

A new star in Ruth's house



Mike LUPICA

One year late, from back in the pack, the Yankees give fans a real September. Maybe it is too late to save them. But it does not change that they have come back and played real ball, when no one thought they could. It has to make you cheer, whether you like the new wild-card system or not. There are 10 games left, which makes it the shortest possible season. The Yankees and their fans will take it.

The Yankees were supposed to be finished after another deadbeat West Coast trip, a team that was completely shot. It seemed half of baseball was between them and first place in the wild-card race. There had been a brief moment in August when the Yankees were four games behind the Red Sox and positioned to make a big move. Then all of a sudden the Yankees were 14 games behind in the American League East.

Only they did not quit. They went back to Yankee Stadium and got well. The Angels are in first place in the A.L. West. The Yankees swept them a couple of weeks ago. The Red Sox are still in first by a lot in the East. The Yankees swept them recently, and beat them up pretty good. Last week, the Yankees took two of three from the Indians.

Maybe the Yankees will fade again. But entering the week, they were the same kind of trouble for the rest of the league they were a year ago. The way the Yankees are going, no one wants to play them in the playoffs, not even the Indians. If they are still playing this way in October, the first 100 games don't matter.

Black Jack McDowell has been the best pitcher in the league for a month. George Steinbrenner has never had a tougher pitcher than McDowell. And it turns out Paul O'Neill has not forgotten everything about last season, when he hit .359.

But the most exciting player of all, as the Yankees try to win September and make the playoffs, is **Bernie Williams**, the gifted young center fielder. When the Yankee season appeared just about lost, **Williams** played as if everything were just beginning.

He has become a baseball star, which is what he was always supposed to be at Yankee Stadium. When the Yankees went 13-3 in a recent stretch and climbed over everybody to reach first place in the wild-card race, **Williams** seemed to get two hits a night, one of them always being a big hit.

He was asked to explain it and quietly said, "I can't. All of a sudden, it's just happening for me. I'm just hitting the ball hard."

It is not just that he hits the ball hard. All of a sudden, **Williams** plays the game very hard. It was there for everybody to see in a play against the Indians, when he flattened Carlos Baerga. **Williams** was on first, Ruben Sierra hit a grounder to Baerga, who likes to tag the runner, then throw to first to complete the double play.

"I don't think I've ever been prouder of a player," Manager Buck Showalter says. "You can't make a guy do what Bernie did."

Before the Yankees start a series, Showalter talks to his team about the other team's tendencies. One of the things he highlighted before the Indians series was about how

Baerga prefers to tag the runner coming from first if there's fewer than two outs, rather than throw to the shortstop and start the double play that way. **Williams** was looking for the tag last week, and got it. Baerga got knocked into the infield. He tried to throw out Sierra from his belly, threw wild, and Sierra ended up on second. **Williams** hit Baerga hard enough that he was not in the lineup the next game.

"Bernie just smoked him," Showalter says. "There's a fire in him these days that I've never seen before, and it's just been very exciting to see as a manager. He hasn't just shown up this last month. He's stepped up, in a way you always hope players will at this time of year." Showalter pauses and says, "What we've been doing lately could not have happened without him."

