

TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 2006 · STAR TRIBUNE · SPORTS · C5

baseball

WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC

This Classic could be a classic

Several WBC teams sport enough firepower to make the tournament an interesting affair after all.

By MARCOE BRITTON

Amid all the whining and American apathy toward the World Baseball Classic, it's been easy to overlook one important point: This Classic could be a classic.

The first true "world" series could be a blast, a rare shot in the arm for baseball that's steroid-free.

In fact, the only real problem with the tournament — aside from ignorance among some American players and media — is that it's been rigged so Team USA has an embarrassingly easy path, facing lightweights such as Mexico, Canada and South Africa (not a misprint) in the first round.



Team USA outfielder Ken Griffey Jr., left, and his father, coach Ken Griffey Sr., shared a laugh during batting practice Monday in Phoenix. Team USA will play Mexico today in the World Baseball Classic.

TODAY'S GAMES

- Pool B
• United States vs. Mexico, 3 p.m., Chase Field, Phoenix, ESPN2
• Canada vs. South Africa, 3 p.m., Scottsdale (Ariz.) Stadium, NBC
Pool C
• Panama vs. Puerto Rico, 6 p.m., San Juan, Puerto Rico
Pool D
• Dominican Republic vs. Venezuela, noon, Orlando, ESPN
• Australia vs. Italy, 7 p.m., Orlando

For their part, the Mexicans boast new A's starter Esteban Loaiza, aging slugger Vinny Castilla, former Athletic Erubiel Durazo, three guys in the outfield named Garcia.

The quarterfinals in Anaheim would feature USA games against Japan and South Korea, who have already advanced from an Asian group that played its first-round games over the weekend in Tokyo.

Puckett was the greatest Twin to ever play the game

sid hartman columnist
• Teammates, coaches, opponents, sportswriters — they all adored the late, great Kirby Puckett.

I was around in 1961 when the Twins arrived from Washington, D.C., and with the lack of progress for a new stadium, if my health holds up, I likely will be around when the team leaves.

Without a doubt, the most popular player during the Twins' 45 seasons of existence would be outfielder Kirby Puckett, who unfortunately suffered a serious stroke Sunday in Scottsdale, Ariz., and died Monday in Phoenix at age 45.

Puckett, Harmon Killebrew and Rod Carew represent the Twins in the Baseball Hall of Fame. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say he was the best player to ever play for the Twins. Puckett was one of the big reasons the Twins won the World Series in 1987 and 1991.

Furthermore, he was unbelievable leader, the best I have ever seen. He controlled the clubhouse. If anybody got out of line, he handled it during the 12 years he was in a Twins uniform.

Yes, and he had the utmost respect from opposing players, who would gather around him in the batting cage before games. Nobody drew a crowd like Puckett. They worshipped him.

Call him indispensable
Chicago Cubs President Andy MacPhail, the Twins general manager for their two world championships, described Puckett "as the best teammate I've ever been around."

"He made the players around him better," MacPhail said Monday. "Whether he got them to relax by teasing them and having a good time out there like Shane Mack, or by getting on other guys by telling them that they needed to get better."

MacPhail added: "You could never dog it around Kirby. Kirby's running 4.2 [seconds] to first base in exhibition games that are going to get raised out. He's always going full tilt, and how are you going to dog it when the best player on the team is going full speed all the time? He just had a tremendous impact."

I told the Chicago writers today that, we won two championships and there were a lot of indispensable people: We couldn't have won without [Greg] Gagne, we couldn't have won without [Dan] Gladden, we couldn't have won without Jack Morris. We couldn't have won without Tom Kelly, we couldn't have won without a lot of guys. But the most indispensable guy we had was Kirby."

Buck called famous homer
Jack Buck was already one of the most famous baseball play-by-play announcers before he broadcast the 1991 World Series between the Twins and the Yankees for NBC.

But Twins fans will always remember Buck best for his famous call of Puckett's home run off Atlanta pitcher Charlie Leibrandt to end Game 7 of the 1991 World Series.

"Into deep left-center," Buck said in the bottom of the 11th inning. "For Keith Mitchell. And



Baseball Hall of Famer Kirby Puckett was with out a doubt the most popular player to ever put on a Twins uniform, not only with fans but with his peers in the sport as well.

« WE COULDN'T HAVE WON WITHOUT A LOT OF GUYS, BUT THE MOST INDISPENSIBLE GUY WE HAD WAS KIRBY. »

ANDY MACPHAIL, former Twins GM

we'll see you tomorrow night" Clark Griffith, the son of the late Twins owner Calvin Griffith, recalled it being a no-brainer when the decision was made to recall Puckett from the minor leagues in 1984.

Clark recalls the decision as a 30-second conversation between his dad and former farm director George Brophy, who recommended the decision. "We were struggling, and we needed him," Clark said.

