

COVER STORY

Clock Strikes Griffey Time

Seattle Rookie, Cincy Vet Record a Father-Son First

By JIM STREET

SEATTLE—A 19-year-old center fielder with major league bloodlines and an abundance of talent threw the Seattle Mariners' short-range plans off course this spring.

Ken Griffey Jr. was so far ahead of schedule that the Mariners had to find a place for him in their lineup at least one year sooner than expected.

When Griffey reported to training camp in Tempe, Ariz., barely three months after his 19th birthday, he was given only an outside chance, at best, of earning a spot on the 24-man roster for the Mariners' season opener.

Griffey wanted to make the major league roster, but he wanted to make it more for his father—Ken Griffey Sr. of the Cincinnati Reds—than for himself.

"My dad said this probably is going to be his last season and he wants us to be the first father-son combination to play in the big leagues at the same time," young Griffey said at the beginning of spring training. "That would make him happy."

When the Mariners announced March 29 that Ken Jr. would be their starting center fielder against the Oakland A's in the Kingdome on April 3 and Ken Sr. signed a one-year, \$320,000 contract with the Reds the following day, there were smiles all around the country.

Fathers and sons have been in spring training at the same time, but never in the regular season. In the spring of 1986, for example, Hal McRae—then entering his final full season as a designated hitter for the Kansas City Royals—and his son, Brian, a shortstop who had been drafted by the Royals a year earlier, made history when they became the first father-son combination as teammates in a major league camp. But Brian was demoted quickly and the McRaes never played together in the majors.

Happiness, the word mentioned by young Griffey, is something foreign to the Mariners, who have had losing records in each of their 12 seasons. The team was badly in need of a marquee player and an infusion of new blood, but Griffey did not appear to be their man when spring training began.

The organization's thinking was that Griffey would start the season at Williamsport (Eastern) or Calgary (Pacific Coast). Griffey had never played above Double A—and he had appeared in only 17 games at that level.

Everyone at the Mariners' camp could tell just by watching Griffey in action that major league stardom was on the horizon. At the same time, Manager Jim Lefebvre and his coaches were concerned that rushing Griffey to the big leagues might be disastrous. The franchise had already had its share of disasters and no one wanted to be responsible if Griffey went into

a slump and his confidence fell to the point that he could never recover.

"If he's going to break (camp) with us," Lefebvre said midway through spring training, "he is going to play. He's not going to sit around. When he becomes part of our lineup, I want him to be there for 20 years. If we rush him, it could set him back a couple of years."

But Griffey rushed himself into the picture and the outlook for the Mariners' outfield changed almost overnight. In his pre-spring training prospectus, Lefebvre didn't even mention Griffey's name among those battling for outfield positions.

By the time the Cactus League schedule began, Griffey's status already was on the rise. And there was no stopping him.

Lefebvre had decided to play the youngster almost every game.

"I want to take a good look at him," he said. "We'll see how it goes."

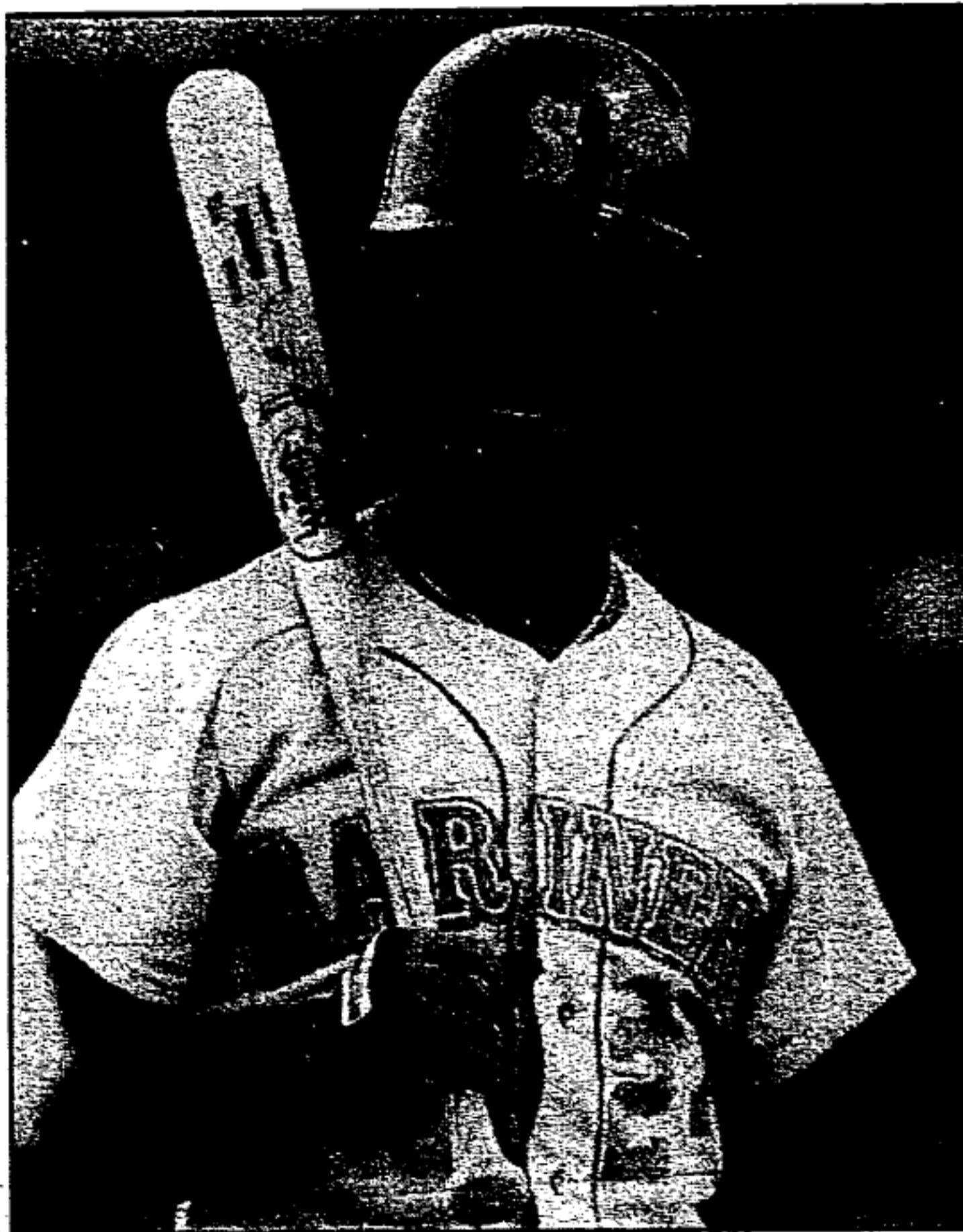
It went better than anyone expected. Even Griffey.

"I didn't expect to be playing this well," he said when he was midway through a 15-game hitting streak that was the longest in the Mariners' history for spring training.

And when the Cactus League pitching got better, so did Griffey's hitting. Skeptics were waiting for him to be overmatched, but he went through a three-week stretch in which he never went more than four at-bats without a hit.

Oh, Griffey incurred a few bumps along the road. Take, for example, his first day in camp.

While Griffey was playing catch, a baseball glanced off the tip of his glove and caromed flush into his right eye. That was the end of that day's workout.



Ken Griffey Jr. is the younger half of what will be the first father-son team to play in the majors during the regular season.

"They told me he could hit, he could run and he could throw," Lefebvre, the first-year manager of the Mariners, said with a laugh, "but no one told me he couldn't play catch."

Can he hit?

Besides the 15-game streak, Griffey set M's spring records with 32 hits, 49 total bases and 20 runs batted in. He batted .360.

Lefebvre had played the kid along March 29. Just as Griffey was convinced he was going to the

minors, Lefebvre said, "Congratulations, you're my center fielder."

"My heart started ticking again," Griffey said.

Lefebvre said Griffey simply was the best player for the position.

"I like him. I like him a lot," veteran outfielder Jeffrey Leonard said. "I think he's farther along offensively than defensively. Sure, he's young, but he kept doing things that other people weren't doing."

"The only thing we don't know about him is how he will face adversity. By having a good spring, he's trained his body and his mind, but one thing you don't train when you're doing well is to train yourself for adversity—that eight-to-nine-game slump."

"It's going to come, so we have to wait and see how he handles it."

Leonard added, "I can help him through the rough times if he wants me to help him." Then, he laughed and said, "If he doesn't, I'll coldcock him."

Do we have a real-life Roy Hobbs on our hands here?

"He's a natural," Mariners batting coach Gene Clines said, marveling at Griffey's ability. "You sit back and watch this kid and he shows you what everybody is talking about. He can do it all."

Can he run?

