

McCarver of the Cards

The National League's sophomore of the year comes to the University

By CHARLES LONG

TO HIS fellow students and his professors at O.U., James Timothy McCarver looks like another member of the University community. To pitchers on nine National League baseball clubs, he looks like trouble. And to the St. Louis Cardinals, Tim McCarver looks like a great future, embroidered with pennants and world championships.

McCarver is a 22-year-old big league catcher with St. Louis, and a very good one. His work in handling collaborating pitchers and man-handling opposing pitchers not only helped spark the Cards to their recent nip-and-tuck flag battle with the World Champion Los Angeles Dodgers, it also earned for him the distinction of being named the National League's outstanding sophomore of 1963.

McCarver is also a sophomore at O.U., majoring in business management. Like so many of the professional athletes of today, McCarver realizes the classroom is as valuable as the dressing room. He wants a college degree as well as a World Series ring, but he doesn't intend to leave the game when he retires as a player.

"I want to stay in baseball as long as I can," he explains, "to make it my living—forever. I hope to work in the front office once my playing days are over. Whether it's the handling of personnel, management or even scouting, I know it would be beneficial to have a college degree."

Baseball prognosticators have been dead wrong on numerous occasions, but those

who say McCarver is headed for stardom have the odds on their side.

In the first place, he is loaded with spirit, desire, aggressiveness and the rare ability to use a hot bat. He proved his durability last year when, after June 1, he caught more games than any other catcher in either major league, receiving both ends of several double-headers and continuously hovering around the .300 mark as a batter.

His value in assuming the No. 1 catching job as if born to it is bolstered by his knack to hit in the clutch. Last year, he delivered one key blow after another during his team's long, uphill battle for the pennant. In 127 games, McCarver hit .289, with 12 doubles, seven triples and four home runs included among 117 hits. He had 51 runs-batted-in and was the only Cardinal besides All-Star first baseman Bill White to hit a grand slam homer. Among his other home runs was a three-run clout in the ninth inning that ruined a shutout for L.A.'s Sandy Koufax (a feat worthy of a raise in salary for any hitter).

In a telephone interview St. Louis Manager Johnny Keane had this to say about McCarver:

"Tim was one of the big reasons we finished as high as we did this past season.

"He is one individual on our club who was not given as much credit as was due him, because we already had established players who were getting most of the public's attention. But the fact that he hit as well against left-handed pitchers as he did

against right-handers was a big factor in lifting our ball club.

"After Tim began starting (around June 1) we relied on him to catch day after day, including double-headers, without being platooned. This is a rarity in baseball today, especially among catchers. And I repeat, it was his ability to hit equally as well against right-handers and left-handers that made this possible. It was a big item as far as we're concerned, and we will continue to count on him strongly.

"Tim is going to improve. After all, he's only 22 and is just now getting his footing. There is no question in my mind that he will become one of the best catchers in the major leagues."

Concerning young McCarver's ability to handle veteran hurlers on the Cardinal staff, Keane said, "There didn't seem to be any criticism of his catching from veterans such as (Ernie) Broglio, (Curt) Simmons or (Lou) Burdette except for the usual shake-offs any catcher might get from his pitchers."

McCarver is no Tiny Tim. Standing 6-1 and weighing about 190 pounds, this solid sparkplug could easily pass for a Bud Wilkinson prospect at O.U. Actually, there was a time when it appeared as if he might be headed toward a football career. At Christian Brothers High School in Memphis, Tennessee, (where Buddy Leake played ball) McCarver led his team to the Memphis football championship as an excellent, pass-catching end. After making a



host of all-star teams, he received scholarship offers from a dozen colleges, including Notre Dame and the University of Tennessee. McCarver also starred in basketball at Christian Brothers. But baseball was his game, and when the scouts began flocking to the Memphis area in the spring like migrating birds, McCarver was the center of attention. The scouts were quick to note that McCarver had unusual speed, determination and the ability to put the bat on the ball.

At 17 he signed with St. Louis for \$75,000.

McCarver made the long trip to the Cardinal starting lineup the hard way—all the way up through the farm system. He started at Keokuk, a Class D team in Iowa. There he hit .360 to win the Midwest League batting title, and in 70 turns at bat with Rochester of the International League that same season, he hit .357, which earned him a late-season trial with the Cardinals.

