



# The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

## Bone's comeback season a highlight for M's

It's the morning after Jay Buhner joined baseball's 300 home run club and the Mariners' right fielder is busy.

Like the father of the bride at a crowded wedding reception, Buhner is getting congratulations from a long line of greeters. Beat writers stop by to shake hands and offer congratulations. Members of the M's broadcast crew make their way to Buhner's locker. So do coaches and teammates.

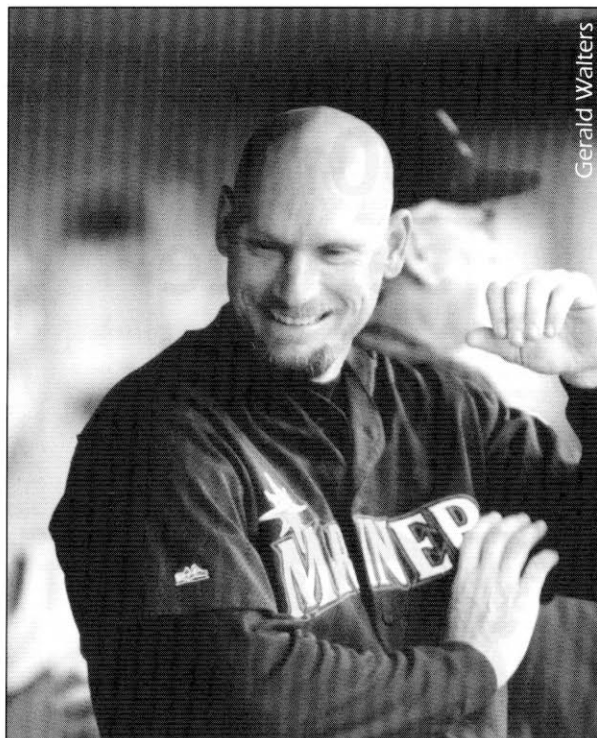
Buhner receives them all warmly, a smile permanently stuck on his well-known mug. He relates story after story from the last 12 hours. There are phone messages from his proud parents, former teammates like Ken Griffey, Jr., and numerous friends, some leaving messages in the middle of the game. There's little room for doubt that getting to 300 home runs is a very special milestone for Buhner, whose career looked to be over so often due to injury the last two years.

When asked, Buhner eagerly recalls what went through his mind as Jason Iringhausen's pitch sailed over the left field wall on Tuesday night July 25th.

"Everything. It's amazing. It was like my whole career up to that point flashed through. It was like reliving some of the things that have happened; some of the trials and tribulations and some of the things I went through this winter to get myself to that moment. Because that was my motivation this winter. There's no

doubt that was my big goal, to give myself the opportunity to get in there and have the chance to hit 300."

Buhner's 1999-2000 winter was full of tough moments. Ankle surgery. Shoulder



Jay Buhner

surgery. A new deal from the M's for considerably less than what he had been making. There was some talk from people on the periphery that Buhner might be done. He'd be lucky to make the 25-man roster, and even then might have to accept a much lesser role with the team.

While Buhner's day-to-day role has been reduced, he'll still end up spending more time in right field than anyone else on the roster. His numbers (30 home runs and 100 RBIs seem likely, and his slugging percentage is back where it was in the glory days of 1995 to 1997) are evidence enough that he can still play the game. Throw in the fact that he is still respected as one of the game's better right fielders and you've got a guy who should receive serious consideration for the Comeback Player of the Year award.

Whether or not that happens, Buhner's 2000 season has cemented him as one of the all-time most popular Mariners. Over 16,000 people shaved their heads to look like him over the last five years. Thousands more wave those giant white inflatable bones in the air any time he does something special. Fans give what amounts to a knowing "ah-ah-ah" to runners who try for an extra base on Buhner before scurrying back to safety. This town loves the guy.

That was never more evident than the night of his 300<sup>th</sup> homer. Fans poured their emotions out in a lengthy standing ovation. Sure, the home run itself was mammoth, both in distance and in the fact that it cut a four run lead down to one against Oakland, but it was obvious this ovation was for more than that.

Mariner fans were saying congratulations on battling back from nearly two solid years of injuries. And thanks not only for staying in Seattle but for adopting this great city as your own. A city that has watched numerous sports stars leave for a variety of reasons was more than ready to lavish cheers on a guy who not only has stayed

but also obviously loves it here. The nearly two minute long ovation left Buhner almost overwhelmed.

