

# 'MR. CUB' KEEPS HIS SHARP EYE

Ernie Banks looks forward to seeing his home run record with Cubs broken.

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If you thought Ernie Banks might be losing sleep over the prospect of being supplanted by Sammy Sosa as the Chicago Cubs' all-time home run leader, then you likely don't know much about "Mr. Cub."

Banks, the perpetually optimistic, upbeat Hall of Fame shortstop, is not only undaunted by the thought of being dethroned by Sosa, he appears to be enjoying every minute of Sosa's rise up the charts.

"I'm happy and rejoiceful about the fact that Sammy has a good chance of not only hitting 500 home runs, but I would say that Sammy has a chance to hit 800 home runs before he retires," Banks said Saturday on the final day of the Iowa Cubs FanFest at the Knapp Center in Des Moines.

Banks, who spent his entire 19-year career with the Cubs, hit 512 home runs. Sosa begins the 2003 season with 499, including 470 with the Cubs. Hank Aaron is the all-time major league leader with 755.

"He's just a remarkable player," Banks said of Sosa. "And I think a lot of these players today like Barry Bonds and A-Rod and Ken Griffey Jr., they have so much talent.

"I kid a lot of my friends, including Hank Aaron. I tell him, 'You better move over Hank, because Barry Bonds is going to break everything you ever thought you were going to break.'"

Banks does not spend his time thinking about all the reasons why baseball's offensive statistics appear to be out of whack.

Smaller ballparks with reduced foul territory? Juiced-up baseballs? Sophisticated fitness regimens? Steroids? Banks, 72, will have none of it. He credits the players themselves.

Banks, a shortstop who won two National League most valuable player awards in a major league career spanning from 1953 through 1971, also contests the notion that it is much easier today to compile lofty statistics.

"I saw Frank Robinson the other day and we were chatting about this," Banks said of the Hall of Fame outfielder, who is fifth on the home run list with 586. "He said, 'Man, if I was playing today I would hit 75 home runs every year.'"

"But I just don't think that way. I just look at the way the game is today and that's the way it is. It's the same way in every sport — golf and basketball and tennis."

Ernie Johnson, a teammate of Banks' with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues in the early 1950s,

also appeared Saturday at FanFest. He has a different view.

"To me, I watch some guys hit home runs with one hand, and I think it's cheapened the home run," Johnson said.

"They say that the athletes today are quicker and stronger, but I can't agree with that," he said. "These guys go on the disabled list with a pulled hamstring. So if they were better fit than the players of yesterday, why do they have so many injuries?"

Johnson also sees the inflated bodies of today's superstars, such as Bonds and Sosa, and wonders how they got so big so fast. And he believes that deep down many past greats do regret the passing of their records.

"I'm sure if you talked to Aaron he'd put a nice light on it," Johnson said of the prospect of the all-time home run mark falling. "But I know deep down he would feel bad about it."

Not Banks, who plans to be at the Cubs' season opener March 31 at Shea Stadium in New York City as Sosa resumes his chase to become the 18th major leaguer to hit 500 home runs. At 34, Sosa could pass Aaron before age 40 by averaging 52 home runs a year over the next five. He's averaged 58-plus over the past five.

"It's a priority for me to be there," Banks said. "I just want to be there when he accomplishes this milestone; but he's going to go much deeper than that."