

Tough Ron Clark Born to Play Ball

Ex-Cowboy Riding High With Twins

By ARNO GOETHEL

ORLANDO, Fla.—To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of Ron Clark's death were greatly exaggerated. The bronco-busting, fist-swinging Texan is very much alive and currently ranks as the best bet to be at third base when the Twins launch their regular season in the Presidential opener at Washington on April 8.

In appearance, Clark is typically Texan. He favors blue jeans, Stetsons and cowboy boots. Otherwise, you'd figure him for a close-mouthed New Englander rather than as a garrulous son of the Lone Star State. That is, until his Texas twang betrays him.

Essentially, however, he prefers to hold his tongue until he has something to say. Clark, 25, was asked: "Has anything unusual happened to you since you've been playing baseball?"

He replied: "No. Nothing unusual."

So the question was put to Frank Quilici, who was a teammate of Clark in 1963 at Charlotte and Wilson, all of 1964 at Charlotte, most of 1966 at Denver and most of 1967 with the Twins.

Quilici played out the line, teasing the reporter: "I can't think of anything particularly unusual about Ronnie."

The reporter offered his thanks anyway and started to move to



Ron Clark . . . One-Time Boxer, Bronc-Buster, Can Punish the Ball.

another possible Clark reference when Quilici added: "Unless you mean the time we thought he was dead."

Naturally, this triggered a double take and an abrupt about-face. I had to agree. This could be unusual.

As Quilici tells it, the Charlotte Hornets were going through their pre-game paces one day in 1964

at Asheville, N. C. Fred (Whip) Lasher, a relief pitcher now with Detroit, was hitting fly balls to the outfielders while simultaneously the infielders were indulging in their normal pre-game drills. Lasher took a mighty swing at a ball, but instead of lofting a fly to left field, smashed a sizzling line drive. At the same time, Clark was charging in from his third base position to scoop up a grounder and took the full impact of Lasher's liner on his chest, right over his heart.

He Looked Like Goner

"Blood gushed out of his nose, ears and mouth," recalled Quilici. "We thought he was dead."

"Oh, yeah," said Clark. "Now I remember. It tore one of my bronchial tubes loose. It knocked me to my knees, but I didn't know I was hurt until I bent over. Then the blood spouted out. Yeah, I remember that—it kept me out of the lineup a couple of days."

Ordinarily, this might smack of feigned modesty. But Clark was baseball-born and baseball-bred. To him, "a couple of days" out of the lineup is an eternity.

"My dad started me when I was six years old," he recalled. "It seems I've always had a bat in one hand and a baseball in the other. My older brother, Charlie, was a pretty good pitcher—turned down an offer from Cleveland. When Charlie was playing, I was the bat boy. I'd stay around all day just to get five or six swings in practice."

"I couldn't wait for school to get out so I could get to the ball park. My younger brother, Mike, is with the Army in Germany. He is an outfielder. I guess he has a tough time convincing his buddies he has a brother who might wind up in the major leagues."

Four-Sport Standout

Clark's trail to the majors began on an unseemly note. First, however, he starred in all sports for Brewer High School in Fort Worth. He was a quarterback and halfback in football, a guard and forward in basketball, a member of the 440-yard relay team in track.

As a high school baseball player, he was all-district one year as a shortstop, won all-district honors the next year as a catcher and in his senior year divided his time among third base, shortstop, sec-

ond base and catching.

He was signed to a baseball contract by Ray Johnson, an independent operator of the Dallas-Fort Worth franchise. In 1961, his first season, Clark was optioned to Bakersfield in the California State League, a Phillies' farm club. The next year he returned to the same league at San Jose, an affiliate of the Los Angeles Angels.

Started at Keystone

Fortunately for the Twins, they moved their Triple-A hookup to Dallas-Fort Worth for 1963, thereby acquiring rights to the young man who had launched his professional baseball career as a second baseman, but who now appears ready to handle third if Rich Rollins' knee troubles persist.

Clark is no stranger to physical miseries. He was a sophomore quarterback in high school in 1958 when, attempting to cut in an open field, his right knee collapsed. He went under the knife in 1959 for a cartilage operation on the inside of the knee. A year later, he required surgery on the outside of the same knee.

Clark worked his way through the Twins' farm system—.301 at Wilson in 1963, .249 and .269 at Charlotte the next two years. Finally, he was invited to spring training with the parent club in 1966, although he was listed on the Denver roster. That was when he incurred an injury that resulted in removal of a pea-sized bone chip from his right elbow last July 21.

Hurt Arm in Collision

"We were working on rundown plays," he remembered. "I collided with Bob Allison and my arm was bent back. After that, I couldn't throw at all. I was sent to the farm camp at Melbourne and got lots of cortisone shots. The day before we broke camp, I had two injections."

"We opened in Oklahoma City and Cal Ermer, our manager, said it was too cold for me to play. Then we went to San Diego; I started and didn't miss another game all year."

He recovered so well, in fact, that he led PCL third basemen in putouts (131), double plays (30) and fielding average (.972).

The injury reappeared last May, after Rollins had wrenched his right knee and Clark started 12

Rich May Lose His Job Same Way He Won It

ORLANDO, Fla.—Ironically, Rich Rollins appears in jeopardy of losing his third base job to Ron Clark by the same method he won it in 1962.

