



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

An Appreciation of One of Baseball's All-Time Greats

WE take Ken Griffey Jr. for granted. It sounds silly to say and looks even sillier when written.

But we do.

We go to the ballpark every night expecting to see him batting third. We expect him to play center field. We expect him to run down every fly ball...including the ones that somehow elude his grasp. We expect to see him hit a home run. Not just every game. But every at bat. Lou Piniella even admitted to me once with his trademark chuckle that even he has to remember to appreciate Junior's metronome-like consistency.

There's an audible gasp from Kingdome crowds when he strikes out. We're left disappointed when he grounds out or flies out.

We've become sensitized to the graphics that appear in the local papers once, or twice, or more a year:

- Youngest in history to hit 350 home runs. Beat guys who don't need first names for baseball fans. Mantle. Aaron. Ott.
- 4th youngest to drive in 1000 runs. Up there on that list with Ott. Foxx. Gehrig. One of three players in history to drive in 140 or more runs three consecutive years. That list includes only Jr., Gehrig, and Ruth.
- One of two left handed batters to hit 21 home runs in a season off left handed pitchers. Fella named Musial is the other.
- One of only three players in history to hit a home run in 8 consecutive games.

He's OK in the field, too. He's won 9 consecutive gold gloves. An all-time record for American League outfielders.

It's almost to the point where we're not impressed anymore.

But think about it. He beat the great Hank Aaron to 350 home runs by a year and a half. He's on an RBI list that prior to last year included only Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. He's possibly the greatest defensive outfielder in American League history.

It's unfair to talk about what his numbers might be if he hadn't been hurt for over half of 1995. Injuries are a part of the game. But the strike of 1994 and 95 robbed him of anywhere from 58 to 66 games. That's approximately 225 at bats. How many more home runs could be added to his bottom line in those games?

How many RBIs? Where would he stand on those all-time lists?

Oops. There we go again. What he's done isn't enough. We're looking for more.

More we shall receive.

KEN GRIFFEY JR. WON'T turn 30 until this Thanksgiving. If he stays healthy, and if he wants to keep playing the game, he could have another 8 to 10 productive seasons left. Maybe more.

If he maintains the pace he's been on the past two seasons he'll reach the 400 home run plateau this season. Let's say after that he slows down a little...and averages "only" 30 home runs a year for the next 7 years. That would still place him well over 600 home runs at the age of 37. Hank Aaron hit 116 home runs after he turned 37.

The point here is that we may be watching the greatest home run hitter in baseball history. And we are watching

him in his prime. And if he keeps hitting home runs... he'll challenge Aaron's records for RBIs (2297) and extra-base hits (1477).

Griffey's assault on numbers like that would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for Seattle baseball fans.

His deep appreciation and respect for the history of the game would make it that much more enjoyable.

The fact that he appears capable of challenging some of baseball's most historical numbers makes it all the more important that the Mariners are able to keep him in Seattle.

ONE OF THE INTERESTING things about following sports as a spectator is that, oftentimes, it's difficult to enjoy great experiences as they are happening. We tend to appreciate things more in retrospective form. We talk about what was the greatest game. Or who was the greatest player.

But we've had a long time saying at Sportsradio. "Don't forget to enjoy the ride." And the ride with Junior is in its mid-career stage.

Enjoy it.

Learn to appreciate it this year when he becomes the 3rd youngest player in history to do this, or the youngest ever to do that, or the first in history to accomplish yet another feat.

Remember that they've been playing this game now for 130 years. When a player makes history it means something.

And although it's difficult to predict the future, Junior's best history may well be yet to come. ☺

Catch Mike Gastineau on Groz with Gas, weekdays from 2 to 7 PM on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM.