

# Watson Swings to Tommy D.'s Tempo

By JOE HEILING

HOUSTON — The similarities are striking. They grab you by the wide lapel of your best double-knit suit and they ask you to take notice.

What they ask is, "Who does the Houston Astros' Bob Watson most remind you of?" And the answer always comes back loud and clear as in an echo. "Tommy Davis . . . Tommy Davis . . ."

The Cubs' Billy Williams maintains this and one must consider the National League batting champion as something of an authority on the subject.

What Williams says is: "He's kind of like Tommy with that sort of stiff-armed swing. He's also strong like him and can muscle the ball out there for hits when he gets jammed by a pitch."

It's all very interesting since Watson was up among the league leaders the first half of the season and has designs on the batting championship.

**HE WAS HITTING** .335 as the second half began and was no more than a couple of points off the lead as Houston struggled to stick in the thick of the NL West race.

At least one Astro coach, Grady Hatton, was predicting a bat title for the 27-year-old Watson. All because of that solid stroke, that Tommy Davis manner of smacking a baseball.

"I keep saying he is going to lead this league in hitting," said Hatton, one of the team's former managers. "He has a perfect stroke. He seldom overthrows and is always hitting down through the ball."

"Bob doesn't try to pull the ball. He does try to put the ball in play wherever he can. He swings down on even the high pitch. He never uppercuts the ball. This is rare. Listen, Bob just doesn't have too many bad days with the bat."

Hatton claims there is plenty of time for Watson to fetch himself a batting crown. He's still young and his peak years are ahead. The best is yet to come. You know, that sort of thing.

"**NOTHING HE HAS** done," said Grady, "has forced me to change my opinion. If he could run, I know he'd lead this league. His are legitimate hits. He gets nothing on bunts or leggers. He just goes up there and pops the ball."

The Astros' left fielder keeps rolling out the hits like a gum machine, one at a time.

After swinging for a .312 average in 1972, his pace is even livelier this year. He's headed for his first 100-RBI campaign, having 57 after 83 games, and also his initial 200-hit season.

He'll take whatever the Good Lord and his 38-ounce bat see fit to provide.

"I don't know about my leading the league," said Watson, a 6-2, 205-pounder from Los Angeles, Calif., "but I think a hitter who does that won't strike out a whole lot and won't hit a lot of flies."

**SOUNDS LIKE** a description of Bob Watson, but he had someone like the Cardinals' Joe Torre—or Tommy Davis, in his prime—in mind.

"The year Torre led the league," mentioned the guy they call Bull, "he didn't strike out much. He just hit those hard ground balls through the infield and those line shots."

"When you have the type of stroke that Torre has, or T. D. has, and I'm trying to work on, when you see the ball—get a good picture of it—you get a chance to really drive it with a line-drive stroke."

