

30 is something

Rangers' run total is highest in major league baseball since 1897

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Sports, Page D1

By Dave Sessions

* Texas scores 30 runs, a modern-era, major-league record, to start a twin bill.

BALTIMORE — No one will ever confuse the 2007 Rangers with the 1927 Yankees, but Texas put on an unlikely offensive display Wednesday night that surpassed anything Murderer's Row — or for that matter, any team in 110 years — ever achieved in a single game.

With a 30-3 victory over the Orioles in the first half of a doubleheader, the Rangers set a modern-era record for most runs scored by one team in a game. They easily trumped the previous club record, also set against the Orioles, of 26 runs in a 1996 contest.

"We're still shaking our heads," center fielder Marlon Byrd said between games, before Texas eked out a 9-7 victory in the nightcap. "No one's ever seen anything like that before, and you won't see it again for a long time.... Today was just a freak of nature."

In the first game, Byrd was 2-for-5 with four runs scored, a grand slam and four RBI. He had a relatively quiet night, considering six of his teammates had three hits or more, three had at least four hits, and one, left fielder David Murphy, had five hits.

The bottom two hitters in the Rangers' order, catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia and infielder Ramon Vazquez, hit two home runs apiece and drove in seven runs each. Even Travis Metcalf, a defensive replacement for Michael Young who was called up from Triple A earlier in the day, went 1-for-1 with a grand slam.

"I've never seen anything like it," manager Ron Washington said. "...When the faucet is on, you want it to stay on, you don't ever want to cut it."

It was more like a fire hose, as Texas pounded out 29 hits. Even more amazing was the fact that the onslaught came from an offense which has hit just .247 since July 1 and struck out 30 times combined in the two games before Wednesday.

"When you face guys like [Johan] Santana and [Erik] Bedard back to back, they can make anybody look like they're in a terrible slump," Washington said.

Saltalamacchia called Wednesday's result "karma" and said, "Every one of us is going to remember it, obviously.... It was unbelievable."

Washington, who has watched his team languish at the bottom of the American League in batting and sink 16 games below .500 before Wednesday, didn't realize that no team had scored 30 runs since 1897, when the Chicago Colts scored 36 against the Louisville Colonels on June 29, 1897.

"We set a record on the good side of baseball," Washington said.

For a little more historical perspective, consider that Babe Ruth, who was born a block away from Oriole Park at Camden Yards, was 2 years old the last time any big league club hung up 30 runs in a single game.

Thirty extra runs also would have been enough to turn the Rangers' last 10 losses into wins if divvied up in appropriate portions.

Third-base coach Don Wakamatsu waved so many runners home that he joked between games that he "may need some ice" for his left shoulder, but Wakamatsu also spent the last few innings giving the stop sign to every runner he could as Texas tried not to run up the score.

The Orioles relievers did a fine job of that themselves, though. Compared to the relievers who followed him, Orioles starter Daniel Cabrera was relatively solid, allowing six earned runs on nine hits in five innings. Brian Burres allowed eight runs on eight hits while recording only two outs in the sixth; Rob Bell surrendered seven runs on five hits and three walks in the seventh and eighth, when he pitched to seven Rangers batters without retiring a single one. Paul Shuey gave up nine runs, seven earned, in the final two innings.

"I'm just so happy that we weren't on the other end of it," Washington said.

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MLB INSIDER

Say hey, legends, the day has come to quit

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Sports, Page D2

By Dave Sessions

* One thing unites everyone in baseball: someday, it's time to go.

The Astros' Craig Biggio has been hit by 285 pitches in his career, but perhaps the most painful thing he'll have to do is to walk away from the game. It was an equally tough decision for Royals manager Buddy Bell, who played half a season with Biggio in his rookie year in 1988.

In 1978, a season before Bell made his Rangers debut, Mike Hargrove played his last game for Texas. He was the Rangers' first baseman, playing alongside an outfielder named Bobby Bonds, whose 14-year-old son was a skinny kid a year away from JV baseball.

Now, after Barry Bonds hits home run No. 756, when the spotlight fades, he'll be a 43-year-old whose legs are shot. At least Bonds is still five years younger than Julio Franco, whose quest to play until he's 50 took a wrong turn when the Braves acquired Mark Teixeira, a man young enough to be Franco's son. Franco could return to Atlanta in September if he isn't claimed by another team first.

How long has Franco been in the game? He was the sixth batter Roger Clemens ever faced. Clemens turns 45 on Saturday, but his last start at 44 was instantly forgettable: the Yankees starter gave up eight White Sox runs on nine hits, without a single strikeout, in just 1 2/3 innings Thursday.

Clemens had already been around awhile by the time he gave up the 86th home run of his career. To "The Rocket," it was just another pitch he'd like to have back, another ball that cleared Boston's Green Monster, but it meant more to 20-year-old Sammy Sosa, who sprinted around the bases after his first major-league home run.

Six hundred three homers later, the Rangers' Sosa heard the news Wednesday no veteran ever wants to hear. A kid from Triple A was taking his place in the lineup and Sosa would be relegated to the bench for the rest of the season, with only the occasional start or pinch-hit presenting itself. Considering the Rangers have no place for Sosa, and considering no team was willing to trade for him, Sosa seems to have little chance of catching Willie Mays for fourth on the home run list.

Mays hit 660 homers, the last nearly 34 years ago, on Aug. 17, 1973, as the oldest position player in baseball at the time at 42. By October, in the '73 World Series, the man whom many considered the greatest center fielder of all time had been reduced to a stumbling, falling, error-making shadow of himself.

Mays retired after that series, as Biggio and Bell will after this season, as Hargrove did a month ago, as Bonds, Franco, Clemens and Sosa should consider doing when this season ends.

There's no shame in walking away when it's time. Years before he retired, Mays foreshadowed what he and every other baseball player must someday realize:

"An old ballplayer can take the aches and pains," Mays said, "and he can take the pressure and the mental strain. But he can't take them both together. Baseball is a young man's game."