When Griffey gets his 6-3, 195-pound body at full throttle, he runs like a deer. Doubles for some players become triples for Griffey. The only negative thing the Mariners noticed was that Griffey, at times, failed to run hard to first base after stroking a routine ground ball. Lefebvre has talked to the youngster about that.

Can he throw?

Ask the San Francisco Giants' Brett Butler, who is no leadfoot. Butler, trying to advance from first to third on a single to center in a game in Arizona, was gunned down by Griffey on a play that wasn't really that close. The throw from center never touched the ground.

And Griffey covers so much ground in center field that tough plays seem to become routinely easy ones.

Having been born into a baseball family, young Griffey was not awed by the major league surroundings.

"Man, this is my 12th spring training camp," he was quoted as saying. "That's 10 with my dad and two on my own."

Lefebvre said, "He doesn't handle himself like a 19-year-old. He's been around major league ball players all his life."

Lefebvre, who once spent half a year as a batboy for the Los Angeles Dodgers before entering baseball himself, said that exposure to the big leagues was invaluable.

"You see these guys, talk to them, watch them and realize they are human beings just like you," Lefebvre said. "We create images that major league ball players are bigger than life. Ken feels right at home."

Griffey's growth came quickly.

After being drafted No. 1 in the country out of Cincinnati's Moeller High School on June 2, 1987, Griffey reported to Bellingham, Wash., to play for the Mariners' club in the short-season Northwest League. The 17-year-old phenom's first hit was a home run against Everett on June 17. He went on to hit three homers, drive in eight runs and steal four bases that week and was named the league's player of the week.

Despite crashing into the center field wall July 4 and suffering an injury to his right shoulder, Griffey came back to hit .453 from July 12 to August 13. He wound up sixth in the league with a .313 average and led the yearling Mariners with 14 home runs, 40 RBIs and 13 steals.

Jay Mariotti, then a sports columnist for the Cincinnati Post, visited Griffey in the summer of 1987, shortly after the youngster had survived his first 10-hour moonlight ride in the Pacific Northwest aboard the Bellingham team bus, a 1958 school bus without a bathroom.

"To be perfectly honest with you, it was a whole lot worse than I ever imagined," Griffey told Mariotti. He said he survived by climbing into the overhead luggage compartment on the bus and going to sleep.

More than once, the homesick youngster who had received a \$150,000 bonus from the Mariners was thinking of chucking his career. But phone calls to a girl friend back home in the Cincinnati suburb of West Chester, O., convinced him that he should stay on track.

Bellingham (pop. 46,380), about 90 miles north of Seattle and 20 miles south of the Canadian border. (Continued on Page 14, Column 1)

Charting the Griffeyes

KEN GRIFFEY SR.

Born April 10, 1950, in Donora, Pa.
Height, 6-0. Weight, 210 pounds.
Bats and throws lefthanded.

Years, Clubs	G.	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	Avg.
Cincinnati (1973-81, 1988)	1894	6768	1074	2015	345	74	139	794	.298
New York Yankees (1982-86)									
Atlanta (1986-88)									
N.L. Totals	1343	4791	799	1452	246	64	90	543	.303
A.L. Totals	551	1977	275	583	99	10	49	251	.285

KEN GRIFFEY JR.

Born November 21, 1969, in Charleroi, Pa.
Height, 6-3. Weight, 195.
Bats and throws lefthanded.

Years, Clubs	G.	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	Avg.
1987, Bellingham	54	182	43	57	9	1	14	40	.313
1988, San Bernardino	58	219	50	74	13	3	11	42	.338
1988, Vermont	17	61	10	17	5	1	2	10	.279
Totals	129	462	103	148	27	5	27	92	.320

Stolen bases-caught stealing: 13-6 for Bellingham, 32-9 for San Bernardino, 4-2 for Vermont. Totals, 49-17.

1989 SPRING TRAINING

Club	G.	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	Avg.
Seattle	25	89	18	32	5	3	2	20	.360

Established club record for most hits in spring training; old record, 31 by Tom Paciorek, 1981. Set club record for longest hitting streak (15 games) in spring training. Set club record for most runs batted in during spring training.

COVER STORY

GRIFFEYS

(Continued From Page 12)

der, was culture shock for a black teen-ager from the big city.

"Things are a little different here," Griffey said. "It will take some getting used to for me. It's kind of weird around here."

Griffey's first manager was Rick Sweet, who had been a catcher for Seattle, San Diego and the New York Mets in the major leagues. Sweet could see that Griffey had the tools to play center field for the Mariners, but he needed to mature.

Even the 17-year-old Griffey admitted that. "I have to mature," he said. "That's why I'm here."

It was left to Sweet to explain what the youngster needed to

learn. For instance, there was the matter of his mind wandering when he was on base.

"He's been picked off twice already because he's been spectating," Sweet said. "He's got to stay ahead mentally. You can't spectate in this game."

After going to spring training as a non-roster invitee in 1988, Griffey was assigned to San Bernardino (California). He was such a hit in the Class-A circuit that San Bernardino held a "Ken Griffey Poster Night" and sold out the ball park.

When Griffey would go to bat, the public address announcer would ask, "What time is it?" The crowd would respond, "Griffey Time."

Griffey hit .338, with 11 homers

and 42 RBIs, for San Bernardino. His career was put on hold for two weeks when he suffered an injured back while trying to make a diving catch in mid-July. But his back responded to treatment and he was promoted to Double A.

Griffey played out the '88 season with Vermont (Eastern), hitting .279 with two homers and 10 RBIs in 17 games. Because of the back injury, he was restricted to duties as a designated hitter.

Ken Griffey Sr. was playing for the Atlanta Braves when Ken Jr. was drafted. Before the youngster reported to Bellingham, he made a visit to the Braves' clubhouse in Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

During his visit, three members of the '87 Braves made young Grif-

fey the victim of an old clubhouse prank. Glenn Hubbard, Dion James and Gerald Perry tied Griffey's shoelaces together in what amounted to an initiation ritual.

"But I got them back when they weren't looking," Griffey said. "I tied their laces."

And what did the veterans do then?

"They called me 'Rookie,'" Griffey said.

Now, he's a major league rookie, and it's Griffey Time in Seattle.

There is only one aspect of Griffey's game that the Mariners haven't seen. The slump.

"I don't know if he understands what a slump is," Lefebvre said. "I don't know if he's ever had one."

Lefebvre also realizes that if

Griffey gets off to a slow start this season, "People will say we made a mistake because he's not ready yet. That's wrong. I think he will handle a slump just fine."

Griffey says he has been in slumps before and he doesn't let them get him down.

"I remember my junior year in high school when I was hitting something like .193, but I came out of it," he said. "You see, I don't have any confidence in myself. If something goes wrong, it doesn't hurt my confidence because I don't have any in the first place. I'm shaking every time I hit, but I've always been like that."

For someone lacking self-confidence, he sure made believers out of a lot of people this spring.

'Original' Griffey: 'I Never Thought About Me Still Playing'

By HAL MCCOY

CINCINNATI—The one item that remained on the baseball wish list of George Kenneth Griffey Sr. has been fulfilled.

Griffey has played on two World Series championship teams—the 1975 and '76 Cincinnati Reds.

He has batted .300 in the majors—.305 in 1975, .336 in '76, .318 in '77, .316 in '79, .311 in '81, all with the Reds, and .306 with the New York Yankees in 1983.

What the 39-year-old native of Dhopora, Pa., wanted this year was to see himself and his son, George Kenneth Griffey Jr., make major league history by becoming the first father-son combination to play in the big leagues at the same time.

That became a reality in the final week of spring training when Ken Jr. was named the Seattle Mariners' starting center fielder and Ken Sr. signed a one-year contract with the Reds for his 17th major league season.

"That's something I never ever thought about when Kenny was growing up," Griffey said. "As a father, you just hope he is good enough to make it to the majors. I never thought about me still playing at the same time."

As is the spring training custom for all Reds players, Griffey did his running in the outfield after leaving exhibition games in the early innings.

As a Grapefruit League game was in progress at the Reds' spring training park in Plant City, Fla., Griffey and fellow outfielders Paul O'Neill, Eric Davis and Kal Daniels sweated through 50-yard wind sprints along the outfield warning track.

O'Neill, Davis and Daniels completed their work, but Griffey plodded on, perspiration dripping off his chin in the 80-degree heat.

When Griffey finished, Davis leaned against a bullpen chain link fence and asked Griffey, "Hey, ol' man, need some air? If you do, I'll go to the clubhouse and fetch some."

Griffey walked slowly to the clubhouse and equipment manager Bernie Stowe greeted him with, "Hi, Senior." Griffey feigned anger and Stowe said, "I could have called you senior citizen."

Cincinnati restaurateur Jeff Ruby, who was in the clubhouse, added his comments, saying, "It's

the Other Griffey."

The elder Griffey quickly corrected Ruby, saying, "I'm the Original Griffey."

