

'Maybe after the year is over, and we get to the playoffs, I'll say,
"Wow! I did something unbelievable."

—Sammy Sosa

taken the hit-'em-where-they-ain't concept one step further — hit-'em-where-they-ain't-never-been — Big Mac has approached history with a dignified reserve that at times has spilled into edginess.

Sosa? He has banged line drive after line drive over the fence while mixing a sheer joy for the game with a wry sense of humor. Try this: On the night he hits his 55th home run—in a victory, by the way—to tie McGwire on the brink of Hack Wilson's National League record, **Sosa** takes a moment to poke fun at the tempest in a teapot over McGwire's use of the over-the-counter diet supplement androstenedione. "This is what I use," he says, holding up a box of Flintstones vitamins. Actually, his supplement of choice is the herb ginseng, but the point isn't missed. **Sammy** is having fun, on the field and off.

Moments later, **Sosa** grows more introspective when considering the task(s) ahead. "I'm going to go home tonight and have a glass of wine with my wife and keep going," he says quietly. "Maybe after the year is over, and we get to the playoffs, I'll say, 'Wow! I did something unbelievable.'"

As this home run chase wound to its conclusion, the hypotheses were legion. How far out did it get? One favorite "what-if" scenario: What if **Sosa** reached season's end and in his last at-bat was forced to choose between swinging for the home run record, knowing that he may never get the opportunity to do it again, and getting on base any way possible to help the Cubs' playoff push?

Sosa's answer? A qualified "both": "If you go out trying just to make good contact, if you have that in your mind, you can hit home runs. I won't overswing."

Barring a June-like surge from **Sosa** in the final weeks, McGwire may have rendered moot the home run half of that scenario. But there are other ongoing considerations about **Sosa's** home run pace as it relates to the Cubs' push for a playoff spot, including Cal Eldred, the Padres' and Astros' staffs and the lingering effects of *El Nino*:

■ **Sosa** has six home runs this year off Milwaukee pitchers, including three off Eldred on June 15 at Wrigley. The Cubs have five games left against the Brewers, and perhaps one or two against Eldred.

■ Throughout his National League career, **Sosa** has hit well against the Padres (.353). The Cubs have a four-game series September 14-17 at San Diego. **Sosa** has averaged a home run for every 12.1 career at-bats against the Padres and has hit .474 in five games against San Diego this season.

■ The Cubs also have three games left against Houston, a team against which **Sosa** has struggled. He has a .188 career average against the Astros and 13 home runs, an average of one for every 21.7 at-bats. However, he is hitting .343 against the Astros this season.

■ Because, in part, of *El Nino*, the wind has blown out at Wrigley Field in less than a quarter of Cubs home games, which makes **Sosa's** 31 homers at Wrigley even more impressive than at first glance. Will the trend continue? And if **Sosa** is as hot as he has been since June, does the wind or the stadium even matter?

Here is the potential benefit **Sosa** derives from being in the middle of one of baseball's few remaining races, the N.L. wild-card race. In word and deed, he has spent most of the season carefully positioning himself in McGwire's slipstream. **Sosa** has conserved energy

that way, has been under less pressure and faced fewer questions, though he has been unfailingly accommodating to the media.

He says he watches *Baseball Tonight* (his favorite show) and worries about McGwire's swing. But he could be taken two ways when he says: "I see sometimes he is trying too hard."

Earlier in the chase, when the order of finish seemed preordained, both men said the same thing, that **Sosa's** consolation prize is that he gets to play in games that still mean something; that **Sosa** probably will get more serious consideration for the MVP award. It was as if **Sosa** couldn't expect to get those things *and* break the home run record. But there's a trace of wistfulness and a good deal of respect in McGwire's voice now when he talks about **Sosa's** season. "He's having a magical year, a way better year than I am having," McGwire says. "His team is right there in the wild-card race, he's driving in quite a few more runs than I have and hit for a higher average."

High praise from the man **Sosa** consistently has referred to as "The Man." That deference may at face value appear to a cynic as hollow, at the least

what **Sosa**, 29, has done this season, no one is accusing the Cubs of financial folly. They're in the wild-card race, and **Sosa** finds himself paired with McGwire as part of the daily news.

