

# The Mariner Muse

*Your (off)-daily source for Seattle Mariners commentary and general thoughts on baseball*



## Ichiro is Timeless...

**M**  
**M**

*...and it'll be all the good times we remember.*

**Patrick Leary**

On September 18, 2009, Ichiro hit a walk-off home run off of Mariano Rivera, the greatest closer in baseball history.

That game was brutally tense. Prime Felix Hernandez fought his way through a complete game even though he only had three strikeouts, but AJ Burnett matched him...and the Mariners' lineup at the time featured the likes of Bill Hall, Jack Hannahan and Rob "6-4-3" Johnson.

## *Happy Off-Day!*

Welcome back to another year of the Mariner Muse, where we try to return a bit of what you miss on days when the Ners don't play. For baseball is beautiful in its rhythmic repetition, its methodic frequency: a ballgame a day keeps the doctor away.

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Even so, a Mike Sweeney pinch-hit double brought Ichiro to the plate in the bottom of the ninth with two outs, and he put the first pitch he saw into the right field seats. The stadium came unglued, the players rushed onto the field, and Ichiro, just moments before jumping onto home plate and into his teammates' celebration (above), crotch-chopped like a Japanese Triple H to no one in particular.

That incredible and impossibly quirky moment is how I'll remember one of the greatest hitters to ever play the game of baseball. That, along with the thousands of slap-hits he had, his vicious arm in right field, and his occasional breaks into English, which revealed a hilarious and intelligent human being. Less so I'll remember his difficult final few years as a Mariner, where he essentially didn't speak to the media and wouldn't accept any other batting position but leadoff as his abilities waned.



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What I don't think I'll remember much about when he goes into the Hall of Fame in five-to-seven years – or even when I tell my (hypothetical) grandchildren about him – is this past month. From the moment the Mariners signed Ichiro in the midst of a firestorm of injuries in Spring Training, tension existed among fans. The general anti-Ichiro take would go something along the lines of “how can a team that claims it cares about winning devote meaningful at-bats to a nostalgia act with deeply diminished abilities?”

That opinion is both valid and reductive at once. Ichiro does not appear to be able to hit at the major league level anymore. His trademark combination of speed, a rocket arm and brilliant,

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creative bat work has deteriorated into something unrecognizable aside from his trademark mannerisms and style.

But to completely pan the Ichiro signing as a joke move from a joke organization is to misunderstand just how important Ichiro is to Seattle and the Mariners. As many have noted, Ichiro is one of the few universally beloved athletes of the 2000s, and I'm not sure the concept "universally-beloved athlete" is one that can exist in today's fractured, regional sports

society. Simply put, people love to hate players; nobody hated Ichiro.

Plus (and yes, it sounds like corporate bullshit), Ichiro's leadership and example in the clubhouse *is* valuable. It's part of why they're keeping him with the team even though he's not playing anymore.

But most of all, it was just downright cool and a little emotional to see Ichiro playing for the Mariners again. He didn't have many highlights,

## Where Are They Ner?

### Brad Wilkerson | Outfielder

**Ner in:** 2008

**Best Ner Moment:** Brad Wilkerson was one of the most insignificant players on one of the most insignificant Mariner teams of the past twenty years. He played with a nagging hamstring injury in 19 games and was released on April 30th after hitting .232 with an OPS of .652. That 2008 team won 61 games and is best remembered for marking the end of the Bill Bavasi era, when the GM was fired in June. Brad's best moment in his brief time was going 3-for-3 against Cleveland the day before he and Greg Norton were released to make room for Jeff Clement and Wladimir Balentien. The Ners would go on to lose 12 of the next 15 games.

**Where MM Gussed He Is Ner:** After a brief stint in Toronto to finish the 2008 season, Brad retired to Owensboro, known as the BBQ capital of the world, and got involved in the competitive barbecue circuit. Known for his smoked pork shoulder, Brad works tirelessly to develop the perfect rub, sauce and smoke to win the Governor's Cup at the International BBQ Festival. This past year, he placed a surprising fourth place.

**Where He Actually is Ner:** Brad actually retired to Florida (where he went to college) and was inducted into the Gators' Sports Hall of Fame in 2010. He is the head coach at King's Academy High School in West Palm Beach, and lead The Lions to the league championship in his first year as head coach. Brad enjoys golf, fishing, watching sports on TV, and spending time with his family. He was named a Kentucky Colonel in 2012, the highest honor that the Commonwealth can bestow. Good for you Brad.



but the 44-year-old man *did* legitimately rob a home run, which was amazing to watch.

Still though, the tension and anger only grew as he struggled. The real low point came when the team kept Ichiro on the roster and demoted Guillermo Heredia, who was hitting over .300 in limited action. The anger on our Twitter timeline was difficult to reconcile, as part of me still wanted Ichiro to succeed and recapture some of his magic but it became increasingly clear he would be unable to do so.