Griffey is on his second tour of duty with the Reds. He was signed as a free agent last August 2 after being released by the Atlanta Braves. He played with the Reds from 1973 through 1981, then was traded to the New York Yankees in November 1981. The Yankees dealt him to Atlanta in June 1986.

Griffey Sr. was on the last Cincinnati team to win a National League West pennant. That was John McNamara's Reds of 1979.

Griffey says the references to his age, including a stubbly beard that pops out white, doesn't bother him.

"I enjoy that," he said. "It's respect. I enjoy being around these guys."

But Manager Pete Rose doesn't have Griffey around just to be the butt of jokes about nursing homes and pensions. In fact, with first baseman Todd Benzinger inoperative with an elbow injury for two weeks this spring, Griffey showed how senior citizens can play first base. He hit .333 in his first 21 spring at-bats.

"I know I was brought here to pinch-hit and fill in," said Griffey. "But, like everybody else my age playing baseball, I think I can still play regularly. I tried to show them that. That's Pete's decision. If I can help in any way—well, I get more out of giving than taking. Some get more out of taking than giving."

Griffey looks around the clubhouse and sees a vastly larger array of talent than what populated the 1979 championship team. Rose was gone, off to Philadelphia for a greener bank account. Tony Perez was freezing in Montreal.

"What I remember most about the '79 team was the way Ray Knight stepped in at third base for Rose," Griffey said, neglecting to say that he himself hit .316 that season. "I enjoyed that. Knight hit .317 and was the biggest plus. Dave Collins played center field and hit .318."

"Davey Concepcion had a great year, drove in some big runs. Perez had rubbed off on him so much we began calling him Little Doggie."

"We didn't do anything wrong that year because we couldn't af-



Ken Griffey Sr., on his second tour of duty with the Reds, thinks he can still play regularly.

ford it."

After the 1981 season, Griffey was traded to the Yankees for pitchers Brian Ryder and Fred Toliver. At the time, Dick Wagner, then general manager of the Reds, cited Griffey's bad knees as the reason for the trade. Actually, the Reds were unwilling to pay Griffey a star's salary.

"While I was in New York, 1985 and '86, all we talked about was the talent in Cincinnati," Griffey said. "And we couldn't understand this second-place stuff. We knew the Reds shouldn't be finishing second. But they have—four straight times. I can't under-

stand it."

Back in the 1970s, when the Reds experienced that winning feeling, the youngsters hanging around the clubhouse included Pete Rose Jr., Eduardo and Victor Perez, Lee May Jr., Brian McRae and Ken Griffey Jr.

The sons were called the "Little Red Machine," and, said Perez, now a Cincinnati coach, "They were wild. You had to keep after them. But they were good kids."

They were good baseball players, too. Rose's son is in the Baltimore system, May's son was the New York Mets' first-round draft

pick in 1988, McRae's son is in the Kansas City organization and Victor Perez is a center fielder at Florida State University. Young Griffey, of course, has made it to the big leagues.

"I never dreamed this would happen," Ken Griffey Sr. said. "I figured that when he signed, it would take at least four years for him to reach the majors."

Ken Sr. was a 29th-round draft pick in 1969. He reached the majors for the last month of 1973 and came up to stay in the second half of '74. When he was traded to the Yankees, he was seldom able to see his son play high school baseball at Moeller High in Cincinnati, but was able to watch him in the three years Ken Jr. was a tailback for the powerhouse Moeller football teams.

Ken Jr. passed up his senior year of football at Moeller to concentrate on his senior season of baseball, and that paid off when he became the No. 1 pick in the 1987 amateur draft.

"It was his decision," Griffey Sr. said. "I wanted to see him play (football), but he'd had baseball scouts watching him since he was 16 and all he talked about was playing baseball."

Griffey Sr. was known as the second most famous baseball product of his hometown in western Pennsylvania. Hall of Famer Stan Musial also came from Donora and was a high school teammate of Buddy Griffey, Ken Sr.'s father, in the early 1930s. Musial remembered Buddy as a left-handed third baseman and a football star.

Ken Sr. was known more for football and track in high school. That accounts for the fact that he went so late in the draft.

Griffey Sr. said his son's favorite player was Rickey Henderson, who stole 130 bases for the Oakland A's in 1982 and now plays for the Yankees. "I was just dad," Ken Sr. said.

Griffey Sr. said his son was not upset at being drafted by the Mariners, a team that has never had a winning season. "My son considers himself a winner. He feels that one day he can help turn the franchise around," Ken Sr. said.

Does Ken Sr. expect to face his son in the World Series?

"Seattle? Nah," Griffey Sr. said with a laugh. "That'll get the kid's goat. He's always calling me the ol' goat."



KEN GRIFFEY Jr.

Fittingly, as the torch as the game's finest player is passed from Barry Bonds, Junior sets the league afire BY MICHAEL KNISLEY

Jay Buhner, eavesdropping from one locker over, picks up a thread of the conversation and joins in the fray of what so far has been a frustrating attempt to persuade Ken Griffey Jr. to compare himself to Barry Bonds. To this point, Griffey has been intractable in his unwillingness to be drawn into the subject.

"Let's see if I can help," says Buhner, addressing his Mariners teammate. "You both are lefthanded."

"That's right," says Griffey, happy for the assistance.

"You both are black," Buhner says.

"We're both black," Griffey agrees.

"You both wear Nike," Buhner says.

"We both wear earrings, too," Griffey says.

"Let's see what else," Buhner says. "He uses a Wilson glove, and you're a Rawlings man. And you both use Louisville (Slugger) bats."

"He uses a black one. I use a white one," Griffey says. "Can't compare that."

"What about batting gloves?" Buhner asks.

"He's Franklin. I'm Nike," Griffey says.

"Can't compare that, either," Buhner says.

"He has his picture on his wristband," Griffey offers. "I've got my number on mine."

"See?" says Buhner, turning to the interrogator. "They're totally different. No comparison."

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porting cast with the Giants hasn't given him much protection in the batting order in recent seasons; Griffey's teammates with the Mariners form perhaps the most potent line-up in the game. All of those differences make comparison a risky business.

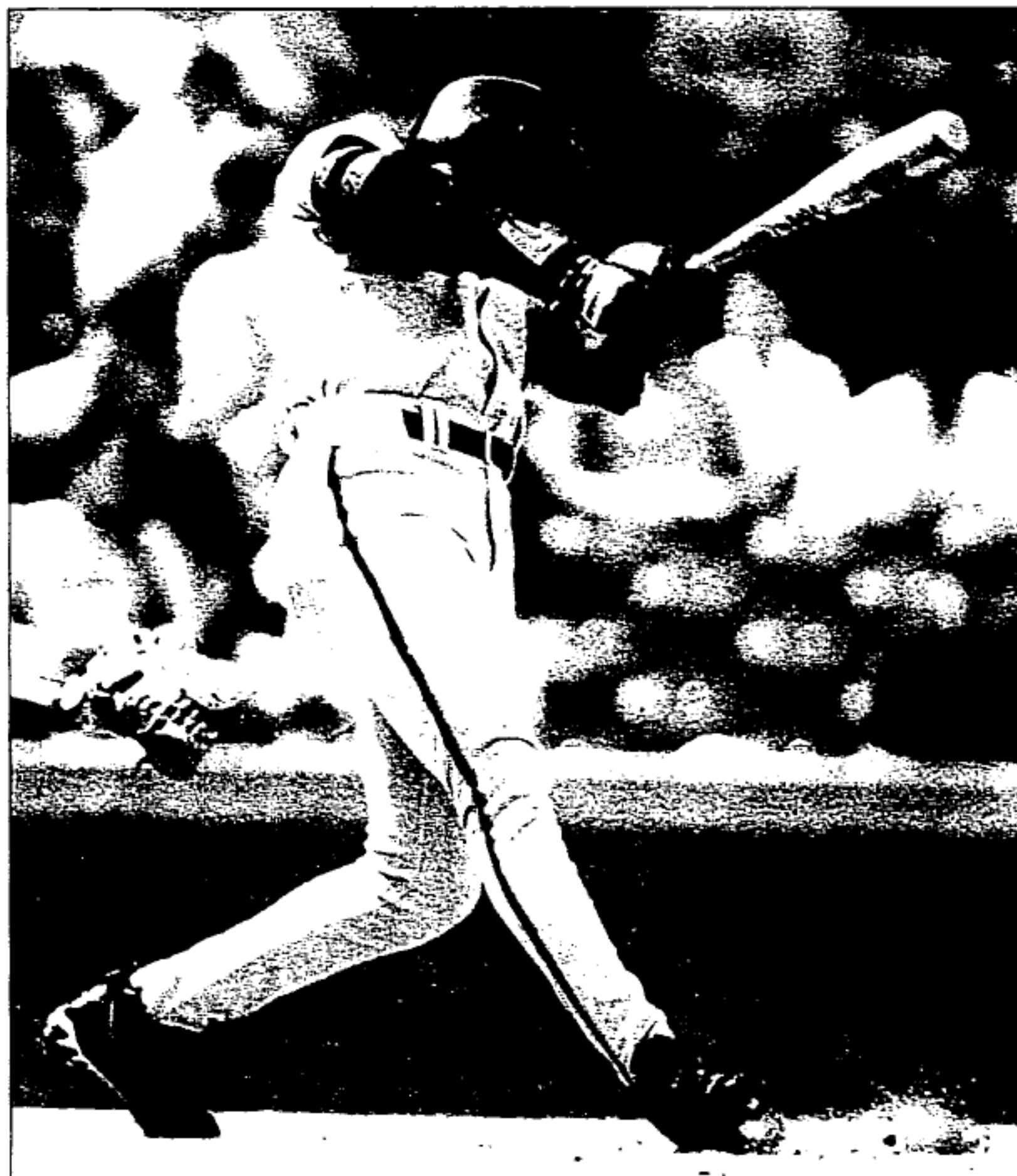
As it happens, Griffey and Bonds are about to play against each other in meaningful games, which has never happened before. Through the magic of interleague play, the Mariners visit San Francisco to play the Giants June 17-18. The Giants travel to Seattle for games June 30 and July 1. It will be Griffey vs. Bonds on the same field, together at last in something other than an All-Star Game or a spring-training exhibition, the two best all-around players in the game.

