

Our view of the week

Good call

When the National League last week skipped over four senior umpires in hiring crew chiefs for this season, it marked not only a major break from past practice but an important push toward placing proficiency over longevity.

League president Len Coleman had three crew-chief openings and bypassed Eric Gregg, Joe West, Charlie Williams and Bob Davidson for Jerry Crawford, Randy Marsh and Steve Rippley.

The common thread connecting the four who were passed over is that their umpiring ability is mediocre at best: the three chosen are highly regarded in league circles for their ability.

Although seniority is not the only factor, it long has been the most important one in determining crew chiefs. The seven crew chiefs in the N.L. last season were the seven umpires who had worked in the league the longest. Crew chiefs receive an extra \$7,500 per year, but the prestige of the position is more significant to umpires than the salary increase.

A secondary issue: By not picking Gregg or Williams,



YER OUT! Gregg's umpiring ability may have cost him.

Coleman passed up a chance to hire the majors' first black crew chief at a time when baseball is pushing to promote minorities.

Coleman, who is black, isn't worried about a backlash, nor should he be.

In this case, he got the call right; he should stick to it.



My turn/Bill Plaschke

The man in the gold mask

Mike Piazza's leadership is not the issue. With his stats and his stamina, how can the Dodgers let him get away?

The baseball cynics say none of these guys is worth it.

Mike Piazza is worth it.

They say there is not a player alive anymore who can carry a team for an entire summer.

Mike Piazza has done it.

They say it is impossible to find a big star today who understands about paying the price.

Mike Piazza understands.

In 1988, after being drafted by the Dodgers in the 62nd round as a favor to family friend Tom Lasorda, the 19-year-old **Piazza** went to the Dodgers baseball academy in the Dominican Republic.

He wasn't ordered to go. He wasn't even supposed to go. The camp is only for young Dominicans.

He went anyway, paid his way, stayed two months, sleeping in cramped dorms, getting sick on strange food, living like a pauper so he could learn about the game's riches.

"I still think about that sometimes," **Piazza** says.

Baseball cynics say owners will balk before making someone the first \$100 million player.

Half the teams would sign **Mike Piazza** for that much money right now if he were available.

And in seven months, he could be.

Meet baseball's hottest property, sizzling across America this summer with his shampoo-commercial hair and Popeye arms and trend-setting mustache.

Meet that rarest of baseball commodities, the person who defies all stereotypes about the modern star.

Mike Piazza is so good, he is the anti-cynic.

And if you don't think that is worth something, just watch.

While his main job involves catching for the Dodgers, this year, **Piazza** will have another task, that of holding both leagues hostage while he figures out his future.

If the Dodgers don't re-sign him before the end of the season, he will become a free agent.

If Rupert Murdoch doesn't officially buy the team and get his act together before then—a growing possibility with each day—then **Piazza** will not be re-signed.

Which means he hits the market this winter. Which means an event previously matched in California only when a bunch of old bearded guys heard someone yell, "Gold!"

The only teams interested in signing him would want someone containing a little bit of what Mark McGwire and Ken Griffey Jr. and Larry Walker and Frank Thomas can do



LOVE OF MIKE: Whether or not it's the Dodgers, some team is going to pay—a lot—for Piazza's production.

... while spending 140 games a year crouched behind home plate.

In other words, just about everybody.

Only one National League player—Barry Bonds—has more MVP votes than **Piazza** in this decade. And **Piazza** has never won the award.

Can you imagine **Mike Piazza** in Colorado? How about Yankee Stadium?

When he is not on the disabled list, he will play 150 games a year. He has four consecutive non-strike season totals of at least 32 home runs and 93 RBIs.

And last September, when many other Dodgers were contributing to their annual collapse? **Piazza** was hitting .406 with eight home runs and 27 RBIs in September.

But that leads to the question

that Murdoch's people will soon ponder: Why give \$100 million to someone who hasn't led his team to a World Series ... or even one playoff win?

Some feel **Piazza** lacks proper leadership qualities, sometimes worrying about his own statistics ahead of the team's. He has been accused of ruining victory celebrations by bemoaning his own poor play.

And your point is ...?

If you can get a catcher to play that many games and drive in that many runs, why can't we just let him do that?

Why can't the leader be somebody who doesn't have the team on his back and his head in a mask?

If the Dodgers don't sign him because they are worried about his leadership, then they deserve their probable post-**Piazza** finish of last place.

