

The curse of Pat Burrell

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

FOR THOSE to whom much has been given," Saint Luke tells us in the New Testament, "much is expected."

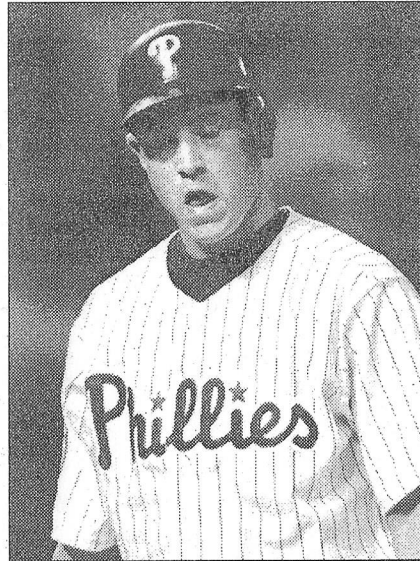
While the apostle might not be on the Phillies' roster, he certainly can feel Pat Burrell's pain.

The highly-rated slugger, currently flirting with a .200 batting average and one of the most prolonged slumps this city has ever seen, is quickly becoming the victim of the kind of great expectations that have ruined the careers of many potential superstars.

Just ask Bobby Murcer or Bill Robinson, outfielders who played with the New York Yankees in the late 1960s and were expected to fill the void left by Mickey Mantle's retirement. Closer to home are Johnny Callison and Von Hayes, who were expected to carry the Phils to a World Series in their playing eras.

These outfielders were never able to realize their tremendous potential because of the near impossible expectations from the fans, the front office and, especially, themselves. Burrell's situation is even tougher because of the current economics of the game.

As the top pick in the 1998 draft, the Phillies gave him \$18 million to sign before he played a single game. Two years later, he was promoted to the majors. After Scott Rolen's departure last year, Bur-



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rell was anointed the "franchise player," given a new six-year \$50 million contract, and an experienced veteran power-hitter in Jim Thome, who can mentor and protect him in the lineup.

To be sure, Burrell has great potential. Winner of the 1998 "Gold Spikes" award for the top college player, he earned his promotion at every level in the Phillies farm system, hitting .303 at single-A Clearwater, .333 at double-A Reading and .294 in an abbreviated 50-game stay at triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. Last year

was his breakout season in the majors. His .282 average, 37 HR and 116 RBI as well as his fine defensive play in the outfield seemed to indicate that he had staying power at the major league level.

But how wise was it for the Phillies to rush Burrell through triple-A where he might have learned to deal with the kind of adversity he's experiencing now in a less pressured atmosphere?

I also question how much of that \$50 million salary is based on incentives. "Motivation" — financial or performance-based — has always been the key to productivity. It's crazy to guarantee that kind of money to a 26-year-old who has had just one productive year in the majors, even to prevent arbitration or free agency.

I admit that I was turned off by the way Burrell carried himself in the minors, like it was simply a drive-by before his inevitable promotion to the majors. Nor did his Penthouse interview last year seem generate the kind of respect I have for players who care about their reputations and their relationship with the fans.

But I am not writing this to excoriate Pat Burrell. I feel bad for him. By all accounts, he works hard. He also cares about the community. Immediately after he signed his new contract, Burrell donated \$100,000 to the Baseball Assistance Team, which aids needy former players and front-office personnel, and \$150,000

to Phillies Charities to promote youth baseball in the Philadelphia area.

He is trying hard to accept the responsibility that goes with superstardom. But that's also his problem — he's trying too hard on the field.

Perhaps he would do better to follow his own advice. When asked during spring training about his feelings on leadership, Burrell said: "We need 25 guys with the same game plan. The same motivation to win. You do that by playing the game right."

Burrell must realize that he is just one of those 25, and he can't do it all by himself. He must allow the success to come to him rather than try to force it on his own.

"Playing the game right" requires much discipline at the plate with runners in scoring position, advancing the runner instead of trying to hit a game-winning home run. It involves being more selective in implementing all the advice he is getting from coaches, teammates and former major leaguers. Ultimately, baseball is a highly individualized game. Only Burrell himself can determine how to become more comfortable at the plate.

But whatever happens, his current trials and the humility he is learning in the process ought to make him appreciate what he's already accomplished — and turn him into a better person. ★

William C. Kashatus is a regular contributor.