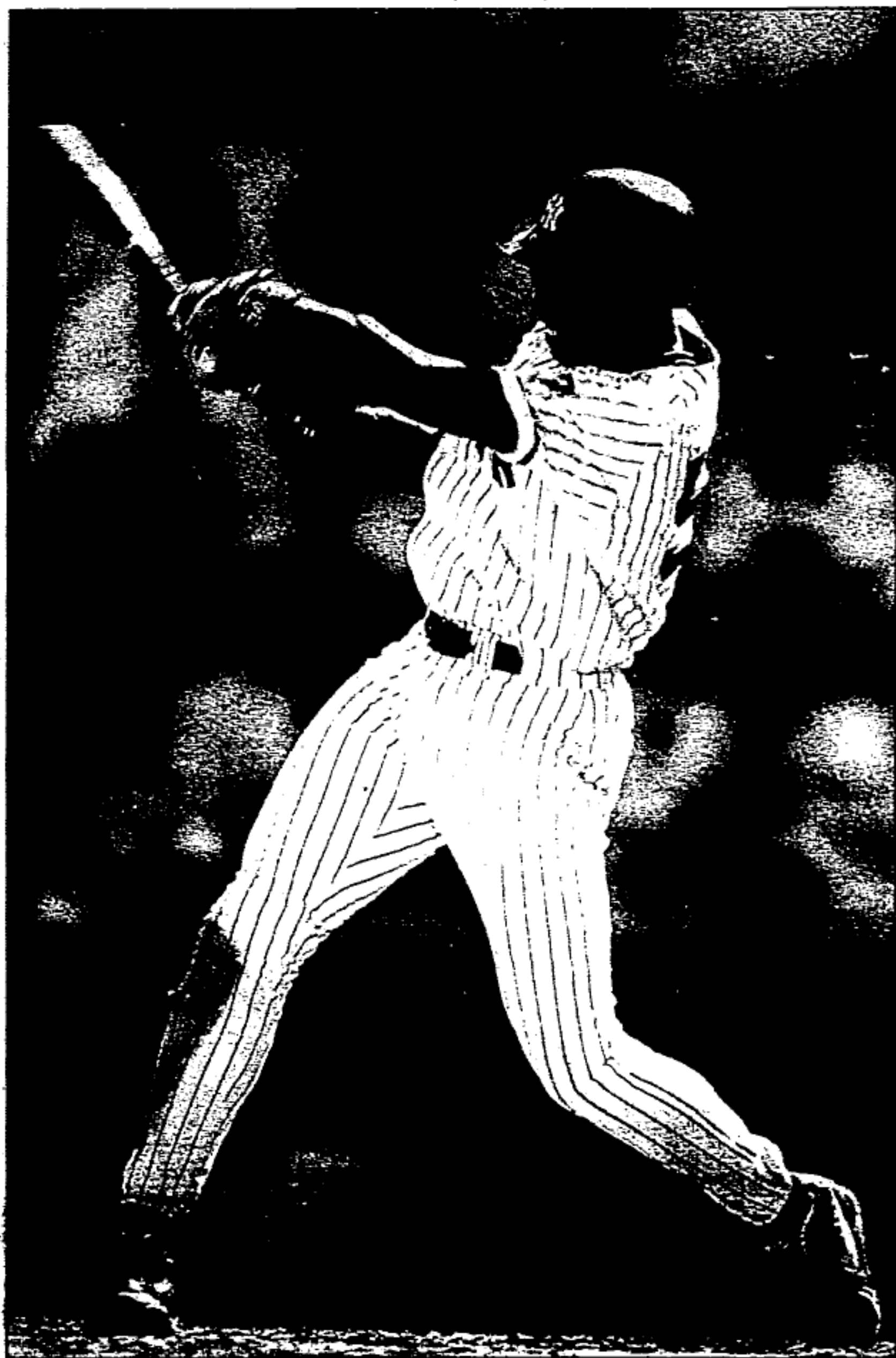
Showalter was asked if moving **Williams** into the No. 2 hole in the order, behind Wade Boggs, has helped.

"I've got to be honest," Showalter says. "The way Bernie's been hitting lately, it wouldn't matter where I hit him. But I'll tell you something: With the talent this young man has, with his ability to switch hit, he's not always going to be a No. 2 hitter. Someday, he's going to be an ideal No. 3."

Williams, out of Escuela Libre de Musica High School in San Juan, never has a lot to say. He is shy and quiet. These days, he talks about working as hard as he ever has, especially with Yankees batting coach Rick Down, who is one of the best in the business. **Williams** has no real explanation for why he has suddenly exploded this way, and

There's a fire in (Williams) these days that I've never seen before, and it's just been very exciting to see as a manager. ... What we've been doing lately could not have happened without him.

— Buck Showalter



Mr. September: **Williams** has been the Yankees' most exciting player this month, getting clutch hits, catching everything in center field and providing hard-nosed baserunning.



Wild-card ace: Steinbrenner has never had a tougher pitcher than McDowell.

neither does his manager, who explodes into a laugh when asked if he and his center fielder have talked about the baseball **Williams** has played lately.

