

# This is Edgar Martinez

Nothing comes easy for Seattle's biggest hit, especially attention



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The Mariners' wild-card drive is gathering force late in August. In Fenway Park's visiting clubhouse a player dresses while watching an overhead TV. A video cassette shows Red Sox righthander Erik Hanson on the mound, at the Kingdome, 10 days prior. Hanson kicks and delivers. Calmly, a righthanded batter strokes a home run to left, second level. Edgar Martinez watches Edgar Martinez circle the bases. Baseball as virtual reality.

"You made it look easy," I say to him.

Dark eyes blink stoically.

"It's never easy," Edgar Martinez says.

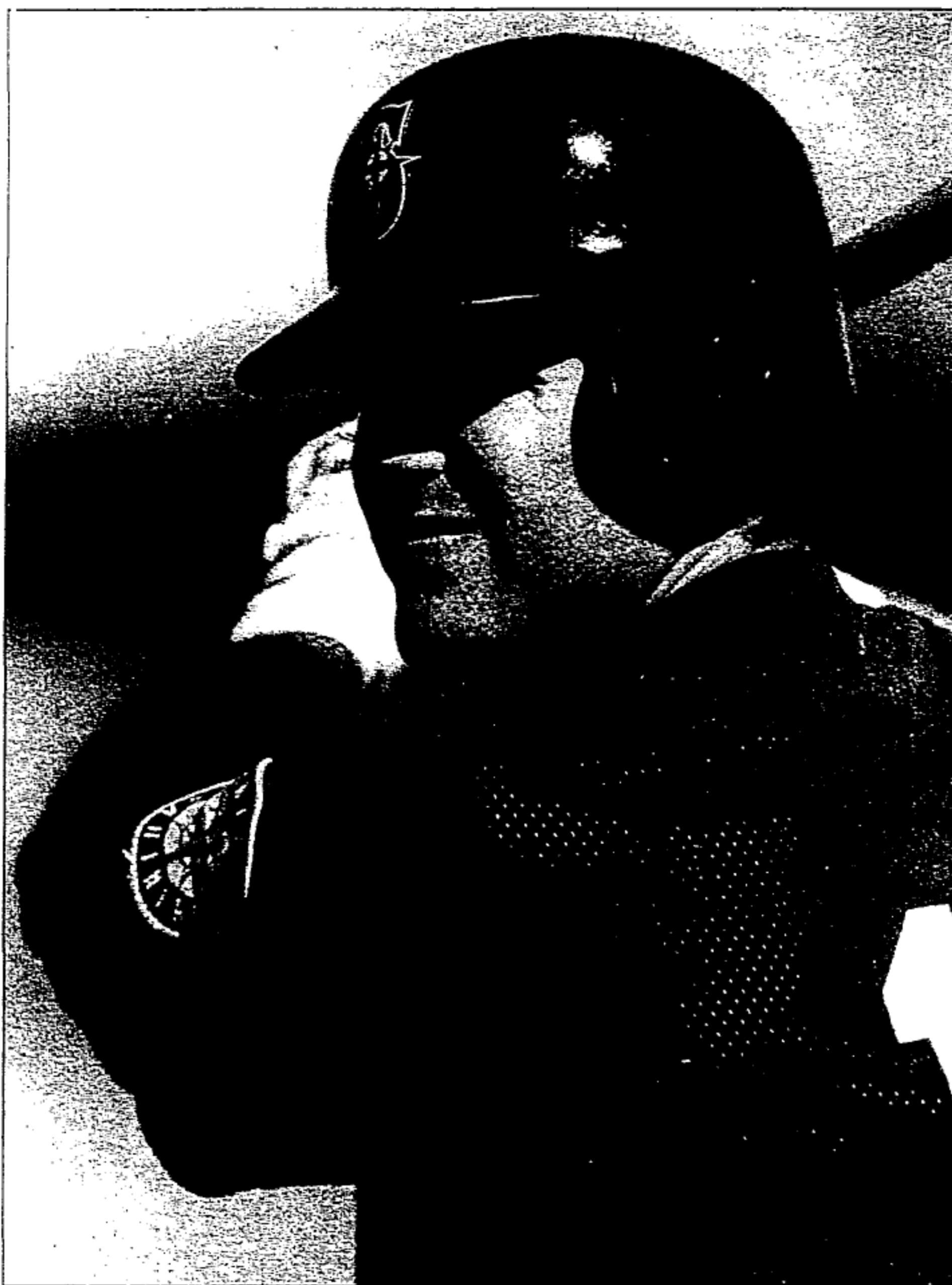
His brief reply could be the Mariners' battle cry in this, their first playoff race. Nothing ever has come easy for a 19-year-old franchise too often a butt of jokes. Even now, they are having trouble drawing fans to the Kingdome during a break-out season. But to watch Martinez bat, and to talk to him, is to gaze upon the surface of a still lake. His demeanor is meditative, monkish; he projects a hypnotic tranquility. But pitchers know this to be a trap: Martinez's bat is a silent and deadly serpent.

