

BASEBALL

FIRST THING'S FIRST

Third base may be the hot corner, but first base is the hot position in the majors. Andres Galarraga and John Olerud won batting titles. Gregg Jefferies finally lived up to his billing, and Rafael Palmeiro had a career year. When fans and coaches made their All-Star selections, first base was the toughest to choose. It is only fitting, then, that this postseason is showcasing four of the best at that position. Here's a closer look at Frank Thomas, Olerud, John Kruk and Fred McGriff, the common thread in these playoffs.

Hurtin', for certain

By JEROME HOLTZMAN

The news here in Chicago has been good and bad. The White Sox could win a World Series for the first time in more than three-quarters of a century: It has been 76 years. The bad news: "The Big Hurt" has been hurting.

"I'll be OK," says Frank Thomas, the White Sox cleanup hitter who has moved into Babe Ruth country, the only player to have more than 100 RBIs and 100 walks in each of his first three full seasons since Ruth switched to the outfield full time in 1920.

When in full health, Thomas is a pitcher's nightmare. But the long ball has been missing since September 19, when he bruised his left arm running into a fence pole in Oakland. Thomas hit 41 homers, none after the injury. He drove in 128 runs, only two after the injury.

How good is Frank Thomas? No one really knows, but having seen him from the beginning of his White Sox career, I am absolutely convinced there is no limit. Two things have impressed me the most: First, he has cut down on his strikeouts; second, he has improved in the field and is no longer a liability at first base.

What sets Thomas apart from most power hitters is that he rarely swings at bad pitches. He knows the strike zone and doesn't lunge. He has a comparatively short stroke and takes a big cut only when the occasion demands.

Like Ernie Banks, the former Cubs hero, Thomas has such outstanding bat speed and bat control that he can delay his swing until



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the final instant. Many pitchers have tested him with slow breaking stuff, but they have discovered he can delay and go to the opposite field. He uses the entire field; the outfielders cannot bunch up on him.

Barring a severe injury, Thomas should wind up alongside baseball's greatest power hitters. He already has broken a half-dozen single-season club records, including most home runs and extra-base hits and highest slugging percentage, and he would have exceeded Joe Jackson's total-bases record for one season if he hadn't hurt his arm. Thomas has 333 total bases; Shoeless Joe had 336 in 1920.

Also, what is impressive about Thomas — and this is crucial — is his poise. I have seen him pound his bat in disgust not more than a half-dozen times. Another plus is that he runs well for a big man, and as a result, always should be among the league leaders in doubles. He is focused and eager to improve. He will never be a great first baseman, but he is now more than acceptable in the field.

When asked about Thomas' potential, White Sox Manager Gene Lamont says, "I don't think anybody really knows. I don't know if this is a fantastic year for Frank or not. It's a good year, but no one really knows what he'll do in the future."

Sparky Anderson, the longtime Detroit manager, seems to know. Sparky is convinced the Frank Thomas Era is in its infancy.

"Look at this," Sparky says, holding aloft a White Sox stat sheet during a mid-September visit to Chicago. "He's got 98 walks and only 49 strikeouts. Now that tells you what kind of a guy you're dealing with. The 98 walks mean he's patient and disciplined. He isn't up there hacking. And the 49 strikeouts show you he makes contact. You're not going to strike him out with a man on third."

Sparky laughs. "This is one time I'm not sorry I'm getting old."

Future Sox: Anderson says Thomas will provide the White Sox with a spark for years to come.



Will he? ... or won't he, return to San Francisco, that is.

The Thrill's out of it

With the thrill of the season over, the question now for Giants' fans is: Is The Thrill going to be gone forever?

The Thrill, a.k.a. Will Clark, is eligible for free agency, and there is considerable doubt whether he will be back with the organization next year. Negotiations broke off early in the season and are set to resume this week. Clark is in the final year of a four-year, \$15-million contract that paid him \$4.25 million in 1993. The Mets, Rockies and Orioles are among the teams who could have interest in bidding for Clark.

