

LOOKING BACK

Rondell's Reckoning

During spring training, Senators manager Jim Tracy seemingly needed only a few minutes to rebuild Curtis Pride's flawed swing.

A couple of months later, he was telling Pride — a career .247 hitter in the minors before Tracy started working with him — he was being promoted to Class AAA Ottawa on his way, eventually, to the major leagues.

Less than a month into the 1993 season, Tracy found another project, another broken hitter in a 21-year-old, top prospect who had known few, if any, real struggles in the game.

That project was Rondell White, a natural-born hitter going through a most unnatural slump to start the 1993 season.

Everybody had suggestions, even relief pitcher Archie Corbin, who told White he was not getting enough bend in his front leg.

White's problems became a regular talking point for Tracy, coach Greg Fulton and Expos roving hitting guru Gomer Hodge.

A quarter-century later, Tracy remembered the beginning of White's turnaround from his disastrous start to becoming the Eastern League's most feared hitter before the All-Star break.

And you quickly learned that when Tracy talked about hitting to just stay out of the way of the answer, because nobody could top Tracy when analyzing a hitter's problems.

"We all know how bad of a slump this was," Tracy recalled 25 years later. "He was virtually lost, and between Gomer, Fulty, and myself, we had talked about and tried just about everything that you could with him mechanically. It got to a point where I felt like he had gotten to information overload and was thinking himself into deeper and deeper trouble with each and every at-bat.

"Enough was enough. We were playing Bowie in Memorial Stadium in Baltimore (in early May). I called him into my office that afternoon and told him that he and I were going to play hit-and-run with his at-bats the entire game, even if he was up and there was nobody on base. I told him he had to look down at me prior to every pitch like we were in Little League — I got a wry smile and a chuckle out of him when I told him that — and even with nobody on, if I gave him a hit-and-run, he was to react and swing at that particular pitch.

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“The purpose of the exercise was to take the mechanical aspect of his hitting out of the equation and force him to just react, find the ball and hit it. Just hit the ball where it was pitched.

“Well, you know how players are. They want results and they certainly don’t want to be giving at-bats away with nothing to show for it.

“So, without a word being said about it, we both knew that this was going to be very hard for him and could possibly make him feel even worse mentally at the end of the day.

“A lot of other things had been tried, but to no avail. There was not one person that was associated with the Harrisburg Senators that wasn’t rooting their asses off for this kid because of who he was, his personality, his unselfishness, his overall character. He was a man’s man, and was revered by every one of his teammates and our entire coaching staff and Montreal organization, as well.

“In one of his at-bats early in the game with nobody on, he worked himself into a fastball count and looked down at me. I put on the hit-and-run and he squared a ball up and hit it pretty well, but it went for an out. You could tell by the body language that he was disenchanted, because it did not result with a hit.

“So, there we are in the eighth inning. I don’t know what the score was and I also can’t remember if we had just a runner on first or runners on first and second. Anyway, we got into another fastball count and he looks down and I put on another hit-and-run. The expression on his face said, ‘I don’t really want to do this.’

“Believe me, to tell you that he absolutely crushed this pitch would be an understatement. He hit this ball about three-quarters of the way up in the bleachers in left-center field in (Baltimore’s) Memorial Stadium. Regardless of how this home run impacted the game is immaterial. Our entire dugout erupted as if we had just won the Eastern League championship.

“That’s how happy they all were for one very special teammate. That’s when he started hitting like Rondell White and he never stopped. During his remaining time with us, there was hell to pay as far as the rest of the Eastern League was concerned. He put a hurtin’ on our league from that point forward.”