

The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

CHASING THE DREAM

On a June night in Oakland, M's pitcher Paul Abbott is laboring through a long first inning. Thirty-nine pitches thrown. Four runs in. And one of baseball's most dangerous teams is just getting started.

But after that rough first inning, Abbott settles down. He works six innings. He keeps his team in the game—a game they ultimately win. How does a pitcher turn it around like that in mid-game? For starters, you've got to be good. But maybe Abbott is able to get things turned around because he understands better than most what a long journey baseball can be. Not just one game. But an entire career.

"I think there's some truth to that," the right-hander says when asked if his long trip to Major League success is something he can fall back on during tough game situations.

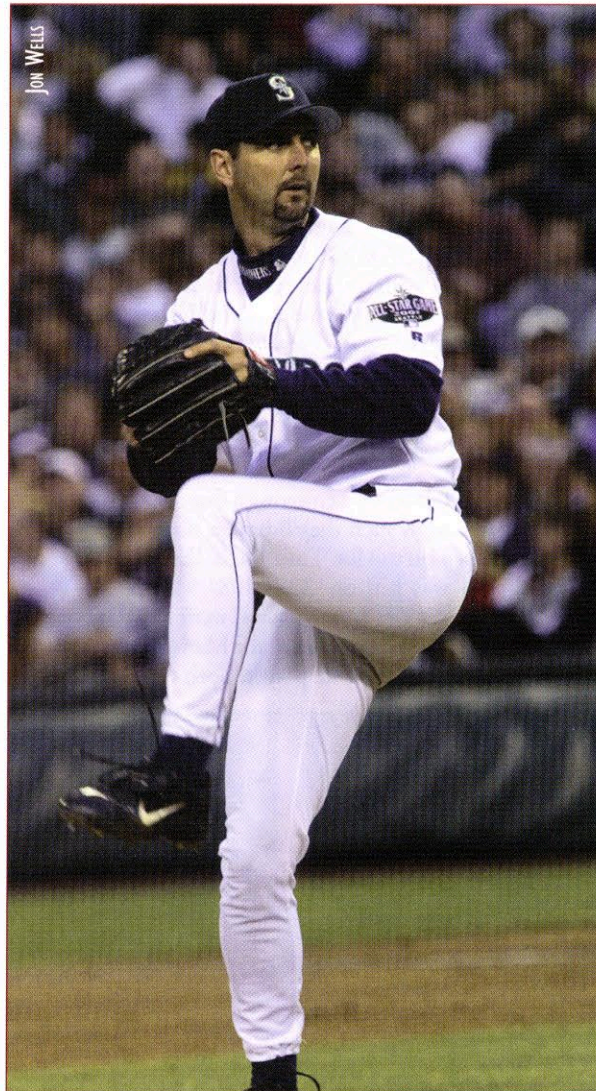
Abbott can rattle off every city in which he ever played professional baseball off the top of his head. This feat might not be as impressive if it weren't for the fact that Abbott's list of stops on the way to the Mariners' rotation the past two years reads more like something out of Rand McNally than Baseball Digest.

"Elizabethton, Tennessee. Kenosha, Wisconsin, for two years. Visalia, California."

Abbott began this journey in 1985 at the age of 18 in the Appalachian League. He quickly worked his way up the ladder.

"Orlando. Portland. Minnesota."

By 1990 Abbott found himself pitching



Paul Abbott

for the Twins. A more or less typical path to that point for a player with Major League stuff. Over the next three years he bounced back and forth between the Twins and Portland, trying to stick with the big club but unable to string together the kind of performances necessary. Finally, in March of 1993, he left the Twins organization and signed a minor league free agent deal with

the Cleveland Indians.

"Canton. Cleveland. Charlotte."

That was all in one year. Surveys say most people move an average of 8 times in their life. Abbott was the runaway winner for the Mayflower Customer of the Year Award. In late 1993 he signed a deal with the Kansas City Royals organization.

"1994, Omaha. 1995, Des Moines. 1996, Las Vegas. 1997, Tacoma."