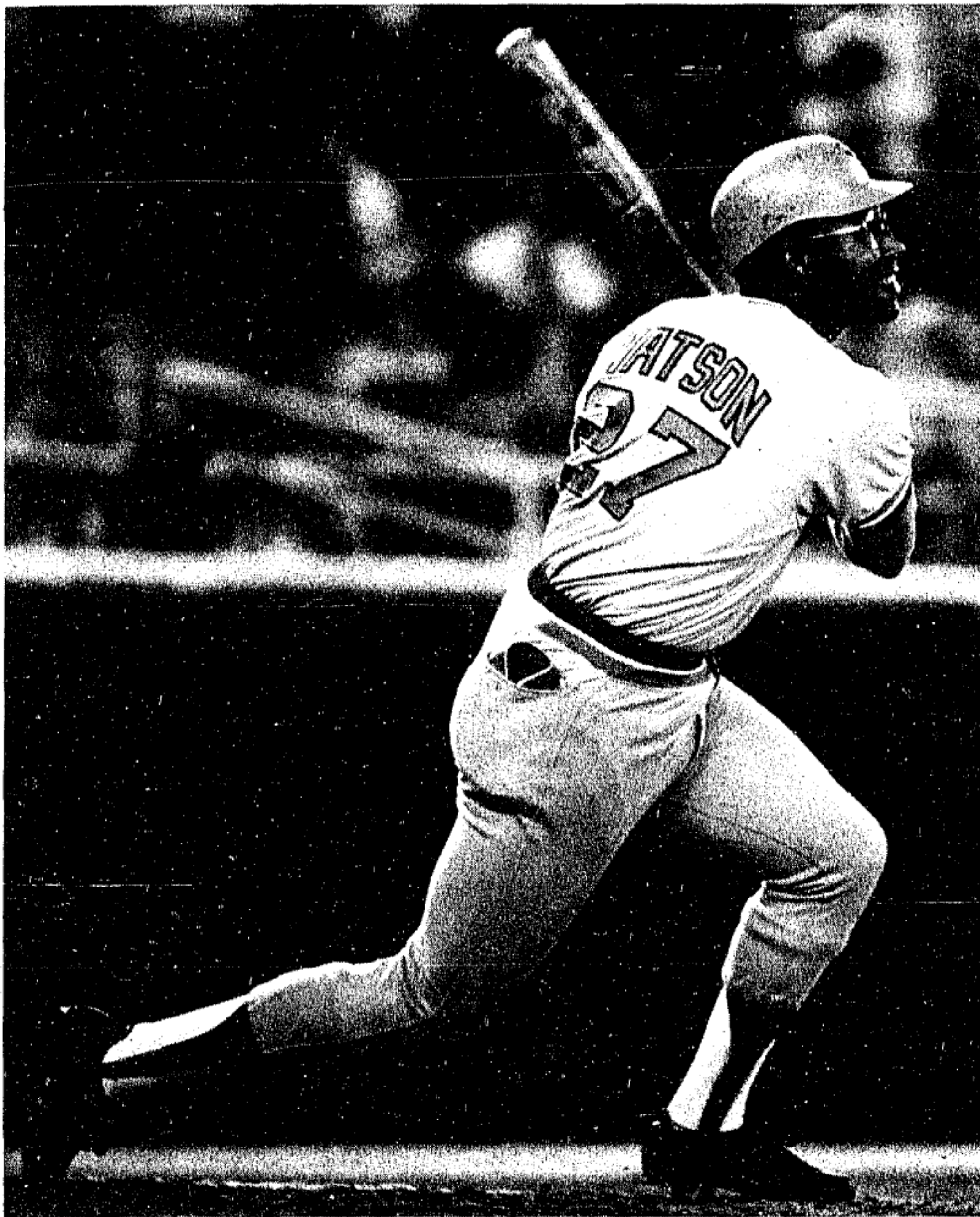
He keeps tabs on the other hitters, as faithfully as any certified public accountant would go over a set of books. Bob makes a lot of mental notes.

"I know against us," said Watson, "Torre hits a lot of balls up the middle and a lot of balls to right field, and he is hardly ever fooled on a pitch. He'll swing at a pitch and miss it. Nobody's perfect. But Joe seldom looks on a pitch. Consequently, he's very tough to strike out."

**MANY OF** Watson's theories about hitting bear the Tommy Davis stamp of approval, and not by accident, either. They chatted endlessly while the two-time batting titlist with the Dodgers—now a designated hitter with Baltimore—was with the Astros late in 1969 and an early part of the next season before he was dealt to Oakland.

"I've tried to pattern myself after Tommy in his theories toward hitting," says Bull, "and that basically is to try to hit the ball back through the middle."

"If it's a hard pitch, I'll hit it to right field. If it's a slow pitch, I'll pull it. When



Bob Watson . . . Astro Hits Down on Everything

Tommy was with the club, I talked with him every chance I got.

"He was a definite help to me. We'd go out and hit together or something and this was when I really started to concentrate on what I wanted to do at the plate, instead of just going up there and swinging away."

**HITTING ALWAYS** has come natural to Watson, the quiet, unassuming type who goes about his business without much fanfare. While others take note of Cesar Cedeno and Jim Wynn and Lee May, Bull keeps pounding away at a .300-plus clip and lets the headlines fall where they may.

He's always had to play second fiddle, it seems, to others in the game.

Signed in 1965, just before the first free-agent draft, he played on the same Fremont High School team as Bobby Tolan, Willie Crawford, Brock Davis and Leon McFadden.

Bull was a catcher in those days and he prospered with the bat as his team captured the city championship. Still, the scouts were attracted to those two other guys. Tolan was signed by St. Louis for a great sum of money and the Dodgers gave Crawford a substantial bonus.

Not much cash was left over for Watson.

**THEY TOLD HIM**, "We could sign you, but we couldn't give you what you wanted. The best thing for you to do is go to school and, after a couple of years of college ball, you might get what you want to sign."

The advice was well taken and Bull attended La Harbor J.C. for a year, batted .370, got himself a pot full of RBIs and homers. He signed with Houston just prior to the spring semester in 1965.

Reporting to Salisbury (Western Carolinas), he batted .421 with 12 homers and 55 RBIs in 80 games. His first official at-bat in professional baseball produced a home run.

That felt good enough, but it also came on a curve and Bull said, "You hear a lot of stories about the rookie who writes his mother and says, 'I'll be home soon, they've started throwing curves.' Well, hitting a curve for a homer my first time up was a big confidence builder."

