

Erstad's preparation, work ethic help him chase league hits record

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turnaround from last year, when he slumped to .253 in an injury-plagued season.

"I've just had a better approach," he said. "It's a combination of taking what the pitcher gives me and hitting the outside pitch the other way."

What makes him a tough hitter, Erstad, teammates and opponents said, is his combination of aggressiveness, discipline and plate coverage.

Yankees Manager Joe Torre, who managed Erstad in this year's All-Star Game, said Erstad poses a vexing challenge for pitchers.

As an aggressive hitter who likes to swing early in the count, Erstad makes it difficult for pitchers to get ahead of him, Torre said.

But, he said, Erstad also has a good eye and a disciplined mind. He doesn't swing at many bad pitches, so he doesn't strike out

often (66 times in 529 at-bats). He has a quick bat, so pitchers can't easily pitch him inside and force him to hit the ball off the handle. And he hits the ball to all fields, leaving few holes in his hitting zone, Torre said.

"There's no way to pitch to him," Torre said. "I don't see any weakness in his swing. I really admire what he's done this year."

As a leadoff hitter, Erstad's job is to get on base and set the table for the Angels' powerful middle lineup. Although he has 45 walks, relatively low for a successful lead-off hitter, his on-base percentage is a healthy .407.

When Erstad reaches base, the Angels offense is poised to get rolling. With 24 stolen bases, he is a constant threat to run. This places added pressure on opposition pitching, which already must deal with a power-packed Angels lineup that includes Vaughn (30 HR, 95 RBIs), Tim Salmon (28 HR,

74 RBIs), Garret Anderson (31 HR, 88 RBIs) and Troy Glaus (36 HR, 78 RBIs).

With all that power behind him in the lineup, Erstad knows the pitcher doesn't want to put him on base. So he knows he will see good pitches to hit — and, he said, he doesn't have the luxury of taking many of them.

"I'm an aggressive hitter," Erstad said. "I've got a pretty good eye. But I get more hits than walks, so the odds are pretty good if I swing the bat."

As he sits on a folding chair in front of his locker at Edison Field, keeping an eye on the Seattle Mariners' game, Erstad dismisses any talk of breaking Sisler's hits record.

"If it happened, great," he said. "That would be a great accomplishment."

"But if we were playing Seattle on the last day of the season, and I was hitting .256, and we had a runner on second with less than two outs, I'm going to hit a ground ball to the right side because that's what will help us win the game."

On Aug. 13, Erstad had been slumping for two weeks, and he said that minor bump in the road cost him the chance to break the hits record.

But starting that night, he stroked nine hits in the next five games before missing the past few games with a muscle spasm in his left rib cage. On Aug. 18, in a game against the Yankees, he made a

game-saving catch while diving back and to his left in the bottom of the 10th, then hit a game-winning home run in the top of the 11th.

"He has a crack at (the record), but that's neither here nor there with Erstad," Scioscia said. "He plays every night to put up a win in the Anaheim Angels' column."

Erstad is averaging 1.55 hits per game. Projected over the rest of the season, that pace would leave him with 246 hits — short of Sisler's record but on the all-time top 10 list.

Sisler set his record in 1920, and few players have even approached it. None of the top 10 single-season hits totals came after 1930. If Erstad were to crack the top 10, he would join such baseball legends as Ty Cobb, Rogers Hornsby, Al Simmons, Willie Keeler and Babe Herman.

An increased emphasis on power hitting and the sheer difficulty of hitting major league pitching consistently help explain the durability of Sisler's record, Erstad said.

"I think chasing the hits record is one of those lost arts," he said. "You're not going to get as many hits when you're swinging for the fences. But the game's probably moving a little in that direction."

"You try to make a good pass at the ball, but you can't control what happens to it," he said. "One night, you might hit five line drives to the outfield for outs and go 0-

for-5. Another night, you might hit five bloopers for base hits and go 5-for-5."

"It's just not easy to get hits against major league pitching. Over a long season, it's tough to stay on a pace like that."

Erstad's focus shifts to the game at hand. He knows Clemens will be tough because of his 95-mile-per-hour fastballs, diving forkballs and unpredictable pitch patterns.

"Against Clemens, you need to really lock in, and hopefully you'll get the pitch you're looking for," he said.