McCarver was the second best hitter in

the Southern Association when he played before the home folks in Memphis in 1960, hitting .347, and again he appeared briefly with the Cards at the end of the National League season. Suffering from a split finger and concentrating on defensive moves, McCarver dropped to .229 at Charleston the first half of 1961, then rode the bench in St. Louis the rest of the season. 1962 marked the first time that he stayed in one place, helping lead Southern titlist Atlanta to the Little World Series championship.

McCarver's bright future is enhanced by constant hustle and desire. He has been called by coaches and managers an aggressive, natural-born leader and a driving force who builds up pitchers' confidence. McCarver, who has been catching since he was 10 years old, credits Hal Smith, another Card catcher who was forced to retire a few seasons ago due to a heart ailment, and Carl Sawatski, who is the No. 2 Card catcher, as the two men who have helped him most in learning to handle pitchers.

"Strong and weak hitters are all going to get their licks," McCarver says, "so rather than learning so much about how to throw to opposing batters, I think it is more important to learn your own pitchers—what their best moves are and how much confidence they have in certain pitches. This was a theory of Hal Smith's. He taught me a lot along these lines. And Carl Sawatski has helped me with the Cardinal pitchers.

"I still think the best pitchers are those guys who just rare back, fire and dare you to hit the ball. This is what I want our pitchers to do: challenge the batter in a tough situation with his best pitch. If a pitcher doesn't like a call I give, he can shake it off. Whether it's Bobby Shantz, Curt Simmons, Ernie Broglio or Hoot Gibson, they know what they're supposed to do. Of course, they want me to do well, but they also realize I'm going to make mistakes.

"We have a meeting before each series

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in order to go over the opposing team's hitters, but on the field 99 per cent of this turns out to be routine—the pitcher throws the ball and you catch it. I'm a firm believer that if you think too much, you can hurt yourself. Natural ability carries you a long way. But, believe me, baseball keeps you honest; it doesn't allow you to get too cocky. I don't think a player can ever know too much about the game. For example, how many times do you see a guy throw to the wrong base or forget how many outs there are? These, of course, are mental errors, but a man who's not on his toes is always susceptible to them.

"When we're on the road, I prefer rooming with a catcher or pitcher. I'm one of the many who take the game off the field. Some say they forget a game once it's over, but I can't do that. Whether it's good or bad, I don't know; but I'm always talking baseball shop with someone, running over certain plays that were made and so forth."

One play that McCarver is not likely to forget happened in mid-June on television's Game of the Week, when he crashed into Dodger catcher John Roseboro in a play at home plate, a collision that caused even armchair viewers to wince. McCarver was called out in his scoring attempt, but Roseboro paid a price for the putout with a mass of bruises from shoulder to leg and a broken lens out of his glasses. Tim himself still has a bruise under his left eye as a result of the incident.

McCarver is a left-handed, line-drive hitter, a free swinger who does not often strike out. Fast, especially for a catcher, he has led off for the Cards on occasion. He says the toughest pitcher he faced last season (other than Koufax) was Dick Ellsworth, the Chicago Cubs' 20-game winner.

Just a portion of the Tim McCarver story is past history. The best chapters lie ahead. Tim is looking forward to the coming season. He feels the trade which brought Roger Craig to the Cardinals will be of great value. He is high on the rookies who must try to replace Stan Musial. Most of all he is ready to get behind the plate again.

"I think I can improve in everything," he says. "Catching, throwing, hitting. I'm not satisfied. I don't think you can be successful if you're satisfied."

And, he feels the same way about the few months out of the year that he spends in a college classroom. He transferred to O.U. this fall from Memphis State where he logged 48 credit hours.

"This is my fourth year in school. It should take me about four more years to complete my studies but I'll get a college education, no matter how long it takes."

If he goes to school like he plays baseball, McCarver has it made. The Cardinals probably don't care if he ever gets his sheepskin as long as he keeps playing. But there are other baseball clubs which would be delighted if McCarver spent all year in a classroom.

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Student McCarver crouches to get out of his car as he arrives home after a day of classes. The position is not a new one. Catcher McCarver spends much of the summer crouching behind a plate.