

Rookie **Bump** Smoothing Rangers' Title Path

By RANDY GALLOWAY

ARLINGTON—In an interview session with the press several weeks ago, Bill Hunter was asked about surprises, pleasant or otherwise, he had encountered in his brief stint as manager of the Rangers.

But the real surprise was his immediate answer. "**Bump Wills** is a better player than I thought he was," said Hunter.

"A what?" came the startled response from one interviewer. Like almost everyone else in Hunter's office that day, he naturally assumed it was an accepted fact throughout baseball that **Wills** had proven to be an exceptional rookie. Now here's the manager, on the job for less than a month, saying this was somewhat of a surprise to him.

"DON'T GET ME wrong," Hunter quickly added. "It's not that I didn't think **Wills** was a talent. It's just that being with Baltimore and seeing him only a few times in spring training and during the season this year, I thought some people in the Texas organization might have overrated him. You know, because of his name and everything.

"But now I know that wasn't the case. You watch **Bump** play game after game and it becomes obvious he's as good as this organization expected him to be. He had a lot to live up to, but he's done it. So more power to him."

Hunter has good reason to laud **Wills**. **Bump** is one of the chief reasons that Hunter's Rangers are challenging for the top spot in the American League West.

HUNTER'S PERFORMANCE has been no less brilliant than **Bump's**, in fact. He's the fourth pilot the Rangers have had this season.

Eddie Stanky managed for just one game as Frank Lucchesi's replacement, and Connie Ryan led the club for a few days after that. Then Hunter took over with the team hanging around the .500 level. He soon got the Rangers moving.

Back to **Wills**. Let's explain something about second base as it pertains to the Rangers. Traditionally, this position was a no-man's land because no man was able to play it correctly.

But during the last two years, the Ranger hierarchy pleaded for patience. They had The Answer and his name was Elliott (**Bump**) **Wills**, son of Maury. But The Answer was being seasoned at places like Pittsfield (Eastern) and Sacramento (Pacific Coast) and it would be 1977 before **Wills** could save the franchise.

THE HYPE WAS strong. It got to the point of being an oversell situation. To say that expectations were high concerning **Bump** is understating the facts considerably.

Because of that, because of his famous father and then because of a turbulent spring training involving the former second baseman, Len Randle, the Ranger brass started dieting on fingernails in its concern about **Wills**. Just being a rookie is pressure enough. But the headaches went far beyond that with **Wills**. Could he beat the heat?

No sweat. Right from the start—spring training, opening day, etc.—**Wills** went about his business like it was a pickup game back home in Spokane, Wash. Everything thrown his way, pitches and otherwise, was handled.

From a consistency standpoint, both afield and at the plate, only center fielder Juan Beniquez can match **Bump** on a day-to-day basis. Obviously there's more to his ability than a name. He can stand on his own spikes.

"The fact my name is **Wills** has its advantages and

disadvantages," said **Bump**. "Certainly it has opened some doors for me in baseball. I know it helped me get a scholarship to Arizona State, and when I proved I could play on that level, the professional teams got interested.

"But the disadvantage is the comparisons that are always going to be made between my father and me. Not only comparisons, but expectations, too. It's like some people are actually wondering when I'm going to steal 104 bases."

The younger **Wills** is stocky and muscular, unlike the sleek body of his father. He won't match Maury's mark of 104 swipes in a season, but that doesn't mean he didn't inherit some of that **Wills** speed, quickness and instinct on the base paths. As a rookie, **Wills** probably will end up with 30 steals this year.

"About the only thing my father and I have in common where baseball is concerned is attitude," continued **Bump**. "I know this is something I got from him—the attitude about playing the game all out and playing to win."

But there's also basic baseball ability involved. "I NEVER HAD SEEN **Bump** until spring training," said coach Ryan. "All I knew about him was that the team was really counting on him coming through at second base.

"Then, the first thing I noticed down in Florida was the tremendous amount of poise he had. I thought that, plus some obvious physical tools, meant he would do a good job for us this season from a rookie standpoint.

"But he has far exceeded my expectations. His consistency has been something else. He has been outstanding for a rookie."

Poise and consistency are two words that are continually used to describe **Wills**.



Bump Wills . . . More Than a Name

"As far as the poise goes," said **Bump**. "I get the feeling a lot of people are surprised I'm as old as I am. Most of them seem to think I'm 21 or 22, which is normal for a rookie. But I'm 25, and I've been around in this game—not the majors, of course—but on a high level of competition.

