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CENTER OF TURMOIL

By DAVID O'BRIEN Staff Writer
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MELBOURNE — It's not as if troubled Marlins center fielder Chuck Carr isn't concerned about the trade rumors swirling around him.

Right now, he just has a far more important matter to deal with.

"They found out my dad has a tumor in his head," Carr said of Charles Sr., who is expected to have surgery as soon as next week in his hometown of San Bernardino, Calif.

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"He could go at any time. He's already gone blind in one eye. ... It's hard to accept, because he's dad, and you feel like dad is invincible."

Though the two have a close relationship and talk often, Carr said he didn't learn of his father's illness until a few weeks ago.

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"I feel bad, because he didn't want to tell me," he said. "He didn't want to bother me or let it affect my game.

"But I would want to be able to see him and tell him, 'I love you, dad.' Because he's always been there to help me."

Carr, who reported to Marlins camp Tuesday and participated in a voluntary light workout, said he hopes to fly to California to be with his father once a date is set for surgery.

Meanwhile, the center fielder is in limbo heading into an abbreviated spring training that officially begins Friday but is already under way. Carr knows there's a chance he might not even be a Marlin by Friday.

If the team succeeds in making a trade for Montreal Expos All-Star center fielder Marquis Grissom, Carr becomes expendable and would be traded for any viable pitching prospect he might attract.

"If they want to go after Marquis Grissom, I understand, because he's a great player," Carr said. "But Chuck Carr's going to have a good season, whether it's for the Marlins or someplace else."

Carr, who lives in Miami, spent most of March working out in Melbourne. He's a little bigger than in past years, and said he's dedicated himself to becoming a better overall player. He believes a .320 average is within reach if he learns to be patient at the plate.

Last year, he stole 32 bases but hit only .263 and had the second-worst on-base percentage (.296) among National League leadoff hitters. He lost the leadoff job to Jerry Browne by season's end.

As the season wore on, Carr said he began to listen too much to critics, and that it affected his performance. Without many close friends to turn to among teammates, he kept the pressure inside.

"It just got to the point where I didn't want to come to the field," said Carr, who hit .234 in June and .184 in July. All the while, he kept the same public persona: upbeat, head held high.

"A lot of people look at me and say, 'He's cocky,' Well, it's just that I'm trying to remain positive. That's the way my dad raised me."

During the offseason, Carr hoped to work on his game in the Dominican League, but after arriving there he was told he wasn't allowed to play because of a previous Mexican League suspension.

"This offseason has been a battle, emotionally," said Carr, who is also in the middle of a divorce proceeding. He and his wife, Candace, have two sons, Sheldon (2 1/2) and Aeron, who turns 1 in September.

Spending time with his sons provided some of the few moments of relief for Carr over the past 7 1/2 months. While the strike's end was relief for most players, Carr's anxiety only rose as the opening of camp arrived and his position with the team appeared so tenuous.

He drove to Melbourne Monday afternoon. He had so much nervous energy that he washed his truck in the evening, sat around his room thinking about baseball and the strike, and couldn't get to sleep until 4 a.m.

"I didn't know what to expect when I walked into the clubhouse today," Carr said. "Even now, I don't know what is going to happen with myself. You're dodging bullets left and right."

Marlins General Manager Dave Dombrowski said of Carr's situation: "You're sensitive to it, but I don't know how else you make deals. We did speak to [Carr's agent] Drew Rosenhaus over the winter, and he said Chuck understood [why the Marlins were pursuing Grissom]."

"But I think uncertainty is the hardest thing to deal with sometimes."

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