

he truth about **Craig** Biggio lies somewhere in the stories the Astros tell. Where, exactly, is often hard to say. But the one about the locker cuts right to the issue. Goes like this:

Next to Biggio's locker in the Enron Field clubhouse is a vacant one, creating a little extra space for the 36-year-old second baseman. That's one of the perks he has earned after 13 years of dirty uniforms, hard slides and a kamikaze approach to baseball.

Biggio shares the extra space with first baseman Jeff Bagwell, his longtime teammate and close friend, who dresses on the other side. Assorted scraps wind up there: fan letters, spare spikes, coffee mugs, rolled-up posters—the everyday artifacts of the clubhouse.

Drayton McLane winds up there, too. The Astros owner must spend more time in his team's clubhouse than any other sports franchise owner this side of Mario Lemieux. He makes a regular foray into the locker room after home games. On most of those nights, he winds up at Biggio's and Bagwell's lockers.

McLane winds up there partly because **Biggio** and Bagwell are almost always the last two players in the clubhouse and partly because he wants to hear what they have to say.

"We just talk," McLane says. "That's what we'll do after a game at night. I'll just sit out there and talk to them and just ask them about baseball. I read the box scores, and following the games, I'll say, 'What do you think about this?' or 'What do you think about that?' I've learned a lot of baseball that way."

Then late last month, someone created a handmade nameplate and taped it over the vacant locker, where it remains. It says, "McLane."

That's meant as a joke, but some might say it illustrates the pecking order on the Astros: **Craig Biggio**, Drayton McLane, Jeff Bagwell.

Is that overstatement? Yes. But Bagwell and, even more so, **Biggio**—though it's difficult to separate the two in this context—enjoy a line of communication straight to the top that isn't equaled by other major league players, giving them more clubhouse leverage than any of their peers.

Barry Larkin of the Reds might come close. The veteran pitchers in Atlanta—Tom Glavine,

Greg Maddux, John Smoltz—filter most of the Braves' in-house issues. Tim Salmon of the Angels, Matt Williams of the Diamondbacks and the Orioles' Cal Ripken Jr. each exercise some muscle with their respective teams. Alex Rodriguez will grow into that role in Texas, the longer he's with the Rangers. But none carries the clout **Biggio** and Bagwell do with the Astros.

"Out of respect for who those two are and the roles they have on the team, from time to time I'll talk to them about players we might be thinking of acquiring," general manager Gerry Hunsicker admits.

Do Bagwell and **Biggio** have any sort of final say over personnel decisions? No.

Do they voice opinions on the front end of some of those decisions? Yes.

"If I was going to make a big investment on somebody," Bagwell reasons, "I'd want to get as much information as I possibly could. Who better to ask than the two guys who have been here the longest? I just think that's smart business."

Is that something to keep in mind if the Astros are contending in the N.L. Central Division as the trading deadline approaches? Yes.

THE RUN OF THE PLACE: Biggio does whatever it takes to win on the field. He is the same off of it.



THE

We already know **Biggio** is the most intense player in baseball, the most-often-plunked (177 HBPs—and counting), one of the most durable (one D.L. stint in 13 seasons), one of the most community-minded, one of the most affable (off the field) and flat-out one of the most talented. But most powerful? Consider another story, as told, at some length, by former Astros pitcher Mike Magnante, now a reliever with the A's:

"Russ Springer and I were the two main setup guys, and then Russ hurt his back," Magnante says, recalling his first year with the Astros, 1997, when Houston was battling Pittsburgh for first place. "With about two weeks to go in August, one of my knees swelled up. The reality was that we were limping toward September 1, when they could call up some minor leaguers to help out.

"Like I said, Russ couldn't really throw, and there were days when I couldn't do anything. But they kept putting us in games. I can remember being out there and thinking, 'Look, just get me in and get me out because this is killing me.' I was aching all over. So we kept talking about it in the pen: 'Just get us to September 1, just get us to September 1.'

