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It's Not Just About Bonds, It's About Who's on Deck

By JACK CURRY

When Barry Bonds batted with the score tied, two outs and no one on base in the bottom of the ninth inning on Sunday night, the Los Angeles Dodgers did not ponder the situation for long before intentionally walking him. Manager Jim Tracy put the potential winning run on base for the San Francisco Giants, which would usually be considered a dubious decision. But with Bonds, it is considered a sensible move.

The strategy worked because the Giants could not push Bonds home and the game advanced to extra innings. Even though the Giants won, 5-4, in 12 innings, Tracy's decision to bypass Bonds and dare the other Giants to produce underlined the fear that Bonds creates and how critical it is for the player who bats in the pressure-inducing position behind Bonds to at least dent the opponent's strategy. For avoiding Bonds is a strategy that will again be prevalent this season.

"With what he's been doing the last two years, in a lot of situations, if I was the other team, I'd walk him, too," said second baseman Edgardo Alfonzo, the former Met who joined San Francisco in the off-season and started this season hitting behind Bonds. "I wouldn't care. You've got to respect the guy or he'll kill you."

Bonds has often minimized the importance of who is hitting around him. Since Bonds never passed the salt and pepper to Jeff Kent, who batted fifth for the Giants for much of the last six seasons, he continued expressing that flippant attitude after Kent's departure to the Houston Astros as a free agent this past off-season.

"I don't worry about who's in front of me or behind me," Bonds said in spring training. "I've got a job to do."

Still, it does matter. The Giants went into last night's game against Houston with an 11-1 record, the best mark in the major leagues, and have soared to that level with decent but hardly overwhelming contributions by Bonds. In playing in all but one of the team's first 12 games, he had put together a .278 average with 4 homers, 9 runs batted in and 13 walks (5 of them intentional). While Bonds's statistics might seem ordinary for him, he is on pace for 54 homers, 122 R.B.I. and 176 walks (68 intentional), numbers that seem appropriate for the player who holds the single-season home run mark, with 73. Last season, Bonds had 46 homers and an unprecedented 198 walks, of which a record 68 were intentional.

Still, if Tracy was comfortable walking Bonds in the ninth inning of a tie game in April, that probably means there are few situations in which he would not walk Bonds and take his chances against whoever is on deck. That is why Giants need a No. 5 hitter who delivers with runners on base and is not frazzled about being in perhaps the most glaring batting spot in the majors. For that reason, Manager Felipe Alou shifted the slumping Alfonzo out of that spot in the lineup after only eight games and inserted the rejuvenated outfielder Jose Cruz Jr.

"I don't think it matters who hits behind Barry, they're not going to pitch to him," Alfonzo said. "I don't think it makes any difference who it is."

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Even if it were Alex Rodriguez? Alfonzo nodded.

"They walked him a lot last year, and sometimes he had Jeff Kent, who is a great hitter, behind him, and sometimes it was Benito Santiago, who was doing a great job," Alfonzo said. "I don't care if they walk him to get to me. I enjoy the moment. I'll do whatever I can do to help the team. You know?"

Alfonzo was supposed to be that fortunate or unfortunate soul who had the best seat in the ballpark for watching Bonds frown while the catcher held out his right arm for four straight balls. After Alfonzo twice failed to knock in runs following walks to Bonds in the Giants' season-opening 5-2 victory over San Diego, Alou said that he would leave Alfonzo in the fifth spot indefinitely and wait for him to thrive.

"He is where he should be on this team," Alou said. "Unless something out of the unusual happens."

On the same day, Alfonzo said, "He just told me that I'm going to be the guy behind Barry, no matter what happens."

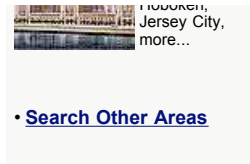
Apparently, not enough happened for Alfonzo, a .292 career hitter going into this season, to maintain his spot. Alfonzo batted behind Bonds seven times in the first eight games (Bonds rested one game) and went only 5 for 23 with one homer and four R.B.I. Alou had praised Alfonzo's patience as one of the reasons he wanted him protecting Bonds, and Alfonzo did walk eight times in those eight games.

But, with Alfonzo hitting .200 and nursing a groin injury, Alou rested him for two games with and planted Cruz, who had a league-high five homers at that point, in the fifth spot. He was 3 for 12 with three R.B.I. batting there before last night. Meanwhile, shortstop Rich Aurilia has batted in front of Bonds in all but one game Bonds has played and is 11 for 42 (.262 average) with two homers and five R.B.I.

When Alfonzo returned to the lineup, the weeks of declarations from Alou about his being ensconced as the fifth hitter vanished. Alou has used Cruz in the fifth spot for the past four games and has Alfonzo batting second, explaining that he wants his hottest hitter protecting Bonds because, sooner or later, teams will have to challenge him.

The Giants were cruising before Alou made the lineup switch, but his speedy adjustment depicts how important he feels it is to have someone reliable on deck when Bonds is at the plate. Pitchers are going to try to avoid Bonds by intentionally or unintentionally walking him. It is up to the other Giants to make sure teams dodge their fearsome hitter as infrequently as possible.

"Pitch to me; I'd be happier," Bonds said. "I can ground out, strike out, hit a homer and go sit down."



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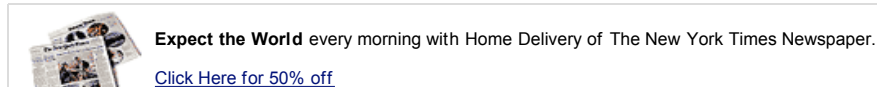
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