Oh, **Sosa** had hit plenty of home runs in recent seasons, 36 last year and in 1995 sandwiched around 40 in 1996 in productive but flawed seasons. But while hanging with McGwire and chasing Maris, he has gone beyond merely providing more summer thunder than usual.

The knock on **Sosa** was he could break open a game but never win one. He would punish mediocre middle relief pitching but was much less of a threat when the game was on the line. That's not the case anymore. Of **Sosa's** 58 home runs, 42 would qualify as particularly meaningful—19 have given the Cubs the lead, six have tied the score, 10 were hit when the Cubs led by one run and seven pulled the Cubs to within one run. Additionally, 20 have produced the first run(s) scored; the Cubs have gone on to win 12 of those 20 games.

A .257 lifetime hitter, **Sosa** averaged .251 last season with his .300 mark in strike-shortened 1994 seemingly an aberration. This year, **Sosa** is



CAN WE TALK? Unlike McGwire, **Sosa** has a sense of humor when he faces the media.

puzzling. But don't mistake it for a lack of drive to be No. 1 in this most individual chase or a desire to melt into a faceless team in a playoff race.

"**Sammy** wants the attention," McRae says. "He wants to be the most popular athlete in Chicago. He wants to be 'The Man' and wants to play every day to prove that he is worth what he's making."

More at the heart of who and what **Sammy Sosa** is today is where he has come from, having grown up in a one-bedroom apartment in San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic, shared with three brothers, two sisters, his mother and stepfather. **Sosa** shined shoes and sold oranges for meal money. His first glove was a milk carton turned inside out, and he was signed at age 16 for \$3,500 in 1985 by Rangers scout Omar Minaya.

"The story of **Sammy Sosa**," says Minaya, now the Mets' assistant general manager, "is not if he breaks that record, but how far he's come to be put in that light in the summer of '98."

In fact, the Cubs were ridiculed in 1997 when, in the middle of a 68-94 season, they gave **Sosa** a four-year, \$42.5 million contract extension. The deal seemed to make public-relations sense, lack baseball logic and be driven by the Cubs' need to keep their only player with marquee value besides Grace, who while a fan favorite isn't a home run hitter. Given the escalation in salaries and

batting .314 and leads the National League with a career-high 140 RBIs. Strikeouts are part of the package with **Sosa**, who led the N.L. with 174 in 1997 and with 142 through last Saturday, but his walks are up to 61, a career high.

"**Sammy** is more disciplined," Phillies hitting instructor Hal McRae says. "Before, he would try to hit everything you threw out of the ballpark."

There will always be an appealing let-'er-rip quality to **Sosa**, who takes few checked swings and doesn't get cheated even when he swings at bad pitches. But there is less flailing these days as **Sosa** has grown as a hitter.

There is an acknowledgement, too, that, yes, he's in this home run chase—hopefully to the end. And, yes, he can get the Cubs to the playoffs, too. And that is a delicious prospect, not only for Cubs fans but for him, as well.

"When I was back home a long time ago," he says, "when I was a shoeshine boy, I was not thinking of being in the major leagues. But now I'm in the major leagues, and anything can happen."

Then, **Sammy Sosa** smiles.

TSN

Bob Hille is a managing editor of THE SPORTING NEWS. Jack Etkin of the Rocky Mountain News and Paul Sullivan of the Chicago Tribune contributed to this report, which contains material from other news organizations.

Seventy for McGwire. Almost 70 for Sosa. It's

percent increase.

"I think there are probably some new baseball fans who didn't even know what baseball was. Every player in the game should be proud of that," says the man who hit 70.

Seventy. 70. *Setenta*.

An absolutely mind-boggling number of home runs.

Seventy for McGwire. Almost 70 for **Sosa**. It's as if home runs are being calculated in yen.

Our throats and eardrums are sore. Our necks are whiplashed. We don't remember when an individual achievement so trumped team results. We don't recall two sluggers each having 66 home runs with two games left. We don't recall the Cubs and Giants in a one-game playoff for a postseason berth. We don't recall baseball as fun or captivating.

The '98 regular season is going, going, gone. But we won't forget. Ever.

The facts of the matter are now a part of the record. Mark McGwire hit five home runs in his last three games to finish the 1998 season with 70 and put the final noisy bells and whistles on the most extraordinary two-man performance in the history of baseball.

