



## Dave Kindred

# Like talking to a wall

**M**aybe we'll talk to the Green Monster, the high left field wall at Fenway Park. After 87 years sharing space with Ted Williams, Carl Yastrzemski and now Troy O'Leary,

the mighty fence is headed for obsolescence. A new Fenway will be built across the street. They'll leave the Green Monster standing to remind us of what once was. So maybe we'll pay our respects and see what the old fella has to say.

During the '75 World Series, the monster asked Boston columnist Ray Fitzgerald, "Who's pitching for the Reds tomorrow?" When Fitz answered, "Billingham," the monster said, "Yummy."

Or maybe talking to a wall is a silly idea. Better to talk to a superstar, the A.L.'s leading hitter, Red Sox shortstop **Nomar Garciaparra**. What a season: hitting over .350, on his way to 30 home runs with more than 100 RBIs. Besides, we remember him from his teenage years as a scrawny 150-pounder at Georgia Tech, a kid with the quickest bat in Atlanta since Hank Aaron's.

Garciaparra, 26, now weighs 185, the first thing we notice as he rips batting-practice drives off the Green Monster. He still has the quick bat, only now he moves it with the forearms, wrists and legs of a man who has remade his body for speed, strength and agility.

Under the instruction of trainers specializing in high-performance athletes, **Garciaparra** committed himself to diet and workout regimens that have helped put him in the A-Rod/Jeter/Nomar debate about baseball's best shortstop.

So we're watching **Garciaparra** when Boston Globe baseball man Gordon Edes says, "See that? Every time, he does that." Garciaparra had dropped a bat on the grass. "Every time, the trademark up. He's got a thousand of those things he does, the same way every time. Watch him on the dugout steps tonight. Both feet on each step every time."

Good. We'll talk to **Nomar** about his sculpted body, his fetishes, the Red Sox's playoff chances, and maybe get a hitter's view of how unhittable Pedro Martinez has been this season. So when batting practice ends, we trot along to catch **Garciaparra**. It's an hour and a half before the first pitch. But no conversation is possible.

"I've gotta get ready for the game," **Garciaparra** says. We say, "Uh, well ..."

"I do these things before batting practice."

Professional journalists adjust and improvise. We decide to talk to catcher Jason Varitek, only to be told by a public relations person, "Not now. He's focusing." The P.R. person does a tomahawk-slash thing with his hand, signifying Varitek's unvarying focus on the game to start any hour now.

Jimmy Williams, the Boston manager, walks by. We follow. "Got a minute, Jimmy?" The skipper walks behind



**NOMAR DEBATE:** Garciaparra's commitment to diet and workout regimens has vaulted him into a class with Jeter and Rodriguez.

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his office desk and does not sit down. He stands there, leaning, eyes locked on, unblinking. "So, Jimmy," we say, "you guys are going good now."

"Got a ways to go," he says.

Stops, stares.

"Jimmy, you worked with the Braves and their great pitching, how does Martinez stack up alongside those guys?"

"His numbers reflect everything he's done. He's having a special, special year."

Stops, not an eyelash moving.

We write down those words while trying to dream up a question that comes out something like, "That **Nomar**, he's pretty good, eh?"

"He's a baseball player."

We nod. There is a great silence in the room until we frame another brilliant question, which is, "By that, you mean ...?"

"He's a throwback."

"In what way?"

"You play the way you practice. That's the way he plays."

"Not many guys do that these days, eh?"

"Not saying that."

Beaten, bloodied and bowed, we put away the notebooks. As we move toward the office door, we hear the skipper say, "Didn't give you much, did I?" Here something happens to Jimmy Williams' face that we might describe as almost a smile if we thought the manager were capable of smiling so near to October.

Back down 10 wooden steps chewed to splinters by decades of spikes, through a dim tunnel with water dripping down concrete walls, we go back to the Red Sox dugout where, amazingly, Martinez is doing a one-on-one interview with a man who wants to know every thought Pedro has ever had. Pedro, bless him, answers every

question.

So we wait our turn. But when Pedro is done with his autobiography, he has time only to say, "**Nomar**, he's greater and greater every day. Without **Nomar**, I do not know where our team would be."

