



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

WILSON DONE? DON'T BET ON IT

Forget the consistent Gold Glove defense, the monster year in 2001, the wisecracking presence in the clubhouse or even the all too rare these days bat-flip.

Perhaps the best thing Bret Boone ever did for the Mariners was to get traded. In November of 1993 the M's sent Boone and Erik Hansen to the Cincinnati Reds for a young reliever named Bobby Ayala and an even younger catcher named Dan Wilson.

The deal didn't seem particularly huge at the time. One of dozens of small deals done in a typical baseball off-season. Some work, some don't. If anything, it felt like the M's gave away too much. Hansen started 31 games in 1993, won 11 and had an ERA of 3.47. And Boone hit .251 in 76 games at second base. Ayala and Wilson had appeared in less than 100 big league games combined.

But Wilson was already making a name for himself in the Reds organization. In 1991 he was named the top defensive catcher in two leagues. He spent the first half of the year with Charleston in the South Atlantic League and was promoted to Chattanooga of the Southern League for the second half.

Among those who noticed his play was then-Reds skipper Lou Piniella, who was instrumental in bringing Wilson here. But neither Piniella nor Wilson could have anticipated what would happen next. From Opening Day of 1994 through the end of the 2004 season Wilson was the Mariners

#1 catcher. He was behind the plate in almost every memorable M's win in the glory days period between 1995 and 2001.

This year he was supposed to be Miguel Olivo's backup. But with Olivo struggling, some thought Wilson would begin to see more action behind the plate. He started the May



4th game against the Angels, had two hits in the game and tagged out Vladimir Guerrero on a close play at the plate. But in the 7th inning of the game, while retreating to first base after a fly ball was caught, Wilson felt something funny in his right knee.

"I felt something give in my knee a

little bit -- it wasn't a painful thing, it was kind of a letting go," Wilson said. "I just stumbled for a second. Once I got back to the bag it felt like something wasn't quite right in there."

Something wasn't quite right. He had torn the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee. Wilson was a mechanical engineering major at Minnesota and his play on the field is evidence of a guy who's got a lot between the ears. So once the X-Ray showed the torn ACL, he knew what the rest of us knew.

"It was really kind of strange. It wasn't real painful so it was strange to hear that news. It was very disappointing."

Just like that a season, and perhaps a career, comes to an end.

Wilson won't buy into the latter part of that equation. He had surgery on the knee on May 20th and before he makes a decision on his baseball future he says he simply wants to get better.

"I haven't really thought about it. Right now my energy is focused on surgery and getting past that and then evaluating things once that's been done and we'll go from there," says Wilson who admits that in a weird kind of way he's looking forward to the long period of rehabilitation.

"You look forward to the rehab a little bit because it's the next step. It's the beginning of getting strong and healthy again. When you get your mind and body working together the healing comes quickly."

Considering the work load he's shouldered during 11 plus years as the M's primary backstop, and considering what a brutal position catcher can be, Wilson has done very little time

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on the disabled list. Six weeks in 1998 with an ankle injury and a couple short stays in 2000 and 2003 with strained oblique muscles. He thus is philosophical in the wake of the events of this year.

"Timing of an injury is never good and to have it be an injury that is serious enough to wipe out a season...it's tough. But I've been fortunate in my career to have not had very many serious injuries; I haven't missed a lot of time. I'm thankful that this happened towards the end rather than at the beginning of my career. It could have plagued me for my entire career."

Yet, by coming at this point in his career this injury may bring down the curtain. There's not a long history of catchers who've recovered from torn ACLs at the age of 36, and he'll turn 37 by next opening day.

By the same token, good catchers can be hard to find. Witness the M's bringing back 42 year old Pat Borders as Miguel Olivo's new backup.

Wilson and Borders have a few things in common. Perhaps most important is their innate knowledge of pitching and pitchers. It allows them to confidently run a game with pitchers who are almost always younger and less experienced than they are.

That's what makes Wilson so valuable to the Mariners and it's a characteristic that's been lost on any fan or observer of the game whose nose is stuck in a Bill James book most of the time. Statistically, nothing Wilson does really jumps off the chart at you. But anecdotally it's a whole different thing.

The way he carries himself on and off the field, the way he interacts with teammates in-game and in the

clubhouse and his ability to be a communications conduit between manager, pitching coach, and pitcher are things that don't show up on any computer print out sheet.

So, has Wilson donned an M's uniform for the last time as a player? Perhaps. But the guess here is no.

Last winter when the M's signed him to a one-year deal Wilson sounded as happy and excited as ever about continuing on as the M's catcher. One injury, season ending though it may be, won't change that. If he's physically able to recover he'll be back behind the dish next spring continuing to pass on knowledge and wisdom to M's pitchers.

Let the stat-hounds bay their woeful howls.

Catch Mike Gastineau from 3 to 7 pm weekdays on KJR 950 AM

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A team that really knows the importance of the draft is the Oakland A's. During the past 10 years, the A's have picked these players in the first three rounds: Eric Chavez, Mark Mulder, Barry Zito, Bobby Crosby, Jeremy Bonderman, Nick Swisher, Joe Blanton, Huston Street, Gerald Laird, Eric DuBose, Mark Bellhorn and others. They haven't simply drafted more players to reach the show, they've drafted considerably better players than the Mariners.

In the past 10 years, the A's have drafted four players that have become All-Stars. The Mariners have drafted zero. In fact, the last time the Mariners drafted and signed a player that turned out to be an All-Star was when they selected Jason Varitek out of Georgia Tech in the first round of the 1994 draft. Speaking of Varitek, he's currently making 24 times the salary of Joe Mauer. Is he 24 times as good? Obviously not; they're actually performing quite similarly this year and it wouldn't surprise me to

see Mauer out-perform Varitek when all is said and done. The Minnesota Twins are another organization that has drafted particularly well in the recent past.

The A's and Twins are two teams that understand the importance of the draft and use it to their advantage. When a team has one of their players leave due to free agency, they can get a draft pick from the team that signs that player. Because of this, the A's had seven first-round picks in the 2002 draft. From 1997 until 2004, the Mariners had seven first-round draft picks, total. But, teams like the A's and Twins utilize the draft out of necessity. When is the last time the Twins signed a big free agent? The Twins and A's are good teams, but just think what you would get when you combine good drafts with a large payroll.

This is why it's so frustrating when the Mariners give away draft picks by signing free agents. While I applaud the Beltre signing (which forfeited the Mariners' third-round pick in this

year's draft), giving up a first-round pick to sign Raul Ibanez last season was just plain stupid. Although last year was painful to watch, there is a reward. In the 2005 amateur draft, which takes place on June 7th, the Mariners have the third pick overall, their highest selection since 1995 when they drafted Jose Cruz, Jr. Another plus is that, hopefully, all of my complaining about the M's horrible draft history might be irrelevant. Bob Fontaine Jr. is in his second year as the Mariners' scouting director. The scouting director is in charge of the draft and, when he was with the Angels from 1986 until 1999, Fontaine was responsible for drafting Roberto Hernandez, Paul Sorrento, Jim Abbott, Garret Anderson, Jim Edmonds, Tim Salmon, Troy Percival, Darin Erstad, Jarrod Washburn, Scott Schoeneweis, Troy Glaus and John Lackey, among others.

Let's all hope that Fontaine can tell the difference between Albert Pujols and Willie Bloomquist. The Mariners' future depends on it.