"Besides two years in the minors, I put in four years at one of the best baseball schools in the country, plus I played for my father three years in Mexico. That's a lot of seasoning. I learned to play under pressure.

"ALSO, PROBABLY THE environment I grew up in was a factor. I was always around major league baseball players. Some of that couldn't have helped but rub off. My father's influence has played a big role in this, too. It's not something you sit down and talk about. It's something you have to acquire."

Maury keeps busy during the baseball season with his TV commentating. Hence he's only seen his son play one major league game in person.

"And I really haven't talked to him on the telephone that much, either," added **Bump**. "I guess I've called him only three or four times to talk about baseball. But I think one of those conversations early in the season made a difference for me."

The Rangers were at Detroit in early May and **Wills** wasn't performing up to expectations. He had a .215 average.

"But more than that, I was starting to doubt myself a little bit," he said. "I was having some second thoughts about being able to hit major league pitching."

So he picked up the telephone one day at the hotel and dialed Maury.

"I TOLD HIM I was slumping and didn't feel comfortable at the plate," said **Bump**. "He didn't give me a lot of technical advice.

"Instead he talked mainly about the mental aspect of baseball. Like the peaks and the valleys a hitter goes through in the course of a season and how you have to keep your head together whether you're going good or bad. We had a long talk and I felt a lot better."

That night the switch-hitting **Wills** went 4-for-5 against the Tigers, including his first major league home run. He went on to hit .345 in May and his overall average has hovered between .280 and .290 ever since.

But it's no surprise that **Wills** has hit well. His bat was rated at the major league level by scouts last season at Sacramento.

The glove, however, was another matter. It was said by the scouts that he'd be better at second defensively than about anyone else the Rangers had ever played there, but then that wasn't saying much.

SO WILLS' DEFENSIVE play, particularly his range, has been a surprise. Considering the fact he was a shortstop until his senior year in college, **Bump** still is learning the trade secrets of second, which makes his play this year even more appealing.

"No doubt I'll get better as I acquire experience around second," he said. "Going into spring training this year, I knew my weakness was on defense, so that's the one thing I wanted to concentrate on the most. I was determined that I'd be able to make the basic plays.

"One thing about our spring training park in Pompano Beach is that if you can handle the ball on that infield without getting killed, you can handle anything. When you stay down on a hop there, it's like taking your life into your own hands because there's no telling how the ball will bounce. But playing on an infield like that was good experience for me. It makes me appreciate major league infields."

What the fans in Texas appreciate this season is major league infielders. Toby Harrah at third, Bert Campaneris at shortstop, **Wills** at second and Mike Hargrove at first have brought improved defense to Arlington Stadium. And the rookie is one major reason why.

On The Cover

Rookie **Bump Wills** (left) and Manager Bill Hunter are two of the chief reasons the Texas Rangers are gathering steam in a run for the American League West Crown.

Attitude Sparking Rangers' Rise, Says Hunter

By RANDY GALLOWAY

ARLINGTON — The Rangers spent the first three months of the season flirting with oblivion. It was a team going nowhere, but going there in a hurry.

Then it happened. Real sudden like, the Rangers performed the sharpest U-turn ever seen in this part of the country, and promptly hot-footed it back toward the top in the American League West.

At this writing, there had been a whopping 25 victories in 31 games, giving the White Sox, the Royals and the Twins another contender for the divisional championship.

WHAT HAPPENED to cause this turnaround?

"Attitude," said Bill Hunter. "I

know that's a simple answer, but when you have good talent, attitude is the whole thing. In other words, you try something, it works, and the players are eager to try it again. When I came here, there was a lot of confusion about what was needed to be done and how it should be done. Maybe the players were looking for someone to step in and say, 'Okay, this is the way it's going to be.'"

Looking for it or not, that's exactly what Hunter gave the players. He became the fourth full-time manager of the season for the Rangers, actually the fourth in a week's time, on June 27. He promised two things between then and the end of the year—a winning team and a fundamentally sound team.

Where the Rangers were concerned, those promises were stout, to say the least. Delivering on them seemed remote, although the Ranger talent is the best in the club's six years in Texas.

"But in the mini-spring training sessions we set up after I took the job, the players were told exactly what was expected of them in fundamental situations," continued Hunter. "And I stressed all along that we would be a bunting team, a hit-and-run team and a team that took every advantage of our speed and our talent.