Now the legend begins.

Now, as the years pass, the stories will grow. McGwire and **Sosa** and their beyond-belief race to be the Home Run King are now and forever a part of the lore of baseball, as much a part as anything else the game has given us in its 130 years of American life. Did Babe Ruth really call his shot in 1932 in Wrigley Field? Did Roger Maris really lose his hair in 1961? Did Mark McGwire *really* hit a ball 545 feet in Busch Stadium? Did he *really* do \$10,000 worth of batting-practice damage to Bank One Ballpark in Phoenix? Did he *really* hit five home runs in his last 11 at-bats?

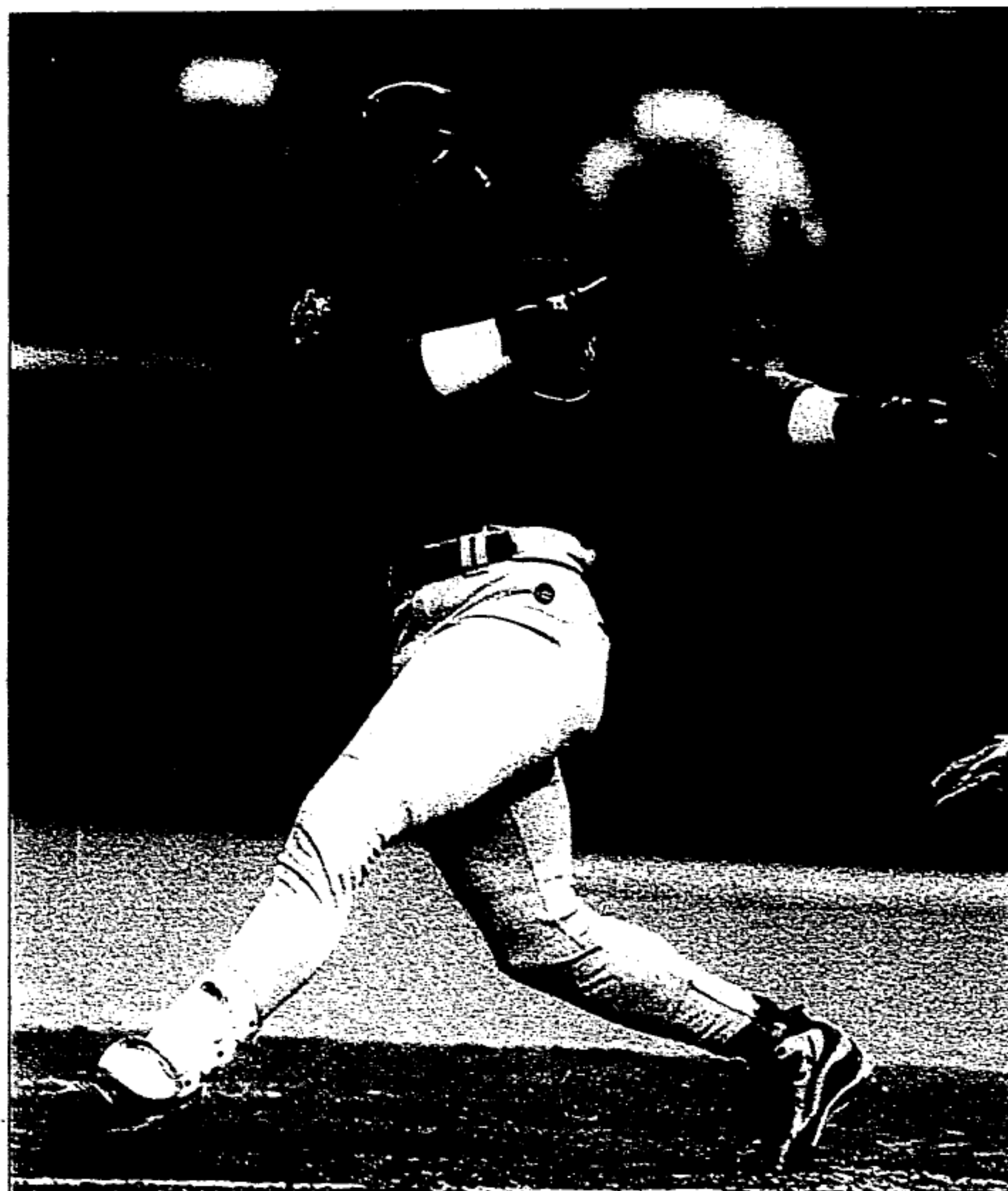
And did McGwire and **Sosa** *really* forge a rock-solid friendship and mutual respect for one another across the boundaries of race, nationality and regional Cubs-Cardinals rivalry as the Summer of '98 sweltered on?

