

SPORTS BRIEFS

Jagr, Rangers bow to Ottawa

NEW YORK — Jaromir Jagr says he plans to play Thursday against the Islanders whether his mending leg injury is ready or not.

"It's the biggest game, probably, of the season," he said after missing his second straight game Monday. "If we lose, we'll be in big trouble. We already are in a big hole."

"We have to win Thursday. There is no other way."

Fact is, Jagr's cockeyed optimism to the contrary, it hardly matters. Having caved in yet again Monday against a superior opponent in a 4-1 Madison Square Garden loss to the Ottawa Senators, the Rangers already are playing out the string.

And other than a loss of such humiliating proportions that it finally will spur Jim Dolan to front-office remodeling action or cause GM/coach Glen Sather to begin a roster purge, Thursday's game against the Islanders will be no different from the 22 that will remain. Win, lose or draw, the Rangers will emerge from it with no realistic hope of breaking their six-season playoff drought.

— John Dellapina
New York Daily News

Timberwolves limp into second half

MINNEAPOLIS — The unofficial start of the season's second half begins Tuesday night for the Minnesota Timberwolves when the Phoenix Suns visit the Target Center.

The Wolves were considered a surprise in the first half, because they sit atop the powerful Midwest Division despite losing Troy Hudson, Michael Olowokandi and Wally Szczerbiak to injury.

While most teams in contention are working the phone lines to pull off a deal before Thursday's trading deadline, the Wolves are close to acquiring three key players without giving up anything in return. Coach Flip Saunders said Monday that all three will be a game-time decision. Of the three, Hudson (ankle) is the most likely to play Tuesday night because Olowokandi (knee) and Szczerbiak (foot) said after practice they probably won't play until Thursday against Sacramento.

"After 52 games, we have pretty much established who we are and how we are going to play," coach Flip Saunders said. "Now it's going to be a situation where Szczerbiak, Olowokandi and Hudson are going to have to adapt their play a little bit as far as how we are playing. I don't think that's going to be a problem."

— Mike Wells
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Phillies ready to outdo Atlanta to be NL East pennant winners

The addition of Billy Wagner and Eric Milton bolster an already strong Philadelphia staff

By Todd Zolecki
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Philadelphia Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins had just strolled through the clubhouse doors at the Carpenter Complex on Monday when Larry Bowa, seated at a locker around a corner, spotted him.

"What's up, dude?" Bowa said. Bowa has been in Clearwater for more than two weeks, and Rollins, like several Phillies, has arrived early for spring training. The two chatted for a few minutes — Bowa teased Rollins about his six-pack abs, which Rollins kept hidden under his shirt — before Bowa returned to talk about his team.

"I'm ready to get going," Bowa said. "I like spring training. I've always liked spring training."

Pitchers and catchers don't officially report until Thursday. Infielders and outfielders don't officially report until next week. But Bowa is ready to roll.

And why not? He has a talented team full of veterans, which means he

has a team with incredibly high expectations — certainly the highest since he became the Phillies manager in 2001. Many people expect the Phillies to finally snap Atlanta's stranglehold on the National League East, and many of those same people agree the Phillies have as good a chance as anybody to reach the World Series.

That's why Bowa has been tabbed as one of those big-league managers to watch, one of those managers that must win this year.

"I don't know where people get that from," said Bowa, shaking his head. "There's no pressure on me. Not at all. I try to win every game I play. I don't care if I'm playing Reading or Atlanta."

But Bowa clearly sees the difference between the team he inherited three springs ago and this one.

He needed to prod the 2001 team. This group is much different. Guys such as Jim Thome, Kevin Millwood, Billy Wagner and Eric Milton have been to the playoffs before. So, Bowa said, he can leave them alone.

"These guys are pretty self-motivated," Bowa said. "These are people that have been there."

That doesn't mean Bowa will kick back and relax. Hardly. He has some

things he wants to see before the Phillies break camp and head north to play Cleveland in an exhibition game on April 3 at Citizens Bank Park. He wants the Phils to:

Put the ball in play. The Phillies were fourth in the National League last year with 1,155 strikeouts and led the league with 1,220 runners left on base.

"We'll do more hit-and-running with some guys that have struck out a lot and get them to concentrate on hitting the ball in certain situations," he said. "I want to see a two-strike approach with some guys."

Hold runners better. Opponents had 82 percent success stealing bases, making the Phils the worst team in the league at preventing the steal. Runners stole 45 bases in 49 attempts with Kevin Millwood on the mound, also the worst mark in the league.

Bunt better. The Phillies finished last in the league in sacrifices with 46. Only two other teams had fewer than 61.

Run the bases better. "If you're going to take it to another level, besides talent, you have to execute," Bowa said.

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what balance can do. Rice won the national championship on the heels of three great starters: Jeff Niemann, Wade Townsend and Philip Humber. But the Owls also had a balanced offense and great team defense that rounded out the club.

That, my friends, is the way baseball teams should be built. And that's exactly what's wrong with shock value.

It serves as nothing more than an attention grabber, which is exactly what the Rodriguez deal is doing. While he adds an incredible talent and character player — so it's been said — he's also a piece that's too big for New York's puzzle.

Watch what happens when a piece either doesn't fit because of poor play on the field or it bends, much like an injury. While Oregon football had a successful 2003 season, imagine what could have been had everyone been healthy all season.

With Haloti Ngata, do the Ducks

lose to Minnesota in the Sun Bowl? With a completely healthy offensive line, does Utah keep the Oregon offense in check?

Now, what happens if Derek Jeter goes down with injury? The Yankees don't have a bona-fide third baseman after Drew Henson decided to go the NFL. They'd have to move Rodriguez to shortstop, opening up a hole at the hot corner.

How about the golden-aged Gary Sheffield? If he has a down year, get ready for the New York media to have a field day.

When the pundits talk about the lack of parity in the game, a golden example is the Yankees. Sure, they make it to the postseason, but recently, it has all been for nothing.


That's the problem with shock value. Still, when it comes to the Yankees, I'd take that any day of the week and twice on Sunday.

Contact the sports editor at hankhager@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



Michael Mulvey Dallas Morning News


Alex Rodriguez finds himself heading to New York after the Yankees completed a trade with Texas.

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Anjan Ghosh,
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