

REDS BEAT

Concepción Heats Up, Houston Runs Away

A 13-9 April is a good month for almost any team in baseball. For the 1975 Reds, it was only good enough to lose a full game in the standings — Houston has been the one team in the National League playing better baseball than Cincinnati, and by the calendar's own accounting, that isn't supposed to happen.

BY DAVE KUHLMANN

CINCINNATI — April 30

One month into the season built to finally answer for itself, the Big Red Machine has done almost everything it promised — a lineup that hits from top to bottom, a bullpen that's mostly held, a rotation anchored by two reliable arms — and it still trails in its own division. Houston's Astros, forecast everywhere outside their own clubhouse to finish somewhere near the NL West cellar, have instead played the best baseball in the National League through April, and Cincinnati's very good month has bought it exactly nothing in the standings. If the ghosts of 1970, 1972, and 1974 are watching, they already know how this kind of story usually goes.

A 4.5-game problem nobody saw coming

The Reds closed April at 13-9 (.591), comfortably above .500 and playing exactly the kind of baseball a 98-win team is supposed to play. It wasn't enough. Houston went 18-5 (.783) over the same month, extending a division lead that stood at 3.5 games two weeks ago to 4.5 games by the 30th — one of the more improbable months a last-place-projected team can have. San Francisco and Los Angeles are tied a distant third at 7.5 back, both climbing out of slow starts, and Atlanta (7-16) has already established itself as the division's clear also-ran. The real 1975 Astros, for whatever it's worth, finished that season 64-97 and dead last in this division — a fact that will keep getting repeated in this space until Houston actually cools off, because right now nothing in the standings suggests it's coming.

BY THE NUMBERS — APRIL 1975

Record	13-9 (.591)
NL West	2nd, 4.5 GB (Houston 18-5)
Current streak	L1
Team trades	0 (4 elsewhere in the league)
Player of the Week	Dave Concepción, SS (Apr 28)
Hottest arm	Pat Zachry, 0.56 ERA last two starts

BATTER	AVG	OPS	HR	RBI
Dave Concepción	.333	.856	2	16
Pete Rose	.333	.852	0	10
George Foster	.298	.820	3	14

PITCHER	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP
Pat Zachry	4	30.1	2.08	0.89
Don Gullett	5	38.2	3.03	1.19
Clay Kirby	5	36.0	3.25	1.11

Full roster tables, lineups by platoon split, and the farm system's April shortlist read live in the Command Center and Farm System Review hubs.

Concepción's award was no fluke

If April had one signature storyline beyond the standings, it belonged to Dave Concepción. The shortstop opened the season hitting .220 with a .499 OPS through the first two weeks — the one soft spot in an otherwise loaded lineup — and closed the month hitting .333 with an .856 OPS, two home runs and sixteen RBI, good enough to earn the National League's Player of the Week award on April 28. It's the kind of turnaround that reads differently in the box score than it does living through it day to day: Concepción didn't just get hot, he passed Pete Rose outright as the best bat in the lineup by the calendar's own accounting, and Sparky Anderson has him hitting leadoff now on merit rather than habit. Whether it holds beyond a hot month remains the obvious question, but for the first time all year, the shortstop spot isn't a lineup card afterthought.

Zachry, quietly, might be the best arm on the staff

Buried a little further down the rotation, Pat Zachry has put together the best stretch of pitching anyone on this staff can claim. The 22-year-old nobody outside the organization had heard of in the Opening Day preview now owns a 2.08 ERA and 0.89 WHIP through four starts — and over his last two turns specifically, a 0.56 ERA and 0.50 WHIP across sixteen innings, the hottest run by any Reds pitcher this month. Don Gullett (3.03 ERA) and Clay Kirby (3.25 ERA) remain the steady one-two punch at the top of the rotation, though both cooled slightly off blistering starts of their own. Gary Nolan is still the one real trouble spot in the rotation at 6.56 ERA, even with a better final turn; Fred Norman's 4.94 ERA hasn't moved much either direction. One month in, the early read on this staff's back half is starting to look less like "four arms with something to prove" and more like "one clear breakout, one clear concern, and two steady hands in between."

A ninth inning still looking for an answer

The bullpen's one real problem has a name, and it's the closer's. Rawly Eastwick has blown three of five save chances in April, his ERA parked at 4.50 the entire month with no real sign of the higher-ceiling arm the Roster Breakdown view keeps promising. Pedro Borbón and Tom Hall have quietly picked up the save-chance slack — two apiece — and both had genuinely dominant stretches along the way: Hall was perfect over his last three appearances (0.00 ERA across four innings), and Clay Carroll matched him over his last two-plus innings, cutting his ERA nearly in half in the process. Jack Billingham had the roughest month of anyone in the pen, his ERA climbing to 9.00 after one bad outing. None of this is a crisis yet with the Reds still comfortably above .500, but "committee closer" is not the sentence a team with championship ambitions wants written about its ninth inning in the second week of May.

Quiet on the farm, quiet on the trade front

Cincinnati has made zero trades through a full month, and nothing about a 13-9 team with almost no bad contracts suggests that changes soon — four deals have gone down elsewhere in the league already, all of them organizational depth swaps that never touched the Reds. Down on the farm, the first Farm System Review of the season came back mostly informational, as expected one month into 162 games: eighteen-year-old Mario Soto remains the system's clear headline arm at an 80-grade ceiling, untouched by the calendar turning, and two bats — Dan Norman in A-ball and Dave Schneck at Triple-A — are hot enough early to flag, though neither has enough at-bats yet to call a real trend. The full shortlist read, level by level, lives in its own hub now, linked directly from the Command Center.

"You don't want to be chasing anybody in April. We're chasing somebody in April."

What May needs to settle

Thirteen wins in twenty-two games is not a month to apologize for, and nothing about this roster looks meaningfully different from the one that opened the season as the best team on paper in the National League. But "best team on paper" has been this club's problem for five years running, and a 4.5-game deficit to a team picked to finish last is precisely the kind of early gap that either gets erased by August or turns into the storyline of the whole season. Concepción's bat and Zachry's arm are the two real additions to the case for optimism since Opening Day. Whether Eastwick finds his ninth inning, and whether Houston's April was a mirage or the first sign of something real, are the two questions May is actually here to answer.