We have had better days. But we watch closely during the game and, it's true, Garciaparra, every inning, puts both feet on each step of the dugout as he enters and leaves. STOP THE PRESSES, WE HAVE A SCOOP!

Then we bump into the sporting author, John Feinstein, who recognizes a sad case of self-pity and throws a life preserver our way. He tells of the Jewish Red Sox fan who goes to his rabbi before Rosh Hashanah and says, "Rabbi, I have a problem. I know it's Rosh Hashanah, but it's the Yankees-Red Sox, and Pedro is pitching."

"It's not such a problem," the rabbi says. "That's why God invented VCRs."

Causing the Red Sox fan to say, "You mean, I can tape the Rosh Hashanah services?"

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Dave Kindred is a contributing writer for THE SPORTING NEWS. Look for additional commentary from Dave weekdays at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com) and on AOL (keyword: TSN).



Steve Marantz

## It's a Golden Age at short

**A**wonderful phenomenon is overtaking baseball, obscured perhaps by the clanging of home runs off upper-deck seats, but no less fascinating. The game is enjoying a Golden Age

of shortstops, a period unsurpassed in history for fine shortstop play.

If anybody doubts this they need only glance at who did not—repeat, did not—make the American League All-Star team: **Nomar Garciaparra**. When an All-Star team does not have room for **Garciaparra**, there simply is no conclusion other than this is the greatest collection of shortstops to dazzle an era.

In his second year, the Red Sox shortstop is better than he was in winning the 1997 A.L. Rookie of the Year Award with 30 home runs, a league-leading 209 hits and a .306 average. His glove is spectacular if occasionally careless. He brings a ferocious intensity to every minute of every game, and is the club's most important player, Pedro Martinez and Mo Vaughn notwithstanding. I would bet my daughter's college fund that barring injury **Garciaparra** is a Hall of Famer. **Garciaparra** became a rarity on July 23, a shortstop batting cleanup. He hit .390 over the next 10 games, with five home runs and 17 RBIs, and through last Saturday was hitting .325, with 22 homers and 87 RBIs.

Yet, Indians manager Mike Hargrove was not wrong in leaving **Garciaparra** off the All-Star squad. How can you fault Hargrove's selections of Derek Jeter and Omar Vizquel to back up the fans' choice, Alex Rodriguez? Jeter is hitting .320, with only six errors in 101 games, and is being mentioned as an MVP candidate on baseball's best team, the Yankees. Vizquel, whom Hargrove has the privilege of watching daily, is the game's premier defensive shortstop. A five-time Gold Glove winner, he has made three errors since August 19, 1997. Moreover, Vizquel is having his best offensive season, hitting .279. Jeter and Vizquel also look like Hall of Famers to me, although Vizquel has a bias to overcome in being perceived as a defensive shortstop, an injustice to his situational hitting skill...

Most remarkable about **Garciaparra**, Jeter and Vizquel is that they may never get elected to an All-Star team because of Rodriguez, who easily outdistanced them in the voting. It seemed as if Rodriguez set an impossible standard in '96 (.358, 36 HR, 123 RBIs), but he may actually surpass it this summer. Rodriguez has the power figures of a first baseman (35 HR, 95 RBIs entering the week) and, with 33 stolen bases, is on pace to join Jose Canseco and Barry Bonds as the third 40-40 player. Rodriguez is in the **Garciaparra** mold as a fielder, spectacular but careless. Based on his first full 2½ seasons, Rodriguez should be writing his Hall acceptance speech.

The day the final All-Star vote tallies were announced I congratulated Rodriguez at the Kingdome and asked him three questions: 1) why he won; 2) if shortstop is the most competitive position in the voting; and 3) if this is the best era in history for shortstops. His short answers were 1) he



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN  
**SHADES OF SMITH:** In this Golden Age of shortstops, Vizquel owns more Gold Gloves than any of them—5.

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isn't sure why, because 56 percent of the ballots are cast by kids, and who can figure out kids; 2) no, first base is more fiercely contested; and 3) yes, he believes this is the Golden Age of shortstops.

