



Warren Cromartie, Ellis Valentine and Andre Dawson . . . Hitting Their Way Into the Hearts of the Expos

Blue-Ribbon Prizes Flourish in Expos' Garden

By IAN MacDONALD

MONTREAL--Collectively, they are the talk of the National League.

Three young men with astonishingly limited major league experience are patrolling the Expos' outfield on a regular basis with exceptional talents.

Ellis Valentine, Andre Dawson and Warren Cromartie easily could form the Expos' outfield for the next half-dozen years and all have the potential to do so in All-Star fashion.

Alike in that they all are 23 years of age and can hit the ball with a fascinating consistency, the three are different characters.

Valentine is a fun-loving type who is not above showboating for the Montreal fans who have come to love him in just a short time. The 6-4 Californian is blessed with the natural talents to become a super star, but needs prodding to keep on the right track.

Cromartie is an extremely confident Floridian who has been telling everyone for years that he belonged in the big leagues. A level-swinging, line-drive hitter, **Cromartie** is outspoken in his thinking that the theory which says lefthanded hitters can't hit southpaw pitchers is all wet.

LIKE CROMARTIE, Dawson is a Floridian, but he doesn't talk much. Manager Dick Williams said early in the season, "When Dawson says, 'Hello,' why it's a speech." In the long haul, Dawson might prove the best of the three.

There have been several reasons put forth for the Expos' turnaround from an abysmal 1976 season. Rightfully, much credit has been given to the addition of veteran stars Dave Cash, Tony Perez and Chris Speier. Also, of course, Williams has added a professional touch as manager and has beefed up his coaching staff.

But in attempting to assess how far this current edition of Expos can go and what's in store for the future, it is the young men on the team who mean so much. And high on that list are the outfielders.

Because he had all of 152 days of major league experience when this season began, Valentine is far and away the senior of the trio in that regard. **Cromartie** had logged 84 days, mostly from joining the inflated September rosters. Dawson was with the Expos for 25 days last September and that represents his sum total in the majors.

Valentine showed in half a season last year what he could do. Recalled July 16 from the Denver (American Association) Bears, Valentine hit .285 while playing regularly for the balance of the year. Though he played in only 88 games, Valentine was fourth among the league's outfielders in assists with 12. Ellis stole successfully in his last 14 attempts.

The son of an outstanding athlete from

Helena, Ark., Valentine played every position at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, but mostly he was considered an outstanding pitcher.

"**YEAH, ELLIS SAID** as he bared glistening teeth with his patented grin, "I kinda fashioned myself after Bob Gibson. He was my idol. That's what I wanted to be, another Bob Gibson.

"I played every position, though. Well, I didn't catch. I didn't like the idea of getting behind the plate.

"But I would start the games at shortstop or third base or in the outfield and then they'd bring me in to pitch. It was fun.

"I had the strong arm and I could blow the ball past people."

Valentine was by-passed in the first round of the 1972 draft. Would-be bidders were frightened off because the youngster had suffered a broken leg in his senior year.

After the accident, Valentine stopped pitching. "I couldn't come down hard on my left leg. I played a lot of first base in my senior year so that I didn't have to run as much."

The Expos' director of scouting, Danny Menendez, remembers that there was serious concern about Valentine's leg.

"It took a long time healing," Menendez recalled. "There was doubt about how well he was going to be able to run and also about how it was going to affect his hitting.

"That's the only reason that nobody drafted him in the first round. We were fortunate to get him in the second round."

VALENTINE'S statistics did drop in that senior year. Then again, he hardly could have been expected to improve. As a junior, he hit .542.

The pitching experience came to the fore when the Expos moved Valentine to the outfield to avoid possible collisions at first base. It didn't take long for everyone in the organization to realize that his arm was something special.

"I always could throw," Valentine said with a chuckle. "I was throwing footballs, baseballs, rocks, bottles, it didn't matter. It was just something to do when we were kids, having rock fights, just having fun—enjoying the physical fun of throwing things."

Williams expressed amazement at Valentine's arm after just a few weeks of his first season back in the National League following managerial roles at Oakland and California.

"They don't take chances against him," Williams commented. "That's some kind of respect for a man who's only been in the league for half a season."

Williams compared Valentine's arm with that of such great gunners as Roberto Clemente and Carl Furillo. Valentine blushed at the comparison.

