

One Big Strike, and Kaat Ends 49 Days in a Pressure Cooker

By MAX NICHOLS

TWIN CITIES, Minn.

Jim Kaat took his stretch, glanced at a runner at second base, and fired a fast ball strike to Baltimore's Boog Powell.

It was the ninth inning with two out, and Kaat had a chance for a victory. He had been in this position over and over in his still young career with Minnesota. He was trying for career triumph No. 100.

But this one was very special to him, and the fact that it was No. 100 had nothing to do with it. This was No. 2 of 1967, a game he had waited 49 days and 11 games to win—after suffering through the biggest slump of his career.

This time he had it. He had all of his ability to hurl, spin and control a baseball that night.

"I can't remember when I've been quicker," said Kaat. "I felt as strong at the end as I did at the start. I had more stuff than at any time last year (when Jim won 25 games and was pitcher of the year in the American League). Now I feel I'm in the groove again."

"You know, when a hitter is in a slump, he has seven days every week to work out of it and try to get hitting again. It's different for a pitcher. You have to wait your turn for another chance. This is what was so tough for me. I couldn't wait to get out on the mound again."

"But I had to wait."

Plenty at Stake

Big Jim has been in some big games for the Twins—their American League pennant-clincher at Washington in 1965 and his twentieth victory last year at Chicago. This one couldn't mean more. But it had major personal significance for the lefthander.

For one thing it meant victory in his personal war with the numerous and varied pressures that have been building up since he wrote his controversial letter last October, protesting the Twins' decision to let pitching coach John Sain go to Detroit.

He had gone through 49 days since his first victory of the season—days of base-hits and runners crossing home plate as well as days of waiting. It was a month-and-a-half of trying to throw the ball to one spot and hitting another—only to see a bloop hit to right-center or a line drive to left start the merry-go-round of runners.

"So many times," said Jim, "I needed a big pitch and didn't come up with it."

Day after day, reporters had asked him what was wrong. So did barbers, people he met at gatherings, long-time friends.

"If there's any pressure, it's from everyone asking me if it worries me that the other clubs are hitting me," Jim once said.

Lot of Oomph

But all that ended with his pitch to Powell. It was a pitch that had the old Kaat zip—even in the ninth inning, and this night of June 10 was the first time he had reached a ninth inning since April 22.

His sinker dived into the spot he had picked out for it, and Powell swung and missed for the third strike. Kaat won, 8-1. And more than that, he won the war. The questions suddenly turned to congratulations and best wishes for luck—and questions like:

"What were you getting them out with, Jim?"

It happened the night after Cal Ermer replaced Sam Mele as manager of the Twins. And it's a cinch that it will be said and written, around the American League that

15 Runs in Sixth Frame—Twins, Tigers Tie a Mark

TWIN CITIES, Minn.—In one of the most unusual games ever played at Minnesota's Metropolitan Stadium, the Twins and Tigers tied a 55-year-old record for runs scored in the sixth inning, June 13.

The Tigers scored ten in the first half of the sixth, taking an 11-5 lead. Then Minnesota scored five in the bottom half, closing the gap to 11-10. Detroit finally won, 15-10.

The total of 15 runs in the sixth was first accomplished by Philadelphia and New York of the American League, September 5, 1912. The most runs scored in any inning was a total of 17 by Boston.

Detroit scored its ten runs on eight singles—no extra-base hits. And the first 11 Detroit batters got on base, though Norm Cash was thrown out at third base.

The Twins scored their last three in that inning on an even more unusual play—a dropped fly ball by Mickey Stanley, Detroit center fielder, who recently went two years without an error.

Kaat's letter and Kaat's pitching problems caused the firing of Mele.

Twins' President Calvin Griffith had said Mele was "on the spot" to contend for the pennant the day after he let Sain go—at Mele's request. So maybe that entered into it. And if Kaat's record of 1-7 under Mele this year had been reversed, the Twins would have been in first place. So there's an argument there.

But there was no hostility or bad feeling between Mele and Kaat. If anything, Kaat might have tried too hard for Mele—to prove the letter business was forgotten. Even that, however, can be refuted.

A Long Process

Kaat may have defeated his problem three starts before he finally won that game against Baltimore. It takes more than one day on the mound to come out of a pitching coma.

He had pitched well for six innings at Kansas City, giving up only two well-hit drives and three runs. Then he was shut out, 2-0, against California. And he allowed Cleveland only three earned runs and five hits for eight innings before finally running out of gas.

"There never has been any bad feeling of any kind between Sam and myself this year," declared Kaat.

"We talked on the phone shortly after the business about the letter, and we've never had a problem since then."