Time to go?

A look at five players over 40 for whom retirement wouldn't be a bad idea after this season:

Julio Franco, 48: Cut by Braves this week, hit .221 total

Roger Clemens, turns 45 Saturday: 3-6 record despite absurd salary

Randy Johnson, 43: Had season-ending back surgery

Barry Bonds, 43: What happens after No. 756?

Steve Finley, 42: Hit .181 for Rockies until they cut him

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A Brave new world

Rangers say goodbye to Tex, hello to four potential stars

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Sports, Page D1

By Dave Sessions

* The blockbuster deal, which also includes Ron Mahay, will be announced today.

CLEVELAND — The Rangers will spell "Texas" without "Tex" from now on.

In a blockbuster deal that seemed destined to happen before this afternoon's trade deadline, the Rangers traded first baseman Mark Teixeira and reliever Ron Mahay to the Atlanta Braves for rookie catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia and three prospects, according to team sources.

Although Rangers general manager Jon Daniels would not comment Monday on any potential deals, the trade is expected to be announced this afternoon pending medical evaluations.

Losing Teixeira will leave a hole in the Rangers' lineup. Teixeira, 27, was selected fifth overall in the 2001 draft by Texas and reached the majors two years later. He quickly became one of the Rangers' most consistent and productive players, hitting .283 with 153 home runs and 499 RBI and playing in a club-record 507 consecutive games. Teixeira also won two Gold Gloves with the club.

"He's a premier player in the big leagues, he's a good teammate, he plays hard," Rangers third baseman Hank Blalock said of Teixeira. "That'll be missed. The Braves got a great player."

Teixeira could be a free agent after next season, and the Rangers feared they would have little chance to extend his contract, expecting him to spurn them for a chance to go on the open market.

Asked what the move meant to the direction of the Rangers franchise, Blalock wasn't sure.

"I have no idea," he said. "We'll see what the GM says."

What Daniels is likely to say is that the Rangers traded for prospects who were considered the best the Braves had. They also weighed offers from the Angels, Dodgers and Diamondbacks.

In addition to Saltalamacchia, Texas received three minor-leaguers: shortstop Elvis Andrus, pitcher Neftali Feliz and a player to be named later, likely pitcher Matt Harrison if the Rangers determine his recent shoulder soreness isn't a major concern.

Saltalamacchia, 22, was ranked as the Braves' top prospect by Baseball America before the season. Andrus, an 18-year-old Class A shortstop, was ranked Atlanta's No. 2 prospect, and Harrison, a 22-year-old Double A lefty, was No. 3. Feliz, a 19-year-old right-hander from the Dominican Republic, is still in rookie ball.

The Braves, hoping to bolster their bullpen, wanted Rangers lefty C.J. Wilson but settled on Mahay, 36, who pitched five seasons with Texas and has a 2.77 ERA in 28 appearances this season.

Saltalamacchia is expected to join the Rangers in Cleveland for their three-game series starting tonight.

A switch-hitter, Saltalamacchia made his major-league debut on May 2 and hit .284 with four home runs and 12 RBI for the Braves this season. He caught in 25 games, played first in 14 games and was the designated hitter in two games.

Where Saltalamacchia fits in the Rangers' plans remains to be seen, but all indications are that he will get a decent amount of at-bats this season, whether at catcher or first base.

Rangers catcher Gerald Laird said he wasn't bothered by the club's bringing in a new player who could see some time behind the plate.

"I know I'm the catcher," Laird said. "I thought I've done a pretty good job defensively, and now I'm starting to swing the bat a lot better, so I'm not really worried about anything. I know they want to bring him over here to play first. We'll see what happens."

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Sammy joins the club

Sosa's milestone homer part of 7-3 victory against former team

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By Dave Sessions

* For someone who has hit 600 home runs, few have meant as much to Sammy Sosa as this one.

ARLINGTON — Sammy Sosa hopped across the plate Wednesday night just as he had so many times before, but there was no way for him to pretend this was another ordinary home run.

As Sosa's 600th homer soared toward the Rangers' bullpen in right-center field, the 38-year-old slugger lifted his right arm, pointed his index finger to the sky, pumped his fist and clapped his hands.

"It reminded me of '98, when I hit 62," Sosa said. "It was a great day. I feel great because you don't see a milestone like that every day. To be coming a long way and doing that, and all the support I'm getting, it's unexplainable, but it's a good feeling."

Sosa's teammates congratulated him at the plate, and Sosa waved and blew kisses to the crowd of 37,564 at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington. They brought Sosa back out of the dugout for more heart-taps and kisses with chants of "Sammy! Sammy!"

Sosa's solo homer off Cubs starter Jason Marquis — who, ironically, wears the No. 21 that Sosa wore when he hit 545 of his homers for the Cubs — was the highlight of the Rangers' 7-3 victory, and perhaps their entire season.

"I honestly got a chill through my body, just to be a part of it, to be in the same lineup," catcher Gerald Laird said.

Michael Young, who hit ahead of Sosa in the lineup, said it was one of the most amazing moments he had seen as a Ranger.

"It's a culmination of tons of great seasons," Young said. "I couldn't be happier for the guy. It really is an incredible achievement."

The Rangers unfurled a banner in center field that read, "Congratulations, Sammy!" and listed the five members of the 600 Club: Hank Aaron, Barry Bonds, Babe Ruth, Willie Mays and Sosa.

"It's a great joy to be there with the greatest," Sosa said. "When I'm leaving this world, at least people are going to remember me."

Sosa had homered against every team but the Cubs until Wednesday. That he was able to achieve the milestone against his former team, with the full attention of the Windy City, was a bonus for Sosa.

Sosa seemed most proud of the fact that he returned to achieve the milestone even though he was out of baseball last season. He thanked the Rangers for giving him a chance to return to the game.

