

# Playing With the Players

*An athlete's version makes some good-natured taunting that much more memorable*

It's the opening week of the baseball season, and rather than focus on a very unfortunate off-season in the baseball world, I will instead tell one of my favorite baseball stories.

Before its demise at the end of the 1993 season, some friends and I held season tickets in the old Arlington Stadium, home of the Texas Rangers. We had a block of tickets in the first row, right next to the visitors' dugout on the third-base side, and the configuration of Arlington Stadium was such that the seats were as close to the infield as you could get anywhere in baseball. Thus, our position relative to both the visitors' dugout and the players on the field meant that we could be a considerable factor in the game, if we so chose.

There is an art to fan involvement in a game. Indeed, one of the rich traditions of baseball is that, thanks to the proximity of fans to ballplayers and the starting and stopping of the game, fans and players can carry on a running dialogue. Unfortunately, some fans don't do justice to this tradition and use foul or abusive language or taunts that are neither in good taste nor in good humor.

We found over the years that most players actually were good sports, and enjoyed the repartee once they realized that we stayed on the right side of that invisible line of taste. Seattle Mariners third baseman Jim Pressley (an obvious target) would generally greet us on the first game of a series when the Mariners were in town. Rickey Henderson gave us props in media reports when he became the victim of Nolan Ryan's 5,000th career strikeout after we predicted to him the inning before that it would indeed be him.

Sometimes, however, the payoff is delayed. One of my ticket partners (we'll call him Scott) had a unique approach to communication with third basemen. Usually our comments were reserved for opposing players, but Scott targeted the Texas Rangers' own third baseman, Steve Buechele, who

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By Bob Latham

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played for the team from 1985 to 1991. Scott had a particular fixation on Aurelio Rodriguez, a journeyman third baseman whom Scott had seen play for the Washington Senators in one of their last years before they, like Scott, moved to Texas. So while we were busy getting in the heads of opposing third basemen, Scott would say things to

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Buechele like, "Steve, I want you to play like Aurelio this year. Steve, you're looking like Aurelio. Steve, Aurelio would have had that one."

This would go on every game we attended, but Buechele never gave any indication that he was paying attention to these bizarre utterances. Then, one day, in his last season with the Rangers, a lazy ground ball came bounding into foul territory. Buechele backhanded it, close to our seats, and was about to turn and throw it back to the pitcher, when his eyes betrayed a quick moment of decision. Buechele took a step toward the pitcher, but instead threw the ball backhanded into the chest of Scott, sitting in the front row, and said to him: "Aurelio would have had it."

Several years later, I was in Chicago with some fellow Stanford alumni to catch a Cubs game at Wrigley Field. By this point, Buechele had been traded to the Cubs, though he was injured and not in the lineup for this game. Buechele was also a Stanford alum, several years behind me, and he knew some people in our group. To my surprise, he showed up at a bar just outside of Wrigley Field after the game to reunite with some of his classmates. A mutual friend introduced us, and I told him of my apprecia-

tion for his play during his six years in Texas from the closest seat in the house to his position. I revealed my favorite memory of him in a Rangers uniform—the time when he good-naturedly (albeit justifiably) bounced a ball off of Scott's chest. "That guy was in your ticket group?" bellowed Buechele. By this point, others had picked up the gist of the story and started asking, "Wait, Steve, what did you do to the guy?"

The tale then told from Buechele's own lips was even better than the one we had been telling since the incident. "OK, I'm playing for the Texas Rangers for six years," he began. "The entire time, I hear this guy yelling in this whiney voice saying 'Aurelio would have had it. Hey

Steve, play like Aurelio.' Anytime I heard this, I would ask the third base umpire, 'what does the guy look like?' The third base umpire would describe the guy: 'middle-aged, short dark hair, big ears, self-satisfied grin on his face.' So it's my last season there, and a ball bounces into foul territory, and I get ready to throw it back to the pitcher. Out of the corner of my eye I see a guy who fits the description that every American League third base umpire had given me over the years. So I take the ball and go 'boom'—right into the guy's chest. I look at him and say: 'Aurelio would have had it.'"

As laughter ensued among the group listening to this story, Buechele put his arm on my shoulder, and quietly whispered into my ear, "Did I get the right guy?"

So as you head to the ballpark this season, remember to keep it clean, keep it fun, and know that the target of your comments may very well be taking names. Better he does so with a smile on his face than otherwise. ■

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*Bob Latham is a partner at the Texas-based law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and is a former chairman of USA Rugby. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.*