This is how myths are made.

"To say the least, I've amazed myself," McGwire said. "I've amazed myself that I have stayed in such a tunnel for so long, through all that I had to deal with—the media and the expectations. Almost every eye in the country was watching me. It just proves to me that I can overcome anything there is to overcome with the strength of my mind."

Sosa, who at the end of a valiant effort to stay with McGwire came up short, is just as amazing. Until this year, he had never hit more than 40 home runs in a single season. But his constant peppering of McGwire's summerlong lead in the major league home run statistics and his *joie de vivre* over his unforeseen success will forever make him a favorite son of his adopted homeland and a national icon in his native Dominican Republic.

"History was rewritten," said Expos manager Felipe Alou, also Dominican, whose team gave up McGwire's final five home runs. "McGwire has to



CHICAGO'S KING OF SWING: Last Friday, **Sosa** hit his 66th (above), which led the majors for almost an hour. However, **Sosa** shifted his focus from hitting homers to helping his team with hits. And although he fell behind McGwire, it worked.



be compared with Ruth. And Ruth didn't have the record. But every time people think of long balls now, they think about Ruth. Nobody else is Ruth or McGwire. I feel kind of empty about **Sammy Sosa** because he provided so many home runs, too. It's been an incredible season."

The final weekend of McGwire's season is one of those photographs for the mind that will grow better with the years. He hit his 66th home run last Friday night to tie **Sosa**, who had hit his only 45 minutes

earlier. On Saturday, McGwire hit Nos. 67 and 68, the ninth time this season he'd hit more than one home run in a game. And on Sunday, he hammered the last two, including—and this, too, will become part of the lore—the winning home run in his last at-bat of the season, a three-run monster that broke a 3-3 tie with the Expos in the seventh inning.

That last one, the exclamation point on this most remarkable of seasons, came on the first pitch by Carl Pavano, who is 22, a rookie. It rocketed over the left-field fence, just inside the foul pole, 370 feet from home plate.

Said Alou, on the decision to let Pavano pitch to McGwire: "I just left it up to ... whatever. God. I didn't want to tamper with history."

Pavano, then, is this generation's Tracy Stallard (the man who gave up Maris' 61st in '61), if the Cubs' Steve Trachsel didn't take on that yoke when he gave up No. 62 on September 8. But Pavano is young. He's resilient. And he has perspective, the proper perspective.

"I hadn't given up a home run in my last four starts," he said, "and I gave this one up to the best home run hitter in history. I guess if you're going to give up a home run, you can give it up to him. I'm not going to bother looking at it any other way. What he did for baseball this year, and what he accomplished, is unbelievable."

"I watched his interviews to see if he was cocky, to see if he had an attitude about it. But he's genuine. So you can't be anything but happy for him. He's a man about it, and he's genuine. He gives back to the community and things like that. He does everything you'd expect of a really high-profile athlete."

That, we hope, will be the ultimate legend of McGwire and **Sosa**. For both of them saw their Season of Swats through with more grace and panache than anyone could have desired. Down to the finish. It was a most remarkable weekend. It was a most remarkable year.

Forty-five minutes. Less than a prime-time drama, more than a sitcom, time enough for **Sammy Sosa** to grab a piece of baseball's most famous record. Let the record show, under the category of home runs, that **Sosa** was the first to hit 66. He got there before McGwire. For 45 minutes last Friday night, **Sosa** was alone on Home Run Olympus. Forty-five minutes may not seem like much time, unless your lawyer's meter is running, but in Sosa's case, it bought him immortality.

It was hit off a fellow Dominican and friend, Astros righthander Jose Lima, who in August was speculated to have grooved a pitch for Sosa's 51st home run. Before the game **Sosa** joked that he had "not gone out lately" with Lima.

