

Faster Than a Speeding Bullet? No, But Mickey Rivers Moves

By Steve Marantz
A Member of the Sports Staff

If Mickey Rivers left the batter's box when you started reading this, and if you were a reader of average speed, then by the time you finished this sentence—whoosh—he would be at first base.

And if you blinked or stumbled over a word then—zap—he would be at second.

That's how fast Mickey Rivers is.

Timed at 3.1 seconds in his trip to first. About :14.0 for the full circuit. Faster than Bayer, Bufferin and other leading aspirin in reaching your blood stream. More deadly than a stadium hotdog.

Joe Frazier, the Mets' manager, nicely described the knack Rivers has in the outfield: "He outruns the baseball."

Naturally, Mickey Rivers feels his speed is beside the point. The point is that the Yankees won their American League East Division and that he hit .312 and played center field for them. He wants to be recognized as a complete player, not a blur.

Besides, says Rivers, the 3.1 was years ago.

"You gotta put it all together," said Rivers yesterday. "You don't steal on speed. You don't hit on speed. You have to know how to play the game."

And who can dispute that Mickey Rivers is a complete player? He hit, ran, and caught well enough to be a consideration for M.V.P. this season. When the Yankees obtained Rivers, 28, and pitcher Ed Figueroa from California in a trade for Bobby Bonds last winter they couldn't have envisioned as much.

"We needed a center fielder because (Elliot) Maddox was hurt," said Billy Martin, Yankee manager.



MICKEY RIVERS
... complete

As an offensive player Rivers could hardly have been better. Along with his team-leading .312 were 31 doubles, eight triples, eight home runs, 95 runs scored and 67 R.B.I., a tidy total for a lead-off hitter.

Perhaps Rivers's most unusual statistic is the 12 walks he took in 590 at-bats. Lead-off hitters are supposed to walk 12 times each week. "I'm not that kind of lead-off hitter," says Rivers. "You gotta know the difference between helping the team and hurting it. I help with base hits. If I could walk I'd walk."

Defensively Rivers uses his speed to great advantage in covering the outfield. His problem comes in throwing the ball. His left shoulder, the throwing side, was injured in mid-September, forcing him to miss several games. Rivers said it gave him no pain yesterday.

"My arm is not that good so I get the ball in as quick as I can," he said. "Not too many guys take second on me on a single. I think only two guys ran on me the second half."

The Yankees were thrilled with the all-round play Rivers gave them. But they didn't know how complete he was. Rivers could be unhappy, too. With California in 1975 he led the American League with 70 stolen bases. Martin kept him harnessed this season and he stole 43 in 50 attempts.

Their rapport didn't improve when Martin accosted Rivers for bringing his wife on a road trip once and being late to the park another time.

The two talked matters out eventually.

"I thought I'd have it (a permanent green light) at first," said Rivers. "He (Martin) explained what he wanted. He's the manager and I'm the player. As soon as I found out I let myself know it wouldn't bother me so I went out and had a good year."

As far as Martin is concerned Rivers is treated the same as the rest of the Yankees, regardless of base-stealing ability.

"Nobody has the green light on my club," he says. "Nobody will get the green light in the play-offs. I don't want to explain why. It might embarrass some of them."

Rivers figures speed and base-running will be the essence of the Yankees-Royals matchup.

"It'll be low scoring," he says. "Lots of defense and good pitching. Stealing and the extra base will be the difference."

"I know I'm gonna be running if I get a chance."