



## Insider

Peter Schmuck

# Piazza lifts Mets' standing in the city, wild-card race

**D**on't kid yourselves. The deal that put superstar **Mike Piazza** in New York was not—first and foremost—a sign that the Mets are ready to challenge Atlanta for control of the N.L. East.

They aren't. The **Piazza** deal certainly will make the Mets a more formidable contender. It might even make them a wild-card team. But it does not put them on par with the runaway Braves, and no one in the Mets' front office believed it would.

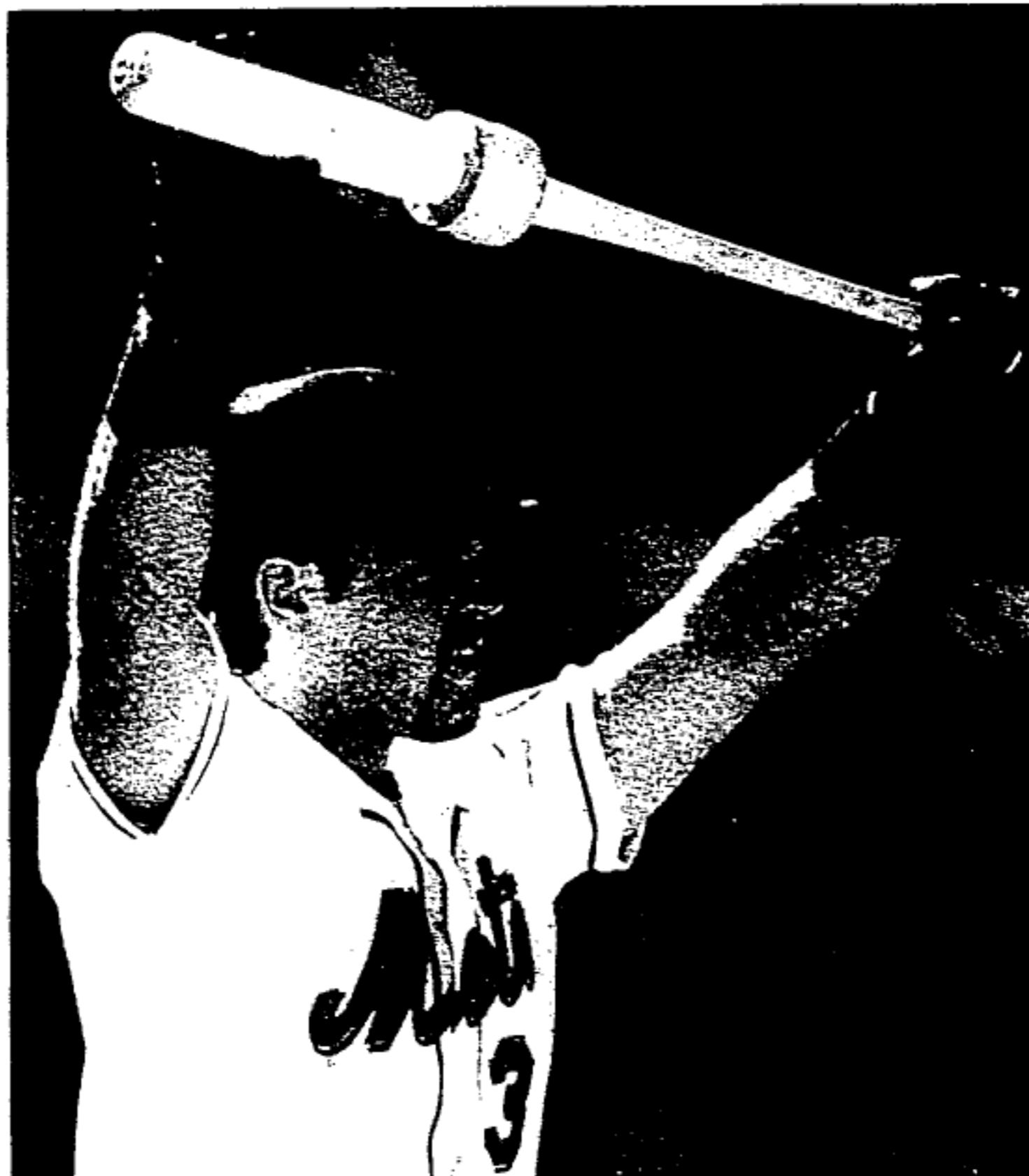
This trade was made because the Mets were losing New York.

It's tough enough competing for local attention with the tradition-heavy Yankees under the best of circumstances, but this season has to be a nightmare for the Mets' marketing department. The Yankees are off to their best start in 40 years, and the Mets have little chance of ever seeing the top of the N.L. East standings.

