

# From snow to Dome, Whitt tells Blue Jays saga

By VINCENT EGAN

The opening of the SkyDome in Toronto - the first sports stadium to have a fully retractable roof - is a remarkable tribute to Canadians' love of major-league baseball.

Since the advent of the Montreal Expos in 1969 and the Toronto Blue Jays in 1977, the game has flourished to such an extent that both cities have had to meet the demand for bigger and better playing facilities.

Just one player on the Blue Jays has been with that organization since it won an expansion fran-

chise, and no one is better equipped to relate the story of the Toronto team at first hand.

Ernie Whitt, besides having top seniority, has the insights that come from playing the pivotal position on the team - catcher. His absorbing new book, written with Toronto editor Greg Cable, is called *Catch: A Major League Life* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson; 271 pages; \$24.95).

### THREE DIMENSIONS

The structure of Whitt's book is a chronological account of the Jays' 1988 season - one chapter per month. Within that framework,

however, he has added two other dimensions - reminiscences about past years' team highlights (and lowlights, of course) in which he was involved, and an autobiographical account of his long-term development as a tough, smart, highly paid ballplayer, an off-season entrepreneur, and a father and husband from Detroit with no claims to perfection.

Whitt writes plainly and simply, with what appears to be complete honesty and a willingness to admit his own shortcomings. He is no less frank in discussing his teammates.

Nearly 200 men have worn the uniform of the Toronto Blue Jays since that snowy opening day, April 7, 1977, including about 20 catchers.

None but Ernie Whitt has earned the place of honor that goes to the last of the originals. He was a 24-year-old unknown with the Boston Red Sox in late 1976 when Toronto, a 1977 expansion entry, made him its 17th selection in the draft of players from existing teams.

### UPS AND DOWNS

Whitt was to put in a few seasons of ups and downs between the dreadful Toronto team of the late 1970s and the minor-league farm teams, where he never earned more than \$1,500 a month for a five-month season.

One reason he languished was that the Jays' first manager, the totally ineffective Roy Hartsfield, had simply decided that Whitt would never be a major-league player. (The unfortunate Hartsfield, after being fired by Toronto at the end of the 1979 season, couldn't find another baseball post. He took a job in an Atlanta printing plant, only to lose part of a finger in an industrial accident.)

Whitt reached fulfilment as a catcher during the era of Bobby Cox, the only manager of big-league calibre that the Jays ever had.

In the last of his four years in Toronto, Cox led the Jays to the

championship of the American League Eastern Division, only to suffer defeat in the league-championship series against Kansas City Royals. Whitt's vivid account of that roller-coaster ride brings back bittersweet memories.

Toward the end of the Jays' 1987 season, Whitt suffered a painful, disabling injury in a home-plate collision, and the team fell short of winning the divisional title to which it had seemed to be heading.

### WHAT IT TAKES

To be a major-league catcher, Whitt writes, "you certainly have to be tough and learn to take punishment of all kinds... But it's a position that I wouldn't change for anything."

A catcher has to know how to deal with his pitchers' personalities and talents, how to assess the strengths and weaknesses of opposing batters, where to position his teammates in the infield and outfield, and what kind of relationship to establish with the umpire who is leaning over his shoulder.

Although fans think of umpires as the natural enemies of players, Whitt has praise for such veterans as Larry Barnett, Ken Kaiser and Steve Polarmo. On the other hand, he rates Joe Brinkman as incompetent, charging that the umpire hates the Toronto club - and offers some highly persuasive evidence, from games that Brinkman has officiated.

As for the 1988 season, which provides the framework for the book, Whitt confirms what the fans could see from the bleachers - that team spirit was low to non-existent, that certain pampered players were exerting only a minimum of effort,

and that even then-manager Jimmy Williams and the coaching staff seemed to have turned defeatist by August. Somehow, the team caught fire in the final month of the season, but by then it was too late to catch up.

In a couple of days, Whitt will reach the age of 37. That's an advanced age for a player who takes the physical battering that a catcher endures, and yet some catchers - Carlton Fisk, Bob Boone and others - have lasted into their 40s.

A reading of *Catch* makes Ernie Whitt seem like a good friend. Most buyers of the book will therefore hope that, playing in the SkyDome and under a new manager, Whitt will achieve his ambition of rounding out his career with the Blue Jays, and extending that career into the next decade.

Vincent Egan, an avid baseball fan, is a columnist with Thomson News Service.

## Close games for tykes

Two close games were played in the GBA Tyke league on June 13. On one diamond Team I played Team III:

For Team I, Mike Walinga and Mike Kitchen both had doubles and Matt Borg hit a homerun. Good pitching from Danny vanderbyl, Mike Walinga and Matt Borg.

For Team III, Mark Helmer pitched two good innings. Stuart Scottford had a great catch in the outfield which started a double play. Chris Gosselin stole home to score the winning run.

On the other diamond, Team II beat Team IV, 7-6:

For Team V Khris Bishop hit two RBIs and had a good fly ball catch. Blair Jackson and Sam Southworth turned in some good pitching.

For Team II, doubles were scored by Shawn Barnes, Darren Mansfield and Adam Jackson. Scot Connell had two RBIs. Good pitching by Stephen Gibbons, Garrett Norman and Daniel Estevan.

On June 15, Team II played Team I for another close game with Team I winning, 9-8:

For Team I, Kyle Springer hit a double and Mike Walinga a triple. Pitcher Mike Walinga made a nice throw to catcher Mike Kitchen for an out. Paul Farmer made a good play at first for the final out.

For Team II, Garrett Norman and Shawn Barnes had doubles while Daniel Estevan hit a grand slam. Shawn Barnes had two RBIs while Scot Connell and Darren Mansfield had one each.

## Canada Day bowls July 1

By KEN BAKER  
Herald Special

July 1, 1987 marked a major event for lawn bowlers across Canada. On that day, we united in support of the Child Amputee Program or "CHAMPS" funded by the War Amputees of Canada which provides assistance to help more than 1200 child amputees and their families meet the daily challenges of amputation.

Once again this year, the Georgetown Lawn Bowling Club will be hosting its third annual Canada Bowls Challenge tournament. In what has become a very successful event locally, area service clubs have been invited to send representatives to bowl as part of a team in a fun day of bowling.

Funds from the day and any donations received are used to assist in the acquisition of specialized sports limbs for children in the CHAMP program. Last year, with the generous sup-

port of the participating clubs as well as area businesses such as Bellamys and The Copper Kettle who supplied prizes, \$500 was raised for this cause.

As well as assisting an extremely worthwhile program it provides people with a positive introduction to the sport of "Bowls."

Additional information on this particular charity event or on the sport itself is available at the greens on Edith Street or by contacting any club member, or by calling Ken Baker at 877-0939.

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