



Get shorty: Whether scooping a ball in the hole or barehanding grounders out of the air, Vizquel has used the postseason as a defensive showcase — with the exception of a Game 1 bobble.

**H**itting comes and goes. Albert Belle can destroy pitching in September, vanish for a week in October, and reappear the next. Same with Jim Thome, Manny Ramirez, Carlos Baeraga and Paul Sorrento. Hitters are Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb today; Duane Kuiper and Bob Uecker tomorrow.

Pitching is fickle. Orel Hershiser can have a 4.11 ERA at the All-Star break and be virtually unhittable in the playoffs. Dennis Martinez can be unbeatable in May and June, mediocre in August and September, and good again in October. Eric Plunk can be Eric Plunk or Eric PLUNK. Eric Plunk me no Eric Plunks.

Fielding is a constant. The Indians won 100 games by virtue of above-average hitting and pitching. But their ordinary defense — unusually sloppy in Games 1 and 2 — is elevated by two extraordinary fielders. Ebb and flow of hitting and pitching matter not to shortstop Omar Vizquel and center fielder **Kenny Lofton**. Their defensive play usually is dependable and occasionally spectacular. Each in his own way, Vizquel and **Lofton** have used the postseason as a showcase.

A World Series can turn on good defense. In Game 4 of the 1960 Series, Pirates center fielder Bill Virdon chased down a drive in right center to kill a Yankee threat; the Pirates won 3-2 and evened the series. Orioles third baseman Brooks Robinson took the Reds out in 1970; his play behind third on Lee May in Game 1 is a highlight-film staple. Yankees third baseman Graig Nettles shut

# The stoppers

## Omar Vizquel and **Kenny Lofton** are the first and last lines of Cleveland's extraordinary middle defense

By STEVE MARANTZ

down the Dodgers in '77. And Chuck Knoblauch, playing at second for the Twins, deked Lonnie Smith into hesitating while rounding second base, costing the Braves a go-ahead run in Game 7 of the '91 Series.

Teams build in various ways. One theory holds that starting pitching is the most important component — the foundation. Second is up-the-middle defense. Third is power at the corners.

"Cleveland has all three," says Roy Smalley, former shortstop, now ESPN analyst. "They are particularly strong in the middle. Vizquel and **Lofton** are as good up the middle as there is. Atlanta has the same thing with Lemke and Grissom, but there aren't too many other teams with equal up-the-middle strength."

Smalley says shortstops, second basemen, center fielders and catchers make 70 percent of assists and putouts. But Vizquel and **Lofton** seem to account for 70 percent by themselves, particularly in the postseason. Vizquel has shown a knack for barehanding ground balls and ranging impossibly far in both directions. **Lofton** not only plays a voracious center but most of left and right as well, shoos Belle and Ramirez out of the way.

**Lofton** goes after home runs, too. In Game 1 of the series against the Mariners, Mike Blowers said he could not relax on his second-inning drive until he saw it clear the outstretched glove of **Lofton**, who had climbed the fence. "It's scary the way that guy gets to everything," Blowers said.

The last out of Game 5 of that series, a 3-2 Indians victory, was typical. Edgar Martinez sent a rope into right center; **Lofton** ran it down and pulled it in just a few feet shy of the fence. Another center fielder might not have gotten to it and Martinez would have been on second with the tying run. Earlier in the game, left fielder Belle flubbed a wind-blown pop that allowed the Mariners' second run to score. Belle made two mistakes on the play: misgauging drift and not getting out of the way of **Lofton**, who had dashed to shallow left to get in position for the catch.

"Do you quarterback calls with Belle and Ramirez?" I ask **Lofton** before Game 1 of the World Series.

"I tell them to get out of the way," he says. "'Get out of the way, here I come. Let the ball go.' Basically, that's my job as center fielder. I'm considered the captain out there. Any ball I can get, it's my job to get."

No less an observer than Vizquel professes amazement at the vast tracts covered by **Lofton**, often to a shortstop's benefit.

"I have a good view of him — he's right behind me," Vizquel says. "What a feeling that is. I know that if I can't get to something in back of me, that he's going to get it. Sometimes I've gone back for a ball and he's right there and I'll say, 'How did you get there?'"

