

\$10 million for modesty, maturity and dazzling defense? You be

By Bill Kashatus

No question that Scott Rolen, the Phillies' second-year third baseman, is a true talent. And in signing him to a four-year, \$10 million contract, the Phillies have done something right for once.

Defensively, he is hard-nosed, making the difficult play look routine. At the plate, he hit .283 with 21 home runs and 92 runs batted in in 156 games, earning him the National League Rookie of the Year award last season. But what matters more to those of us who love our dying national pastime is a player of Rolen's stature with character — something hard to find in baseball these days.

Rolen leads by example. His modesty is refreshing. "I don't need all the attention,"

he said when informed of his Rookie of the Year award. "I'm happy to be playing major league baseball because that's what I wanted to do. Not to see my face on television or read it in the headlines."

He could easily have made more money by choosing to negotiate a new contract each off-season. Instead, he chose consistency and loyalty, signing with one of the worst teams in baseball for the next four years. "My main objective was to work out something that was good for both sides," he explained. "I wasn't trying to get top dollar. I don't need to see my name at the top of the money list."

What's more, Rolen underscored his desire to be a Phillie, shopping for a house in the area. The Phillies have a presumed number-one draft pick named J.D. Drew, who apparently believes he deserves \$11 million even before stepping onto the turf at the Vet. Mr. Drew, take some serious notes.

I hope only that Rolen won't suffer personally by playing here, as Mike Schmidt did. There are more than just a few similarities between the two.

Schmidt was the Phillies' last bona fide franchise player. Like Rolen, he was a third baseman from the Midwest. He put up impressive statistics and made the difficult look routine. His Hall of Fame consistency brought Philadelphia six division titles, two pennants and the only world championship the organization has ever known.

While other superstars were doing drugs and waging battles for multiyear contracts, Schmidt was speaking out against drug addiction, sponsoring a host of charitable organizations, raising a family and playing the game of baseball with grace and dignity. He often did so despite the fickle treatment he received in Philadelphia.

Fathers would point him out as an exam-

ple for their Little League sons to follow. That was in the 1970s. They booed during the bad times, spoke out against his team's poor farm system incompetence, chastised him for not showing up. Meanwhile, the front office was willing to market his image to the ticket plans. When Schmidt retired, the Phillies thanked him by refusing him what he wanted and deserved: a job in the organization.

If Rolen is indeed the franchise player everyone thinks he is, I certainly hope he stays in Philadelphia. Years down the road, the Phillies will thank him with a little more respect than they showed Mike Schmidt. High-quality players are rare in baseball today. High-quality players are rarer still.

Bill Kashatus is a Quaker schoolteacher in Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Thursday, March 5, 1998