"Finally, we finished a series in Chicago on August 31. It was Russ and Billy Wagner and I. We said, 'OK, we made it. We made it through. We'll have help tomorrow. We're going to be fine.' Then tomorrow comes, September 1, and they didn't call anybody up. Not a soul showed up to help, at least not out in the pen. In a word, we were pissed. Believe me, on September 1 in our little corner of the locker room, it was a very bad day.

"Biggio's locker was close to ours, so it was just a matter of time before he figured out something was messed up. None of us were hiding our emotions very well that day, so he asked us what was wrong. We told him. We didn't hold back. I remember he said, 'Don't worry about it.' And he took off. He went in and talked to somebody. I don't know who. And the next day, we had two pitchers for the pen. I don't know how he did it, but he did it."

To be fair, Hunsicker disputes Magnante's version. Former hitting coach Tom McCraw doesn't, though.

"(Biggio) has that kind of power," McCraw says. "The organization listens to him with open ears. I don't think much of anything is done there unless (Biggio and Bagwell) are consulted."

THE

There are a lot of stories about Biggio and Mitch Meluskey. Here are two:

Meluskey jumps in front of Biggio, Bagwell and other veterans waiting their turn in the batting cage—just one of an unforgivable series of gaffes by the rookie catcher. As a result, his first season in the big leagues, 1999, is even more of a hazing hell than most rookies endure, and some of it is *not* all in good fun.

Second story:

Meluskey drives in his first run as a major leaguer, the winning RBI in a game against the Cubs during the first week of the season. Local reporters gather by his locker, but Meluskey is nowhere to be found. Biggio walks past, figures out what's happening and says to the knot of reporters, "Wait here."

A moment later, he physically drags Meluskey out of the players' lounge, pushes him toward the media, then walks away, shaking his head.

"I don't know what that guy is thinking sometimes," Biggio says.

Meluskey and Biggio never reconcile. After the 2000 season, Meluskey is traded to Detroit. Is it a stretch to connect point A to point B?

Maybe. The deal was made in part because Houston needed a veteran catcher to help fix a pitching staff that went deep south last year, and the Astros got one of the best, Brad Ausmus, in return. But the point remains that any Astro crosses Biggio at his own risk. On a team as big on chemistry as the Astros are, acceptance is important. And unless you play the game the way Biggio plays it, acceptance isn't automatic.

To the dismay, sometimes, of the front office, Biggio can be less than helpful to young players who think they already have it made.

Biggio: "I've never had anything to do with running anybody out of here. That's just false. I wish I had that pull. But come on, that's kind of ridiculous. Management of an organization is going to do what it wants to do. I've never really known an organization to let a player run a club. That's totally false. There's no accuracy at all."

THE

Three offseasons ago, Biggio lobbied McLane to re-sign third baseman Ken Caminiti, a free agent who wanted to return to Houston, where he'd spent his first eight major-league seasons. The Astros already were leaning toward making an offer, but McLane had questions he wanted answered before he finalized the deal.

"I went to Craig," he says. "You know, Ken had a great career here, but he had a lot of problems, both health-wise and emotionally. So I went to Craig, and Craig and Jeff and I talked. They encouraged me. It wasn't Ken's athletic ability that I was concerned about. I just asked Craig, 'Can you help him overcome some of these problems?' And he encouraged me to sign him."

A deal was quickly struck, and Caminiti made it through a season and a half before the problems that had dogged him previously—pain killers, alcohol—finally got the better of him. He left the club in mid-June last season for rehabilitation. Now, he's apparently clean and sober but playing for the Rangers.

This is a sensitive topic, not one on which the Astros care to be forthcoming. But the point might



CHEMICAL REACTION: Biggio doesn't always extend a hand to young players. He can turn on ones who don't conform to his way.

be raised that Biggio may have protected Caminiti too much, that perhaps the third baseman's problems were hidden for too long and became worse as a result, that because of Biggio's influence, Houston was left holding the bag.