**L**ofton, 28, is the first to admit his 1995 production was disappointing, due, he says, to injuries — lower back, ribcage, hamstring — that limited him to 118 games. His offensive figures —

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
ATLANTA	0	2	1	0	1	2	0	0	0
NY	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	2

Over in New Jersey, Rick Holmes' New York team hung one on his buddy Lou Zantelli's Atlanta team

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.310 average, 7 homers, 53 RBIs, 54 stolen bases — declined from 1994 (112 games, .349, 12 homers, 57 RBIs, 60 stolen bases). Defensively, his fielding percentage dropped from .993 to .970, as his errors increased from two to eight, and his assists dropped from 13 to 11. Nonetheless, his range is unequaled, his arm dangerous, and he is likely to win his third Gold Glove.

During the Mariners series, it was natural to compare Lofton defensively with Ken Griffey Jr. Both turned in solid performances fielding and hitting. Mariners Manager Lou Piniella suggests Lofton plays a more shallow center — reminiscent of former Orioles center fielder Paul Blair. Indians Manager Mike Hargrove gives Griffey a slight edge on arm strength but otherwise equates the two. With that in mind, I approach Lofton.

"How would you describe your arm?"

Lofton is alternately defensive and engaging with media; reporters never know what to expect. This time, an instantaneous reaction.

"I got a cannon, brother."

His arm was "raggedy" when he broke into pro ball, he explains, but he built it up with repetitive long throwing. That process began in 1988, when he was drafted by the Astros out of the University of Arizona, where he played basketball and baseball. The Indians traded for Lofton in 1991 when it became clear he was not going to displace Steve Finley as the Astros' center fielder. Lofton went, as he puts it, "from one last-place team to another," and won the Indians center-field job. He became an immediate force, hitting .285 with 66 stolen bases in his first full season. G.M. John Hart says Indians scouts always believed Lofton would become a complete player.

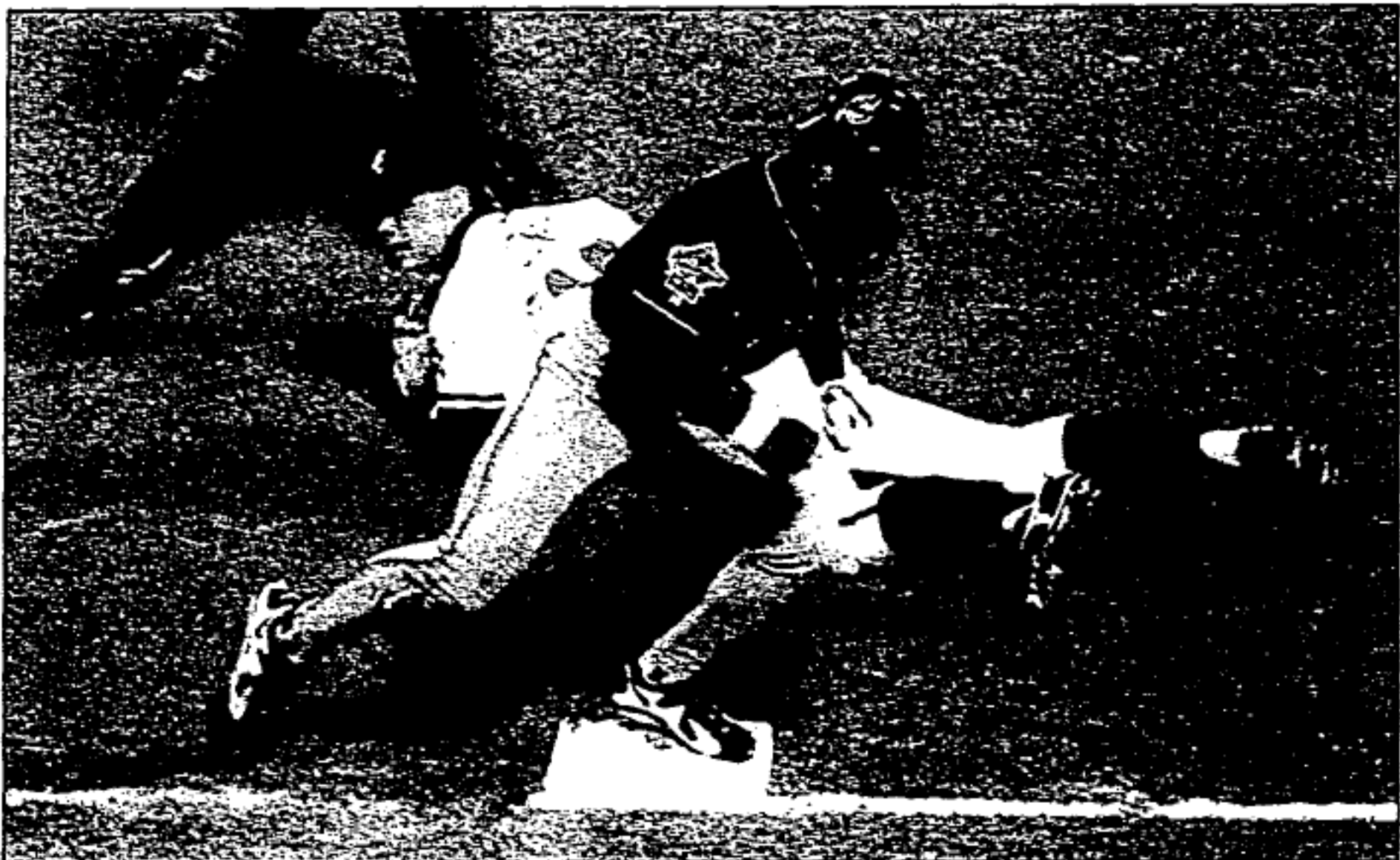
"His talent jumped out at you," Hart says. "Line to line in the outfield. He could run. But he didn't do the things you wanted to see a leadoff hitter do. He didn't take many pitches and he struck out too much. He refined his skills. He became a great bunter, and he built up his arm. Kenny is one of those rare guys with talent who is also an overachiever."