A righthander, Lima likes to challenge hitters, which accounts for 34 home runs allowed as well as an unexpectedly fine 16-8 season. In the fourth, he challenged **Sosa** with a fastball down and in,

as if home runs are being calculated in yen.

and 462 feet later, in the left-field loge, it descended as home run No. 66. The Cubs and Astros were tied at 2, and at that moment, **Sosa** held the record. A crowd of nearly 52,000 saluted.

Outhomering McGwire was just one of Sosa's concerns last Friday, with both poised at 65. There was the matter of the Cubs fighting for the National League wild-card berth. But McGwire and the Astros were relatively benign adversaries next to Mother Nature.

Hurricane Georges had devastated Sosa's Dominican Republic. On Thursday he took a call from President Leonel Fernandez, who told him to "play your game" as recovery efforts began. **Sosa** spent Friday morning telephoning family and friends on the island. He decided to set up a relief fund, which he announced to a media gathering late in the afternoon. Sadly and quietly, **Sosa** spoke of death, homelessness and despair wrought by the storm.

"I have to do everything I can to help my people," he said. "I have to try to find the strength to play a good game tonight."

Home run No. 66, then, was Sosa's gift to his storm-ravaged country, as well as a record-setter. The significance was largely overlooked, in light of subsequent events, including the Cubs' 6-2 loss that created a wild-card tie with the Mets and Giants. Forty-five minutes after **Sosa** touched home plate, one particular event at Busch Stadium was about to reclaim the spotlight. From the visitors' dugout **Sosa** glanced up at the large Astrodome screen. McGwire stood in.

While **Sosa** had the overlay of the hurricane and the Cubs' high-pressure lurch in the direction of a playoff berth to add context to his swings, McGwire's final at-bats were stripped bare of any pretense. Once the Cardinals won Friday night, 6-5, and assured themselves of a regular-season finish above .500, the final team-concept goal standing between McGwire and an unadulterated assault on the Busch Stadium fences disappeared. At least as far as St. Louis manager Tony La Russa was concerned, McGwire was free at that point of any team obligations.

"I'm just trying to think whether to say this or not," La Russa said late Friday. "I'm not speaking for the ownership or the coaches or the front office. But to me, Mark McGwire's home run record is the most important thing over the next two days."

That's one explanation for Saturday's two nuclear blasts—Nos. 67 and 68 traveled a combined 838 feet, and the 435-foot shot in the seventh inning left the building at a speed of 111 mph, according to the scoreboard sign that tracks the speed of pitches. Except that McGwire didn't buy into it. Saturday's swings, he said, were no different than Friday's swings, or early September's swings, or mid-May's swings.

Maybe, then, it was Sosa's 66th homer Friday night, coming as it did 45 minutes earlier, that propelled McGwire into Saturday's two-blast bonanza. That 45-minute stretch on Friday was only the second time McGwire had lost the lead since mid-May. On August 19, **Sosa** hit his 48th home

run against the Cardinals at Wrigley Field; McGwire caught up 58 minutes later and went back ahead a few innings after that.

Tom Lampkin, the Cardinals' backup catcher who played press secretary as McGwire began to limit his media access in the season's later stages, noticed something different in the big man's demeanor after he hit No. 66.

"It was the expression he got on his face after he tied **Sammy** on Friday," Lampkin said. "He just came into the dugout and looked at me. He didn't say anything. But it was almost as if he'd just broken



THE UNDISPUTED CHAMPION: McGwire not only smashed the single-season home run record, he set career highs in RBIs and runs scored.

the record again. The feeling that I got from him was, 'OK, I'm relaxed. I don't have anything to worry about now. I'm just going to go out and hit.'"

McGwire, though, never accepted the one-upmanship element as a motivator, either, despite the overwhelming evidence. He matched **Sosa** with a same-day home run 21 times.

"I don't have an explanation for that," he said. "Some things are meant to be unexplained."

McGwire's No. 66 came at 8:39 p.m. CT on a fastball over the inside half of the plate from righthanded reliever Shayne Bennett. Bennett, incidentally, spent the next afternoon chatting at length in the Expos' bullpen with Cardinals groundskeeper Tim Forneris, the man who retrieved McGwire Home Run Ball No. 62.

They had a common bond. They'd both had their hands on historic baseballs.