**Piazza** is going to make a big competitive difference, but the deal probably would not have been made for solely competitive reasons. The Mets needed to wrest the back pages of the New York tabloids away from the Yankees, and they probably aren't finished.

The day after the Mets acquired **Piazza**, there were more headlines and additional trade speculation, this time involving the beleaguered Orioles. The Mets were discussing a deal that would send infielder Carlos Baerga to the Orioles for lame-duck second baseman Roberto Alomar, a deal that might be expanded to include first baseman John Olerud and pitcher Dave Mlicki for power-hitting first baseman Rafael Palmeiro.

If that deal goes down, the Mets might start resembling last year's Marlins. They still wouldn't figure to overtake the Braves, who have built a substantial lead in the division and have the pitching to make it stand up against anyone, but



MARK LENIHAN / AP

**NEW YORK, NEW YORK: All around the town, **Piazza** could spur renewed interest in the Mets.**

the Mets likely would emerge as favorites in the wild-card race and, well, the Marlins have proved that you can get there from there.

Subway Series, anyone?

Alomar, if properly motivated, could have as significant an impact on the Mets as **Piazza**. Palmeiro, if he can be persuaded to waive a limited, no-trade clause in his contract, would give New York one of the most power-packed lineups in the National League.

The arrival of **Piazza** had an immediate impact on attendance. The Mets were averaging only

18,000-plus per home date before the trade, but they drew 32,908 for his Mets debut and sold approximately 13,000 tickets for the game after the deal was announced. That is exactly the reaction that Mets co-owners Fred Wilpon and Nelson Doubleday wanted when they pushed general manager Steve Phillips to make the deal that sent top pitching prospect Ed Yarnall, outfielder Preston Wilson and a player to be named (presumably pitcher Geoff Goetz, the team's 1997 first-round draft choice) to the Marlins.

"This town is ready and waiting for Mike," Wilpon says. "They love him already. **Mike Piazza** is the kind of player, like Willie Mays, like Mickey Mantle, the kind of player that will take to this town. He's a New York kind of guy."

It was an aggressive move and also a pre-emptive strike. The Yankees were not believed to be seriously interested in acquiring **Piazza**—and upsetting a near-perfect team chemistry—but the Mets prevented the possibility of being further upstaged by unpredictable Yankees owner George Steinbrenner.

Now, for the hard part. The Mets have given up so much young talent to acquire **Piazza** that they almost have to sign him to a long-term contract, which puts him back in position to become baseball's first \$100 million player. Wilpon didn't exactly cover his hand when he compared **Piazza** to Mays and Mantle, so it appears that the Mets are willing to set a new salary standard.

If they do, the focus will shift to the future of injured catcher Todd Hundley, who is expected back from elbow surgery in the next couple of months.

**Piazza** could play first base, but he would not be a \$100 million player at a position that is crowded with big-time run producers. Hundley could play there—if the Mets move Olerud—but like **Piazza**, he does not want to surrender his status as one of the best-hitting catchers in the game.

Phillips reportedly assured Hundley he was not going to be replaced as catcher—before Wilpon and Doubleday came out publicly in favor of a **Piazza** deal. Now, it appears Hundley will not have a full-time catching job to come back to, which could lead to more Mets trade speculation.

## Budig steps up

American League president Gene Budig got tough after the ugly brawl that marred the opener of last week's series between the Orioles and Yankees at Yankee Stadium, proving that he learned something from the Roberto Alomar fiasco in September 1996.

The eight-game suspension he levied against Orioles reliever Armando Benitez was three games longer than Alomar got for spitting in the face of umpire John Hirschbeck. That might not seem fair—considering that there was no way to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Benitez drilled Tino Martinez intentionally—but that wasn't the issue.

Budig's actions made a strong statement. And this time he kept himself and the league out of the line of fire. **TSN**

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## Much ado about J.D. Drew

Agent Scott Boras apparently will continue his crusade to overturn the amateur draft, threatening to take Major League Baseball to court to get 1997 top draft choice J.D. Drew declared a free agent.

That's just what baseball needs, of course, another self-interested attempt to put more of the game at the mercy of greedy agents and lawyers. The draft might be the only thing still standing in the way of the total Balkanization of the large- and small-revenue clubs.

If the Phillies had offered Drew \$25,000 and said take it or leave it, there might be a principle involved here, but he turned down a \$2.6 million bonus and a \$6 million package in an ill-advised attempt to help Boras make the world safer for player agents.

Don't be fooled by the self-serving free-market rhetoric. It was bad for the kid and bad for the game.



ANDY KING / ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS

**DREW: He seems a pawn in a crusade to end the draft.**