"There's no way you can compare other eras," Rodriguez says. "There are so many good ones, from (Rey) Ordonez to (Edgar) Renteria to (Mark) Grudzielanek all the way to (Gary) DiSarcina. The list goes on and on. It's unbelievable."

Generational loyalty is admirable, but for the sake of fairness, let's give other eras their due. There are 19 shortstops in the Hall of Fame, 17 of whom played primarily in the 20th century, in overlapping eras. Honus Wagner and Joe Tinker graced the first two decades, Rabbit Maranville, Dave Bancroft and Joe Sewell the second and third decades. Travis Jackson, Leo Durocher and Joe Cronin played in the '20s, '30s and '40s; Luke Appling, Arky Vaughn and Lou Boudreau primarily in the '30s and '40s. Pee Wee Reese and Phil Rizzuto starred in the '40s and '50s, while Ernie Banks and Luis Aparicio played primarily in the '50s and '60s.

It's not that none of them was as good as Rodriguez, Jeter, **Garciaparra** and Vizquel. It's just that no four who were as good played simultaneously. Cronin, Appling and Vaughn were a fine offensive trio, but their fourth was Durocher, whose .247 batting and .961 fielding average puts him a cut below Vizquel. (Durocher played 17 years in the majors, but his entry to the Hall was based on his 2,008 victories as a manager.) Boudreau, Reese and Rizzuto couldn't hit like Rodriguez, Jeter and **Garciaparra**.

You have to go to the 1970s, '80s and early '90s to find a comparable foursome, in Robin Yount, Alan Trammell, Ozzie Smith and Cal Ripken. Yount, Smith and Ripken are certain Hall of Famers, while Trammell is possible. The catch is that Yount moved to center field only a few years after Ripken came on the scene. Smith and Vizquel are similar players, which is a strong argument for Vizquel's Hall candidacy, provided he can keep it up. Ripken's power almost matches Rodriguez's. But **Garciaparra** and Jeter, at this stage, project as better hitters than Trammell. (Barry Larkin is a cut below Hall caliber, a Dick Groat with more power.)

The fly in this ointment is the word "project." Rodriguez, Jeter and **Garciaparra** still are young. Some, of the middle-aged persuasion, in deference to stars of their youth, hesitate to canonize this era prematurely.

"Let's wait and see if they can do it year in year out," Rockies manager Don Baylor says. "This is a special group that looks like it could play in any era. But let's give them some time."

Fair enough. We should give them as much time as they'd like. My wish is that the Golden Age of shortstops be a long one.

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Steve Marantz is a senior writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.

## KEN ROSENTHAL

kenrosenthal@sportingnews.com

## SPEED READS

■ Major League Baseball should get its act together and relocate the Expos to D.C. next season, even if it means settling a lawsuit with the team's former minority owners who plan to contest a move in court. The Expos' temporary home at Washington's R.F.K. Stadium would be in less than ideal condition, but keeping them in Montreal would be an embarrassment.

■ Giants manager Dusty Baker is unlikely to leave his Bay Area comfort zone, but he's in an enviable position, with his contract set to expire. At least a half-dozen managerial changes are expected, and Baker could emerge as a viable option for the Cubs, Mets and Red Sox, not to mention the Expos if they move.

■ If shortstop Alex Rodriguez of the last-place Rangers is a viable MVP candidate by virtue of his stats, then Indians first baseman Jim Thome deserves top-five consideration. Thome plays a less significant defensive position but leads the league in on-base/slugging percentage despite hitting in a much weaker lineup.

# A sacrifice would let the Red Sox fly

**T**he idea is no more blasphemous than the Mariners trading first Randy Johnson, then Ken Griffey Jr., and allowing Alex Rodriguez to leave as a free agent. It doesn't even qualify as especially outrageous for a franchise that sold the greatest hitter of all time, Babe Ruth, and lost arguably the greatest pitcher, Roger Clemens.