"People in baseball know that I was retired for one year," Sosa said. "To put everything together and come back? That's big."

The next batter, Frank Catalanotto, hit what had to be most anticlimactic home run in Rangers history, and the Rangers took advantage of three Cubs errors on their way to victory.

Rangers starter Kameron Loe turned in a second consecutive strong outing, pitching 6 2/3 innings and allowing three runs for the win. On an ordinary night, Loe would have been the hero. But it was no ordinary night. And Sosa once again showed that he is no ordinary player.

"Everything clicked," Sosa said. "All that was incredible — I'm never going to forget it."

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Uh-oh! It's a big no-no

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By Dave Sessions

* It's not perfect, but Mark Buehrle goes 27 up, 27 down against the Rangers in a masterful no-hitter.

CHICAGO — It was not, by definition, a perfect game, but it's hard to get any closer to perfection than Chicago White Sox pitcher Mark Buehrle's no-hit gem against the Rangers on Wednesday night.

In a 6-0 victory over Texas, Buehrle faced the minimum 27 batters, walking Sammy Sosa in the fifth inning but picking him off for the next out.

The left-hander threw major league baseball's first no-hitter of 2007 and only the third against the Rangers in their 36 years.

"I never thought in a million years I would throw a no-hitter," Buehrle said. "It hasn't sunk in."

Buehrle might have pitched for a million years without giving up a hit to the anemic Rangers, who are hitting .221 as a team, next to last in the major league (and leading only the White Sox).

Buehrle would have lasted awhile against anybody, though.

"Good team, bad team, it didn't matter who he was facing," Rangers first baseman Mark Teixeira said. "He was going to pitch well."

For the Rangers, Kevin Millwood's start was all but inconsequential.

Jim Thome's third-inning, solo homer off Millwood was the deciding run; Jermaine Dye's fifth-inning grand slam merely made Buehrle sit in the dugout a few minutes longer

"I don't think I pitched very well today; I was definitely frustrated about that," Millwood said. "But to be able to sit there and watch [Buehrle] do what he did — I don't know that it made it easier, but it was a pleasure to watch."

Thome homered again in the seventh, off Joaquin Benoit, for his third home run in two days against the Rangers.

But the night was all about Buehrle.

He struck out eight batters, threw only 106 pitches and hardly got into trouble at all, save for a few hard-hit balls that the Chicago defense negated.

Hank Blalock had the Rangers' best at-bats of the night.

He hit a ball about 350 feet to right field that Jermaine Dye caught by reaching over the wall in the second inning.

In the fifth, Blalock's ground ball to the hole on the right side might have snuck through had second baseman Tadahito Iguchi still been positioned for the double play.

But Sammy Sosa had just been picked off, and Iguchi made a diving stop to his left on Blalock's grounder.

"It just had the makings of a no-hitter," Blalock said. "He was on from the get-go ... and they made some nice defensive plays."

Third baseman Joe Crede made the most dazzling of those plays in the third inning, diving to the line to grab a Jerry Hairston Jr. grounder.

Crede's throw barely beat Hairston's headfirst slide into first. Hairston was unhappy with the call and was ejected, erasing one of the two Rangers in the game batting over .300.

Hairston voiced his displeasure with the call to first-base umpire James Hoye, then threw his helmet as he walked off, prompting Hoye to eject him and take away one of two Rangers in the game hitting over .300.

"Obviously, I did [feel I was safe]," Hairston said.

Sosa managed to draw the lone walk, but he didn't get more than a few feet away from first before Buehrle erased him from the base paths.

"Everything was working for him, because he got me at first base, too," Sosa said. "That happens when everything is going your way."

The fact that Sosa's walk and Blalock's almost-not-0-for-3 night were the Rangers' best individual performances said something about Buehrle's mastery.

Teixeira struck out twice, the last in the eighth inning looking at a cutter that nipped the outside of the plate.

Buehrle used the cut fastball to great effect against right-handers and wound up striking out three of the final six batters.

So the Rangers' struggles at the plate continue, but, for once, they have someone to blame but themselves.

"We've seen Buehrle where he had good stuff, but this is the best we've ever seen him," Teixeira said. "He made no mistakes tonight.... I'd rather get no-hit by a guy that had great stuff than get beat 7-6 by a guy we should have scored 10 runs on."

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How will it end? Rangers bank on happily ever after for Sosa, Gagné

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By Dave Sessions

* Former superstars Sammy Sosa and Eric Gagné could enjoy classic comebacks or simply exit stage left.

The Dominican Republic and Quebec are separated by thousands of miles and dozens of degrees on the thermometer. Culturally, they have about as much in common as flip-flops and ice skates.

But those differences don't matter to Sammy Sosa and Eric Gagné, because both came to Texas from the same place: that awkward spot on the road between past greatness and a graceful exit from the game.

They were in baseball's version of purgatory in 2006. Sosa didn't play at all. Gagné pitched two innings in the majors. Both were unwilling to leave it at that.

"That's when you realize your passion for the game; you realize you miss it," said Gagné, who will be activated from the disabled list and is expected to pitch in tonight's game against the Seattle Mariners. "I could have retired and gone home and enjoyed my family. I never considered it. I had to come back and play."

When Gagné finally takes the hill for the Rangers, he'll officially throw his sweat-stained, weather-beaten hat into the ring as a candidate for baseball's Comeback Player of the Year award, alongside Sosa.

If Sosa, 38, and Gagné, 31, manage to recapture some of their former success — which is by no means guaranteed — then the Rangers will likely have the award winner and the runner-up.

And perhaps they'll have the Executive of the Year in general manager Jon Daniels, who will be proven prescient for signing the pair during the off-season.

Does Daniels think he's gambling with Sosa and Gagné?

"Absolutely," Daniels said. "What makes it more palatable is when the player is as motivated as these two guys are. Motivation is the No. 1 thing. Why are they coming back? What are their goals?"

