

Team USA hosts Cuba national team in exhibition game

BRYAN JOHNSTON Asst. Sports Editor

Columbia has once again become a road to the Olympics in Atlanta.

First, it was the women's marathon trials on Feb. 10. Then on June 25, the Olympic torch passed through the capital city. On June 30, the USA baseball team took on the Cubans in an exhibition game at Capital City Stadium.

In yet another stop on their 41 game tour, the 1996 USA Baseball Team Tour made an appearance in Columbia. With just days to go until the Olympics begin, the team is set and has their eyes focused on the gold.

Team USA is one of eight teams competing in this summer's Centennial Olympic Games. Starting July 20 when they take on Nicaragua, the team will play a round-robin format. The four teams with the best record will advance to the medal round.

Team USA, along with Cuba, Japan and Korea are the favorites going in. LSU coach Skip Bertman, whose Tigers won the 1996 College World Series, heads up the Olympic team. Also, new USC baseball coach Ray Tanner is one of the assistants.

As far as the game went, it had all of the pomp and circumstance of a Fourth of July celebration. From American flags to dancers, skydivers to chants of "U-S-A" and a mini-torch relay to fireworks, this had it all.

But the action on the field was a little less enthusiastic as Cuba defeated USA, 4-2.

Going into the five-game series

with Cuba, the USA baseball team had won 39 straight, including all 18 on the pre-Olympic tour. But after two losses, the Americans know who is the favorite in Atlanta.

"Cuba is the number one team in the world by far," Bertman said.

Before a record crowd of 6,527, the USA got off to a promising start in the top of the first. With the bases loaded and one out, Cuba pitcher Omar Luis settled down to strike out J.D. Drew and Jacque Jones to end the threat. After that, it was all downhill.

Luis kept the Americans off-guard with his blazing fastball and wicked slider as he gave up five hits and struck out nine in eight innings of work.

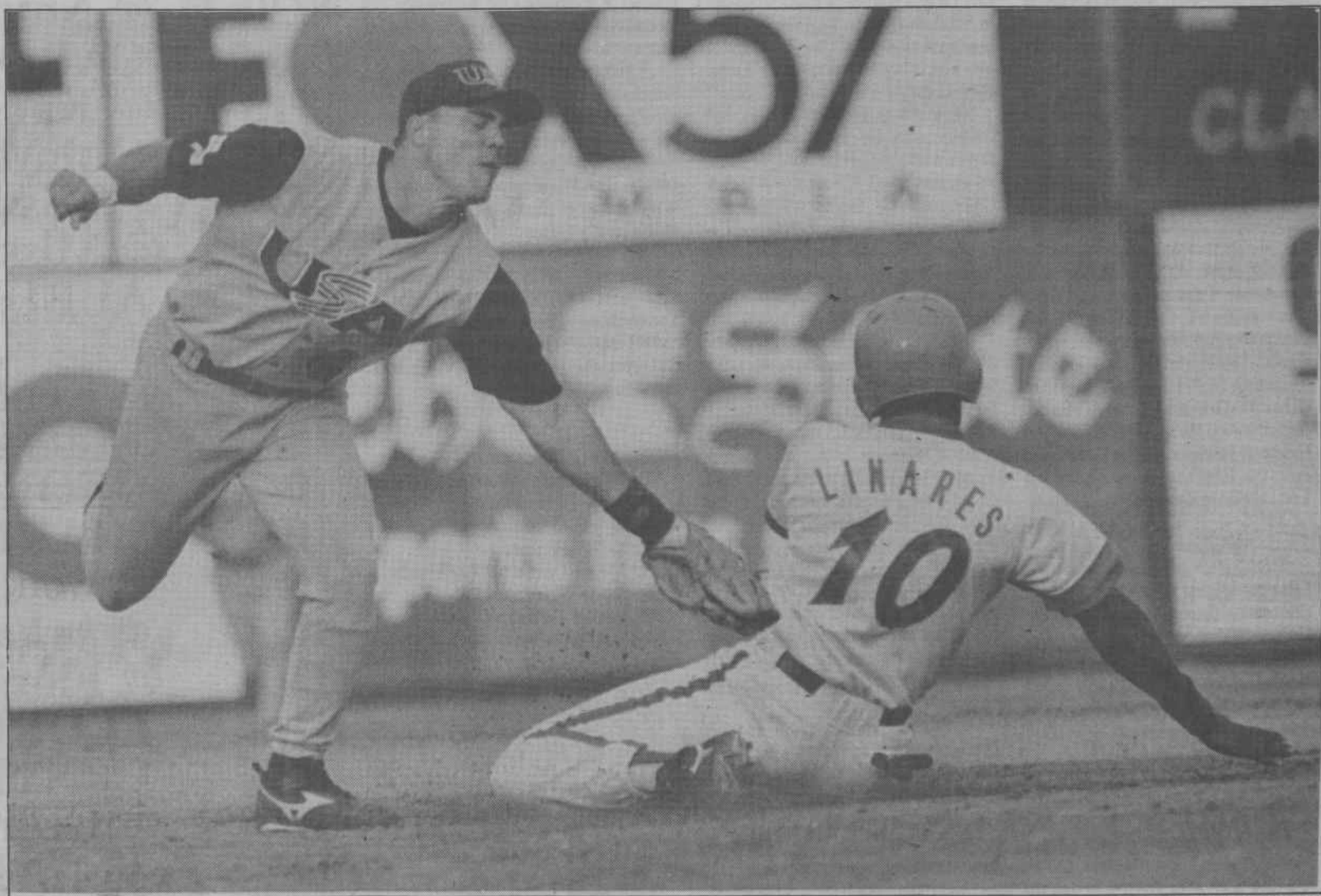
The Cubans struck in the second and never looked back. Cuba strung three consecutive singles off Billy Koch to make it 2-0.