"**THE WORD IS** around the league," said Ted Simmons, the hard-hitting catcher of the Cardinals. "People don't try to take the extra base on him."

Valentine was the Expos' representative on the N.L. All-Star team and he was no token choice. Ellie jumped over the .300 mark on April 27 and hasn't dipped below all season. He was hitting .340 on June 13 and at the All-Star break he was the fourth-ranked

hitter among the outfielders in the league.

Cromartie is so confident that he comes off as something of a braggart. He knows he can hit and isn't afraid to tell anyone. He has been doing just that for years.

"Oh yeah," **Cromartie** readily agreed when asked if he was not rather cocky for a first-year man who had just three years of experience in Organized Ball.

"I've been like that all my life," he said. "Somehow I always could hit. That's been my thing. I love to do it and I work at it.

"Just because I believe I can hit doesn't mean that I think I know all the answers. I know that I don't. I'm willing to learn.

"But I think that because I can do it, I work harder at it. That's just the way that I've been brought up. I've always been able to hit to different parts of the field."

THE OPPOSITION has difficulty defending Cro because he sprays line drives and sharp bouncers in all directions. He credited his dad Leroy for some early tutoring.

"My father was the recreation director for the City of Miami," **Cromartie** explained. "He had Little League, Pony League, Senior League and all of those under his direction."

The senior **Cromartie** helped the youngsters with fundamentals before they got into organized games.

"He started me off on the tee (hitting a ball off a waist-high prop)," **Warren** said. "Everybody should start that way. It develops a perfectly level swing. I'm going to start my boy off that way, too."

Christopher Lee **Cromartie** is just a little over a year old right now. It'll be some time before the tyke can use a hitter's tee. In fact, he could probably get by with an overgrown golf tee.

His mom, Carole Ringuet, is a French-Canadian who met Warren **while** he was tearing up the Eastern League with Quebec City in 1974.

The superbly conditioned **Cromartie** had a high value on his hitting potential way back in his days at Jackson High in Miami. That's the reason that he spurned the offers of four teams and attended Dade North Junior College before the Expos made him their top choice in the secondary phase of the 1973 draft.

"**IT WAS STRICTLY** financial," said **Cromartie**, who despite his limited major league status hired former football great Nick Buoniconti as an agent last winter. "My father and I had a figure that we felt I should get. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to accept a scholarship at the University of Arizona if we didn't get what we wanted from the Expos."

His confidence oozed forth again when he said, "I would have been in the majors by now no matter which way I would have gone."

Dawson's story is startling in its success. The young man had just 643 minor league at-bats when he was called up last September. In 1975, he hit .330 in the rookie Pioneer League with the Lethbridge team.

Skipping Class-A ball, Dawson opened the '76 season with Quebec City. By early June, he had eight home runs and 27 RBIs while

hitting .357.

Elevated to Denver, Dawson added 20 homers and 46 RBIs while hitting .350.

ANDRE IS THE eldest of eight children who have grown up or are growing up on the south side of Miami. Pressed, Dawson says that his mother raised him by working long hours as a short order cook and that they lived in a low-income housing project.

Dawson's mother was divorced from his stepfather when Andre was 12. When he started to make money, he helped out and last year when his mother had a malignant tumor removed, he became the sole source of income for her, his seven brothers and a nephew who lives with them.

"I do feel it's my job to contribute as much as I can," Dawson said. "I was making enough when she got sick to send some money home to take care of the rest and have enough left to take care of myself. I do love everyone in my family and, if that's the purpose the money is going to serve, that's what I want."

Dawson was the 250th choice in the 1975 summer draft after graduating from Florida A&M. Though he hit for average at school, he did not have many home runs. In pro ball, the homers started coming.

"The pitching is better in the pros," Dawson admitted. "A lot of pitchers in college don't have any idea where they are throwing the ball. Once the pitchers did, the chances of hitting were better. I had more opportunity to swing."

WHILE VALENTINE had won his job with that fine second half last year, **Cromartie** and Dawson won their chance in spring training. **Cromartie** hit .375 in the Grapefruit League and Dawson .307.

Cromartie started hitting from the start of the season. He led the league in doubles from May 18 until July 17.

Dawson started slowly. In fact, he was 1-for-18 through his first five games. Williams started spelling him and then he began playing regularly on May 29.

From June 10 through the end of July, Dawson boosted his average from .230 to .290.

