



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

Boone Hopes to Help Offset Seattle's Power Shortage

In the optimistic way of a baseball fan in spring, you could say that the M's traded one All-Star middle infielder for another this winter when they lost Alex Rodriguez to Texas while signing free agent Bret Boone away from San Diego.

Now, no one is suggesting that Boone is going to replace the 41 home runs and 132 RBIs that the M's lost when A-Rod bolted to the Lone Star State. Even Boone quickly points out that no one guy can replace those kind of numbers.

"When you're talking about a guy like Alex leaving it's pretty tough to replace him and his production, but I'm here to do my part," Boone said one afternoon in March at the M's spring training facility.

But take Boone's numbers from last year (19 HRs, 74 RBIs, .251) and compare them to American League second basemen and only Robbie Alomar was statistically superior. Boone racked up those numbers despite missing the last five weeks of the season with a knee contusion.

Add in the fact that Boone has consistently ranked among the top fielding second basemen in baseball the last five years and it becomes clear why the M's wanted to bring him back to the organization where he started.

Boone's 2000 season wasn't a fluke. He's averaged good power numbers for a second baseman for much of his big-league career. But he enters 2001 with a different offensive mindset—one that reflects a desire to improve upon his career .255 batting average.

"I know I can go out there and hit 20 to 25 home runs and drive in 90 to 100 runs, but going into the season I'm not setting that as a goal. My goal this year is to have more consistent at-bats. I know I

can hit 25 home runs and hit .260...but I want to hit .290."

All right. Wanting to add 30 points to your average and doing it are two different things. But Boone has a plan. In addition to concentrating on consistent at-bats, he's taking advantage of a valuable resource available to all M's hitters.

"The first thing that helps me is hitting with Edgar every day and watching him and picking things up from him."

Boone also used his knee injury to continue to add bulk to his upper body. And while more upper body strength would appear to benefit his power numbers, he says that wasn't his motivation.

"I worked on my knee a lot this winter and as a result I also worked on my upper body but it was more for the long haul. Not for hitting balls farther or hitting more home runs. I just feel that the stronger I can be the more punishment I can take. It's a long season. And when you're an everyday player the wear and tear on your body gets to you. And that's why I did it. More to be as strong as I can so my body can take more punishment and continue to be strong."

In the field Boone has quietly developed into one of baseball's best glove men. He led NL second basemen in fielding for three consecutive years and was the 1998 Gold Glove winner at the position. That was also the season he was named to the NL All-Star team.

So what we have here is a guy with good power numbers, a great glove, and whose stated goal for the season is to add 20 to 30 points to his average. But there's at least one other thing about Boone's

makeup that should put a smile on the collective face of Mariner fans.

The man is lethal in the post-season. In 21 games he's hit .333, including an eye-popping .538 in the 1999 World Series. Boone quickly points out that his team (the Braves) lost and that obviously takes the edge off any personal accomplishments. But he's also proud of his ability to perform at baseball's highest level.

"In '99 I had a big post-season and a big World Series. And it was my first World Series. That first time going out into Yankee Stadium in a World Series. It was awesome. I remember the announcer saying my name. There's no place like it. There's nothing like it. I was fortunate to have a great series."

Like all players who've been there, Boone's number one desire is to get back to the World Series. He says the M's pitching, managing, and overall makeup gives them a great chance to make that dream become a reality.

"I'm looking at this team with a chance to win and I've been lucky enough at this stage of my career to be on a couple of good teams that got deep into the post-season. This winter when we decided to sign with Seattle that was a big part of it. I liked the makeup of the team."

He's not Alex Rodriguez. But if he maintains his power numbers from the past several years, and continues to field his position like a Gold Glover, and can add 20 to 30 points to his average, Boone will almost certainly be a member of the 2001 American League All-Star team.

It's true that no one player can replace the kind of numbers the M's lost. But this one player can replace a big chunk of them. If other guys step up, Bret Boone may get a chance to build on his past post-season successes.

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