



SUSAN WATTS DAILY NEWS

AL'S PALS: Mets pitcher Al Leiter poses yesterday with children from the East Harlem School at Exodus House.

Leiter talking title Says Mets can beat out Braves

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Al Leiter likes to think big. That's why he pledged a million dollars to his charitable foundation, Leiter's Landing, last October after signing his hefty Mets contract. And it's why the Mets' ace doesn't want his teammates setting their sights too low this season.

"Of course we have to be careful and give the Atlanta Braves all the respect in the world, (but) I just think as a team coming in with the improvements that we made, we got to feel like we can really compete with Atlanta and go for winning the East as opposed to always looking at that wild card," Leiter said yesterday at a news conference at the Official All Star Cafe to publicize his donations.

With that remark, Leiter officially put the Braves on notice. The Mets are going after the National League East, even after Atlanta retooled its own lineup by adding Bret Boone and Brian Jordan.

The Mets retained Leiter and Mike Piazza and added Robin Ventura, Bobby Bonilla and Rickey Henderson — enough, Leiter thinks, to catch the Braves.

"I don't see any reason why this team shouldn't be significantly better than last year. We won 88 games last year and we missed the playoffs by blowing it at the end," Leiter said. "We were a playoff team last year. By all rights, we should've been. A lot of us are teed off about it. All the guys that were there last year, that last day in Atlanta, there's a bitter pill for us to swallow in this spring to remember that feeling of going home, of knowing it was kind of ours."

Leiter signed a four-year, \$32 million contract last October, both a reward for his 17-6 season in 1998 and a

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Old-timers week continues at Shea. The Mets are planning to bring back another name from the past. **Rusty Staub**, last employed as a Mets broadcaster, is returning to the team, but not in the booth or in uniform, baseball sources said. Staub will have an as-yet undefined public-relations role for the club with which he played two stints in the 1970s and '80s. After the Mets rehired **Tom Seaver** as an announcer-pitching instructor last week, **Bobby Valentine** said, "Hopefully, there'll be more. I talked to Rusty and told him how glad I was to get us all reunited. Hopefully, it won't be a one-guy thing." . . . Unable to reach a one-year agreement with reliever **Turk Wendell** by their self-imposed Monday deadline, the Mets extended the deadline indefinitely. Wendell's arbitration hearing is set for Friday, but GM **Steve Phillips** is confident he can sign him before then. "We're still hopeful we're going to get the deal done," Phillips said. — **Hermoso**

playoffs.

Leiter laughs that pressure off. With money come expectations. And he's not alone. Just ask Ventura or Bonilla.

"When you make good money, you know it comes with the territory that you're generally one of the better players," Leiter said.

And in Leiter, Bonilla and Henderson, the Mets finally have players with

have that feeling," Leiter said. "That's the infectious thing. That's what makes the Yankees so great, that they have winners there."

With the contract, Leiter and his wife, Lori, promised to donate \$250,000 per year for the next four years to Leiter's Landing, which helps needy children. He began yesterday by presenting a check for \$5,000 to the East Harlem School at Exodus House, an independent middle school for children with low grades.

"They found us," executive director Hans Hageman said.

"It was easy, so easy. I didn't even think twice. It's almost like, 'Is a million dollars enough?'" Leiter said of last October's pledge.

Leiter has found company in his benevolence. He said Microsoft has committed to donating Leiter's compensation for an upcoming video game to the charity. One fan promised to donate \$1,000 for every Mets win over the Yankees and \$5 for every bat Leiter breaks. "I'll just lie and say I broke 5,000 bats," Leiter joked.

Both Leiter and the Mets opened their pockets this winter, hoping to affect a change. The effect of Leiter's generosity could be seen in the faces of the 20 children seated next to him yesterday. The Mets' free spending will take months to be evaluated.

"When you see management and ownership make an improvement this winter, I think you have the confidence that you can compete with the Yankees and the Braves and what-