If Murdoch doesn't plan on re-signing **Piazza** for any reason, then he shouldn't complete the purchase of the team.

"You lead according to your personality," **Piazza** said after an early spring game. "Guys can smell a fake. For me to be a rah-rah guy, that's not me. I lead other ways."

Piazza had just caught nine innings, without complaint, in the third exhibition game. Some stars don't play nine innings in any spring game.

Piazza had just eluded hordes of autograph seekers not to go pose for some photo layout, but to run wind sprints on a back lot with the minor league catchers.

"Snuck out again," said a cynical fan.

Fooled 'em again, said the catcher's smile.

TSN

Bill Plaschke is a columnist for the Los Angeles Times and writes a monthly column for THE SPORTING NEWS.

Sound bite 'You cannot strike your boss and still hold your job—unless you play in the NBA.'

—NBA commissioner David Stern, after the Latrell Sprewell ruling.

BASEBALL REPORT

Piazza's attitude and discipline keep him on top



Bob
NIGHTENGALE

He was Tommy's boy. It didn't matter that it was his youngest brother, and not he, who was Dodgers Manager Tom Lasorda's godson. It didn't matter that he warranted a chance because of his skills. Or that he already had the finest hitting mechanics in the organization the day he became a Dodger.

He still was considered Tommy's boy and dearly paid the price.

He was ostracized by some of the minor league coaches, shunned by a few administrators and ridiculed by some of his minor league teammates.

It got so bad playing in Class-A Vero Beach (Florida State) in 1990 that he up and quit. Went home. He was tired of being castigated for his father's relationship with Lasorda, and thought enough was enough.

"He went through some tough times, boy," Lasorda says. "I was just hoping and praying they would leave him alone. I knew he could do it if given the opportunity because he was on such a mission."

"My God, now would you look at him."

Today, Mike Piazza just so happens to be the greatest catcher in baseball.

Only in America.

"I prayed to the good Lord that he would make my son a big-league ballplayer, but who ever dreamed this?" Vince Piazza says. "I mean, there's only two professional ballplayers that ever came out of Norristown, Pa. One

is a manager. The other is my son. And they're on the same ballclub.

"You talk about believing in faith."

Mike Piazza, who has batted .319 with 59 homers and 204 RBIs the last two seasons, proves every day that this is no accident.

Do you know where he was on New Year's Eve? He was in a basement batting cage, swinging at pitch after pitch, perspiring profusely, and he couldn't have cared less about Dick Clark and Times Square.

Do you know where he is each day after Dodgers spring training games? Standing in the batting cage for at least another hour, swinging until his hands are sore.

Do you know where he is each morning? On the field with catching instructor Mike Scioscia, working to improve his defensive skills.

Piazza shrugs his massive shoulders, and laughs softly at this obsessive behavior. People don't understand. Most never will.

They see him playing cameo roles on "Married ... with Children" or "Baywatch." They see him as a guest on MTV. They see him playing golf with Charles Barkley. They see him being mobbed for autographs in the Forum Club at Lakers games. They see him hanging out with Rocket Ismail. They see him sliding home on ESPN commercials.

What they don't see is his heart and desire, instrumental in transforming a 62nd-round draft choice into the finest catcher in the game.

"I'll never take this game for granted, never," Piazza says. "I've worked too hard to get here. It's something I've always been taught, and lived by. I know this can be gone as easily as it came."

Piazza, drafted by the Dodgers only as a favor to his father, is considered a celebrity now. Even in Hollywood, where you're taught to act cool around stars, the guidelines are forgotten when it comes to Piazza.

Men want to be seen next to him. Women want to go out with him. Kids idolize him.

There have been at least a dozen letters sent to the offices of the Beverly Hills Sports



Unspoiled star: You can't tag Piazza with the label of being lazy and unappreciative. Fans don't see the hours of work he puts into his craft.

Council from women informing Piazza that they've named their babies after him. One woman has his name on her license plate. One woman in Bakersfield, Calif., even named her horse after him.

The adulation, the goofy way people act when they see him, Piazza says, is flattering. It's nice to be recognized as an honest-to-goodness celebrity at 26.

"But what people forget," Piazza says, "is that I'm only known because of my success on the ballfield. Nobody knew who I was three years ago. I used to walk across this (spring-training) complex when I was in the minors, and nobody would ever stop me for my autograph."

