

Baltimore's Belle reportedly ready to retire

By David Ginsburg
The Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Albert Belle has just about given up hope of playing baseball again.

"At this stage, I need a miracle," the Baltimore Orioles' slugger told USA Today after delaying his long-awaited spring-training debut again on Monday.

He has missed all four of the Orioles' spring training games because of an arthritic right hip that threat-

ens to end his career.

"At any second, it could go," he said. "I've felt more pain the last three days. The leg isn't getting stronger."

Shortly before the Orioles boarded a bus to Port St. Lucie, Belle told manager Mike Hargrove that his ailing hip had not healed enough to allow him to play right field in the exhibition game against the New York Mets.

Their morning chat has become a

daily ritual, and Hargrove has yet to hear the three words he's been waiting for: "I can play."

"It's no different than yesterday. The hip was no better," Hargrove said. "He'll try to play tomorrow."

Belle, 34, has three seasons left on a \$65 million, five-year contract. He will receive the remaining \$39 million whether he plays or not. The Orioles have an insurance policy that will cover 70 percent of that amount, The Washington Post and

The (Baltimore) Sun have reported.

But money is not the issue for the Orioles, who need Belle's bat in a lineup that is severely lacking in power. Despite suffering through a second-half slump last season because of his hip, Belle still led the Orioles with 23 homers and 103 RBIs.

That's why Hargrove will wait as long as possible before charting plans for a season without his projected cleanup hitter.

"Obviously there comes a point in time that common sense says you have to do something," Hargrove said. "But we haven't set a certain date when we'll make a decision one way or another."

Hargrove said Sunday the team would like to reach a decision by the middle of spring training. With every passing day, the doubt surrounding Belle's future intensifies.

"Each day your concern grows," Hargrove said.

Gonzaga captures third straight trip to Big Dance

By John K. Wiley
The Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Break out the dog-eared "Go Zags" signs.

For the third consecutive year, the Gonzaga Bulldogs are in the NCAA Tournament, with an unprecedented third West Coast Conference tournament title and victories in all but one of their last 19 games.

"This is so sweet because everyone expected us to drop off," Casey Calvary, the only current Bulldogs player who started on both the other NCAA teams, said after Monday night's 80-77 win over Santa Clara. "But we're back again."

Bulldogs fever is on the rise in Spokane, the Eastern Washington city of 190,000 residents whose long winters have been enlivened by Gonzaga basketball.

A large crowd of fans greeted the team at the Spokane International Airport on Tuesday afternoon, and

all three network television stations cut from regular programming to broadcast the arrival.

"They're the greatest fans in America, I say," said freshman guard Blake Stepp, who scored 21 points Monday night.

Dan Dickau, the transfer from Washington who scored 25 points in Monday's championship game, said this trip to the tournament will be sweeter than the trip he made with the Huskies in 1998.

"I feel more a part of things here," Dickau said. "It's a great feeling."

The Bulldogs (24-6) find out Sunday whom they will play in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Calvary, a Wooden Award finalist and conference MVP, and Mark Spink, the conference defensive player of the year, are the team's only seniors.

Dickau, who spent December on the bench with a broken left index

finger, returned in mid-January to key the Bulldogs' 13-1 regular season conference run. Stepp was named the WCC freshman of the year.

"It's sweet, maybe even sweeter the second time around," second-year Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "There is supreme satisfaction of a mission accomplished."

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Mark Few
Gonzaga coach

Dickau scored 19 of his 25 points in the second half Monday and was named MVP of the WCC tournament. He was 6-of-8 from the free-throw line in the last 1:36.

Gonzaga enters the NCAAs having won 18 of 19 games.

Gonzaga won five NCAA games the last two seasons. It fell a win short of the Final Four during its surprising run in 1999, then came back for more last year, reaching the regional semifinals before being eliminated.

Santa Clara made 10 three-pointers in the second half to rally from a 13-point deficit, including one by Kyle Bailey to pull Santa Clara to 78-77 with 24.9 seconds left.

Gonzaga fouled the Broncos before they could get off shots in the final seconds. After a timeout, Jamie Holmes shot an airball as time ran out, sending the Zags into a familiar celebration.

Stepp added 21 points for the Bulldogs. He led a 22-3 run in the first half by making three three-pointers, giving Gonzaga a 38-20 lead 3 minutes before the half.

Brian Jones scored 21 for Santa Clara (20-12) and Steve Ross had

20.

It was the second time in the tournament that Gonzaga came back from an early deficit to win. Santa Clara jumped to an 11-point lead just six minutes in. In Sunday night's semifinal victory over San Diego, Gonzaga was down by 14 in the first half before going on a 16-0 run.

"They are a very good team that can give you problems in the tournament," Santa Clara coach Dick Davey said. "They create a lot of problems that other teams don't."

Gonzaga led 40-35 at halftime and then opened a 48-35 lead, its biggest of the game, after Dickau made two shots, including a three-pointer, and Stepp hit three free throws.

Santa Clara scored the next 11 points, a run capped by three-pointers by Ross and Bailey, to tie it at 48, but could never get the lead back.

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Horoscope by Linda C. Black

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY (March 7). Fame and fortune can be yours, but there's work involved. Luckily, it's work you love. Focus on the job in March and rake in the money in April. Upgrade your skills in May. Spend on your home in June and snuggle there in July. It's back to work in August. Commit to a change in September. You're jet-propelled in December. Write down your daydreams in February, then find a way to sell them.

To get the advantage, check the day's rating: 10 is the easiest day, 0 the most challenging.

ARIES (March 21-April 19) — Today is a 7 — You're tempted to set your worries aside and go for the gold, but a couple of your worries are well-founded, especially the one that involves money.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) — Today is a 6 — A friend lets you in on an excellent deal, but don't get too carried away. Use your good judgment to minimize risks. Meanwhile, take care of an older person's needs, especially the one who pays the bills.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) — Today is a 7 — You'd like to go, but you'd better stay, even if you're up against a difficult task. Once you get done, you'll feel better in ways that you can't even imagine.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) — Today is a 6 — There's so much money going back and forth, it may be hard to tell if you're winning or losing. Hold on to as much as you can. This is not a good day to give generously. Schedule that for Friday, instead.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) — Today is a 6 — You're so cute, you may think you can get away with anything. Your friends would like you to believe that, and so would some of your enemies. Be entertaining on your own time, not the boss'.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) — Today is a 5 — It looks like others are going to win the battle, but you have the edge. Use something you've learned from experience or just listen to an older person. Don't get involved in an argument that has nothing to do with you.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22) — Today is a 6 — Friends tell you what to do, but if it's going to cost you much, pass. Follow the advice of someone who's got your best interests at heart. If you can't get the job done as you've promised, call and let them know.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21) — Today is a 7 — You could be the lucky winner again. Your intuition is more accurate than the experts' opinions. Even a partner who's usually right could be wrong this time. Follow your hunch.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) — Today is a 6 — A romantic adventure could be ill-timed and ill-financed. Plan now and save the spree for the weekend. It will be even more successful if the trip you've planned is for business.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) — Today is a 6 — If a loved one is having fits, be patient. Throwing money at the problem won't help. Settle for dinner out and save the big expenditure for later. Your first whim is too expensive.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) — Today is a 5 — You're gung-ho to launch a new project, but hold off a little longer and plan more. Let somebody else's suggestion fall flat before you offer yours — don't worry, it won't take long.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20) — Today is a 5 — Expect a foul-up on a job today. Nobody knows what's supposed to be done or in what order. Watch for mistakes, and prevent them if you can.

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