

STREAK OF CONTROVERSY...CAL RIPKEN JR.'S CONSECUTIVE-GAMES STREAK WILL NOT BE INTERRUPTED, BUT HE'LL REST MORE

BY RICK WEINBERG



Rick Weinberg

The conversation was strained, uncomfortable. But **Johnny Oates**, the personable manager of the Baltimore Orioles, knew he had to approach his iron-man shortstop, **Cal**

Ripken Jr., about his consecutive-games streak.

"It's such a touchy subject and such a special, special feat," says Oates, "but it was time." Time to have a serious talk. Time to lay it on the line. Time to come up with a plan to rest baseball's most durable player.

The result of the one-on-one encounter? "He'll be rested," says Oates. "We'll find the right circumstances to rest him but keep the streak alive at the same time."

In case you've been in hibernation, here's the lowdown on Ripken: He's played in 1,735 consecutive games, a streak that began in May 1982. An awesome feat, indeed, yet he's still 2½ seasons away from breaking **Lou Gehrig's** record of 2,130 straight games, a record once seen as untouchable. Remarkably, Ripken's also played in 15,659 innings out of a possible 15,787 during the streak. At one point, he played in 8,243 consecutive innings.

Controversy over the streak only seems to surface when Ripken slumps, which has happened twice in the last three seasons. He had a miserable September in 1990, which everyone attributed to fatigue from the streak. Then, when he hit .323 with 34 homers and 114 RBI and won the American League's Most Valuable Player Award in 1991, no one uttered a peep about the streak. But last year, when Ripken hit .251 with a career-low 14 homers and 72 RBI, well, you know what everyone was saying.

What's a manager to do? "We did some research on Gehrig's streak and consecutive-game streaks in general," says Oates. He discovered that Gehrig

was once replaced in the first inning after batting leadoff. Another time, Gehrig left a game after the third inning to—true story—get married.

Oates and Orioles public relations director **Rick Vaughn** also consulted baseball's rule book to see what constituted the interruption of a consecutive-games streak. "It'd be tragic if we made a mistake that ended the streak," says Vaughn. They found, for instance, that if Ripken pinch ran and did not stay in the game, the streak would end. DHing, on the other hand, wouldn't jeopardize the streak.

So when Oates finally approached Ripken this past off-season, "I talked about playing him for only an inning or two the day before an off-day, which

would almost be like having two days off," Oates says. "I also plan to take him out of games we trail by seven or eight runs, which I certainly hope isn't often, but those days happen. I won't take him out if we're up by seven runs, because we don't have another natural shortstop to catch the ball, and you know as well as I do there's been many six-run innings in baseball history." Oates even plans to plug Ripken into the DH spot occasionally.

Ripken, as stubborn as he is bursting with pride and determination, doesn't particularly like the idea of DHing or coming out of a game early. "How much rest can I get by not playing an inning here or there?" he says. "It won't matter."

But Ripken is 32. He'll be 33 this summer, and baseball takes more out of a player today than in the 1920s and '30s, when Gehrig played. Ripken plays a demanding position; Gehrig played first base. Ripken's travel is strenuous; Gehrig never traveled west of St. Louis. Ripken plays 162 games a season, 24 on AstroTurf; Gehrig played 154 games, none on turf.

"We had to do something," says Oates. "I respect the streak. I respect Cal tremendously. He's the most remarkable athlete I've ever seen. But the fact is, when you get older, your body breaks down more and takes longer to recover. I want to protect him."

And, out of respect, he wants to protect the streak as well.



Cal Ripken Jr.

TOM DIPACE



Derrick Coleman

NEW JERSEY NETS

LOU CAPOZZOLA/NBA PHOTOS

New Jersey Nets power forward **Derrick Coleman**, whose mouth is almost as big as his game, has emerged as one of the most devastating and feared forces in the league in this, his third season. But don't tell him. He already knows. He says he's better than

Karl Malone: "I can do more things," Coleman says. "He's a great scorer, but I can score just like he can, and I'm a better rebounder, passer, defender outside the blocks, and I can run the break." Coleman backs up the talk on most nights, but the organization is tired of his act, particularly since New Jersey proved it can win without him. One Nets exec promises that Coleman will cool out, or else.

Dribbling out the clock: One NBA scout's 1996 Dream Team: C **Shaquille O'Neal**; F **Larry Johnson** and **Derrick Coleman**; G **Michael Jordan** and **Tim Hardaway**. Add Olympic team: Trash the 11-pros-and-

one-collegian roster plan. The best way to satisfy everyone is to go with six pros and six collegians. "No matter what the ratio is, we'll win going away," says Shaq, who's already looking forward to Atlanta in '96....Is this one of the greatest rookie classes ever? Shaq, **Alonzo Mourning**, **Christian Laettner**, **Tom Gugliotta**, **Walt Williams**, **LaPhonso Ellis**, **Clarence Weatherspoon**, **Anthony Peeler**, et al. I've got to admit I never dreamed Gugliotta and Laettner



Michael Jordan