



The Chisox' Guillén: The High Priest of Shortstop Bop does his thing.

El Santero de Oz

In the Air With Ozzie Guillén

by Ed Morales

CHICAGO—See Ozzie run: There are two outs in the top of the eighth when first baseman Greg Brock pops one into short left-center. Ozzie, the shortstop, goes racing after it, eyes bulging, looking possessed. See Ozzie leap: As the pop-up flutters downward, Ozzie leaves the ground, his legs scissoring out balletically. Flexing his body in midair, he reaches for it as if grasping for a carousel ring—but the ball pops out of his glove. See Ozzie see the ball: Whirling off-balance as he touches the ground, Ozzie's eyes lock onto the muffed leather pellet and telekinetically draw it into his grasp before it drops below waist level.

"You gotta look for the ball," Ozzie later says in the clubhouse. "I always see the ball."

We're talking pennant race here. We're talking best shortstop in the league, we're talking late summer, midwestern dog days, so we're talking Ozzie Smith, right? Nope. The Ozzie we're talking here is Ozzie Guillén, heir-apparent to the Wizard of Oz as baseball's premier shortstop. Anchoring the defense of this year's Surprise Team, the 26-year-old White Sox hotshot has swiveled and spun his way to the top. Like Thelonus Monk twirling in a composer's trance, he's become the high priest of shortstop bop, Caribbean style.

The AL's Rookie of the Year in 1985, Guillén is the latest in a line of virtuoso Venezuelan White Sox shortstops, which include current Chisox broadcaster Chico Carrasquel and the legendary Luis Aparicio. It was in Ozzie's hometown of Ocumare del Tuy, about 35 miles southwest of Caracas, that Aparicio's uncle Ernesto instructed Guillén in the sacred rites of shortstopping. "My idol when I was growing up was Dave Concepción," Guillén recalls in the Comiskey clubhouse, "but [Ernesto] taught me the first step to being a ballplayer: Play hard."

Ozzie wears his defiant number 13 well—he is brusque, brash, and badass. He prowls the locker room with his chest all stuck out, like a welterweight with an attitude. When a clubhouse attendant gibes him for bullshitting in Spanish with Puerto Rico native Ivan Calderón, Guillén snaps back, "Shut up, fuckface, I speak English." And when I ask him for a little time he glares. "A few minutes?" he fumes. "What are you

writing, a fucking book?" It's textbook machismo, a very Latin kind of playful aggression that soon melts—then you get Ozzie, the nice guy, playing with his two small sons and thinking of going into coaching when his career is over because "I like to teach people."

Beyond the flash and bluster, the New Oz is intensity, focus, and control. Watching him is so mesmerizing, it makes me wonder whether he's on a spiritual kick. "I am a santero," he smiles. "You know that movie, *The Believers*, is a bad movie—that's not what *santeria* means. A lot of people think

THRIFT REDUX? Exactly a year since resigning as Yankees' GM, Syd Thrift is just now itching to get back into the game. "I'm starting to seriously look around to see who might need me after the season," says Thrift, reached by telephone at his Fairfax, Virginia, home last week. "I'm ready for another challenge. But it would have to be a good fit."

A "good fit" is a phrase that certainly wouldn't describe Thrift's thoroughly distasteful five months under George Steinbrenner, who pounded him with personal attacks, hounded him with angry, late-night phone calls, and, as punishment, kept him from traveling on the road. The experience made this past year almost a recovery period for Thrift, who's rehabed by promoting his book *The Game According to Me* and working as a baseball commentator for cable TV's Sports News Network.

"I don't regret it," he says of his Yankee days. "It wasn't a total loss, because I learned from it. I learned how things can get messed up."

While eyeing several clubs, "imagining how I would look," Thrift has neither pursued nor been offered anything. But sources say he's keenly interested in the Braves' GM job, a position currently held—barely—by Bobby Cox, who's also managing the last-place club to new lows.

"I don't like campaigning for a job that isn't open yet," said Thrift, who wouldn't confirm his interest in Atlanta. "I'll just wait and see what develops after the season. I don't know even if there'll be an opportunity. But, I'd assume, if there is one, it would come from a club that's struggling."

● Phillies GM Lee Thomas met several times with Lenny Dykstra's

it's voodoo, but it's Catholicism with a different name. When I pray to Chango, for instance, it's Santa Barbara."

