

now for Paul Beeston, [GM] Gord Ash, for the fans.

"The thing that pisses me off is when Dan throws that 40-39 record [the last four years] in my face, because after every game, win or lose, I was the good soldier, never bitching about not getting the win because of the bullpen blowing it, not getting enough runs, or the defense collapsing."

Clemens was 9-7 in '94, receiving the worst run support in the league at 4.06 runs per game. "I got no run support whatsoever," he says. "I easily could've had 16, 17 wins. I left six games in the bag." Six games his bullpen blew. "By the time I got the ice strapped on," he says, "the game was shot."

That 9-7 record may be the most dominant 9-7 in history: His 2.85 ERA was second-best in the AL, his opponents' .204 batting average against was the league's lowest, and his 8.9 strikeouts per nine innings was second only to Seattle's Randy Johnson. Rocket was effective but inconsistent in '95, going 10-5 with a 4.18 ERA, but last season the old Rocket returned.

"My velocity is still there," he says. "I'm still a power pitcher and will be until I'm done. I can go get my 94, 95 mph fastball anytime—first inning or the eighth. The difference in my pitching the last few years vs. 1986 or '88 is that I'm not just a thrower. I've learned to 'pitch.' When I don't have my good stuff, I'm still gonna beat you. I tell people: 'If you have your best stuff, you should win. When you have your No. 3 stuff, let's see what you got and see if you can win one of those 4-3 games.' Those are the games I love to pitch. I relish those games when my catcher and I look at each other and say, 'OK, now we gotta concentrate and get to work.'"

Rocket no longer lives and dies with his velocity. "I feel so good about my movement and location that if I ever lost my velocity, I feel I could still win 16, 17 games," he says.

Clemens joins Pat Hentgen, last year's Cy Young Award winner, and Juan Guzman, the '96 AL ERA champ, in a rotation that could turn out to be the best in the league.

"I don't have to be the No. 1 guy on this staff, and I don't have to try to punch every guy out with a runner on third because we have guys who can catch the ball, guys who throw and hit the cutoff man and play fundamental baseball," he says.

Rocket often saves his best heater anyway—his 95-96 mph fastball—for the league's big guns. "Other guys will get it up and down, in and out," Rocket says. "I'll work them. My philosophy the

last few years has been, 'Why waste it if you don't need it?'"

Don't get him wrong. He still relishes blowing hitters away. Nothing was sweeter than his 20-punchout masterpiece against Detroit last season that showed he still had plenty left.

"But I've learned over the last few years that strikeouts aren't that important to me anymore," he says. "Winning is. Getting out of innings by being smart. I'll go with my forkball when I need to. I go with what the situation calls

for. Say we get home from a long trip and we're lethargic. I'll just punch out the first two guys to get the stadium going, to get the fans into it, and suddenly everyone's all pumped and we're putting heat on the other guys."

His pitches are now predicated by the moment. He's become a thinking man's pitcher.

"Facing Rocket the last few seasons is harder than when I first saw him because you never know what's coming now and where the pitch will be," Frank Thomas says. "Before, you knew you were getting the big No. 1 [fastball] early and often. He can still get it up there, but now you don't know what you're going to see because he has so many quality pitches."

And if nothing's working, Clemens relies on his competitiveness. He recalls a game in 1995 in which he had little velocity on his fastball and poor location. "But the movement was there," he says. He didn't have much emotion, either. "I was hoping something would fire me up." Something did. "The homeplate umpire made a questionable call," Clemens says, "and that did it. It got me all heated up and everything started to



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click. My velocity came back, the fans were into it, and we got the W."

Those W's will now be posted in Toronto's record books. He has closed the book on Boston and moved north to

author the final chapter of an illustrious career that may land him in the Hall of Fame, right next to Cy Young. Clemens is hooked on Toronto: the cleanliness of the city, the potential of the team, everything.

He relishes the idea of playing with Joe Carter and throwing to Charlie O'Brien, whom Rocket describes as "the best receiver in the business."

For Clemens, Canada already feels like home. The deal with the Blue Jays was actually sealed when Beeston said he would not only provide a locker for Clemens' four sons in the clubhouse, but that the boys could also be on the SkyDome field before games, playing catch and hitting grounders with their father.

"When Mr. Beeston said that, it blew me away," Clemens says. "It became just too perfect of a situation, a perfect fit. He made my decision for me."

Of course, being handed number 21 didn't hurt. ★

**"Believe me, I never wanted to leave Boston."**