

ROCKY COLAVITO

Baseball's Glamour Boy



When Rocky Colavito stretches his muscles, women sigh and enemy pitchers cringe.

Can Detroit beat out the Yankees this year? Maybe not, but here's a fans' favorite who will make it a good show

By JACK RYAN

PERHAPS THE BEST THING that happened to American League baseball in recent years was a Christmas card. It happened this way:

Four men huddled around the living room of a Bronx, N. Y., apartment. Baseball scout Mike McNally of the Cleveland Indians and Dominic Colavito were bargaining heatedly; the other two were silent. One was Rocco (Rocky) Domenico Colavito, an awkward, muscular 17-year-old; the other, his stocky iceman father.

McNally was offering a \$3,000 bonus for young Rocco's unproved diamond talents. Brother Dom was demanding an extra \$500 for the kid brother he had helped raise after their mother died. But there was another reason for holding out. Only 20 blocks away was Yankee Stadium, and most of his life Rocky had dreamed of playing where he had studied every movement of his boyhood idol, Joe DiMaggio.

The Yankees, however, hadn't topped Cleveland's offer, and negotiations dragged on until the head of the Colavito clan grew impatient. In Italian, he asked Rocky a question. Rocky nodded. Then the father spoke curtly to Dom who, after a moment's hesitation, turned to McNally. "Okay, we'll sign."

Later, McNally asked why the sudden change. "Pop asked if you were the scout who sent us a Christmas card," Dom replied, a little sourly. "When he learned you were, he just said, 'Sign.' We did."

Could the American League have survived a Yankee outfield of Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris—and Rocky Colavito? Together they've hit 463 home runs in the last four years. The leader?—Rocky Colavito with 159.

As the '63 season opens this week, the most likely challenger to the Yankee pennant habit is Detroit, where Rocky nowadays exhibits his handsome profile and Adonis physique to the "ohs" and "ahs" (and some boos) of one of baseball's oddest followings. His slugging in 1961 (45 homers) almost upset the Yankees, and although he kept up the pace last year (37 homers), injuries to other Tiger stars left him shouldering an impossible burden. In 1963, he thinks it will be different: "Everybody looks great. I know I feel good."

Whatever the Tigers do, one thing is certain. Durable Rocky probably will go on "feeling good," and his Little League enthusiasm, body beautiful, and circus antics will draw fans—up to 1,500 extra a game, according to Detroit estimates. The reason is that Rocky is a baseball rarity, a glamour athlete who is exciting as hero or goat.

LAST YEAR, for example, he thumped across left field with elephantine strides as a foul fly seemingly arched beyond his reach—but no! With unexpected grace, his flat feet propelled him under the ball, and his glove swooped out for the catch. As fans cheered, the hero tripped on the bullpen rubber, the ball bounced loose, and Minneapolis scored the game-winning run.

No matter. Not long after, against his once-beloved Yankees, he came up with six singles and a triple in 10 at-bats in a 22-inning game. In 1959, after a slump (he calls them "slackening offs"), he pounded four homers in one game in Baltimore's vast stadium, where no team had hit more than three in a game before.

Rocky has provided a Hollywood show since he

came up with Cleveland in 1956 and entered the batting box, clawing dirt like an enraged bull, stretching his 33-ounce bat behind his shoulders so biceps and shoulder muscles danced, then peering malevolently into the deep recesses of the pitcher's mind.

Delighted teen-agers formed half a dozen fan clubs (motto: *Socko Rocco*), Cleveland attendance rose from 600,000 to 1,000,000, fans sent him religious medals during slumps, and Rocky happily signed autographs by the hour, forming rowdy teen-agers into lines like a stern Scoutmaster and making each one say, "Thank you."

Coming up against the likes of Frank Lane, the Cleveland general manager, and Bobby Bragan, the manager, must have been a shock to Rocky. They liked him personally. "I wish I had his disposition," said frantic Frank Lane. "Always happy!" But as a ballplayer—no. Lane held onto him mainly for attendance purposes, and Bragan seemed to regard him as a Bronx hayseed just right for playing jokes on.

DESPITE new slogans from his fan clubs ("Don't Knock the Rock"), Lane sent his erratic slugger to Detroit in 1960 for Harvey Kuenn, a steady single hitter.

"I don't know why he did that," Rocky said in some bewilderment upon leaving the city which once voted him Man of the Year. "It sorta surprises you, huh?"

Detroit frowned on such nonsense as fan clubs, and in general Rocky's wide-eyed boyishness found itself blacked out in a big-business atmosphere. The 1960 season was his most dismal (35 home runs and a .249 average), but where other players would have heard nothing but jeers, Rocky's irrepressible gee-whiz attitude toward baseball and life won him a loyal following. Fan groups assembled in left field, good-natured teasing greeted his batting gyrations, and his teammates learned to steel themselves against the bone-crushing handshakes he dispenses after each homer. By 1961 Rocky had found a "home" again and the loyal following he needs.

Rocky's real home is a suburban brick split-level in Temple, Pa., where he lives with his wife of eight years, Carmen Perrotti Colavito, and their children, Rocco, 7, and Marisa, 5. The Colavitos met while he was playing with Reading, Pa. After a brief try at big-city living, they decided to settle in Carmen's home town because the Bronx boy was convinced "trees and space are better for kids."

During the season, Rocky sees his family when the Tigers visit New York. Carmen and the youngsters move in with uncles, aunts, or Grandpa, and family and friends have an exuberant reunion which swells to hundreds at Yankee Stadium. Once a near riot broke out when a drunk annoyed Carmen and Mr. Colavito. The clan moved in from all directions—including Rocky, who rushed into the stands from left field and was tossed out of the game.

Every year—and 1963 is no exception—the Bronx Colavitos have been planning a mass migration to Tiger Stadium for a World Series and a family celebration on behalf of Rocky. Of course, this would have been more convenient and more probable if Rocky had signed with the Yankees in the first place, Christmas card or not. Has he any regrets?

"Naw," says Rocky. "They wanted me as a pitcher, and pitchers don't get to play every day."