"When we started doing these things, we started to have success with them. One thing started to magnify another, but that's what a few wins will do for you. And when you're dealing with talent like this

club has, a few wins can lead to a lot of wins. Once the proper attitude is there, the next thing can be a snowballing effect. That's what happened to us."

INITIALLY, when Hunter was promising a winning team for the fans in North Texas, he wasn't talking in terms of a pennant. That changed in early August when the Rangers took three of four games from the White Sox in Chicago. Except for a rookie umpire's judgment call on a ground-rule double, Texas might have swept the series.

"We're going to win it," said Hunter. "We're going to win the whole damn thing. Of the teams that are in contention, we have the best pitching. And when it gets

down to the stretch run in September, pitching is going to mean the most."

Remarkably, most of this turnaround by the Rangers had been accomplished while the club has had crippling injuries to key personnel. The most notable is Juan Beniquez, the center fielder who missed a week of action in late July due to a hamstring injury.

HE RETURNED for two days before reinjuring the hamstring, then went on the 15-day disabled list. Beniquez had been the best all-around center fielder in the league when he was forced to the sideline.

Claudell Washington was moved from left field to center, but the 22-

(Continued on Page 8, Column 1)

Slumping **Bump** Takes Dump With Bit of Acid

By RANDY GALLOWAY

ARLINGTON—A lot was written about **Bump Wills**, the rookie. But so far in 1978 there hasn't been nearly as much comment from **Bump Wills**, the second-year man.

"The most frustrating thing about this season has been talking about it," said **Wills**. "I need to beat it out of my mind, work harder and hope that everything comes back together soon."

That ol' rascal, the Sophomore Jinx, covered up **Wills** during the first half of the season, leaving the son of Maury struggling to regain the status that his banner rookie year brought him.

The statistics from 1977 were impressive to say the least—a very solid .287 batting average which produced 87 runs, 62 RBIs and 28 stolen bases. In addition, his defense at second base was above average.

BUT THIS YEAR Wills has been stuck in the .220s when it comes to a batting average, his defense hasn't been the same, his strikeouts are up and Manager Bill Hunter has even started platooning the switch-hitter on a semi-regular basis.

As might be expected, **Wills** doesn't like to be sitting out

against lefthanded pitchers even though his average from the right side was in the .180s.

"I'd like the chance to hit my way out of this slump," he said, with a hint of bitterness.

But bruised feelings were just a minor part of Hunter's worries. Chief among the manager's concerns was how to straighten out the Rangers, who had lost nine of 12 decisions prior to the All-Star Game.