When the Twins reported for spring training that year, they had three shortstops in camp. Zoilo Versalles, No. 1, came down with the mumps. No. 2 was Orlando Martinez, who pulled an Achilles tendon while crossing the plate. Nestor Velasquez, the third shortstop, was sidelined by a sore right shoulder.

So Sam Mele tried Rollins at short. The redhead tore the cover off the ball. Rollins was moved to his regular position, third base, and rookie Bernie Allen was inserted at short. Allen also capitalized on the opportunity, matching Rollins' .400-plus average.

When Versalles returned, Allen was moved to his regular spot at second base.

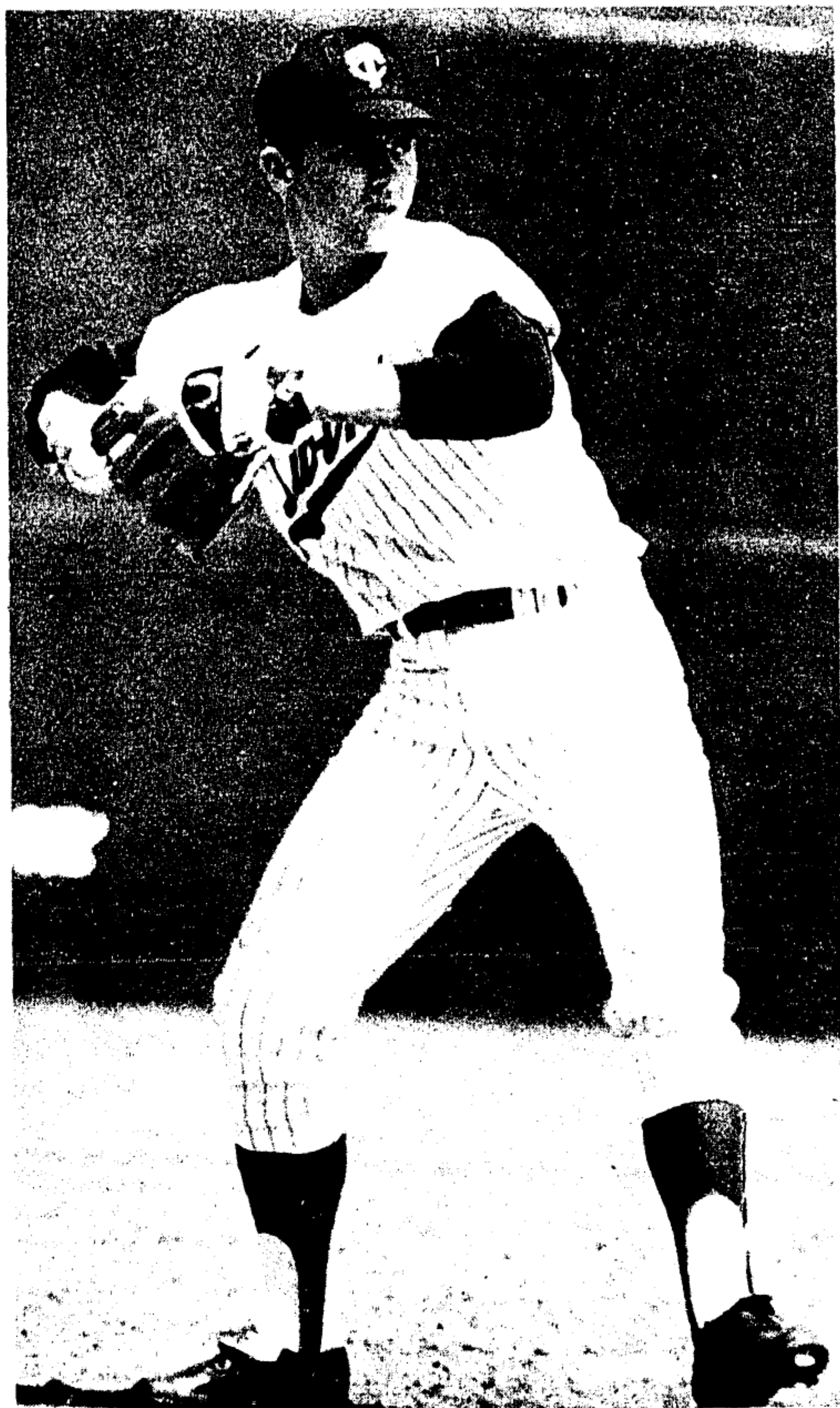
consecutive games at third base for the Twins. He remembers vividly a May 2-3 series against the Yankees at Metropolitan Stadium.

"It was cold and my arm started hurting again. I could make the low throws, because there was no stress on the arm. But I couldn't get the leverage for an overhanded throw. One day I went to put on my sun glasses and it felt like something busted. That night on the plane I could move my right arm about one inch."

"But I didn't say anything about it. Then we went to Los Angeles (May 19) and my arm hurt so much I couldn't button my shirt."

Clark finally confessed his injury to trainer Doc Lentz. He was placed on the disabled list and then underwent surgery. Now he's ready to capitalize on his opportunity, although he regrets it is presented because of Rollins' misfortunes. "Richie is a great fellow," Clark said.

But shucks, podner, playing third base should be duck soup for a Texan who was a teen-age bronco buster and who won 104 of 111 amateur boxing bouts.



Clark . . . Sharp Glove at Hot Corner.