

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Frazier hasn't seen vintage Brooksie, but he'll add his own third-base highlights

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Maybe it's to Todd Frazier's advantage not to have seen films of Brooks Robinson's third-base clinic in the 1970 World Series that cemented the Orioles great's Hall of Fame election.

A glimpse of the vacuum-cleaner routine, with Brooksie diving across the third-base line, then in one motion straightening up to fire to first might put ideas in the glib Frazier's head. You want to play aggressively, but you don't want to try to play beyond your level.

"I might not make it look good as [Robinson], but I'll get it done," said the White Sox's top off-season acquisition, who already has become a clubhouse emotional centerpiece in spring training.

"I think you can always improve," added Frazier. "I feel very confident over there. I think I'm one of the elite third basemen. Not being cocky, just being confident."

You can count on one hand the great all-around third basemen in Sox history. Unless there's an unexpected backsliding in his career, Frazier will join the likes of Robin Ventura, Joe Crede, Bill Melton and Buck Weaver. Crede and Melton would have had even more stellar seasons if not for back problems in the prime of their careers.

Finding an all-around player to man the hot corner is one of the hardest tasks in the game. Hall of Fame standards seem to be lower for third basemen simply because comparatively few rack up the numbers seen at the other "power" positions. Only two – Mike Schmidt and Eddie Matthews – have ever amassed 500 or more homers.

Why are the true two-way third-base stars in such short supply?



Todd Frazier thoroughly enjoys the defensive challenges of third base.

“It’s a good question,” Frazier said. “I was a shortstop coming up. They’ll move guys to third who aren’t necessarily true third basemen. That’s the only thing I can think of.”

In the attempt to construct a quality third baseman, the ability to pick it at the hot corner is an absolute necessity, a skill more valuable than even a 20-homer bat. A glove that lets double-play grounders leak through or the lack of an extra half-step to stop shots down the line is a defensive liability and a team morale-killer.

Frazier’s mindset is ready for the challenge. He knows his defense is his first and second priority. He has mentally mapped out his strategy before every hitter.

Anticipation key at third

“Most of it is anticipation,” he said. “The natural talent will take over once in your mind you’re in the right position. Third base, it’s a step and a dive to get to the ball. That’s how much time you really have.

“I go with my gut a lot. I talk to the shortstop: ‘Hey, man, move it over a little bit,’ and we adjust from there. You’ll see me talking a lot at third base.”

Frazier had a good role model from his childhood memories after celebrating as a world-champion Little Leaguer in Toms River, N.J. in 1998. The following season, the Mets signed prized free-agent third baseman Robin Ventura. Although a shortstop at the time, the 13-year-old Frazier couldn’t help but watch the Ventura’s all-around baseball portfolio and steady attitude.

“Just the way he played the game,” Frazier recalled. “He was always in all the highlights, whether he played offense or defense. He played the right way, man. He was quiet, but he worked with his bat and played defense and just went about his business the right way. That’s how I like to play, too.

“It’ll be a travesty if I don’t pick his brain every day to figure out something at third base. Just talk, about, ‘Hey man, I missed that ball, did you see anything?’ ‘Where do you think I should line up against a guy like this?’”

Adjusting to American League pitchers will be one priority when Frazier seeks Ventura’s counsel.

“Set your goals high,” he said. “I’m big on pitch selection. Swing at the right pitches. It’s a chess game, a matter of you beating them.”

All-around, indeed. Frazier has amused Jose Abreu with an attempt to sing in Spanish to the Cuban slugger. That’s part of his natural personality that has already livened up a formerly quiet clubhouse.

Imagine how lively the Sox will be if Frazier, without looking, indeed does his best Brooksie imitation behind third. Just like Robinson, he’ll be around afterward to talk about it and spread the message he’s worth the price of your admission.



Robin Ventura caught Little League champion Todd Frazier's eye when he came to the Mets in 1999.