



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

The Best Job in the World

You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball and in the end it turns out it was the other way around all the time.
—Jim Bouton, Ball Four

Baseball won't let go of Norm Charlton.

Oh, it's tried. It wrecked his elbow. It gave him a couple tastes of the high life but also a solid dose of the cruel side of the game. A World Series ring. A double deal from management that left him ready to retire in April of 2000. But baseball won't let go.

Charlton memories, good and bad, echo around Seattle.

We're talking about a guy who had the best season a reliever ever had in an M's uniform (1995, when "The Sheriff" saved 14 games in 15 tries and posted a 1.51 ERA). As tough as Charlton was in '95, he was tougher in the post-season that year. He worked thirteen and a third innings and notched a 1.35 ERA in seven appearances.

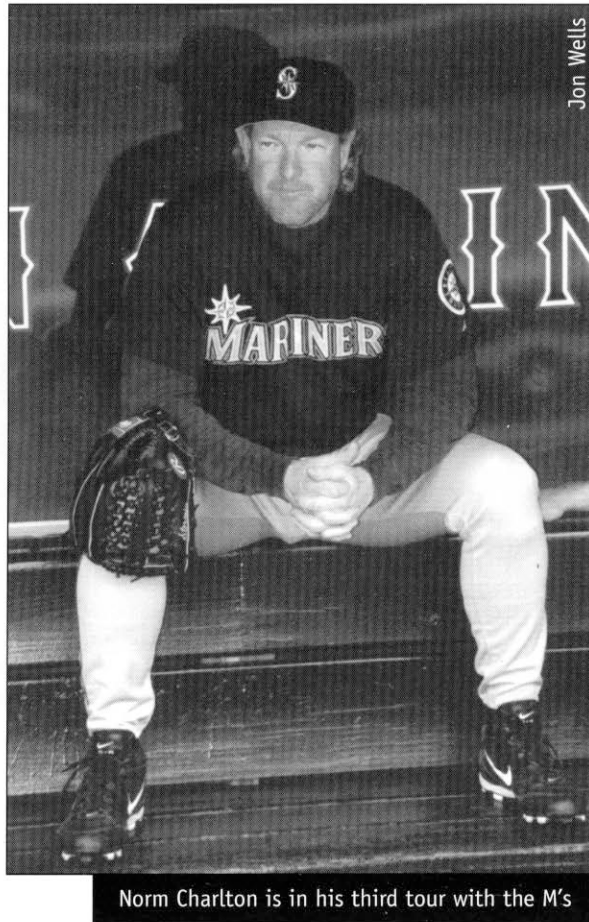
No appearance was tougher, or more memorable, than Game 3 of the ALCS at Cleveland.

Randy Johnson had worked 8 innings before leaving after a lead-off triple by Kenny Lofton in the bottom of the ninth. The game was tied, the Indians fastest guy was on third, nobody out, and Jacobs Field was shaking.

Into the firestorm walked Charlton. Strutting like a rooster, brash and confident. "Hells Bells" blared on the PA. The crowd was so loud that when I turned to address my KJR colleague Michael Knight (we were sitting in a makeshift press box in the right field stands, smack

dab in the middle of the fans) he had to lean over towards me to hear.

"I don't think Lofton's gonna score," I said. Knight just smiled in response.



Norm Charlton is in his third tour with the M's

Charlton remembers how he felt.

"I remember that night well. They were glad to get the starter out of the game. With the starter out of the game it was like 'OK, we got em.' Sorry. That put a charge in me. I had something to prove right there. Hey...you guys are happy to get him out of the game? Wait 'til you

see this."

"This" was the retiring of Omar Vizquel, Carlos Baerga, and Albert Belle. Jacobs Field fell silent. And the M's ultimately won the game on an 11th inning bomb from Jay Buhner.

He struggled some in 1996 as his ERA nearly tripled. His subsequent fall from grace in 1997 (3-8 with a 7.27 ERA) brought more boos than cheers from the fans and erased for many the folk hero status he had earned. He left the M's after that disastrous 1997 season, and, after bouncing back and forth between the minor leagues and Baltimore, Atlanta, Tampa Bay, and Cincinnati, finally retired last April.

He was very unhappy with how his career had ended. He felt betrayed by the Reds organization who he thinks released him not so much because of his pitching ability, but because of his age, a numbers crunch, and payroll concerns.

His unhappiness might've eventually subsided. If only baseball would let go.

When Seattle moved their Double-A farm team from New Haven to San Antonio, Charlton started thinking. He felt he could still pitch and he thought it would be worth it to call the M's.

"My home town is San Antonio. I was pretty content at home. But I called my agent and told him to ask the M's if there was a chance I could make the big league club. They said there was...that they might use me as a situational lefty."