The Clemson right-hander (3-1) took the loss. He struggled with his control for much of the six innings he pitched, allowing five hits and six walks.

"I didn't have my best stuff, but I did what I could with it," Koch said. "They're a good ballclub. They didn't swing at any bad pitches."

Team USA cut the lead to 2-1 in the fifth. Casey Blake was hit by a pitch and moved to second on a fielder's choice. Lead-off man Chad Green then doubled off the left-field wall to score Blake. But once again, Luis settled down to strike out Warren Morris and Mark Kotsay to get out of the jam.

But Cuba upped the lead back to two in their half of the fifth. Jose



ROBERT WALTON THE GAMECOCK

Cuba's Omar Linares slides safely into second base under the tag of the USA's Warren Morris. Cuba won the game played at Capital City Stadium, 4-2.

Estrada led off with a walk and stole second and third. Orestes Kindelan's groundout scored Estrada to make it 3-1.

The USA refused to give up. In the sixth, Travis Lee led off with a double, moved to third on a passed ball and scored on a wild pitch.

"We kept battling," Koch said. "We were never out of the game."

But in the seventh, Cuba pushed

the lead back to two runs. Third baseman Omar Linares, who has been compared to Wade Boggs, hit a towering solo home run to left-center field in his final at-bat to make it 4-2.

In the ninth, the USA threatened once again when Drew led off the inning with a bloop-single to center. As the crowd went into a frenzy, reliever Pedro Lazo dashed their hopes

of a comeback as he struck out Jones and pinch-hitters Matthew LeCroy and Tony Glaus to end the game.

"Their pitching is so tough," Bertman said after the game. "Luis and Lazo are so good that it is hard for us to catch up. We're not prepared for 90-plus (mph) pitching. The last time we faced pitching like that was in an intrasquad game with Koch and (Kris) Benson on the mound."

But the one thing Bertman was quick to point out was that this was a practice game.

"I'm looking for improvement," Bertman said. "I'd rather play well and lose than play poorly and win."

Ready or not, on July 20 the games become real. It's all or nothing for the Americans. The tension will rise and everything will count as Team USA goes for the gold in Atlanta.

New head baseball coach Ray Tanner ready to face challenges of SEC

BRYAN JOHNSTON Asst. Sports Editor

When South Carolina hired Ray Tanner as its new head baseball coach, they got more than a coach who has proven he can win. They got a young, energetic and friendly person.

"I think Dr. McGee made a great pick. Ray will infuse his energy, which is endless. He's a tireless worker, he's well-liked by the kids, he's incredibly enthusiastic and he knows a lot about baseball," LSU coach Skip Bertman said.

The 38-year-old comes to Columbia from North Carolina State where he enjoyed much success with the Wolfpack. At N.C. State he averaged 45 victories a season while compiling a 395-173 record.

While the success in Raleigh was nice, Tanner must get right to work on the Gamecock squad. But, that might be tough considering he is one of the assistant coaches on the Olympic baseball team. Although it is a minor setback in building his team, it is good to know that USC has hired a coach good enough to coach in the Olympics.

But don't let his "other job" fool you. He is already in the process of preparing the 1997 version of the Gamecock baseball team.

"As soon as I accepted the job, the first thing I did was make contact with

"I think Dr. McGee made a great pick. Ray (Tanner) will infuse his energy, which is endless."

Skip Bertman, LSU coach

the players. That's been very encouraging. I've talked to some kids who are really excited about getting it going," Tanner said.

For a man who has had the job for less than a month, he knows what needs to be done. High on his list of priorities is pitching.

"We have to sure up our pitching staff. That's our number one priority. We're recruiting right now. We're planning on bringing in four or five pitchers before the fall gets under way," Tanner.