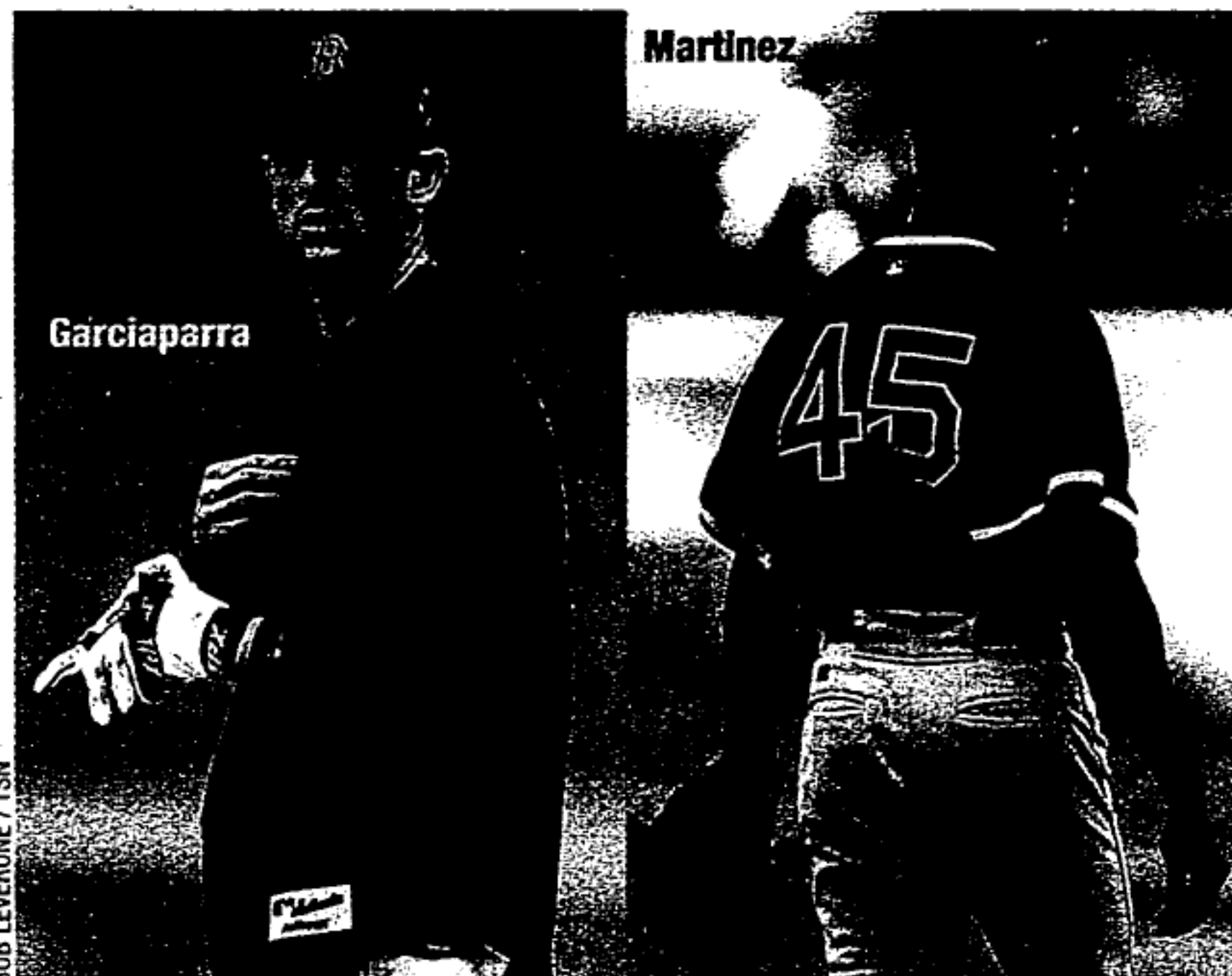
Buckle up, New England: The Red Sox should trade **Nomar Garciaparra** or Pedro Martinez.

Outside-the-box thinking is necessary for a team that last won the World Series 84 years ago and is about to miss the postseason for the third straight season, despite fielding the game's second-highest payroll for the past two campaigns.

The Sox can keep trying to max out, knowing they've got control of **Garciaparra**, their All-Star shortstop, and Martinez, a three-time Cy Young winner, through 2004. Or they can begin the retooling process that the previous regime deferred in its shortsighted attempt to win a title before the end of the 68-year Yawkey ownership.

