

Thon's Career Is in Jeopardy

HOUSTON—After unsuccessfully trying to overcome blurred vision for the first six weeks of the season, Houston Astros shortstop Dickie Thon requested to go on the disabled list.

How long Thon will remain inactive is uncertain. One thing is clear, however. Thon's career, which seemed so bright before he was hit in the left eye by a pitch in April of 1984, is imperiled.



"I think the important thing is that he now realizes his career is in jeopardy," said General Manager Al Rosen. "He's having problems. This was not an easy thing for him to do. It's been weighing heavily on his mind. Maybe this will take some weight off his shoulders."

Thon was hit in the eye by Mike Torrez, then of the New York Mets, on April 8, 1984, and missed the rest of the season. During spring training this year, when Thon hit .360, it appeared his vision had improved. But once the season began, pitchers began throwing Thon a steady diet of breaking balls, and he looked like a shadow of the player who hit .286 with 20 home runs in 1983.

Thon's vision problems became more apparent as the season unfolded. He started the first nine games, but he hit only .211 with 10 strikeouts in 38 at-bats. Since then, he's made only six starts, going 4-for-20. Overall, Thon was hitting .207 (12-for-58) with one double and two runs batted in.

"I'm going to keep trying and see what happens," said Thon. "Hopefully, I can get back. I played a lot of games (20), and I know what I can do. I didn't feel I was seeing the ball well enough. I was seeing it, but I wasn't picking up the rotation."

Thon called Rosen on May 19 and told him he thought it would be in the best interests of himself and the club to continue his comeback at his own pace and not have the extra pressure of playing in a competitive situation.

"There was no pressure on me to do it," Thon said of his request to be put on the disabled list. "Every day I would come to the park and work out, hoping I would get more comfortable. I didn't ever get that feeling. I wish I could play, but..."

There had been speculation that Thon would be asked to go to the minor leagues on the rehabilitation program. Rosen said that Thon didn't think that would help the situation.

"It's like Dickie said. If he can't see properly, he can't play properly," said Rosen. "Some people thought playing on a daily basis would help. His feeling is that playing any place would not be to his benefit right now. The problem is not inactivity; it's not being able to see."

Instead, Thon will continue to travel with the team, taking batting and infield practice before games. Neither Rosen nor Manager Bob Lillis would set a timetable for the 26-year-old shortstop's return to the roster.

Although Thon went on the 15-day disabled list, that could be extended. With the Astros in contention for the lead in the National League West, they will not rush Thon back. If there is the slightest reason to believe that playing him could hurt either Thon or the team, he will remain on the disabled list.

"He isn't seeing the ball, both on offense and defense," Lillis

said. "That puts us in the position where there is some danger. You want to do what's right for Dickie. And he wants to do what's right for the club. His concern was that he wasn't helping the club."

Rosen said that Thon's vision was last tested when the Astros returned from spring training. At that time, doctors said there was some improvement from last winter, when the vision in Thon's eye was 20-40.

"But Dickie knows better than the doctors how well he can see the ball," said Rosen.

For now, Thon realizes his vision isn't good enough.

Astromotes: When Thon was disabled, infielder Bert Pena was activated. Pena had been playing at Tucson (Pacific Coast) as part of the 20-day rehabilitation program. He underwent minor eye surgery in spring training. . . . After going the first nine games of the season without a home run, the Astros hit 24 in their next 29 games. Included was a week in which they hit three homers in a game three times. . . . Rookie Mark Ross picked up his first major-league save by getting the final out in a 6-5 victory over St. Louis May 18. Nolan Ryan pitched 8½ innings. Through 38 games, Ryan had the Astros' only complete game. . . . Mike Scott walked a career-high six batters and equaled a career high with eight strikeouts in only 4½ innings May 21 at Pittsburgh. He was the loser in a 3-2 game. . . . In Joe Niekro's first nine starts, the Astros scored 18 runs. His record was 2-5. Last year, Niekro was 2-7 at the end of May. In those nine decisions, the Astros scored 11 runs.

NEIL HOHLFELD



Soto Would Prefer Five-Man Rotation

CINCINNATI—When Cincinnati Reds Manager Pete Rose and pitching coach Jim Kaat decided on a four-man pitching rotation this spring, some eyebrows were raised.

Mario Soto, Cincinnati's ace, is not enamored with the four-man plan. He prefers a five-man rotation to give his arm four days to recuperate.

"I'll do it as long as my arm doesn't hurt. Then, I won't," Soto said this spring.

For eight starts, all went well. Soto was 5-2. But problems occurred on May 11, his ninth start of the season. Soto pitched a one-hitter for five innings against Houston and led, 5-1. In the sixth, Houston scored five times, and Soto was gone.

Normally, Soto avoids the training room, but he spent the next few days getting treatment. Before his next start, four days later, Soto said his arm hurt and that he no longer wanted to pitch with only three days of rest.