What the Giants must decide is if his subpar numbers the past two years are an aberration, or a trend. Clark hit .300 in 1992, but with just 16 homers and 73 RBIs, his lowest totals since his rookie season. His power numbers this year were nearly identical. Clark insists, "Next year is going to be totally different."

They must decide if his possible replacements, rookie J.R. Phillips or veteran Todd Benzing, can do a comparable job at a greatly reduced rate.

More than anything, they must decide if they can afford to shell out the anticipated \$5 million a season it will take to retain Clark, in light of a payroll that is set to skyrocket based on the Giants' runaway success this season. Put slightly differently, they will weigh whether they can afford, from a marketing and public relations standpoint, not to retain Clark, who remains a highly popular and visible player.

"It's safe to say the fans and I have always had a good understanding," Clark says. "I've thoroughly enjoyed the support they've given me, especially this year, which has been very trying. I appreciate their support more than they understand."

Giants Manager Dusty Baker is convinced that Clark can retain his former level of play. When he re-inserted the hobbling Clark back into the lineup during a series in Houston, he told him, simply, "We need you."

"What's going on with Will is that water seeks its own level sooner or later," Baker says. "The bigger the game, the better he plays. He's been that way his whole life. Why would he change?"

—LARRY STONE

he says. "Frank Thomas is only 25. I feel sorry for all the younger managers because they're going to have to catch his act for a long time.

"He reminds me of Willie McCovey. Big, like McCovey, but wider."

Sparky talks about Thomas at every opportunity.

"What I like about him is he's steady," Sparky says. "He doesn't have big flashy days, like the guy with St. Louis." The reference is to Mark Whiten. "(Whiten) hit four home runs and drove in 12 runs in one game. They won 15-12. I'd throw that out. That doesn't mean anything.

"One day is all that it was. I call them 'dream days' for agents. But Thomas is a dream for the ballclub. He builds up his numbers day by day. It's like watching a sky scraper go up. One floor at a time."

White Sox batting coach Walt Hriniak, an old pro, usually is reluctant to talk about star players but makes an exception on Thomas.

"Frank has a chance to do things that are really exceptional," Hriniak says. "He uses the whole field, hits home runs, walks and hits for a high average. And he loves the pressure. What more can you say?"

Perhaps equally remarkable is Thomas' knowledge that he must not be overly impressed by his press notices. Soon after he joined the White Sox, he took a strip of tape, penciled the initials D.B.T.H. and fastened it above his locker. It stands for "Don't Believe The Hype."

During the last three seasons he has batted .319, with 97 home runs and 352 RBIs. That's not hype. That's fact. ◆

Jerome Holtzman is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Not .400; above average

By JAY GREENBERG

No pendulum swings with an arc more precise than does John Olerud.

"In almost every aspect of hitting, John's on the mark," says Larry Hisle, the Toronto Blue Jays' batting coach. "He is perfectly balanced. His center of gravity between his two legs is ideal. He rocks back a couple of inches, according to the book. He gets a large push off the back leg.

"He rotates the lower half of his body, the part that enables him to hit for power, perfectly. His bat path to the ball is exactly where it should be. The rotation should be stopped when he makes contact and he does that well."

Subjected to such stringent quality control, the balls come off the American League batting titlist's assembly line in uniform line drives. Outside pitch to left, inside pitch to right. Over the plate, over the pitcher's head. "It's not a matter of if," Hisle says. "It's where."

Certainly the Jays never suffered much anxiety about the "when" part. A franchise that has won five division championships in nine seasons obviously has identified more than its share of prospects, but it has encountered few inevitabilities such as Olerud. When the



Slow foot, fast bat: Because he lacks footspeed, Olerud never believed he had a shot at .400.

rest of baseball found two good reasons not to lift the bat off its shoulders to draft and sign such an obviously gifted player, the Jays kept fouling off pitches in 1989 until they got their man.