Daniels said he was satisfied that both players wanted to win as badly as they wanted to re-establish themselves, and the general manager gave both players incentive-laden, one-year contracts.

Gagné's base salary is \$6 million; Sosa will make \$500,000 at a minimum. Both could earn sizable bonuses for various achievements — including winning Comeback Player of the Year.

Of course, saves and home runs matter more to the Rangers than trophies. And although nobody has ever had more 50-homer seasons than Sosa, or more 50-save seasons than Gagné, it's probably unrealistic to expect either one to do it again.

Gagné was once the most dependable closer in baseball history, converting 84 consecutive save opportunities from 2002-04. But he lost almost all of the past two seasons, not to mention the past two weeks, while recovering from elbow and back injuries.

"It's been hard, it's been long, it's been frustrating," Gagné said. "There's been some setbacks, too. I've been hurt for two years, and just to come back and show that I can do it again... that's what it's all about."

Sosa has more home runs than anyone not named Aaron, Bonds, Ruth or Mays. But he wants to add a fitting coda to an extraordinary career that fizzled quietly in Baltimore in 2005, when he hit .221 with 14 homers. Sosa never officially retired, but he didn't swing a bat for anyone, either.

"At one point, I thought that I wasn't coming back," Sosa said. "But for a lot of reasons, I'm here. It's a good team, a good manager, everything's good."

"My main focus is to win games for this team. There are a lot of things I still have to accomplish."

Sosa hasn't accomplished much in seven games, hitting .143 with one home run. Gagné, at least until tonight, hasn't accomplished anything.

So for now, even Daniels isn't 100 percent sure either player can blaze the comeback trail.

"Ask me in about a month," he said.

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Ranger for life? Young commits to stay for next seven seasons

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By Dave Sessions

* Michael Young could have been a free agent in two years but wanted to help Texas become a winner.

SURPRISE, Ariz. — Michael Young is ready to be the face of the Rangers' franchise, but only because he believes the franchise is ready to win.

The Rangers will announce today a five-year, \$80 million contract extension that would keep their shortstop in Texas through the 2013 season.

"It's the only organization I played for in the big leagues, so it means a lot," Young said Thursday afternoon. "There was a commitment on both sides to get a deal like this done."

When the extension kicks in in 2009, Young will quadruple his \$4 million salary. He'll make \$5 million next season.

If Young, 30, continues the pace he has set over the past five seasons, by the end of his new contract he would be the franchise leader in most major offensive categories, including games played, at-bats, runs and hits.

Young, a three-time All-Star, the 2005 AL batting champion and the 2006 All-Star Game MVP, will also be expected to be the Rangers' favorite poster boy much like the Stars' Mike Modano or the Mavs' Dirk Nowitzki.

"I'm going to do whatever has to be done to make people aware that this is a great team," Young said. "The responsibility they've given me is not only playing hard and winning games."

But the last responsibility is the one Young takes most seriously. In Young's six seasons with the club, the Rangers have had only one winning season and have never finished higher than third place in the AL West.

Young believes that will change. He is encouraged by the atmosphere in camp under new manager Ron Washington and by the team's recent off-season moves.

But Young still took a gamble in committing to a team that has had little success in his tenure. He could have been a sought-after free agent after the 2008 season.

"Every player is at least curious about becoming a free agent — who wouldn't be?" Young said. "But I felt like this organization, this team, was due to start winning. We've had some rough times, but it's definitely in a turnaround. I wanted to be here for it.

"If I had signed with somebody else and the Rangers won the World Series, my wife would probably kick me out of the house. I'd be miserable."

The Rangers gambled, too. Young will be 37 at the end of the contract, which is the second-largest in Rangers history behind Alex Rodriguez's 10-year, \$252 million deal in 2000.

"It absolutely is a leap of faith on their part, and that's something I appreciate," said Young, who has averaged 215 hits and 160 games played over the past four seasons. "The fact that I've been durable over the past few years maybe alleviated any concerns they had. There's no doubt in my mind I'm going to be healthy and productive over the course of this contract."

The Rangers have not commented on the contract extension other than general manager Jon Daniels' saying, "I'm optimistic." Owner Tom Hicks is planning to fly to Arizona this morning so he can attend the first spring training game, and presumably Young's news conference.

After that, Young will take the field for the Rangers again, something he plans to do many more times over the next seven seasons. Young was adamant about ending negotiations before they became a distraction.

"I'm glad it's over," Young said. "I'm not going to sit here and say I haven't been thinking about it; that'd be a lie. But when I get to the field every day, there are a bunch of guys out there who are only concerned about 2007. It's nice to get it behind me and get back to work."

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NHL INSIDER

Secrets are hurting hockey

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By Dave Sessions

* If disclosing players' injuries works for the far more successful NFL, why can't the NHL follow suit?

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Let's say your knee has been hurting all week, so you finally decide you can't bear it anymore and you go to the doctor.

He gives you a thorough examination, and just when you can't wait any longer to know what's wrong, he tells you.

You have a lower-body injury.

In the real world, this would certainly result in an unpaid doctor bill, and perhaps even a malpractice suit. In the NHL, this is perfectly sufficient, and fans don't need to know any more information about their favorite players' injuries.

The NHL does not have an injury reporting system the way the NFL does, and there are a few obvious reasons for that.

First, the NFL's system is a good way to keep unsavory things from happening in the gambling world, where inside information on an injury could result in millions of dollars changing hands.

Second, the NFL just gets it. America's most popular professional league understands that it's impossible to ask fans to devote their finances and hearts to a game that keeps them at arm's length.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that people who spend \$200 on a Mike Modano jersey and wear it to every game might want to know what's wrong with him when he misses even a single contest.

Historically in the NHL, injury details are kept secret during the playoffs because players could target opponents' weaknesses. If someone has a wrist injury, the thinking goes, his foes will slash him there.