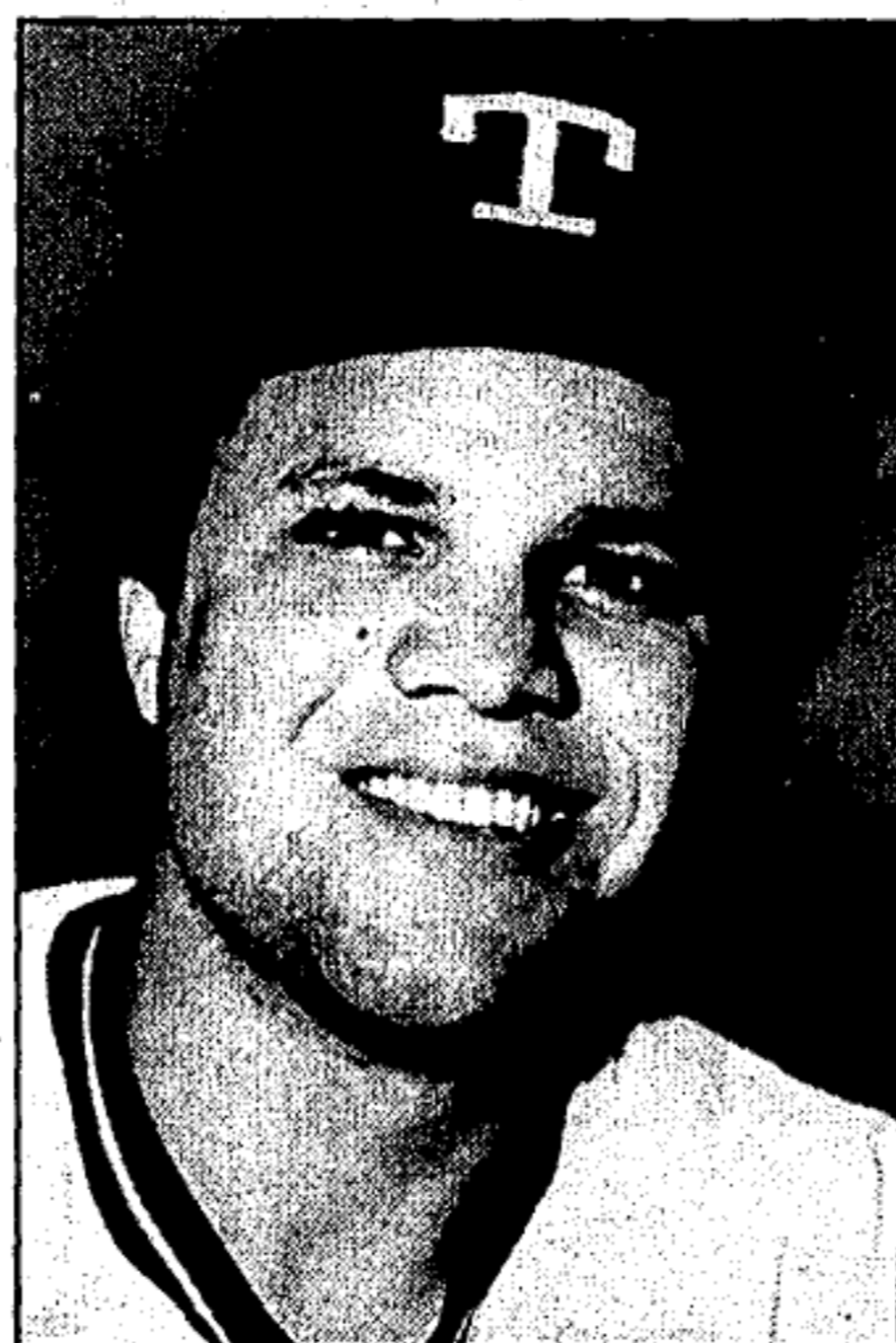
Hunter's entire infield was slumping, both at the plate and in the field. So **Wills** was just one of many disappointments for the Rangers.

"I'm going through the same thing Fred Lynn went through that second year," said **Bump**. "I think the expectation of having to come back the next year and equal everything you did can be most difficult from a concentration standpoint.

"**THE WILL AND** the desire are still there, but being aggressive is a big part of concentration. When you get off to a slow start, your mind begins to play tricks on you and sometimes it's very difficult to pull out of it."

Despite his bloodlines, **Wills** has always contended that he was not gifted with superior athletic abil-

ity. "A lot of people believe that I'm a natural, but that's very, very wrong," he said. "Any one who saw me coming out of high school can tell you that. I've gotten where I am today because of hard work and dedication. And that's the only reason. It's also the only way I'm going to have to turn this season around."



Bump Wills

Wills has started choking up with the bat in an attempt to change some of his offensive patterns. He admits that the nine homers he hit as a rookie inspired him to try for even more this season, which may have caused some of his offensive problems.

OF COURSE, the power game is 180 degrees from the way his father played. And after being compared with Maury every time he steps on a baseball field, **Bump** says he almost took a delight in going the other way.

"I think subconsciously during my professional career I went against the comparisons," he said, smiling. "That's nothing against my father. He was a great player, who had a great career. But in the back of my mind I guess I was trying to be different. I tried to hit with more power. I even thought about hitting 15 homers this season."

"But that goal is a thing of the past.

"A .300 batting average, that's what I want now and that's what I intend to work for," said **Wills**.

Of course, it will be very difficult for that to happen this year after the slow start. But **Wills** has time on his side and he also has some rookie credentials which show

what can be done under better circumstances.

Ranger Ramblings: Home attendance was due to top the million mark after 45 dates, easily the earliest in club history, but with the break-even point now at 1.7 million, the team will have to play much better in the second half of the season if the Rangers expect to be able to pay their bills. During the weekend before the All-Star Game break, there were definite signs that the enthusiasm of the fans was waning as a three-game series with Detroit didn't draw even 60,000.

Outfielders Al Oliver and Juan Beniquez, both out for nearly a month with injuries, were back immediately after the All-Star break and that should help the anemic offense. . . . One area of improvement for **Wills** over last year is in stolen bases. He has 25 swipes in 28 attempts. . . . During one stretch of games, the Rangers failed to score 12 straight times in bases-loaded situations. . . . More sad news for Roger Moret. He was placed in a psychiatric hospital in his native Puerto Rico after apparently slipping into another catatonic state. In mid-June, Moret took a leave of absence from the Rangers to visit his pregnant wife.