It isn't much of a stretch to signal the occasion of those games as a cross-course pivot point in their careers, because it has become apparent as this season has progressed that they are no longer "the best all-around players." At this point, there is only

one, a clear-cut "best."

The tie was broken once and for all in late April, on the night Griffey hit three home runs in Toronto. Those three, his 11th, 12th and 13th in April, gave him the major league record for that month. If a watershed moment can be pinpointed, that is the day the handoff finally took place and the torch was passed. Griffey, it can safely be said now, clearly is the best all-around player in baseball, finally assuming that unofficial mantle from Bonds this season in the culmination of a transition that has been inevitable since 1991, when Griffey hit .327 and put together his first 100-RBI year to establish himself as one of the game's supermen.

Since that season, even Bonds, a three-time National League Most Valuable Player while Griffey has yet to win his first MVP, has known it was only a matter of time. Now, as Griffey threatens to break Roger Maris' home run record (61 in one season) and Hack Wilson's RBI record (190), that time



Junior's the Man: A three-homer night in Toronto in April sealed the fact Griffey is a step ahead of Bonds as the game's premier player.



simply the best



has come. Through May 28, Griffey was on a pace to hit 73 home runs and drive in 194 runs. And with four games left in May, he broke the major league record for homers through that month when he connected for No. 23. Junior had held the record with 22, set in 1994.

The Triple Crown is a real possibility for Griffey, as it is for the Rockies' Larry Walker in the National League this season.

"What Junior is going to do throughout the course of his career is going to well take over anything I've ever done," says Bonds, who is refreshingly open and engaging in a conversation about Griffey, in contrast to Griffey's disinclination to discuss Bonds. "Junior started in the game three years younger than I was when I came into the league (Griffey was 19, Bonds was nearly 22). Junior is going to take the game to another level that I don't think anyone is going to be able to catch up to. Sure, someday there will be some other kid who comes along and maybe be as good as Junior. But Junior will surpass me throughout his career, by a lot. Not by a little. By a lot."

Bonds has been one of the game's best players for so long that it has been difficult to gauge a younger man's performance against his standard. On baseball's time line, Bonds' longevity alone—he's in his 12th major league season—has always been at an advantage in a comparison with Griffey or any other current player. But after 8½ seasons in the major leagues, Griffey has played long enough and well enough to mitigate the seniority argument. Ask any general manager outside Seattle and San Francisco which player he'd take if both were offered in trades on the same day, and the answer almost unanimously will be Griffey.

To be fair, though, that answer comes with qualifiers that lessen its relevance to a *mano a mano* appraisal of their all-around baseball abilities. Most general managers will choose Griffey partly because his future in the game

Eight is enough to judge

Statistics for Ken Griffey Jr. and Barry Bonds after their first eight seasons in the majors (for Griffey, 1989-96; for Bonds, 1986-93):

Griffey Jr.		Bonds
238	Home runs	222
1,204	Hits	1,165
695	Runs	801
227	Doubles	258
21	Triples	40
725	RBIs	679
.302	Batting average	.283
504	Bases on balls	737
634	Strikeouts	669
108	Stolen bases	280
78	Assists	81
35	Errors	39
.986	Fielding percentage	.985

is longer. And, partly, they'll choose Griffey because he plays center field, which requires a unique and more demanding set of skills than left field does. Bonds is the best all-around left fielder in baseball, but a center fielder who hits for the power that Griffey does is as rare as a Rafael Belliard home run.

"I think if you're trying to put together a championship club," says Kevin Malone, the Orioles' assistant general manager who as a general manager for the Expos watched Bonds in the National League, "you want to put power in the corner spots in both the infield and the outfield, and you want speed and defense up the middle. Now, if you're talking about a Griffey, you've got speed and defense up the middle as well as power and batting average. That's when you're talking about a superstar."

Baseball's talent evaluators grade players on the basis of five skills—running speed, arm strength, defensive ability, hitting for average and hitting for power. Griffey scores the highest possible mark in all five categories. Bonds rates at the exceptional level in four of those skills. Arm strength is his only tool with an average grade. In his younger play-

(continued on page 31)



Willie

That Mays-Aaron thing

Who's better? Barry Bonds or Ken Griffey Jr.? Giants manager Dusty Baker has heard all this before, in a slightly different context.

"It's like when I was a kid," Baker says. "We all compared Willie Mays to Hank Aaron. One was a center fielder and one was a right fielder."

That Mays-Aaron argument may never be settled. Aaron finished his 23-season major league career with 755 home runs, 2,297 RBIs, a .305 batting average, 429 assists and a .982 fielding percentage. Mays played for 22 years and finished with 660 home runs, 1,903 RBIs, a .302 average, 233 assists and a .981 fielding percentage.

Aaron's numbers are slightly better. Mays played the more difficult position, center field (although Aaron did spend some time at that position in Milwaukee). Bonds has put up impressive numbers from left field for 11-plus seasons now; Griffey is in his ninth year as a center fielder.

"In defense of Barry, I'll tell you one thing," says Baker, who wound up playing against Mays and alongside Aaron. "Barry can recognize different pitches quicker than anybody I've ever seen except Hank Aaron. He'll see a guy flare his glove on a changeup when nobody else can see it. He'll see a guy move his finger out on a fastball. Hank Aaron is the only other guy I've ever seen who's been able to do that like Barry can."

—MICHAEL KRESLEY



Hank

JUNIOR'S perfect op

As he enters the prime of his baseball life, **KEN GRIFFEY JR.** can take his game to a dizzying level or settle for mere excellence *By Steve Marantz*

"All my life in pro baseball, people have said, 'He can be better.' There's always a 'but' at the end of anything I've accomplished. You get tired of people saying, 'He hit 49 home runs, but he could do more.'"

—Ken Griffey Jr. after winning the 1997 A.L. MVP Award

But. He is among the best players in baseball, the American League MVP and a Gold Glove center fielder. He hit 56 home runs with 147 RBIs last year. You want him on your team—who wouldn't? But.

He swings a "perfect" swing imperfectly. Born and bred to win a Triple Crown, his .304 batting average last year wasn't even close to the league leaders. Challenging Roger Maris' season home run record of 61, Griffey became pull-conscious and slumped. Predestined for World Series glory, he was 2-for-15 with no home runs and two RBIs in the Mariners' first-round playoff loss to the Orioles.

Junior could be better. The Mona Lisa could use brightening. Pavarotti's high F-sharp could be smoother and Häagen-Dazs chocolate swirl could be easier to scoop. No doubt Junior feels nitpicked, but greatness nit-picks the great.

Though he wears his hat backward, he is measured against those whose pants went on two legs at a time—Ruth, Gehrig, Williams, Musial, Aaron, Mantle and Mays. He could become the Michael Jordan of baseball by taking it up a notch. Or he could remain the Drew Bledsoe of baseball by staying merely excellent. A player gets just one prime. At 28, entering his 10th season, Junior's prime is now.

"What is Junior's best year?" father Ken Griffey Sr. asks rhetorically. "Nobody knows. Junior doesn't know."

Opinions are free, however. Royals vice president George Brett, a three-time batting champion, says Griffey could win the first Triple Crown since Carl Yastrzemski in 1967 (.326, 44 HRs, 121 RBIs).

"Sure, he could do it," says Brett, who occasionally works with Royals hitters. "He could hit for

power and average. But to do that he's got to stop trying to muscle the ball."