"The joke around here is that if I see any

of my coaches bothering **Bernie**, they're gone," Showalter says. "I limit my conversations with him these days to how many centimeters Waleska (**Williams**' pregnant wife) is dilated. The rest of the time, I just leave him alone."

Williams, 27, hit .289 last season, with 12 homers and 57 RBIs in a strike-shortened season that lasted 113 games. He is better across the board this time. The batting average was .301 last week, with 17 home runs and 78 RBIs. If there were 162 games in the season, **Williams** would be on his way to 100 RBIs for the first time. In the outfield, he still catches anything that stays in the ballpark. There have been catches, at Yankee Stadium especially, that rank with ones the great Paul Blair made out there.

"As far as my approach is concerned, nothing is different," **Williams** said.

But he is a different player. The Yankees, who saved something for the late innings, are a different team. Somehow, they have remembered who they were last season, the team they were supposed to be this season. If this had all started sooner, even the Red Sox would be starting to look around.

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Japanese slugger.

"Oh says the head should be down when you make contact and the bottom hand should face the sky," Baker says. "He says to think of the end of the bat as a spoon so that you can keep the ball on the bat longer.

Baker points to a roughly drawn sketch. "See there, the bottom hand faces the sky."

The meeting with Oh occurred in the late '70s, Baker recalls, at a time Baker's first marriage was falling apart. The disturbance in his personal life was affecting his hitting.

"We were sitting by a pool," Baker recalls. "There was a full moon and the wind was blowing. Oh looked at the pool and said, 'When things are rough you see several moons like that. That's how the ball goes when your concentration isn't right. Turn it off, the wind stops blowing and the moon is one.'"

A calm spirit, one moon. Baker scribbled it down.

"That's what the ball looks like when you concentrate properly and the mind is clear," Oh told Baker.

BARRY BONDS reveals his HITTING SECRETS

Barry Bonds: "This is my philosophy: You've got to crawl before you walk, walk before you run, be a student before you finish school and you must graduate before you become a professor. Barry Bonds has not graduated. So you're asking the wrong person. The rest of them who have played, now they can be instructors because they have the credentials. I'm in no place to explain the philosophy of hitting."

Me: "OK. Who were your hitting influences?"

Bonds: "My biggest influences were Bill Cosby and Muhammad Ali. Ali was the greatest of all time. Nobody greater except God."

Me: "How did they help you?"

Bonds: "Ali, his air, his confidence. Cosby learns something every day he wakes up. Every day he educates himself and other people."

Me: "Do you enjoy sitting around talking about hitting with players and coaches?"

