

On being humbled

CHRIS CARLSON, The Carlson Chronicle

Major league baseball starts this week not a moment too soon! We all need diversion from the mind-numbing political games being played nationally and in Idaho. There's a poetry in motion to the national pastime that enables one to suspend time, focus on the purity of competition and performers one can still idolize even as an adult. So different from the political arena.

For years my baseball heroes have been journeyman players who but for circumstances beyond their control could have been and should have been superstars.

Take for example Tom Paciorek, the best player on the 1970 Spokane Indians, who waltzed to the PCL championship and then swept a good Hawaii team in the play-offs. The MVP award though went to teammate Bobby Valentine, today the manager of the Boston Red Sox, who had some pretty good numbers himself. That team also had others baseball fans would recognize: Steve Garvey, Bill Buckner (who today lives in Boise), Davey Lopes and Bill Russell.

When it came time to move to the bigs though, Paciorek's way was blocked on the parent Dodgers club by veteran outfielders who stuck around longer than the infielders the other Indians replaced. Paciorek rode the bench in obscurity, until the Mariners picked him up.

I have a favorite memory of the night in the Kingdome he clobbered a bottom of the ninth, two outs and two strikes home run that beat the hated Yankees. He did it again the next night.

After Paciorek retired I "adopted" another quiet, solid, competent player who also labored in obscurity, Raul Ibanez. He is the answer to a trivia question about who hit the first grand salami in Safeco Field. He had two stints with the M's and has been an all-star. Despite three solid years with the Phillies he was not on the Phillies team that last won a World Series.

Today, Raul is 40. Imagine my surprise when as a free agent he signed with the hated Yankees! He is expected to play right field and DH this year. Suddenly I'm a Yankee fan because I want Raul to get that World Series ring.

Most have favorite players or teams. Most know too that the game can be humbling for player and fan alike. Though hope springs eternal at the start of each season, the cold hand of reality soon sets in, shattering fantasies of a team winning the series and Raul leading the way.

The game can be humbling in other ways too. My life's most mortifying moment occurred at a spring training game in Arizona many years back. It was early in the 80's and I was attending spring training with the Mariner's RBI Club.

For some reason my pea-brain conjured a mission while there to convince the Mariners' management to trade Dave "Hendu" Henderson. He struck out too often in my book, was too streaky a hitter and rarely came through in the clutch.

A nice feature about spring training is being close to the players because the ballparks are minor league facilities. So there I was sitting off of home plate a couple rows back, but close enough to where I could yell at Hendu when in the on-deck circle and at bat. I started riding him, as the expression goes, egged on by one of my companions and fueled with too much beer on a hot day.

Half way through the game two women sitting in front of us got up and moved, obviously bothered by my behavior. The younger lady was pregnant, and the older lady I thought was her mother. Shortly thereafter the older lady came back and let me have it verbally. It seems the younger woman was Hendu's wife, they had just relocated to a new home in Bellevue and she sure as hell did not appreciate my banter.

Needless to say, mortified, I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut and take my medicine. All I could say to myself was thank gawd I had not said anything personal. The older lady happened to be a friend, a building contractor and one tough cookie.

She informed me I was going to find Mrs. Henderson at the RBI Club dinner in our hotel that night and apologize. I simply said "yes, ma'am," and did as I was told. That evening I sought Mrs. Henderson out, apologized profusely and stuck out my hand.

She let it sit there; staring at it for what seemed an eternity, but probably about 30 seconds, before with a faint smile accepting it. The great game taught this fan one valuable lesson in humility that day for which I will always be grateful.

Play ball!

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