As a unit, the three were averaging .296 through August 3, ranking them third among the league's outfielders, behind the Pirates' Bill Robinson, Al Oliver and Dave Parker and the Reds' George Foster, Cesar Geronimo and Ken Griffey.

There are defensive lapses and downright weaknesses. **Cromartie** has a nasty habit of swatting at fly balls with one hand and has lost a couple. Dawson isn't aggressive enough in center field. Valentine sometimes shows off his marvelous arm by throwing over the cutoff man.

Williams writes off their miscues as due to a lack of experience.

"They simply haven't played that many games," Williams said.

Unless a lot of people are very wrong, these fellows will be playing a lot of games in the future and hopefully for the Expos' cause as a unit. Had he played a full season last year, Valentine might have been Rookie of the Year. Dawson and **Cromartie** may well fight for that honor this season.

On The Cover

The "outfield of the future," Warren Cromartie, Ellis Valentine and Andre Dawson faced the camera before a recent game at Olympic Stadium in Montreal.

Angry Valentine Tells Expos to Swap Him

By IAN MacDONALD

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.—Convinced the impasse between himself and Manager Dick Williams is irreparable and furious over none-too-subtle remarks from teammates regarding his frequent absenteeism, Ellis Valentine wants to be traded by the Montreal Expos.

And in case that doesn't happen soon, the 26-year-old four-year veteran warned, "I'm sick of people suggesting that I don't play when I should. Somebody is going to get knocked out cold soon if I keep hearing things like that."

Valentine made it quite clear that the "somebody" wears an Expos uniform. About a trade, he said, "The sooner the better."

"I don't like the feeling I get when I put on my uniform. It was bad enough when management was on me, but now the players are getting on me. Little digs, remarks that come back anytime I say anything."

The sensitive outfielder believes that the press has turned teammates against him. He exploded after just the second day of the full squad training at the Expos' spanking new quarters here.

Valentine's latest beef stemmed from the fact that the batting backdrop beyond the center field fence here is not too good. In fact, there is no backdrop at all on the Expos' auxiliary field. The batters look directly into the blue sky.

Williams divided his training camp contingent of 50 players into two groups, which alternate taking batting practice day to day on the main diamond and the alternate field.

Williams was standing behind the batting cage on the main diamond talking to a reporter when Valentine strode across from the other field. From about 15 feet away, Valentine yelled, "Hey, I can't hit out there. There's no backdrop. I can't see nuthin'."

"Okay," Williams said. "Go hit in the cage. This other group has to hit here today."

Later, Williams said, "He's the only one who complains. We are keeping everyone busy by hitting on two fields. We can't change the whole schedule just for him. These other players need their swings, too. He'll just have to hit in the cage."

Valentine did not hit in the cage, choosing instead to shag flies. When approached by a reporter afterward and asked why he hadn't hit, Valentine was livid.

"If he (Williams) told you I'm not doing my work, he's a

damn liar," Valentine said. "I didn't hit out there (auxiliary field) because I couldn't see the ball. I'm not going to hit out there at all."

"Listen, I was hit in the face by a baseball. I was damn near killed. I was near blinded. Well, I'm not going to take a chance of that happening again—not for anybody."

"If he thinks it's more important for those kids to hit at the main diamond, that's his business. I'll do my other work and hit every other day."

Valentine started in only 83 of the Expos' 162 games last year because of injuries. On May 30, he was beamed by Roy Thomas in St. Louis and suffered multiple fractures of the cheek. Comments were made last season and again this spring suggesting that the big man with the super talent could not play every day.

Despite his limited action, Valentine led the Expos with a .315 average and had 67 runs batted in. The team was never the same defensively when his rifle arm was out of the lineup.

About the needling, Valentine says, "I can only take so much. I think the only way I'm going to stop the smart remarks is by punching out somebody. The only thing that has stopped me from doing it before is that I know it can do me no good."

"If I do go after a guy, though, it won't be just to give him a shot. I'm going to keep punching."

Valentine has given up ever getting along with Williams. He is convinced that he forever will be the manager's scapegoat.

"I know how it's going to be," he said. "I can be the guy that wins the game, but I'll still get the static. I've been with this organization nine years now (Williams is starting his fifth season as manager), and I know it can only get worse."

"I'm not the first player not to get along with Williams. It's because he doesn't care what the players think of him. I'm just staying out of his way now because I don't care any more."

"I'm tired of hearing all the remarks. I'm fed up with it all. You'd think I was a militant or something."