Soto was scratched from that start, setting off a flurry of meetings and discussions. Meanwhile, lefthander Joe Price started in Soto's place. In his first start of the season, Price gave up three hits in eight innings and beat Montreal, 2-1.

"I didn't expect the four-man rotation to last all season," Rose said. "The schedule broke right for us, and we didn't need a fifth man. I called a meeting of all our starters to get their input, also informing them that Price, with his performance, made it known he is ready to step in there."

Soto then pitched with seven days of rest and came within one pitch of shutting out the Pirates before giving up an infield hit to George Hendrick, then losing the shutout with a bases-loaded walk. Last year, Soto was one pitch away from a no-hitter before Hendrick, then with St. Louis, hit a two-strike homer.

"Yes, I do remember what Hendrick did every time I see him," Soto said. "How could you forget?"

Regardless of whether they use a four- or five-man rotation, things went beautifully for the Reds on the first five games of a trip. The Reds beat Montreal twice and won three in a row in Pittsburgh. Reds pitchers compiled a 1.40 earned-run average in the five games.

The streak ended May 20 in Chicago, when the Cubs beat Jay Tibbs, 6-1. After posting a 0-4 record in April, Tibbs had been 3-1 with a 2.96 ERA in May before losing to the Cubs, who nicked him for seven singles and a double.

"With a tad of luck, I could have been 4-0 in April, but I was 0-4," Tibbs said. "I'm throwing good, and that's the only thing keeping me going. If I had been hit hard, I could step back and ask, 'What am I doing wrong?' I'm not doing anything wrong. But you are judged by your record, and I'm 3-6. Depressed? Yes. I have good reason to be."

Red Hot: Ted Power retired 19 of the first 21 hitters he faced in May. Rose's homer off the Cubs' Scott Sanderson May 20 was his first since September 18, 1982. Rose's homer tied him with Hank Aaron for the National League career record for runs scored (2,107). "You guys think I'm statistical crazy, but I couldn't tell you who I hit my last homer off or where," Rose said. When informed it had come against Pittsburgh's Don Robinson, Rose said, "Oh, yeah, a 3-and-0 fastball down the right-field line." Second baseman Ron Oester aggravated muscles in his left shoulder and was sent home from a trip for rest and rehabilitation. . . . Tom Hume's save in Montreal on May 16 was his first since May of 1984. . . . In his first two games after his recall from Denver, catcher Alan Knicely had four hits and four runs batted in.

HAL MCCOY



Mario Soto was left scratching his head in wonder when Manager Pete Rose instituted the four-man pitching rotation, but it's hard to argue with success.



Dodgers' Pitching Beginning to Crack

LOS ANGELES—Strapped with a lethargic offense and a so-so defense, the Los Angeles Dodgers will go only as far as their pitching will take them. And after one-fourth of the season, it had taken them to fourth place in the National League West.

When all else failed last year, there was always the pitching. It kept the Dodgers above water much of the season—they were at .500 or better from April 13 until July 16. This year the Dodgers fell below .500 on May 17 and kept falling.

The Dodgers have been operating all season without Alejandro Pena, the 1984 National League earned-run average champion, who had shoulder surgery in February. That didn't appear to be a crisis, though, because the Dodgers still had five capable starters: Fernando Valenzuela, Rick Honeycutt, Orel Hershiser, Jerry Reuss and Bob Welch. But because of a tender right elbow, Welch made only one start, April 22 in San Francisco, before going to Vero Beach in late May for three weeks of rehabilitation in the Florida State League. Honeycutt was brought along slowly after shoulder surgery in October, and Reuss, too, was watched closely (too closely, some say; after working 7½ innings in his first start, Reuss got a quick hook in each of his next four starts).

Tom Brennan and Bobby Castillo were pressed into service as starters—Brennan four times, Castillo twice. Brennan's first three starts were fine, but then the Cubs battered him for four runs on 11 hits in 5½ innings May 7. In seven appearances (two of them starts) from April 27 to May 20, Brennan was touched for 23 runs in 16½ innings, and his ERA jumped from 1.88 to 7.63. Castillo pitched 6½ scoreless innings in his first start, May 12 against the Pirates, but was tagged for four earned runs on three hits and five walks in 4½ innings May 20 in Montreal.

