



August 05, 1996

Prime Chuck

A leaner Knoblauch is making mincemeat of opposing pitchers.....

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When the Twins played the Orioles on July 22, Minnesota second baseman Chuck Knoblauch avoided a hitless night by singling in the ninth inning. When he arrived at first, Orioles first baseman Rafael Palmeiro asked him, one top hitter to another, "Don't you ever take an 0-fer?" Knoblauch smiled and said, "No, I have a 100-game hitting streak going."

It only seems that way. At week's end Knoblauch was leading the major leagues with a .369 average, and recently he had been especially torrid. Through Sunday he had gone 45 for 106 (.425) in his last 28 games, including a streak of 10 consecutive multihit games that ended July 11—the longest such streak in the major leagues since 1978.

"I told him before he went to Philadelphia for the All-Star Game that he had had one of the greatest half seasons I've ever seen," says Twins designated hitter Paul Molitor, a 19-year major leaguer. "He's so disciplined. I've never seen a hitter have so many 10-pitch at bats, then draw a walk. I've never seen a player who has been in the majors for only five years who could do what he can. It took me so long to learn to go to the plate with a plan, then carry it out. I still don't do it like him."

Knoblauch, 28, has always been a disciplined player. When Chuck was growing up in Houston, his father, Ray, a high school baseball coach, built a mound in the backyard so he could throw batting practice to Chuck. Ray also hit as many grounders a day as Chuck wanted, to sharpen his fielding. "I used to count them up to 200," says Chuck.

That discipline became even more rigid after the 1993 season, Knoblauch's third in the majors, when his batting average dropped to .277—a 20-point decrease from the year before—and the Twins lost 91 games. "That was the worst season for me and the team," he says. "We were down early so often, I gave away a lot of at bats. I learned that year never to give away at bats no matter what the score."

In 1994 Knoblauch bounced back to hit .312 with 53 extra-base hits, but he wasn't satisfied. The next spring he showed up at camp weighing 168 pounds, 12 fewer than the year before. The weight loss and a 6% reduction in body fat—he's at 6.8% now—came from working out with personal trainer Philip Green. "I learned how to eat," says Knoblauch. "The toughest thing I had to eat was yams, but now they're my favorite things. There are a lot of ballplayers who feel, Why mess with success? But I wanted to make myself better. I'm lighter and stronger."

Last year Knoblauch hit .333 with 53 extra-base hits, and this season he has been even better. At week's end he was on a pace for 73 extra-base hits, and he could cash in on that achievement if he becomes a free agent after this season. That hinges on one giant variable, however: the completion of a new labor agreement between the players and the owners.

Knoblauch may be the most desirable of a number of players (*list, above*) who fall just short of six full years of major league service but who could become free agents if the players are awarded service time for the days lost during the strike of 1994 and '95. That may happen because the players have been given service time after every previous work stoppage. If Knoblauch gets to test his value in the open market, he will probably be seeking between \$5.5 million and \$6 million a year for four or five seasons.

That puts the Twins in a difficult spot. They're trying to get the public to build them a new ballpark in the Twin Cities area, but the club is almost out of contention this year, they aren't drawing well, and they have lost the most popular player in club history, Kirby Puckett, who was forced to retire on July 12 because of glaucoma in his right eye. Minnesota can hardly afford to lose Knoblauch, now its best player, but it may not be able to match what bigger-market teams like the Yankees and the Dodgers might offer him. As a result the club may have dealt him by this Wednesday's trading deadline, after which any player traded must first clear waivers. A player of Knoblauch's stature would surely be claimed by one or more contending clubs.

Unlike Puckett and another Twin Cities hero, retired first baseman Kent Hrbek, Knoblauch isn't emotionally tied to the Twins and will not take less money to stay with them. "I enjoy playing in Minnesota," he says, "but the lesson I've learned from Kirby's retirement is that you might wake up tomorrow and not be able to play anymore. You have to make the most of everything when you can."

After the 1995 season the Twins tried to sign Knoblauch to a long-term deal, first offering him a four-year contract worth \$16 million, but he wanted \$17.8 million. As Minnesota increased its offer, Knoblauch's figure also rose, and the negotiations broke down. On the baseball field, in contract negotiations and with everything else in life, Knoblauch is a maniacal competitor who has a fierce drive to win. If the other top second basemen in the major leagues—the Orioles' Roberto Alomar and the Astros' Craig Biggio—are making \$5.5 million a year, then Knoblauch believes he shouldn't get a cent less. His desire to be recognized as one of the game's best players also brings with it an arrogance that hasn't made Knoblauch the most popular guy in the Twins' clubhouse. Earlier this year Knoblauch got called out on strikes, was ejected for arguing, then screamed at the umpire, "I've got the best eye in the league!"

In the next few months, if he succeeds in winning his first batting title and becomes the premier free agent on the open market, he may find himself in the best spot in all of baseball.