Tanner feels confident in the catching core of the team that includes Randy Stegall, Etienne Hightower, Mike Curry and Eric Stanton.

"From where I sit right now, I think the position players are pretty good, but it's important that we get that pitching staff sured up."

Pitcher Brett Jodie must be healthy and Jason Pomar needs to be solid out of the bullpen, Tanner said.

While at N.C. State, he led them to their first ACC championship in

1992. He was the ACC Coach of the Year in 1990 and has led his team to seven NCAA tournament appearances in nine years. He is the second-winningest coach in school history. He has had 30 players go on to play professional baseball and coached the Wolfpack to a school-record 49 victories in 1993.

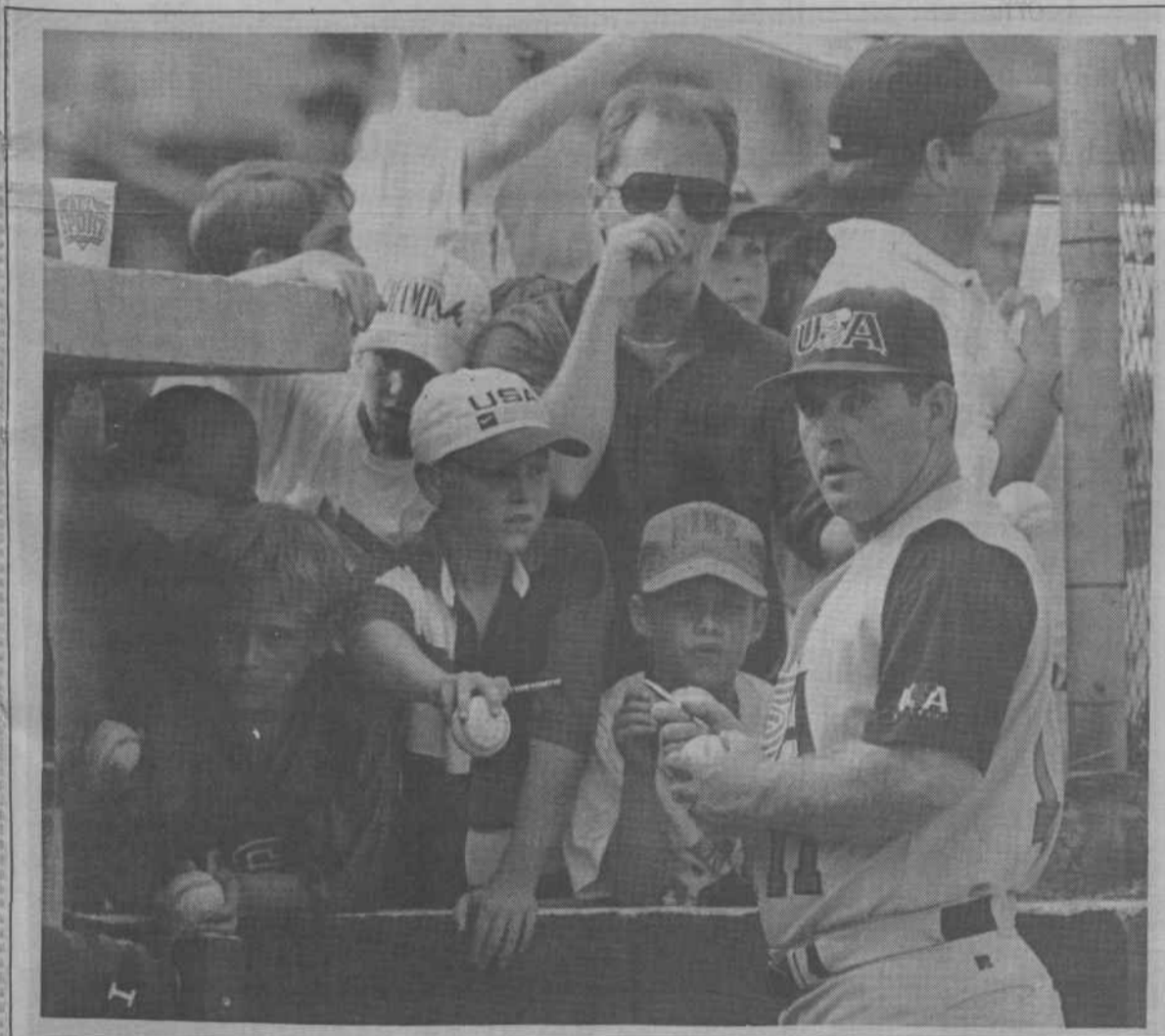
After a 25-28 campaign for USC in 1996, a year in which they did not make the SEC Tournament, most would see '97 as a rebuilding year, but not Tanner.

"I have high expectations. I don't use the word 'rebuilding.' I think that you're trying to be good every year. You have to take that approach," Tanner said. "I'm expecting to be very competitive in the SEC and I'm going to be disappointed if we're not."