"He is," Mariners Manager Lou Piniella says, "the epitome of a professional hitter."

For an epitome, he is remarkably obscure. Martinez is not even a household name in his own household: eight out of 10 fans probably could not say for whom he plays. This may be because his surname is common in baseball, the Mariners are on the fringe of the baseball universe, and two teammates — Griffey and Johnson — attract most of the attention.

So when Martinez climbed to the top of the batting charts early this season, fans thumbed madly through baseball dictionaries, looking for a clue. What they found is this: Martinez, 32, born in New York, raised in Puerto Rico, won a permanent spot on the Mariners in 1990. Playing third base when he came up (he is now primarily a designated hitter), Martinez hit .302 and .307 in his first two full seasons; won the 1992 American League batting title with a .343 average; and after a spring-training injury was limited to 42 games in '93 and 89 games last season. He makes a \$3-million salary, owns a thriving embroidery business near Seattle, is married, father of a son, and is self-taught in English.

A former batting champion comes with portfolio, yet some wondered if he were a one-season aberration. Detroit's Norm Cash won the 1961 A.L. batting title with a .361 average, but never hit .300 again and retired af-



Plain view: To most fans outside of Seattle, the top hitter in the American League remains a mystery man. But pitchers know Edgar when they see him, and by now they know it's wisest to put him on base.

ter 17 years with a .271 career average.

One thing is certain: Martinez is no Norm Cash. Martinez played in the Puerto Rican League last winter while others were on strike. When the strike ended, his eye was sharp and his body conditioned. He started quickly, gradually moved ahead in the batting race, and as of last week still was hovering around .360. No righthanded A.L. hitter has topped .360 since Joe DiMaggio in 1939.

Martinez also is hovering near a .500 on-base percentage, a feat accomplished just 11 times, five by Babe Ruth, made all the more remarkable by his lack of speed. He is contending for the A.L. lead in doubles and RBIs, and is on pace to hit at least 30 home runs, 18 being his previous high.

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Most unexpected is the power. At 5 feet 11 and 190 pounds, Martinez is a tad smaller than Jeff Bagwell, an undersized power hitter who compensates with Popeye forearms. Martinez has been lifting for a few years, widening his back and thickening his arms and legs.

"He's one of these guys who the more clothes he takes off the bigger he gets," says Lee Elia, the Mariners' hitting coach. "His back and forearms are very strong. He generates a lot of power out of his legs. The thing I admire about him is he doesn't have a hole in his hitting area. He doesn't swing at bad pitches, and he uses the whole field to hit."

Says Hanson, a former teammate: "The only way to pitch him is to put him on base. Walk him. I've chal-

lenged him twice this year — two home runs."

Piniella likens Martinez to Tony Oliva, a lefthanded hitter who won three batting titles for the Twins in the 1960s and '70s, led the A.L. in doubles four times, drove in more than 90 runs five times, and had 220 homers in 15 seasons. Like Oliva, Martinez hits to all fields. But Oliva never walked more than 55 times; Martinez may top 125.

Martinez is gratified at the comparison, but he is quick to say that his inspiration as a youth was Roberto Clemente. The first World Series that held Martinez's attention, in 1971, was Clemente's showcase, a seven-game Pirates victory over the Orioles. Clemente returned to Puerto Rico a hero; young Edgar was enthralled.

"When I saw Clemente play, it got into my mind that I want to play in a World Series, too," Martinez says. "I used to play stickball and imagine myself pitching in a World Series."

"Is it too early to think about the World Series?" I ask.

"I have," Martinez says. "I think about it, even if it is early."

If the Mariners win the wild card, then Martinez's MVP candidacy will be enhanced. But baseball writers who vote may be hesitant about a D.H., the thinking being that a fielder contributes more. Jim Rice won the 1978 MVP award after being D.H. in 49 games, and Don Baylor won it the next year after being D.H. in 69 games. Martinez has been D.H. in all but 5 of the Mariners' games.

"I can't see why he shouldn't be (MVP)," Elia says. "Who can you say is having a better season?"

Mo Vaughn, Albert Belle, Tim Salmon, Jim Edmonds, Gary Gaetti and Ivan Rodriguez are full-time players with a claim on the award. Those in large markets on division-winning teams have an edge.

"Realistically," Piniella says, "we play in a small market and the team hasn't had much success in the past."

Martinez shrugs, unperturbed. "So many good players are deserving," he says. "Mo Vaughn's team is in first place and he is

having a great year. Jim Edmonds from California. I can't think about that. I'm just concentrating on doing my job and hopefully getting into the playoffs."