"As a ballplayer, the ultimate nirvana is to get a curtain call. And then to have a

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## **BUHNER from page 11**

double curtain call. I'll never, ever forget that. It was awesome. It made whatever little bit of hair I have on my head stand up. I had goosebumps. I was trying hard not to let the first tear run out because then the floodgates would have opened."

Buhner is proud of what this team has accomplished this year. And after two years of bouncing off and on the DL with injuries, he's enjoying his role in the M's success. "For me, it's nice to be able to contribute. It's nice to be able to help the team out offensively and defensively. It's awesome to be a part of a group of guys who come in every day and work hard," Buhner says, adding that Lou Piniella's managerial style really seems to fit this club.

"We have a very low key, relaxed atmosphere in here. I take my hat off to Lou. The communication is incredible. Guys know what their roles are gonna be and when they're gonna play."

Buhner and Piniella are part of a dwindling group of M's with links to the magical season of 1995.

It was during that late-season run that Buhner first publicly asserted himself as a leader when he scoffed at the notion that the M's were concerned with winning the AL Wild Card after club executives began posting the wildcard standings on the outfield railings. Within a day the wildcard standings were down, the AL West standings were back up, and the M's drive to their first-ever division crown continued.

Once again this summer Buhner showed his leadership as the M's discussed bringing in a left-handed bat to help the offense. Three days before the M's picked up Al Martin, Buhner was typically blunt when asked if he'd be upset if he lost playing time.

"If it means cutting my playing time down a little then so be it. It's all about winning. And everyone in this room would agree with that. Our goal is to win our division and go to the World Series. This isn't the time of year for egos."

Someday the Mariners roster won't include Jay Buhner. A year ago, that day seemed to loom on the horizon. Now, a pretty strong case can be made to extend the slugger's career with a new deal. Alvin Davis may have been "Mr. Mariner," but given his ability on the field and his love for this area, maybe Buhner can be "Mr. Seattle." He says he wanted to enjoy the night of his 300<sup>th</sup> home run for as long as it lasted. Fans should do the same thing with his career.

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

## **HARDBALL from page 17**

Saturdays.

"We always have less players," he said. "Somebody's always on vacation." This, then, was a good day for the block. When I asked him why they didn't switch players around to make even teams, he looked at me like I was crazy. Block alliances run deep, apparently, and that sort of thing just isn't done. As for the mystery pitch that dropped off the table, the star pitcher confessed with a devilish grin that he'd put dirt in the ball to weigh it down.

When it comes to real competition and the desire to win, it just doesn't get any better than this.

So next time you're fed up watching millionaire players at ballpark prices (though those \$5 seats at Safeco can't be beat), go out of your way and find some real, pure, simple baseball. Check out a little league,

## **PLAYOFFS from page 15**

One of the biggest questions for Seattle manager Lou Piniella will be how to set up his pitching staff. With off-days in the post-season, Lou might go with a four-man rotation or even a three-man rotation. One would expect that Jamie Moyer and Aaron Sele will be part of the rotation, but what about spots 3 and 4? Freddy Garcia? Paul Abbott? John Halama? Should be some interesting decisions for Lou and pitching coach Bryan Price come late September.

While the M's went through a funk in mid-August, this club still looks like a good bet to go deep in the post-season. They'll need to get good pitching, play solid defense, and get some timely hitting. And finally, they've got to hope that Lou Piniella's renegade managing doesn't cost them any tough one-run games.

high school, or college game, where most players play simply because they love the game.


Better yet, head down to Tacoma and catch the Rainiers. In addition to seeing top prospects such as Ryan Anderson and Joel Pineiro, you'll also see PCL veterans Mike Neill and Brian Leshar, still trying after all these years to reach The Show. Or head up I-5 to Everett to see the AquaSox, where kids just drafted out of high school and college are getting their first exposure to professional baseball.

There's great baseball out there, and sometimes you just have to look a bit harder to find it. For one Saturday in August, I found it on the streets of Seattle. Where will you find it?

*Jason Michael Barker will graduate from the University of Washington next March. He is a regular columnist and one of the founding partners of Strikethree.com.*

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