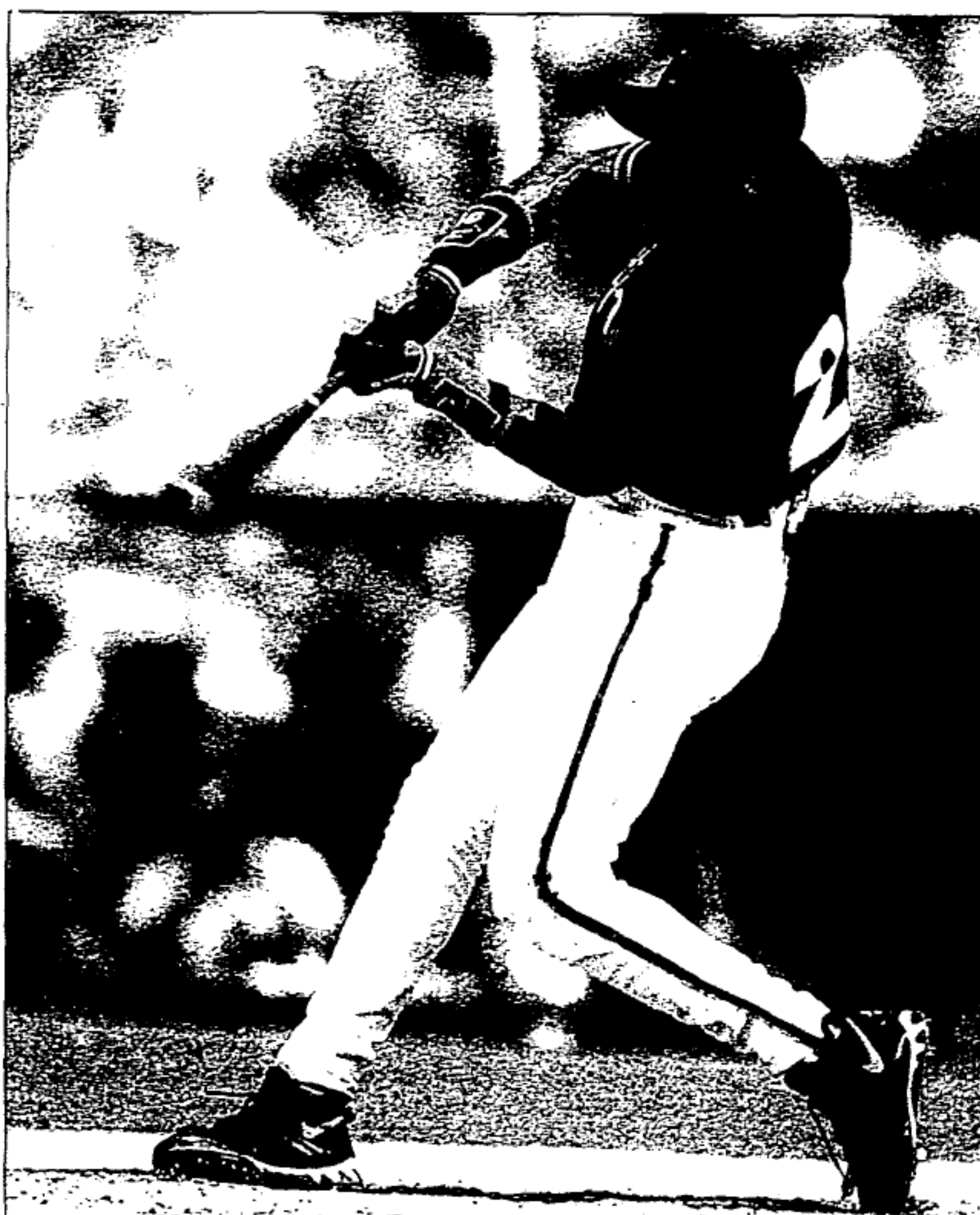
Bonds: "No. Maybe I will one day when it's over."

WWW.PUREHITTER.COM

Hackers swing, but pure hitters bat. There is a difference. Where hackers push lumber, pure hitters perform a 10-act drama. A hacker wants to crush a ball, but a pure hitter



Pure hitting: Bernie Williams knows ... it don't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing.



Actions speak louder than words: Right now, Barry Bonds would rather hit than sit around philosophizing about it.

wants to drop a bank shot in the side pocket. Thinking is the enemy of hackers. Pure hitters are computers processing information in gigabytes.

"Most hitters are hackers," Yankees catcher Joe Girardi says. "Only a few are pure hitters."

Yankees center fielder Bernie Williams is said by Girardi to be one of two pure hitters—five-time A.L. batting champion Wade Boggs is the other—wearing the world-champion pinstripes. Williams gleans his ideas from Boggs, hitting coach Chris Chambliss, former coach Rick Down and players he admires. But ultimately, Williams says, a player creates his own approach.

"A swing is a very personal thing," Williams says. "A lot has to do with attitude. Some players hack hard all the time. Some cut down their swing with two strikes. Myself, I like to react to the ball, unless I know the pitcher. I like to keep my swing under control."

Williams considers his "pure hitter" label a compliment.

"It's always a battle to get your mechanics right," Williams says. "Having that perfect swing is a good goal. If your mechanics are right then you don't have to think about it during the game. You can concentrate on the pitcher and react to the pitch. Practice is when you think about your elbow and shoulder and not going under the ball. Hopefully you practice good enough so when you get to the game your mechanics are right."