A great friend lost
Former Twins first baseman Kent Hrbek, who was Puckett's teammate for 11 seasons, said: "Puckett revived baseball here. What you remember is he always had a smile on his face. And he made such impression on kids."

Like Kelly said Monday, "I don't know where I would have been without Kirby Puckett."

Personally, I have lost a great friend who probably entertained me more than any athlete I have ever covered. And he was a friend, too. His postgame news conference would end and he would time after time yell, "Sid, do you need anything?"

He made an impact on and off the field more than any athlete I have ever covered.

Sid Hartman can be heard weekdays on WCCO 630-AM at 6:58, 7:48 and 8:48 a.m. • sidhartman@startribune.com

MAJOR LEAGUE NOTES

Royals' Redman has knee surgery

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kansas City Royals left-hander Mark Redman underwent arthroscopic surgery on his left knee Monday to fix a lateral cartilage tear.

There was no immediate word on when Redman, a former Twin, would return. He was acquired in a December trade with Pittsburgh and was being counted on to be in the Royals' starting rotation.

The Royals said Redman would be re-evaluated next week at the team's spring training camp in Surprise, Ariz.

Redman had swelling in the knee after a two-inning start Thursday against Texas. He was scheduled to start on

Monday against San Diego but the swelling did not subside. Redman has a 33-66 career record with a 4.47 ERA, and the Royals are his sixth club since 2000.

Rueter retires
Kirik Rueter retired, ending a 13-year major league career during which he became the winningest left-handed pitcher in San Francisco Giants history.

Rueter, 35, finished with a 130-92 record and a 4.27 ERA. He won 105 games after joining the Giants near the end of the 1996 season, surpassing Mike McCormick last year as the winningest lefty in San Francisco history.

Rueter went 3-7 with a 5.95 ERA in 2005 and was designated for assignment on Aug. 14. No team signed him during the offseason.

In Scoreboard: Spring training lineoscores. C11

TWINS NOTES

Twins add 12 more hits to fast start on offense

By JOE CHRISTENSEN

BRADENTON, Fla. — Granted, it's early — so early — but the Twins are off to a decent start offensively this spring.

They had 12 more hits in Monday's 5-4 loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates after entering the game ranked fourth in the American League in batting average at .306.

Michael Cuddyer had two hits against Pittsburgh, giving him four hits in seven spring at-bats. Terry Tiffie had two doubles, and Nick Punto went 3-for-4.

Twins pitchers also entered Monday leading the majors in strikeouts, and they added

eight more against the Pirates, giving them 47 in six games. Durbin improves
Durbin gave up five runs in one inning in his first spring outing. J.D. Durbin tossed two scoreless innings against Pittsburgh, giving up only one hit. But bullpen candidate Willie Ryan gave up his second home run in as many outings, this time on a mammoth shot by Jeremy Burnitz to start the third inning.

On deck
The Twins will play the New York Yankees today for the first of two times this spring, with Brad Radke facing Shawn Chisholm. Former Yankee Ruben Sierra, who is 3-for-5 this spring, plans to make the trip to Tampa with the Twins.

PIRATES 5, TWINS 4

Table with columns for PIRATES and TWINS, and rows for individual players and their statistics (AB, R, H, RBI, etc.).

Uncommon, more dangerous form of stroke affected Puckett

He suffered a hemorrhagic stroke, in which internal bleeding put pressure on his brain. Doctors wanted to believe that pressure quickly through surgery.

By GLENN HOWATT
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The type of stroke that apparently killed Kirby Puckett was a relatively uncommon but more dangerous form of the illness, according to medical specialists.

Puckett underwent surgery Sunday afternoon, reportedly to relieve pressure on his brain caused by internal bleeding, after suffering a stroke in his Arizona home earlier in the day. He died Monday night.

About 20 percent of strokes are caused by internal bleeding in or around the brain and are called hemorrhagic strokes.

The brain becomes compressed and malformed to make room for the blood in the skull. "Then we have a much better chance of preventing the stroke from getting so big that

LEARN ABOUT STROKES

More information about strokes is available at www.startribune.com/41045.

O, and it pulls apart."

Not much specific information has been reported recently about Puckett's health, but friends and colleagues have said they were concerned about the baseball star's increasing weight. Excess weight can contribute to high blood pressure.

In general, black men are more likely to die from stroke and are more likely to have hypertension. At some moment, because of years of wear and tear on the vessels, they break and blood rushes into the brain," said Dr. David Anderson, chair of the neurology department at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis.

The brain becomes compressed and malformed to make room for the blood in the skull. "Then we have a much better chance of preventing the stroke from getting so big that

"It can deform the brain," Anderson said. "It is like jell-