

SCHMITTY: JUST WHAT THE PHILS NEED

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

HUMANITY IS the keystone that holds baseball teams together," said Connie Mack, the legendary manager of the old Philadelphia Athletics. "When that collapses, the whole structure falls apart."

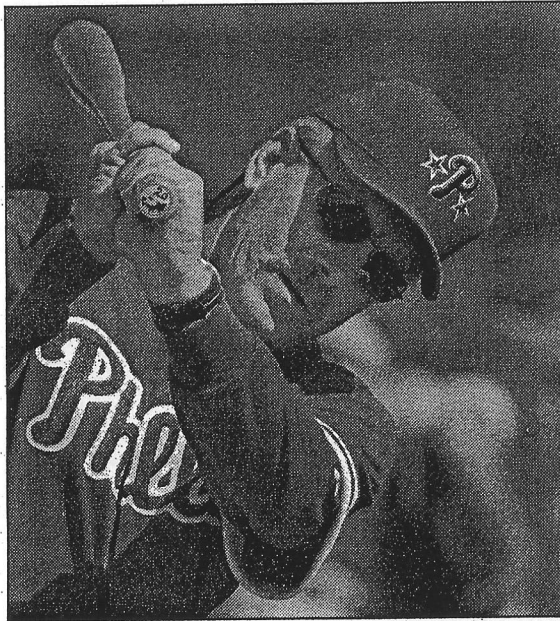
If he were alive today, Mack would be disappointed in the ongoing feud that is taking place between the Philadelphia Phillies and their Gold Glove third baseman, Scott Rolen. It just doesn't bode well for the organization's future.

But I'm sure his Irish eyes were smiling down on Clearwater when Mike Schmidt, another Gold Glove third baseman from an earlier era, arrived Monday to assume the role of temporary hitting instructor.

The return of Schmidt to the Phillies, even in a limited capacity, offers some hope for an organization that is struggling to show a dwindling fan base that it cares about its former players as well as the current crop of budding stars.

It's been more than a decade since Michael Jack donned the red pinstripes of the only team that ever employed him. While he attributes that fact to his "hot pursuit of a golf career," there are those who remember the distance the front office placed between itself and their greatest player after he retired in 1989.

When he asked for a position in the brain trust, Schmidt was told that he was "too intimidating" to nurture a team of young players. That his philosophy of hit-



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ting, as successful as it was for him, was unorthodox and wouldn't work for others.

Schmidt stuck around the Philadelphia area long enough to glean the fact that there was no future for him with the club, and then decided to move on with his life.

The hair is grayer now. The presence, not as intimidating. And the quotes much more diplomatic than those he gave during his playing days. But his passion and concern for the game is still there, along with the question: When will the greatest third baseman ever to play the game re-

turn to it on a full-time basis?

Schmidt was noncommittal about his future. But if ever there was a time to return to the Phillies' organization, it is now. The Phillies claim they are trying to build something special — a nucleus of talented young players who they hope to retain and shape into a regular contender.

Sounds just like the strategy that brought Schmidt to Philadelphia in the early 1970s and kept him in Phillies' pinstripes for nearly two decades. To do that though, the Phils will need to rely on those who know what it means to be a consistent winner.

Dallas Green, Larry Bowa, John Vukovich, and Greg Gross are some of the names from a gloried past who have returned to offer their expertise.

Why not Mike Schmidt?

Schmidt's invitation to spring training might be viewed as an experiment to see if he can relate to a younger generation of players, born during free agency and softened by the multimillion-dollar contracts bestowed upon them.

Unlike his younger teammates in 1989, the current Phillies are not in awe of Schmidt. Indeed, some like Pat Burrell and Rolen, have been receptive to his instruction. He's older, wiser, and could serve as a valuable adviser — if not power-hitting coach — to young players trying to learn

how to maximize their potential while balancing the demands of stardom.

Chief among them: Scott Rolen.

Schmidt recognizes the similarities between the two. "As a major-league player he is a mirror of me," said the Hall-of-Famer of his successor. "He's a very intelligent, somewhat outspoken player who likes his privacy and is totally dedicated to the game. Sometimes he feels the weight of the world on him. He likes everything to be perfect and when things get out of kilter, it upsets him a little bit."

But the similarities don't mean that Schmidt has to take sides in the current stalemate between the club and its marquee player. When asked about Rolen's decision to explore free agency rather than sign long-term with the Phils, Schmidt called Rolen's decision a "very noble stand," and placed blame for the impasse on the "troubled state of the game" itself.

None of this is to say that Schmidt's presence would keep Rolen in a Phillies uniform any more than it would make a Hall-of-Famer a successful coach. But if there's anybody in the organization's past or present who deserves a shot, it's the greatest player.

If nothing else, Michael Jack would restore a little humanity — and class — to the Phillies' clubhouse. ★

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