Another pure hitter, Rangers first baseman Will Clark, has read Hrinak, Lau and Ted



Hit parade: It took a few years and a lot of work, but Vaughn is now a .300 hitter who talks hitting with the best of them.

Williams. Each influenced his approach to contact. But Clark's ideas about spring preparation come from seven-time N.L. batting champion Tony Gwynn.

"First I try to re-establish my strike zone," Clark says. "Early in spring I take a lot of

pitches. The hardest thing for me is going the other way. So the next thing I do is hit a lot to left field. As the spring progresses I try to pull a few balls. Toward the end I try to pull more. Basically that's how Tony approaches it."

A few years ago nobody would have considered Mo Vaughn a pure hitter—he was just a strong guy making infrequent contact. Then former Red Sox hitting coach Mike Easler taught him not to pull every pitch. Easler gave Vaughn an approach in which he hits off his back leg, delays a split second and makes contact deep in the zone, swinging inside the ball and not extending to reach it. Extension comes after contact during release.

Vaughn is now a confirmed .300 hitter who talks hitting with the best of them. Catch him at the right moment and Vaughn will discourse on the 12 hitting zones and the different swing each zone requires. He might even demonstrate how he tosses a 10-pound medicine ball in a Frisbee motion to strengthen his hitting muscles.

"All the great ones talk about it and think about it every day," Vaughn says. "What can I do to get myself in a better position? How can I handle it?"

Late in February Vaughn telephoned retired Yankees first baseman Don Mattingly in Indiana. He questioned Mattingly about specific pitchers.

"Pitchers he had success with," Vaughn says, "but I haven't."

Pure hitters are hooked into the worldwide web, downloading information 24 hours a day.

MATT WILLIAMS gives and receives WISDOM

Me: "Your style is distinctive. Where did you learn it?"

Williams: "I don't know. That's just the way I do it."

Me: "Is it comfortable?"

Williams: "You have to be comfortable. One of the keys is to be comfortable, even if you have to stand on your head. Because you wind up thinking about outside variables rather than watching the baseball if you aren't."

Me: "What size bat do you use?"

Williams: "Thirty-five inch, 31½ to 33 ounces. Depending on the pitcher and how you feel, tired or rested. Sometimes I go to a shorter bat. It all goes back to the same basic thing."

Me: "Which is what?"

Williams: "Being relaxed. If you have a bat that's too heavy you're not going to be relaxed. If you stand a way that's not comfortable you're not going to be relaxed. Then outside variables creep in and you don't watch the baseball and you wonder why you struggle."

Me: "Sadaharu Oh told Dusty that the mind must be at peace. A pitched ball is like the reflection of the moon on

water. Calm water gives a single reflection. Choppy water gives several reflections. What do you think of that?"

Williams: "Whoa. Too heavy." ◆

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He refused to say it—even now (much later), even here (deep inside Yankee Stadium, away from the din)—but Rangers pitcher Rick Helling knew he had done his part in Game 2 of the American League division series against the Yankees. He had given up but two runs in 6½ innings and was left to contemplate this hard math problem: If the Rangers' offense averaged almost six runs per game in the regular season, then how, oh how, could he and his team be the victims of their eighth consecutive playoff loss to New York?

The 'X' in the equation, however, is that this is October and this is the Yankees (and the Rangers, for that matter). Nothing adds up as normal this time of year, when the sum of one team's parts is greater than the whole while the other adds, subtracts, multiplies and divides and still comes up with a big fat zero.

Pressed to describe what it feels like, Helling turns to—of course—a Yankee.

Helling says: "It's *deja vu* all over again."

And for those who've been saying this Yankees team isn't as good as the 1998 team, better hang on a week or two. This is all starting to look familiar. For although the victory total is guaranteed not to be the eye-popping, postseason-inclusive 125 it was a year ago, when this is all finished there could be a cork-popping number: four victories in the ALCS and four more over either the Braves or, batten down the boroughs, the Mets.

That's the scary part. Although the Yankees won *only* 98 games this regular season, a paltry sum compared to 114 last year, and fought for its home-field life down the stretch, this team is playing as good, if not better,

than the '98 model. In fact, New York is playing like it's poised—accent on that word—to make a run at another World Series title, its third in four seasons, no matter the opponent.

