

Sports

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Major Leagues: A goal few attain

A's McCatty is a survivor

By Jim Hughes
staff writer

THERE'S STILL some 150 games left on the Major League Baseball schedule, so it's much too early to talk about the playoffs. But if Detroit and Oakland hang on to their leads in the East and West divisions, respectively, there will be a big homecoming celebration for A's pitcher Steve McCatty.

"It'd be great," McCatty said from his room at the Sheraton Hotel in Boston. "Then I could stay in my Rochester home instead of the Pontchartrain downtown."

Means that much to you, eh Steve? Actually, you can expect a response like that from the "Cat."

McCatty, a Troy High School graduate, is great with the one-liners, and he's also pretty decent between the foul lines. Going into the weekend series with the Red Sox, McCatty, who was scheduled to pitch yesterday, had a 2-0 record and a 3.10 earned run average for the division-leading A's.

IN REALITY, a Detroit vs. Oakland American League playoff series would mean more for McCatty than sleeping in his own bed.

"It would be really exciting," he said. "My mom and dad would be torn between the two. I'd be fired up to have something like that. Sure, it's a long way off, but it's not unreal for that to happen. There's a good chance for it."

"We're a real good team. People tend to say, 'Yeah, they're a good team, but they're not legitimate contenders.' But we are that. We are legitimate."

Like the rest of the baseball followers, McCatty is impressed with the Detroit Tigers' nine straight wins to open the season. He says it's important to start strong in the tough East Division, but he's not willing to erase defending world champion Baltimore from the picture, despite the Orioles' horrendous start.

"Detroit's a real good team. That (strong start) is something they need. If you go 500 early in the East, it's so much harder to make up. But most of the teams are good enough where they won't go through many long losing spells."

"Baltimore never starts strong," McCatty added. "They play good baseball around the All-Star break, that's always been their style. I don't think they'll change that much in one year because they're the same ballclub. It's still early."

THE SEASON STILL IS in its infant stage, but McCatty already is off to a

fast start with his 2-0 record. Prior to the Boston series, he had three starts, and the A's were winners in each of those games. That's something the former Cy Young runner-up hopes will be constant.

"I'd like us to win every game I pitch in," said McCatty, who, going into the 1984 season, has a career record of 61-45 with 49 ERA. "That's not to say I win every game, all I want is the team to win. So far, we have. If I start 35 games and we win 35, by rights, I should get half (of the wins)."

In five full seasons with Oakland, McCatty never has been a 30-game winner. His best chance for the magic number would have been during the strike-shortened 1981 season when he posted a 14-7 record and finished second to Milwaukee Brewer relief pitcher Rollie Fingers in the Cy Young voting.

If McCatty gets half of those 35 wins he talks about, it will be his best season in terms of pitching victories. But one thing is for sure: He wants to be the ace of the staff.

"Sure I would," said McCatty, who is part of a four-man rotation with Larry Sonson, Mike Warren and Tim Lincecum. "The only thing I've been wild. I've been wild a lot of times. My arm feels good, but the unfortunate thing is I throw too many pitches."

"If I go seven or eight innings, I should get a lot of wins. I've been around the league, and I know the guys. Some pitchers are makebitt. They'll lose games, 2-1. More often than not, I'll win, 5-3, and 4-2. I've got a little luck going my way."

"I WANT TO be the stopper. If we lose a few, I want to be the guy they give the ball to."

McCatty has yet to see the seventh inning in his first three starts. His 1-1 wins were 14-2 against Boston and 3-1 against Seattle. He nearly had a win against California, but was out of the game when the Angels tied it, 1-1. Oakland eventually posted a 2-1 victory.

Although McCatty is confident in his ability, it's difficult for him to pinpoint a reason for his early success. "It's hard to say. We've been scoring runs while I've been pitching, and I've been keeping it close. And, we've been getting good help from the bullpen. That's basically why we've had the good start."

"I feel as long as I keep it close, we have a chance to win, and that's what counts."

