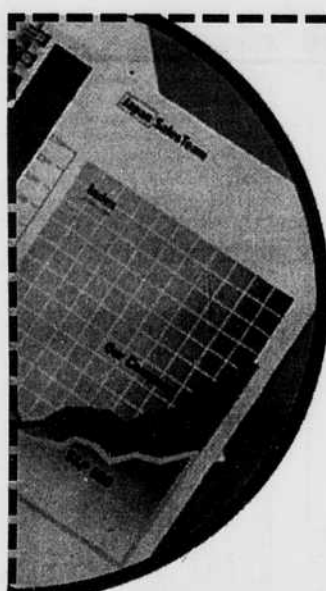




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McGwire not concerned with record

Mark McGwire says helping his team is more important than breaking Roger Maris' record

By R.B. Fallstrom
The Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — To one teammate, he's a modern-day Babe Ruth. To a rival manager, he's practically a force of nature.

Mark McGwire is pounding a baseball like few before him.

"You can feel the intensity and the electricity in the stands when he comes up, and rightfully so," San Diego Padres manager Bruce Bochy said. "He hits a baseball like no other human being."

McGwire homered in each of the first four games, and all but one was the game's big blow. On opening day, his grand slam broke up a scoreless, fifth-inning tie against the Dodgers and prompted the Ruthian comparison, not by a wide-eyed rookie but 39-year-old Gary Gaetti.

With McGwire in the on-deck circle, fans began roaring when the count went to three balls on Delino DeShields. Ball four brought the anticipation to fever pitch.

McGwire didn't let them down, and he punctuated the moment with some football-like forearm-bashing and backslapping that left at least two teammates in pain.

"That was about as electric as they come," said catcher Tom Lampkin, "and I think he got a little carried away."

He ended Game 2 with a three-

run shot in the 12th inning against the Dodgers. He put Game 4 against San Diego out of reach with a three-run shot in the sixth, and joined Hall of Famer Willie Mays as the only National League players to homer in each of the first four games. The AL keeps no such record.

"You just don't see too many guys in this league do the things he does," San Diego's Tony Gwynn said. "If you look at his numbers, it's hard to argue that he's not the best power hitter in the game."

The thunder abated in Game 5 on Sunday. San Diego's Kevin Brown and Treavor Hoffman held McGwire to a pedestrian 1-for-4 with a walk.

McGwire is as blasé about the long ball as a guy who has hit 110 homers the last two seasons can possibly be. Given a chance to become the first man to homer in the first five games of the season, he took his rips, but he also put the ball in play for a first-inning single and didn't mind walking to load the bases in the fifth.

"He's established his reputation," said manager Tony La Russa, who also had McGwire in Oakland. "He's a hell of a lead-off man in an inning. Just look at his on-base percentage."

The last two months last season, it was .411. So far this season, he's 8-for-20 with five walks.

For McGwire, home runs just happen, even if they happen in bunches. As a young boy he remembers watching Mays near the

end of the line and not being all that impressed.

"I was never in awe of anybody," McGwire said. "I just went to enjoy the game."

Nor does he seem to take his feats too seriously. All week he couldn't wait for the horde of reporters to leave his locker, and he was definitely on the churlish side for a man enjoying the ride of his life. As far as McGwire's concerned, the game is the thing, not Roger Maris' record.

"Anytime you can help a team win a ballgame, it means a lot," he said. "Home run, base hit, a walk, a defensive play, it doesn't matter to me. As long as you can contribute."

Needless to say, he doesn't think highly of a new section of upper deck seats just inside the left-field foul pole that is called, in neon letters, Big Mac Land. McGwire is quick to point out it's a hamburger promotion and not a McGwire spinoff that will add to his \$9 million salary.

He's just as quick to say he's never, ever, had a Big Mac sandwich because he can't stand the special sauce.

"It's not my name and it has nothing to do with me," McGwire said. "It's all McDonald's, believe me."

Want more cold water? He's not licking his chops about playing the next three games at Coors Field.

"It's just another ballpark," McGwire said. "You guys make more of it than we do. This is a game and it's not easy, but nobody ever writes that, do they?"

Johnson's slow start has fans worried

But the Mariners say they are not concerned about his poor showing

The Associated Press

SEATTLE — What's wrong with Randy Johnson?

Johnson and the Mariners say nothing, but his perplexing 9.26 ERA after two starts has Seattle's fans beginning to wonder.

Johnson (0-1) was the loser in a 10-5 Sunday defeat by the Boston Red Sox in his second start. He surrendered seven runs on six hits and walked four, while striking out 10 in six innings.

Not to worry, the Mariners insisted.

"I am not concerned about Randy one bit," Seattle manager Lou Piniella said.

"I'm not going to get upset over two games," Johnson said.

Johnson's poor start comes in

the final year of his contract with Seattle after a winter of discontent for the 6-foot-10 left-hander. The Mariners said in November that they wouldn't extend his contract after 1998.

The 1995 AL Cy Young Award winner became the franchise's first 20-game winner last season when he was 20-4 and had a 2.28 ERA with 291 strikeouts in 29 starts.

But he was 0-2 in the Mariners' division series that they lost to Baltimore 3-1 last fall.

Johnson, who was not involved in the decision in a 10-9 loss to Cleveland on opening night, is earning \$6 million this season.

With a 45-6 record from 1995-97 in Seattle, he has a history of being a fast starter.

A year ago, he was 3-0 in five starts in April. For his career, he's 20-9 in April.

The Red Sox said only nice things about Johnson. Of course,

they will face him again Friday in Boston.

"Whoever said that is crazy," Mo Vaughn, who is a career .381 hitter against Johnson, said of the questions about Johnson's performance. "He hasn't lost anything."

"You won't hear me saying he's lost anything," said Nomar Garciaparra, who had a two-run homer and a two-run single Sunday against Johnson. "He seemed pretty tough to me."

Since joining the Mariners in 1989 after a trade with the Montreal Expos, Johnson has won four AL strikeout crowns and leads the major leagues in strikeouts during the 1990s.

Johnson missed most of the 1996 season following back surgery.

"He just hasn't found a groove yet," teammate Ken Griffey Jr. said. "Once he gets comfortable, he'll be all right."

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