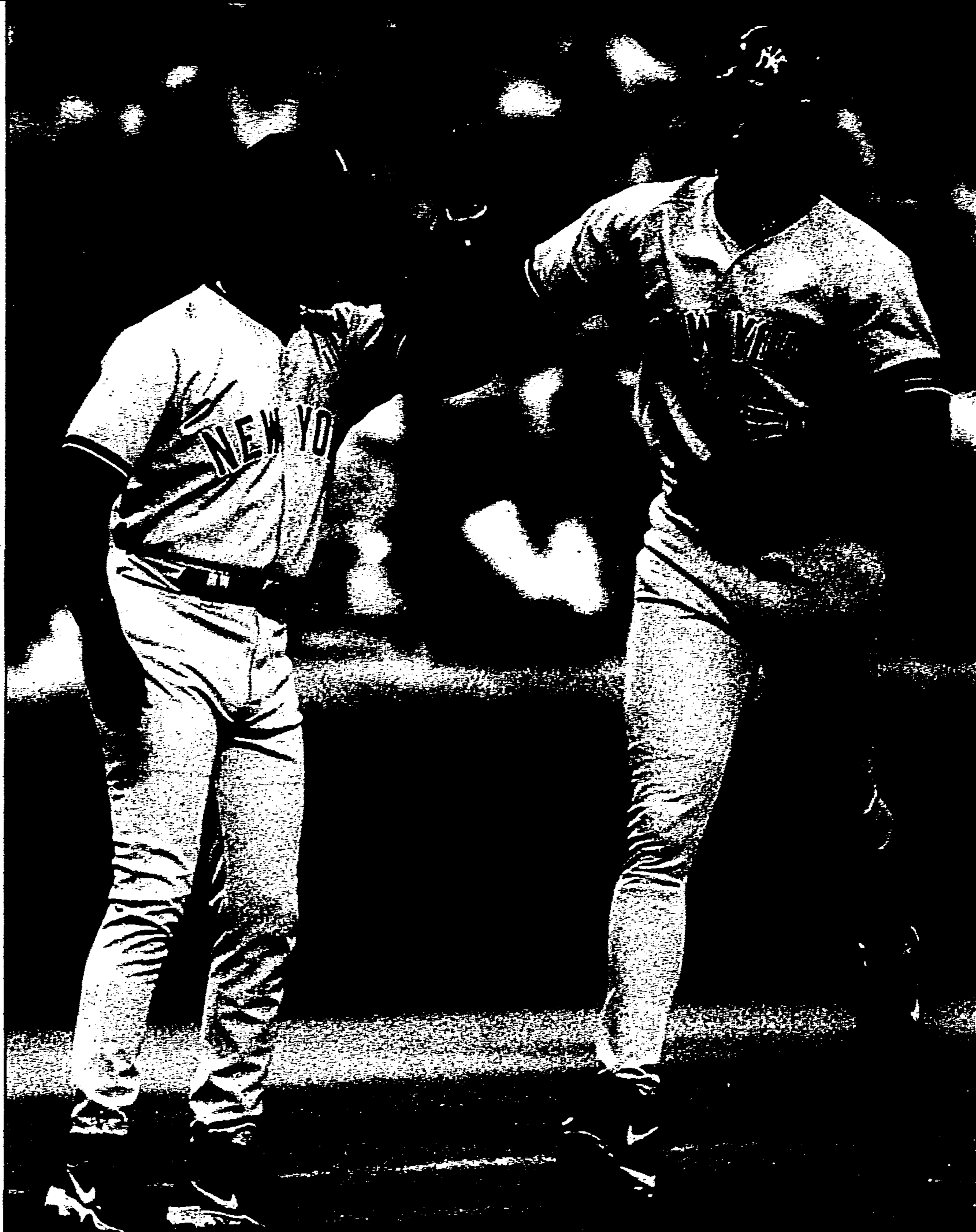
The reasons are multiple, but distilled to their essence they are these:

■ **Bernie Williams**, playing with clear head and long-term contract, has seized the mantle of quietly confident team leader to accompany his elegantly understated ability on offense and defense that leads one A.L. East general manager to call him "the best all-around player the Yankees have had since Joe DiMaggio."