Ultimately, Lofton proved a more potent offensive force in the Mariners series than Griffey. He was on base in 15 of 28 at-bats, and when he reached base, he could not be ignored. His dash from second to home on catcher Dan Wilson's passed ball in Game 6 broke Seattle's back and made an indelible statement about Lofton's nerve. It also served fair warning to the Braves.

"It's very tough to score runs in the playoffs," Lofton says. "You try to get one run here and there somehow in a different fashion. I feel if I get on base we have a good chance to get a run."

Perhaps Lofton's strongest postseason statement has been hitting against and running on the game's best pitchers. He ducked a couple of nasty brushbacks and touched up Randy Johnson for a triple and three singles, demonstrating textbook opposite-field batsmanship. In Game 1 against the Braves, he singled against Greg Maddux, reached on an error and stole twice. His aggressive baserunning led to two Cleveland runs and almost single-handedly neutralized Maddux's two-hitter.

Meanwhile, the most curious event in Game 1 was Vizquel bobbling a routine grounder in the Braves' two-run seventh inning. The bobble turned a possible double play into merely a force at second, setting up Rafael Belliard's sui-



Thoughts of home: Lofton has hurt opponents with his defense, but he also has caused damage by manufacturing runs with his aggressive baserunning. He scored the Indians' only Game 1 run on this forced throwing error.

cide squeeze. Vizquel so often makes the spectacular ordinary that the sight of him mishandling a grounder is, well, spectacular.

"When Omar makes a mistake I always say this," says Alvaro Espinoza, Indians utility infielder and fellow Venezuelan. "Nobody is perfect. Omar is human, too."

At times it has seemed a legitimate question, because human shortstops field with gloves. Vizquel, however, is just as comfortable scooping a ball in the hole with his ungloved right hand or picking a chopper out of the air the same way. In Game 6 of the Mariners series, he barehanded consecutive grounders off the bats of Luis Sojo and Wilson, stopping a potential rally.

Equally theatrical is Vizquel's ability to range over the middle and turn singles into outs. In Game 6 against the Mariners' Alex

## Ball barings

Mariners Manager Lou Piniella opined recently that Omar Vizquel "doesn't need a glove." This seemed hyperbolic, but I decided to ask Vizquel, just to be certain.

"Could you play without a glove?" I ask. "You want me to get hurt or something? I do need the glove."

Vizquel is an accommodating man who fields questions patiently. Once, after making three errors early in his first season with the Indians, he met reporters instead of ducking them. Now, he is a little wary that his skill for barehanded grounders will be perceived as gimmicky and that the substance of his play will be missed.