Yet this doesn't appear to be a rampant problem in the NFL, which is no less physical and brutal in the trenches.

With the lack of a standard injury reporting system in the NHL, some teams have begun to apply playoff secrecy to everyday injuries. At best, they divide them into "upper body" and "lower body." At worst, they say a player has the flu when the reality is far more serious.

Some coaches fine or reprimand players who talk about injuries. And while you can't blame a coach for trying to find any competitive advantage, you can certainly blame NHL leadership for condoning this ridiculous charade.

They don't care Modano was said to be "day to day" for nearly a month after he was injured in early December.

They don't care if you spent a couple hundred bucks to take your family of four to a game so your kids could finally see their hero in person, only to find out he wasn't on the ice because his lower body was still hurting.

This isn't some woe-is-me media rant about access. More often than not, reporters will find out what injuries are anyway and report the details ad nauseum.

But the NHL's secrecy is not fair to the fans or the players, who sacrifice their bodies and play hurt all the time but get second-guessed when they sit out for weeks with undisclosed injuries.

It's typically short-sighted NHL stodginess and nothing more. You'd think a league with infinitesimal TV ratings would want to copy its vastly more successful big brother.

The only reason we can think of why the NHL won't do that is because it has an upper-body injury: It has lost its mind.

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Great expectations

As heir apparent to The Great One, can Sidney Crosby revive NHL's popularity?

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By Dave Sessions

DALLAS — Ready or not, Sidney Crosby is the new face of the NHL at age 19.

And the consensus among the All-Star crowd is that Crosby is definitely ready, from his on-ice dominance to his off-ice charm. If leading the league in scoring and leading all All-Star vote-getters were signs Crosby is already the heir to the throne, then this week is his coronation.

When the league needed players to endorse the new uniform at its unveiling Monday, Crosby was there. When the All-Stars addressed the media later that day, Crosby and Washington's Alex Ovechkin were the main attraction. After the league decided not to tinker with its unbalanced schedule Tuesday, one of the common complaints from representatives of Western teams was that they wouldn't see enough of Crosby.

Already, the league is depending heavily on the kid from Nova Scotia to reverse its weakening popularity, in TV ratings and attendance, in the second year after the lockout.

But the huge expectations don't bother Crosby.

"I don't put that sole pressure on myself," Crosby said. "I do my best to play my part and be a good role model. The easiest way to do that is by your on-ice performance. I think that I'm one of a group of guys, that yes, I do put that responsibility on my shoulders. But I don't think it's solely on me."

Other young players share some of that responsibility, but even the Russian-born Ovechkin still let Crosby answer many of the tough questions at Monday's shared news conference.

Both said they don't concern themselves with the constant comparisons to Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux.

But like those two, Crosby and Ovechkin are captivating hockey because of their play. Crosby's 72 points are six more than Martin St. Louis, the second-leading scorer. Ovechkin is third with 65.

Both are personable young men, but that's not why they're at the forefront of their sport.

"We use them a lot for marketing and pushing our league, the way we should," said Stars goalie Marty Turco, a Western Conference All-Star. "But they've made the game about them because of their play. It's not that we said... 'We're just going to highlight these two because they're going to be good.' No, they are great and they're great now. Sid's leading the league at 19 years old. He deserves everything he gets."

Even Penguins owner Lemieux, who was an NHL sensation himself at 19 with 100 points as a rookie, thinks what Crosby is doing is more impressive.

"He's a much better player," Lemieux said.

Unlike the livelier, unvarnished Ovechkin, Crosby chooses his words carefully. Ever the good spokesman, sometimes Crosby's charm and politeness venture into gee-whiz platitudes. But commissioner Gary Bettman is one of many in the league who appreciate Crosby's sincerity.

"There's no false airs about him, and he's just up there as himself," Bettman said.

It's easy to forget that the man upon whom the NHL is placing so much faith is really a 19-year-old kid. Crosby has been playing above his age for most of his life, but nothing compares to the attention he has received this week at the All-Star Game. He admits it can be intimidating.

"I think I'm still a little shy, for sure," Crosby said. "You can't just change that overnight. To walk into a room and see that many media figures, it doesn't matter how old you are, it's still a little overwhelming sometimes. But at the same time, for me to be at my first All-Star Game, I'm enjoying it."

Since the day Crosby was chosen with the No. 1 overall draft pick in 2005, he has been regarded as the NHL's best hope for the future. If this week is any indication, the future has arrived.

In a season and a half, Crosby has become the league's most prolific scorer, its most popular player and perhaps even its most sought-after spokesman.

"He's a great ambassador for the game even at the age of 19," Lemieux said. "He had it all from Day 1... he's got the whole package."

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The calm belies the storm stirring off ice

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By Dave Sessions

* Although it looks peaceful from afar, the Stars' bench teems with activity throughout the game.

DALLAS — Viewed from a quick shot on TV or the upper reaches of American Airlines Center, the Stars' bench appears almost serene compared with the fast-moving chaos on the ice.

In reality, however, the bench is only slightly less chaotic than the game itself, which seems infinitely faster when you're actually on the bench.

"When you're upstairs watching, it looks a lot easier," Stars winger Brenden Morrow said. "When you're down in the trenches and things are going that speed, it is a different game."

A look at what went on behind the boards in Dallas' 3-1 preseason victory over Phoenix on Friday:

The players

After they march in an orderly line from the locker room — slapping hands with the "junior starter," in this case Philippe Boucher's son Matthew — the players file onto the bench and fidget their way through the national anthem. Shortly thereafter, things get turbulent.

Line changes rarely look orderly. Players run into one another at the door or slip at the last instant, needing to be pulled over the wall. When the spent skaters return, they reach for water bottles and silver personal oxygen dispensers. They do not talk much — they don't have time.

"Most of the time you come to the box and you've only got a minute, sometimes two to get your breath," Morrow said. "So there's not much yelling and screaming."

