

# Del Unser Becomes Swinger Instead of Pinger

By RAY KELLY

PHILADELPHIA—Imagine that! Del Unser spent all those years in baseball thinking he was a ping hitter. You know, the "high-hop, hard-run" type.

That's why he was so happy when the Indians traded him to the Phillies last winter. The stocky lefthanded-hitting outfielder figured those AstroTurf and other synthetic fields in the National League would be right down his alley.

Only it hasn't turned out that way. At the not-so-tender age of 28, Unser has been doing things with the bat he never did before. He's turned into a line-drive hitter with power and reached the All-Star break needing only one more homer to match his all-time slugging high.

Better still, Del has been hitting for average, too. He's been right up there among the National League's leading hitters for more than two months now to dispel any notions that it might be a flash-in-the-pan thing. And his 40 RBIs are more than twice as many as he managed all last season.

**YET EVEN THOSE** gaudy batting statistics are not a true indication of Unser's value to the upcoming Phillies. Used mainly against righthanded pitchers, he's been giving the Phils the kind of defensive center fielding they haven't had since Richie Ashburn was in his glory. In addition to that, he's been making clutch throws and running the bases like a demon.

After a recent series with the Braves in Atlanta, two American League scouts came up and told the Phillies' director of player personnel, Paul Owens: "We didn't know Unser was that good. He must have saved at least four runs in three games by cutting off balls hit down the alleys."

Owens looked sheepish and said: "I hate to admit it, but I didn't know he was that good, either."

But the big change is in his hitting. Ted Williams might have trouble recognizing Unser for the player he tried so hard to help. Del is attacking the ball nowadays instead of being content to make contact. He's a swinger instead of a pinger!

**IT ALL GOES BACK** to last winter. After the trade in which he went to the Phillies in exchange for outfielders Oscar Gamble and Roger Freed, Unser read in a newspaper that Danny Ozark was considering him as a "fourth or fifth" outfielder.

Naturally, Unser was upset. He had done more than enough benchwarming with the Indians. That's why he begged to be traded. After talking the matter over with his wife Dale, Del decided there was only one thing to do—and he did it.

He called Manager Danny Ozark on the long-distance telephone.

"Danny, I want you to know I'm coming to the Phillies with one thought in mind—winning an outfield job. Being a fourth or fifth outfielder doesn't cut it insofar as I'm concerned."

Ozark reacted predictably. He said: "That's great. I wouldn't want it any other way."

**WITH THAT MATTER** out of the way, Del did himself another big favor. He found out about a strengthening program the Red Sox players follow in the off-season and turned it into a daily ritual—with lots of push-ups and hand and arm routines with light weights.

Unser didn't think too much about it until after he started spring training with the Phillies at Clearwater, Fla. Then he found out he was much stronger and hitting the ball a lot harder than he ever did.

"Hey, I like this," he told himself.

Coach Billy DeMars and the other Phillies gave him encouragement. Del went to a lighter bat, moved closer to the plate and started remembering some of the things Williams had advised him about hitting.

"I'm only sorry I didn't pay more attention to Ted," Del said in retrospect.

Nevertheless, he was more than impressive during the exhibition season and was in the proper frame of mind when the season opened. "This is a good team and a good bunch of guys," he decided.

