

NEW SECRET WEAPON

Brewer Thomas Won '79 HR Title, But Few People Knew It

By TOM FLAHERTY

MILWAUKEE—As the cab driver pulled in to Cleveland Stadium, he turned to his passenger and asked, "Well, do you think Gordon Thomas can hit 45 home runs again this year?"

"That's Gorman. Gorman Thomas," the passenger said.

Inside the stadium, before the game between the Cleveland Indians and Milwaukee Brewers, three teen-agers puzzled over the question: Who led the American League in home runs last year?

The two girls in the group gave up immediately, but their companion thought it over while he slapped some mustard on his hot dog. Finally, a name popped into his head.

"I know," he said, "Jim Rice?"

Not a bad guess considering the fact that one national baseball publication (not THE SPORTING NEWS) lists Rice and Boston teammate Fred Lynn as co-champions with 39 each.

But the answer to one of the best-kept secrets outside of Milwaukee is: Gorman Thomas, the Brewers' center fielder, led the league in home runs last year with 45.

It's an achievement that has been almost ignored.

"You hardly read about it anywhere outside of Milwaukee," said Brewers pitcher Bill Travers. "It was like it wasn't supposed to happen. It was like it should be Lynn or Rice or one of those guys."

"But like Gorman says, he knows it. We know it. All of the pitchers know it."

Thomas isn't complaining.

"It really doesn't make any difference to me," he said. "Everybody wants to make a name for himself. It's something I achieved, something that happened. I didn't really try for it, it just happened."

"As far as getting recognition for it, I don't really care. Everybody likes to be known, but I don't need my name in the paper every day as long as I'm in the lineup every day."

Getting a chance to play means a lot to the fun-loving slugger. He waited a long time for it.

Thomas was the Brewers' first draft choice. They picked him in the first round in 1969 when the team was in Seattle. He got a couple of shots in the major leagues, but the team had given up on him when Manager George Bamberger arrived.

"Where's this Thomas kid?" Bamberger asked before the 1978 season.

Thomas, it developed, had run out of options when the Brewers sent him to Spokane (Coast) in 1977, and he had been traded to the Texas Rangers at the end of the season.

Bamberger wanted Thomas on his team—not so much for his bat, but for his defensive ability. General Manager Harry Dalton, also a new arrival in Milwaukee, reacquired Thomas, whose return was greeted with a lack of fanfare.

"The center field job is yours," Bamberger told him at the start of spring training. "Don't lose it."

He didn't. Playing regularly for the first time as a major leaguer, he hit 32 home runs and a lot of fences chasing down fly balls.

There were slumps and strikeouts, both of which had caused Managers Del Crandall and Alex Grammas to give up on him earlier. Bamberger left him in center field and the Brewers were rewarded.