Dodgers scout Mel Didier says: "I was involved in a recent survey, and they asked me if I could pick any player in the National League to start a team, who would I pick."

"I thought about it, went over every player on every team, and came up with only one guy: Mike Piazza. He is that good."

In these days of self-promotions, marketing strategies and photo opportunities, it's gratifying to see a kid who still reveres the game of baseball.

"You know something," Piazza says, "I got a \$15,000 bonus when signed. If they had asked, I would have paid them. This game means everything to me, and I'm not about to cheat it."

Back in form

It's nice to see that Mitch Williams is back.

In his first outing against the Giants, he sent two batters to the hospital. He plunked J.R. Phillips, who was X-rayed for a possible broken wrist. And he hit Jeff Reed, who was X-rayed for a possible broken finger.

As an added bonus, Williams threw two wild pitches.

"I played golf with the guy," Angels teammate Chuck Finley says, "and he's everything I thought he would be. His swing is violent. He drank Coke hard. He throws hard. He's out of control, but he's fun to be around. The nice thing is he's a lefthander, so all of that is

normal."

Rising in the West?

The Padres and Mariners are sharing much more than a spring-training facility this year. The two small-market clubs believe they're legitimate contenders.

"We had the best record in the (N.L. West) over the last 75 games," Padres G.M. Randy Smith says, "and we have a much better club now than we did then. I do think we have a chance to win a very competitive division. I think the Dodgers, Rockies and Giants have received a wakeup call."

Mariners Manager Lou Piniella says: "I'm not going to make the same mistake I did last year when I predict-

ed we'd win (the A.L. West) and maybe put too much pressure on the kids. No expectations this time. I just want them to go out and play. I'm confident they'll play well. I don't think there's too many clubs in the American League that can field a better lineup on a daily basis."

Around the bases

Why didn't the small-market Pirates bid on David Cone? "We can't even afford an ice-cream cone," Pirates Manager Jim Leyland says. ... The Red Sox desperately are trying to trade for Angels starter Chuck Finley (who will make \$4.5 million this year), and the Angels are listening. ... White Sox first

baseman Frank Thomas says he wants to stay in the No. 3 spot this season. "The three-hole is where I've been and where I'll be," Thomas says. "Babe Ruth hit third. Hank Aaron hit third, too." He's comparing himself to the Bambino? "I didn't mean it that way. I really didn't. I am just the same kind of hitter as they were." Oh. ... One of the best-kept secrets in baseball is Jeff Maultsby, Class-A Vero Beach assistant general manager. If baseball is serious about dramatically improving its woeful minority hiring practices, there's no reason Maultsby shouldn't be an assistant farm director or an administrator for a major league club next season. ... Twins outfielder Kirby

Puckett says unless the Twins are competitive this season, he'll exercise the option on his contract after this season. Yet, what other team will pay him \$6 million a year? ... Starter Curt Schilling is causing concern in the Phillies' camp. He has a tender right elbow, the same pain he felt last season when he started 0-7. ... The slowest team in the big leagues this season may be the Angels after the trade of Chad Curtis. Their nine projected starters stole only 32 bases last season. ... The Rockies opened in 1993 with an expansion payroll of \$8 million, nearly \$2 million less than they will pay free agents Bill Swift and Larry Walker in 1995. ... The Astros are try-

ing to dump off Luis Gonzalez or Phil Plantier so they can have an outfield of Gonzalez or Plantier in left, Derek Bell in right and rookie Brian Hunter in center.

Bob Nightengale covers the Dodgers for the Los Angeles Times.

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Insider

Peter Schmuck

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



MARK LENIHAN / AP

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

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

Subway Series, anyone?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Budig steps up

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

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

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

Peter Schmuck covers baseball for the Baltimore Sun. E-mail him at schmuck@sportingnews.com.