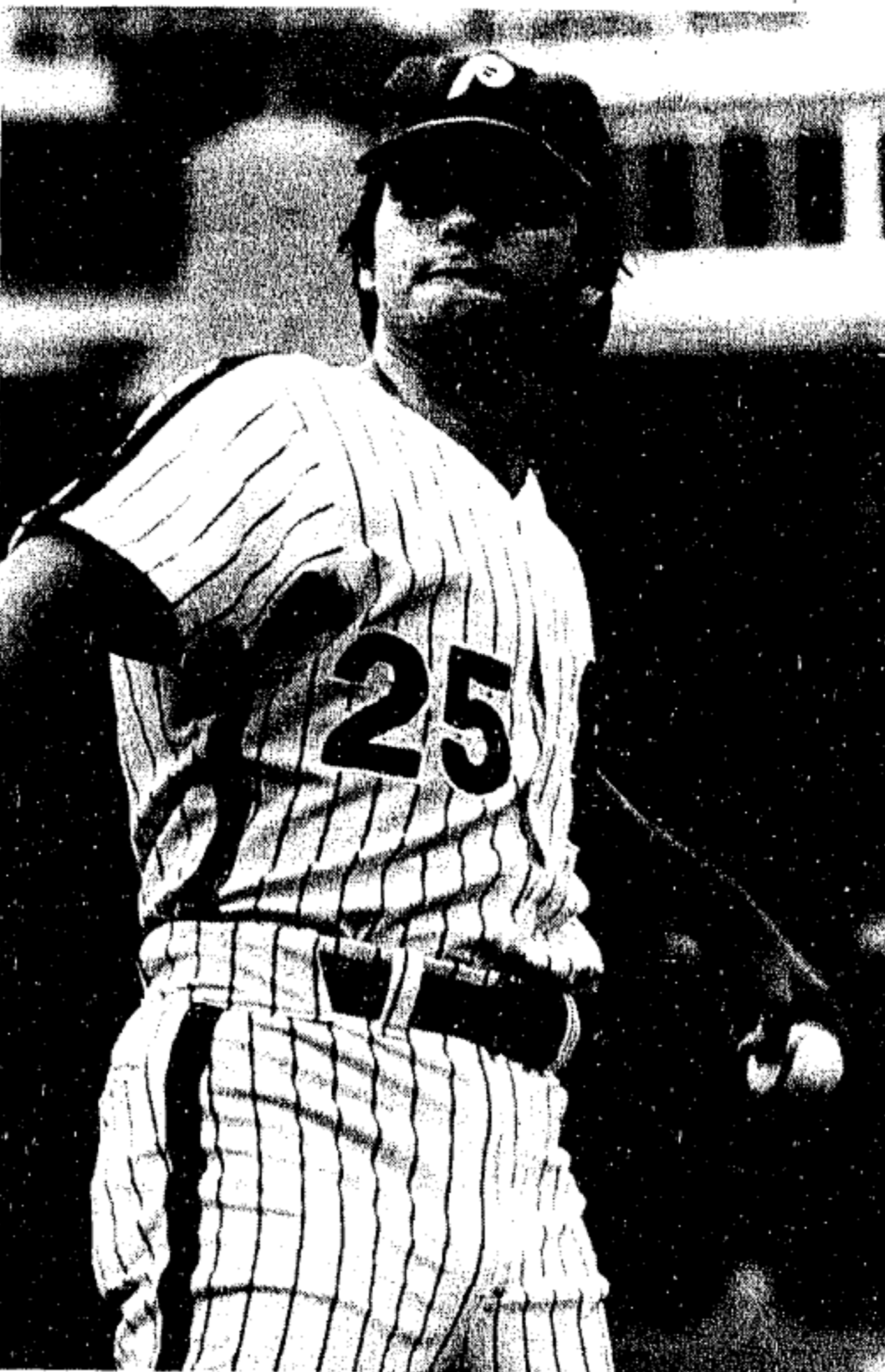
**YET IN SPITE OF** all that pleasant anticipation about playing on the synthetic fields, Unser went right up to the All-Star break without beating out an infield hit.

"It's not as easy as I expected," he explained. "The infields are so fast that infielders can play you deeper. In a

way, one thing takes away from the other."

Happily, Del hasn't needed that kind of help. Almost one-third of his hits thus far have been for extra bases, including eight homers. He more than doubled his last season's RBI count with the Indians and has a good chance of eclipsing his career high in scoring and driving in runs.

That trite phrase, "It couldn't happen to a nicer guy," takes on a special meaning in Unser's case. He's really the All-America boy next door. He's devoted to his wife and two



Del Unser . . . A New Image

daughters, goes to church regularly and thinks his father, Al, a former big league catcher and now a Cleveland scout, is a special kind of parent.

**DEL SELDOM USES** profanity, takes a beer now and then and is almost always pleasant. It's hard to imagine him stalking into Cleveland General Manager Gabe Paul's office and demanding to be traded. Or even having a fuss with Indians' Manager Ken Aspromonte.

But that's how it was and Unser is willing to accept his share of the blame. In those days, going to the park was no longer much fun for the former pitcher who came out of Mississippi State with a high potential rating and blue-chip credentials.

Del practically grew up with a baseball. His father, Al, was a catcher who played in the big leagues with the Baltimore Orioles with intermittent stops along the minor league way which took Del, his three brothers and four sisters to a lot of different towns around the country.

"It wasn't easy for my dad and mother," Del recalled. "We called Decatur, Ill., home, but, somehow, my father managed to have us with him in the town where he was playing."

**DEL PLAYED FIRST** base and pitched for St. Teresa High School of Decatur. He attracted hardly any scouting attention and wound up at Mississippi State only because the coach was Paul Gregory, a pitcher who had played with his father in the Pacific Coast League.

"Paul managed to get me a one-year scholarship and said

the rest was up to me," the outfielder recalled.

Del took care of that detail. He moved from the pitcher's mound to first base and then to the outfield, where he made All-America in his senior year. Meantime, the Twins and Pirates picked him in the draft, but the youngster, just married, wanted to finish school.

It was a costly move. The Pirates wanted to give him \$25,000 to sign. He agreed to accept \$10,000 from the Senators after being picked first in the 1966 special draft. "I figured I could get to the big leagues quicker with Washington," he explained.

By 1968, he was a rookie with the Senators. "I got a break," he said. "Jim Lemon was the manager. He told me the center field job was mine until I showed him I couldn't handle it."

**FOR A ROOKIE,** Del did quite well. He led the majors in turning double plays and assists that season. He hit only .230 after a fast start. "I was trying to slap the ball while taking a big stride and it didn't work," he explained.

Williams became the Senators' manager the following season and he changed Unser's batting style. "Ted got me thinking about the pitchers, too."

"What were they getting me out with? What were they getting over the plate? What was their best pitch and what would they throw in a jam? I can't bad-mouth Ted Williams. He helped me a lot."

