

# 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 2011 through 2017 seasons.*

*(Part 6 of 6)*

**By Mike Gastineau**



Coming off their second 100-loss season in three years, the 2011 Mariners looked to turn the tide, hiring Eric Wedge as their new manager. After a slow start the team recovered and, despite a sluggish offense, was just 2.5 games out of first place on July 5. Unfortunately, that's when their season went south in a hurry and was done in by a team-record 17-game losing streak.

In 2012 their offense picked up a little thanks to the addition of Kyle Seager to the lineup. Drafted by the Seattle in 2009, Seager made his Major League debut in 2011 and by the start of the new season was the Mariners everyday third baseman. In his first full season, Seager hit .259 with 20 home runs and 86 RBIs.

In an effort to accelerate a rebuilding of the team Seattle elected to trade the incomparable Ichiro in July, sending him to the New York Yankees for a pair of minor league pitchers. In an interesting coincidence the Mariners first three games after the trade were against the Yankees. Ichiro had three hits for New York in the series.

The two big highlights of the 2012 season both came on the pitcher's mound. On June 8, Kevin Millwood started an interleague game for the Mariners against the Los Angeles Dodgers. At the end of the sixth inning, despite not giving up a hit, he was removed from the game due to a groin injury. Relievers Charlie Furbush, Stephen Pryor, Lucas Luetge, Brandon League and closer Tom

Wilhelmsen went on to complete one of the most unusual no-hitters in baseball history. The six pitchers combined to throw 114 pitches, strike out nine and walk three en route to their no-no.

Just over two months later, on August 15, Felix Hernandez threw the first perfect game in Mariners history. The King retired 27 consecutive Tampa Bay batters in a 1-0 win. Hernandez is just the 23rd pitcher in Major League history to throw a perfect game. He was urged on by a crowd of 21,889 on a hot Wednesday afternoon. Earlier that season, in April, Seattle had been on the wrong end of a perfecto at Safeco Field courtesy of White Sox pitcher Phillip Humber. It was the only time in baseball history that two perfect games were pitched in the same ballpark in the same season.

Among those in the crowd in August were approximately 1,500 fans



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sitting in a section that had come to be called "The King's Court." Another innovative promotion, the idea was hatched during the 2011 season. On nights when Hernandez pitched, fans who purchased specially priced tickets

were given a bright yellow T-shirt and a card with a “K” on it. A King’s crown perched atop the K. The fans all sat in a section down the left field line. A throne was placed on the concourse at the top of the section and fans took turns sitting for photos.

Seattle struggled again in 2013, winning just 71 games and striking out a club record 1,353 times, and it became evident another change was needed. The Mariners hired manager Lloyd McClendon for the 2014 campaign and bounced back with their best season in several years. They won 87 games and were mathematically alive for the second Wild Card playoff berth on the final day of the season.

Seattle was bolstered by the addition of free agent Robinson Canó, who signed a 10-year deal with the team during the offseason. Canó was a five-time All-Star with the Yankees and was selected to the American League team in his first year as a Mariner. In his third full season with the club, Seager continued to improve and was rewarded with his first All-Star Game appearance and the AL Gold Glove Award for third basemen.

Hernandez anchored the pitching staff with 15 wins and a career high 248 strikeouts and was the starting pitcher for the AL in the All-Star Game. Hisashi Iwakuma also won 15 games and was named an All-Star. By now he had firmly established himself

in the Mariners rotation. Another successful player signed from Japan, Iwakuma joined Seattle in 2012 after a strong 11-year career as a starter in Japan. He began his MLB career in the bullpen but had worked his way into the rotation for good by July.

During this time, in the front office several changes occurred over a two-year period to the management structure of the team starting in late 2013 with the retirement of Chuck Armstrong. Armstrong originally joined the Mariners as team President in the 1983 offseason. He was not retained by new owner Jeff Smulyan in 1989. During Smulyan’s aborted attempt to move the franchise to Florida in 1991-92, Armstrong was asked by then-U.S. Senator Slade Gorton to work as a behind-the-scenes consultant to the group that eventually bought the team and kept them in Seattle. He returned as President in 1992. Kevin Mather, who joined Seattle in 1996 as Vice President of Finance and Administration, eventually replaced Armstrong as President and Chief Operating Officer on Feb. 1, 2014.

Then, in May of 2016, Howard Lincoln announced his resignation as Chairman and CEO. Like Armstrong, Lincoln had played a huge role in the delicate negotiations between MLB and the group that was put together to purchase the Mariners from Smulyan. At the time he was the chairman of Nintendo of America. In 1999, he was named CEO of the Mariners, replacing John Ellis. Lincoln was replaced by

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Left to right: Kevin Millwood, Charlie Furbush, Stephen Pryor, Lucas Luetge, Brandon League and closer Tom Wilhelmsen combined to throw 114 pitches, strike out nine and walk three en route to their no-no on June 8, 2012.