Trouble was ahead, however, and it threatened Watson's entire career.

**HE HAD CAUGHT** 75 games, including both ends of doubleheaders, when Houston

selected a young catcher in the draft and dispatched him to Salisbury.

"Chuck Churn was the manager," said Bull, "and he asked if I'd play the outfield. I said, 'I'll give it a try.' So I played three or four games out there and the kid was doing a pretty good job behind the plate."

"Then Churn said, 'We'll move you back and forth out there. Give you a rest.' About that time, we were playing Greenville, the Mets' farm club, and I'm playing left field, Larry Bingham is in center and Ed Moxey in right."

Reconstructing the accident, the bases were loaded and a line drive was cracked to left center. Watson raced in full pursuit and ramed into the brick outfield wall.

"I look up and the wall's there," he remembered painfully, "and I'm going pretty good. I put my hands out and I collapse into the wall. I broke my left wrist and the point of my right shoulder hit the wall."

**THEN HE** blacked out and crumpled to the dirt of the short warning track.

"The next thing I know," said Bob, "a fight broke out. Moxey accused Bingham of not telling me I was close to the wall. I'm out cold, on the ground, and they're out there swinging at each other."

The rehabilitation process was a long, slow painful ordeal, and the shoulder wasn't operated on until the end of the '66 season after Watson had hit .302 at Cocoa (Florida State) and been promoted late in September.

"My first at-bat was against Claude Osteen," he said, "and I hit a line drive, one hopper to John Kennedy, the third baseman. He backhanded the ball and threw me out."

"In the Florida State League, that was a double for sure. Here, it was just an out. When I ran across first base, Ron Fairly said to me, 'Welcome to the big leagues.'"

**THE NEXT** three seasons were like an elevator ride. He kept going up and down, from such minor league points as Oklahoma City, Amarillo and Savannah, to Houston, and back down again. Somewhere in there, he broke an ankle in Chicago (in 1968) to add to his frustration, but the situation was to improve in 1970.

Helping turn things around was unpredictable Joe Pepitone and his many problems.

"This was the point in my career," insisted Watson, "when I thought I might be lost in the shuffle. We had Tommy Davis and Pepitone and I was just sitting around doing nothing."

"I was the No. 3 first baseman and the No. 5 outfielder and No. 4 catcher. I was, more or less, the 25th man on the ball club. I was only 24 then, which I felt was a bad age to be a utilityman already."

"**IT WAS** approaching the trade deadline, and if something didn't happen, which it did, I was going to ask to be traded because I didn't have any options left. I wanted to play every day—to play somewhere."

Up popped Pepi and his problems. He had a date with a judge back in New York and the proceedings dragged out an extra day or two, something to do with back alimony payments.

Harry Walker, then the Astros' manager, asked Watson that night, "You got a first baseman's glove?"

"Yeah, I sure do," answered Bull. "Good," replied The Hat. "You're playing first base." Much to Bob's relief, he accepted the challenge with a flurry of hits, long ones and short ones.

"**I HIT** four home runs in three days," said Watson, "and I had about 12 or 14 RBIs in that series in Atlanta. Then Joe came back and he got upset. He wanted to play first base, not left field. So he took off again and, ever since then, I've been in the lineup."

To this day, Watson becomes a little jittery, harking back to that series and what course his career might have taken if he had not responded positively with the bat.

"I hate even to think about it," he winces. Thus, a personal memo to Joe Pepitone, wherever you are:

Bob Watson thanks you. His wife thanks you. Even baby Keith thanks you. You helped make a dream come true.

## Astros Walking on Air Over Super Helms-Man

By JOE HEILING

HOUSTON—Just think of it, Pete Whisenant was saying, a tiny spot not even on the globe producing that many major league ballplayers.

The dot that isn't there, it seems, is Paw Creek in North Carolina, and it has been the spawning grounds not only of Whitey Lockman, Ken Woods and Whisenant, himself, but also the Astros' Tommy Helms.

For the uninitiated, Paw Creek is a village some six miles outside of Charlotte, N. C., that draws its life and breath from the cotton mills there.

"Whitey and I lived next door to each other," said Whisenant, a big league outfielder for eight years and 10 days, by his own count, "and Tommy later moved into the same house I was raised in."

This was no small accomplishment. "The only way you could live there," says Helms, the little second baseman flirting with his first .300 campaign in the big time, "was for your dad to work in the mill."

"There were 50 houses up there and two more across the highway. That was it. You filled up those houses and there was no more room."

Don't put down Paw Creek, though. Whisenant, in the vending business in Punta Gorda,

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