Saturday spelled out the difference between McGwire and **Sosa** between circumstances allowing one to pursue home runs, the other to pursue victories.

The Cubs were locked in a life-and-death duel with Astros righthander Shane Reynolds, trailing, 1-0, in the top of the fifth, when McGwire's 67th home run was announced. **Sosa** shrugged. Most of the Cubs ignored the news.

Flash forward to a tie game, 1-1, as **Sosa** came up in the eighth. Falling into an 0-2 hole against Jay Powell, **Sosa** did something McGwire never considered in the final weekend—he changed his approach. Down the stretch Sosa's pursuit of home runs occasionally had conflicted with team goals. There had been situations when **Sosa** swung for the fences when a contact swing was called for. This time he shortened his swing.

Sosa singled to center. Then Mark Grace singled, and both came home on Gary Gaetti's double. The Cubs cheered. **Sosa** and Grace were engulfed as exuberantly as for any home run celebration.

In the top of the ninth, McGwire's 68th was announced. Again, little reaction from the Cubs. **Sosa** was on deck when Mickey Morandini made the third out. When closer Rod Beck nailed down a tense 3-2 decision, **Sosa** raced in from right to shake Beck's hand.

"We got a big game tomorrow, that's all I'm thinking about," **Sosa** said. "I always said McGwire is the man, and I'm saying that now. He'll probably hit two more tomorrow. I hope he hits 70."

"I always said I'm more interested in the wild card, so if that's what it is, I'll take that, and that's a wonderful feeling."

On Sunday, **Sosa** kept swinging for singles. In the first inning he lashed an RBI single off Mike Hampton for a 1-0 lead. As the Cubs took the field for the top of the third, McGwire's 69th was announced. **Sosa** and center fielder Lance Johnson exchanged a few words.

"He's going to get 70," **Sosa** told Johnson.

Between the sixth and seventh innings, McGwire's 70th was announced. Trotting into the dugout, **Sosa** wagged a clenched fist and clapped.

He would add another single, but Sosa's Sunday almost ended badly, when he misplayed Carl Everett's drive into a triple that turned into the Astros' winning run in extra innings. However, Neifi Perez and the Rockies beat the Giants and put a smile back on Sosa's face. There would be another day, another game.

Later, wearing a **Sosa** cap with a "66" patch, he congratulated McGwire and repeated his mantra, "Thank you, Mark. You the man." But he would rather be playing for the wild card, **Sosa** went on, than have 70 home runs. Winning the wild card was driving him. He would swing for a single if the situation required a single.

Will you be remembered in 10 years? he was asked.

Replied **Sosa**: "Not only in 10 years, 50 years from now."

We'll remember **Sosa** all right. We'll remember

him for his stunning numbers and for prodding McGwire. We'll never forget him in Busch Stadium on September 8, graciously acknowledging McGwire's 62nd with hugs and his quirky fingers-to-heart salute. We'll remember him for settling for singles when the Cubs had to win.

Sosa the player was magnificent; **Sosa** the man was better. He was everything baseball needed in its summer of joy: agreeable, tactful, even-tempered and compassionate. His deferral to McGwire had just the right combination of respect and coyness. His bilingual fluency enabled millions of Latin American fans to feel closer to the chase.

We'll remember **Sosa** last Saturday night, answering a call from the Dominican consulate in Houston, along with teammates Henry Rodriguez and Manny Alexander, to help load trucks with food and emergency supplies for hurricane victims.

"The consulate asked if I could help," **Sosa** said. "I said, 'I'm there.'"

We don't think the concept of runner-up does justice to **Sosa** in 1998. We like to think of him as MVP.

TSN

Michael Knisley and Steve Marantz are senior writers for THE SPORTING NEWS.

Memories are made of this

One exhilarating moment after another makes for a truly momentous baseball season.

Right from the start, the baseball gods hinted it could be a one-for-the-books season. Then, with a week remaining in the schedule, they confirmed it.

There was, after all, commotion galore at Yankee Stadium on a Monday in April—but no game was in progress. Then, on the third Sunday of September, a clamor erupted at Camden Yards when a certain player never went to the plate or fielded a ball or took a throw or did anything.