Four years, four organizations, and four minor league cities. At this point, Abbott had 12 years invested in pro baseball. At some point you'd expect bitterness or resignation to creep in. But Abbott says he has nothing but good memories of those days.

"You've got to learn how to play this game. I met a lot of good people and good friends. I can remember most of it. It was all pleasant times."

Pleasant perhaps but not without it's difficulties. Abbott says the toughest thing about his days in the minors was learning to live without his family. "There were times when it was a struggle. Especially when I was younger. Being away from my family was not easy."

Abbott also found himself wintering in Venezuela twice and Puerto Rico three times. Chasing the dream. Trying to find the right stuff. In addition to seeing a lot of places, Abbott began to develop a new attitude toward the game. His first journey to the

Majors happened in a relatively short five years. But suddenly, at the age of 30, he was looking at a major league career that had included a grand total of three wins, all in 1991. He resolved to make another run at the bigs, this time armed with a new energy.

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"I had to refocus my goals. I can't do this forever. It's a small window where we can play. I had to change my commitment to the game. And get back some passion for it. Because I'm a gigantic baseball fan. I grew up eating and drinking and sleeping this game."

Part of the refocused energy came from the confidence gained from years in the minors. And that helped Abbott come to the conclusion that he could indeed be a major league pitcher.

"I finally said: 'I believe in myself. I know I've got the talent. I got to the majors early and I can do the job but I've got stay healthy and work harder.'"

Somewhere between his head and his arm the message got lost. Abbott suffered through much of 1997 with a sore elbow. It turned out surgery was necessary and that wiped out much of 1998. But by the end of the '98 season, he found himself on the M's roster. He started four games in

September and won three of them. His first major league wins in over seven years.

He headed back to Puerto Rico to play winter ball after the 1998 season. But his season there was cut short when he tore the ACL in his right knee while covering first base. So back to the doctor he went. More major surgery. More time in the minors rehabbing. He finally made it back to the M's roster in late June of 1999. And he's been there ever since.

Last year he worked 179 innings for the M's. That's almost as much as he had worked in his entire major league career up to that point.

This year he's become perhaps the M's most consistent starter. But not without a potential roadblock. Shoulder soreness at the end of spring training sidelined him for a month. Just one more challenge on a list that's longer than almost any Major Leaguer has had to endure.

Abbott knows his journey allowed him to develop a toughness he can fall back on when times in a game get sticky. But he

also knows that pitching for this team is a huge advantage as well.

"I think it mainly has to do with how the team is playing. It seems like every time I give up a couple of runs in the first they come right back and keep scratching out runs. The way the team's playing defense you just get the other team to put the ball into play we're gonna catch it. So we just keep the score as close as we can and then hand it over to the bullpen."

He pauses for a moment before stating what has become obvious to all.

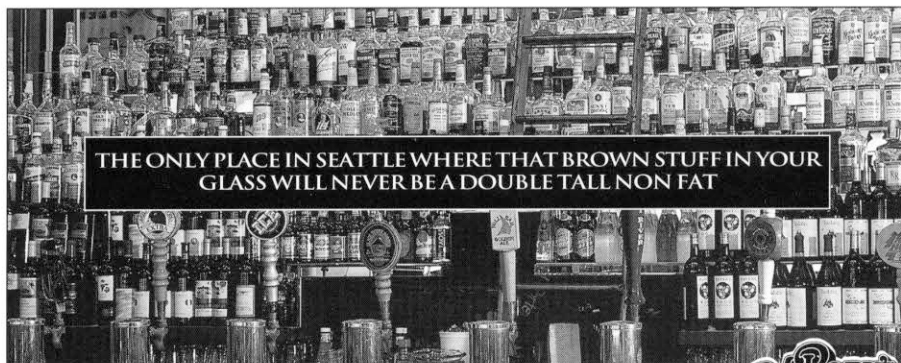
"I mean, there's not a weak spot on this club."

Considering the number of clubs Abbott has been a part of, the number of leagues he's worked in, the number of countries and states he's journeyed to in order to make it to the M's rotation, there might not be a man better suited to make that kind of analysis.

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

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