



# The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

## THE ULTIMATE UTILITY PLAYER

In the spring of 2000, two men were standing near the M's batting cage in Peoria, Arizona, watching Mark McLemore hit. One had a copy of McLemore's career stats, which detailed the circuitous route of a classic baseball journeyman.

"Look at all the stops this guy has made in his career," he said to the other.

"Seattle probably isn't the last one, either," came the reply, which was followed by laughter from both.

Seattle is the 18th place McLemore has received his mail since entering pro ball in 1982. And there was nothing to indicate in the spring of 2000 that Seattle would be any different from past stops. Maybe he'd stick around for a while with his sixth team. Quite possibly he'd move on.

Flashing forward to the spring of 2001, it appeared likely the latter was more probable. McLemore had played 138 games for the M's in 2000, the majority of them at second base. There was no reason to think he wouldn't be there again this season.

But the M's signed one major position player as a free agent last winter: Bret Boone, second baseman. So McLemore found himself in Peoria in the spring of 2001 looking for a job. And for a while it looked like it would be with a new team.

McLemore arrived in M's camp upset. He quietly but pointedly indicated that if he didn't have a job with the club he wanted out. "I did a good job for the ballclub last year," he told Seattle P-I columnist Laura Vescey. "You don't want to say you earned

the right to play every day, but I think I did some good things here. If I'm not going to get the chance to play, I asked to be traded."

But the M's quickly diffused the situation. Lou Piniella met with McLemore



Mark McLemore has played six different positions in 2001

and reassured him that he'd have plenty of opportunities to help the M's this year. Pat Gillick publicly praised him as a valuable guy who could help the M's at numerous positions.

Just like that, one of the first potential problems of a long season was handled. And as it turns out, McLemore's demand for a trade, and how the M's responded to it, ends up being one of the most critical moments of the year. Think of what the M's would have missed had they decided to ship Mac out.

The M's started the spring without a backup third baseman, without a backup shortstop, and a little thin in the outfield once it became clear Jay Buhner wasn't going to be able to play much. McLemore has solidified every one of those potential concerns.

Has there been a more versatile talent for the Mariners this year? Prior to 2001 he'd played a total of 13 games at third base in his career. This year he'll end up playing over 30 games there. Prior to 2001 he hadn't played shortstop in eleven years. This year he's been there over two dozen times. Prior to 2001 he'd played a total of 26 games in the outfield in the past five years. This year he'll end up playing there close to 75 games.

Throw in the fact that he's a switch hitter and McLemore becomes a manager's dream.

Perhaps all this jumping around has been helpful. McLemore is having one of his best years ever, setting career personal bests in steals, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage. But this season is about so much more than just raw numbers.

McLemore's play with the M's this year calls to mind another "Mac" in Seattle's sports history. During Nate McMillan's playing days in the NBA, someone once wrote that you had to see him play every night in order to appreciate how good he is for his team. Indeed, despite the fact there were always guys with much gaudier stats, night after night during

the Sonics glorious run between 1992 and 1998 fans would walk out of the building singing the praises of the unheralded versatile McMillan.

At least one guy who does see the M's play every night might be willing to compare the two. When asked recently if he thought Bret Boone or Ichiro has been the M's Most Valuable Player this season, broadcaster Dave Niehaus responded with a hearty "What about McLemore?"

*Continued on page 15*

## McLEMORE from page 7

Obviously, it's hard to pick McLemore as the team MVP given the work done by Boone and Ichiro this year. But maybe they could make a new award this year and call it the MVM (Most Valuable Moment).

The hands-down winning moment for this season would be the first few hours after McLemore asked to be traded. Think of how easy it would have been to just make his wish come true. A utility player without a clear-cut role on your team asks to be moved. It might have been tempting to say "OK."

But Piniella and Gillick obviously saw the potential bonus McLemore could be for this club. Their reassurances combined with the willingness of McLemore to accept change and work on new positions was a huge turning point before the season ever began. The potential problem of either being forced into a trade or carrying a guy who wanted out was quickly and effectively defused.

One of the things Piniella said in the wake of McLemore's unhappiness last spring was the old manager's cliché that "the players make out the lineup." Most of those old manager's clichés are actually true.

Players really do fill out the lineup card, and McLemore has simply made it nearly impossible for Piniella not to include him in the lineup most nights.

Ten years from now when fans around the country remember this team, they'll remember Boone and Ichiro. Kazu. Edgar. One word icons of power and glory. They'll remember Piniella etching his name permanently among the game's great skippers. But most fans around the country won't remember McLemore. (Quick now...who were the key utility players on the '93 Blue Jays?)

But ask any Seattle-based fan about this team ten years from now and no list of contributing players will be complete without a mention of McLemore.

You had to see him play every night to appreciate how good he was.

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

## LOU from page 9

Lou has become more patient as well, particularly with younger pitchers. Despite his high walk total last season—walks being something that really don't sit well with Piniella—Gil Meche made 15 starts before going on the disabled list. Piniella was never that patient with the likes of Ken Cloude, and how often did we see a reliever called up from Tacoma only to be deemed unacceptable after just two or three innings?

This year, Lou selected unproven reliever Ryan Franklin to make the club out of spring training and stuck with him, something that never would have happened two or three years ago. He also allowed Brian Fuentes and others to compete for the "second left-hander" spot in the bullpen, rather than simply handing the job to his old buddy Norm Charlton as he might have done in the past.

## SNELLING from page 11

hit for more power than Dykstra as he matures. I still think the best comparison is Rusty Greer: good average and walks, with doubles power and some home run pop. If he can handle center in the majors, Snelling could be a star with that sort of offensive game. In an outfield corner, he'd be a solid contributor.

Early in the year, Piniella stressed the importance of playing to win series rather than stressing over each pitch, each individual situation, even each individual game. It takes a patient man to see the season this way.

Perhaps the most telling sign that Lou has mellowed, matured, and learned patience in the past year was his reaction when the Mariners lost that awful 15-14 game to Cleveland last month after being up by as many as twelve runs. "You never know about baseball, that's for damn sure. It was looking pretty secure."

That game may have slipped away, but Piniella would tell you it's just one game out of 162, relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of things. And thanks to the new Lou, the Mariners are looking pretty secure this season, too.

*Jason Michael Barker is a regular contributor to and founding member of Strikethree.com.*

The next time someone tells you the M's don't have any good position player prospects in the minors since Antonio Pérez' injury, remind them about Chris Snelling. Don't forget about Ryan Christianson, Pedro Liriano, or Jamal Strong, but the name at the top of your list should be Chris Snelling, the Australian sensation who's soon to be sweeping the Mariner nation.



**Grandsalami.com**  
Daily Mariners Coverage

The online voice of Seattle Mariner Fans: [www.grandsalami.com](http://www.grandsalami.com)



**wok & grill**  
AND COCKTAIL LOUNGE

**BROADWAY**



**wok & grill**

**Authentic Asian Cuisine**  
Banquet & Catering • Orders to Go  
Free Delivery Available  
(limited delivery area)

Fremont  
3601 Fremont Ave. N. #314  
Seattle, WA 98103  
Tel: 206-575-8508

Capitol Hill  
614 Broadway E.  
Seattle, WA 98102  
Tel: 206-568-0505  
Open 'til 2:00 AM every night  
(except Sun. & Mon.)