Guillén tells me he picked up the discipline a few years ago from a friend he grew up with in Venezuela. "It's about protecting yourself and trying to be clean," he says. "I'm in the beginning stage; it's called *aleyo*. Every Thursday I dress in white. I don't drink. I don't go out, I pray for a while. A lot of guys used to make fun of me, but not anymore. At my house I got my beads and my saints and an altar. My son wants to be a *santero*."

Obviously protected from the evil spirits of nasty curveballs and suffocating strike zones, Guillén is having his best season at the plate; even now, with his average in the .290s after a mild slump, he is still tied for the team lead. Essentially a slap hitter, he is just as entranced and fluid at the plate as he is on the field—he waits coiled in a deep crouch, rocking with the easy movements of a salsa dancer (he digs countryman Oscar De León the best), bat tilted like a divining rod, then ferociously springs into the pitch, his top hand flying off in a Walt Hrniak-inspired follow-through. "Hrniak [the Chisox batting instructor] has taught the players to follow the ball into the bat," says Frank Diaz, manager of Hispanic community relations for the White Sox. "Before he came along Ozzie was swinging at almost anything."

On a team that's an odd collection of faceless but steady players (Scott Fletcher, Robin Ventura, Sammy Sosa), A's-style beefy slug-

gers (Calderón, Carlton Fisk, Dan Pasqua), and an affable sociopath (Steve "Psycho" Lyons), Guillén stands out as a bona fide team leader. "The team management has been careful to build around Ozzie," Diaz insists. "Ozzie is special," says manager Jeff Torborg, whose deconstructive meetings-on-every-phase-of-the-game style makes Torborg Ball a successful fusion of La Russa and Derrida. "He's a presence on the field who's come into his own. He's sharp as a tack." Torborg even let Guillén bring the lineup card to home plate that night at Comiskey—Oz was a goof, his cap slung forward, leaning over exaggeratedly to make sure he heard what the ump's were saying.

Ever since the 1919 Black Sox scandal, the Pale Hose have been a pretty goofy franchise. The insipid Go-Go Sox incarnation (imagine a team with someone named Minnie Minoso), the Bill Veeck inanities, the constantly changing bad uniforms, all have conspired to keep them second to the cloying Chicagoand-fave Cubs. And the urban-renewal policies the city followed by surrounding Comiskey—which aptly resembles one of the South Side's rotting warehouses—with massive, fortresslike housing projects, didn't help. The White Sox should have changed their name to the White Flight, while the Cubs' Wrigley Field prospers on the North Side, home to the minions of the financial services/information economy.

Inside, Comiskey has taken on a Coney Island-of-the-Midwest atmosphere: Andy the Clown, his

red nose flashing, tells me he once sat on a girl's lap and made her pee; a deranged man in a Santa Claus suit walks around with a banner proclaiming the "Miracle on 35th Street," and a group of women lurk behind the home dug-out waiting alongside a placard reading "Drop 'Em Lyons." "Psycho" Lyons, who made all the highlight films when he stripped to his underwear at first base last month ("I forgot where I was"), is no Jimmy Piersall—he's actually a glib free spirit quick to quote Roger Angell's new *Yorker* observation that Sox boosters refer to Cub fans as "yuppie scum." "He's the most beloved .200 hitter this town has ever seen," sneered a cynical beat writer.

Juiced by Torborg's genial manner ("It's old fashioned, but we approach it from a family standpoint. We enjoy one another") and persistent planning, a fleet outfield à la St. Louis (further improved by the recently acquired Phil Bradley), and a deep bullpen powered by AL save leader Bobby Thigpen, the Sox will probably keep Canseco & Co. reaching for steroid substitutes. Like last year's Surprise Team, the Orioles, the low-wage Sox are literally hungry; the White Sox' average annual salary is less than Canseco's monthly paycheck.

But it's Guillén's joyful athleticism that holds the Sox together. As long as El Santero de Oz keeps diving, floating, 360ing as he takes DP shovels from second baseman Fletcher, and slapping sweet sweat tags on runners trying to stretch singles into doubles, Comiskey will be rockin' through September, at least.

Rundown Mike Geffner

agent, Alan Meersand, last week. But the two sides moved no closer together, with the remaining sticking points being the deal's option years and an incentive clause for plate appearances. The team's original offer, made a little more than a week ago, would've guaranteed the potential free-agent outfielder \$7.15 million over three years with the chance for an additional \$900 each season for 650 or more plate appearances. But Meersand countered by asking for a four-year, \$10.5 million deal with the chance to escalate to \$11.7 million should Dykstra make 550 or more plate appearances each season.

Thomas and Meersand also remain a year apart on option years: Thomas keeps insisting on two, while Meersand seems willing to only agree to one. Look for something to break, one way or the other, this week or next.

INSIDE PITCHES: The Yankees have talked with several clubs about unloading Jesse Barfield before the August 31 deadline, but expect them to manage no better than a trade of Randy Velarde to a noncontender.

... The Yankees' veteran pitchers have nothing against Stump Merrill personally, they just think he shouldn't be managing in the majors. In addition to grousing about Merrill's quick hooks, they're annoyed at his "minor-league pep talks" during trips to the mound. ... "Prime Time" Japan: Delon Sanders, interviewed by NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation, the country's largest TV network, before a Falcons practice session last week, told questioner Fusao Mashimo off-mike, "I can't speak no Japanese, man, but don't worry, I'm cool." ... Rangers' dis-

abled relief ace Jeff Russell and manager Bobby Valentine had a wild closed-door shouting match last week. The source of the disagreement? Russell, who underwent elbow surgery after the 35th game, wants to sit out the rest of the season; Valentine, on the other hand, wants Russell to "do something for his money." (Russell is in the first year of a three-year, \$6.3 million contract.) Valentine also accused Russell of not working hard during the off-season and delaying surgery until signing his contract. I suspect Valentine will now push for Russell's ouster while trying to convince management he can get along without him.

... The Twins, sick of watching fly balls continually drop in front of Kirby Puckett, are prepared to move their four-time Gold Glove center fielder to right in '91. ... Orioles' leading game-winner Dave Johnson, eligible to come off the DL this week, is concerned, along with his club, about his persistent lower-back pain. "I can get out of bed and do jumping jacks without it bothering me," he says. "But it hurts when I pitch. I played catch the other day—not even off the mound—and felt fine for the first three minutes. Then, all of a sudden, all the pain returned." Johnson underwent an extensive examination and took four painkiller shots last Friday. ... After misplaying two balls in a game last week, Blue Jays left fielder George Bell endured a minute-long chorus of hometown boos during his last at bat. Afterward, in the clubhouse, an incensed Bell screamed, "They have nothing to be upset about. They should be happy. They got a \$2 million player who goes out and plays hard every day. Oakland's got a \$5 million guy [Jose Canseco] who plays

half the season." ... The Twins dipped into Triple-A for an emergency starter last week and surprisingly plucked Paul Abbott with his ugly 5-14 record and 4.96 ERA. Abbott, not surprisingly, ended up lasting three-plus innings, allowing seven runs on six hits while walking five. After the game, left fielder Dan Gladden ripped the club from top to bottom for bringing up the too-raw hurler. "It's not fair to have us take the field with somebody who doesn't belong," he said. "I roomed with guys who went 10-10 in the minors and never got so much as a cup of coffee."

... Expos third baseman Tim Lincecum, becoming a 10-and-five man last week, says with a laugh, "I hope this gives me the right to veto our [rumored] move to Buffalo." ... The Red Sox tried to set up a trade for Astros reliever Dave Smith, but sources say their AL East rivals, the Orioles, blocked the deal by claiming the pitcher on waivers. ... At last glance, the Ripkens of Baltimore, Cal and Billy, have hit a combined .357 since July 23 and committed a total of two errors since May 29. ... Not a great week for Cubs' rookie starter Lance Dickson: After going 0-3 with a 7.24 ERA, the team's 1990 No. 1 draft pick was demoted to the minors hours before landing in the hospital with a season-ending knee infection. ... Don't look for the Orioles to re-sign under-achieving catcher Mickey Tettleton at the end of the season. Tettleton, hitting .156 with men in scoring position and with 11 of his 12 homers coming between May 17 and June 23, wants a lucrative four-year deal; the Orioles want a productive player. ... Red Sox right fielder Dwight Evans will undergo back surgery during the off-season.