



CATCHING UP WITH ... **JULIO CRUZ**

By Mike Gastineau

Julio Cruz is happy and excited. Right now. Whatever he is doing and wherever he is, he's happy and excited. Such is the nature of his personality. He is the living, walking embodiment of a person who has decided to never have a bad day.

And wherever he is right now, the one sure way to make him happier and more excited is to start talking about baseball thievery.

This past Spring Training, Cruz spent a week as a guest instructor with the Mariners, and after a long day of teaching the fine art of the stolen base he summed up his philosophy in a voice rising with excitement.

"If you're a base stealer, you go," he explained. "You've got to want to steal that base. You're always in steal mode. Steal, steal, steal! You have to go with the intention of not being thrown out."

Cruz debuted with the Mariners in 1977, halfway through their inaugural season. He singled in his first at-bat

that day and was promptly thrown out in his first attempt at a stolen base. Two nights later he stole the first of 290 bags he'd nab in seven seasons with the Mariners.

Learning from the Best

When Jerry Dipoto decided to invite a few former Mariners to Spring Training this year to work with young players, Cruz was a natural choice to teach base stealing and base running fundamentals. To the surprise of no one, he enjoyed himself.

"I was there for a week and I loved every minute of it," he said. "I had a blast. It felt like being in spring training as a youngster."

Heading into this season, one of the Mariners goals under first year manager Scott Servais was to be more aggressive on the base paths. And they wanted that attitude to prevail through the entire organization. By bringing in Cruz to teach some techniques they gave their young players a direct link

to a legendary group of ballplayers who were adept at taking what was not theirs.

"I learned how to steal bases by asking other players who were good at it, what they looked for and what tipped them off," said Cruz. "Rickey Henderson, Lou Brock, Bill North, Davey Lopes, Willie Wilson. I would take everything they told me and I would write it down. Then I took whatever I could use for myself and that made me a better base stealer."

While Cruz was willing to take advice from anyone, he credits one guy above all for making him complete as a base stealer.

"Maury Wills taught me how to steal off left handers. I never stole off lefties. I had a fear of being picked off. One day he took me out to the ballpark early and showed me all the moves left handers can make. He made it so much easier for me."

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Sharing the Knowledge

One thing that Cruz tried to make easier for speedy members of Seattle's organization was to help them get the biggest possible lead. He said most players in the minor leagues take short leads, which is OK in the minors.

"Who doesn't steal a base in the minor leagues?" he said. "I could steal a base in the minor leagues today. But when you get to the Big Leagues it's a whole different ballgame. Everyone knows you're running. And no one is faster than the ball."

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That means the only way you're going to be successful as a base stealer at the Major League level is to get the biggest lead you can possibly get without being picked off. When asked by players about the danger of taking such a big lead and then being picked off, he offered them a little common-sense wisdom.

Cruz (right) chats with Mariners broadcaster Rick Rizzs during spring training.



"If you're going to get picked off," he laughed, "get picked off in Spring Training."

Cruz emphasized taking the same size lead every time on every pitch to make opponents think you're going. He also worked with players on the psychology of it all and how to deal with failure. It's been almost 30 years since he last stole a base but he remembers what it's like when you don't get the job done.

"To run all the way down there and look up and see that ump's fist in the air, you want to dig a hole and crawl in," he said. "You've got to walk back

This past spring training Cruz (left) joined Edgar Martinez and the rest of the Mariners coaching staff as a guest instructor to teach the fine art of the stolen base.

to the dugout and see your teammates. The fans are booing. The hot dog vendors are booing. When you get thrown out, it's the worst feeling."

Cruz experienced that less than most guys who try to steal. He was successful more than 81 percent of the time in his career, ranking him 33rd all-time in baseball history in stolen base percentage.

"That came from Lou Brock," said Cruz. "He told me, 'Don't go unless you're going to make it eight out of every 10 times.'"

Still Close to the Action

These days, Cruz spends time at Safeco Field each summer as the analyst for the Mariners Spanish language radio broadcasts with Alex Rivera. He said he's proud to be a part of the presentation and recognizes the importance of connecting the team to the Spanish speaking audience.

Cruz had one more piece of general advice to every player he spoke to this past Spring. "You have to go pick Edgar Martinez's brain," he said. "I don't care what you do, pick that man's brain. Go to him every day."

To get that kind of good advice for free could almost be called a steal.

Mike Gastineau is a freelance writer based in Seattle. He spent over 20 years hosting a local radio show, and is the author of two books.

