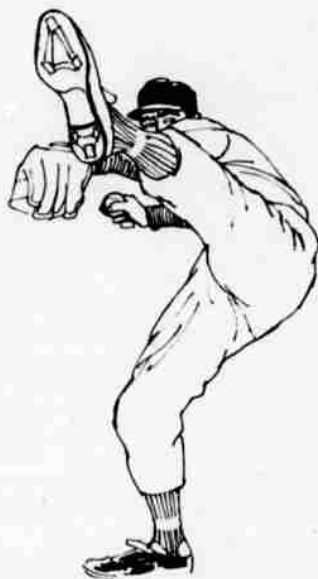




WHO ARE BASEBALL'S BEST?

Here are the strengths and weaknesses of the top stars at each position in the majors.

by Bill Furlong

IN THEIR inner councils, baseball's hard-headed businessmen ignore the lyricism of the sport pages and concentrate on the cold facts: what a player can do and what he can't do. For the front-office men live by one great truism: all players have faults—one slugger is a poor fielder, another is an off-the-field playboy, a third is burdened with personal problems.

The question is when and where the assets outweigh the liabilities. On paper and in their minds, baseball's businessmen constantly study the balance sheet of player potential. As the 1959 season opens, all the veteran players are undergoing close scrutiny against the day when a rookie might beat them out. Here is an insider's frank appraisal of the top men at each position in the major leagues:

National League



FIRST BASE

Stan Musial, St. Louis Cardinals.

Age—38. Years in majors—17.

1958 batting average—.337

Major league career average—.340.

Now aging, Musial still has a great eye and fine batting judgment. Home-run power seems to be fading slightly, but he still gets on base with as much consistency as anybody in the league. A great hitter but not a great pinch hitter. By experience an outfielder, Musial has never developed great fielding skills around first base. He lacks range in chasing balls. His arm is weak. He is not an exceptional base runner.

Best of the rest: Gil Hodges, Los Angeles Dodgers; Orlando Cepeda, San Francisco Giants.



SECOND BASE

Bill Mazerowski, Pittsburgh Pirates.

Age—22. Years in majors—3.

1958 batting average—.275.

Major league career average—.272.

Scrappy, aggressive, just developing his great potential. As fielder, has great range and the fastest, surest hands in the league; very skilled in turning tough grounders into double-play balls. Batting may have been hampered by bringing him up to the majors too soon. Now is cagey hitter; pitch that gets him out one day won't the next. Pitchers learning to fear him as he develops into a good, though not great, home-run hitter.

Best of the rest: Johnny Temple, Cincinnati Redlegs.



SHORTSTOP

Ernie Banks, Chicago Cubs.

Age—28. Years in majors—6.

1958 batting average—.313.

Major league career average—.293.

By using wrist, not arm power, Banks became one of greatest sluggers in the game. Uses very light bat (31 ounces) and swings it like a buggy whip. Has unusually sharp eyes (20/13 compared with normal 20/20). Hits liners, not long flies; led both leagues in homers last year as well as in total runs produced. Not exceptionally good fielder. Tends to play position flat-footed and thus fails to get jump on the ball. Has uncertain arm. Only player in league to play every game last season and quite visibly tired toward the end.

Best of the rest: Roy McMillan, Cincinnati Redlegs; Dick Groat, Pittsburgh Pirates.

American League



FIRST BASE

Vic Power, Cleveland Indians.

Age—27. Years in majors—5.

1958 batting average—.312.

Major league career average—.294.

Nimble, flashy fielder who likes to showboat at times. Has weak arm. Has considerable power; ranked just behind Mantle and Jensen in producing runs last year. Very cagey batter; particularly with men on base.

Best of the rest: Bill Skowron, New York Yankees; Gail Harris, Detroit Tigers.



SECOND BASE

Nelson Fox, Chicago White Sox.

Age—31. Years in majors—12.

1958 batting average—.300.

Major league career average—.299.

Can't run, throw, field, or hit with power—but is a superb player. Used brains and determination to overcome all deficits and become one of most valuable players in the league. Has good range in the field; plays the hitters shrewdly; chips and chops out his hits; is strictly a singles hitter (but last year led league in total hits—with 187—for the fourth time). Level-headed off the field; inspirational leader on the field. Has missed only one game in four or five seasons.

Best of the rest: Pete Runnels, Boston Red Sox; Frank Bolling, Detroit Tigers.



SHORTSTOP

Luis Aparicio, Chicago White Sox.

Age—25. Years in majors—3.

1958 batting average—.266.

Major league career average—.263.

An effortlessly brilliant fielder who makes spectacular plays seem routine. Goes to right with great skill, thus helping to cover one of White Sox' traditional weak spots at third base. Has great range, steady and sure hands in fielding grounders. Easy man to pitch to, largely because he fancies himself with some slugging ability (but got only two home runs last season). Would do better to choke up on the bat more to punch out hits.

Best of the rest: Gil McDougald, New York Yankees.