■ The Yankees' starting pitching, a roller-coaster of a rotation all season, solidified itself last week, again stifling one of the league's best hitting teams. How



LINDA KATE/AP



L.M. OTERO/AP



JEFF ZELEVANSKY/AP

DON'T RUSH TO JUDGMENT: *The 1999 Yankees aren't as good as the 1998 World Series champions? Considering the team's ability to play at a high level at this time of the year and the clutch performances it is receiving from Clemens (above, left), Pettitte (left) and Strawberry, among others, it might be wise for everyone to hold off on an assessment of this season's New York club for a while longer.*

OCTOBER'S A.L. PLAYOFFS TEAM

The Yankees are at it again, parlaying timely hitting, stingy defense and strong starting pitching into a berth in the A.L. Championship Series *By Bob Hille*

good were Orlando Hernandez, Andy Pettitte and Roger Clemens? They held the Rangers, a team that scored 5.83 runs per game in 162 regular-season games, to one run and a .152 batting average in three playoff games. "If we keep pitching like this," third baseman Scott Brosius says, "I think I like our chances against anybody."

■ And Darryl Strawberry, who after all his woes, unlucky or self-inflicted, still owns a sweet lefthanded swing that can send a ball deeper than it ever wants to travel. Hitting from the No. 5 spot, he is the lineup fulcrum on which many a rally is launched. Example: His three-run, first-inning bomb, all the support Clemens needed in the series-clinching victory in Game 3 last Saturday in Arlington.

Don Zimmer had just been helped from the floor of the Yankees dugout last Tuesday night in Game 1, yet manager Joe Torre admits he felt like he was in a trance after watching his bench coach and faithful sidekick get scorched upside the head by a foul ball.

Bernie Williams approached his manager during what was still a close game and an extremely tense moment for everyone.

"Are you with us?" Williams asked.



MARK LERHMAN/AP

"Normally I'm the one who goes to Bernie and says, 'Are you with us?'" Torre said. "It just looked like he had this mission he was about to go on."

Williams, in fact, drove in six runs and made a critical defensive play in the Yankees' 8-0 Game 1 victory at the Stadium, a victory that got inside the Rangers' heads: "Once we started falling behind," third baseman Todd Zeile says, "we felt the weight of the monkey, which has turned into a 400-pound gorilla."

Williams always has been one to let his play do his talking, let his agent do his bidding, let his teammates do his attention-gathering. But there have been two distinct instances in the past month that have led Torre and the Yankees to see an evolution in him, from passive clubhouse presence to as much of a leader as his personality will allow.

One was in the dugout last Tuesday. The other was last month in Toronto after he and Paul O'Neill had hit grand slams to end any thoughts of a September swoon for the Yankees. Afterward, Williams was high-fiving everyone in sight, declaring loudly, "This is our defining moment."

The question now is this: Were those Williams

defining moments? "I told Bernie in '96 that he's a leader here, and I think he was surprised I told him that," Torre says. "I don't think at that time he understood what he means to this team."

It would be impossible for any of the Yankees not to understand it now, and it goes beyond Williams' .342 average and his team-high 115 RBIs.

Torre was reminded against the Rangers—and all season—exactly what life without Williams, 31, might have been like had the Yankees not kept him with an \$87.5 million free-agent contract last November. "I'm just glad Bernie didn't have to get used to playing in another uniform," Torre says. "And we didn't have to see him in one."

Yankees G.M. Brian Cashman had gathered his passenger, Roger Clemens, at the baggage carousel of the Tampa airport, determined that the embarrassment of Yankees riches never end. Here was the greatest team ever, lined with Bernie Williams to Derek Jeter, meeting the hard-edged Clemens, cropped hair, Texas twang and five Cy Youngs.

There was a locker waiting for Clemens at Legends Field (the team's home field for spring training), below where the nameplate used to read "Wells 33." They slid it out, slid in "Clemens 12," figuring it could be done with seamless ease.

