

Sky King Writing Tape-Measure Tale

By JACK LANG

NEW YORK—Does an artist appreciate one of his own masterpieces? Is an opera star pleased after hitting a difficult high note? Does a home-run hitter get his kicks from a tape-measure job?

If the home-run hitter is Dave Kingman, the answer is: "Not especially. What difference does it make how far they go? I'd just as soon hit a single that wins a ball game."

In the realm of home-run hitters today, Kingman is acknowledged by many to be the Big Bopper of Baseball. His shots are likely to require the use of the tape measure more often than anyone else's in the business.

In all deference to Philadelphia's Mike Schmidt, with whom Kingman is waging a neck-and-neck race for the major league home-run leadership, Sky King—as his Met teammates refer to him—probably hits the longest home runs in baseball today.

A RECENT BLAST in Chicago is believed, by amateur surveyors, to have traveled 600 feet. It went out of Wrigley Field, high over the left-center fence, crossed Waveland avenue on the fly and finally hit the porch roof of the third house up the block on Kenmore street.

The next day, Sky King hit two "mini" jobs. All they did was crash off the sides—on the fly—of two houses across Waveland avenue.

Of the three in two days that left the Cubs, Mets and Wrigley Field fans gaping, only the third gave Dave any particular pleasure.

"That one came in the ninth inning and won the game," he pointed out.

Just prior to that homer, catcher Randy Hundley and pitcher Tom Dettore had had several meetings at the mound before a pitch was thrown. When they finally got their signs straightened out, Hundley said to Kingman:

"We're through with all the meetings. We're really going to throw one this time."

Kingman hit the next pitch for a home run, scoring two runners ahead of him.

"THANKS FOR throwing that," Kingman said to Hundley as he stepped on the plate.

Last spring, shortly after the Mets had purchased Kingman from the Giants, he faced Catfish Hunter in a game at Fort Lauderdale Stadium and hit what many Mets consider to be his longest homer to date. It sailed high out of the park and landed in the middle of the infield of another park beyond the stadium.

"That's the longest home run I've ever seen," said Mickey Mantle, whose drives with the Yankees evoked the term "tape measure" in the lexicon of home-run historians.

Referring to his Florida blow, "I've hit balls longer than that," Kingman said modestly, which is not out of character for this extremely shy and somewhat introverted giant of a man.

"Before I turned professional, I hit longer balls. I don't get any particular pleasure out of the distance of a drive. I know if I hit it right, it will go out."

That's what makes Kingman the extra special home run threat he is. He doesn't even have to hit them good to have them go out.

"I didn't have the good feeling on any of those three," he said. There's a difference. I know when I hit a ball good.

"HE REALLY believes it," said Joe Torre, who may be as close to Kingman as any man on the Mets. "He really be-

lieves he can hit a baseball better than he hit those three. I'd like to be around to see how far he hits one when he gets that good feeling."

Few people have been able to get close to Dave. He prefers it that way. There's nothing standoffish about him. Some people even feel he is strange . . . off in another world, so they say.

"It's just that I prefer a private life of my own. I like to live quietly," said the lean, lanky, powerful outfielder.

A bachelor, Dave recently purchased a four-bedroom home in Cos Cob, Conn. People thought it strange that a single man would want such a big home in the country.

"I enjoy playing in New York, but I don't enjoy living in the city," he said. "I like peace and quiet. I like to get away from it all. I enjoy woodworking. I enjoy making things. I'll have my own shop in this place."

LEAVING THE San Francisco area—which he loved—last year was not easy for Kingman. Leaving the Giants was something else. He virtually demanded they get rid of him, which was like handing the Mets a super star on a gold platter.

"I wasn't going to sign with the Giants last year and I told them that," Kingman explained. "We never discussed money. It was just who they would trade me to. I just felt I was getting nowhere with the Giants. I hit 29 home runs my first year and played less the next year. And when I played, I played all over. No one position."

Kingman's unrest was one of the biggest breaks the Mets ever got. The background of the deal also puts to lie the theory that the Giants sold him because Horace Stoneham needed money.

"That may be," said Bob Scheffing, who got the first clue Dave was available, "but I think they just decided he wasn't going to play for them and they'd sell him."



Dave Kingman . . . A Modest Mauler

"We had always been interested in Dave and inquired a couple of times when I was general manager if he was available. The Giants knew we wanted him. So there I am one day last spring getting ready to tee off on the first hole at the Arizona Country Club and Charley Fox comes up to me.

"HE ASKED ME if the Mets were still interested in Kingman and I said we were. He told me he thought the Giants would sell him now. I couldn't wait to get to a phone to call Joe McDonald. He completed the deal. There was never any talk of a player trade. It was strictly cash."

Various sums have been discussed on what the Mets paid for Kingman. McDonald, the general manager of the Mets, concedes that "\$150,000 is about right."

The Mets got more than that back last season when Kingman hit 36 homers in 134 games, second-ranked figures in the majors and only two fewer than Schmidt hit playing in considerably more games.

It is not likely that Schmidt will appear in more games than Dave this year. McDonald and Manager Joe Frazier see eye to eye on that.

"Joe Frazier told me at the start of the season that he was going to get more out of me than any manager ever got out of me," Kingman said happily. "Joe Frazier is beautiful. The man told me the job was mine and I would play every day. That is all I ask. I have never played a full season. The only criticism he has had of my play has been constructive."