"Somebody can make 20 errors and still be good," Vizquel says. "It depends on how you make and field the routine balls. A lot of guys can dive and stop a ball, and stop a run, but that doesn't mean they're the best. The best is one who makes the play 99 percent of the time, the routine plays. Talk to any pitcher. They'll tell you they'd rather have a shortstop who makes the routine plays over one who makes spectacular plays."

"What about one who makes both?" I ask.

Vizquel nods agreeably. "That's even better," he says. "If you got one who can do both, you are in the World Series."

—STEVE MARANTZ

Diaz, Vizquel dived to his left, hit the ground, and popped up throwing as though propelled by a trampoline. In Game 1 of the World Series he made a catlike dive on Chipper Jones' first-inning liner to double up Marquis Grissom at second.

"He's as good as they come," Piniella says. "He's the glue to their infield ... he positions himself so well against hitters. He has such a great feel for the game and makes those barehanded plays. He's not as flashy as Barry Larkin, but he makes all the plays and more. He's the kind of guy, when you have him as your shortstop, you feel confident as a pitcher to let them hit it."

Piniella knows whereof he speaks; he had Vizquel when he became Mariners manager in 1993. Vizquel was in his fifth season, about to win his first of two Gold Gloves. But the Mariners had not yet made the monetary commitment to a winning team; in spring 1994, they traded him for Felix Fermin and Reggie Jefferson to contain costs.

The Indians acquired Vizquel to put a finishing defensive touch on their offensive juggernaut. He has been everything they expected defensively, and possibly more. Indians infield coach Buddy Bell says Vizquel's knowledge of hitters' tendencies and his positioning instincts have gone beyond expectations, as has his ability to finish off double plays.

"You watch guys taking ground balls, and the thing about Omar is he's always working his hands," Hart says. "He'll catch a grounder and funnel it to his bare hand. He'll flip the ball. He always wants to have those soft hands going. You see other guys try to imitate it, but they're in slow motion."

Vizquel, 28, who grew up in Caracas, became aware early on of fine Venezuelan shortstops who left marks, among them Chico Carrasquel, who played for the Indians in the 1950s, and the Reds' Dave Concepcion. In Venezuela, Vizquel suggests, infielders "are more fluid to the ball." The reason is coaches are *laissez-faire* about technique, allowing instincts to direct players.

Lofton says Vizquel's range surprised him at first; he saw Vizquel reach balls that he assumed were headed in his direction.

"He doesn't surprise me anymore," Lofton says. "Playing with him every day you see plays that make you open your eyes a little bit ... it seems like if it's hit Omar is going to get to it, somehow."

Steve Marantz is a senior writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.

## Staying power

Do hot starts matter? In the past five seasons they have.

Of the 30 division races since 1997, the team in first place on May 4 has won the division 21 times—70 percent of the time.

Of the nine teams leading in early May that did not go on to win their division:

■ Five were from last season, a year in which only the Mariners, who won a record-tying 116 games, jumped out front early and stayed there.

■ Four were from the N.L. West, where only the Padres in 1998 won the crown after leading on May 4.

■ One of the nine, the 2000 Mariners, came within one-half game of beating out the A's, who were in second place May 4. The A's finished 91-70, the Mariners were 91-71. Because both teams qualified for the postseason, there was not a playoff. —*Jim Meier*

Hernandez, and your hitters are not intimidated," Phillies righthander Terry Adams says. "You hear guys in the dugout saying, 'We can get this guy. Let's go.' Then you get to the seventh inning, and they've got you down, 3-1."

The problem is not the one but the three; it's not enough. Don't be shocked if the Giants use some of their pitching depth—Kurt Ainsworth was sent to the minors despite a 1.69 ERA to make room for Jason Schmidt—to trade for some offense.

## In arm's way

A dreadful road trip (4-9) spiraled the Cardinals from first to third in the N.L. Central. Not even a stop in Milwaukee helped. Indeed, a four-game sweep at the hands of the Brewers is as frightening to St. Louisans as Whitey Herzog bungee-jumping from the Arch wearing nothing but a thong, but it happened. The sweep, that is.

"St. Louis is doing us all a favor by letting us all stay in it now," Astros closer Billy Wagner says. "But they're obviously the best team with all those veteran pitchers."

The Cardinals' struggles have been blamed on pitching, which figured to be a strength. The offense hasn't been stellar, but the pitching staff has been a mess.