Not that Dr. John Olerud, a dermatologist and former minor league catcher, and his wife, Lynda, ever threw the suitors any curveballs. John Jr., like the Sr., is as straight as an Adirondack and as level as one of his swings, so when he maintained he was going to play his final year at Washington State, most clubs bought it.

Of course, most wanted to believe Olerud, too, because it saved them a decision. Five months before the Jays risked a third-round draft choice on Olerud, he had collapsed while jogging during a WSU workout. When tests failed to identify a problem, Olerud resumed physical activity, but a colleague of Dr. Olerud urged him to find a doctor who would look further. Olerud went to the University of Washington Medical Center, where an X-ray taken from another angle finally showed an aneurysm.

Olerud, a strapping 6-5, 210-pounder, wound up in bed looking like a 21-year-old Don Zimmer, but before the six-hour operation, he was hardly shorn of hope. While brain surgery may not be as difficult as making out a good Padre lineup, it's a little more complicated than soaking a blister in pickle brine. Nevertheless, Dr. H. Richard Winn was reassuring all along that Olerud's aneurysm, which stood a 50-50 chance of suddenly killing him if not removed, was in a much more reachable place than most Dennis Eckersley sliders.

See, when you know the background, Olerud seems a lot less out of nowhere than from a mad scientist's laboratory. It's wilder than science fiction to see someone identified as so special through his formative years turn out so completely without pretense.

Four years into his major league career Olerud still looks like he's going to start crying if Roger Clemens comes inside, but those doleful eyes can read the worry lines in the pitcher's forehead from 60 feet away. Yeah, he may still look like a kid, but Olerud has always been very mature for his age with a bat in his hand.

"When a guy is pretty much under control mentally and physically, it's just a matter of time until things work themselves out," Jays G.M. Pat Gillick says. The Jays used Olerud as a D.H. in his first full season, then made room for him at first base when they sent Fred McGriff to San Diego in the astoundingly successful deal that brought Robbie Alomar and Joe Carter to Toronto.

Physical laws rarely have failed Olerud when he swung early in counts, but in his first three full seasons, he too often forgot. Nice guy that he is, he had always figured that hitting 0-2 was the only way to make it fair for those college pitchers. In the majors, he wound up waiting for something the pitchers knew better than to throw at 0-2.

This year he started swinging from the first pitch of the first exhibition game. By August, he still hadn't stopped. In the 52 seasons that have transpired since Ted Williams was the last man to hit .400 for a season, only George Brett and Olerud have been over that mark in August.

Olerud was so remarkably sane during the chase that one suspected that Dr. Winn had performed a two-for-one: the clot and a lobotomy. Olerud believed all along that his utter lack of footspeed made .400 an impossibility, so he didn't build the quixotic goal up in his mind. Instead of becoming caught up in being all-time, Olerud concentrated on one at a time. "If you keep thinking about (hitting .400), you start thinking, 'I've got to have two hits tonight,'" he says. "I don't want to go up there thinking about not making outs. I just want to try to hit the ball hard every time up." He became either tired or human in September.

He finished at .363, with 200 hits, 54 doubles, 24 homers and 107 runs batted in. A little short of his eventual destiny of 1.000 maybe, but still pretty good for a man with no pulse. ◆

Jay Greenberg is a columnist for the Toronto Sun.

The wait is finally over

By BILL BROWN

John Kruk sits by his locker three hours before the game with a cigarette and coffee while he tries to locate all of the incidental costuming — the Lycra pants, elastic sleeves, knee pads, ankle guards and shin protectors — that must be worn or affixed underneath his uniform.

His body language sends a warning: Bad Johnny is in a foul mood. The lower-back strain that will keep him tied to the bench for this game, the final date of the regular season, could linger throughout the postseason and he knows it.

"It's not a weight thing," he growls. "It has nothing to do with my weight. Nix that angle right now.

"It took me eight years to get here, so only death will keep me out of the lineup in the playoffs. It's a back thing. You never know. I could wake up feeling fine tomorrow. Then again, I might not wake