If these strange occurrences—the collapse of a steel joint into empty Yankee Stadium seats and Cal Ripken's decision to take one day of vacation after 16 years of hauling his lunch bucket to the ballyard—were attention-getters, how do you categorize the historical significance of what happened on the field from opening day 1998 through last Sunday?

Groping for words? Don't fret. Noah Webster would be, too.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Mark McGwire instigated all the wonderful fuss—a real surprise there, eh? Big Mac was given a good chance to break Roger Maris' home run record even before the season started, and then he goes out and hits a grand slam on Day One and slugs a homer in each of the first four games of '98.

Paul Bunyan in cleats becomes the main story—but hardly all of it. **Sammy Sosa** starts slowly, then does the unthinkable and the impossible: He hits 21 homers in 22 games. Juan Gonzalez has 101 RBIs by the All-Star break, for crying out loud. And Barry Bonds, rating nary a mention in the long-ball derby, instead forms the career 400-400 club, a homers/steals fraternity of exactly one.

Then there's that kid pitcher in Chicago, Kerry Wood. He begins the year in Class AAA to get a little seasoning—after one start, he's pronounced seasoned—and then strikes out 20 Astros in his fifth start for the Cubs. San Diego's Trevor Hoffman ties the record for consecutive saves, then Boston's Tom Gordon comes along and breaks it. David Wells pitches a perfect game for the Yankees and, 3½ months later, goes 20 batters deep into a possible sequel. Roger Clemens and Randy Johnson put up post-All-Star-break ERAs that render minuscule a poor choice of words. Clemens posts his second consecutive pitching "triple crown"—he leads in victories, ERA and strikeouts. And Dennis Martinez stirs emotions throughout the hemisphere by becoming the winningest Hispanic pitcher in history. All this in the Year of the Home Run.

Ah, the home run. McGwire shatters—no, obliterates—Maris' mark by hitting No. 62 with almost three weeks remaining in the season and



ED NESSEN / TSN

GREATNESS: McGwire overshadowed record-setting performances by Rodriguez (left), Clemens (center) and Jeter's Yankees.

sets off a lovefest that warms baseball hearts pierced by the '90s labor mess and the ugly dismantling of last season's World Series champion Marlins. He finishes with an astonishing 70 homers and no asterisk (although his final figure will seem like a typographical error in the record book). Sosa's dogged pursuit (66 homers entering Monday's wild-card playoff game) and exuberance win him a place in fans' esteem, if not the No. 1 spot in the record book. (The only thing missing: the echo of "Holy Cow!" or "Hey, Hey.")

Ken Griffey Jr. hits 56 homers and winds up starved for attention. Gonzalez falters—if you can call it that—and has 157 RBIs at season's end. **Sosa** got his 158th on Sunday.

Alex Rodriguez becomes the third player to reach 40 homers and 40 stolen bases in one season—and he's only 23. Rickey Henderson leads the majors in steals—and he's 39.

Things are a-happening off the field, too. The game finally installs a commissioner. And 1998 brings the trade of the century—of the decade, anyway—when the Dodgers deal Mike Piazza to Florida. Then Piazza gets traded again. And Johnson, as long rumored, is sent packing by Seattle—but to the Astros, not the suitor-in-waiting Yankees.

Those Yankees hardly need the Big Unit. By August 18, they are 62 games over .500 and threatening the big-league record for victories in one season. Alas, they settle for most wins by an American League team.

Runaway division races are the rule, but that not-so-gimmicky wild-card innovation proves a godsend when the Cubs, Giants and Mets wage a death struggle.

Is there an end to all this? Not for three weeks, anyway—by which time Baseball '98 will have had ample opportunity to add a classic post-season to its can-you-top-this regular season.

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Ken Rosenthal

Insider

Sosa is going about this thing all wrong

What does **Sammy Sosa** want?

If it's top dollar, he should shut up, play out the final year of his contract and become a free agent. If it's Cubs

immortality, he should use the team's offer of a four-year extension in the \$70 million range as a starting point.

And if it's a World Series ring, he should allow the Cubs to trade him, lead some contender to the postseason and rebuild his image while raising his market value, all in one fell swoop.

The latter option is clearly the most attractive, and it's the one **Sosa** likely will choose as the July 31 deadline nears for completing trades without waivers.

Then again, **Sosa** frequently confuses his priorities, and he already has tarnished his once-spotless image by engaging in a prolonged contract dispute with the Cubs.