With an attitude like that, it shouldn't be too long until the Gamecocks are back in contention. But it's his friendly, out-going personality that makes Tanner likeable.

The Benson, N.C., native is dedicated to the South Carolina program. His wife is a USC alumna and is "ecstatic" according to Tanner. He loves the area and says the attraction has always been there.

"I'm looking for the Gamecocks to take me in and let's get ready to go."



ROBERT WALTON THE GAMECOCK

New USC baseball coach Ray Tanner signs autographs for fans at the USA vs. Cuba baseball game.

Football previews, fun facts leave a lot to the imagination

Oh, this should be fun!

In both Lindy's and Athlon's preseason football issue, Gamecock opponents are rated as some of the toughest. Tennessee is first in the nation in Athlon's and fourth in Lindy's. Florida is sixth and fifth, respectively; Auburn is 21st in both; Clemson is 10th in Athlon's. Even East Carolina is ranked 23rd in Athlon's. To make matters worse, Central Florida, who makes the jump from Division I-AA to I-A, has one of the top 20 quarterbacks in the nation in Daunte Culpepper and their aerial attack is considered potent.

Something to be thankful for

Kentucky's Moe Williams, who last year ran all over the Gamecock defense for 299 yards, decided to forego his senior year and was taken in the NFL Draft.

Things to be hopeful for

Tennessee's Peyton Manning and Florida's Danny Wuerffel are the top two quarterbacks in the nation. Is it too late to hope that they will enter the NFL Draft?

In case you cared

Here are some little known facts about 1996 college football:

Cheapest Ticket: Ball State - \$2, \$4

for a good seat

Most Expensive: Arizona State and Oklahoma State - \$60 for a really good seat

Smallest Stadium: Idaho's Kibbie-ASUI Dome; capacity of 16,000

Largest Stadium: Michigan Stadium; Capacity of 102,501

Most unusual fact: Kent's school colors were orange and purple until a laundry mishap left the basketball team's uniforms dark blue and gold

Makes you wonder

Two recent high school graduates, Jermaine O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, were selected in the June 26 NBA Draft and everyone says they need college experience. The same thing is said if a college football player leaves early. But nothing is said if a high school baseball star goes straight to the minor leagues.

Is it a coincidence that football and basketball are the two highest grossing revenues for colleges?

That silver lining

As bad as the Gamecock defense was last year, they had the lowest single-game rushing total in the SEC when they held Kent to -20 yards.

BRYAN JOHNSTON

SCRUM DOWN

Speaking of Kent

Out of 111 Division I-A teams ranked in the preseason poll, the Golden Flashes are ranked, drum roll please...

111. No where to go but up!

Mark your calendar

On Sept. 21 Tennessee travels to Gainesville to take on Florida in a game that will probably decide the winner of the SEC East.

Do the Wright thing

Until Anthony Wright proves he can lead the Gamecocks to victory, any comparisons to ex-Florida State QB and Heisman winner Charlie Ward are a little premature.

The next Northwestern?

Although it'll take a remarkable team to top the Wildcat's dream season of 1995, Maryland could be a pleasant surprise. The Terps, who in '95 had their first winning season in five years, appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough that could get them to their second bowl in ten years.

Here's a good idea

The NCAA passed a new rule to take effect this season. When a ballcarrier's helmet comes

completely off, the play will be blown dead and the ball will belong to the runner's team at that spot. Makes sense.

Not so eager Beavers

And who would be? The Oregon State football team will more than likely extend their own NCAA record for consecutive losing seasons. It is currently at 25 but should reach 26 by mid-October.

Who's number 1?

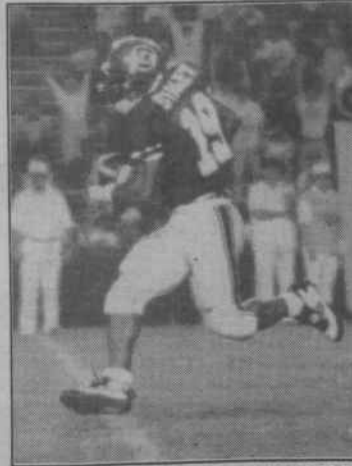
Nebraska has gone undefeated in the past three regular seasons, claiming back-to-back national titles. Until anyone proves that they can beat them, the Cornhuskers get my nod as the preseason favorite.

What about number's 2-10?

If I had a vote in preseason balloting, behind Nebraska would be Florida St., Tennessee, Notre Dame, Florida, Southern Cal, Texas, Colorado, Ohio St. and Miami.

And finally...

USC could go 1-10 this football season, but as long as the one win comes against Clemson, the critics are quiet and Brad Scott's job is safe.



FILE PHOTO

Gamecock Football Fever
Catch it in the Aug. 19 edition!