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Scouts honor

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Marin's top talent judges concur:the Marlins must avoid pitching to Bonds If you're a Giants fan simply looking to be entertained, you have a message for opposing teams in the playoffs: Pitch to Barry!

If you're a sensible baseball scout, including three with Marin County ties, simply doing your job, you have the same message, different punctuation: Pitch to Barry? Bonds? You've got to be crazy!?

Scouts honor.

"It's not my call," said Gary Hughes, who's providing information to Dusty Baker as special assistant to Chicago Cubs general manager Jim Hendry.

"Just get a left-hander that throws 110 mph and your problem is solved. Everyone's got one of them, right?" said Will Schock, West Coast supervisor of scouting for the A's.

"I'm not going to be a rocket scientist. You just can't. Bottom line," said Charles Scott, who's finishing his third season as West Coast supervisor of scouting for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

"What he (Bonds) is doing and what he's going to continue to do is going to be mindboggling and scary. He's that locked in."

Scott, a 1982 Terra Linda High graduate who became Bonds' teammate and friend when they played together at Arizona State University, got that sense when he visited the Giants' left fielder in the team's clubhouse last week. It was Scott who last year predicted that Bonds would have a monstrous playoff.

"I think he's going to be even better," said Scott, a Novato resident. "He's more comfortable now because of what he established in the playoffs last year. That got the monkey off his back and it'll only escalate from here. He knows something the rest of us don't. He's going to hurt you if you pitch to him. Period."

In the playoffs last season, Bonds was walked 27 times, shattering the major league postseason record by seven and it is no wonder why. He also set a playoff record with eight home runs, four in the World Series. He batted .356 (16-for-45) with 18 runs scored, 16 RBIs, a .581 on-base percentage and a .978 slugging percentage.

"He's the most dangerous hitter in the game," said Hughes, who was baseball coach for nine years and athletic director for four years at Marin Catholic through 1972.

"He makes adjustments," said Schock, a 1982 Tamalpais grad. "You can't pitch him in the same place twice in a row because he's so smart."

Schock and Hughes have been sitting in the stands and scouting Bonds and the Giants for a couple of weeks and will continue to do so during the team's best-of-five National League Division Series against the Florida Marlins.

Scott has been watching Bonds for years. In mid-August, before he was assigned to scout the

Giants, Scott watched the Giants play the Expos on TV in a three-game series in Montreal that Bonds missed because he was on bereavement leave. Scott wasn't impressed.

"I thought they had a good Triple-A team," Scott said. "The pitching was carrying them, but they didn't have any (offensive) punch at all."

Bonds rejoined the team in San Francisco where they began a three-game series against the NL East champion Atlanta Braves. He hit dramatic game-winning walk-off home runs in the first and last games of that series.

"With Barry coming back, he's added so much dimension to that team," Scott said. "Without him, that team has no chance to win."

Schock said there's a running joke going around amongst scouts about Bonds and his status in the game. Schock regularly keeps a statistical chart on how a batter competes with runners in scoring position.

"Now when Bonds comes up (anticipating a walk) you can consider that being runners in scoring position," Schock quipped.

That's Bonds' impact on a game. He's bigger than life, improving the situation in situational hitting without lifting the bat off his left shoulder.

"He makes that a scary team," Scott said. "Now they have that fear factor. They're pretty much peaking at the right time."

The Giants won 100 games this season, including 20 of their last 28. They have scored at least four runs in 56 of their last 84 games, going 44-12 during that span.

"They're all dangerous hitters," Schock said.

"No matter who they run out there, they're playing well. They're playing really well," Hughes said. Scott believes third baseman Edgardo Alfonzo and catcher Benito Santiago, who usually hit behind Bonds in the batting order, will be pivotal players for the Giants in the playoffs. Last October, when teams walked Bonds in the playoffs, Santiago responded by going 9-for-25 (.360) with two homers and 11 RBIs. He grounded into six double plays, but his hits were big ones - two times they put the Giants in the lead and another one tied the game.

Alfonzo, who is batting .306 with 16 doubles, eight home runs, 52 RBIs and 29 walks in his last 71 games, has replaced Santiago as Bonds' "protection" behind the clean-up spot.

"He's the key. He's the Rich Aurilia of this year," Scott said.

Aurilia, after batting .257 during the regular season last year, had six home runs and a team-high 17 RBIs in the playoffs. The Giants' veteran shortstop has learned to adjust to how opposing pitchers are trying to get him out.

"He's figured out what Barry's already figured out," Scott said. "He's learned to play within his own abilities."

All told, players like Aurilia, Bonds, et al, give the Giants a formidable lineup, a tough out from one through nine.

"They're swinging the bats real well all up and down the lineup, even the old guys," Schock said.

"They had a pretty solid lineup (batting order) when you look at them. I guess it all depends on their pitching (their chances in the playoffs)."

Their pitching is solid, too, and it limits damage in a game in a big way, or small one.

"The Giants maximize their opportunities in that they don't make many mistakes," Scott said.

"They're not an overly talented team like some of the teams they may face in the playoffs, but their strong point is they don't make many mistakes and they win a lot of those close games."

The Giants had the best record (28-12) in one-run games this season. They were second in team pitching and third in team fielding.

"It kind of dawns on you that there are a lot of parts that work well," Hughes said.

"Rarely do you hear of the Giants giving up a big inning. They don't make those compound mistakes," Scott said. "Because they don't make huge mistakes and don't give up that big inning, that's the type of ballclub you need to win in the playoffs."

Is it the type of ballclub that can win it all?

"They may be a better team this year than last year," Hughes said. "I mean, they went out and spent some money."

The Giants couldn't afford to keep Russ Ortiz, Jeff Kent or David Bell so they brought in free agents Alfonzo and Ray Durham, who gives them a legitimate leadoff batter. They eventually traded for Sidney Ponson to replace Ortiz. The Giants also added veteran leadership in Marquis

Grissom and tapped into the potential of Jose Cruz Jr., who has played Gold Glove-caliber defense for them in right field.

"They definitely have a personality to them," Schock said. "They play hard. They swing the bats. They stack up with anybody. Their chances are just as good as last year."

Plus, Scott sensed, the Giants have some intangibles on their side this time.

"With the experience of the Giants and the persona of that team, they have the good karma to win right now," Scott said. "Atlanta is a more talented team in terms of profiling (from a scout's perspective). I just think the Giants have that persona and karma to get back there (to the World Series) having been there last year and having lost the way they did and having been in first place all year."

Now comes the moment of truth. The bottom line.

Pitch to Barry! Or pitch to Barry?

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