

On Target

By Sturgis Hedrick



THEY'VE BEEN playing baseball for at least 150 years, but a Randy Grady arrives on the scene once in a lifetime.

That's why the sports news that supersedes all else today comes with the word that Randy has done it again. This scrappy super-tough catcher of the Eastern Blues bounced back from what appeared to be the most severe injury of his life Friday night.

This First Class Boatswain's Mate in the United States Coast Guard has come up smiling so many times in his brief but meteoric baseball career that his thousands upon thousands of admirers in Carteret County some time take his resilience for granted.

"Oh, Randy will shake it off," they'll say. And these fans mean well, because they have seen him take so many ferocious injuries in his 3-year Seashore League career.

BUT FRIDAY NIGHT, as the defending champion Carteret Tides humbled the leading Blues, 16-6, in Swinson Park, looked like the end. From all outward indications, this latest crippling blow could have spelled the end of Mr. Grady's playing days.

To a layman, in fact, the complete immobility of both his legs looked like a possible paralysis. The medical technicians who transported Randy first to Carteret General Hospital and then to Cherry Point fully concurred in the potential gravity of the situation.

It took a sickening 1-2 combination of blows to fell the Blues' catcher and keep him down. The first came in the form of a blazing fast ball foul-tipped into his groin area. Randy walked in the 7th and dove back safely to 1st on a pick-off attempt.

This head-first leap to the bag, hard



RANDY GRADY

on the heels of the foul-tip, knocked the 24-year-old fire-eating Blue out of the game for keeps.

BUT THE MOST disturbing aspect of it all for the Grady family came as an aftermath of this night of horrors. It seems that Randy has been playing for one or 2 years or more with a fractured spinal bone, incurred while sliding into a base in the already-forgotten past.

A boxing referee could have counted at least 20 minutes over an absolutely prone Mr. Grady, while he lay on the sidelines awaiting the emergency evacuation.

He took at least a 5-minute count, again prone, while he lay on the starboard side of home plate after that vicious impact of the foul tip.

And, sure enough, up popped this Spirit of the Blues, back behind home plate, with a casual observation, "I'm all right." He took a bit longer to bounce back from the head-first slide back to first base.

PARDON THE PERSONAL reference, but the reporter who plays "On Target" on this typewriter has been playing, associating with or covering sports since the age of about 8. (And that was a few years before last Friday night.)

Ty Cobb, Jackie Robinson, Ed Stanky and Solly Hemus — just to mention a tiny few out of the many — had what it took in the courage department.

But this First Class Boatswain's Mate Grady rates as a very special guy, unique, a breed far far above the norm.

Let's overlook for the moment the hard knocks he has absorbed in his 3 years as a Seashore League All-Star. We've all seen the same cruel blows sideline lesser catchers.

Mere mortals, they.

BUT THIS RANDY Grady, whew! In his first year with the Blues, 1974, he hit .412 and was voted Most Valuable Player by the guys who knew him best, his teammates.

Let's just check back to a few games ago when it appeared he had suffered a broken right wrist, certainly a badly-damaged throwing and batting lever that generates the vital power.

In the blink of an eyelash, Randy was throwing once again with the best. Not right away like the Grady of old. But still with a quick get-away, zip and accuracy that make potential base-stealers look foolhardy.

It added up to a different blight on Randy's power as a right-hand hitter. So what did he do? He turned over and batted left. And managed to get good wood on the ball in his 2 official trips Friday night. He smashed a towering fly to center and singled sharply to left.

SOME ATHLETES HAVE the courage of a brave bull fighting a matador in the plazas of Spain. They keep coming back for more and more punishment.

But our Randy once again hardly qualifies as a brave bull. He has the grace of those Spaniards who fight the bulls. And he certainly could tip-toe his way through a china shop.

Coast Guardsman Grady, however, owns an in-bred will-to-win and a team-relaxing sense of humor that spells out the Spirit of the Blues. He keeps them together.

And, you know a funny thing about this Randy. He's such a regular guy from Harker's Island and scorns all talk about Supermen that let's hope he doesn't need this.

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