Just before a shift, Russian defenseman Vadim Khomitski turns to partner Sergei Zubov, exhales sharply and asks a two-word question in Russian; Zubov merely nods. In an instant, they're gone.

Silence doesn't always prevail, though. When Coyotes defenseman Keith Ballard gets up in front of the bench after being slammed into the boards by the Stars' Krys Barch, winger Steve Ott is a foot away, mocking him with loud whimpering noises.

The coaches

Coach Dave Tippett, associate coach Rick Wilson and assistant coach Mark Lamb try to make sense of the maelstrom on the bench. Twenty-five seconds into the game, Tippett is yelling, "Lindros, Lindros, Lindros up next," getting that line ready. Tippett will do this about six dozen more times, figuring out on the fly who's tired, who's having his skate fixed and who is ready to go.

"It's like a car race with 75 pit stops," Tippett said.

While Tippett barks out instructions, Wilson casually walks to the next two defensemen he needs and taps them on the back. Lamb, meanwhile, looks like a Secret Service agent, with an earpiece that allows him to communicate with coaches upstairs.

Pro coaches are often high-strung, but this group tries to take a laid-back approach.

"People say, 'You sit down there, and you're so stoic and you stand there without a lot of emotion,'" Tippett said. "But imagine if you were a chaotic guy down there, in that chaos."

The supporting cast

Equipment manager Steve "Sudsy" Sumner holds the door for line changes nonchalantly — but whenever a player breaks a stick, he dives for the stick rack as though dodging a grenade. Lindros has broken two by the second period, sending Sumner and assistant Chris "Critter" Davidson-Adams scrambling for more.

Everybody dodges pucks from time to time. But strength and conditioning coach J.J. McQueen, standing between the benches, hardly flinches when an 80-mph puck slams into the glass, leaving a circular pattern of droplets just in front of his face.

Injuries happen every night, though. Late in the second period, defenseman Stephane Robidas comes off the ice with blood streaming from his nose, lip and right ear and athletic trainer Dave Surprenant following close behind. Robidas needs several stitches, but it's still a relatively easy night for Surprenant, who views the game differently from anyone else.

"I watch the puck go into a crowd," Surprenant said, "and instead of watching it come out, I see if anybody limps out of the crowd."

Tippett can fit the pieces together

Sunday, March 26, 2006
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By Dave Sessions

* Whether he's coaching the Stars or working on his custom-built motorcycle, Dave Tippett is in hog heaven.

PLANO — On game days, after Stars coach Dave Tippett leaves the morning skate at American Airlines Center and heads home for a few hours, the bike beckons.

It's a heavy, midnight-blue-and-chrome beast with sharp edges, angular lines and points throughout, like a shark — fittingly, with a seat stitched from the coarse underbelly of a stingray. It sits in a pristine room Tippett uses as a workshop.

Tippett's one distraction from the rigors of being an NHL coach — the motorcycle he built himself from the ground up — calls out sometimes in the moments before he leads his team into battle.

Tippett, 44, starts the engine and his futuristic softtail roars loudly enough to drown out everything else.

"I'll take a 10-minute blast on it on game days," Tippett said, "just to make sure my mind's in the right place."

Recently, that has rarely been a concern for Tippett. His third season as an NHL coach also has been his finest.

The Stars earned their 47th victory Friday night, one more than Tippett's team recorded in his first season as its coach, 2002-03. He has 11 games remaining to pad his victory total.

The Stars have all but clinched a division title, which will be their second under Tippett, but the coach will defer any credit for that accomplishment as quickly as he'll peel away on that shiny bike.

"The players are the show, not the coach," Tippett said.

Wall-to-wall hockey

Tippett built his custom motorcycle with an unwanted surplus of free time during the NHL lockout, but his days have long since returned to the almost unending grind of a pro coach's schedule.

Tippett always has been a builder of things. It's in his genes. One of his grandparents was an auto mechanic; another, a carpenter by trade. Tippett still has his first car, a 1967 Mustang, and he and his wife, Wendy, did much of the work on their summer home in northern Minnesota.

"He can build anything," said Wendy, who met her future husband 24 years ago this month while they attended the University of North Dakota, where he helped win an NCAA championship in 1982. "He can learn how to do anything. He just intuitively gets things."

That meticulous nature finds its way into Tippett's work. Every NHL coach watches copious amounts of video, but Tippett takes it to an extreme.

At practices, when someone brings up a moment from a game the night before — any game — Tippett seems to have seen it. It's as if he finds a way to watch every game in the NHL. Armed with a TiVo and several screens, he might be able to, if there were enough hours in the day.

"We have five or six TVs with boxes," Tippett said, "and I would say that at any given time there's four games going on. It's like background music in our house."

Wendy and daughters Nicole and Natalie have become accustomed to the constant sound of hockey in their Plano home.

"In the lockout year," Wendy said, "it sounded so weird not to hear the background noise, all the skates and sticks every night."

There are limits to a spouse's patience, however.

"A couple of years ago my wife was all over me," Tippett said, "saying that I was staying up too late and watching too many games in my office. So I went and bought a 55-inch TV for my bedroom. So now she watches with me."

That kind of give-and-take has kept the Tippetts married for 22 years. They are not far from being empty-nesters, now that one daughter is a freshman in college and the other's about to get her driver's license.

Dave and Wendy are an example of how opposites attract. He's often gruff, a gravelly voiced hockey player, and no social butterfly.

She's a stately blonde, an outgoing, talkative real estate agent.

The tough-guy persona was evident in Tippett from his college days, when he was a player respected for his work ethic, knowledge of the game and will to win.

"He hates to lose," Wendy said. "He has since the day I met him. The coach of his college team would bring me a chair when they lost because he would be down there stewing for an hour after the game. But there's no whining and complaining. His mind starts going and he has to start to figure out why."