Last season, the Cardinals used nine different starters. They passed that number this season in April. At one point, an entire rotation—Rick Ankiel, Andy Benes, Bud Smith, Garrett Stephenson and Woody Williams—was on the disabled list. The team hopes Ankiel's bum elbow will be well enough for him to start a rehab assignment later this month. Benes won't return. Besides his creaky knee, he has been unable to shake a career-threatening case of the bad fastballs. The rest are expected back by June.

For the National League's most talented team, coming out of April with a sub-.500 record was a disaster—albeit one that can be overcome.

Even when the rotation is whole, a turnaround will take clever bullpen management from manager Tony La Russa. With the starters averaging slightly more than five innings per outing, worst in the league, it will be important to limit relievers' innings so their arms don't break down late in the season.

Cardinal relievers downplay how much they are being used. "Even if you've thrown 100 pitches in the past three days, you're still ready to pitch," Mike Timlin says. "Guys in the pen hardly ever think they are overworked. We're just bred that way. What we're



**Hernandez is on pace for a career year, thanks in part to improved control.**

going through now is just part of the baseball season."

The team hopes that with Matt Morris, Darryl Kile and Williams healthy, the rotation will have three innings-eaters who can give the bullpen a break.

"Then, we'll sit out there and be bored for seven, eight innings," righthander Gene Stechschulte says. "We might as well take our innings now."

## Kenny's back

As **Lofton** warmed up in the on-deck circle before his first game back in Cleveland, a video tribute of

**Lofton** played on the scoreboard. **Kenny** running, **Kenny** catching, **Kenny** hitting. Something's missing ... what could it be ... **Kenny** doing those things with the White Sox. His strong start after signing in the offseason comes after two down seasons in Cleveland, where his average dropped from .301 in 1999 to .261 last season.

Even before new Indians center fielder Milton Bradley arrived from the Expos last season, **Lofton** was a goner. He was paid a hefty \$8 million in 2001, which made him all the more expendable because of the payroll purge ordered by owner Larry Dolan.

**Lofton** has used the nearly \$7 million pay cut as motivation. "He has tremendous pride. He wanted to prove to people he's not done," Indians general manager Mark Shapiro says.

Also, **Lofton** is healthy, which he credits in part to taking up yoga. He was beaten up the last three years, from a torn rotator cuff to hamstring, calf and back injuries. Because of those previous ailments, it will be important for the White Sox to manage his time, especially considering his history of hot starts and subsequent struggles. **Lofton** hit .320 through May 5 last season, then batted .251 the rest of the way. So far, he has resisted the club's efforts to rest him, playing in 29 of the team's first 30 games.

"I thought he'd hit .300. I didn't doubt that. Kenny's skills as a hitter have not declined," Shapiro says. "I am surprised he's running as well as he has. He's been running very well so far."

**Lofton's** hot start has helped put the White Sox in a battle for first place in the A.L. Central. With questions surrounding the stability of the team's rotation, the one-two punch of **Lofton** and Ray Durham, leading into big boppers Frank Thomas and Magglio Ordonez, will be crucial in the White Sox's attempts to finish ahead of the Twins.

"Kenny's been a huge help," says Durham, who also is off to a strong start. "When he gets on, (pitchers) have to spend a lot of time watching what he's doing. They usually have to slide-step to the plate, and I've gotten a lot of good pitches to hit." **TSN**

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## They won't be a shock

When the season is over, some developments won't be surprising at all.

- Mark Buehrle follows up his solid rookie campaign with a Cy Young Award. Chicago wins the A.L. Central.
- Injuries and walks plague Barry Bonds' season as he belts "only" 42 home runs. The Giants win the wild card.
- Ken Griffey Jr., recovered from a knee injury, ends the season with 44 homers. The Reds fall out of contention anyway.
- Rangers pitcher **Kenny** Rogers is named comeback player of the year. It isn't enough to pull the Rangers out of the cellar.
- Under the tutelage of Frank Robinson and Andres Galarraga, Vladimir Guerrero wins the N.L. MVP. The Expos' last season in Montreal is punctuated by a fourth-place finish.
- For the first time in his career, Sammy Sosa knocks out more than 60 home runs (64, to be exact) and wins the home run title.
- Detroit wins 60 games, but Kansas City finishes with the worst record in the majors, 58-104.
- Managers Don Baylor, Larry Bowa and Buck Martinez finish the season before their teams do. —*Jeff Paur*