Castoff Pirtle Blooms as Expo Relief Expert

By IAN MacDONALD

MONTREAL—During the week leading up to the All-Star break, the Expos came up with a most unlikely savior for their bullpen.

Indeed, for a short term anyway, Gerry Pirtle represents one of those improbable rags-to-riches romances.

Here's a 30-year-old who had

given up on a baseball career in mid-May. He was back at his home in Broken Arrow, Okla., pondering the frightful prospect of going to work for a living.

"**YOU CAN'T** blame him for thinking that way," Expos' Manager Dick Williams was saying after Pirtle had given him eight runless innings in four appearances during a crucial trip just be-

fore the All-Star Game break.

"It seemed like everyone had given up on him."

Not everyone.

When the Cubs sent Mike Krukow down to Wichita (American Association) on May 18, they had to find room on their roster. Pirtle was given his unconditional release.

After 12 years in minor league

baseball, during which he had never once had a chance in the big leagues, Pirtle was out. Surely this was the end.

"**I HAD THOUGHT** about quitting the year before," said the father of 10 and six-year-old boys. "I was away from the family so much and things weren't looking good.

"My wife (Eilene) had to work because we needed the money. When Wichita released me, I told everyone that was the end of my baseball career.

"I had done carpentry work—framed houses—in the winter and I had nothing else really. I was looking for a better job, but I didn't know where to start.

"My wife was happy. She was ready for me to get out. I was home. The baseball business was over."

Then there was a fellow who hadn't given up. Doc Edwards, manager of the Expos farm at Denver (American Association) remembered that Pirtle had thrown strikes for him when he managed at West Haven (Eastern) during the '74 season.

"**JIM BURRIS** (Denver general manager) called me and said that Edwards had suggested he call me," Pirtle said. "He said that they were interested, but had to call Montreal first. He asked me to give it some thought and that Jim Fanning would be calling shortly from Montreal.

"I talked it over with my wife and we decided that playing for Doc Edwards might be a break. He knew how to use me in '74. And, anyway, we knew we could use the money for the rest of the summer."

So, after nine days' retirement, Pirtle was back in the game. He walked the first man he faced and that man scored. That was it. Pirtle made 14 appearances in five weeks, working 15-plus innings. He gave up only that one run. The earned-run average was 0.57.

"**DOC KEPT TELLING** me that he would do his best to get me up

there," Pirtle said. "He kept putting me in close games and asking me to protect leads. That's how I got eight saves.

"All of a sudden, I'm in the majors. It's unbelievable."

"We don't know if he's the answer," Williams said, "but he's going to get the chance. He has a good slider and curve and a sneaky fast ball. He throws strikes.

"And he's healthy. He's a short reliever and he appears to like work. Off what I've seen in one week, we can use him under any conditions."

Williams spotted Pirtle carefully at first. The afternoon the right-hander arrived in Montreal, Williams called on him and he responded with two shutout innings against the Cardinals in a game that was lost.

AGAIN AT Pittsburgh, Williams asked Pirtle to pitch a couple of innings after the Expos had fallen behind.

Then in Philadelphia, Pirtle was given a more severe test. The Phillies had scored five runs against Wayne Twitchell and Rudy May and were still threatening.

Pirtle came in to face Greg Luzinski, the 10th Phillie to bat in the inning, with runners on first and third. With more than 50,000 roaring on every pitch, Pirtle struck out The Bull.

"I'd faced Luzinski in the minors," shrugged Pirtle. "I had some success with him then: I threw him the same thing this time—sliders."

The next day, when rookie starter Dan Schatzeder scrambled for the first time, Pirtle came on with runners at second and third and forced Larry Bowa to sky out softly. Then he pitched another two shutout innings.

IN JUST ONE week, Pirtle had not only pitched in front of more people than he ever had before, he saw five bigger crowds than he had ever seen.

"I'm embarrassed to say this," (Continued on Page 19, Column 1)

McRae Blames Slump on HR Swing

By DEL BLACK

KANSAS CITY—Hal McRae found little pleasure during the first half of the season. The Kansas City designated hitter-outfielder experienced one of his worst starts since joining the team in 1970. He was also plagued by a sore arm.

That's why, in the midst of a slump that saw his average drop as low as .259, a couple of milestones were appreciated.