Mele and Early Wynn, Twin pitching coach, tried several different methods to help get Kaat going.

They kept him in the rotation through several bad starts. Then they gave him an extra day or two of rest.

Finally, at Jim's request, they let him pitch in relief during a game that was hopelessly lost.

"Sometimes," he said, "you can work out a problem by pitching in a mop-up game where there is no pressure to win." Jim was pasted for six hits and five runs by Chicago in a 14-1 Twins loss during that relief job.

"The Chicago players said he threw as if he had a sore arm,"

said Mele. It didn't seem to work at all. But maybe that's what did it. Four days later, he started in Kansas City and things seemed to start to fall into place.

Just what was wrong with Kaat? Why did a 25-game winner suddenly have so much trouble winning?

"I was never right all spring," said Kaat. "I was pitching the innings I needed to pitch, but I wasn't getting many batters out in spring training."

"When I won that game in Detroit on my third start of the season (April 22), that was just an old hard-ball game. It was cold (in the 30s). I couldn't do much with the ball. I just threw fast balls."

After that, a series of bloop hits and broken-bat singles started plaguing Jim. But he never alibied for his troubles.

"If I were throwing right, with my best stuff and best control, they wouldn't be getting those good swings off me," he said. "So something is missing."

Arm Feels Fine

"But it's not the kind of thing you can go out and work on, because we don't know what I'm doing wrong. I feel good. I'm getting my pitches over the plate. My ball is moving. My arm is all right."

But Jim was missing those spots he wanted to hit—especially on important pitches. And his "stuff" wasn't quite what it should be at times. And every break went against him.

Early in May, Griffith said he thought Kaat was pressing because of the letter he wrote last October.

That brought the issue back into print again, and that didn't help Jim. But he said the mental strain from the losses and publicity did not hurt him.

"Actually, if anything, I probably haven't thought about it enough," Kaat said in the middle of his slump. "I've been confident all the way that I would come out of it. I still am."

He said he had no trouble sleeping ("getting too much, maybe") or eating. "I just can't get guys out," he said.

"I've been grateful that a number of friends have called and have written, saying not to worry, that I would be all right. Most of my mail was encouraging. A few said I was pressing, not many."

Working Well With Wynn

Jim was asked a loaded question. Could Sain have helped solve the problem quicker? He fielded it the easy way he handles ground smashes.

"I don't think so," he said. "Wynn and I have worked well together. But we were still trying to find out what to work on."

Whatever it was, he found it.

Twin Tracks: About the time Jim Kaat came around, the rest of the staff started having problems. That included Dean Chance, who was 9-2 on June 1. Chance was knocked out of the box in his next three starts. . . . Even relievers Al Worthington and Ron Kline had problems—Worthington having an ERA of 10.00 the first two weeks of June in five games and Kline getting hit for a 5.63 ERA over the same period in seven appearances. . . . The Twins' staff had a 5.45 ERA for the same period, yet the Twins won seven of 13 games, outscoring the opposition, 80-77. . . . Rich Rollins hit at a .350 pace to bring his average up to .288 from .194 on May 22. . . . Jim Grant tried hard to return on a knee that was giving him pain. He was hit hard in his first two relief appearances after being out nearly two weeks.



Jim Kaat . . . The Game He Had to Win

Cal's Curvers Will Earn Pay With Double Duty

TWIN CITIES, Minn.—The Twins' new manager is adopting a new policy on pitchers.

Cal Ermer says he will use starting pitchers in relief if necessary to save a game. If used often, this will be something new, because Sam Mele, when he was manager, rarely employed starters as relievers.

The new policy was evident on June 15 when Dean Chance warmed up in the final inning of the game with the Tigers. He was available if needed for the final out in a 6-4 Minnesota victory.

"One batter won't hurt you," Chance said. "I did that when I was with the Angels."

When Mele was pilot, you could almost count on the fingers of his hands the times he rushed a starter into the breach. In the pennant-winning season of 1965, Jim Kaat relieved four times and Jim Grant twice.

Ermer's strategy is plain. "I want to win today," he said. "Tomorrow it might rain. I don't think it hurts starters to use them in relief once in a while."

Relief pitching, at least during the early stages of Ermer's reign, has been something of a problem.

Ron Kline had been having his troubles, but came up with his first three-inning stint of the season, June 15, when he hurled against Detroit. He surrendered three hits and a run in the eighth and a double in the ninth, but it was his best performance of the season against the Tigers, who frequently have fattened up on his servings.

"I had a better slider in this one and the slider is my 'out' pitch," said Kline. "When I pitched several days in a row more than a week ago, I guess my arm got tired. It dropped down—more side-arm—and my slider flattened out. That's why I was hit so hard by the Tigers."