

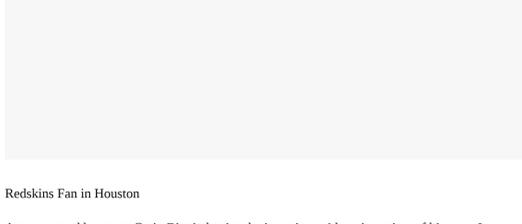
# In Attempt to Stay On, Gooden Takes Some Off

By **Richard Justice**  
March 12, 2000

For those who remember Dwight Gooden as the guy who had the most unhitable stuff in baseball, it's sad to watch him trying to make the Astros as a fifth starter until Scott Elarton returns from shoulder surgery a month or so into the season.

Gooden has made the full transition from pure power to getting by on precise control, changing speeds and a decent curveball. He's still capable of winning games on those days when his control is almost perfect, but there aren't many of those days. Gooden hasn't pitched a complete game since 1996 and was let go by the Indians after going seven innings in only three of his 22 starts in 1999.

"I think Houston is a good fit for me," he said. "At this stage in my career, it's all about winning. I'm not the same kind of pitcher I was years ago when I could fall behind in the count, and everyone knew what was coming. Now, I have to get ahead in the count and be more of a complete pitcher."



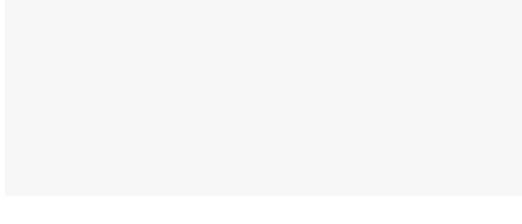
## Redskins Fan in Houston

Astros second baseman Craig Biggio begins the interview with an interview of his own. In addition to being one of baseball's best players, he's also a Redskins season-ticket holder--"Joe Gibbs section, near the 50-yard line."--so last week when I shake hands and want to talk baseball, he's thinking football.

"The Redskins aren't going to pass up [Penn State linebacker] LaVar Arrington, are they?" he asks. "That guy is awesome. He could make the defense special. . . . And what about Stephen Davis? They're going to get him signed, aren't they?"

He wants to know about Redskins owner Daniel Snyder. Does he deserve his hands-on reputation? Is he too hands on? "He should be involved," Biggio said, "but I hope he's not trying to coach the team."

Biggio grew up in New York, but when an older brother adopted the Redskins, "I started rooting for them, too. Now, it's kind of a passion."



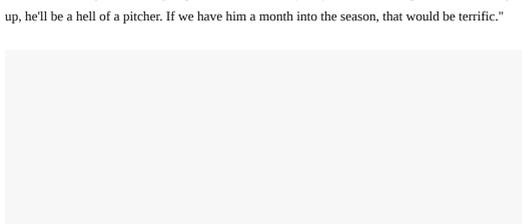
## Avery Rejoins Braves

Braves Manager Bobby Cox was standing in the outfield talking to John Smoltz, Tom Glavine and Greg Maddux one day early in spring training when he happened to ask how Steve Avery was doing.

When Glavine said Avery was still home waiting for a team to call, Cox did just that. A few days later, Avery was back with the team he spent his first seven big league seasons with. He's recovering from a shoulder operation that should help him regain some of the velocity lost the last three seasons when he won just 22 games for the Red Sox and Reds.

He probably won't break camp with the Braves, but Cox is hopeful he'll be the Avery of old by May or June. With John Smoltz out for the season with a shoulder injury, Avery may find himself back in a pennant race after all.

"I thought he'd signed with Detroit," Cox said. "When I heard he was home, I called him. He's so smart and so tough that if he gets pain-free, his velocity may increase 4-5 mph. With his change-up, he'll be a hell of a pitcher. If we have him a month into the season, that would be terrific."

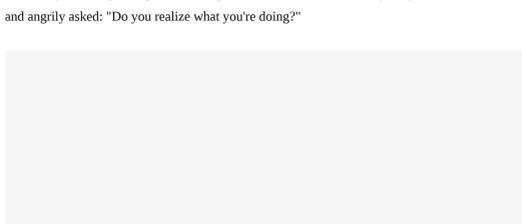


## Attitude Adjustment

Padres second-year catcher Ben Davis, the heralded second pick of the 1995 draft, has spent this spring trying to prove he's not the jerk he appeared to be during a brief appearance last season. At various times, he declined to warm up pitchers in the bullpen and acted as if he had proven himself. Some in the organization believe his immaturity came from the fact he's a pampered prep school graduate who has been told how special he is for most of his baseball life.

When first baseman Wally Joyner was traded to the Braves, he said: "Ben Davis is going to be a problem for the Padres. He hasn't learned the ropes. But he doesn't know he's doing anything wrong. He thinks he deserves to be in there because he's Ben Davis, high draft choice."

Davis may have begun to get the message late in the season when Tony Gwynn confronted him and angrily asked: "Do you realize what you're doing?"

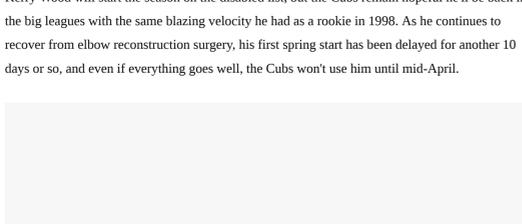


"I told him, 'Man, you've got more ability behind the plate than we've ever had, and you're only 22,'" Gwynn said. "If you don't take advantage of the situation, you're not going to have anyone to blame this year [but yourself]. But you've got to work at it. And you've got to have [your teammates] see you work at it."

Davis apparently agrees. "Looking back on it, it was a stupid thing to do," he said. "But I was just so frustrated at the time."

## Wood Update

Kerry Wood will start the season on the disabled list, but the Cubs remain hopeful he'll be back in the big leagues with the same blazing velocity he had as a rookie in 1998. As he continues to recover from elbow reconstruction surgery, his first spring start has been delayed for another 10 days or so, and even if everything goes well, the Cubs won't use him until mid-April.



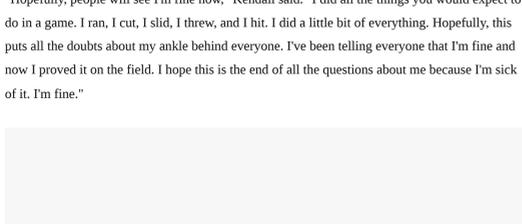
"When I said we are going to be cautious with him, I can't state that enough," Cubs Manager Don Baylor said. "It could mean May 1, who knows? Any type of pain, and he is off the field."

## Kendall Back

Pirates catcher Jason Kendall, a two-time all-star, appears completely healthy after suffering a gruesome ankle injury July 4. After surgery to repair a dislocation and four torn ligaments, Kendall returned last weekend by catching three innings and scoring two runs in his first game.

Far from the fears his days behind the plate might be over, Kendall appears on his way back to being one of the game's top catchers.

"Hopefully, people will see I'm fine now," Kendall said. "I did all the things you would expect to do in a game. I ran, I cut, I slid, I threw, and I hit. I did a little bit of everything. Hopefully, this puts all the doubts about my ankle behind everyone. I've been telling everyone that I'm fine and now I proved it on the field. I hope this is the end of all the questions about me because I'm sick of it. I'm fine."



Pirates Manager Gene Lamont liked what he saw so much he started him three straight days, junking the original plan to catch him only every other day for a while.

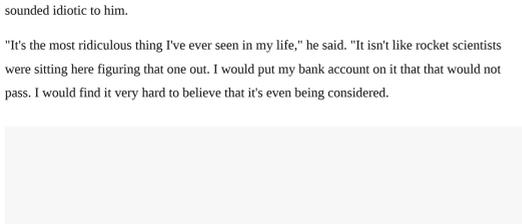
"Jason wants to jump right into it," Lamont said. "We talked about it and decided to go ahead and play him again right away. He needs the at-bats, too, because it's been a long time since he played."

## Alignment Problem

The Devil Rays are agreeable to a realignment plan that would shift them to the National League, but Diamondbacks chief Jerry Colangelo is lobbying to keep his team in the NL.

Others aren't happy, either. Upon hearing the Cardinals might wind up in a division with the Devil Rays, Braves and Marlins, Mark McGwire said breaking up the Cardinals-Cubs rivalry sounded idiotic to him.

"It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen in my life," he said. "It isn't like rocket scientists were sitting here figuring that one out. I would put my bank account on it that that would not pass. I would find it very hard to believe that it's even being considered."



"It's inevitable that there will be realignment, but that's a radical realignment. With that realignment, there's no common sense involved. It's not that difficult to sit down and do realignment with a map."

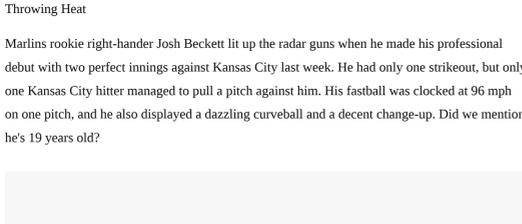
Another proposal has the Astros joining the Braves, Devil Rays and Marlins, with the Cardinals staying in a division with the Cubs, Reds and Brewers.

Asked about no longer having the Cubs as a division rival, Cardinals President Mark Lamping said: "It stinks. I'm assuming it's a typo. If you believe the thinking that regional rivalries are important, how can you possibly separate the Cardinals and the Cubs? You just don't do that."

Commissioner Bud Selig yesterday tried to alleviate the concerns, saying no final decision on realignment had been made.

## Throwing Heat

Marlins rookie right-hander Josh Beckett lit up the radar guns when he made his professional debut with two perfect innings against Kansas City last week. He had only one strikeout, but only one Kansas City hitter managed to pull a pitch against him. His fastball was clocked at 96 mph on one pitch, and he also displayed a dazzling curveball and a decent change-up. Did we mention he's 19 years old?



"That's big-time stuff," Marlins Manager John Boles said. "They were late with their swings. He had composure. I wish I could find something about his performance I didn't like, but I honestly can't. It was impressive. You don't want to go crazy with your praise, but my goodness gracious."

Beckett was the second pick of last June's draft and received a four-year, \$7 million contract that includes a \$3.6 million signing bonus. His last appearance in a game was a year ago when he took the mound for Spring High in the Texas high school playoffs.

Beckett probably will start the season at Class A, but the Marlins will be watching him closely. Many scouts believe he'll be in the big leagues by September.