Much ado about J.D. Drew

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

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

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

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



ANDY KING / ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS

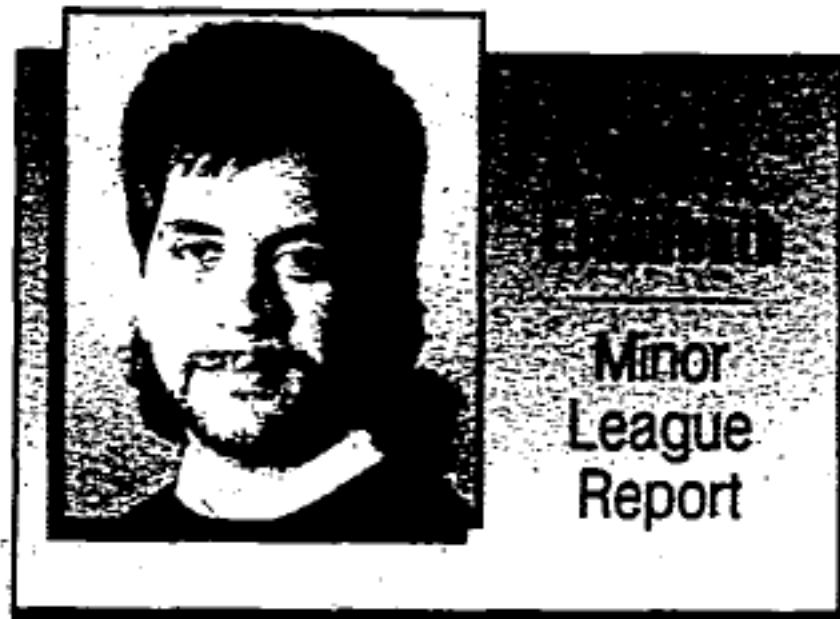
DREW: He seems a pawn in a crusade to end the draft.

BASEBALL

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

MINORS

Godfather knows all about this prospect



A few years ago, Alex Fernandez was pitching for the University of Miami and was called one of the country's top college pitchers. He transferred to a junior college, Miami-Dade North, for quicker exposure to the major league draft. The White Sox picked him in the first round.

Mike Piazza followed a similar path into pro ball. Miami to Miami-Dade North because of draft aspirations.

"Alex got a little more publicity than I did when I transferred," Piazza jokes.

Piazza's time might be near, however.

Piazza, 23, gained a spot on the Triple-A All-Star squad after an outstanding first half as the catcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers' affiliate in the Pacific Coast League, the Albuquerque Dukes. He actually started the season at Double-A San Antonio (Texas), where he batted .377 and quickly gained a promotion. He is batting .356 for the Dukes in 50 games, with 12 home runs and 39 RBIs. Combined, he has 20 home runs and 66 RBIs this year.

Piazza generally has been steady, but he had a memorable stretch from June 24 to July 4 — six home runs in those 11 days, including two on the Fourth of July. Dodgers fans are starting to see him as a possible successor to free agent-to-be Mike Scioscia.

You might expect such feats from someone who played at Miami and Dade North, two of the top programs in the country.

But Piazza wasn't drafted the 62nd round in 1988 — baseball's draft doesn't even last 62 rounds anymore — and he wanted to get into pro ball because he didn't feel up to the caliber of the Miami Hurricanes.

"I didn't feel I fit into the college game," he says. "I wasn't ready. In college, at a program as good as Miami, naturally the emphasis is on winning and not developing. I wasn't ready to help them win, so I didn't play much. And I needed to play to get better."

He didn't get to play as much as he wanted at Dade North, either. He suffered torn ligaments in his left hand and missed three weeks, right at the stage of the season when pro scouts were doing the bulk of their evaluating. Piazza rushed back and wasn't in top form.

When draft week rolled around that June, the kid from Philadelphia didn't get much attention because he had sustained torn ligaments in his left hand and missed three weeks, right at the stage of the season when pro scouts were doing the bulk of their evaluating. Finally, the Dodgers plucked him late — as a bit of a favor to Dodgers Manager Tommy Lasorda.

Lasorda and Piazza's father are old friends,

and Piazza is a godson of Lasorda.

"For me, I consider that old news," Piazza says. "But I know that so many guys are out there in the minor leagues, and most of them are just average guys out of high school or college. I am, too, but I have that interesting thing in my background and it gets blown up."

"All the guys I've played with never knew it until they read it somewhere. I never went around saying, 'I'm Tommy's godson.' I'm proud and definitely happy about it. Tommy has always been great to me. He would give me equipment and let me be a batboy when the Dodgers came to Philadelphia. Just to experience the aura of being around the players meant a lot."

"But I didn't use Tommy to move up through the minors. I had to put up the numbers myself."

Piazza had 29 home runs and 80 RBIs last season for Class-A Bakersfield (California). He has worked hard to turn himself from a catcher not ready for the college game into one on the verge of the majors.