KINGMAN IS happy with the rapport he has with McDonald.

"We had a good session this winter," he recalled. "I discussed with Joe every facet of the game and my overall performance. He discussed with me what he wants to see in one of his players. I have a good idea of what he wants from me."

One thing the Mets would like is for Dave to make more contact. That, of course, would cut down on his strikeouts, which are usually among the highest in the league.

"I've learned to live with strikeouts," Kingman confesses. "It's part of my game. I just hope to have fewer of them."

Kingman's strikeout ratio per times at bat is higher at this point in his career than most home-run hitters of note, Dave has learned.

"But my home-run ratio is right up there with them and that's good," he said with a smile.

KINGMAN HAS set no goals for himself with regard to homers or RBIs.

"I had a good year last year in some areas . . . home runs and RBIs for the amount of games I played. But I want to bring my average up. I think a good year for me would be somewhere between .250 and .270. If I do that, the other things will come."

How many home runs is he capable of?

"I don't even want to think about that," Kingman contended. "It's like after those three home runs in Chicago. Somebody asked me if I'd like to play a full year in Wrigley Field. They couldn't understand when I said no. I wouldn't want to play in a small park. I'd be thinking home run too much. The size of the park doesn't matter. If I hit 'em right, they'll go out in any park."

Amen.

Mets' Grote Turns Into Good Guy and Hot Hitter

By JACK LANG

NEW YORK—Under the heading of items "Least Likely to Happen in Baseball," the idea of Jerry Grote leading the league in hitting or winning the Good Guy Award has to rank high on the list.

Perish the thought, say his detractors.

Not so improbable, says his growing legion of admirers.

Well, honestly, no one really expects the Mets' catcher to lead the league in hitting. But to develop into a .300 hitter? Yes, that is distinctly within the realm of possibility.

AND THE Good Guy Award? Don't laugh. Unless you've had the pleasure of his company lately, you'd never realize that this is the same fellow who was once the most cantankerous player in baseball.

Sportswriters who once dreaded the thought of having to ask him a question for fear of having their heads snapped off now find him to be the Personality Kid. Positively charming. And it is no facade.

The Mets couldn't care less about his personality as long as he produced on the field. And for 10 years they've delighted in his outstanding defensive work.

If Jerry isn't the best defensive catcher in the league, the Mets dare you to name one better. With that glove on his left hand and the rifle arm dangling from the right side, Grote is the peer of Johnny Bench or Steve Yeager or any other fine receiver you can name.

BUT HIS new-found success with the bat is a bonus the Mets hardly expected in his 10th and 11th seasons.

Whether or not anyone realized it, only Ted Simmons and Manny Sanguillen, among National League catchers, hit better than Grote last year, when he compiled a personal high of .295.

By way of proving that was no fluke, Jerry got off to a sizzling start. At the conclusion of the second week of the current season, he was indeed leading the league.

What brought about the trans-

formation from a .248 career hitter and an irritating personality?

"I DON'T KNOW if I'm Mr. Good Guy," Grote said, laughing at the question, "but I do know of three things that helped me over the last year. One was TM, another was Phil Cavarretta and a third was rooming with a guy like Del Unser."

"I got into TM (transcendental meditation) through Tom Leopold, who started all the Phillies on it," Grote explained. "This is my second year at it. It's very relaxing, but the big thing is it takes the stress away."

"I've been rooming with Unser ever since he came over here last year. It's the first thing we do every morning before going down for breakfast. It's a great way to start the day."

SOME OF Unser's pleasant personality rubbed off on Grote. But rooming with Del also had beneficial side effects.

"All my years with the Mets I always roomed with a pitcher until

last year," Grote related. "First, it was Nolan Ryan and then Jon Matlack. The idea was to get us thinking together because we worked together and, as a result, most of our discussions revolved around pitching to other guys."

"Then Del came along and suddenly we were talking offensively. Talking about hitting. A lot of the ideas we exchanged have been helpful."

Grote also paid tribute to Cavarretta, the Mets' hitting instructor.

"HE WORKED quite a bit with me in spring training and at home and he pointed out some flaws. I had a habit of not staying back. He corrected me. He's kind of a soft-sell guy. I asked him not to wait if he saw me doing something wrong, but to tell me immediately."

While others may be given some of the credit for the difference in Grote, it's the man himself who deserves it all. Bud Harrelson summed it up best: "Jerry Grote is a decent human being."

Gotham Gossip: Ed Kranepool wonders what a guy's got to do to make the All-Star ballot. "I hit .323 last year, but I'm not on the ballot," he pointed out. "Seven guys who hit less than me are. I'm proud of the fact that the fans voted me fifth last year on a write-in vote. They know more than the people who make up the ballot."

Del Unser suffered a severe bruise of his right elbow that forced him out of action for a week. He was hit by Lynn McGlothen in a St. Louis beanball war following his second homer in as many games. Del won one game with a 17th-inning homer. . . . Mickey Lolich, who had not gone to bat the last three seasons in the American League, stroked singles his first two times up in a game against the Cardinals.

Dave Kingman has the green light to run any time he's on the bases. He's probably the fastest of the Mets. Dave was three-for-three in his early attempts at larceny.