Trading **Garciaparra**, in particular, seems unimaginable—he's 29, homegrown and an elite middle-of-the-diamond performer. Martinez, who turns 31 in October, is even rarer, one of the most dominant pitchers of his generation. But even with both players healthy for most of the season, the Sox were cooked by early September.

The obstacles to a deal would be significant. Martinez will gain no-trade rights at the end of the season. His contract includes a \$17.5 million option for 2004. Any team that acquires him or **Garciaparra** would, for all practical purposes, need to renegotiate immediately. But the Sox can't let themselves be deterred. Nor can they consider any player untouchable when they need to make their payroll more flexible and to inject



young talent.

Rather than wait too long, as the Phillies did with Scott Rolen, the Red Sox should act as quickly as possible. If, for example, the Diamondbacks wanted Martinez, the Red Sox could demand closer Byung-Hyun Kim, first base prospect Lyle Overbay and two top pitching prospects. If, say, the Braves wanted **Garciaparra**, the Sox could demand left-hander Damian Moss, reliever Tim Lincecum and top shortstop prospect Wilson Betemit.

Former Sox CEO John Harrington and G.M. Dan Duquette left the new owners not only with a meager farm system but a horrendous albatross: Manny Ramirez's eight-year, \$160 million contract. Ideally, the Sox would re-sign **Garciaparra** and Martinez and trade the one-dimensional, flighty Ramirez. Alas, Ramirez's contract is immovable, and painful decisions await. Pitcher Derek Lowe and catcher Jason Varitek also are eligible for free agency in '04.

It's not just the impending luxury tax that should give the Sox pause; paying Martinez, **Garciaparra** and Ramirez nearly \$60 million annually would be ill-advised under any labor agreement. Principal owner John Henry comes from the low-revenue Marlins, club president Larry Lucchino from the low-revenue Padres. They know that the cycle needs to be

reversed, that the Sox need to trade for prospects instead of bartering them for veterans.

Red Sox fans are understandably impatient, but the current plan isn't working. No matter how much the Sox spend—and they've already guaranteed nearly \$70 million to eight players for next season—they can't keep pace with the Yankees. When does it end? Teams that try to win every year often don't win any year. And the Red Sox are facing increasingly limited resources because of their lack of a new ballpark and increased revenue sharing.

A new vision is required,

along with a fearless general manager. Interim G.M. Mike Port is capable, but maybe the Sox should just buy Billy Beane from the A's—it wouldn't count against their luxury-tax threshold, and Beane would prove a better investment than say, free-agent outfielder Cliff Floyd. More realistically, Beane is under contract through 2008 and can escape only if the A's are sold. Blue Jays G.M. and Beane protégé J.P. Ricciardi is more immediately available, as is Giants G.M. Brian Sabean.

The new general manager must be shrewd enough to acquire a quality return for **Garciaparra** or Martinez and credible enough to withstand the inevitable public-relations fallout. Two general managers who spoke on condition of anonymity said they would rather deal Martinez, reasoning that the Sox could rebuild their rotation around Lowe. But Martinez's trade value might diminish if injuries limit him to fewer than 30 starts for the third straight season.

**Garciaparra** would be equally difficult to replace, but he, too, should not be viewed as invulnerable. He's coming off wrist surgery that forced him to miss nearly all of 2001, and his .879 on-base/slugging percentage would be his lowest for a full season since he was Rookie of the Year in 1997. His 22 errors are the most of any A.L. shortstop. And he

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has become increasingly cranky, whining about labor-related issues and sniping at critics who question his penchant for swinging at the first pitch.

Still, the Red Sox need not justify a trade by tearing down **Garciparra** and Martinez the way they did Clemens and Mo Vaughn. The only reason to move a superstar is to acquire younger, healthier, less expensive players and improve the team's chances long-term.

