

Bobby Thigpen

Daiei's Ace

On March 18, Bobby Thigpen before a pre-season game to Here's what he had to say.

On the upcoming season and Kevin Mitchell:

It should be fun. I guess th (Mitchell) said he's gonn so... (laughing) I'm sure they' him to it.

On the strike back in the St

I haven't been following it already committed to corr December and all the stuff: ing... It's a mess, I hope it ge

On Brian Traxler's release:

Yeah, that was kind of a bad sit I think they were trying to d the whole off-season, and w that he came over for a wee actually came over here, wa for a week, and then releas it would have been me, I wc before I get there."

On the game here in Japan:

Well for me, it's basically the gotta throw it and they gotta ing the same stuff I've alwa depend a lot on my outstanc because he knows the play got here I told him, hey, you and I don't, so you watch m ever you think it takes to ge what I'll throw. Which is bas in the States.

On returning for another sea

It's the first time in what, abo the same two guys back. The differnt guys every year, so too, they get to know us, v them. I think it helps the team somebody...

On superstar manager Saduh English level:

I think he knows a little mo think. Absolutely.

On his own Japanese:

Good. A little bit. It's getti where if someone's talking, I they're talking about me or r

On the fans:

They're great. Shane Mack w that with Reims (Kevin Reir were down here. He's alrea so much easier to play here fans. You know, they're alwa they don't get down on you nobody buries you, even o know... the other team's f down on you either.

On the Hawks' chances:

The perennials aren't just goi Seibu's won so many times, I places the people and even so assume that Seibu's going to wi So, hopefully it'll be different! team we have, and the pers We're going to finish... up. Las but we really want it this yea



Thigpen talks about the upcoming RADAR Editor Erik Brandt.

HAWKS

Will '95 be the Year of the Hawk?

FiiBAAAA!

by Eric M. Olson

Paint your body orange and black, put on your Hawks *happi* and MAKE SOME NOISE, cause after years of futility the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks look ready to take their first Pacific League crown.

In an all-out effort to reach the top, team owner and president Isao Nakauchi signed famed U.S. slugger Kevin Mitchell, as well as Seibu Lions mainstays Kimiyasu Kudo and Hiromichi Ishige. They join a team that finished a very respectable 69-60-1 in 1994. Nakauchi has also installed legendary HR king Sadaharu Oh as manager, guaranteeing the Hawks big-time national media exposure.

Already wildly popular in Fukuoka, the Hawks



Former Giant greets Sadaharu Oh and Shigeo Nagashima. Will they still be smiling come Japan Series time?

led the PL in attendance last year with an average of 38,000 per game. Kyushu fans love an aggressive team and the Hawks more than delivered in '94, staging frequent, heartstopping comebacks and slamming 132 home runs. Before you start camping out for Japan Series tickets, however, let's take an honest look at the '95 team.

The View From The Top Ⓞ Manager Sadaharu Oh is a highly-respected figure, although he produced only one pennant during a five-year reign (1984-88) as skipper of the Yomiuri Giants. To be fair, Oh was under tremendous fan and media pressure while managing his legendary team, and seems much more at ease in his new digs. He believes in *kidoryoku yakyu* (mechanical baseball), however, in which runners are moved ahead by bunting and opposite field hitting, a style that would seem ill-suited to the free-swinging Hawks.

The Big Hurt Ⓞ With major leaguers still on strike in the U.S., Daiei was able to lure Kevin Mitchell (.326 AVG, 30 HR, 77 RBI) across the Pacific (a ¥450,000,000 contract didn't hurt either). Mitchell was National League MVP in '89 with 47 home runs, and has the power to hit 50 in Japan. Media worries about a possible attitude problem evaporated after Mitchell went through

a two-hour workout almost as soon as he got off the plane.

Offense Ⓞ The Hawks' starting line-up could hit as many as 170 home runs. The bench is extremely weak, however, and if anyone goes down, the Hawks will be vulnerable. Team speed is negligible, with only Akiyama posting decent stolen base numbers (24). Rather than scratch for one run at a time in traditional Japanese-style, the Hawks scored in intimidating bunches. If Oh is bunting and hitting behind runners most of the time, it will be difficult to maintain the momentum (and outs) needed for such big innings.

Fielding Ⓞ Defensively, the Hawks were surprisingly porous last year, considering they added Gold Glove winners Koji Akiyama and Hiromi Matsunaga to the mix. Even with center fielder Akiyama (.254, 24, 73), the Hawks were extremely weak up the middle defensively with catcher Koichiro Yoshinaga (.284, 19, 55), shortstop Chihiro Hamana (.260, 6, 38) and second baseman Hiroshi Fujimoto (.243, 11, 52). Yoshinaga lacks defensive skills and a decent arm, so rookie Kenji Jojima will be given every chance to win the position. 10-time Gold Glove winner Ishige



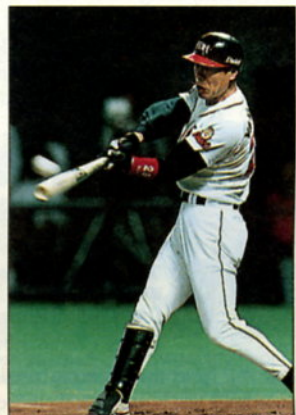
Oh welcomes ex-Seibu star Kimiyasu Kudo (center). Seibu's loss is our gain.

(.266, 11, 46) should take over second base, allowing Fujimoto to handle first and DH. Hamana has good defensive range, but committed a league-leading 19 errors. Outfielders Kevin Reimer (.298, 26, 97) and "Kazu" Yamamoto (.317, 11, 62) were outstanding offensively, but both committed nine errors.

Batting Order Ⓞ Matsunaga (.314, 8, 55) is likely to lead off again, but Kazu may find himself batting sixth because of Oh's frustration with his tendency to swing at pitches in the dirt. Kazu was a definite rally starter in the second slot last year, and Oh might be foolish to tamper with success. Oh would also be wise to bat Akiyama third, in front of Mitchell, because notorious slow-starter Akiyama will thrive on fastballs from pitchers too scared to pitch to Mitchell. Reimer will do best batting fifth because of his ability to crush low pitches, something Akiyama doesn't do nearly as well.

Pitching Ⓞ The Hawks' starting pitchers were knocked out far too early in '94, requiring middle relievers Keiji Kimura (5-1, 2 saves, 2.21 ERA) and Tsuyoshi Shimoyanagi (11-5, 4 saves, 4.51) to summon up heroic efforts. Starter Toyohiko Yoshida (12-11, 3.78) has vowed to pitch 200 innings, and workhorse Kudo (11-7, 3.44 with Seibu) should pitch a similar amount, so the stress on Daiei's bullpen will be much relieved.

O t h e r starters are Kenichi Wakatabe (10-7, 4.03) and rookie sensation Hidekazu Watanabe (8-4, 3.20). **C l o s e r** Bobby Thigpen (2-2, 1.93) joined the team late, but had 12 saves in 13 opportunities. Rookie Mitsugu Saito has shown some good stuff, but is untested. The base of a good top-to-bottom staff exists, but with extremely shaky backups the Hawks had better hope for an injury-free year on the mound.



Whap! Kazu hopes for another big year at the plate.

All Of Japan Is Watching Ⓞ With Oh managing such high-profile players, media interest in the team has never been higher. Dozens of Hawks games will be televised nationally and the team has established Channel 89, a closed-circuit station that will broadcast Hawks games to train stations, shopping malls and public areas throughout the city.

As exciting as all of this is, 1995 might be the Hawks' best chance at a pennant for awhile. Mitchell, Reimer and Thigpen are all likely to leave after the season, and Akiyama (33) Matsunaga (34), Kazu (37), Ishige (38) and Kudo (30) are each past their prime. It seems incredible, however, that two years ago the Hawks were the joke of the Pacific League. This year, they might just be the kings.

CENTRAL LEAGUE PREVIEW:
Yomiuri Giants (70-60): Manager Shigeo Nagashima is basking in the glory of the Giants' Japan Series triumph, although they almost choked down the stretch in the CL. Hiromi Makihara (12-8, 2.82), Masumi Kuwata (11-11, 2.52) and Masahiro Niimi (11-9, 2.52)

will be on manager Katsuyuki Tanaka's turn to turn the team around. (3rd)

Hanshin Tigers (62-68): To improve this year if they get Surprise rookie pitching staff, led by ace pitcher (20 IP) and...

Teams That Don't Stand A Chance

PACIFIC LEAGUE PREVIEW:

Seibu Lions (76-52-2 in 1994): Winners of 11 PL crowns in the last 13 years, Seibu