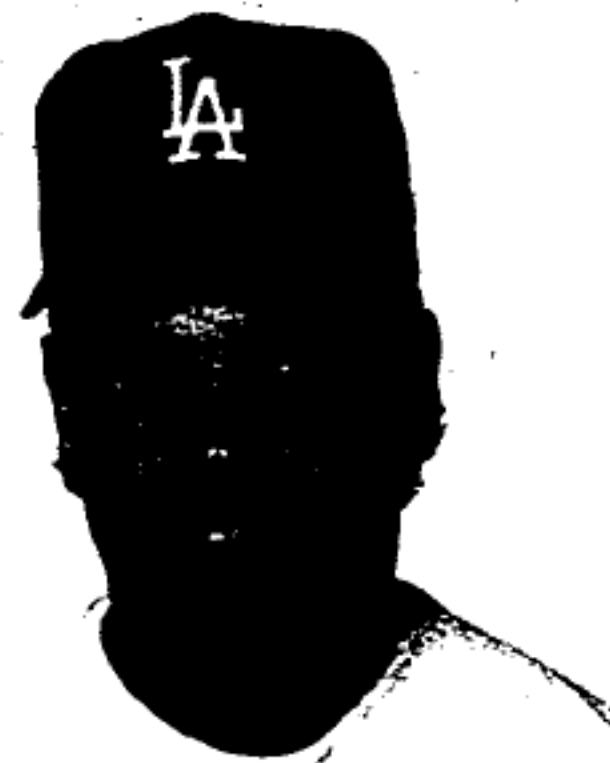
"I knew I had the talent, the power, the arm — the tools to maybe make it," Piazza says. "But I don't think I would have come this far if not for the Dodgers. They gave me the chance, and they had the patience."

The American way

All-Star week had a distinct American League swagger. Not only did the A.L. win the major leagues' All-Star game in San Diego, but also the stars from A.L.-affiliated teams won the Triple-A game, 2-1, in Richmond, Va., as well as the Double-A All-Star Game, 4-3, in Charlotte, N.C.

Tim Salmon, a right fielder for Edmonton in the Angels' organization, hinted at why he is bidding to win the triple crown in the Pacific Coast League. He doubled home Denver's Jim Tatum in the sixth inning with the winning run in the Triple-A game and earlier had scored the game's first run on Gerald Williams' groundout.

Omaha's Dennis Moeller was the winning pitcher after his scoreless first inning. But Columbus hurlers Bob Wickman, Sam Militello and Mike Draper were dominating, combining for five innings and allowing two



Dodgers

Catching a break: The Dodgers were more than lucky to have inside information on Piazza's talents.

hits, two walks and six strikeouts.

Smooth Shave

Jon Shave was the Texas League's Most Valuable Player in the Double-A All-Star Game. A second baseman for the Rangers' affiliate at Tulsa, he went 2 for 3 against N.L.-affiliated pitchers and had a two-run double in the seventh inning.

"It was a great experience, just to be around all those guys that are pretty good players," Shave says. "You didn't really feel like a 'star,' though. There's still a long way for us to go before we're stars."

"Still, that's been the highlight of my pro career. In a game when you're not starting, you don't know if you'll get a chance at something like that. I was excited to come up with runners on base."

"As for it helping my career, well, it was just a fun game."

Shave gave his career enough help in the season's first half, when he batted .302, had

16 doubles and drove in 27 runs. His defense still needs work — he committed 16 errors — but he has shown full recovery from surgery on torn knee ligaments.

One thing that might have helped Shave in his injury rehabilitation is his patience. He had several opportunities to enter pro ball early but held off.

The Angels drafted him in the ninth round — out of high school in Fernandina Beach, Fla., an island northeast of Jacksonville. The town of about 10,000 boasts a good high school program, and Shave might have been ready for pro ball. But he wanted to take his scholarship to Mississippi State.

Toronto drafted Shave late in the draft after his junior season, then the Rangers took him in the fifth round in 1990.

"I just go out there every day and have fun," Shave says. "I try to stay consistent and play well. If I keep moving up, that's great." The Double-A All-Star Game had three MVPs, one from each participating league. In addition to Shave, they were Huntsville first baseman Marco Armas, named from the Southern League after he went three for four with a home run; and Eastern League representative Len Picota. The Harrisburg pitcher struck out the side in the top of the eighth inning.

Power surge

Jim Edmonds won't have Mark McGwire or Cecil Fielder looking over their shoulders in the A.L. home run race any time soon — and probably never. But he got to experience their thrills in a recent week in the Texas League.