What pitch would that be? "I can't tell you that," he said. "You'd be surprised at how fast things get around."

The challenge of facing one of the greatest pitchers of all time clearly excites Erstad.

"These are the fun ones," he said. "I'm not here to face average pitching. I'm here to face the best in baseball."

In his first two at-bats, Clemens got Erstad to line to center and ground to first by feeding him a steady diet of fastballs in the 93-95 mph range.

But in the bottom of the fifth, with the Yankees leading 2-0, the Angels put a runner on first with two outs. With Erstad on deck, Clemens walked Kevin Stocker, the Angels' weak-hitting No. 9 hitter. Knowing he now had to face Erstad with a runner in scoring position, Clemens pounded his glove in disgust.

Clemens gave Erstad a new look, throwing two off-speed pitches for strikes. After throwing a fastball for a ball, Clemens gave Erstad one off-speed pitch over the middle of the plate on a 1-2 count.

Erstad smoked a low line drive just to the left of second base for a single, scoring the runner from second and bringing the Angels within one run.

It turned out to be the Angels' only RBI that night. Behind Clemens' solid pitching performance, the Yankees won 4-1.

"I got a change-up, and I was just trying to put the ball in play," Erstad said in the locker room after the game. "Unfortunately, it wasn't enough."

Through Monday night, the Angels were three games out of the wild card spot and 5 1/2 behind the AL West-leading Mariners.

As the Angels make their late-season push, Erstad will lead more by example and work ethic than by a rah-rah attitude, he said.

"I'll say stuff," he said. "But it's not like I make a point of being loud and obnoxious."

Erstad said he learned his approach to the game while grow-

ing up in Jamestown and watching the Minnesota Twins, and later while competing as a Husker.

"Kirby Puckett is someone I really enjoyed watching," he said. "He was out there every day having fun. He played hard and ran out ground balls. If he was struggling, he still played hard. He played to win."

As a player on Nebraska's 1994 national championship football team, Erstad also gained valuable experience. When he reached the major leagues, he already had learned to deal with big crowds, media attention and travel. And, he said, he learned from his coach.

"I have such great respect for Tom Osborne and the way he carries himself," he said.

Erstad still follows Nebraska athletics closely. He said he was excited, both about the football team's top ranking in the major national polls and about the success of the Nebraska baseball team, which came within one game of reaching this year's College World Series.

"I'm biased, but I think Nebraska fans are the most supportive in the country," he said. "All their teams are good, and with Bill Byrne running the show, they'll stay on top. He's a class act."

Wherever he goes, Erstad said, fans remember his roots as a Husker.

"You'd be amazed," he said. "In just about every ballpark, I get a 'Nebraska sucks' or a 'Go Big Red.' I'll be going to the plate in Yankee Stadium and hear a 'Go Big Red.'"

Erstad is determined to build on his success, and Vaughn is betting on him.

Sometimes, Vaughn said, the type of failure Erstad experienced last year can be a catalyst for future success.

In 1995, coming off an MVP season with the Boston Red Sox, Vaughn went 0-for-15 in the playoffs. He learned from the painful experience, he said, and the next time he reached the playoffs was more prepared.

"The negative things are what teach you how to get better," Vaughn said. "He'll take that with him the rest of his career."

"He may not always hit as high as he has this year, but he'll always be in the .300, .320 range because he's got focus and he's got speed."

With his work ethic and his passion for the game, Erstad said he is not content to bask in the success he has achieved this season.

"I think I have a lot of room to improve," he said.

"I think, as I continue to learn the game, I'll reach more of my untapped potential, and I think I can become a more complete hitter."

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NU's LeBlanc award finalist

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Nebraska senior, Karina LeBlanc, a preseason All-Big 12 and All-American goalkeeper, has been selected as a finalist for soccer's Hermann Trophy.

The award, equivalent to college football's coveted Heisman Trophy, will be given out Dec. 9 in Charlotte, N.C. to honor the most outstanding female and male collegiate soccer players.

The Maple Ridge, British

Columbia native, who also starts at goalie for the Canadian National Team, led the Big 12 her junior year with a .51 goals against average, good enough for fifth nationally.

"Karina has played the top teams in the world," Nebraska coach John Walker said. "She's an experienced international keeper."

LeBlanc is one of 15 players from 11 schools up for the award, which will be chosen by coaches and select media.

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