Hold that thought; first things first. Deconstructing Griffey starts with his swing, a marvelous engine of efficiency and destruction. Mariners designated hitter Edgar Martinez, regarded as one of baseball's finest pure hitters, describes it as "perfect."

"It's so smooth," Martinez says. "He's balanced and his head stays on the ball. His hands go back when he starts to swing. He's got quick hands, a short stride, quick hips and he gets good extension all the time. I believe Junior's swing is perfect, I really do."

Blue Jays righthander Roger Clemens notes that Griffey's swing generally is a slight uppercut. "His swing path stays through the hitting zone a long time," Clemens says. Griffey's edge, Clemens adds, is that he sees how the ball comes out of a pitcher's hand. "He has a great eye."

"Traditional" is a description applied by Mariners hitting coach Jesse Barfield. In textbook manner, Griffey keeps his hands back until the last instant, Barfield says, enabling him to react to late movement on a pitch and preventing him from being caught "out front" or ahead of a pitch. Griffey extends on pitches away and around the middle, Barfield says, and sometimes—but not always—shortens his swing on pitches in. His left heel comes off the ground, and he releases his top hand on follow-through, as do 85 percent of the best hitters.

The swing seems to be permanently grooved. When Griffey came into camp in February, four days after catchers and pitchers, all players participated in a soft-toss hitting drill. The object was to hit the ball, thrown from a side angle, on a line to the back wall of the batting cage.

"Junior beat everybody with 13-of-15," Barfield says. "It takes most guys two or three days to get that down, and he had just gotten here. He hadn't been swinging at all. That's a Natural."

The man who put a bat in Junior's hands when he was 3, Ken Sr., designed his swing to be short and quick. "The fastball inside is a pitcher's bread-and-butter pitch," says Griffey Sr., now the Reds' hitting coach. "I gave him a technique to get to that pitch. It's hitting on top of the ball, like chopping wood. Not necessarily doing it, but thinking it. Junior's swing is not as long as most of the power hitters. It's short and fluid. He can get from point A to point B quicker than anybody."

Is Griffey's swing perfect? Aesthetically, perhaps. Relative to most players, yes. But in an absolute (and nit-picking) sense, no.

At the Frank Carey Hitting School in North Reading, Mass., instructors point to a poster of Griffey launching a swing with his right arm "locked out," in theory, a flaw making him vulnerable to an inside pitch. Youngsters are taught that Griffey gets away with it because of his extraordinarily quick hip pivot and bat speed, but that most hitters can't be effective that way, certainly not 11-year-olds.

Barfield agrees that in keeping his hands back an extra instant before fully extending, Griffey leaves an inside hole. Hard throwers—Detroit lefthander Justin Thompson is one—exploit the flaw by pounding Griffey inside or high. "He has a loop in his swing, up and in, if you've got a good fastball," Yankees advance scout Bob Didier says.

Another reason pitchers beat Griffey inside is his medical history, including a broken left wrist and a broken hamate bone in his right hand. Doctors warn Griffey that a forcefully checked swing could cause a stress fracture, as occurred in the hamate in



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1996. Once he commits, he tends not to stop.

Bottom line: Griffey probably could improve mechanically, although tinkering invests tedious effort for a marginal return. A hitter's hitter such as Tony Gwynn enjoys the intricacies of mechanics; Griffey does not. It is unlikely Griffey's swing will change; more plausible is a change in approach.

"I like being called 'The Natural.' It makes it so easy on me. I just go out there and do what I gotta do and don't think about nothin'. Just show up and throw on a pair of Nikes and go with it. Bat goes up there on autopilot and away we go. Switch on—kowpoom!—see you later."

—Junior Griffey

A label—The Natural—recognizes his genes, upbringing and effortless manner, but ignores his work ethic and intelligence. He regards it cynically.

Griffey is more than a natural. When he was 12, from a Little League mound distance, his father threw him 70-mph fastballs, sliders, curves and changeups without announcing the pitch. Soon, Junior could recognize the pitch as it left his father's hand.

"To me, hitting is a mental game more than anything," Griffey Sr. says. "The biggest thing with Junior when he got of age was to make him adjust from pitch to pitch."

With each pitch, Griffey Sr. changed the angle of delivery and location.

"When he got to 13, I couldn't strike him out, so I knew he was pretty good," Griffey Sr. says.

After Griffey's hamate bone injury in 1996, pitchers tried to take advantage by busting him inside. In the spring of 1997, Griffey still was slow on pitches in. In the season opener, Yankees righthander David Cone went with the scouting report. Griffey homered off a forkball down and in. Next at-bat, Cone tried to backdoor a breaking ball. Griffey went yard again.

"He's an intelligent hitter," Didier says. "He figures out what you're trying to do with him."

"I've pitched him outside and down, and he's taken it the other way," Clemens says. "Then he's pulled some good fastballs inside. He has enough time in, and been in enough big games, to recognize different situations."

Griffey's intelligence enables him to adjust to pitch patterns, go with the pitch he gets and swing more conservatively with two strikes. Yet, he is not always a smart hitter.

Last season, something curious happened to Griffey. Against his father's training, conventional wisdom and his own stated intentions, he tried to hit home runs. Junior being Junior, he hit 56, a fabulous total. But within that number germinated the seed of his playoff flop against the Orioles.

"I'm not a home run hitter. I've just got good pop."

—Junior Griffey

When Roger Maris was pursuing Babe Ruth's 60 home runs, he said forthrightly, "I know I'm not a great player. But I damn sure want to break that record."

Griffey talks as if Maris' 61 is less



TAKE MY HAND, SON: Griffey Sr., then a Rockies coach, kept Junior in tow when the two got together at a spring training game in Arizona in 1996.

desirable than a day on the links with Tiger Woods, his neighbor and golfing buddy. Should he be believed? Put it this way: Watch his bat, not his mouth.

First, his average: A .304 figure is fine and dandy for almost anybody but Griffey in his prime. Larry Walker hit .366 with 49 home runs last year. Walker had 409 total bases to Griffey's 393, in 40 fewer at-bats. Both are lefthanded hitters, play in a hitter's park and anchor talented lineups. Griffey has an edge in speed. Walker should not have been 62 points better than Griffey, but somehow he was.

Consider these statistics: Walker hit the first pitch 122 times for a .443 average and averaged 3.35 pitches per plate appearance. Griffey hit 92 first pitches for a .315 average and averaged 3.62 pitches per appearance. Griffey's 29-for-92 on first pitches included five home runs, a double and a triple.

The numbers say Walker is going after the best hitter's pitch, 0-0, more than Griffey, with decisive results. Griffey is being more deliberate—looking for a pitch in that he can pull—at the expense of his average. Griffey's highest batting average, .327, in 1991, occurred when he had his highest first-pitch average, .476, and averaged 3.53 pitches per appearance. He went 39-for-82 on first-pitch at-bats, with two home runs and eight doubles, because he was going with the pitch instead of pulling it.

Moreover, Walker puts the ball on the ground approximately three times to every two in the air. Griffey's figures are reversed—three fly balls to every two ground balls, further indication of his long-ball fixation.

"The thing about Griffey is he doesn't have to muscle up," Brett says. "If he just hits the ball hard he'll get his home runs. You tend to tense up and slow down your swing when you go for distance. Some hitters feel they have to carry their lineups, but Griffey shouldn't feel that way. He's got (Jay) Buhner, Edgar and Alex (Rodriguez). He had (Paul) Sorrento, and now he's got (David) Segui."

'THE NATURAL': Griffey is cynical about the label, but his exciting plays do seem to come naturally.



TOMASSO DE ROSA / ALLSPORT

Griffey Sr. says Junior was taught to try to "hit the ball hard, not far." That approach got him off to a fast start in '97, and by the end of May he had 24 home runs. Inevitable Maris buzz enveloped him. Subsequently, Griffey's power declined in June and July, when he totaled eight home runs and hit only one in a 25-game stretch. A strained hamstring was partly to blame. Additionally, Griffey became pull-conscious. Scouts could see a difference.

"Probably, yes, he became more power conscious," Blue Jays advance scout Gordon Lakey says. "Sixty-one is as big a sports stat as there is. It's got to have an effect."

Fortunately, his normal stroke returned in late July. Griffey corrected himself by consciously inside-outting the ball to center and left-center, Mariners manager Lou Piniella says.

"Junior can hit for a high average," Piniella says. "He's blessed in that he can hit wherever he's pitched and hit to all fields."

Again, Maris' record loomed after Griffey got to 50 with six home runs in the first week of September. Griffey appeared to get caught up in the excitement of a neck-and-neck home run race with the Cardinals' Mark McGwire. His approach reverted.

"Toward the tail end of the season he began to pull off the ball and try to lift it," Lakey says. "Maybe he continued in the playoffs."

