

FOUR DECADES OF SEATTLE MARINERS BASEBALL



Each month during the 2017 season, Mariners Magazine will highlight a different era to celebrate the club's 40th Anniversary. In this issue, we'll take a look at the 1977 through 1983 seasons.

(Part 1 of 6)

By Mike Gastineau

The first game in Seattle Mariners history was played on April 6, 1977, in front of a sellout crowd of 57,762. In an historic twist Diego Segui was the Opening Day starting pitcher for the Mariners. Eight years earlier, on October 1, 1969, Segui pitched the 9th inning of what would be the final game in the Seattle Pilots history. He gave up a run that tied the game but got the win when the Pilots scored in their half of the inning. His luck was not as good in 1977 as the Angels chased him in the 4th inning of a 7-0 loss.

The opening night defeat aside, when the Seattle Mariners arrived on the baseball scene in April of 1977 as a member of the American League West they had a lot going for them. They played games in a nearly brand new stadium called the Kingdome, which opened in 1976 and featured a thin shell dome that was the largest self-supporting concrete roof in the world.

The Mariners also had lured a young and talented announcer named Dave Niehaus away from the Angels, and his warm style and likability immediately connected the team to the town.

They also had an impressive duo in leadership roles. General Manager Lou Gorman had just completed a stint in the Royals organization, helping Kansas City to the first of three consecutive



AL West titles in 1976. And Manager Darrell Johnson was two years removed from a World Series appearance as Boston's skipper.

What the 1977 Mariners did not have in abundance was wins. Typical of an expansion team, Seattle struggled to find cohesion and were never above .500 during the season. They ended the year with 64 wins and 98 losses. Glenn Abbott led the pitching staff with 12 wins and right fielder Lee Stanton hit a team high .275 with a career high 27 home runs. Center fielder Rupert Jones was Gorman's first pick in the expansion draft and became the Mariners first-ever All-Star.

Baseball's return to the Emerald City was a hit at the gate with 1.3

million fans attending games as Seattle outdrew six AL teams. The total represented a nearly 100 percent increase from the 678,000 fans the Pilots had drawn in 1969.

The following season, the 1978 Mariners ended up with the dubious distinction of losing a franchise record 104 games. Among the paucity of highlights for the year was the emergence of base stealing bandit Julio Cruz who swiped 59 bags, the fourth highest single season total at the time.

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The next season brought the national baseball spotlight to Seattle for the first time as the city played host to the 1979 All-Star Game. It was the 50th edition of the midsummer classic and the first national telecast of a baseball game at the Kingdome.

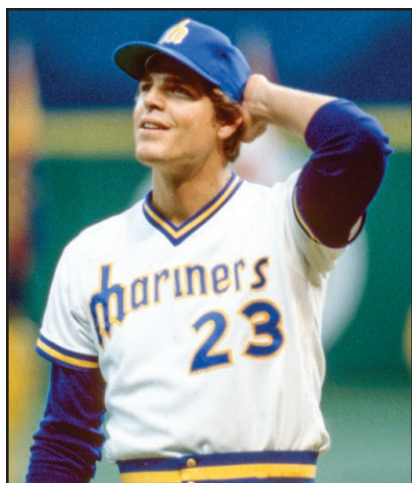
The game started fast and stayed entertaining all night. The National League scored two runs in the first inning and the AL countered with three in the bottom of the first. Overall, the teams combined for 13 runs and 20 hits in a game that saw the lead change hands four times.

The Mariners lone representative in the game was first baseman Bruce Bochte, who received a huge ovation from the hometown crowd when he was announced as a pinch hitter in the 6th inning. The fans roared again moments later when Bochte bounced a high chopper over shortstop and into left field to give the AL the lead.

After a night of fireworks on offense and spectacular plays on defense, the NL rallied for what would prove to be the game-winning run when Ron Guidry issued a bases loaded walk to Lee Mazzilli, giving the NL a 7-6 victory.

After the All-Star break the Mariners continued to chase wins with little success. Former Tigers legend Willie

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Horton joined the team as a free agent and, at 36 years of age, was named the AL Comeback Player of the Year and Designated Hitter of the Year after hitting .279 with 29 home runs and a career high 106 RBI.

1980 brought the first small taste of on-field success for Seattle fans. On June 9, the Mariners defeated Boston and moved to 26 and 28 and third place in the seven-team West Division. From there, the bottom fell out as they won just 13 of their next 53 games, a collapse so thorough that it led to the first managerial change in franchise history as long-time Dodgers star Maury Wills was hired to replace Johnson on August 4.

Wills finished out the 1980 season and started the 1981 season, but it became clear that as a rookie skipper he had a lot to learn. A series of managerial mishaps culminated in late April when he told the Kingdome grounds crew to extend the batter's box by one foot towards the mound before a game with Oakland. A's skipper Billy Martin noticed that something didn't look right and after the head groundskeeper admitted to the chicanery Wills was suspended by the AL. He was fired two weeks later and replaced by Rene Lachemann.

Were the batter's box fiasco the only crazy thing that happened in 1981 it would have been enough. But on May 27, in a game against Kansas City, and in a play that will be replayed on big screens in baseball stadiums for as long as they play the game, third baseman Lenny Randle watched a weak dribbler from the Royals Amos Otis hug the foul line as it slowly rolled his way. Convinced (rightfully so) that the ball was going to stay fair, Randle dropped to his belly and began blowing furiously on the baseball, eventually sending it foul. Fans roared but Randle's move was deemed against the rules and Otis was immediately awarded first base. The play ultimately had no impact on an 8-5 Royals win.