Just in case the dream series doesn't pan out, McCatty and the A's will be in town for a weekend series with the Tigers May 18-20. Then again, it could be an interesting prelude.



Steve McCatty, a native of Troy, has made his mark in the major leagues with the Oakland A's. Others have not been as fortunate.

College: Where dream begins

By C.A. Rissak
staff writer

Looking back a year, Bill Hanis can sum up his freshman baseball season at Michigan State as some good news, some bad.

First the good: Hanis discovered the transition to college ball wasn't really that difficult. "It wasn't that big a jump," said the former All-State catcher from

Plymouth Canton. "The biggest adjustment came during our spring trip."

After Hanis got his first taste of collegiate baseball in MSU's trip south last year, he got going quickly. He caught 38 games for the Spartans and batted over 300 until a late-season slump dropped him to .263 for the year. Still, he scored 19 runs and hit two homers, collecting 13 RBIs.

Now for the bad news. Michigan State dropped 32 games, which is about 24 more defeats than Hanis experienced in his last two seasons at Canton.

"We lost 32 games last season and I'm not used to that," he admitted.

MSU FIGURES to be much improved.

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Dreams die hard in minor leagues

By Rich Swenson
staff writer

Former Birmingham Seaholm baseball star Jerry Keller still has his mind set on making it to the big leagues.

The 28-year-old power-hitting catcher signed a minor league contract to play this season with Syracuse (AAA) of the International League, with hopes that the parent club — the Toronto Blue Jays — can use his offensive clout later this season.

He's spent seven years laboring in the minors, but to Keller, it's been worth the effort.

"I don't know what my chances are of making it to the major leagues," he said. "It's a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

"But I'll take my chances. I've always enjoyed baseball — it's something I've always done. I'll take it one day at a time."

WITH IMPRESSIVE back-to-back seasons at Portland (Pacific Coast League) and Richmond (International League), Keller has improved his prospects.

The mammoth six-foot-four, 240-pounder belted 48 home runs in each of the last two seasons, leading Portland to the championship last year. The Beavers finished second to Tidewater.

In each of the last five seasons, the right-handed slugger has hit between 25-30 homers, including two home run titles. But he can also hit for average.

Last year, Keller finished with a respectable .285 average and has stayed around the .275 mark throughout his career. He also increased his marketability by doing a superb job catching.

"I've never done a whole lot of catching," he said. "But last season, I thought I did a good job."

AS A RECEIVER, Keller's strengths are handling pitchers and blocking the plate. If he has a weakness, it's in his throwing ability. But he said even that has improved.

Syracuse officials plan to use him at first, catcher or designated hitter (DH). The main thing is getting his bat in the game.

"I don't care how they use me as long as I'm in the lineup," he said.

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Easter exodus: Where the jocks are

SO YOU WANT to be a high-school baseball coach, do you? Or a high-school track coach?

Before you apply, consider some of these horror stories.

• One ranked area baseball team lost a ballgame to a team it should have beaten because all but two of its seniors were down in Florida, forcing the team to play with a handful of junior varsity players — the game was played on the Monday of the week prior to Easter break.

• Three key players on a ranked area soccer team decided to take a trip to Florida despite the fact that their team was to play its arch rival — this, too, happened a week prior to the Easter vacation.

• One area coach — Stevenson's Chuck Dobos — quill with the school's administration wouldn't back him on a policy that would deter his athletes from missing scheduled games because of Florida trips.

COACHING high-school sports in the spring time is no picnic. Not only do you have to deal with unstable weather conditions, but you have to deal with the new traditional Easter exodus. "You just have to understand that the tradition of it all has gotten bigger than spring sports," said Mike Thompson, Farmington Harrison's girls softball coach.

Nobody is sure where the tradition began, but it has grown to epidemic proportions. Every April, right around the time of Easter break, high-school and college students take off for the sunny shores of Florida. And for area educators.