The Orioles had a plan for Griffey: off-speed pitches early in the count, make him chase, fastball in, off-speed away late in the count, don't give in. Griffey was out of sync. In Game 1, he chased the first pitch he saw from Mike Mussina, with one out and a runner on second, and failed to advance the



PILING ON: A joyous Griffey capped a remarkable performance in the 1995 division series by scoring the winning run in the decisive game.

runner. In Game 3, he came up twice with one out and runners on and failed to advance them. In 16 at-bats, he wasted one 3-0 count, two 3-1s, one 2-0 and two 1-0s while drawing one walk. Some experts concluded that Griffey was overaggressive and impatient, but in fact, he swung at only four of 16 first pitches. He was waiting for something to pull, just as he had in June and July, but the Orioles were not cooperating. Mussina retired him six consecutive times in Games 1 and 4, which is as much a commentary on Mussina's fine ability as Griffey's dubious approach.

"The key is changing patterns, depending on where he is at, and not getting into a situation where he gets what he wants," Orioles assistant G.M. Kevin Malone says. "To be honest, I'd rather not talk about it. Let a sleeping giant lie."

"Griffey is not the most disciplined hitter, not like Edgar Martinez or Frank Thomas," Didier says. "He's not looking to get 100 walks. He goes out of the strike zone. He's old-fashioned in that

DEFINING JUNIOR

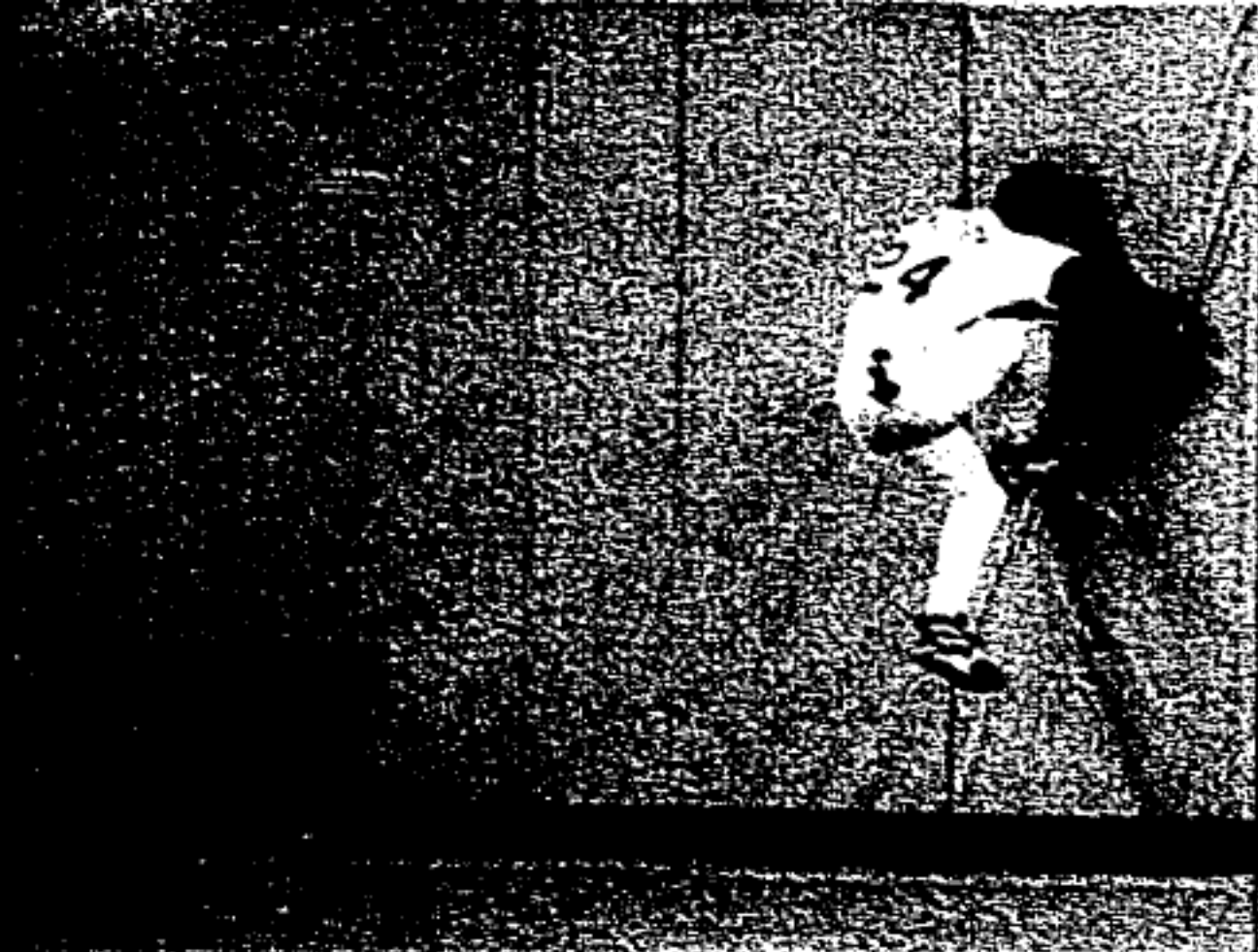
The 10 defining moments in Ken Griffey Jr.'s career:

- 1 Hit a home run to left field on the first pitch thrown to him in his first home game in the majors. The place was the Kingdome, the date was April 10, 1989, and the pitcher was White Sox righthander Eric King.
- 2 Hit a game-winning home run against the Brewers in his first career pinch-hitting appearance on May 16, 1989.
- 3 In 1990, he became the first Mariners player to be voted by fans as an All-Star Game starter.
- 4 After his father, Ken Griffey Sr., homered for Seattle in the first inning off the Angels' Kirk McCaskill on September 14, 1990, Junior came up next and hit a homer in almost the exact location. A year earlier, the Griffey family had become the first father-son combination to play in the major leagues at the same time.
- 5 Reached the 100-RBI plateau for the first time with a run-scoring single against the Rangers on September 30, 1991. At age 21, he became the youngest player in the A.L. to drive in 100 runs since Al Kaline did it in 1956.
- 6 Went 3-for-3, including a home run off Greg Maddux, in the 1992 All-Star Game in San Diego and was selected the MVP.
- 7 Hit a home run in eight consecutive games in 1993, tying a major league record.
- 8 Became the first player to hit a fair ball off the B&O Warehouse beyond the right field wall at Camden Yards. The occasion: the 1993 All-Star Game's home run contest.
- 9 Hit five home runs in the five-game division series against the Yankees in 1995.
- 10 A 56-homer, 147-RBI season in 1997 made him the 13th unanimous MVP selection in big-league history. —Jim Street

The Kid's draft mates

Here's how baseball's 1987 amateur draft class—of which Ken Griffey Jr. was valedictorian—has fared:

Pick	Team	Player	Pos.	Highest level	Now	Comment
1	Mariners	Ken Griffey Jr.	OF	Majors	Mariners	A star since breaking into the majors at age 19, he could repeat as A.L. MVP.
2	Pirates	Mark Merchant	OF	AAA	Royals	Started 1998 in the Royals' minor league camp, a place where stars can rise.
3	Twins	Willie Banks	RHP	Majors	Yankees	He's in the running for a rotation spot with the Yankees.
4	Cubs	Mike Harkey	RHP	Majors	Padres	Was reassigned to the Padres' minor league camp this spring.
5	White Sox	Jack McDowell	RHP	Majors	Angels	He's being counted on for 200-plus innings on Anaheim's aging staff.
6	Braves	Derek Lilliquist	LHP	Majors	Gone	Disappeared after a brief stint with Cincinnati in 1996.
7	Orioles	Chris Myers	LHP	AAA	Gone	Finished his career with an independent-league team in 1995.
8	Dodgers	Dan Opperman	RHP	AAA	Gone	The 1992 season was his last in the Dodgers' chain.
9	Royals	Kevin Appier	RHP	Majors	Royals	He has been Kansas City's ace since '90, but '98 will start with an injury setback.
10	Padres	Kevin Garner	RHP/OF	AAA	Gone	Homered every 11.7 at-bats in the last three years—in the Northern League.
11	Athletics	Lee Tinsley	OF	Majors	Expos	Could make the Montreal roster as a reserve, or after the next budding star leaves.
12	Expos	Delino DeShields	SS/2B	Majors	Cardinals	He had a career year with the Cardinals after struggling in Los Angeles.
13	Brewers	Bill Spiers	SS	Majors	Astros	He hit .320 in 1997 and could play a large role this season.
14	Cardinals	Cris Carpenter	RHP	Majors	Gone	A disappointment despite a few solid years as a reliever.
15	Orioles	Brad DuVall	RHP	A	Gone	Never got out of Class A after electing to sign in 1988 (with the Cardinals).
16	Giants	Mike Remlinger	LHP	Majors	Reds	After one good year as a reliever, he's now a starter on a poor team.
17	Blue Jays	Alex Sanchez	RHP	Majors	Gone	With only four big-league games on his resume, he was done after '95.
18	Reds	Jack Armstrong	RHP	Majors	Gone	A key to the '90 World Series champs, he hasn't pitched in the majors since '94.
19	Rangers	Brian Bohanon	LHP	Majors	Mets	Had a breakthrough year in '97; he will relieve and spot start in '98.
20	Tigers	Bill Henderson	C	A	Gone	Was traded to the Cardinals' system in 1989, then retired.
21	Tigers	Steve Pegues	OF	Majors	Gone	He was released after finishing '97 in the Cubs' organization.
22	Astros	Craig Biggio	C	Majors	Astros	He has been an All-Star catcher and second baseman and one of the Killer B's.
23	Rangers	Bill Haselman	C	Majors	Rangers	Will be the backup for the Rangers after stops in Seattle and Boston.
24	Mets	Chris Donnels	3B	Majors	Japan	After a career with the Mets, Astros and Red Sox, he's playing in Japan.
25	Angels	John Orton	C	Majors	Gone	Last played in 1996 in Class AAA. Bowed out of the majors in '93.
26	Red Sox	Reggie Harris	RHP	Majors	Astros	He has a chance to win a job because of the Astros' injury woes.