In 1998, **Sosa** was the toast of baseball. On February 2 of this year, however, he was booed by a vocal minority of Cubs die-hards at the team's annual fan convention.

Sosa attributed the mixed reaction to a misunderstanding over whether he would attend the convention, but his ongoing contract saga could not have helped.

Both fans and Cubs executives might be growing S.O.S.—Sick of **Sammy**. It's difficult to imagine how trading the game's leading home-run and RBI man the past three seasons would be in the team's best interests. But the A's recovered from the Mark McGwire trade by developing top young talent, and the Cubs are in position to do the same.

With **Sosa**, the Cubs are 100-169 since June 9, 1999, the worst record in the majors. Obviously, that's not all **Sosa's** fault. But the Cubs are loaded with upper-level prospects, and they could add others by trading **Sosa** or acquiring two draft picks if he leaves as a free agent.

The problem with the Cubs is that, well, they're the Cubs. They haven't won the World Series since 1908. And their current ownership, the Tribune Co., has little incentive to increase payroll with fans packing venerable Wrigley Field no matter which underachievers are wearing Cubs uniforms.

Sosa has become part of the Wrigley phenom-

enon, helping put people in the seats, but team president Andy MacPhail, a guy who once was pretty smart in Minnesota, finally seems intent on shaking the franchise out of its century-long funk: He discarded longtime favorite Mark Grace over the winter and bid \$105 million for Mike Hampton, albeit unsuccessfully.

It might seem logical to build around **Sosa**, a

veteran slugger to complement all the budding Corey Pattersons, Hee Seop Cho and Bobby Hills. But if the Cubs want to start anew, they should start anew. **Sosa** is more of a circus act than a baseball player.

Why didn't MacPhail trade **Sosa** to the Yankees last summer? Because the Yankees had no interest in meeting MacPhail's demand for five players or **Sosa's** desire for a contract extension. They used the Cubs as leverage for other pursuits.

Why doesn't MacPhail trade **Sosa** now?

Because **Sosa** maintains veto power as a player with 10 years of major-league service and five with the same club and continues to insist that he will not approve a trade unless he receives a lucrative extension from his new team.

The Cubs aren't going to trade **Sosa** with such little leverage. A team like the Mets or the Mariners never would give MacPhail a face-saving return when the price of the trade also would include a new contract for **Sosa** at nearly \$20 million per season, so the stalemate continues.

"They're treating him like a franchise player," said one G.M., revealing that the Cubs continued to demand five players for **Sosa** this winter. "They'll move him only if they get barreled over."

Sosa, 32, could change the entire dynamic by quietly informing the club that he would waive his no-trade right, but he's trying to get the Cubs to increase their offer to five or six years. (Jeff Bagwell, another 32-year-old slugger, recently signed a five-year, \$85 million extension with the Astros.)

An option with a lucrative buyout would be one way for the Cubs to bridge the gap, but **Sosa** would be nearly 37 at the end of a four-year extension. His weight, listed at 200 pounds in 1998 and 220 last season, is a concern. And his play in right field figures to deteriorate further.

Many in baseball perceive him as an essentially one-dimensional player who craves money but cares little about winning. **Sosa** could alter that perception by a) accepting a below-market deal from the Cubs, or b) agreeing to join a contender without an extension.

So what does **Sosa** want?

He is not wrong to believe that he deserves top dollar—heck, he has averaged 60 home runs over three seasons. But whether **Sosa** likes it or not, the only way he can get top dollar is on the free-agent market, and a work stoppage could disrupt his plans.

He's too proud to give in to the Cubs. The Cubs won't give him away just to achieve tranquility. MacPhail spent the offseason reshaping his roster in an effort to contend in the modest N.L. Central. What's **Sosa** going to do, create a disturbance? It's in his interests to slug, not pout.

Ken Griffey Jr. made his priorities known when he used his 10-and-5 hammer to force a trade to his hometown Reds. Alex Rodriguez made his priorities known when he used his free-agent hammer to land a record \$252 million contract with the Rangers.

Now **Sosa** has the hammer. The way he swings it will reveal much about the man. **TSN**

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TIME TO CHOOSE: *Sosa needs to decide whether to stay or go.*