The Red Sox are like an aging beauty who keeps reapplying makeup to preserve her appearance. Re-signing both Martinez and **Garciparra** wouldn't erase the underlying wrinkles and blemishes, which grow more pronounced every season: No farm system. No payroll flexibility. No world championships since 1918. **TSN**

**Q** Love trivia but not sure of the answers? Here's the answer: Play TSN's Trivia Shootout. First-time players get 10 games for \$10 at <http://trivia.sportingnews.com>.

## M@IL BONDING

KEN ROSENTHAL ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

*The worldwide draft could improve competitive balance. A cap on draft bonuses also would help. When will the restructured draft be implemented?*

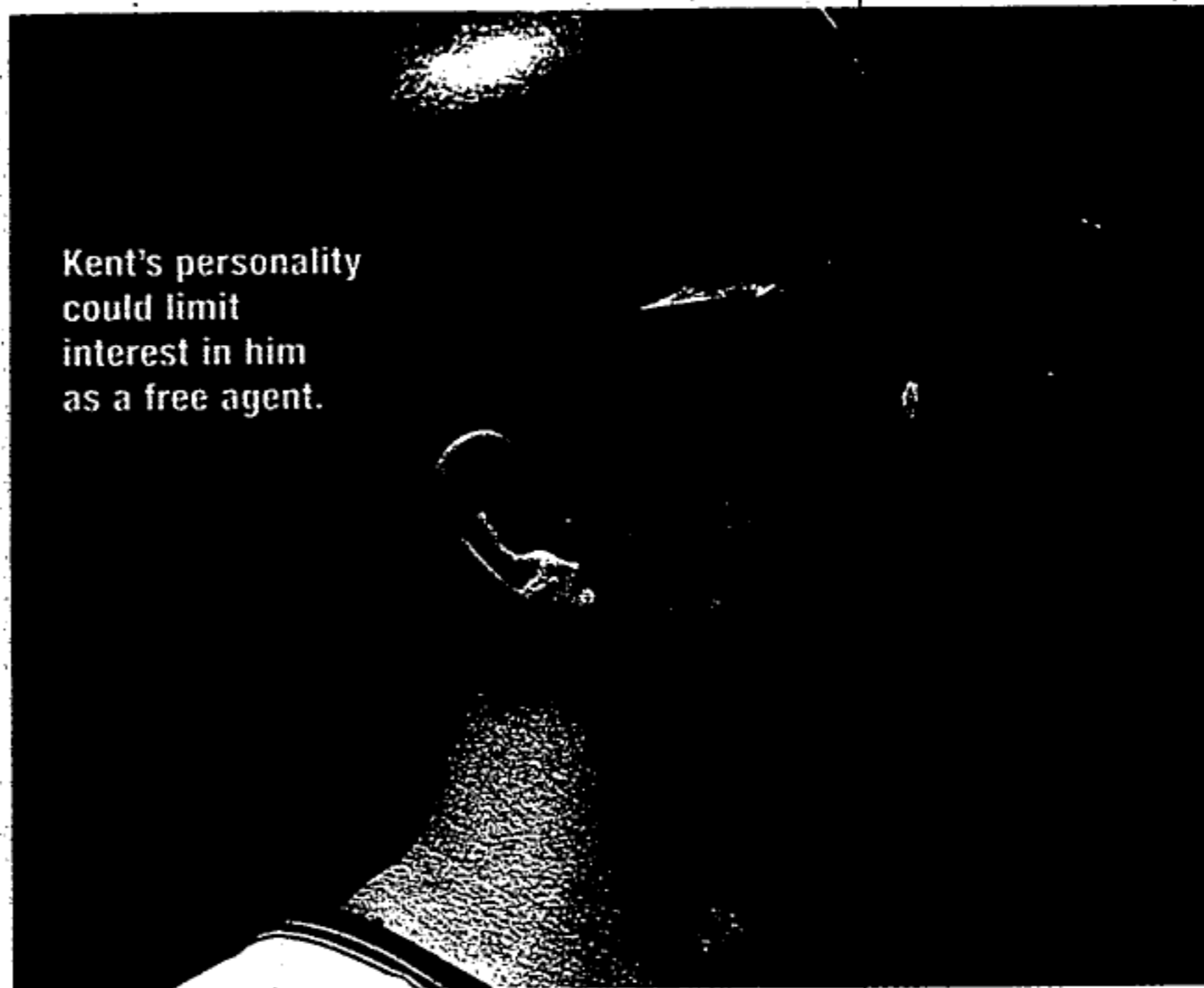
*Stephen Leathers, Birmingham, Ala.*

Stephen: The players and owners agreed to a worldwide draft and formed a committee to work out the details. Alas, the draft faces so many obstacles, it might never happen.