GARY STEWART / AP

BONE-JARRING: Griffey foiled the Orioles with a marvelous catch in '95 but broke his left wrist.

the first thing he sees good he swings at."

"Junior gets himself where he puts the whole load on his back," Griffey Sr. says. "I used to tell him he has too many good hitters to help him. Edgar, Buhner, Alex. They could do the same things Junior could do. But it's the personal pride they have inside themselves. They want to do a little more than they can do. It gets them into trouble, every hitter."

Talking baseball with Junior is a Socratic exercise. One question begets another, as he leads an inquisitor toward Junioresque reality and logic. If his bantering manner does not always clarify baseball, it explains why he is regarded warmly by the media and public—he enjoys give and take. Other superstars participate, dutifully, but Junior engages. Sometimes his bantering seems a defensive maneuver, but occasionally Griffey is willing to share himself, his private feelings and concerns. Junior's dark eyes are unaccountably soft and vulnerable. For a high-profile superstar, his relative openness is rare, and nine years after his big-league debut, still refreshing.

I find him in Arizona, at the opening of camp, saddened by the death of his 7-year-old dog, hassled about travel difficulties encountered by his wife and two children and worried that baseball is messing up his golf swing. His cubicle, adjacent to Jay Buhner's, and facing those of Alex Rodriguez and Edgar Martinez, is a nerve center. A stream of players, staff and media stop by for small talk. Junior carries on two or three or four conversations

TESTING YOUR GQ

So you think you know Ken Griffey Jr., eh?

The long-ball hitter extraordinaire, the gifted fielder, the perennial kid with his cap turned backward, the smiling hawk of athletic apparel.

But do you *really* know Ken Griffey Jr.? To find out, here's a test of your GQ (Griffey Quotient):

1. Junior played minor league ball for four Mariners affiliates. Name at least one of those farm teams.

2. In 1993, Junior hit home runs in eight consecutive games. Having achieved an eight-game hitting streak on homers alone, what is his longest batting streak overall in the majors? a. 12 games; b. 22; c. 28; d. 32; e. 35.

3. Junior (56) and Jay Buhner (40) combined for 96 home runs in 1997, the third-highest figure by two teammates in one season in major league history. What sets of teammates rank 1-2 on the all-time list?

4. In his first at-bat in the majors in 1989, Junior doubled off a pitcher who would finish his big-league career six years later with 168 victories, two championship-series Most Valuable Player awards and one World Series MVP honor. Name this pitcher.

5. What major postseason award has Junior won in eight consecutive years?

6. Junior, born in Donora, Pa., has 294 career home runs entering the 1998 season. He and two other Donora-born players (both retired) have combined for 921 homers. Who are the other two Donora sluggers?

7. Going into this season, Junior's career batting average is .302 over 1,214 games. Is his average higher or lower than the figure Ken Griffey Sr. posted over 2,097 games?

8. OK, Junior has enjoyed 27 two-homer games for Seattle, but has he ever hit three home runs in a big-league game?

9. Of Junior's 56 home runs last season, how many came in extra innings?

10. Which of the following has Junior not accomplished in the majors? a. Had a 200-hit season; b. Hit a total of 100 homers in two consecutive years; c. Had a season batting average above .325; d. Won the MVP award in the All-Star Game; e. Averaged one RBI per game played in a season.

at a time, idly fingering a bat or flipping a ball. Stripped to his athletic shorts, he is brawny and deep-chested, but most conspicuous are his legs and backside, thick and muscular as a fullback's. Home run power comes from below the waist.

Question: Edgar Martinez and Jay Buhner average about 4.2 pitches per plate appearance. You're down around 3.6. Are they taking too

many or are you not taking enough?

Answer: How many good pitches do they see, and how many do I see? Who's the one guy pitchers want to keep in the park?

Q: You?

A: Right. I don't have time to be sitting, waiting for this guy to think twice. Edgar and Jay are going to get a couple. They aren't afraid of Edgar,

ANSWERS

1. The four: Bellingham, Wash.; San Bernardino, Calif.; Burlington, Vt.; and Tacoma, Wash. (The latter being a one-game rehabilitation assignment in 1995).
2. 12 games. Junior has had four 12-game hitting streaks, the last coming in 1993.
3. The Yankees' Roger Maris (61) and Mickey Mantle (54), who combined for 115 in 1961, and the Yanks' Babe Ruth (60) and Lou Gehrig (47), who hit 107 in 1927.
4. Dave Stewart.
5. The Gold Glove.
6. Ken Griffey Sr., who hit 152 homers, and Stan Musial, who had 475.
7. Higher. Griffey Sr.'s career mark was .296.
8. Yes, twice. He hit three home runs at Toronto's SkyDome on April 25, 1997, and three against the Yankees at the Kingdome on May 24, 1996.
9. None.
10. He has not had a 200-hit season, with his high being 185 in 1997. He hit a total of 105 homers in 1996 and 1997, batted .327 in 1991, won the MVP award in the 1992 All-Star Game and averaged one RBI per game played in 1996 (140 RBIs in 140 games).

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PUERTO RICAN BASEBALL'S FINEST—BOBBY BONILLA

The phrase, "Only the Finest," refers to the highest quality and diversity of taste experiences from Puerto Rico. This translates not only to the sun, beaches, nature, food, arts and rums of Puerto Rico, but to the spirit of the sports tradition as well—particularly on the baseball diamond.

Several current major league players have helped continue the great heritage of Puerto Rican baseball, with Florida Marlins switch-hitting third baseman Bobby Bonilla among the elite. Throughout his 12-year tour of duty, Bonilla has been a steady power source and reliable hitter for average. The five-time All-Star is approaching 2,000 hits for his career and begins the 1998 season having smacked 262 career homers, fifth on the all-time list for switch hitters.

The 35 year-old Bonilla signed on with the Marlins in November '96 and was considered a jewel in the club's talented free-agent

class. Bonilla didn't disappoint, hitting .297 with 17 homers and 96 RBIs. Bonilla tied for the lead in the majors with three grand slams and established a team record by registering 39 doubles. He hit two postseason homers, including a 462-foot bomb against Cleveland in Game Seven of the World Series, and drove in 10 runs in playoff action.

Bonilla first made his mark in the majors with the Pittsburgh Pirates, teaming with Barry Bonds to form a deadly one-two punch that helped the Bucs to back-to-back playoff appearances in 1990 and '91. In 1990, Bonilla clouted 32 homers and drove in 120 runs. The following year, he hit .302 with 18 dingers and 100 RBI. In 1992, Bonilla moved on to New York to join the Mets. He clubbed 34 homers in 1993 and was on his way to a career season two years later when the Mets traded him to Baltimore. Bonilla ended the year with a .329 average, 28 homers and 99 RBI.

Facing Junior

In the last two years, pitchers have had a tough time getting Ken Griffey Jr. out. Junior has hit .304 and averaged 52 home runs and 143 RBIs in those seasons.

So how do opponents prevent Junior from doing further damage in 1998? TSN asked five top pitchers how they would work to him, and we discovered there were no easy solutions.

■ David Cone, Yankees: "I'm not sure (how to pitch to Griffey). I haven't had a whole lot of success. ... Every mistake I throw, he hits a home run. That doesn't seem fair. He can at least mix in a double every once in a while. He has that classic uppercut swing, and if you make a mistake, he's going to get it in the air. He doesn't have a weakness. You have to mix it up as best you can. When you throw him an off-speed pitch, he can stay on it with his long swing even if he's a little out in front of it. The idea is to get him to look one way, and throw another—to look away and pound him in. One problem is that Seattle's so deep, so it's tough to pitch around him. Either you get Griffey or you get Edgar Martinez. Otherwise, you'd just walk him."

