



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

Classy Molitor a True Baseball Ambassador

WITH Roger Maris' record 61 home runs under assault for the second straight summer baseball fans are getting a front row seat to one of the game's most important components: history.

Maris' record has lasted through almost four full decades. Hank Aaron couldn't break it. Neither could Willie Mays. The Big Red Machine's assorted bombers never got close. Neither did Willie Stargell or Mike Schmidt.

It makes you realize how special the guys are who are chasing 61 dingers this summer. And it makes you appreciate how hard it is to get there. We saw it in Seattle last summer. Ken Griffey Jr. fashioned one of the greatest seasons in history with 56 home runs. But a power outage in July kept Junior from breaking the record. That's how it goes in this race. Struggle for ten days and you're off the pace. Struggle for two weeks and you may have lost your chance.

Minnesota Twins designated hitter Paul Molitor knows all about chasing immortal baseball numbers. In 1987, with the Brewers, he fashioned a 39-game hitting streak. Along with Pete Rose (44 in 1978) Molitor is the only player this half century to get within 20 games of Joe DiMaggio's all time record of 56 consecutive games with a hit. His run at the record helped him appreciate the significance of the achievement.

"I always thought that the 56 game hitting streak was one of the more unapproachable records in today's game," Molitor said during the Twins trip to Seattle in July,

"To have an opportunity to put together one that lasted almost six weeks, which is a pretty nice hitting streak in itself — and realize that I was 17 games short... certainly helped put into perspective what an accomplishment (DiMaggio's streak) was."

Part of the reason these records are so tough to break is the (usually) unwanted attention that the chase itself calls to the pursuer. Molitor says the pressure facing Griffey and Mark McGwire this summer is different from what he faced during his six-week streak in '87.

"There's a huge distinction in what these guys are trying to do. I really didn't catch a lot of attention until I got to 30 so I only had to deal with (media attention) it for about a 10 to 12 day period. For me it was a short-term deal. I know it's gotta be tough for them... probably the most relaxed they are is when they step on the field."

Molitor says the toughest thing about chasing a record is maintaining the necessary balance between being a team player and pursuing an individual accomplishment.

"Naturally, when you become more of a focus than the game it's a test of your character to separate winning and what you're trying to do as a team player as opposed to methodically going along trying to keep a streak alive or break a home run record."

Typical of almost any player who has played the game at this level for this long there is an almost effortless look to Molitor's game. Twins skipper Tom Kelly compares his veteran star to an NFL quarterback.

"He sees the field. You talk about quarterbacks in football... they see the field or they see the defense. Well, Paul sees the field and what's going on out there and he reacts to what he sees and executes. There's not many players who can do that."

Kelly explains that most players see a base hit as just that, a base hit. But Molitor's game is predicated on him being able to ascertain almost instantly what's happened all around the field as a

result of that base hit. He then looks to take advantages where he can get them.

Molitor also is willing to do his part in baseball's on-going PR battle to win back fans since 1994's disastrous players strike. On a recent minor league stint to re-hab after a broken rib Molitor had more on his mind than just getting his game back in shape. The Twins Triple A affiliate, the Salt Lake City Buzz, was playing in Tucson. Despite the fact temperatures climbed well above 100 degrees Molitor put in a little extra work according to Kelly.

"They told me he stayed and signed autographs for just about everybody in the building that day in Tucson - he did so many things to promote the game of baseball. The crowd in Tucson was very appreciative."

It was a two-way street. A day in the minors helped Molitor recall what it's like to be at the beginning of your baseball career.

"When you do have a chance to play in the minors and you see the intensity level these younger players have who are trying to find a way to climb that ladder to get to the big leagues, it's kind of a reminder of what it was like."

Molitor broke in with the Brewers in the summer of 1977. Twenty-two summers later the end is approaching for this quiet, classy baseball gentleman. The 1993 World Series MVP admits he's thought a little bit about Cooperstown and the Baseball Hall of Fame.

"This next ballot... a lot of my contemporaries should make it in on the first ballot. Brett, Ryan, Yount, Fisk. You can't help but wonder what it's gonna be like someday to maybe have the opportunity to join that group."

Molitor's humility, which has served him well over the years, quickly surfaces.

"I'm not trying to get ahead of myself. No player has ever voted himself in. I'll just wait and see what happens and if and when it happens it'll be... as they say... the old crowning glory to your baseball life." 🍌

You can hear the Gasman every weekday afternoon on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM