



## CATCHING UP WITH ... **DAN WILSON**

*By Mike Gastineau*

In baseball, the phrase “he plays the game the right way” is considered by many players and coaches the ultimate compliment. It’s a somewhat nebulous definition but baseball people know what it means and they recognize guys who show up every day and do all the little and big things necessary both on and off the field to earn this level of praise.

There’s no better example of a Mariners player who played the game the right way than Dan Wilson, who owns every career catching record with the team after a 12 year run in Seattle from 1994 to 2005. He was the Opening Day catcher 10 times, caught 30 of the 34 Mariners postseason games and most of the 275 wins racked up by Randy Johnson and Jamie Moyer as Mariners pitchers.

### **Giving Back on All Fronts**

Since retiring in 2005 Wilson has stayed active with the team, representing the Mariners in the community, working part time in the broadcast booth, working as the team’s roving minor league catching coordinator

since 2013, and now serving as the Defensive Coordinator for the club’s minor league system.

“I’m working with all of the catchers in the organization,” said Wilson. “It’s nice to be able to work with the kids and share some of the things that helped you.”

Wilson was a kid himself when he got his first taste of baseball mentoring. In the Cincinnati organization he received advice and help from Scott Bradley, who briefly played for the Reds in 1992 after spending the previous six seasons with the Mariners. Teams didn’t have as much specialized coaching back then so it was really just luck that Bradley happened to be a former catcher.

“Things are a little different now because there’s more focus on position,” said Wilson. “Before there was one guy who did all the positions. Now, we specify by position and do a good job of giving players the instruction and the fundamentals on how to play the game.”

Personalized instruction by position isn’t the only thing that’s different

about the game. Wilson admits he’s had to learn a lot about pitch framing, which is defined by the website [baseball-catcher.com](http://baseball-catcher.com) as a “subtle movement of the wrist that drags the ball toward the strike zone.” This now widespread defensive move by catchers has only come into the game in the past few seasons so Wilson has been both a teacher and student.

“I’m learning about pitch framing right along with those guys,” he said. “Getting into coaching gives you a different perspective. You watch the game differently. So I’m continuing to learn what it takes to be a good coach.”

### **Drawing from Experience**

Spending as much time as he did with Johnson and Moyer turned out to be great training for Wilson. Seldom has one team featured two more dramatically different pitchers that presented challenges for their catcher.

“With Randy’s velocity and movement you really had to be on physically to catch everything, block everything

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and keep it in front of you. There wasn't a ton of thinking or guesswork. It was either the fastball or the slider. He just came right at you and catching him was more of a physical challenge.”

“With Jamie, he was extremely easy to catch. But the mental energy that went into it was much more prevalent. You had to really think through how you were going to get guys out because he didn't have velocity. You really had to have a good plan.” The duo spent enough time together formulating good plans that they developed a telepathic connection.

“We had some nights where we weren't seeing eye to eye but we had many more nights where we could almost read each other's minds from 60-feet, six-inches away, and there's no greater feeling than that. That's something that's pretty special.”

Wilson shared iconic moments as a teammate of both players. He caught Johnson's final pitch of the one-game playoff against the Angels that clinched the 1995 American League West division for Seattle. Then, in 2005, playing on a knee not yet fully recovered from surgery, Wilson caught one final in-



ning with Moyer in the final game of Wilson's career. That brief appearance elicited Moyer's memorable quote: “I've never thrown a warm-up pitch with a tear in my eye.”

### On Junior and Juniors

Wilson is excited to see his long-time teammate Ken Griffey Jr., enter the Baseball Hall of Fame this year and still marvels at Junior's almost automatic ability to deliver in the clutch. But as much as the great plays, he remembers what fans didn't get to see – what he calls “the softer side of Junior.”

“He did a lot of things for people without any publicity and that was by design. He didn't want that stuff to be about him. I remember that made a big impression on me then and it still continues to make a big impression. He was never shy about helping people out who were in tough situations and he always did it very quietly and under the radar.”

In addition to still staying involved on many levels with the Mariners, Wilson has also picked up a creative hobby in his post playing days. He puts together highlight videos and slide show

Wilson will work with catchers at all levels of the system.

tributes complete with music for his four kids to mark special occasions and celebrate various sports seasons. He is under no illusion that this is something that could become a paying gig.

“Trust me,” he laughed, “I am no Hollywood producer. It's pretty amateur and it's pretty novice. But it's been fun to do that.”

So for now Wilson will concentrate more on pitch framing than framing a scene and trying to instill his work ethic and talent into young Mariners catchers to get them to play the game the right way.

“Something that should be stated more is how hard Big League players have to work to be consistently successful,” he said. “There's a difference between working a lot and working smart. The good ones work hard, but they also work smart and they understand the things they have to put time into to become better players. The good ones figure that out.”

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.