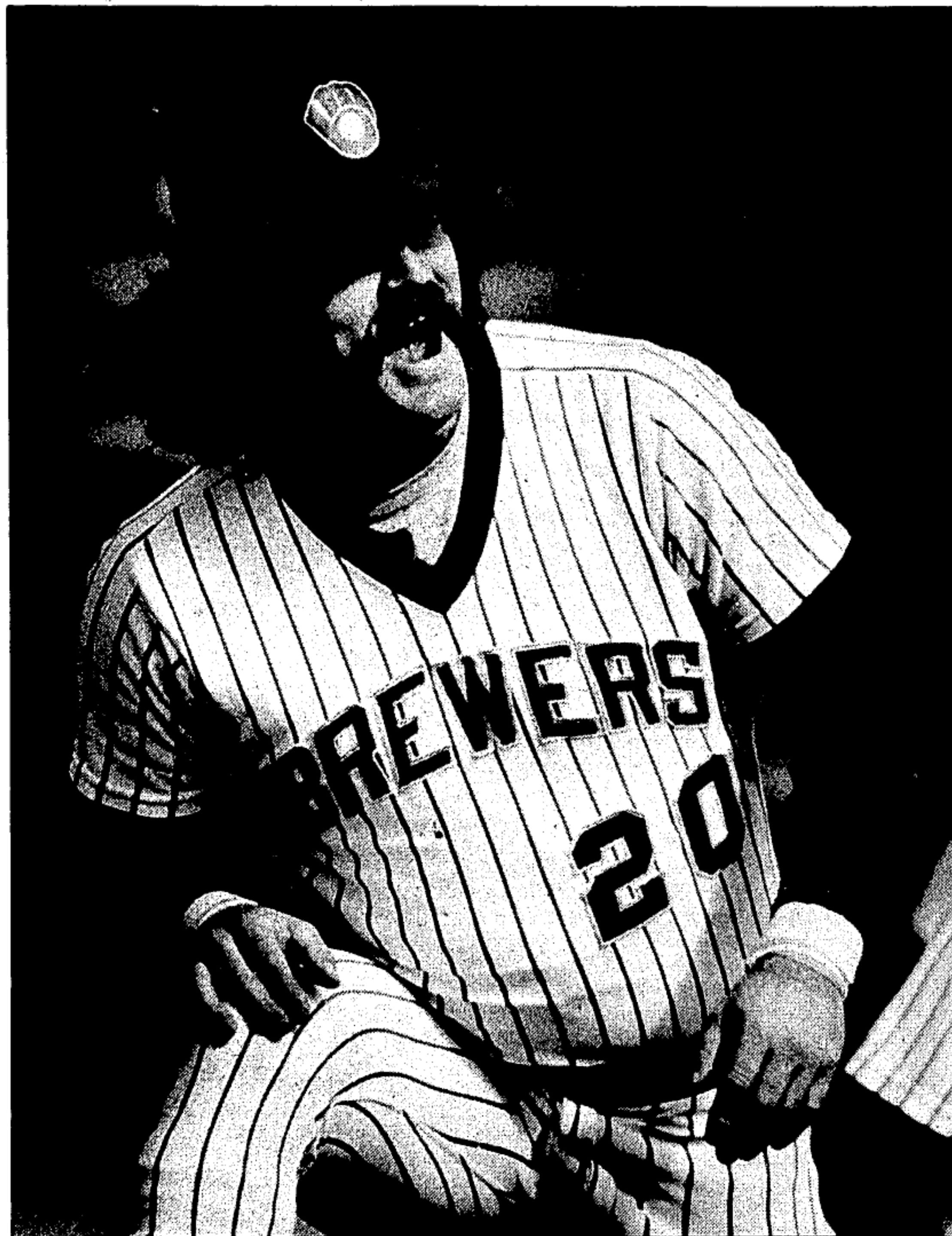
"He's a big swinger," said Coach Frank Howard, former American League home run king. "Like most big swingers, he'll go through his bad streaks. When he's hot, he's going to carry the club for a week to 10 days."

"He's a hard-nosed defensive player. Gorman plays hard. You couldn't ask for more. He has great rapport with his teammates. Everybody on the team likes him."

It might be added that everybody on the team becomes a little nervous when Stormin' Gorman gets a certain gleam in his eye.

When infielder Jim Gantner's shoes were nailed to the floor, there was only one suspect. When Tony Muser found a dead fish in his locker, whom did they blame? And when Sal Bando found a live frog in the pocket of his athletic supporter, guess who was accused?

"You usually suspect Gorman," said Travers. "He's the top suspect."



Gorman Thomas . . . The publicity mills grind slowly.

Thomas, getting a hurt look on his rugged face, always professes innocence.

"He's also a very good liar," Travers said.

"I get blamed for everything," Thomas said. "Anything that happens around here, invariably, I get the blame."

"Not that I don't do half of it."

"Last year, everybody was stealing my cigarettes. They'd stop by my locker and take one. I sent one of the clubhouse kids out for some loaded cigarettes. I marked some so I'd know which ones to smoke."

"Then I sat back and watched. Cigarette after cigarette started exploding. Buck Rodgers told me he quit smoking because of that."

"Sometimes people think too highly of themselves. You have to bring 'em down to earth. Some guys don't like it, but I'd say 99 percent don't mind. Everybody enjoys watching it, though."