According to one agent, the draft would force changes in agreements with nations that support their own professional leagues, most notably Japan, Korea and Taiwan. If major league teams began drafting players from those countries, the foreign clubs might respond by raiding U.S. players, creating chaos.

The camps that many teams operate for young players in Latin American countries represent another potential impediment. Teams would be reluctant to close them, but ideally the camps would be industry-run, giving low-revenue clubs a chance to scout on a level playing field.

A cap on amateur bonuses is also not certain. The players union opposes all caps and maintains a say in draft rules through the committee. Even if a cap became part of the agreement, an agent likely would challenge it in court.



Kent's personality could limit interest in him as a free agent.

DILIP VISHWANATH / TSN

The Yankees could offer to televise Tokyo Giants games on their YES network to dissuade Japan's most storied franchise from trying to retain OF **Hideki Matsui**, but the bidding for the free-agent slugger also is expected to include the Mariners, Dodgers and Braves. A scout who recently visited Japan says Matsui offers 20- to 30-home run potential and enough speed to beat out a ground ball in the hole. Scouts and executives aren't convinced he can play center field, but Matsui could fill the left field void for the Yankees or Mariners or force the move of Braves LF **Chipper Jones** to first base. ... Giants 2B **Jeff Kent** could be this year's **Bret Boone**, drawing scant free-agent interest after a monster season. Kent, 34, eventually figures to move to first base, and his offensive production at that position would not be as exceptional as it is at second. Kent's quirky personality also could limit his market. The Braves, for example, need to upgrade at second but probably would prefer a better defender and a player who could better co-exist with RF **Gary Sheffield**—a good friend of Kent's rival, LF **Barry Bonds**. ... The Dodgers had interest in 3B **Bill Mueller** in mid-July but backed off because Mueller did not appear sufficiently recovered from his broken left kneecap. Now, after getting traded by the Cubs, Mueller could help the Giants catch the

Dodgers for the wild card. ... OK, **Alex Rodriguez**, set the record straight: Do you want to be traded to

the Mets? "No way," says Rodriguez, the Rangers shortstop who has a blanket no-trade clause. "I'm very happy here. I'm very happy about where I think our team is going in the future."

... Rodriguez raves about A's SS **Miguel Tejada**, perhaps his biggest challenger for MVP. "When they would talk about the top three shortstops, I would always laugh," Rodriguez says, referring to himself, **Derek Jeter** and **Nomar Garciaparra**. "There were four. I've always said Tejada is one of the most underrated

players in the game." ... The Blue Jays, committed to **Chris Woodward** at shortstop, are likely to trade SS prospect **Felipe Lopez** for pitching. The Orioles, White Sox, Braves and Padres are among teams that likely would show interest. Lopez, 22, remains an intriguing player, a switch hitter who likely will hit for power. ... White Sox IF **D'Angelo Jimenez**, acquired from the Padres in July, could get playing time at three infield positions next season. "His instincts and actions are such that there's no doubt in my mind that he can play shortstop every day," White Sox G.M. **Ken Williams** says. Another general manager says of Jimenez, "I think San Diego quit on him way too early." ... The case for Braves 3B **Vinny Castilla** as the worst free-agent signing of the year doesn't simply include his long stretch without a home run. Castilla is next-to-last in the N.L. in on-base percentage, last in percentage of pitches taken and last in pitches seen per plate appearance. ... It's no coincidence the Diamondbacks' struggles coincided with the absence of injured IF **Craig Counsell**. "They miss him big-time," one executive says. "He gets big two-out hits, makes diving plays, takes the extra base, lays down the big bunt to start a rally in the eighth inning." Angels SS **David Eckstein** does all of those things, too. "He's their Counsell," the executive says.