Valentine says that "mental abuse" from teammates, which was evident as he sat out the final weeks of last year's hectic pennant race, resumed in camp.

"The top four men on this roster are using every opportunity to make me look like a fool," Valentine charged. "All you have to do is read the newspapers to realize that."



Ellis Valentine . . . 'The sooner the better.'

Valentine declined to name the four, but added, "It's pretty obvious who they are." Indeed, Valentine found good words to say about only General Manager John McHale and pithy outfielder Jerry White.

About McHale, Valentine said, "He is one helluva guy as far as I'm concerned. He's helped me a lot when I've been down and discouraged."

The club announced that it tried to trade Valentine at the winter meetings in Dallas. Valentine, who is sorry now that a trade didn't materialize, said, "I don't think they tried very hard. You can't tell me nobody in baseball wants me. I don't have to prove anything. They might be saying I have to make the team here, but there are a lot of other people in baseball who know what I can do."

"It'll only be when I'm gone that they'll appreciate what they've lost."

Dave Smith an Astro Stalwart in Bullpen

By HARRY SHATTUCK

COCOA, Fla.—For the second successive spring, pitcher Dave Smith feels little personal pressure in the Houston Astros camp. This spring, however, the reasons are different.

"I didn't feel much pressure last spring because, to be honest, I didn't think I had a chance to make the club," Smith said.

Smith did not add that pressure is missing this year because, after a banner rookie season in 1950, he's assured a job. Overlooked in the glow of Houston's division crown was the sparkling performance delivered by this youngster. He saved 10 games, won seven and compiled a 1.92 earned-run average.

Smith joined Joe Sambito and Frank LaCorte to give Houston perhaps the National League's deepest bullpen. Smith spent the winter playing in Puerto Rico, compiling an 8-0 record and 0.92 ERA.

"But I spoiled it by losing a game in the playoffs," he said.

Smith's saga should be an inspiration to every fledgling pitcher trying to win a job in spring training. A year ago, Manager Bill Virdon knew his pitching was so deep that a number of talented hurlers would fail to win jobs.

True, the Astros were seeking a righthanded, late-inning reliever, but Dave Smith hardly seemed the answer. He'd pitched four years in the minors, mostly as a starter. Houston was loaded with starters.

Smith was called on in the late innings of an early exhibition against Los Angeles at Vero Beach. He gave up no runs in two innings, prompting Virdon to say, "As long as he gets them out, I'll keep taking another look."

Virdon is still looking and liking what he sees. Smith was productive all season and Virdon never hesitated to use him in tough situations.

Pitching the last six days of September, when every game was critical, Smith logged three saves. He worked in three of the N.L. playoff games and notched one of Houston's two wins over Philadelphia.

"He wasn't your normal rookie," said Virdon. "He didn't

look like a rookie in terms of control, ability and competitiveness. He showed an unusual command of a forkball for someone early in his career and he didn't scare."

Smith also has a good fastball and is working on a curve to keep hitters even, more off stride.

His only serious problem was a tendency to develop muscle soreness in his back and shoulder, ailments which led to suggestions that he may eventually have to return to a starter role. Both Smith and Virdon disagree. Says Smith,

"My physical problems last year probably happened because relief was new to me. I had to learn how much time I needed to warm up and I had to get used to Bill Virdon's strategy. Now I know what Bill expects of me and when he probably will use me."

Virdon makes another point: "The way baseball is today, the bullpen isn't for pitchers who can't start. The bullpen is every bit as important. To be competitive, a team must have good late-inning relief."

"The Astros are fortunate to have three pitchers who fill

that bill admirably.

Astronotes: Don Sutton isn't one to avoid running during spring training. When the Astros finish running, Sutton takes off down a country road, often going six or seven miles. . . . New outfielder Chris Bourjos, acquired from San Francisco, was impressive in early workouts.

J.R. Richard says he continues to make progress every day in his comeback bid after suffering a stroke last July 30. Richard says his lifestyle has changed. "I take things much slower now. I used to start late, hurry and get there late. Now I start early, take my time and get there early."

Ken Forsch, who asked the Astros to trade him to a contender, said he thinks the club may be trying to force him to accept a trade to San Francisco by not pressing other opportunities. Forsch has veto rights over trades and rejected one that would have sent him to San Francisco for outfielder Larry Herndon. Ken said he would consider it only if San Francisco renegotiated his contract (which the Giants would not do).

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