuba in 1970, when Rafael was 6 years old. While people talk now about his natural swing from the left side, it was actually the product of years spent by Palmeiro trying to please his father.

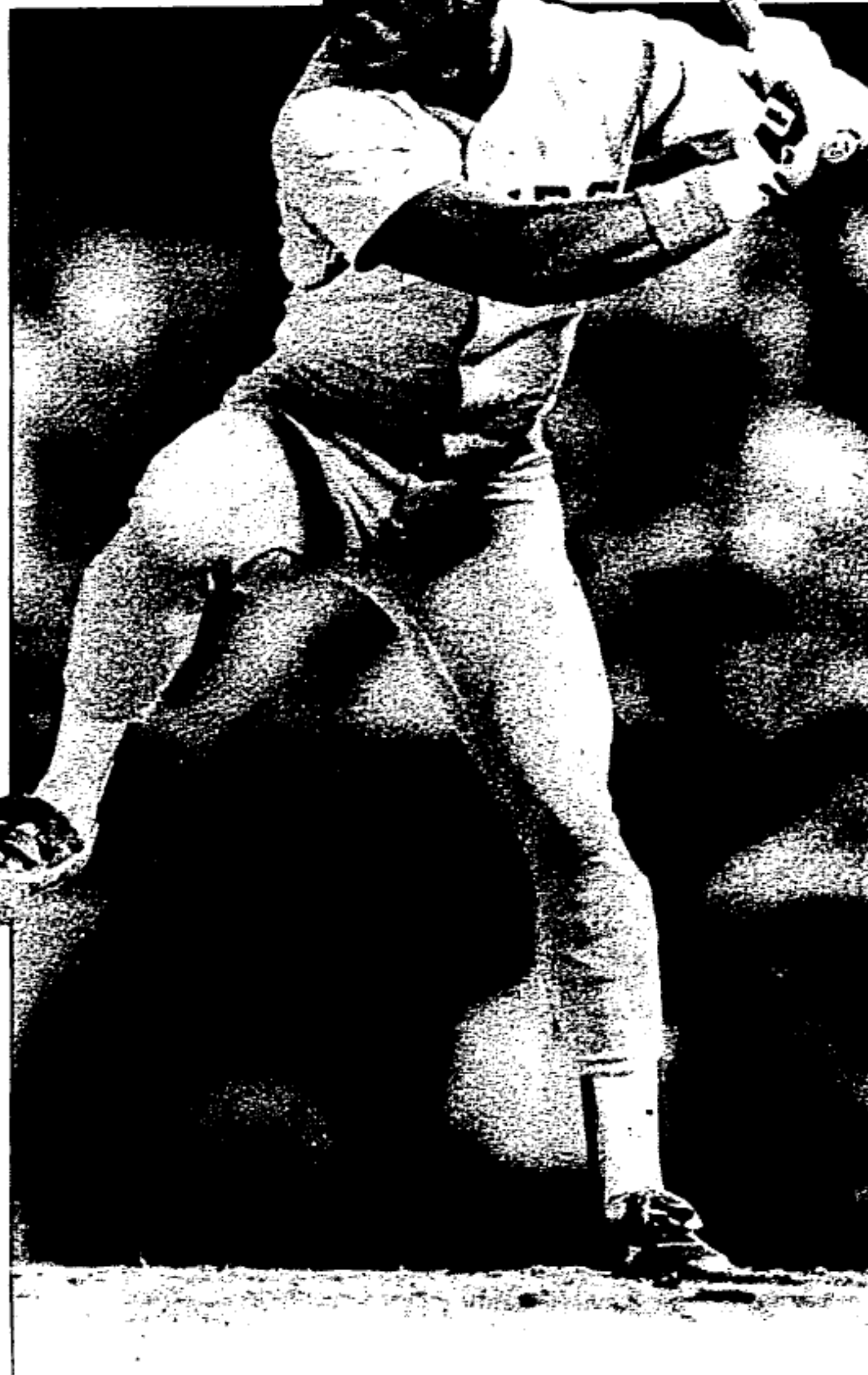
"People say my swing hasn't changed a bit since I was 14 or 15," Palmeiro said. "If my swing was that good then, I was taught pretty well."

Palmeiro finished second in the NCAA with 29 home runs in 1984, and last year finished second in the National League to Tony Gwynn with a .307 batting average. He still hopes to deliver more power (he had five homers and 48 RBIs through 93 games with the Rangers), but he has the look of a complete hitter.

While Palmeiro says he no longer burns over the trade that sent him from the Cubs to the Rangers last winter, he can still be ruffled by news dispatches from Wrigley Field. He was incensed by a quote attributed to Cubs pitching coach Dick Pole in June. At the time, Mitch Williams, the ex-Ranger, had 12 saves in a Chicago uniform.

Pole was quoted as saying, "I'll trade zero game-winning RBIs (Palmeiro had none in 1988) for 12 saves at this point anytime. Rafael was cute. The female fans were upset with the trade because he was cute, but cute doesn't win ball games."

Palmeiro called it "a very stupid comment from a very stupid man," before later cooling off. "I had con-



RUBEN SIERRA

Sierra began to live up to his potential when the other two Amigos joined him in the lineup.

sidered him one of my close friends in the game," Palmeiro said of Pole. "Obviously, I was wrong."

Even the normally cautious Grieve joined the fray over the Pole quote. "We didn't get Rafael because he was cute," Grieve told the Dallas Times Herald's Frank Luksa. "We got him because he can hit. Dick Pole will never be mistaken for a scout. The only thing he knows about hitters is that they were tough to get out when he was a pitcher."

Palmeiro says he's driven by two motivations—to help the Rangers win, and develop his potential to its fullest.

"I'm not playing to show people I can play," he said. "I'm playing the game to help this team out. That's my only concern."

Palmeiro's biggest series came May 26-28, when he was 8 for 14 at the Metrodome. Minnesota Manager Tom Kelly was impressed. "Mr. Boggs had better watch out," Kelly said, alluding to Boston's Wade Boggs, the American League batting champion the last four years.

Left-handed pitcher Jamie Moyer, who accompanied Pal-

meiro in the trade from Chicago to Texas, believes Palmeiro has improved. That would be normal, as this is only Palmeiro's second full season in the majors. He appeared in 22 games with the Cubs in 1986 and 84 in '87, when he displayed his power with 14 homers.

"He's a better hitter now," Moyer said. "Last year (with the Cubs), he used the whole park but went to left a lot. This year, he's using the whole park but going to right field with authority more often. I don't think there's been a team so far that's found a way to pitch to him."

Although Palmeiro hit only .200 in a 46-game stretch through July 18, he was getting on base and was on a pace to score 97 runs for the season. Both Palmeiro and Sierra, who was second to Rickey Henderson in the A.L. with 61 runs scored through July 20, could challenge McDowell's club record of 105 runs, set in '86.

"When I get on base, I'm going to score," Palmeiro said. "These guys are going to drive me in. Ruben and Julio are going to do it."

You don't believe it? Just ask Roger Clemens.



Palmeiro says he is no longer angry over the trade that sent him from Chicago to Texas.

