Sands Has One Eye, Fighting Heart

ORLANDO, Fla.—It's difficult when you're equipped with only 50 percent vision, but rookie Franklyn Sands sees a baseball career in his future.

Sands was among the first Twins cut from their spring training squad. As he departed for the farm camp at Melbourne, he was wearing wrap-around sun glasses over both eyes as well as a big smile.

"If I had to lose an eye," he philosophized, "I'm glad it was the right one. I've always been right-handed. So the left eye is the one I need most, both for hitting and for pitching."

A catcher only recently past his 20th birthday (December 2), Sands was the victim of a freak accident while performing with the Twins' entry in the Florida Instructional League at St. Petersburg last October 6.

Lefthander Tommy Hall uncorked a breaking pitch while warming up with Sands. It broke too much and went into the dirt, caromed off Sands' big mitt and crashed into his right cheekbone.

A splinter of bone pierced his eye from inside.

Sands never will forget that moment of impact:

"When I got hit, I knew I had lost my eye. I put my hand to my face. It came away full of blood, but there wasn't a cut.

"The doctor was afraid to tell me, but I told him, 'I'm sure I've lost my eye.'

Wilber Remembers

"Then he said, 'You certainly did.' "

Del Wilber, the super-scout who annually manages the Twins' Florida team, also recalls the incident vividly:

"It was a Sunday. That evening, the doctor told me there wasn't much chance of saving the eye. Frank was in the hospital for four weeks.

"Four weeks and one day after the accident, he was let out. He called the ballpark and asked if somebody could come to get him.

"Instead of going to the club's motel, he went right to the ballpark and put on his uniform.

"I'll be darned if he didn't go out there and take batting practice. His attitude and spirit were so great, we didn't want to stop him.

"Six weeks after that accident, I let him pitch two innings against the Detroit team. He gave up a couple of runs, but he also struck out a couple of guys.

"Then—and I think he was joking—he got disturbed at me for not letting him pitch the third inning so he could hit.

"Everybody was rooting for him because he was so determined."

Discouraged at First

Sands accentuated the determination when he said:

"I never thought about quitting baseball. Naturally, at first I was discouraged when the doc said I was losing the eye, but then I decided I could play because I still could hit and still could see well.

"The view is narrow and my first time in the batting cage after the accident I couldn't even hit the ball. It was hard to adjust. My depth perception isn't 100 percent, but I still can follow the ball and pick it up all right.

"I feel good about trying to become a pitcher. I think I can do it. I can throw a fast ball, curve, slider and change-up and my experience as a catcher should help my thinking as a pitcher.

"I feel it would be more difficult to become an outfielder. As a pitcher, I have that good left eye to keep on the target when I'm in my windup."

More Time Needed

Manager Billy Martin, who recognizes a scrapper when he sees one, considered giving Sands an opportunity to pitch in an early exhibition game. However, team physician Dr. L. J. Michienzi cautioned him against it because it will require possibly a year to 18 months for Sands to adjust his depth perception.

Sands' financial worries have been eliminated by Twins' President Cal Griffith, who has guaranteed the gutty youngster a lifetime job in his organization.

Meanwhile, Sands insists he partakes of other pleasures that are "no different at all, except I'm missing the wider view."

These off-diamond interests, which suddenly figure as great luxuries for Sands, include reading, watching television and driving a car.

FRANK SANDS works out under the close check of Early Wynn, Twins' pitching coach.