"(What) happened with me, Bidge was there to protect me," Caminiti asserts. "He was a firm believer that things were done wrong with me. And even though I did it to myself, I still think (the club) should've treated me more like a member of the family. And obviously, they didn't. I don't know exactly what Craig did. I'd just say he protected me, which was good. I needed that. I needed somebody on my side."

Biggio: "Whatever happened, I did what I felt was right. I did what I would do for a friend, and what I hope a friend would do for me. Cammy is a great friend—one of my best friends. We all do what we have to do to help a friend out. You play baseball together for 10 or 11 years. You think alike. You play alike. You just try to help a friend out."

And that's just the problem. Sometimes a player is too close to the situation. Sometimes friendship can get in the way of winning.

Nice guise

The difference between Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell, Houston's undisputed clubhouse policemen, boils down to this: good cop, bad cop. And the good cop isn't Biggio.

Where Bagwell is quiet, Biggio knows how to make his views known.

"He's not the most popular guy in that clubhouse," former teammate Ken Caminiti says, "but he's the guy who gets the stuff done that needs to get done."

On the field, Biggio is as hard-nosed as they come, and some of that might have infected his reputation.

"Before I came here, all I used to hear was what a nice guy Baggy was but that Biggio wasn't as nice," says Astros outfielder Moises Alou. "That's the word around the league, and when I came here, that's what I heard. That's what other players on other teams ask me. They hear the same thing—that Baggy is an awesome dude, but Biggio is a little different."

"But that's not the case. All I've seen since I've been here are good things about him. Everybody likes him and respects him in here." —M.K.

THE

"When I was up in the broadcasting booth, before I got the manager's job, I was very seldom watching during the times when teams would be taking infield," says Astros manager Larry Dierker. "I was either having dinner or writing stuff in my book. Somehow, I didn't realize that from the time when I played until the current time, teams had stopped taking infield every day. So for four or five days in a row that first season, Biggio would come up to me and say, 'Are we taking infield today, Skip?'"

"I'd say, 'Yeah, why not?'"

"He'd say, 'Oh, just asking.'"

"I always thought taking infield was just part of the preparation for the game. Turns out the Braves had stopped taking infield a lot, and the players noticed it. They were saying, 'Well, the Braves don't take it, and they seem to do OK. How come we have to take infield if they don't take infield? They don't prepare for the game, and they beat us every time.'"

"Of course, the honest response to that would probably be because we're not as good as the Braves, but you don't want to tell your players they're not good. Anyway, that's how I got the news on taking infield. Biggio kept asking me about it."

Did Biggio sweet-talk his manager out of much-needed work or merely keep Astros management in-tune with changing times?

Biggio: "Honestly, taking infield every day is going to kill you. I mean, you go out, you come back in, you cool down, you go back out there to take infield, you come back in again, you cool down again, and then you have to go play the game. Now we don't take infield at all. Ever."

THE

To Biggio, talk of his influence over McLane is overblown. "He's open to suggestion," Biggio says. "It's not like he's going to go out and do whatever Baggy and I suggest. But he asks what he can do to help. Sometimes you tell him, 'Yeah, go out and get me Pedro Martinez and Roger Clemens.' It's nice to have an owner where you can kind of talk things out."

TSN

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Read my lips: Lo, new taxes

The owners' proposal was 102 pages long, one for nearly every day since the baseball strike began. Players have waded through it, springing a few predictable leaks of pessimism but for the most part finding themselves on the same playing field. Federal mediator William Usery brings them back to the bargaining table Monday, and we should know after that whether there is hope for a normal season in 1995.

Players did not flatly reject the new tax proposal last week, which is much more than could be said about the previous salary-cap proposal. Although there were no definitive signs, it is possible that the two sides will look back to this round as a turning point. For the first time, there is at least a common ground on which a settlement might eventually be achieved, and a counterproposal is expected next.

