

The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau



THIRD BASEMAN CAL RIPKEN

You can hear that out of a PA announcer's mouth a hundred times and it still makes you look up. "Hey," you hear whatever part of your brain is in charge of remembering important things like where guys play in the field say, "isn't Ripken the shortstop?"

Not anymore. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt at moving baseball's ironman to third in 1996, the O's management picked up Mike Bordick during the off-season and made the move permanent this past spring. So after more than 2200 games at shortstop Cal Ripken came to camp last February to relearn an old position (*Ripken moved from third to short in 1982*). "Big deal," that pesky brain of yours is saying, "guys learn new positions all the time in this game. And Ripken's a sure-fire Hall of Famer." But even the great ones are human.

"Secretly, I worried about it," said Ripken in a recent conversation on KJR-AM, "I didn't try to let anyone know in spring training, but when you change positions there's an uncertainty about whether you have the ability to play it."

Ripken also worried that the change to third might negatively impact his offense. "When you change positions and you worry too much about making plays in the field, sometimes you don't pay as much attention at the bat. I worried about losing the proper balance between offense and defense. I've made some mistakes but I'm learning from those mistakes and it hasn't impacted my offense at all."

Moving from shortstop to third base literally doesn't require more than about 15 to 20 steps. But figuratively, the entire picture changed for Ripken. "You do see the field and the play in a slightly different way. The ball is hit to third so quickly. It's a reactionary position. At shortstop, you get view it. You've got time to set up. And you get to choose your hop. At third base you don't have the luxury of choosing your hop. Sometimes you have to be a goalie. Sometimes you have to block the ball. You're looking at it from the side and you don't have the same vantage point that I used to really enjoy at shortstop."

Anyone who has ever spent anytime at third base whether in Little League, Pony League, American Legion, the American League, or the Beer League will tell you one of the toughest things about the position is making throws to first base. Think about it carefully for a second. What is there between third and first base that could get in the way? The answer, of course, is your friendly neighborhood pitcher. One would think that at the big league level pitchers would always remember to get out of the way. But sometimes they either don't or can't. And that makes life tough for third basemen like Ripken.

"I think angles are involved a lot more at third in fielding

the ball. Anytime you have to go to your backhand side or you have to come in toward the third base bag you're throwing the ball across the diamond. And sometime the pitcher is in the way."

All right. Simple. Just take a step towards the plate and fire to first, right?

Maybe not.

"You can't afford to have the ball go up the line at all because then the runner gets involved in the play. Your angle to first base, your margin for error, is less than it is when making the throw from shortstop since you have a much broader target. I've made a couple of mistakes there. I've thrown the ball up the line a couple times and gotten some errors. But if you realize that and you get your body in front of you and aim a little bit further out that's the thing you need to do."

The Orioles have been tough on the M's so far this year, taking five of the first six games. The teams meet again in early August with two games in Baltimore and two in Seattle. Ripken realizes these games could be previews of bigger games to come in October.

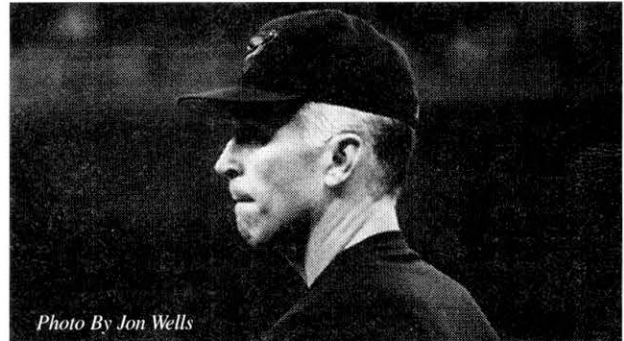


Photo By Jon Wells

"I guess if you sat down and really thought about it that is one possibility. But knowing you have to play everyone and knowing how important each game is in the season you don't try to put so much importance on one series. Obviously, Seattle is a very good ball club. It makes for an interesting series from a fan's point of view. The competition is always fun no matter what. And it's always good to play against good teams that are really hot."

It's also fun for Ripken to spend time with Alex Rodriguez. The two have a friendship that dates back to when A-Rod was in high school and would spend all his free time at the Orioles Spring Training complex in Florida. They've maintained it over the years and although their teams compete on the field, the nature of the sport dictates that Ripken and Rodriguez never really compete head-to-head. Except in off season pick-up basketball games. The elder statesman claims the prodigy still has some learning to do on the hardwood.

"I may not be the most talented person on the basketball court. And A-Rod is really physically skilled. But an old man like myself can really shut him down."

If you have any feedback on this column contact the Gasman at Kjrgas@aol.com. Or listen to his show from 3 to 7pm daily on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM.

(Ed. Note: When the M's are home on weekdays, the Gasman's show always includes conversations with players, managers, coaches and broadcasters from the M's and their opponents).