He does bring his work home with him. The walls in his office are filled with photos, a few of John Wooden, the "Wizard of Westwood." Tippett admires the former UCLA basketball coach.

There are also trophies and other hockey memorabilia, and a dry-erase board with players' names written on it.

Tippett has not had to overanalyze his team this season. He always preaches that the Stars can be better — that they must be better to win the Stanley Cup — but his players seem to have bought into his management style more this season than before.

"He's let the leadership group handle a little bit more than in the past," said winger Brenden Morrow, an alternate captain. "Where early in the game, he'd get excited when things weren't going our way, now he's sort of realized we're a veteran group and we can turn things around."

A matter of trust

Trusting his players, for Tippett, means being careful not to criticize anyone publicly, even when everybody knows a player isn't playing his best.

"If I have something bad to say to a player, I'd much rather say it to his face [rather] than [have] somebody else [do it] and wake up in the morning and read it," Tippett said. "That just comes from me being an ex-player. ... I was always much more appreciative if someone could tell me face-to-face."

"The tough part of being a coach is you've got to hold people accountable, but you can hold people accountable without embarrassing them."

That strategy has won approval from the veteran group of Stars.

"You don't want a baby sitter," captain Mike Modano said.

What they want, many of the Stars say, is someone who'll give them guidance but not be a control freak, and they say Tippett has found that balance.

"Guys want to play for him," defenseman Jon Klemm said. "The way he goes about it, it makes you want to go out there and do that much more to win for him."

Tippett hasn't changed his philosophy much since his first coaching job, when he was a player/coach with the International Hockey League's Houston Aeros in 1994-95 and later took over the general manager duties. His team won the IHL championship in 1999 and he departed for the NHL, where he was an assistant coach under Andy Murray in Los Angeles, reviving the Kings' power play.

In those days, especially with his varied duties in Houston, Tippett didn't have time for much other than hockey.

"I put a lot of hours in," Tippett said. "Those are 18-hour days, easy. The other six hours [are] lying in bed thinking about what you're going do."

Enter the motorcycle, which Tippett uses to clear his head.

"It is a consuming job. Sometimes, it helps ... if you can rest your mind from it," Tippett said. "You get sharper if you have the ability to get away from it. That's one thing the motorcycle has done for me. ... When I'm driving it, I'm concentrating on what I'm doing and that takes away a lot of the other headaches that I have."

In building the bike, Tippett ordered a frame from a Canadian company named Rolling Thunder and did most everything else himself with help from a few friends and craftsmen. It took almost four months. The painting alone was a three-week job.

Every detail on the bike was planned. From the sharp, pointed metal in the wheels to the fin-like rearview mirror to the medieval dagger imported from Belgium beneath the frame, the parts work together to make a seamless whole.

That isn't so different from what Tippett wants from his team. If the Stars run smoothly to a Stanley Cup, however, he won't have much of an off-season to work on his next project, a 1950s-'60s "old school" bike.

But right now, anyway, the motorcycles take a backseat to the Stars' stretch drive.

"He loves this team," Wendy said. "He is more passionate about this team than any team I've ever seen him on."

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Rise in bets is troubling to NCAA

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By Dave Sessions

* Gambling on "March Madness" increases every year -- as does the NCAA's concern over what it sees as a deeply negative influence.

Moments after CBS announces the NCAA Tournament brackets, the real madness begins.

In offices from coast to coast, more than 10 percent of Americans toss a dollar or two into the pool and fill out their brackets in hopes of a modest payoff.

In Las Vegas, sports book directors scramble to set point spreads and create dozens of side bets.

In homes across America, gamblers mouse their way to an estimated 2,000 Internet gambling sites.

In exotic locales such as Antigua and Costa Rica, hard drives spin and phones ring as Web sites process transaction after transaction in what is believed to be a \$3.7 billion industry.

In dorm rooms, student bookmakers take bets from their classmates, some of whom are likely student-athletes.

In Bradley Beach, N.J., a former compulsive gambler who runs a help hotline prepares for the yearly deluge of inquiries from worried gamblers.

And in Indianapolis, NCAA officials try to find ways to curb the rampant proliferation of wagering on an event that is surpassed only by the Super Bowl in the minds and pocketbooks of avid sports bettors.

Madness, indeed.

Fighting the tide

Bill Saum, the NCAA's director of gambling activities, said the organization decries all forms of gambling on college sports. That includes the ubiquitous office pools, in which an NCAA survey says 10.7 percent of Americans participate.

"It's a philosophical statement, but it's also our rule," Saum said.

In fact, it's part of NCAA Bylaw 10.3, which forbids not only college-sports wagering by student-athletes and athletic personnel, but also the sharing of information with gamblers.

In the 1990s, a handful of point-shaving scandals at prominent universities such as Boston College, Northwestern and Arizona State proved that gambling's influence can reach all the way to the locker room.

Saum concedes that gambling is so prevalent in the university lifestyle that one can find a bookie on every single campus. The NCAA has more than 350,000 student-athletes, almost all of whom might have access to illegal gambling.

Saum worries that gambling jeopardizes the integrity of the game and puts student-athletes at risk.

"The issue that we're really concerned with is that young people are becoming involved in an illegal activity and then get in over their head," Saum said. "Then the bookie's in charge. Certainly a \$1 pool is not going to cause any of that to occur. We understand that the \$1 pool is very much part of the NCAA Tournament. But we have to take a zero-tolerance policy. We need to send a clear message."

In the past, the NCAA has pushed for legislation that would limit the ability of gamblers to legally bet on college sports. Sen. John McCain, of Arizona, has sponsored bills that would outlaw gambling on amateur sports, but they have never made it through Congress. Other bills have targeted offshore Internet gambling, but they, too, have never passed.

Without federal help, the NCAA will continue to try to educate its athletes about gambling. Every participant in an NCAA sport must watch videos illustrating the dangers of gambling before they compete for the first time.