Should the Mariners get into the World Series, Piniella will have a decision more difficult than the MVP vote — where to play Martinez in the games in which there is no D.H. (one is allowed in A.L. home games only). It's a dilemma that didn't stop Toronto in 1993, when D.H. Paul Molitor won the World Series MVP award. Martinez can play first as well as third, but third baseman Blowers and first baseman Tino Martinez swing potent bats.

"We'd find a way to get his bat in the lineup, believe me," Piniella says.

As Edgar Martinez would say, it's never easy.

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**Ken Rosenthal**

## Martinez keeps the hits coming despite eye disorder

**E**dgar **Martinez** was in a panic. He was losing sight of pitches. He appeared headed to the disabled list. He told the Mariners' eye specialist, Dr. Douglas Nikaitani, that he might retire.

"We were concerned that if the ball was thrown at his head or his face, he wouldn't be able to get out of the way," team trainer Rick Griffin says.

The episode occurred in May 1999. Frightening as it was, it was not the first time **Martinez**'s vision had failed him during his distinguished career that was then in its 13th year. Nor would it be the last. **Martinez**, 38, suffers from strabismus, an abnormality that prevents his eyes from working in tandem. The condition causes his right eye to drift out intermittently, forcing him to use only his left.

Nikaitani, the optometrist who detected the problem more than a decade ago when **Martinez** was in the minor leagues, says it's "a miracle" that **Martinez** has overcome his eye trouble to become one of the best hitters in baseball. Though Nikaitani says he knows of no other major leaguer with the abnormality, "it probably happens more often than we know," says Dr. Michael Repka, associate professor at the Wilmer Institute of The Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Repka says that strabismus is exacerbated by fatigue and worsens with age, presenting an especially difficult challenge for an older athlete such as **Martinez**.

"He is basically one-eyed at times," Nikaitani says. "His (right) eye doesn't want to go straight. He has the ability to pull the eye in and maintain it. But when the eye goes out, he loses depth perception and the ability to see a change in velocity in pitches."

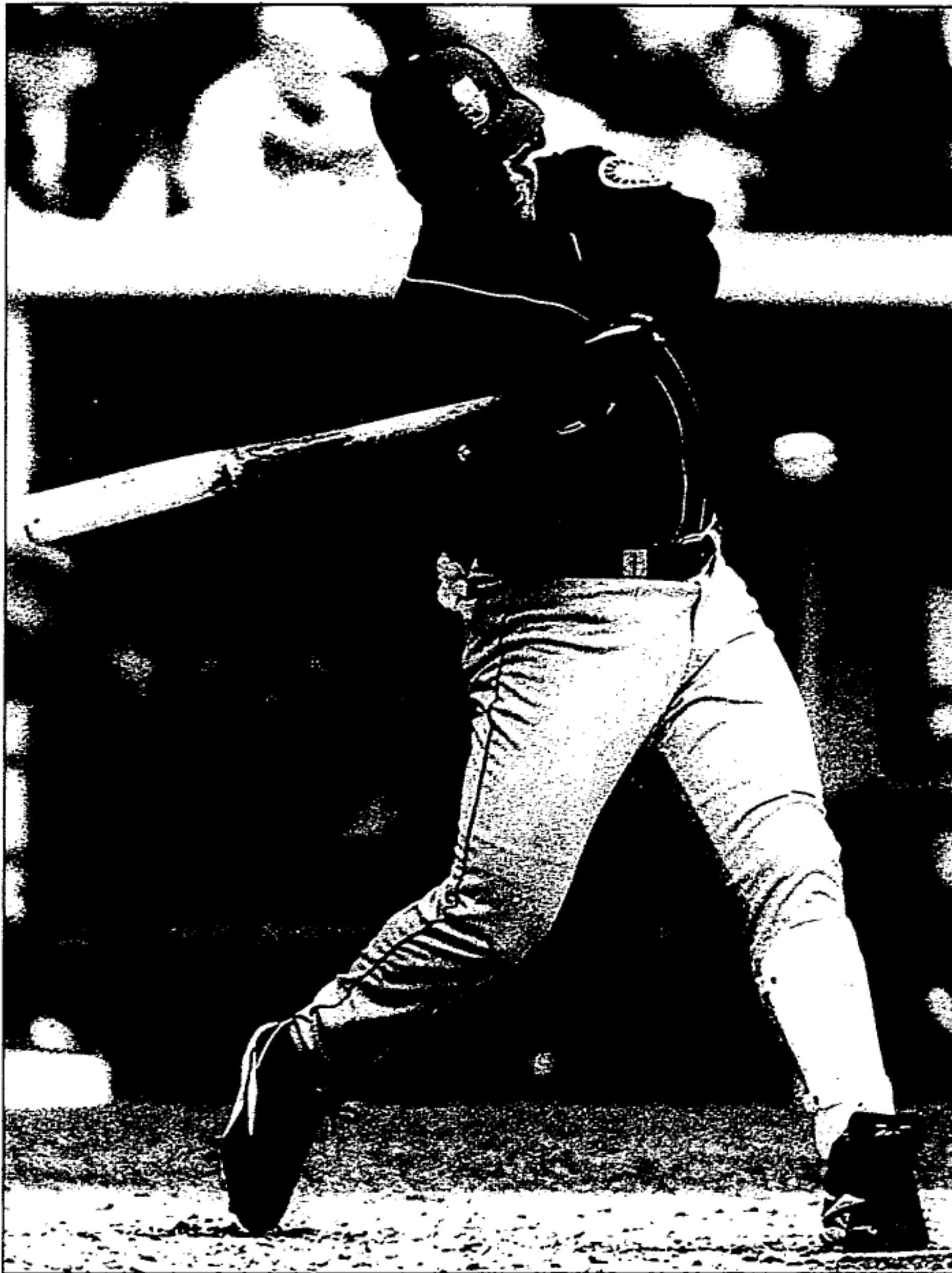
**Martinez**, one of the game's hardest workers, lifts weights, studies video and hits relentlessly in batting cages. He also performs eye exercises as part of his daily pregame routine.

