

UNSUNG HEROES



The Mariners low-profile relief corps has been crucial in bridging the gap between the starter and closer.

By Mike Gastineau

It's a warm July morning at Safeco Field, the Mariners are less than three hours away from a 1:00 p.m. start against the New York Mets, and Seattle relief pitcher David Phelps is talking about the 'Midnight Rule.' When he pitched in college at Notre Dame his coaches told the team that midnight is when they should refocus their minds after a tough loss or a bad outing.

"Once midnight hits, it's over and it's a new day," Phelps explained before adding, "I wish it was that easy. There are nights where you lose a little bit of sleep but you've got to learn to manage the ups and downs in order to get some longevity in this game."

The previous night, Phelps and lefty Mark Rzepczynski were touched up for three runs in the eighth inning turning a 5-4 lead into a 7-5 Mets win. So, perhaps this was a morning when the

'Midnight Rule' was hard to follow, but Phelps is in his eighth year as a Big Leaguer and knows that to be successful as a reliever you simply cannot dwell on the past...for any reason.

"It's very important to have a short memory," he said. "You may give up runs on one night but there's a pretty good chance you'll be in there the next night. It goes both ways, too. You can't be focused on how you've pitched well for five straight games. You've got to be focused on whatever pitch you're throwing at that specific moment."

Phelps was acquired from Miami in

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July and joined the Mariners bullpen that, after a tough start to the season, has been very good about moving games cleanly from the starter to the closer. From May 21 through the start of August, the relief corps ranked second among Major League bullpens in ERA. And their 2.29 ERA during July was the seventh lowest in a single month in club history. All this during a midseason stretch when the starting rotation was banged up with various injuries and the team needed critical innings out of the pen.

Keeping Low Profiles

Typical of most bullpens, there is one star among Seattle's relievers and that's closer Edwin Díaz. The rest of the group doesn't exactly toil in anonymity, but they don't get a whole lot of attention. And that's fine by them.

"You don't want to be in the media because the only time you're in the media is if things are going bad," said right-hander Nick Vincent, whose 47 appearances and 1.02 WHIP led the pen through early August. "If you're

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not on TV, things are going well. When you see yourself on SportsCenter it's usually not a good thing."

"That's the nature of the job," added Tony Zych, who had not allowed more than one run in his first 37 games. "You've got to be able to answer the questions when you've done something bad and hopefully not talk to anyone for a couple of months when things are going great."

Vincent laughs again when he points out a benefit to working as a middle reliever.

"I can go out in the middle of Seattle and no one knows me," he said. "Robinson Canó walks downtown and he gets bombarded with people. With me, people ask what I do and I say, 'Oh, I just work up here in Seattle during the summer.'"

They may not live in the spotlight, but like all professional athletes the Mariners relievers have a lot of pride and a healthy respect for what they do and how important they are to a team's success.

"People who understand the game recognize that you might have gotten the biggest out in the game, and it might have happened in the sixth inning," said Zych. "You might have helped the starter get out of his last inning and save him some runs. You might have been in the game to face



one guy and you got him out. But when that happened, a fan might have been in the bathroom and missed it."

While some fans may miss some things that happen in a game due to various reasons, others are literally on top of pitchers in the bullpen thanks

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—Nick Vincent

to the design of many new parks that allow fans to stand within a few feet



of the relievers. According to Zych the attitude and volume of some fans can increase as the game goes on.

"With it being basically a club back there [in Safeco's left-field 'Pen area] sometimes around the fourth or fifth inning things can start to get a little goofy and rowdy. Most of the time the fans are good and fun to be around."

Vincent agreed and said on the rare occasion when a fan may verbally cross the line his reaction is just to stare at him. "That usually does it. They usually quiet down. Most fans who hang out by the bullpen are great; they know who you are and they know what's going on."

Getting Their Due

Phelps believes more fans are coming to appreciate the work of middle relievers due to the game's continued evolution. Each year fewer starters work deep into games, while closers work just the ninth. He knows that having teammates like veterans Vincent and Rzepczynski and younger guys like Zych, James Pazos and Emilio Pagan and others who can cover those innings in between has become crucial to a team's success.

"The teams that win the World Series don't just have dominant starters and dominant closers," said Phelps. "Guys one through seven in the bullpen have got to be good. There are 27 outs and it doesn't matter how you get them. As long as you're a part



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Rzepczynski

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of the equation in getting to 27 you're bringing value to the ball club."

Pagan pointed out that it's not hard to find a situation where every guy in a team's bullpen was the key to success.

"We all saw how important middle innings are during last year's World Series," said the rookie right-hander. "You saw how Cleveland and Chicago used their bullpens."

Pagan said he developed an attitude

playing in college and the minors that helps him deal with the pressures of a job where your successful appearances are treated as routine, but outings where you don't get the job done can leave fans muttering your name as they head home after the game.

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—Emilio Pagan



Pagan

"It's tough mentally because these hitters are the best in the world," he said. "You're not going to get the job done every night and people tend to notice you more after you've blown a game. But everyone in baseball has been in those shoes at some point and no one is going to feel sorry for you. So you've got to move on because moping doesn't help the team win the next day."

According to Vincent, one of the keys to a good bullpen is to share each pitcher's successes and failures and to embrace the fact that the bullpen, by its very nature, is somewhat separate from the team.

"We take it to heart when one of our guys gives up a run or a home run," he noted. "Starting pitchers, infielders, outfielders and catchers are all in the dugout talk-



Pazos

ing. No one thinks about us way out in the bullpen. So it becomes a little bit of a brotherhood."

"We're in it together," added Zych. "We're always sitting in the bullpen talking about hitters. If you didn't pitch the day before you'll talk to the guys who did and see how they went about getting guys out. We always stay plugged into what is going on in the game and what might happen next. That kind of thing goes a long way."

The pitchers agreed when it was pointed out that middle relievers are like an NFL offensive line – they may not be noticed by everyone, but savvy fans know that without a successful bullpen (or offensive line), the team's success is next to impossible.

"An offensive line clears the way for the running back," said Phelps. "We're trying to clear the way to hand the ball to the closer and let him do his job. That comparison fits."

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.