The NCAA also wants to send its message to the general public. The association has vocally opposed sports touts, who advertise "inside" information, mostly on radio. And the NCAA has encouraged newspapers and Web sites to stop publishing point spreads, which Saum believes have no value beyond informing bettors.

But the NCAA fights an uphill battle in changing the minds of the American public, which gambles more than \$600 billion legally each year. The association budgets one-millionth that amount -- \$600,000 -- annually for its anti-gambling measures. And gambling becomes more accepted with each new day, each new casino and each new state lottery.

Sports in Sin City

At the Las Vegas Hilton, the largest of Nevada's 159 sports books, director Jay Kornegay and his staff must work feverishly to prepare for an influx of gamblers during the NCAA Tournament.

At the Hilton's two sports book rooms, there's room for nearly 800 people amid the 42 big-screen televisions and individual TVs that are being added to every seat. There's more than enough room on those screens for all 64 NCAA Tournament games, from the play-in to the championship.

The tourney crowd isn't as enormous or as deep-pocketed as the visitors who lay money on the Super Bowl, Kornegay said, but they still part with plenty of cash in the only state where people can legally bet on college sports.

All told, Kornegay said the tournament brings in upwards of \$80 million, mostly during the first three rounds, to Nevada sports books. The Super Bowl brought in \$90.8 million in February, according to Frank Streshley, a senior analyst with the Nevada Gaming Control Board.

"The gap has basically been getting closer and closer," Kornegay said. "They used to be \$20 million apart back in the '90s. I would say we write more tickets on March Madness, but at the Super Bowl, we get larger plays.

"The action from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. is a huge attraction."

Fans put money on all sorts of side "proposition" bets, especially in first-round mismatches whose winners are practically guaranteed. No 16th seed has ever beaten a No. 1 seed, but it doesn't stop the action in Las Vegas.

"We have bets like, will Monmouth ever have the lead against North Carolina?" Kornegay said.

Of course, the Nevada gaming industry vehemently opposes prohibition of gambling on amateur sports. Taking away America's last legal vestige of such bets, casinos say, would only drive gamblers to illegal bookies -- and beyond the scope of authorities.

"Al Capone said, 'Prohibition was the best thing that ever happened to me,' " Kornegay said. "If you were to go out and ask 100 people in my sports book, 'If they were to take away college sports betting, what would you do?', not one would say, 'I'll stop betting.' The answer would be, 'I guess I'm going to have to call somebody else.' "

In the case of the Arizona State basketball scandal in 1994, unprecedented heavy action of up to \$1 million per game drew suspicion from Las Vegas casinos, the Nevada Gaming Control Board and the NCAA. The FBI investigated and found Mafia ties.

Kornegay and others argue that because legal sports books pay such close attention to their bottom lines, they're often the first ones to notice impropriety.

"When those lines get buried underground, you're not able to monitor it like we do and enforce it and police it like we do," Kornegay said. "This isn't some smoke-filled room where we decide how these games pan out."

Regardless, the NCAA closely protects its trademarks to avoid any appearance of condoning casino betting. In Las Vegas, if you see the terms March Madness, Big Dance or NCAA on display, you can bet the casino will receive a terse letter from the NCAA's attorneys.

The net effect

A plane ticket to Las Vegas often costs far less than an NCAA Tournament bet, but it's no longer necessary to travel to put money on sports.

Gamblers can bet from the comfort of their own homes on as many as 2,000 Internet sites. According to Christiansen Capital Advisors, which tracks Internet gambling, online sports betting will generate \$3.7 billion in revenues in 2005, part of a \$10 billion windfall that includes casino-style games and lotteries. In 2001, online sports betting was a \$1.7 billion industry. Ten years ago, it barely existed.

Despite federal attempts to ban Internet gambling, the online industry still thrives. And sports betting, especially on the Super Bowl and March Madness, leads the way.

"It's the convenience," said Mark Balestra, vice president of publishing for the River City Group, an industry observer. "Serious sports bettors are not as likely to be interested in the entertainment that casinos offer. They just want the best price they can get."

Offshore sites operate largely out of the U.S. government's reach, but major American credit card companies have denied customers the use of their cards at Internet gambling sites. Instead, companies such as NetTeller draw money straight from bettors' bank accounts.

Online gambling might not be as simple as it was a few years ago, but it appears to be here to stay.

"The genie's out of the bag," said Calvin Ayre, CEO of bodog.com, one of the most popular online destinations for U.S. gamblers. "If they can't stop Las Vegas from taking bets on the NCAA, they're certainly not going to stop it internationally."

The last bet

Some bettors go too far, stumbling into the life-wrecking territory of compulsive gambling. A large number of them cross that line by betting on sports, including March Madness, said Arnie Wexler, a New Jersey-based counselor and former compulsive gambler himself.

Wexler believes the NCAA is too punitive and generally unconcerned with gambling unless it affects the organization's image.

"The NCAA could have done better stuff than waste their time and efforts and money running around in Congress to try to shut down gambling in Vegas," Wexler said. "If somebody has a gambling problem ... they think the answer is punishment."

Every March, Wexler said the calls to his hotline increase. That's true locally as well. A spokesperson for the hotline for the Fort Worth/Arlington Gamblers Anonymous group said call volume increases probably tenfold during March.

Many of the callers are college students. Wexler has spoken on several campuses, including Texas Tech, about the dangers of compulsive gambling.

"You can't believe how many kids are gambling," Wexler said. "They're gambling on everything: sports, cards, poker."

Handicapping the future

Nearly everyone involved agrees as long as the NCAA Tournament remains a marquee event, people will gamble on it, legally or illegally. With a \$6 billion CBS television contract that guarantees huge exposure, and countless Web sites such as Yahoo! and CBS SportsLine offering online bracket games, the temptation is great.

"You know what to expect with the tournament," Balestra said. "It gets a little bit bigger every year."

And there's no sign that the madness will subside.

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