■ Mike Mussina, Orioles: "He's one of those players that you don't want ... up there in an important situation, because you know if you make a mistake, he (will hurt you). You have to really focus on what you're doing when he's at the plate. ... He hits the ball to all fields with power. The situation dictates what you do. He hit .300 (actually .304) with 56 home runs last year. You have to throw him everything. I use everything I have."

■ Chuck Finley, Angels: "I can't tell you (how to pitch to Griffey). What's wrong with you? I might as well mail it to him. ... You don't see many weaknesses in his swing. He makes adjustments well. I don't think any pitcher tries to approach him in a similar manner. How do you get him out? You make great pitches."

■ Roger Clemens, Blue Jays: "The biggest thing about Griff is (his) sweet swing. The reason his swing is so good is it stays in the hitting zone for such a long time. Let's put it this way: You're not supposed to be able to cover both sides of the plate. I know I threw him a fastball inside, bellybutton high, and he hit it out. Then I threw him an even harder one than the cross-seamer, about an inch off the plate down and away, and he hit it to the opposite-field alley over the fence. He can hit the breaking ball, too. He looks for pitches. He's like any other hitter that way. ... Until you have the opportunity to face him in a very meaningful game, like the playoffs, you'll see guys pitch around him. You can't afford to let him beat you. But unlike a guy like (Barry) Bonds, he is surrounded by some very talented people. (Jay) Buhner's got that power, (Alex) Rodriguez has the power, too. It's a tough-hitting lineup where you can't take a deep breath."

he's going to hit doubles. Edgar doubles you to death, and every once in a while hits a home run. They got a good chance of getting Jay out: he chases. But me? They ain't givin' me nothin'. Plus, those guys are righthanded, which is an advantage to them. Being a lefthander is a disadvantage to me.

Q: Why? You see more righthanded pitchers.

A: Take a righty. Jay sees all righties. When they see a righty, it's not going away from them, it's coming in. When I see a lefty, I don't see that. How many lefties do you see growing up?

Q: I'm confused. Don't righthanded pitchers have an advantage against righthanded hitters?

A: A lot has to do with the person in front or behind you. You think I'd get more than one good pitch with Rickey Henderson or Kenny Lofton in front of me? Guys who can run? If nobody is running, what are they going to do? High leg kick. Curves. Changeup. Because (the runner) isn't



"If you look at stats you'll be all messed up. ... I can't be thinking, 'Frank hit one today. I've got to hit one.'"

A: Unless they make a mistake.

Q: They don't bust you in?

A: What's that going to do? That's a ball.

Q: You're looking at outside stuff all the time?

going anywhere. But no, I just show up and play.

Q: Oh.

A: Here's a question: A righthanded pitcher against a lefty, guy on first base, what's he going to throw? Hard stuff or changes and curves all the way to try and get you to roll over on that? To a righty what does he throw? He wants him to pull, so he throws fastballs in. That's why you can't compare me to Jay and Edgar. Here's another question: Do you want me to pull the ball if nobody is on?

Q: No.

A: Does the situation change if somebody is on?

Q: So they always pitch you away?

A: Look where the catcher sets up. He sets up outside. Very seldom inside.

Q: Why not go opposite field all the time?

A: I don't look left field or right field. I look up the middle. He throws it down the middle, I'm looking right there. Throws it away, I'm looking over there. In, I'm looking here. I adjust in and out.

Q: Couldn't you hit .350 if you went the other way more often? Plus hit for power?

A: How can you say that? I use all the field.

Q: Who's going to hit 62 first? You or Mark McGwire?

A: He's 6-6, 250 pounds. His biceps are bigger than my thighs.

Q: You say you don't care about 62 home runs. Why not?

A: If you look at stats you'll be all messed up. All they do is compare you to this guy or that guy. I motivate myself. I can't be thinking, 'Frank hit one today, I've got to hit one.' Or Albert did this, Juan did that, Tino did this, McGwire did that. That's not how I think.

Q: Has the MVP changed your life?

A: Is it supposed to change?

Q: Do you get better tables at restaurants?

A: No. I don't call in with my name.

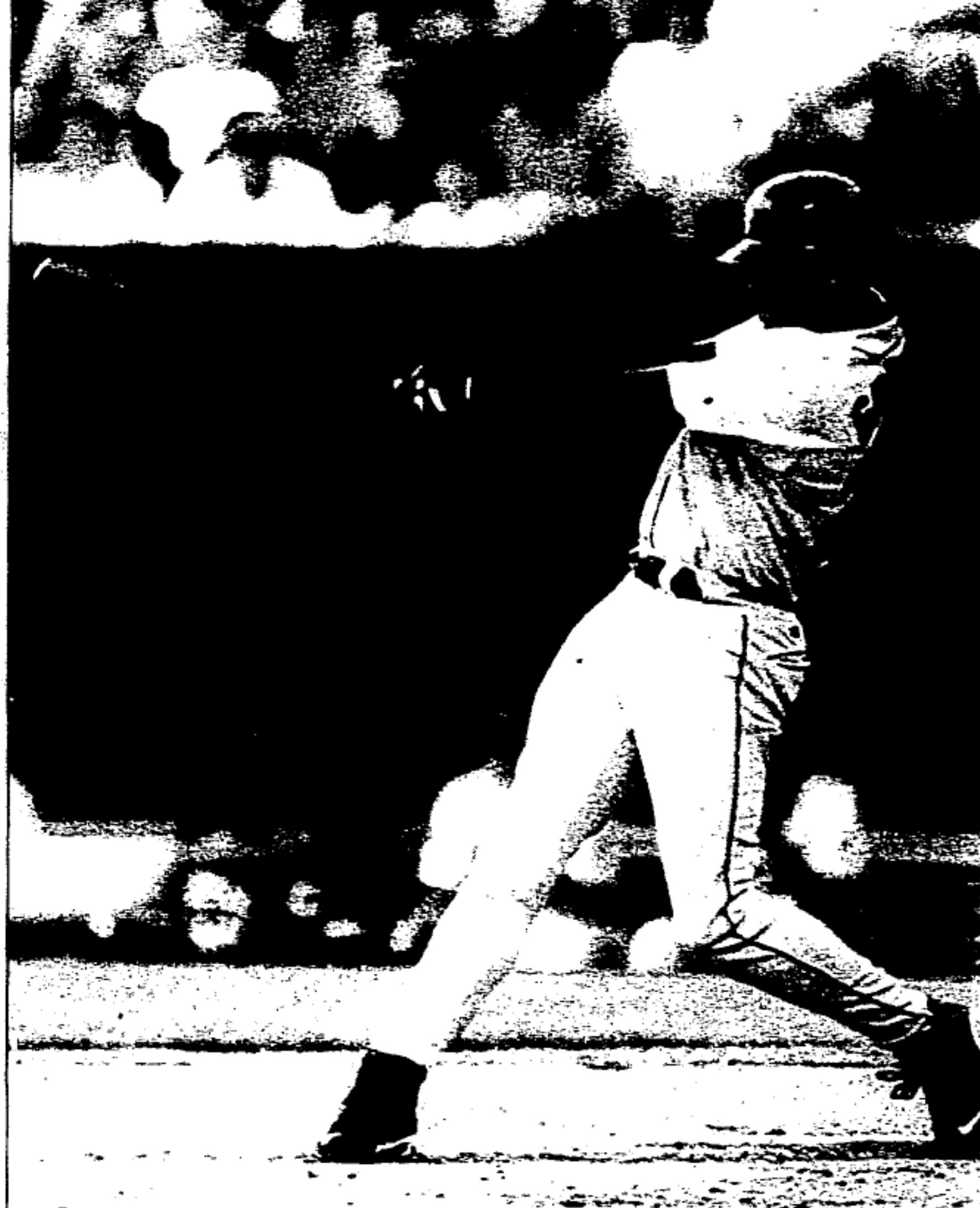
Q: What name do you use?

A: That's a secret.

Q: Can we be serious?

A: No.

Steve Marantz is a senior writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.



A CUT ABOVE: In a nit-picking sense, Griffey's swing has a flaw that makes him vulnerable to an inside pitch—but try telling that to opposing pitchers.

■ Orel Hershiser, Giants: "You can't be too careful facing Griffey because you've got Edgar Martinez, Alex Rodriguez, Jay Buhner and everybody around him. It's one thing to face a great hitter and be careful, but you've got to get him out. The only weakness Ken had was after he hurt his hand. People could see whether it was bothering him. If he checked his swing or took a full swing and he grimaced in pain, then you knew his hand was hurting and you could throw a fastball in, or throw a slow breaking ball because he couldn't generate his own power."