

# Riverfront *Report*

CINCINNATI REDS BASEBALL · BEAT COVERAGE

RIVERFRONT REPORT

MAY WRAP-UP · VOL. 3

## REDS BEAT

# Houston's Mirage Cracks, a Freak Injury Reshapes the Staff

*A division race that stood at 4.5 games a month ago is down to 2.0, and for once the Reds didn't even need their best month to get there — Houston simply stopped playing like Houston. The bigger story in Cincinnati, though, started with a freak off-field injury that cost the Reds their No. 2 starter and forced Sparky Anderson into the first real roster decision of his season.*

BY DAVE KUHLMANN

CINCINNATI — May 31

Cincinnati closed May at 28-21 (.571), 2.0 games behind a Houston club that is still, somehow, playing like the best team in the National League rather than the 64-97 also-ran the real 1975 standings remember. But the gap is finally moving in the right direction, and it moved almost entirely because Houston stopped being perfect rather than because the Reds were. The month's real headline, though, has nothing to do with the standings: on May 24, starting pitcher Clay Kirby fractured a finger protecting a woman from a mugger, ending a quietly excellent season (9 starts, 3.32 ERA, 6 quality starts) two to three months early and forcing the first meaningful roster call of Sparky Anderson's year.

## ***Houston's April Mirage, Right on Schedule, Starts to Crack***

The Astros opened the season 18-5 in April, a pace nobody in the organization expected to hold against a division with this much star power, and for a month it looked like it might anyway. It didn't. Houston has gone a far more human 13-15 since, and a division lead that stood at 4.5 games on April 30 is down to 2.0 by the end of May. The real 1975 Astros finished that season 64-97 and dead last in this very division — a fact that gets more relevant with every game Houston plays like a team that eventually has to come back to earth. Cincinnati's own May wasn't the vehicle for the comeback, exactly: the Reds went 11-10 in the window and closed on a sour note, a four-game losing streak capped by a loss at St. Louis. San Diego has been the division's real disaster, an 18-32 team now on a 12-game losing streak, while the Dodgers have quietly climbed to within 3.5 games on a winning streak of their own. This race has more entrants than it looked like it had a month ago.

## BY THE NUMBERS — MAY 1975

|                    |                                            |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Record             | 28-21 (.571)                               |
| NL West            | 2nd, 2.0 GB (Houston 31-20)                |
| Current streak     | L4                                         |
| Team trades        | 0 (6 elsewhere in the league)              |
| Player of the Week | Ken Griffey, RF (May 19)                   |
| Hottest arm        | Pat Zachry — NL Rookie of the Month (Apr.) |

| BATTER          | AVG  | OPS  | HR   | RBI  |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| Joe Morgan      | .278 | .897 | 7    | 27   |
| Dan Driessen    | .291 | .879 | 2    | 21   |
| Johnny Bench    | .255 | .867 | 12   | 43   |
| PITCHER         | GS   | IP   | ERA  | WHIP |
| Pat Zachry      | 9    | 64.0 | 2.67 | 1.12 |
| Don Gullett     | 12   | 83.0 | 4.01 | 1.41 |
| Clay Kirby (IL) | 9    | 65.0 | 3.32 | 1.26 |

*Full roster tables, lineups by platoon split, real Zone Rating defense, and the farm system's May shortlist read live in the Command Center and Farm System Review hubs.*

### ***A Mugging, a Fractured Finger, and a Decision That Wasn't Obvious***

The in-game report on May 24 read almost too strange to be a baseball story: “The Cincinnati Reds are reporting that Clay Kirby will be out for about 2-3 months with a fractured finger. It happened while saving a woman from being attacked by a mugger.” Kirby was not a footnote at the time — 9 starts, 6 wins, a 3.32 ERA and 6 quality starts, quietly the Reds' second-best starter behind Don Gullett — and his season is now frozen exactly there, out until sometime in July or August. Sparky's answer wasn't the obvious one. Rather than simply calling up the best arm at Indianapolis, he moved Jack Billingham out of the bullpen and into the rotation, a bet that Billingham's stuff — which has always graded out better as a starter than a reliever on the organization's own scouting cards — finally gets a real audition. That move opened a bullpen chair, and the Reds used it to call up Tom Hume from Indianapolis for his first real big-league look, over the more MLB-ready but ceiling-capped Larry Payne. It's one spot filled by subtraction and one filled from the system's best remaining relief prospect — a tidier solution than it had any right to be for an injury nobody could have planned for.

### ***Bench's Power, Driessen's Breakout, and a Lineup That Keeps Reshuffling***

Johnny Bench spent May doing the thing Johnny Bench does, six home runs and twenty-one RBI in the window, pulling his season line to .255/.867 OPS with twelve homers overall even as the average cooled under the power binge. The real lineup story, though, belongs to Dan Driessen, whose .879 OPS has quietly passed Tony Pérez's at first base — Pérez still rates well ahead of Driessen against left-handers on true platoon value, so the two now functionally split the position rather than one simply replacing the other. Ken Griffey strung together the best week of anyone's May, a .354 isolated average that earned him the NL West's Player of the Week honors for the week of May 19. Dave Concepción's torrid April has kept cooling for a third straight check-in — still a solid season, just no longer the best bat in the lineup by the calendar's own accounting the way it was a month ago.

## ***The Pen Steadies Itself, and a New Look at the Glove***

Rawly Eastwick's committee-closer problem from April looks mostly solved: nine saves in thirteen chances now, with no new blown save since the last check-in, and his ERA down to 3.32. Clay Carroll is the real turnaround story in the pen — from a 5.14 ERA a few weeks ago to 3.00 now, quietly the bullpen's steadiest arm again. Tom Hume's own debut has been rough in a tiny two-game sample, exactly the kind of noise to expect from a brand-new call-up rather than a read on whether he belongs. A new look at the defense, built this month from the game's own Zone Rating data rather than scouting grades, confirms something the real 1975 Reds knew by eye: César Gerónimo's glove in center field (+4.98 ZR) is doing real work even while his bat stays ice cold, which is exactly why he keeps cutting into the more productive Merv Rettenmund's playing time out there.

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*“You don't plan for a finger injury that happens on the street. You plan for what you do about it.”*

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## ***What June Needs to Settle***

Two months in, this still looks like the best roster in the division on paper, now finally starting to show it in the standings too. June has one obvious job: find out whether Billingham's one rotation start is the start of something or just one data point in a long transition, and whether a 2.0-game deficit to a Houston team this reliant on a historically unlikely hot streak closes the rest of the way or hardens into the story of the whole season. A four-game losing streak to end May is not the way anyone wanted to answer that question going into June — but for the first time since Opening Day, the Reds are chasing a lead that is actually shrinking.