The chance was all Charlton wanted. But with a minor league affiliate in his backyard, he also offered to help the M's if he didn't make the club. He said he'd be happy to report to San Antonio and work with the M's young pitchers there. Per-

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as doing a great job adjusting. So I am very optimistic that once I go out and get comfortable, start playing the way I know I can play, the focus will be on the performance of where the Rangers are going as a group rather than where I am as an individual player. Hopefully the attention will always be on my performance and the contract status will go to the back burner.

GS: *Do you see any similarities between yourself and Tiger Woods and what he is going through?*

AR: Tiger is a legend in the making. But the one thing about golf is that it's such an individual sport that if he goes out and plays well and doesn't win for six weeks they consider it a slump. Baseball is a team sport. I remember being in 12-game winning streaks and going 5-for-50 and the team is doing well and you're happy. So this is a totally different situation. But I can relate to the media focus.

GS: *How's your relationship with Derek Jeter?*

AR: We've made an agreement that we won't talk about each other until we retire.

GS: *How long do you expect to keep playing?*

AR: My passion for the game of baseball is so strong. I'm only 25 years old and I have so much to work on in this game that if I get the opportunity to play for another 15 years I am going to be the luckiest man in the world. I don't want that love to be tainted by the financial side of things. I have Scott (Boras) and Mr. Hicks. They can talk about that all they want, but my love of the game is what I'm all about.

GS: *Do you envision today's players still playing for 10-12 years?*

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haps serve as a combination mentor/insurance policy. The M's liked the idea. And Charlton liked the idea of working for people he liked and trusted.

"Pat (Gillick) and Lou (Piniella) are honest men and I knew I'd get an honest shake over here," said Charlton who felt the M's would give him the only guarantee he wanted. A chance to make the team on merit.

M's pitching coach Bryan Price, minor league pitching coordinator Pat Rice, and minor league pitching instructor Chris Bosio all worked with Charlton during spring training on mechanical problems that Charlton feels have been at the root of his inconsistency the past few years.

"The book on me the past couple of years has not been 'he doesn't have good stuff.' It's 'he doesn't throw strikes.' I don't care who you are...if you're always pitching behind in the count you won't be successful."

Charlton doesn't have to do this. At the age of 38 he doesn't have to walk the tightrope of a Major League reliever. He's an educated man holding perhaps the most unique triple major ever given by Rice University (Religion, Philosophy, and Phys Ed). When asked to explain the usefulness of his sheepskin he once said, "If I can't preach it out of you or reason it out of you, I'll beat it of you."

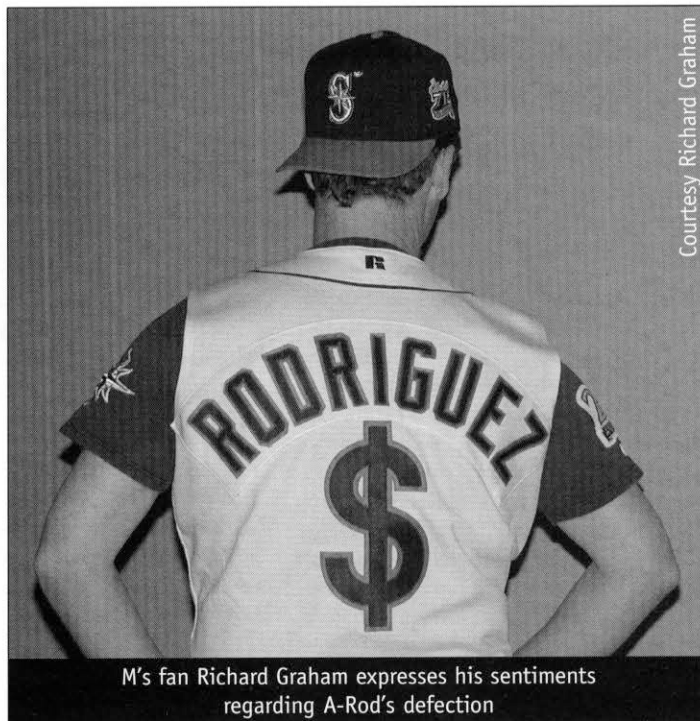
No, he doesn't have to do this. But like many major leaguers who near the end of their career, Charlton wants to squeeze every moment out of this part of his life.

"There's nobody out there who has a better job than me," Charlton

says while sitting on a stool in the M's clubhouse. He looks you in the eye as he says this. And you can easily see the passion for the game that continues to rage in this man's heart.

Baseball just won't let go of Norm Charlton.

Catch Mike Gastineau weekdays from 3 to 7 PM on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM.



M's fan Richard Graham expresses his sentiments regarding A-Rod's defection

AR: The finances are so good these days that you could play for 5 years and retire and for some people that might be an option. For some reason there's a notion out there that the modern-day athlete doesn't have a passion for the game and I beg to differ because I know what I do in the off-season and I would love to compare today's athletes to maybe 30, 40 years ago. We work at it 12 months out of the year because the competition is so good.



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