Baseball: On Way Up
By PAUL BURKA

If members of the Rice baseball team happened to be reading the Sunday morning papers, doubtless more than a few of them suffered slight attacks of vertigo. There were the Owls, in the rarified atmosphere of first place! (First division is all too strange to Owl baseball entries, and first place—well, that’s just something reserved for Texas.)

The performance of the Owls has been one of the more pleasant surprises of a spring season which has had plenty of shockers—the right kind—in the early weeks. No one expected Fritz Schunck to have the greatest day of his life against two of the nation’s top tennis players; none predicted the third-place finish at the Border Olympics; few foresaw five wins for the baseballers in their first six games.

Just how good is Doug Osborne’s nine? One thing is certain—they’re better than anyone thought they’d be at this stage of the game. Whether they’re good enough to contend for a Southwest Conference title remains to be seen. Certainly they’re not up to the level of any of the great Texas teams which have monopolized the SWC in recent years, but then neither is any other conference club.

The strength of the Owls is—for once—hitting. While nobody is moving the fences back in Forth Worth, College Station, or Austin, any opposition will have to contend with a Rice team that is willing to swing the bat.

Joel Tigett and Randy Kerbow give the Owls some good power, although not enough. A characteristic of power hitters, however, is that you never have enough of them.

Making up for the long ball punch is a solid group of singles and doubles hitters. In college ball, the line drive hitters can make up for the big guns, for stolen bases and bases on balls come easier.

There isn’t a man in the Owl batting order who is an “automatic out.” This is the first year in quite a while that’s been true.

The pitching isn’t great, but it is adequate, and more importantly, it’s deep. Ken Schoppe, Tex Spear, Darell Mullins, and Butch McKee are all good and good stuff. Spear has a knuckler, McKee is a junk-baller who can be “sneaky fast,” and Mullins is the hardest thrower on the staff.

Schoppe, now 4-0 for the year after two straight route-going performances, seems to have overcome his affinity for the high, hanging curve ball, and has improved his control. Always blessed with an excellent curve, Schoppe seems to be able to throw it where he wants it. Low, that is.

Then there’s defense. Ah, yes, defense.

Oddly enough, thus far the Owls haven’t looked too bad. There were a few rough days at third base before Don Kirks finally won the job, but he played well there Saturday against SMU on a day when he got few really tough chances. Billy Hale is good at shortstop, and Lee Raesener is a seasoned veteran at second.

First base is solid, catching is good, and the outfield is basically good although James King won’t rob anyone of base hits with his speed in right field. But King, Gene Fleming, and Tigett have good arms and are dependable fielders.

A look at the SWC, then, for the ’63 season:
1. Texas A&M—Aggies return to the top.
2. TCU—Frogs ride early hot streak.
3. Rice—Balanced but not spectacular.
4. Texas—Not this year, fellas.
5. Baylor—Bears lack defensive strength.
6. SMU—On the bottom, as usual.