The Easter exodus is causing a lot of problems for area coaches — and for area educators. Teams are having to use junior varsity players because all their key athletes are in Florida. Coaches and parents are frantically trying to reschedule meets, matches or games to avoid forfeits. Good teams are losing to poor teams because all their key athletes are in Florida. Coaches and parents are at odds. It's getting ugly.

The sad thing about it all is, these games are scheduled during the week prior to the vacation. The kids are leaving school a week before the vacation starts. They are missing school as well as athletic events.

"I GUESS we just have to realize that the kids are in Michigan aren't going to be that big of a deal," Coachman said. "You can get others over it or you can pull your hair out, but you have to be realistic — the kids are going to go."

Teachers don't stand on the fence from an educator's standpoint. "It bothers me more as a teacher. At Harrison we get more vacation time



Chris McCosky

than most schools, but that's still not good enough. Some parents need to take even more. What does that say to a kid about the priorities of education? The heck with sports — I mean, with sports the worst you're talking about is loyalty to a group. What can you do about families that make those kinds of value judgments? There's not much a coach or a teacher can do."

Teacherman brings up a valid point. The Michigan High School Athletic Association lists as one of its objectives to "increase the educational value of interscholastic athletic programs throughout the state."

Now you tell me, what educational value does a student-athlete get from being able to just up and blow off to Florida in the middle of a season? What does that teach him about loyalty, about commitment?

Too many high school exodus sets a bad precedent. If a kid is allowed to shirk off responsibilities in high school — and being part of a team involves re-

sponsibility and commitment — then what's going to stop that kid from shirking off responsibilities later in life?

THERE'S A significant distinction that should be made here. There is a difference between going on a family vacation during the regularly scheduled Easter break and going down with a bunch of friends the week before.

Both are fine, as long as they don't conflict with other commitments. It's the same in any area of life. You take vacations when you can, not always when you want to.

Obviously, the students have a right to their vacation. But, they should know that they have a responsibility to their teammates, also.

Coaches deal with the exodus in differing ways, but they all agree on one point — they don't want any surprises. If a player is planning on taking a vacation during the season, they want to know about it up front. That doesn't

always happen.

Most Observerland coaches try not to schedule anything during the regular Easter break. This causes problems because the break comes right in the middle of the spring season.

"We allow them to go," said Harrison baseball coach John Herrington, "but they cannot miss any games. We put that rule in about four years ago and it seems to work. It may have discouraged some kids from coming out, but not the good players."

Herb Osterland, Livonia Churchill baseball coach, has games and practices scheduled during Easter break.

"I talked to the kids last year and again before this year," he said. "I told them that they were going to be a senior group and if they had to make plans, make them. But remember, you're here to play the game. And they understood that if they wanted to be competitive in this league, they were going to have to play during the break. There's no way you can walk away from something for 10 days and have the same edge as when you left."

Only one Churchill ballplayer will be gone this week.

FARMINGTON HARRISON girls softball coach Mike Thompson has a unique method of dealing with the exodus. He gives his runners a workout program to take with them, and he asks them to follow

it. He'll know if they don't. He runs time trials the day they return.

One team that never has a problem with the Easter exodus is Plymouth Canton baseball.

"We don't have any rules," said coach Fred Crisney. "Legally, you can't tell a kid he can or cannot go. It's a civil-rights thing. What we tell our kids to do, one, the season's short. We schedule games during the vacation. And if a member of this ballclub, you don't take vacations in the middle of the season."

"I have no quarrel with them going on vacations, I really don't. But the big thing is, the kids have to decide their priorities. You only have two years of varsity ball in high school. Most of my kids wait all year just to play. The season's only 13 weeks long. You can't tell me missing a week and a half to two weeks doesn't hurt."

It's indeed a tough situation, this Easter exodus. It's a situation that has gotten completely out of hand. Churchill track coach Fred Price has a solution:

"Forget Easter. Call it a spring break and have it the third week in March. Teachers will be excited in the year and won't interfere with spring or winter sports — except some state championships," he said. "Couldn't agree more."