Edmonds, an outfielder for Midland in the Angels' organization, batted .450 and with five home runs in six early-July games. That included a three-homer game against Wichita on July 7. It helped raise his season's batting average to .313 and his home run total to eight.

Quite an unusual power outburst for Edmonds, a seventh-round draft pick in 1988. Before his awesome week, he had eight home runs in 4½ pro seasons.

Mike Eisenbath covers minor league baseball for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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PIAZZA AND HIS DEF



It's better than catch as ca

This is an inquisition of the most unfair kind. Exactly how Mike Piazza has come to stand before this court is a tale of innuendo and fallacy. And yet here he is, just four full years into the making of a Hall of Fame career, being asked to justify his existence behind the plate at Dodger Stadium.

He will not be told the identities of his accusers, the shadowy figures who have brought him up on charges of—*gasp!*—bad defense.

You would know them. You would recognize their prominent baseball names. They're managers, coaches and front-office personnel, and they think it's time for the Dodgers to look for another position for Piazza. They think Piazza's de-

fense hurts the Dodgers. They think Piazza's offense, prodigious as it already is, would be even more remarkable if he didn't have to catch 140-plus games a year. They think, if they were running that team, they'd find a way to use Piazza at first base, where he played briefly in the minor leagues before he realized the big league club needed a catcher more than a first baseman.

Yes, you would know these people. But you won't be told who they are. You can't be told, because they only voice these thoughts in off-the-record conversations. They think these things, but they won't say them for attribution. And, certainly, Piazza can't be told who they are.

Which is a problem, because early in this inquest over a

spring training dinner, Piazza makes it clear he has no stomach for the anonymous quote. Not from the quoter, who collects this inside prattle. And not from the quotees, who provide the buckshot for this particular story hunt. Early on, Piazza illustrates his opposition to journalism's anonymous sources with an anecdote from a couple of years ago.

The anecdote, as it happens, involves a newspaper story about Piazza's catching. The story quoted two unidentified Dodgers pitchers who questioned his ability to call a game. After it ran, Piazza called a closed-door meeting with his pitchers, where they aired their differences and came to a better understanding.

"But I was still ticked off at the guy who wrote the story."

ENSE:

Detractors cite cold statistics to make their case that he's out of position, but, honest, those figures lie

By MICHAEL KNISLEY

available information; at its worst, it's unchecked license for a source to push his or her own agenda.

But, obviously, Piazza's defensive skills behind the plate and the toll they take on his body are issues in the gossipy corridors of baseball. Cold, hard statistics make them an issue, even without the inadmissible evidence of unidentified whisperers. Last season, according to the *STATS Scouting Notebook: 1997*, Piazza threw out 14.4 percent of runners attempting to steal, the second-lowest number in the National League among starting catchers. He led the league in passed balls in each of the past two seasons. He committed nine errors in 1996, which tied for sixth-highest among N.L. catchers.

And as each season drags into August and September and Piazza continues to catch, his offensive numbers begin to sink. Last year, laboring against a hyper-flexed knee, his batting average dropped 59 points in the second half of the season, from .363 before the All-Star break to .304 after it. His career numbers reflect the same strain. Through his first four full seasons with the Dodgers, Piazza is a .386 hitter in the month of May and a .288 hitter in September and October.

So, as we begin a discussion of his abilities as a catcher, the specifics of the anonymous buckshot are kept in the background, and the focus is on those numbers. That way, Piazza, now 28 years old, can defend his catching without attacking his accusers, or the messenger. He can still fire back. And when we're done, he has rifled back enough ammunition to shoot the legs out from under the cold, hard statistics. They lie, and the baseball people who would move him out from behind the plate are wrong. Maybe someday down the line, the Dodgers should think about relieving some of the pressure that comes with catching every day, but Piazza is a long way from that day.

His take on the notion that he is now miscast as a catcher, which he has heard before, is simple.

"It's a joke," says Piazza, fully aware of what he's up against.

There are, in fact, three major elements to the explanation for his awful numbers, and they add up to what might be one of the most thankless jobs in baseball:

■ Piazza works with a starting pitching staff of nothing but righthanders, which means he rarely works with the natural advantage that a lefthander, who faces the bag, has in holding a runner at first base.

■ The staff ace, Hideo Nomo, uses a painfully protracted delivery to get the ball from the pitcher's mound to the plate, which is an open invitation to second base for any potential basestealer. ("Don't forget Valdes, too," Piazza says while we're on the subject of slow deliveries.)