Optimism is far too strong a word, especially when considering this reaction by agent Tom Reich: "It's nothing but a backdoor salary cap. It's more oppressive than the original proposal and is obviously set up for implementation purposes, not negotiations." Fortunately, most of the involved parties heeded Usery's plea for patience and restraint, few of them sharing Reich's rhetoric.

"We're not hiding the fact that we're trying to inhibit growth, large growth, in players' salaries," says management negotiator and Red Sox Owner John Harrington. "But this doesn't stop player signings. You might do it in a particular year if you think you're close enough — and that's what

drives decisions."

Owners propose to tax teams millions of dollars if their payrolls rise above \$34 million, still a world apart from the 1.6 percent tax players proposed back in September. If players reject the proposal, then the sides at least have a thread with which to work.

Owners are beginning to feel time pressure. Harrington said owners want to have a new system in place before December 7, which under the current rules is the last day to offer salary arbitration to free agents. "If they have counterproposals, the sooner the better," he says. "Even if they give us preliminary adjustments."

As examples of the new plan, Jay Buhner, who probably will summon a \$5 million-per-year contract, would cost Boston \$11 million more in taxes if the Red Sox signed him without cutting players. Jim Abbott would cost the Mets about \$3 million in taxes if he signed with them for \$5 million.

Using rough estimates, 17 teams would have paid taxes in 1994. Without the strike, Detroit reportedly would have had the highest tax at about \$46 million, approximately 80 percent of the Tigers' payroll, which owners calculated at \$58 million.

The Braves and Giants, with payrolls of about \$54 million each, would pay taxes of about \$35.6 million apiece. If the Braves wanted to sign a \$1-million shortstop and not cut any players, then they would have to pay \$2.9 million in taxes in addition to the salary.

Will it fly? Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Bill Lyon writes: "Owners being businessmen, the notion of a tax is anathema to them. That they would agree to this proposal seems to suggest, at least on the surface, the depth of their sincerity. Now, the players have to be convinced."

Bad move

Imagine moving Abraham Lincoln's birthplace from Kentucky to New York, or Graceland from Memphis to L.A., just so more people could see them. That's the unfortunate mindset of an entrepreneur who paid \$60,500 for Mickey Mantle's auctioned boyhood home and announced he will move it from Commerce, Okla., to Las Vegas or Branson, Mo.

David Drozen says he will refurbish the house and barn, relocate it and make it a museum for Mantle memorabilia. The South Quincy Street house is a block off Route 66, America's great deserted road.

"What made the idea more than a lark was the concept of moving the house," Drozen says from his California office. "I don't know how many people drive on the interstate through Commerce, but a lot more go through Vegas or Branson."

Not surprisingly, Drozen is not a huge Mantle fan. (Memo to purchaser: Visit us or your nearest library for one of several Mantle biographies.)

"Was he my idol? No," says Drozen, who produced Richard Pryor's first comedy albums. "But he's the idol of so many zillions of people — that's what makes it magical."

The most important part of the purchase is the old tin barn in the backyard. The barn (with its baseball-sized dents) is where Mantle

learned to switch-hit, standing in front of its wall as his dad and grandfather pitched to him. The house was home to the Mantles from 1935 through '44.

—MARK NEWMAN

Good move

When **Craig Biggio** was approached by the Astros after the 1991 season and asked if he would consider switching from catcher to second base, he was not completely taken with the idea. **Biggio** had been named to the '91 All-Star team as a catcher, so it wasn't as if he had been a washout at that position.

But then-Astros General Manager Bill Wood was convinced that **Biggio** would be able to better utilize his speed and quick hands if he moved to the infield. **Biggio** made the switch, and in 1994 Wood's theory proved correct. **Biggio** won the Gold Glove at second base and led the National League with 39 stolen bases, two things that likely would not have happened had he stayed behind the plate.

"My toughest decision was to move from catcher to second base and focus my attention to a new position," **Biggio** says. "The extra hours working with (infield coach) Matt (Galante) really paid off."