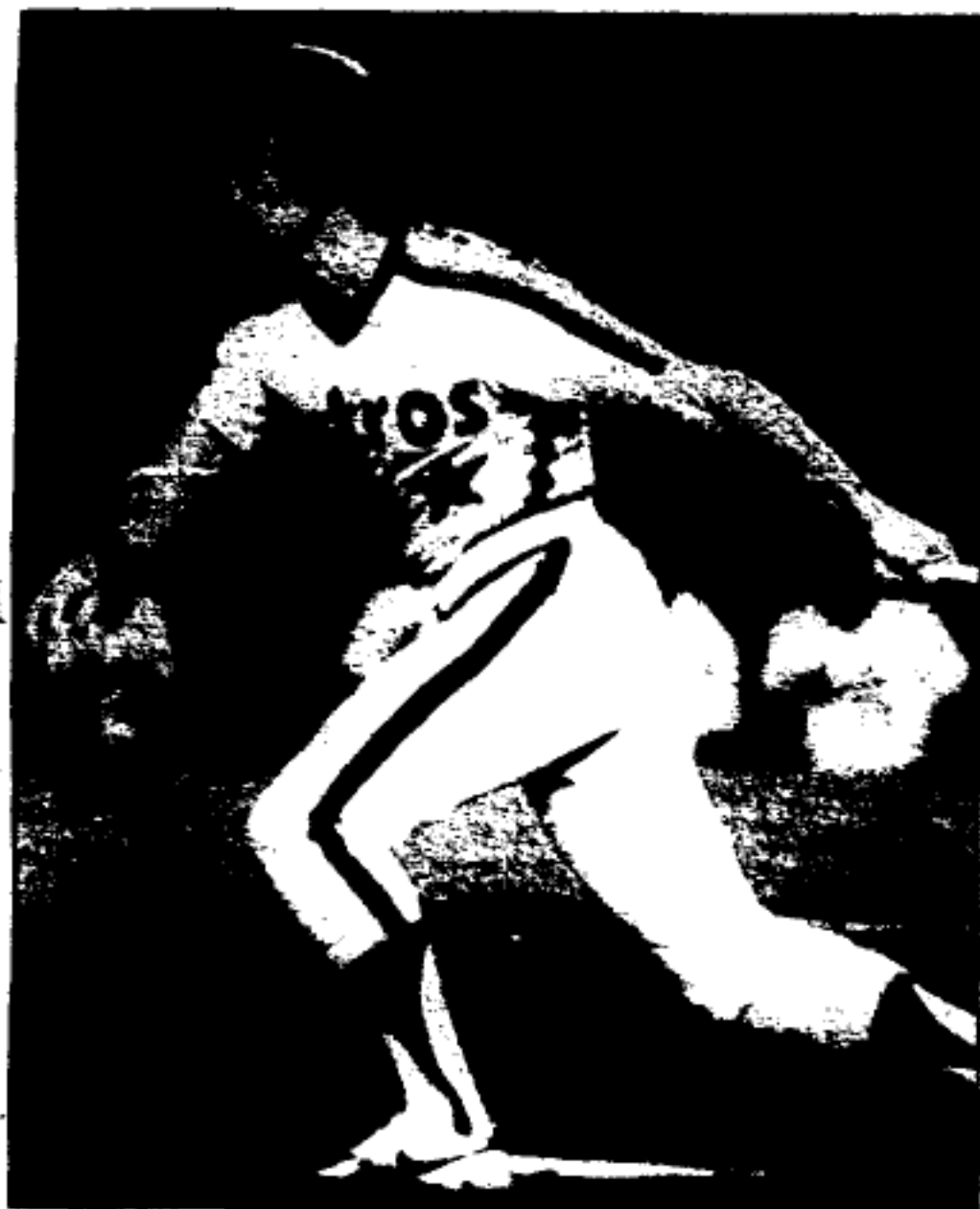
The staff's earned-run average ranked third in the National League, but the strain from the lack of support, both offensively and defensively, was beginning to show. After scoring only 19 runs during a seven-game home stand May 8-15, the Dodgers scored five runs in two successive games in Philadelphia May 17-18, but lost both, 10-5 and 7-5. Those defeats were followed by 9-1 and 6-1 losses in Montreal.

The Dodgers committed three throwing errors (including one by second baseman Steve Sax, his first error of the season) in the first loss at Montreal.

"This is a tough period," veteran Bill Russell said after the loss in Montreal. "Everything seems to be going against us."

Dodger Dope: Al Campanis, vice-president of the club, was on hand to watch Welch make his first appearance at Vero Beach on May 21. With Welch's status questionable, Campanis was hamstrung in his efforts to deal for a hitter. Welch's name has been mentioned in trade rumors involving the A's, and reliever Tom Niedenfuer has been mentioned repeatedly in rumors, most recently with the Yankees. Al Oliver (pulled hamstring) became the ninth player on the Dodgers' disabled list May 19. Last year the Dodgers didn't lose their ninth player until July 2. First baseman Sid Bream was recalled from Albuquerque (Pacific Coast) in the wake of Oliver's injury. At Albuquerque, Bream played the outfield for the first time in his career. . . . Dave Anderson, on a 20-day injury rehabilitation at Albuquerque, reported that his back felt fine. . . . Twenty-three

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