McRae collected his 1,000th career hit and a few games later he topped 500 runs batted in.

"I was happy when I got No. 1,000," he said, "but, really, I feel as though I should have 1,020 by now. If I had been hitting consistently, I would have had 1,000 a long time ago."

McRae reached 1,000 in grand fashion—with a home run, his 10th of the season.

But he acknowledged that the home-run ball may have been the culprit in his quest for more hits.

"**WHAT GOT ME** messed up in the first place was trying to hit home runs," he said. "When I tried to adjust, it wasn't as easy as it used to be. I think I've had only one good week all year. I suppose it's something every player dreams about—hitting a home run at a crucial time—but I really wasn't trying to hit one."

McRae has averaged 175 hits the last four seasons, and when he hit the 1,000th, it was No. 833 as a member of the Royals.

"I was surprised when they put up the 1,000 on the scoreboard," said Manager Whitey Herzog. "I thought Mac had more than that. But I guess he didn't play much in Cincinnati before he came over here in 1973. He was an extra guy, a pinch-hitter, and he missed a lot of time because of injuries."

HERZOG NEVER has considered resting McRae, who has played in more consecutive games than any other active major leaguer. The 32-year-old righthanded hitter has batted .310, .306, .332 and .298 after a dismal .234 in his first campaign with the Royals. This indicates it's only a matter of time before he finds the groove.

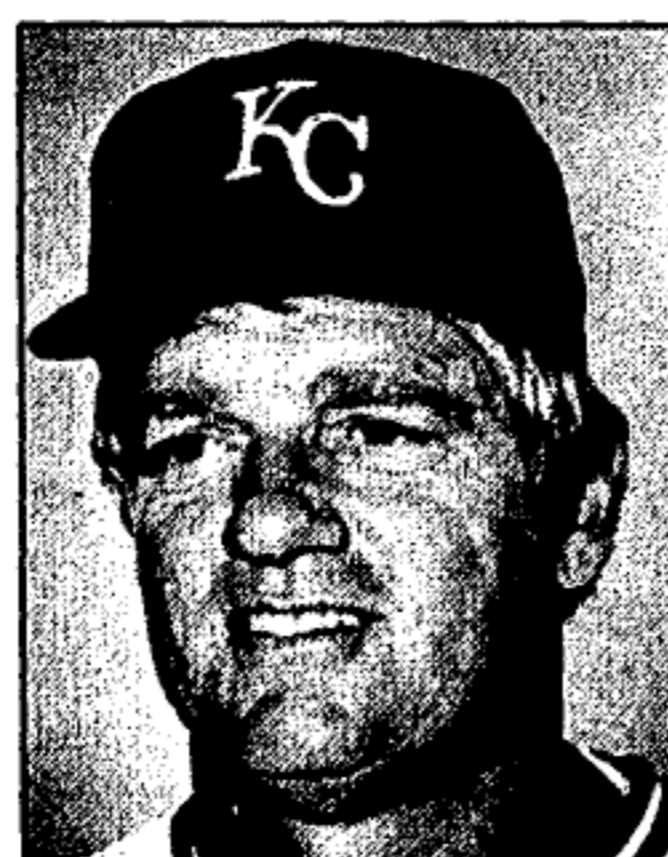
"With Mac in a slump, it's different than most hitters," said Herzog. "He's such an intense competitor, he helps a club even when he's not hitting. I've never been afraid that he wouldn't start hitting. Not Hal McRae."

Royals' Roundup: John Wathan, the catcher-first baseman who suffered a dislocated left shoulder June 15, returned to active duty July 7. To make room on the 25-man roster, the Royals sent catcher Art Kusnyer to Omaha (American Association). . . . When outfielder Al Cowens went on the 15-day disabled list because of an injured right knee, Kansas City called Randy McGilberry, a righthanded relief pitcher, from Omaha.

Southpaw Paul Splittorff became the Royals' first 10-game winner when he pitched a four-hitter to beat Baltimore, 3-1. It was Splittorff's third win over the Orioles. . . . Third baseman George Brett was chosen the Royals' player of the month for June and Larry Gura was picked the pitcher of the month. Brett hit .320 in June, with 18 RBIs and a dozen doubles. Gura, a lefthander, went 3-1 with a 2.74 ERA. . . . Doug Bird, the righthanded ace of the Kansas City bullpen, was married July 7 to the former Chris Brooks of Fort Myers, Fla.



Hal McRae



Whitey Herzog