"How can you trade somebody with the popularity that 'Boomer' had overnight, the year he had? How? Only way you could do it was to get him," David Cone said, nodding over to Clemens, a touch of wonder in his eyes.

Eight months later, the promise of spring has

It would be impossible for any of the Yankees not to understand Williams' leadership now, and it goes beyond his .342 average and his team-high 115 RBIs.

worn down with the grind of summer, a 14-10 record, a 4.60 ERA. But give Clemens, 37, the ball for Game 3 of the division series in Arlington and seven shutout innings and a series sweep later, a season deemed a disappointment is forgotten, redemption within reach.

"Well," says Torre, "I think it turns the page on everything that happened this year."

For this is October, these are the Yankees and Clemens can reshape his season, restore his good name. He closed out the Rangers, ended the division series. The pressure still is on Clemens, not to save a series or a season but to merely be Clemens. Between today and a tickertape parade, the Yankees will need to believe they can count on Clemens with the season on the line.

"People keep wanting to throw the word 'vulnerable' in front of our team," says Jeter, who went 5-for-11 against Texas. "Then one guy after the next comes out and pitches like that."

Indeed, the subbing of Clemens for Wells in Torre's rotation did nothing to prevent the Yankees pitching staff from limiting the Rangers to a single run for the second consecutive division series. That would be two runs in 60 playoff innings, wrapping up nine consecutive New York victories over Texas dating to 1996.

"Big-game pitchers, that's always been the trademark of our team," says Cone, who was slated to pitch Game 4 against Texas but was not needed, which speaks to the depth of the Yankees' rotation and the quality of their scouting, too.

Gene Michael of the Yankees' front office spent most of September following the Rangers, just as he did in '98. Yankees pitchers fed off Michael's scouting report, which in essence said Rangers batters would be overeager, ripe to be victimized by the right pitches (mostly off-speed stuff) at the right times (when working ahead in the count), which invariably Yankees pitchers did on both fronts.

"Hitting depends on how many mistakes you make," Torre says. "We didn't make many mistakes."

Remember that here in this same clubhouse—same time, same place 12 months earlier—this same team was paying tribute to a teammate missing. A year ago, Darryl Strawberry was out battling cancer, and Tim Lincecum was toasting him in this same clubhouse in Texas after a nearly identical sweep.

Strawberry was watching, waiting for another chance, a chance that is here and now. So last Saturday night Strawberry could be excused for reflecting on what has been and what might be.

"You've got to think, 'How crazy will it be in New York?'" Strawberry says, his mind skipping ahead, over a sizable barrier—the ALCS—to contemplate the delicious possibility, never mind plausibility, of a Subway Series.

Strawberry, a living, breathing link between the Yankees and Mets, pauses and lets his imagination run like the non-alcoholic champagne pouring over his head. "As far as the fans and the rivals, Mets fans and Yankees fans," he says, "you wonder if the city could control that."



HUY NGUYEN / DALLAS MORNING NEWS

WHAT'S A TEAM TO DO? Ivan Rodriguez and the Rangers ran into a Yankees juggernaut—again.

Control is a word Strawberry knows a thing or two about. It has never been as easy for him outside the foul lines. At 37, after a bout with cancer and a 120-day drug suspension, it was easy to think he wasn't going to be of much use anymore.

He was too good to go away in September, though. There was never much doubt that Torre would put him on the playoff roster. "He's a guy other teams just hate to see come to the plate," Torre says.

"It's been a very tough fight," Strawberry said as teammates sprayed sparkling grape juice that was a nod to the recovering alcoholic. "I'm just not a quitter. I don't feel any pressure."

Torre noted after Game 3 that his team seemed "very quiet and very tense" at the start. Strawberry changed all that by taking an Esteban Loaiza pitch 415 feet into left-center field, and the Yankees were off and running into the league championship series. That's the way this Yankees team, like last year's Yankees team, wins.

"The regular season and the postseason are such a different ballgame," says Brosius, the 1998 World Series MVP. "Guys step forward and find their games."

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Bob Hille is a managing editor of THE SPORTING NEWS. This story contains material from other news organizations.