



CATCHING UP WITH ... **TOM PACIOREK**

By Mike Gastineau

How big can one game in the middle of the season be for a guy who played 18 years in Major League Baseball? Huge, if you ask former Mariners outfielder Tom Paciorek.

On July 2, 1978, Paciorek came to the Kingdome to prepare for a game against Milwaukee. Two days before our nation's birthday, he was convinced he was about to gain his own unwanted independence.

Paciorek came up in the Los Angeles organization and spent parts of six seasons with Dodgers. He played on the Dodgers National League championship team in 1974. He was traded to Atlanta where he spent two years with the Braves before being released in Spring Training in 1978. The Braves resigned him a week later, but six weeks into the season released him again.

Paciorek then signed a minor league deal with Seattle and was sent to San Jose. When Mariners outfielder Rupert Jones had an appendectomy, Paciorek found himself back in the Majors,

albeit in a backup role. By the end of June he had a grand total of three hits in 18 at-bats in the '78 season and, with Jones slated to return after recovering from surgery, Paciorek figured his days as a pro ball player were numbered.

So Paciorek was surprised to see he had been inserted into the lineup that day as the Mariners DH. At that moment he had a revelation.

"I really felt it was the most important day of my life," he said. "I thought I was either going to make it or break it right here."

Paciorek proceeded to go on a most fortuitously timed hitting streak. He had faced Mike Caldwell, who was pitching for the Brewers, when they both were in the NL and used that knowledge he had gleaned to his advantage.

"I knew he liked to start you with a fastball so I saw four pitches that day and got four hits. I hit a home run and got the game winning RBI. I played the

next day and hit another home run and the following day Rupert came back and they released Dick Pole instead of me."

The Lasorda Affect

Paciorek laughs as he recounts the story. But he also laughs when he says hello. He's maintained a light-hearted approach to life and baseball and he credits the manager of the first team he played for in 1968 in Ogden, Utah, for instilling that attitude in him.

"Tommy Lasorda absolutely corrupted me," he said, of the Hall of Fame manager. "His personality in Ogden was the exact same as it was when he became the Dodgers skipper. At first, I thought everyone in baseball was like that, but 50 years later I'm still looking for someone like him."

Paciorek was part of a group of players who literally came up with Lasorda from the minors all the way

(continued on page 88)

(continued from page 87)

to the Big Leagues. The Dodgers 1968 draft is considered one of the best ever. In addition to Paciorek they selected Ron Cey, Steve Garvey, Davey Lopes, Bobby Valentine, Bill Buckner and Doyle Alexander.

Paciorek said the team was close because Lasorda insisted that they eat meals together. When he noticed that Paciorek always ordered a hamburger he hung the delightful sobriquet “Wimpy” on him (in a nod to the burger-loving character from the “Pop-eye” cartoons). But he also instilled a lot of his own outgoing personality into Paciorek.

“He’d make you come to his appearances,” said Paciorek. “Anyone in town that had an event, they’d invite Tommy. And he’d make players come with him and speak. So after a while I felt really comfortable behind the microphone. He had a lot to do with my being able to parlay my playing career into a broadcasting career.” After his playing days were over, Paciorek spent 18 seasons as a broadcaster, primarily with the White Sox.

Paciorek laughs as he recounts one of his favorite Lasorda stories. Many of those players taken in 1968 were

with Lasorda in Albuquerque in the Pacific Coast League in 1972. The Dukes had fallen on hard times, losers of five games in a row. Lasorda called a pregame meeting and according to Paciorek addressed the team in a matter-of-fact, fatherly tone.

“You guys are walking around here moping and you’re not playing good baseball and you’re not having any fun,”

Lasorda said. “You lost five games. So what? People outside of Albuquerque don’t even know who you are.”

Lasorda told them that the 1927 Yankees, considered the greatest team ever, endured a seven-game losing streak.

“Go out there, think of the ’27 Yankees, and start having fun again.”

The Dukes ended up winning the PCL. Paciorek bumped into Lasorda after the season and asked him if the 1927 Yankees really lost seven in a row.

“How in the hell would I know?”



Lasorda sputtered. “I wasn’t even born yet. But it worked on you guys.” For the record, the ’27 Yanks longest losing streak was four games.

Passing Down Lessons

Paciorek’s primary concern these days is coaching his grandson’s baseball team and for that job, he draws on the obvious inspiration.

“Not a day passes where I don’t stop and think, ‘What would Tommy do in this situation?’ He taught us how to play the game, but also how to act before and after the game, which is very important. I try to apply that to coaching kids today.”

He also tells them about a lesson he learned in 1981 which was his best season as a pro. He finished second in the AL in batting behind Carney Lansford, and was in the top five in numerous other offensive categories.

“Before that season I made a pact with myself that I was going to be the best player on the field each day, and all of a sudden things started clicking. I stayed within the team concept but I didn’t worry about yesterday or tomorrow. I always tell young players that. Live in the present moment and you’ll be able to perform at your maximum ability.”

If that doesn’t work he can always bust out a story about the ’27 Yankees.

An All-Star in 1981, Paciorek put together a stellar season hitting .326, second best in the AL. The fun-loving outfielder played for the Mariners from 1978-81.

