Delayed Major Leaguer

Johnny Oates has finally made it to the major leagues.

Well, almost. The former Virginia Tech catcher is there at least in spirit on the field. He’s in the box. But so far the newest member of the Baltimore Orioles hasn’t been able to step up to the plate from behind bird manager Earl Weaver.

A few weeks ago Johnny was beginning to worry if he would make the major leagues. That was during the strike which canceled the second half of the Commissioner’s scheduled opening at a Yankee Stadium.

Johnny was cut out two days before the strike started so he would be gone from Tech’s schedule with Oriole, “They had cut down to three catchers,” said Johnny, “so I was out after one extra pitcher.”

Oates briefly left to1920 for a period of elimination. That meant had he been a starter, he would have been an L e a g u e ’s champions club. But that meant he wouldn’t be a catcher.

But he came back. The strike “I was very disappointed,” admitted Oates, “I had my hopes up and was excited about making the club.”

It was even harder for Johnny to face another reason. “I didn’t have a vote. Only players with 60 days of major league experience had a vote. It bothered me a bit. But I realized that the strike was designed to help the younger players like myself and I know it would end.”

Still, the strike didn’t wind up in time to save Oates from getting on the bench when opening his career in Yankee Stadium.

It’s true Yankee Stadium isn’t what it used to be. Not the days of crowds ranging from 50,000 to 100,000, one usually sees more kids blithely in around the stadium than people sitting in the cluttered old stands.

No longer do the Mantles, Berras, Skowrons and McClellans hit the baseballs as they did when Oates was growing up. He can’t recall the DiMaggio, Ruths or Gehrigs who were before his time.

Yankee Stadium a Dream

“I was building up for that opening day in Yan- kee Stadium,” recalled Oates who was the first player up to bat for the first full baseball schedule at Tech. “I’ve always been used to watching baseball on television and thinking one day I would walk into Yankee Stadium and hit a home run.”

“I’m not so much who is playing for the Yan- kees. It’s just Yankee Stadium and to think of all those very famous players.”

“When you talk baseball, Yankee Stadium is the first thing that comes to mind. Play a word association game for any stadium and you think Yankee Stadium.

“Ask me is concerned it would give me a bigger thrill just being up there than the Astrodome or some of the other places they’ve built in the past 20 years.”

Oates is in the majors for two reasons. First of all was the retirement of Clay Dalrymple, last year’s starter for the Orioles. It’s not surprising he retired since the Orioles decided he’d be better off in the International League where Oates played in 1969.

And secondly, the Orioles usually keep three catchers around because of Weaver’s theory.

“Earl Weaver is a believer of percentages base- ball.”

“Quite often he’ll pinch hit Andy Etchebarren for Elio Hendrick’s or vice versa. And when someone pinch hits he has to come into the game for the other one, since Earl wants a third catcher to back him up.”

Lucky Break

All that is fine, Oates, at 23 is now the third catcher and is hoping to get his chance to move up on the batting order.

But he’s lucky in another way. He could have been in another organization, say like Pittsburgh which is trying to dumps catchers to outliers since the strike is over so early.

“The Baltimore catchers are underrated,” Oates asserted. “Those two together were second in NFL for the most strikeouts last year. Earl has won with them and he’ll stay with them.”

Oates figures that this was his year, though. He hit just .235, but was second in the league last year. However, he was able to get up .300 when he came down with a kidney infection. He got one hit in his final 29 trips and Johnny’s aver-

age never recovered.

“I was first string in triple-A for Baltimore,” Oates recalls, “I have a lot of confidence. If they traded for another catcher, I’d be traded to be first.”

That was the natural reaction. Now Johnny would like to find out what it’s like to play in the big leagues. That’s the next step.