

Sandy Koufax

AFTER BLANKING the New York Mets one night this summer, Sandy Koufax, reeking of the hot poultice he had applied to his shoulder before the game, explained in the mellifluous tones of a matinee idol why he is baseball's best pitcher:

"A lot is mental. I had to learn how to throw the ball down the middle. I used to try to overwhelm the batter. I had to learn control."

Obviously, Koufax is a thinker. He is also a worrier. If he weren't both, his story would concern only another bonus baby who never made the grade. Instead, it's the story of how thinking made a promising athlete into a record-breaking star—and then, ironically, nearly wrecked his career.

"It was a 'B' game in Orlando (Fla.) during spring training two years ago," the Los Angeles Dodgers' lefty says in recalling what started him toward greatness. "Norm Sherry was catching me, and we had talked things over earlier."

Sandy had been worrying. This was his sixth season in the majors and, except for such flashes of brilliance as striking out 18 batters in one game, he was still a "brick thrower"—a fastballer with no control and, hence, little future.

"What you want to do," said Norm Sherry, a .200 hitter but a slugger in the brain circuit, "is let up a little. Don't force your fast ball. Use some strength in control."

In that "B" game, Koufax followed the advice with success for a while, then the temptation to let go with all his power became too great. "I walked three in a row," Koufax says. "Just like old times. Norm came out and said to let up. I told him a fast ball was my best pitch. 'Try it my way,' he said. I did and found I could throw fast without total effort and still control the ball."

That was a sorry lesson for batters. In 1961, Koufax won 18 games and broke the National League strike-out record. In 1962, he got off to an incredible start: by All-Star time he was 14-4, had pitched a no-hitter, and again struck out 18 in one game.

SANDY COULD NOW revel in the rewards of star status. He'd never been the hungry kid of baseball legend, of course. His father was an attorney in Brooklyn, and Sandy lived the good life. In 1954, Dodger scout Al Campanis shook hands with Mr. Koufax, and the 19-year-old boy had a \$14,000 bonus.

One reason Mr. Koufax signed his son with Brooklyn was that the youth could live at home. But owner Walter O'Malley subsequently moved his team to Los Angeles, so Mr. and Mrs. Koufax packed up and moved with Sandy. They bought a new home—but Sandy purchased one of his own in Studio City, in which he installed hi-fi stereo, an impressive library, and contemporary paintings. During the season, he had little time to tool around Hollywood with beauty-contest winners in his bronze-hued auto, but during the off season he cut a romantic figure.



Baseball's Comeback of the Year

Last year doctors considered amputating his pitching finger; this year he's using it to break pitching records

By JOHN KENT

With all this, a worrier-thinker naturally starts worrying and thinking. The thought that haunts all pitchers arose: what if, while batting, I get hit on my bread-and-butter arm? Koufax came up with a bright solution. By batting lefty, his precious left arm would always be away from a pitched ball. So Koufax, normally a right-handed batter, switched. In this awkward stance, a pitch by Earl Francis of the Pittsburgh Pirates jammed his left palm against the bat. Sandy didn't think too much about it—after all, it wasn't the arm.

It's a fair guess, though, that this minor mishap caused what sports writers refer to as "the mysterious Raynaud phenomenon," which the articulate Koufax doesn't think mysterious at all: "A blow or trauma simply caused a blood clot in the fleshy part of the palm, cutting off circulation to the finger."

In midseason 1962, when Sandy appeared en route to several records, the index finger went numb and, to lesser degrees, his thumb and forefinger. Later, the pitching finger turned purple from broken blood vessels. Doctors considered amputating it at one time, but anticoagulants reduced the clot. Koufax was through for the season, however—and so were the Dodgers, who then blew a shoo-in pennant. Hot stovers added an ominous afterthought: "Koufax?—he's through for good!"

DURING AN agonizing winter, Koufax never showed that the whispers bothered him. He added to his \$35,000 salary by touring Las Vegas and Miami Beach night clubs with Milton Berle. On stage, he laughed off remarks about his precious pinky; off stage he would angrily cut off questions about it.

Spring training this year added to the pressure. In 18 innings, he allowed 11 runs. When it came time for his season opener in Chicago May 11, Sandy hadn't completed a game since the previous July 4. The temperature in Wrigley Field was near freezing, and even the warming pad Sandy sticks his hand into between innings couldn't relieve the numbness for long. But Koufax was determined to make this the test. He went out and beat the Cubs, 2-1, striking out 10.

A month later, he doused the last doubter by pitching a no-hitter against the champion San Francisco Giants. In early August, he was approaching the 20-win mark, had nine shutouts, more than 200 strike-outs, and a very low earned-run average around 2.00. "I wasn't worried about my spring trouble," he said. "I start slow."

But later in the season, when he was sure he had his comeback cinched, he revealed what he really felt in those troublesome days. "I was afraid to get mad at what happened to me. I felt like Job, but I couldn't get angry at anybody but the Lord, and if I did that I was afraid things would get worse. So I took what came."

Does he think the ailment could recur?

"Listen," he says, patient now with questioners, "it was an injury—not a disease. It won't come back." Then he pauses, half worried, half thoughtful. "Not unless I bat lefty against Francis again—and that I'm not about to do!"