That was the season Unser hit .286 while leading off and getting less strikeouts and more walks than ever.

The next year, Unser injured some stomach muscles running the bases and the season was a painful one. Afterward, he went to Venezuela for winter baseball and was hitting .400 when the stomach acted up again. He could hardly run. He underwent an operation.

**AFTER THE 1971 SEASON,** Unser was sent to the Indians in a multi-player deal. It came as no surprise to him. "I guess they didn't think I was going to be a hitter," Del said.

It was a fresh start for him at Cleveland. In his first official trip to the plate, he doubled. "A good omen," he told himself.

But it was downhill from then on. And there was a game in Baltimore in which Del neglected to run out a fly ball. Unknown to him, Manager Aspromonte informed the press he had fined the outfielder for lack of hustle.

"Aspromonte hadn't said a word to me, so I asked him about the fine and he told me: 'Forget it this time, but if it ever happens again, I'll give up on you.'"

Del didn't play again for five weeks.

**HE FINALLY GOT BACK** in action when Buddy Bell was injured, but by then it didn't matter. Del used the activity to do some experimenting at the plate. He tried swinging hard instead of doing the pitty-pat routine and he liked the feel of it.

Since it was obvious he didn't fit into Aspromonte's plans, Unser went to Paul and asked to be traded. It was not an easy thing to do. Del liked Cleveland so much he had purchased a house there.

Paul urged the outfielder to be patient since outfielders not hitting their weight are not in high demand. "Be patient," Gabe asked. "I'll see what I can do later on."

The day after the 1971 season ended, Unser was in Paul's office at 10 a.m. renewing his plea for a change of scenery. "I'd like to try the National League. The AstroTurf fields ought to help me."

**COINCIDENTALLY,** THE Phillies were looking for an outfielder who could do something besides swing a bat. The deal was discussed and at first the Phillies were going to swap Freed and Joe Lis for Unser. But Owens also got involved in a deal with the Twins. They wanted Lis, so Gamble was put in the package with Freed.

"I can't tell you how relieved I was when Paul called and told me I had been traded," Del said. "Then when Owens, Phillies' President Ruly Carpenter and Ozark all took the time to call me, I had a hunch things would turn around."

They did and Del Unser is at ease again. The Phillies are happy, too, and Ozark credits his center fielder for being in the forefront of the new image at Philadelphia Veterans Stadium.

"Del gives you 100 percent every minute he's out on the field," Ozark said. "And you can't ask for more than that!"

## Phils' Cup Overflows With Robinson, Bowa's Fill-In

By RAY KELLY

PHILADELPHIA — Even the Phillies agree that little Craig Robinson is entitled to feel sorry for himself. And they would be putting it mildly.

Robinson, of course, is the 25-year-old rookie shortstop who was called up several weeks ago after Gold Glove winner Larry Bowa broke his ankle sliding into second base. Bowa may be out for the remainder of the season.

Craig, a Wake Forest graduate from Ivyland, Pa., outside of Philadelphia, thought he should have been playing in the big leagues all along, but getting the opportunity through some other player's misfortune was not exactly what he had in mind.

Nevertheless, he reported to the Phillies determined to do his level best to fill in for the finest fielding shortstop (check the averages) in the business. And he was doing a lot better than anyone suspected when it happened.

**IN THE NINTH** inning of an August 4 game with the Pirates at Veterans Stadium, Robinson darted to his left almost beyond second base for a ground ball, wheeled and threw a strike to first base. It was a Bowa type play that drew a rousing ovation from the 49,294 fans.

At the time, Craig felt a slight twinge in his right leg, but he didn't give it a second thought. But when he woke up the next morn-

ing, he could hardly walk. It turned out he had a sprained ankle.

"I felt like crying," said the long-haired youngster. "I've been battling my tail off for three years to convince people that I can play in the big leagues and now this happens. There just ain't no justice."

**ACTUALLY,** IT wasn't as depressing as all that. In the 12 games he played for the Phillies, Robinson actually made the fans forget about Bowa. He fielded everything that came his way. He handled pop flies like they were routine cans of corn and his throwing arm was more like a shotgun. Every time he released the long toss from shortstop, the velocity brought an audible reac-

tion from the fans.

"He can throw with any infielder in the league," said the Phillies' coach, Bobby Wine, who had an exceptional arm when he played.

What surprised the Phillies more than anything else was Robinson's hitting. He did things with the bat they never expected, such as hitting the ball to right field to advance runners, making some nice bunts and getting some hits when they counted.

**AT THE TIME HE** was injured, Robinson was hitting at a tidy .286 clip and four of his 12 hits were doubles. He also accounted for four RBIs.

"Craig doesn't look like the same hitter we saw in spring training at Clearwater (Fla.)," said Manager Danny Ozark. "Down there, he couldn't hit a ball to right field to save his life and, as I remember, it was an event any time he got a hit."

It must be remembered that Craig was in the middle of an awkward situation in the spring. After all, he knew he didn't have a chance to beat out Bowa for the job and Director of Player Personnel Paul Owens' efforts to negotiate a trade with the Braves got nowhere.

(Continued on Page 4, Column 1)