## TIMELINE

**July 7, 2011** – Third baseman Kyle Seager makes his Major League debut against the Angels.



**July 12, 2011** – Felix Hernandez, Michael Pineda and Brandon League make AL All-Star team.

**2011** – Mariners steal 125 bases during the regular season, led by Ichiro’s 40.

**2011** – Team sets club record with a 17-game losing streak, from July 6-26.

**2011** – Closer Brandon League records a team high 37 saves.

**June 8, 2012** – Six Mariners, starter Kevin Millwood and five relievers, combine to pitch a no-hitter against Dodgers.

**June 2012** – Catcher Mike Zunino selected No. 1 in the MLB Draft.

**July 2012** – Starting pitcher Jason Vargas named AL Pitcher of the Month.

**Aug. 15, 2012** – Felix Hernandez throws first perfect game in Mariners history, beating Tampa Bay, 1-0.

**August 2012** – Felix Hernandez named AL Pitcher of the Month.

**2012** – Kyle Seager leads team with 20 HR, 86 RBI, 154 hits and 35 doubles in first full season in Majors.

**June 12, 2013** – Mike Zunino makes his Major League debut against Houston; goes 1x4.

**June 28, 2013** – Mike Zunino hits game-winning RBI single in bottom of 10th inning to beat Cubs, 5-4.

**July 12-23, 2013** – Mariners run off a season-best 8-game winning streak.



**July 16, 2013** – Felix Hernandez and Hisashi Iwakuma named to 84th annual All-Star Game.



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John Stanton who joined the ownership group in 2000.

In addition, it was announced that Nintendo was selling its majority interest in the club to other members of the ownership group. As part of the deal Nintendo kept a small percentage of the team. The sale included the group's majority interest in the regional cable network *ROOT SPORTS*, which was purchased by the Mariners in 2013.

Back on the field, the 2015 Mariners welcomed free agent slugger Nelson Cruz, who proved every bit his value by adding significant production to the offense, leading the team with 44 home runs. However, Seattle couldn't sustain the success of 2014 team and the subsequent 86-loss season led to the dismissal of both McClendon and General Manager Jack Zduriencik. Zduriencik was replaced as GM by Jerry Dipoto who was the GM of the Angels from 2011 to 2015. Among Dipoto's first moves was the hiring of former MLB catcher Scott Servais as the team's new manager.

Their first year in Seattle was an eventful baseball rollercoaster, filled with twists and turns, ups and downs and plenty of thrills. The Mariners stumbled out of the gate, losing six of their first eight games, including their first five at home. They recovered quickly, though, and by Memorial Day

The Mariners bolstered their offense with the addition of free agent Robinson Canó in 2014.



In 2012, his first full season, Seager hit .259 with 20 home runs and 86 RBIs.

weekend they were 28-18 and leading the AL West.

However, they lost 19 of their next 27 games to fall back to .500 where they stayed for most of July. A loss to Boston on August 1 left them at 52-52 and in third place in the AL West. But a subsequent hot streak, in which they went 15-5, lifted them back into second place and in contention for postseason play.

The ride wasn't over yet. They ended August and began September by losing 10 of 12 games, a disastrous collapse that seemed to erase all hope of reaching the playoffs. Improbably, one more time they got back in the race with a 17-7 tear that left them within a game of a Wild Card berth heading into the season's final weekend. They were ultimately undone by a see saw 9-8 loss in 10 innings to Oakland on the final Saturday of the regular season. In the end, the 2016 team finished with an 86-76 mark, a 10-game improvement from 2015.

Power returned to the Mariners offense in a big way, with nine players hitting 12 or more homers. Cruz led the way with 43, Canó added 39 and Kyle

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**2013** – Lefty reliever Charlie Furbush leads the team with a career-high 71 appearances.



**2013** – Raul Ibañez (29), Kendrys Morales (23), Kyle Seager (22) and Mike Zunino (20) all hit at least 20 HRs.

**April 23, 2014** – Kyle Seager hits walk off home run against Houston.

**June 2014** – Felix Hernandez named AL Pitcher of the Month.

**July 15, 2014** – Robinson Canó is selected to the All-Star Game in his first season with Seattle; joined by Felix Hernandez, Fernando Rodney and Kyle Seager.

**2014** – Mariners finish with 87-75 record; first time since 2009 with winning record.

**2014** – Defense leads the way with an AL best .986 fielding percentage.

**2014** – Pitching staff leads league and sets club record with 3.17 ERA and .230 batting average by opponents.



**2014** – Closer Fernando Rodney establishes a club record with 48 saves.

**2014** – Raul Ibañez wins the Hutch Award for community service.

**June 30, 2015** – Mike Montgomery tosses a one-hitter at San Diego.

**July 21, 2015** – Franklin Gutierrez hits pinch-hit grand slam at Detroit.





In 2016, Nelson Cruz (left), Robinson Canó and Kyle Seager all hit at least 30 home runs. It was only the third time in team history with three 30 home run players.

on January 6, and while his induction was a certainty he made baseball history once again by being named on 99.3 percent (437 of 440) of the ballots submitted by the Baseball Writers Association of America, the highest percentage vote for a player in history.

The Mariners season-long Junior party began on Opening Night when he

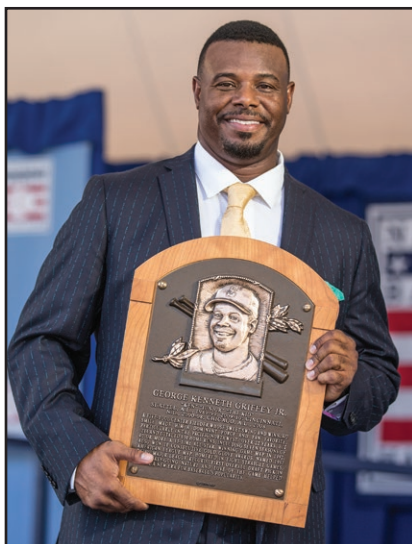
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Seager hit a career-high 30 as the team finished second in the league in home runs. The Mariners had three players with 30 or more home runs for the first time since Ken Griffey Jr., Jay Buhner, and Paul Sorrento all did it in 1997.

Iwakuma led the pitching staff with 33 starts, 16 wins and 147 strikeouts in 199.0 innings. Hernandez tallied 11 wins, as he went on the disabled list for the first time since 2008, missing June and much of July with a calf injury. He started just 25 games, his lowest career total, but went 7-4 after returning from the DL.

The Seattle organization spent the entire 2016 season celebrating Ken Griffey Jr.'s Hall of Fame induction. Griffey got the call from Cooperstown

Ken Griffey Jr. was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2016 with the highest percentage vote (99.3%) for any player in history.



threw out the game's first pitch and received a long, warm standing ovation from sold out crowd at Safeco Field.

On July 24, 2016, he was formally inducted in the Hall of Fame becoming the first Mariners player to enter baseball's ultimate shrine. In a moving speech Junior allowed his emotions to show as he thanked his parents, his brother, his wife and his children. He thanked several former teammates and stated that he believed Edgar Martinez deserves to join him in the Hall. After thanking the two other teams he played for (the Reds and White Sox) he closed his speech thusly:

"Out of my 22 years, I've learned that only one team will treat you the best, and that's your first team. I'm damn proud to be a Seattle Mariner."

Two weeks later he returned to Seattle for a weekend long celebration that culminated in the club retiring his jersey number 24, the first Mariners player to be so honored. During his thank you speech to fans at the ceremony he addressed the 2016 Mariners who all watched the event from the top steps of the dugout with their caps appropriately turned backwards to honor Junior.

"Keep fighting," he told them. "Because we're all rooting for you."

The two-word phrase "keep fighting" became a mantra for the team over the final eight weeks of the season and thoroughly tied the Mariners greatest player to their current team.

The 2017 season marks the Mariners fifth decade of existence.

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.

**July 31, 2015** – Taijuan Walker tosses a one-hitter at Minnesota.



**Aug. 12, 2015** – Hisashi Iwakuma throws fifth no-hitter in team history as Mariners defeat Baltimore, 3-0.

**Aug. 16, 2015** – Robinson Canó collects five hits against Boston.

**2015** – Nelson Cruz wins Silver Slugger Award in his first season with Seattle; hits career-high 44 home runs.

**April 8, 2016** – 47,065 fans pack stadium for Opening Day at Safeco Field.

**May 9, 2016** – Felix Hernandez earns this 146th career win, passing Jamie Moyer for the most wins in franchise history.



**Aug. 2, 2016** – Rookie closer Edwin Díaz earns his first career save, strikes out 3 vs. Boston in 1.0 inning.

**Aug. 6, 2016** – Ken Griffey Jr. becomes first player in franchise history to have his number (#24) retired.

**2016** – Nelson Cruz (43), Robinson Canó (39) and Kyle Seager (30) all hit at least 30 HRs, the 3rd time in team history with three 30 HR players.

**2016** – The bullpen strikes out a club record 550 batters.

**2016** – The Mariners offense averages 4.74 runs per game, 3rd-best mark in the AL and 6th-best in the Majors.