"I couldn't play at this level without them," he says.

The exercises take nearly 30 minutes to complete and help keep **Martinez**'s eyes working together. Still, he sometimes requires special sessions with Nikaitani to stabilize his vision.

May 1999 was one of those times. **Martinez** couldn't pick up the ball after it left the pitcher's hand.

"You could see the ball from the release point, then all of a sudden you'd lose it," **Martinez** says. "Other times, you would think it is one place, but



SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: **Martinez** sometimes can't tell exactly where the ball is.

it's not exactly there. It could be close and appear to be a little farther."

**Martinez** had learned to duck his head and tuck his shoulder to protect his hands against those infrequent pitches that he lost in midflight. But if he consistently could not see the ball, what then?

The Mariners had a day off on May 16. **Martinez** wanted Nikaitani to visit him at home, fearing his career was "getting close" to the end.

"I tried everything," he says. "I was doing everything I always did to prepare myself. But still, it wasn't enough."

Whenever **Martinez**'s average drops, Nikaitani jokingly tells his wife, "Edgar's going to call soon." But in this case, he knew he needed to act quickly to keep **Martinez** off the D.L. and salvage his career.

Nikaitani put up his usual charts on the walls of the **Martinez** home and asked **Edgar** to fuse the targets. Then he started throwing tennis balls at **Edgar**, forcing him to bat them away as he continued the exercise.

"His wife thought I was crazy," Nikaitani says. "His little son was picking up all the balls."

Next, Nikaitani put his martial-arts skills to work, forcing **Martinez** to block his kicks and punches while still fusing targets. Then, out of the blue, the optometrist began shouting math problems.

"I was stressing him to the max, giving him things to distract him under pressure," Nikaitani says. "I had to make it harder than a baseball game. I was trying to break him."

**Martinez** survived and remained on the active roster. The next night, he hit two homers against the Twins. The night after that, he hit three.

**Martinez** told reporters that he had changed his hitting mechanics. Only last week, in an interview with TSN, was he willing to reveal the rest of the story.

"I felt different," he said. "I could see the ball more. I was able to pick up the rotation. I still will lose pitches at times. But I felt I was improving, back to where I wanted to be again."

How much better would **Martinez** be with normal vision? He's the only major leaguer to hit .320 or better in each of the past six seasons. And he's coming off career highs of 37 homers and 145 RBIs last season—the latter total a record for a player 37 or older.

"He's the best hitter I've ever seen, period," says **Martinez**'s former teammate, Yankees first baseman Tino **Martinez**. "He can break down a pitcher, get the pitch he wants from any pitcher, then kill it. He can do whatever he wants with any pitch, anywhere in the zone."

That is, as long as he is seeing properly.

**Martinez**'s longtime teammates are aware of his condition. Jay Buhner sometimes teases him,

saying, "Are you going to show me your eye?" But joking aside, Nikaitani says that **Martinez**'s battle to overcome strabismus has proved beneficial to his career.

"This is my theory: **Edgar** has lasted this long because he has had the discipline to really work on his eyes so that they're not a weak link," Nikaitani says. "A lot of players, when they hit their 30s, they can't read velocity as well, can't see the rotations of balls. With **Edgar**, because we've been doing this so long, he's able to maintain a high level of ability."

A higher level than almost anyone with two strong eyes could achieve. **TSN**

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