Biggio and first baseman Jeff Bagwell became the first Astros to win a Gold Glove since outfielder Cesar Cedeno in 1976. Ironically, both Bagwell and **Biggio** changed



Switch hit: **Biggio** is equipped to play second, too.

positions after their professional careers began. Bagwell started as a third baseman. Just as **Biggio** was helped by the retirement of Ryne Sandberg, so was Bagwell helped by the departure of Will Clark to the American League. THE SPORTING NEWS determines the Gold Glove and Silver Slugger winners on a vote of major league managers and coaches.

Bagwell, who also was THE SPORTING NEWS Player of the Year, says, "Winning this award means a lot because you're getting recognition for being a complete player."

—NEIL KOHLFELD

Possible move

Pete Rose, banished from baseball by former commis-

sioner Bart Giamatti for illegal gambling in 1989, plans to apply for reinstatement when baseball "gets its house in order."

"Right now, (acting Commissioner) Bud Selig's got enough on his mind without getting a letter from me," says Rose, baseball's all-time hits leader with 4,256. "But when the strike is over, and they name a commissioner, I'll let a little time pass and do it."

"Every day that goes by is a plus for me," said Rose, 53. "Giamatti told me to reconfigure my life: no more illegal gambling and to be more selective with my friends. I've complied."

Rose's nightly radio show is syndicated in 140 markets by the SportsFan Radio Network, and if you listen then you know he still is a point-spread expert. Rose should not be reinstated until he sincerely admits what he did, shows remorse and severs all ties to the point-spread world.

Less Harry

Broadcaster Harry Caray will reduce his schedule to a handful of road trips but will call all Cubs home games in 1995. He plans to go on the season-opening swing to Cincinnati and New York, do the two series in St. Louis, where he grew up and did Cardinals play-by-play for 25 years, and make one stop in Miami to thank doctors who helped him through a mid-season heart problem.

—JOE GODDARD

AROUND THE BASES

Never thought we'd say it, but here's one reason to hope the strike will last forever: If baseball is played in 1995, there will be a new look at Shea Stadium — advertising behind the plate. . . . The Angels are confident enough in Jim Edmonds that they are shopping center fielder Chad Curtis, who struggled in 1994 after signing a three-year, \$3.5-million contract. But their efforts to slash salary apparently do not include dealing lefthander Chuck Finley. The Cardinals, who intend to trade one of their four outfielders for a starting pitcher, were told he wasn't available. Brian Jordan won't be one of the outfielders to go; he can return to the NFL.



Screen test: The Cardinals will play Jordan before they lose him to the NFL.

after next season and the Cardinals are going to see if he can play. . . . The Reds are interested in Terry Mulholland, Pete Smith and Mark Gubicza, and they were expected to sign one of them this week. . . . The Phillies are closing in on a deal to re-sign Norm Charlton, who would get a very low base salary but could earn \$2 million-plus if healthy.

The goal of most teams is to get off to a fast start once the season begins. Thanks to a favorable schedule, the Indians will have the opportunity to do just that if play starts on time in 1995.

Cleveland would play its 24 April games against clubs from the relatively weak American League West. The Indians were 19-9 against the Angels, Athletics, Rangers and Mariners last season. . . .

The Orioles announced last week that they are raising ticket prices on most of the seats at Camden Yards; some as much as \$5. The club explained to fans in full-page newspaper ads that the price of the team (\$173 million), the cost of free agent players and strike related losses contributed to the decision to hike the cost of seats. . . . Pitchers Todd Stottlemyre and Dave Stewart, both free agents, were cleared last week of any wrongdoing in a Tampa case. Charges had included battery on a police officer, stemming from an incident outside a nightclub last February. The trial lasted seven days, but the jury deliberated for only 45 minutes before finding the pair not guilty. "It's been a living hell for myself, my wife and my family," Stottlemyre says of the last nine months. Says Stewart: "Justice does work."