

Where Have All The Horses Gone?

Editor's note: This is one of an occasional series of stories on fantasy baseball leagues — teams drafted by fans that accumulate points in various statistical categories. Richard Zitrin is a consultant to ESPN on fantasy leagues, and he is the co-founder of one of the oldest Bay Area leagues, the Pacific Ghost League.

By Richard Zitrin
Special to The Chronicle

Danny Jackson won a game Sunday. That's no surprise for a pitcher who won 23 last season, except that fully a fifth of the season had passed since Jackson's last victory, on Opening Day. You could almost hear a sigh of relief from thousands of fantasy-league owners who had shelled out big money for him.

Jack Morris and Frank Viola are two of baseball's elite pitchers. Morris has the most victories in the '80s, Viola the most in the past five years. But neither won a game in April; they started out a combined 0-11 with a 4.64 ERA. That's a lot of sleepless nights for a lot of fantasy-leaguers.

Remember when you could count on a pitcher — really count on him — for 15 to 20 victories, year in, year out? Those days are long gone.

In the '60s, there were Juan Marichal and Bob Gibson, Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale. Just a cut below were Jim Kaat, Jim Bunning, Mickey Lolich and Denny McLain, workhorses who won year after year. Jim Maloney won at least 15 games for six straight years. Dave McNally had four straight 20-victory seasons.

Then came the next generation, with Tom Seaver, Jim Palmer, Catfish Hunter and Don Sutton; we marveled at Nolan Ryan's heat, Phil Niekro's knuckler, Steve Carlton's slider and Luis Tiant's endless repertoire.

Ferguson Jenkins was chalk. Twenty victories six years in a row, an off year, then 25 more

triumphs. Gaylord Perry was the ultimate horse: Between 1966 and 1978, he won 15 or more games every season. His highest ERA was 3.38. He averaged 19 victories.

Morris is the pitcher of this decade, hands down. He's had a fine career, but he's still well short of 200 victories and has just two 20-victory seasons. In the whole decade, only five pitchers — most recently Roger Clemens and Dave Stewart — have won 20 games more than once. No one's won 20 three times. And if Jackson has an off year, he'll have plenty of company — more than half the pitchers who've won 20 games is a season since 1981 failed to win even 15 the next season.

Why are the '80s so different? Maybe it's the five-man rotation, the designated hitter or the development of the middle-inning reliever who's more than just a starter gone sour. Maybe it's a statistical glitch — just one of those things.

It's clear, though, what today's pitching inconsistency means for the fantasy-league owner. "Pitchers is cheap," sports historian and author Jules Tygiel is fond of saying. Tygiel, a longtime fantasy-league participant, twice won his league's championship with a pitching staff put together with baling wire, duct tape and "a couple of lucky injuries."

The pitching ace may be making a comeback, of sorts. Dwight Gooden has averaged 18 victories in his five seasons, and he's off to another flying start. So are Clemens, who's won at least 18 the last three years, and Stewart, who could make this his third straight 20-victory season. And Viola and Morris are winning again.

But while George Steinbrenner may pay megabucks for starting pitchers, this just doesn't make sense to a knowledgeable fantasy-leaguer. Says Tygiel, "I'll take the first five healthy arms I see and save the big money for a stopper in the bullpen."

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