Fortunately, it appears that in an uncharacteristically Mariners fashion, the Dipoto front office actually had a plan to deal with the definite possibility that Ichiro was done. The solution arrived at is not one with much precedent, if any at all, and suggests a creative idea crafted over several discussions between Mariners officials and Ichiro's camp. It's honestly refreshing to see a Ners front office come into a potentially dangerous situation that could have legitimately alienated fans on both sides of the Ichiro spectrum, and instead handle it in a coordinated, mature and effective manner.

The best part about all of it is the discussion around the team can now stay focused on "can the team possibly chase down the Angels or the Astros?" as opposed to "when are they going to DFA the club legend who now sucks?" The theories about them keeping him around to retire during next year's opening series in Japan definitely have legs but at least for now, Dipoto and co have put the conversation to bed. And rightfully so.

Ultimately, what I hope Mariners fans begin to realize in the months and years to come is that this short episode, where some fans chose to look at one of the best players in franchise history as a waste of space, won't last. As time goes on, these brief, angry memories will fade, and Ichiro's legacy will be as the hit king, a trailblazer for Japanese baseball players, and an amazing ambassador for the game.

And of course, we'll always have that night in September, 2009, when he made the greatest closer ever look like just another guy who couldn't get Ichiro out.

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# Rotation Roundup

*Grading the Mariners' starters thus far.*

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## James Paxton: A-

It's tough to be critical at all of Paxton after his 16-K performance against Oakland last week. That was utter dominance. However, there are a couple of things that James could work on to get better. Here's where my mind is at: James Paxton has never pitched a complete game. Not only that, James Paxton has only pitched into the ninth inning *once* in his career.

The Big Maple – like Felix (see below...way below) – thinks that he is a power pitcher, and pitches that way. He never throws to try and induce bad contact, he throws to try and induce *no* contact. Yes, Paxton is a better power pitcher than Felix is, but the fact remains that there may come a time soon when we're going to need innings, not K's, out of James...and when



that day comes, I'm fearful we're going to get somewhere around 5 IP, but with 10+ strikeouts. If James is to move into the role as one of baseball's elite pitchers, he's going to have to find a way to resist trying to only make hitters look stupid, and instead make them be *useful* here and there.

## Marco Gonzales: B+



Marco Gonzales is not a stellar pitcher. But Marco Gonzales is a good pitcher. And as a 4<sup>th</sup> guy in a rotation, “good” is all we can ask from Marco. He has found a way to battle, going 6 innings in each of his past three starts, never giving up more than 4 runs. (0 in one, 2 in another, 4 in the latest). He has found a way to work his pitch count up as well, crossing the 100 mark for the first time this season in his last game. To be completely honest, I don't want Marco to change a thin – because the

bottom line is this: he keeps us in the game. His changeup is still excellent when he can get to it, and even on days when he doesn't quite have his best stuff, he alters his approach to favor lean on the one, maybe two pitches he feels confident in. I now expect 5-6 innings from Marco every start.

## Mike Leake: B

Yeah, Leake had a game recently where he gave up 5 in the first and 2 more in the second. Yeah, the only reason Leake won his last game was because the Ners put up 12 to back him up. But I'm still alright with Mike Leake – because Mike Leake is a middle of the rotation guy. I'm not expecting 16-K gems out of him like Pax, or him to feel pressure to reinvent himself like Felix. Of course not. But I don't want Mike to change anything right now. This may come as a surprise to some of you – but I like how Leake goes after batters early in counts, without fearing giving up a few runs here and there. Up until these past couple appearances, it had worked; Leake was eating innings like a machine, averaging over 6 per start. Yeah, they were rarely perfect – he'd often give up 2 or 3 – but remember, we have a good offense. Let's see how the next start goes before criticizing him for the past couple...I have a sneaking suspicion that he'll be bouncing back to his true form real quick.

## Felix Hernandez: B-

Felix just doesn't get it. He just doesn't understand that his body is different than it was 8 years ago, that his stuff is different than it was 8 years ago, and that hitters have a different approach when they face him than when they would 8 years ago. He still pitches as if he's slinging electricity up there on the mound and can fool anybody with his dazzling changeup and power fastball. He can't.



Today's hitters know this – so they approach him looking to take pitches early in the count, when Felix is trying to get ahead. This results in him either giving up dingers – like yesterday – or him falling behind. Also, Felix still thinks he's a strikeout pitcher, and therefore hates to give into people. He'd rather walk a hitter than pitch to contact. Today's hitters know this as well – so they'll wait him out if they don't see what they like early.

2018 Felix Hernandez needs to get back to what he was trying out at the beginning of the year, and reenter the Johnny Cueto School of Reinvention. What happened to the three windups we saw early this season? What happened to the low fastballs that were clearly designed to try and induce groundballs early in the count to preserve pitch count? If I could ask for anything, it would be for Felix to throw his next game with this game plan: find a way to throw changeup (which, by the way, still has great movement) to get ahead in the count against the 3-4-5 hitters, and throw the fastball – not the sinker – low and away to the other hitters to try and induce an early-count rollover. If that happens, y'all will be hearing from me on twitter because I'll be so pumped. But unfortunately, I don't think you'll be hearing from me on twitter...cause I just don't see Felix adapting.

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