

New York Mets dominate National League East; Destiny seems assured, but remember the Cubbies

By EDDY LANDRETH
Staff Writer

The major question that looms in the National League this year is not whether the New York Mets will win, but can they possibly lose?

Somehow they have found a way to do just that the last two years. Maybe in '84 the Cubbies were a team of destiny, at least until that October anyway. And maybe the Cardinals were the better team last year. But this is '86 and it seems to be the year of the Mets.

The Mets have managed one of the key ingredients for winning up

to this point: good health. Regardless of the sport, injuries can play as big a role as any home run or last minute field goal. The Mets can testify to this from past experience. Last year slugger Darryl Strawberry was out with a bad thumb and the team's performance suffered severely.

They lead the league as a team in both hitting and pitching; a sure recipe for winning.

When people think of Met pitching, they usually think of Doctor K, Dwight Gooden. Trying to hit Gooden is an unfulfilled wish for most batters. In today's brand of

baseball there are many throwing the ball at 90 mph or more, but few are able to control the ball like Gooden. With his speed, control and wicked curve ball, he simply owns most of the hitters in the National League.

This is not a one-pitcher staff. Sid Fernandez actually has more strikeouts per nine innings than the Doctor. Although he has not gotten the W each time, the Mets have won all eight games in which Ron Darling has started. At the end of May, Bob Ojeda had won five of his first six starts and had a 1.76 ERA.

People usually think of Darryl

Strawberry when they think of Met hitting. This year, however, Ray Knight has rediscovered the technique of making contact with the ball. After two disappointing years, he has burst out to a great start. He is fourth in the league in hitting and he has provided the Mets with some timely hits.

But when you apply the term clutch hitter, there is one man standing above the rest: first baseman Keith Hernandez. He may be the toughest out in the National League. Pressure at the plate seems to bring the best out in Hernandez. He happens to be pretty decent fielder too: he is the perennial gold glove

first baseman in the league.

So, will the Mets win or won't they? We will have to wait for the cool breezes of autumn to answer to this question. One thing is for sure: if they don't, the criticism in past years will seem like kind words compared to what they will hear this time.

• *Ray Knight and his wife, Nancy Lopez, a member of the LPGA tour, recently had a new baby girl. They named her Shea, as in Shea Stadium where the Mets play their home games. It's a good thing Knight was traded a couple of years ago — Astrodome would have probably been kind of awkward.*

Akeem boosts Rockets to win

By EDDY LANDRETH
Staff Writer

To the Houston Rockets he is a dream, but to the rest of the National Basketball Association he is rapidly becoming a nightmare.

His name is Akeem "The Dream" Olajuwon and he is the best young center in the league. Sorry, Patrick.

"It'll be his league in a year or two," Ervin "Magic" Johnson of the Los Angeles Lakers said in a CBS television interview. "He's cat quick, has an array of shots and nobody can block him out when he goes to the boards."

The Lakers found out that Olajuwon is a reality in the Western Conference finals. He led the assault on last year's champions, scoring 40 points in one game. He even blocked a Kareem Abdul-Jabbar skyhook, which is supposed to be impossible.

This nocturnal pivotman is not the lone force on this Rocket team. There is the matter a 7-foot-4-inch forward named Ralph Sampson. Ralph does

have one problem; he has a split basketball personality, with the body of a center and the mind of a guard. Sampson is extremely gifted, but he wants to play outside and shoot jumpers, while the world tells him he belongs under the hoop. When Sampson does exhibit all of his varied skills, he can be virtually impossible to stop.

The Rockets lack a quality point guard, so Head Coach Bill Fitch asks forward Rodney McCray to perform much of the ball handling duties. He

gets those much needed key rebounds and in the Laker series he displayed his defensive skills on former North Carolina star James Worthy. McCray is the glue which holds the Houston puzzle together, doing a little of everything.

The Rockets will probably not win the NBA title this year. The Boston Celtics seemed destined for that honor. (There is your due, Celtic fans). But if Houston can acquire the needed point guard, next year their dream may come true.



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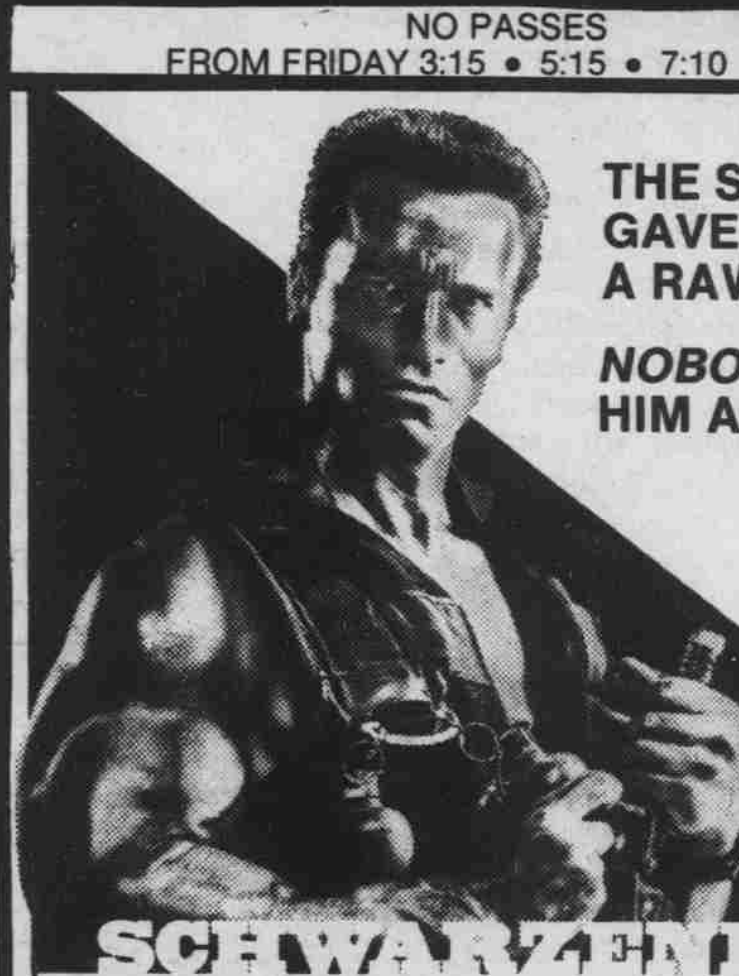


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