Travers, a friend of the Brewers' center fielder since their low minor league days, says, "He's a crazy guy in his own way. He's shy in his own way, too."

"When he puts on his uniform, he goes wild. He keeps saying he's going to quit pulling jokes and be real serious, but he can't do it."

That's the outward appearance of the 29-year-old slugger who is getting a chance to do what he has wanted to do all his life, play major league baseball.

"That's his reputation, as a clown," said Bob Sullivan, the Brewers' equipment manager and one of Thomas' closest friends. "I've known him since 1970, and he's serious about baseball, about everything."

Thomas' teammates saw his serious side in his determination to become a good outfielder. In the process, he became an outstanding one.

"He's as good as anybody," Travers said. "What he doesn't have in speed, he makes up for in getting a good jump. He'll run into the wall to catch a ball."

"I remember in '72, when we were at San Antonio, they'd

hit him pop flies all day."

In the outfield, Thomas is fearless. He has loosened teeth, been knocked cold and bruised his entire body. But when he slams into the wall, he holds on to the ball.

"My father tells me to stay away from the fence," he said. "If I did that, I wouldn't get some of the balls I'm supposed to catch. And I wouldn't get some I'm not supposed to catch."

Around the league, Thomas is recognized for his home runs—and his strikeouts.

He agonizes through slumps, then hits home runs in bunches. He also strikes out in bunches.

Early this season, he struck out three straight times against the Cleveland Indians, then hit a home run in the ninth inning to win the game.

"That's the story of my career," Thomas said. "Three strikeouts, then do something."

Thomas tied Dave Nicholson's league record by striking out 175 times last year, but he had some other numbers that were of greater interest to the Brewers.

He batted only .244, but his 136 hits drove in 123 runs.

"There are worse things than strikeouts," Bamberger said. "You could hit into a double play. A strikeout is only one out."

Thomas, a three-sport athlete for three years at Cardinal Newman High School in Columbia, S.C., and his senior year at James Island High School in Charleston, S.C., had already accepted a football scholarship as a running back at Florida State when the Seattle Pilots drafted him.

"I knew there was not another job in the world I would enjoy as much as playing baseball," he said. "That's something I always wanted to do."

Possibly the desire to play baseball was inherited. His father, Gorman Sr., now the postmaster in Charleston, had been a strong-armed pitcher called No-Hit Thomas because of his habit of pitching no-hitters for two semipro teams on the same day. The elder Thomas signed with the Yankees but suffered a back injury during World War II and never played professionally.

"He didn't push me," Thomas said. "It was up to me whatever I wanted to do. This is what I wanted to do."

Thomas' mother, Gladys, also had a hand—or an arm—in Gorman's career.

"If my dad wasn't around, she'd throw me batting practice," Thomas said. "She had a good arm. She used to bring it up there pretty good. Didn't have a curve, though."

This year, Gorman has a home run title to defend, and even though the world may not be aware of it, his main competitor is.

"Rice told me I better get a good look at him because I was going to be behind him all year," Thomas reported. "I said, 'You hit 50, I'll hit 51.'"

"But you say things like that in jest. Right now I don't know if I can hit 45 again. That's the most I ever hit except for that one year in Sacramento when we played in the banjo hitters' park. I hit 51 that year."

Thomas would like to win a Rawlings Gold Glove as much as another home run title. Besides, you get something to show for that. All he got out of his home run title was a line of type in the record books.

"I was surprised," he said. "I thought they'd give you a trophy or a bowl. I didn't even get a typed letter from the league. If you get fined or thrown out of a game, you get a letter in two days. I'll guarantee it."

"If you win the batting title, you get a silver bat. If you're on the All-Star Team, you get a ring. The most prestigious title of all, you don't get anything."

"I did get something. Buck Martinez bought me a case of champagne. I probably enjoyed that more than anything else I could have gotten. It was from a teammate."

Martinez presented Thomas with the champagne at the pitchers' and catchers' annual party at the end of the season.

"It didn't seem like people were thinking too much about what he did," Martinez said. "I thought winning the home run title was kind of special. You don't get to play with a guy who does that very often. I wanted to do something for him."

"Besides, I like the guy."