Two weeks after that, MLB players voted to strike as a labor dispute

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TIMELINE

January 15, 1976 – Seattle granted expansion franchise by Major League Baseball.

March 27, 1976 – Kingdome building opens.

April 6, 1977 – Seattle Mariners play first game in club history.

1977 – Dave Niehaus begins first season as Mariners play-by-play announcer.



1977 – Mariners select Dave Henderson in 1st round of 1977 June Draft.



July 19, 1977 – Ruppert Jones represents Seattle as Mariners first-ever All Star.

1978 – Julio Cruz steals a team-best 59 bases.

July 17, 1979 – Seattle hosts MLB's 50th All-Star Game; Bruce Bochte represents Mariners.



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interrupted the season. No games were played between June 11 and August 10. As part of the settlement, parties agreed that games played until June 11 would constitute a 'first half' of the season. The Mariners finished that half with a record of 21-36, but when the 'second half' season began they won seven of their first 10 games and were in first place in the AL West on August 16. They cooled off a bit after that but stayed in the race long enough to give Seattle fans their first taste of meaningful September baseball.

The 1982 Mariners did two things that fans hadn't seen yet in Seattle. They pitched well and, not coincidentally, they won games. The staff combined to record 1,102 strikeouts (tying Philadelphia to lead the Majors). The Mariners posted a 31-24 record in one-run games and had 40 come-from-behind wins.

The Mariners had planned on trying to build a winner with young players, but that plan was altered when team President and GM Dan O'Brien (who had replaced Gorman in 1981) signed pitcher Gaylord Perry to what amounted to a monthly contract. The 43-year-old (quickly dubbed 'the Ancient Mariner') was three wins away from 300 for his career and came to Spring Training not guaranteed a roster spot. He not only made the team but on May 6 picked up his 300th win in a complete game win over the Yankees. He became the 15th player to win 300 games, the first to do it in 19 years and, at the time, the oldest to achieve it.

Perry ended up with a 10-12 record on the year, and finished second on the staff in innings pitched and third in strikeouts while making all 32 of his starts. Lefthander Floyd Bannister led the team with 12 wins and 247 innings pitched. His 209 strikeouts not only led the Mariners but the AL as well, the first time a Mariners player led a major statistical category.

Mariners hurlers were aided by a major cosmetic change in the hitter-friendly Kingdome. The right field wall



Bill Caudill led Seattle with 26 saves in both 1982 and '83.

was doubled in size from 11.5 feet to 23 feet high. The new wall, nicknamed the 'Walla Walla,' helped reduce the number of home runs hit.

Seattle was also helped by the arrival of one of the more colorful characters in Mariners history, Bill Caudill. Known as "Cuffs" (he was once detained by police in Cleveland in a case of mistaken identity) and "The Inspector" (he would make a show of 'inspecting' Mariners bats looking for unused hits), Caudill was an instant hit with fans. Owing to his second sobriquet, the theme from "The Pink Panther" would play when he entered games. His fun loving attitude was matched by a talented toughness for closing games. He led Seattle with 26 saves in both 1982 and '83.

The successful pitching led to wins. The Mariners record was 45-41 at the All Star break and 59-59 in late August before a seven-game losing streak ended their already long shot at making the postseason.

Unfortunately, the 1983 Mariners were unable to build on the modest success of the 1982 team and, in fact, went backwards. A bad start combined with a 3-15 stretch in June led to the dismissal of Lachemann and the arrival of Del Crandall as new manager, as Seattle stumbled to a 60-102 mark.

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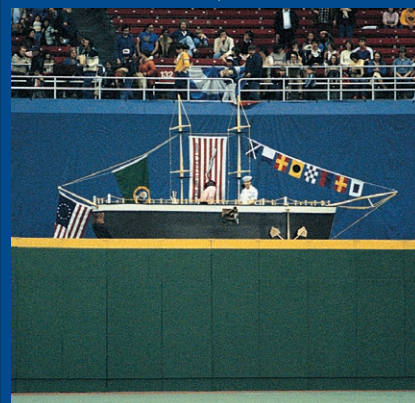
July 1979 – Willie Horton joins team, wins AL Comeback Player of the Year and DH of the Year.

1981 – Massive TV screen known as DiamondVision unveiled in Kingdome.

May 27, 1981 – Lenny Randle blows on ball to send it foul; batter awarded first base.

June 11-August 10, 1981 – MLB players go on strike; season broken into two halves.

1982 – Height of right-field wall increased from 11.5 feet to 23 feet, dubbed Walla Walla.



1982 – USS Mariner, a wooden, two-masted ship, installed beyond left centerfield wall; cannon fires after home runs and wins.

1982 – Pitcher Floyd Bannister leads AL in strikeouts, becomes first Mariner to lead AL in a major statistical category.

April 11, 1982 – Mike Moore, 1st round pick in 1981 June Draft, makes MLB debut.



May 6, 1982 – Pitcher Gaylord Perry earns his 300th career win.

May 8, 1982 – Funny Nose Glasses promotion debuts.

Sept. 2, 1983 – Harold Reynolds, 1st round pick in 1980 June Draft, makes MLB debut.

Be sure to pick up the May issue of Mariners Magazine for the next installment highlighting the 40th Anniversary of the Mariners.