■ Another of the Dodgers' starters, at least until this season, has been Tom Candiotti, whose knuckleball not only takes its sweet time getting to Piazza but also makes a quick catch-and-release throw to second next to impossible.

Those three factors somehow escape the critics.

"I marvel sometimes when I see articles and comments by so-called baseball experts (about his defense)," Piazza says. "It doesn't take an expert to figure out that our staff is not (great) at holding guys on."

Piazza is not a Gold Glove catcher, and probably never will be. His arm is adequate, at best, and he still relies on pitching coach Dave Wallace for a good portion of the signs he flashes to his pitchers. Also, his size—he's 6-3, 215 pounds—works against him in that it takes longer for him to uncoil and make his throws. But it's doubtful that even Johnny Bench's defensive numbers would glitter against the odds that Piazza faces.

"People don't take those things into account," says Charles Johnson of the Marlins, who is a Gold Glove catcher and will testify on the record about Piazza's defense. "As a catcher, you see those things. I understand what he's up against over there. I've never had to catch a knuckleball pitcher, and I really don't have any guys on this team with a big leg kick."

"But you know, you don't have to have a great arm to be a

good catcher in the major leagues. It doesn't take that. A lot of times, you need help from your pitching staff to give you a chance. If you get that and if your footwork is right and you're quick enough, you can throw guys out. You don't need a cannon. Piazza gets a bad rap as far as his defense. You have to understand certain guys on his team."

You have to understand that Nomo's devastating forkball and 90 mph-plus fastball come only after his twister of a windup. More bases were stolen against Nomo (52) last year than against any other pitcher in the N.L. You have to understand that Valdes' sinking fastball and precise control came with the league's fourth-worst percentage (82.5) of stolen bases allowed last season. You have to understand that Martinez's baffling changeup came last year with the fifth-highest number in the N.L. in stolen bases allowed (24). And you have to understand that Nomo's forkball and Candiotti's floater quite often arrive at the plate either in or near the dirt, which contributes mightily to Piazza's passed ball totals.

Last June 30, the Dodgers lost one of the season's more bizarre games to Colorado in Coors Field, a 16-15 peculiarity that took 4 hours and 20 minutes to complete. Among the



Thankless task: Although the Dodgers have a talented rotation, slow deliveries and errant pitches take their toll on catcher Piazza, who continues to weigh in heavily offensively.

freakish sidelights were the 10 stolen bases the Rockies managed against Piazza and the Los Angeles pitching staff. Eric Young, Colorado's second baseman, tied a modern major league record with six steals, including three in one inning, which tied another big league record.

Nomo pitched the first five innings.

"In that game, on probably four out of six of E.Y.'s steals, I should have just held the ball," Piazza says. "I shouldn't have even bothered

to throw. I'll be the first to admit that my throwing has been inconsistent. But it's brought about probably just by being anxious at times, feeling that I've got to make a perfect throw. And I think that's an offshoot of the lack of application by our pitchers, our starters. And some of it is just confidence. Confidence is so important. Once a situation comes up where they're stealing bases off Nomo, then I start thinking, 'Well, I'm not going to throw anybody out, so why even try?' You put yourself in a bad frame of mind."

"But, hey, what are you going to do? I'd say probably 20 percent of the times last year I should've just held on to the ball or tossed it back to the pitcher instead of trying to throw a guy out. But am I going to embarrass my guy and get him

ROBERT SEALE/TSM

JOHN DUNN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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he says. "I went to him and said, 'Why didn't you come to me before you wrote it, so at least I could have fired back a little bit?' I was really disappointed in that whole situation. If he'd have come to me and told me what they were saying and who was saying it, I would have buried them. At least it would have been a little bit even. I would have had a chance to rifle back."

Then, as if to back up his belief in the virtue of identifying sources, he reveals who the two pitchers were: Ramon Martinez and Ismael Valdes.

Still, Piazza won't be told who in baseball is dissing his role behind the plate, even though he is right-on about this distasteful little wedge of journalistic practice. At its best, the anonymous quote is a necessary evil to get to otherwise-un-



His plate is full: Those who would move Piazza should be apprised that he loves to catch and even likes collisions—provided, that is, the ball is in his grasp (which it wasn't against the Cubs' Sammy Sosa).

ticked off at me? No. I'm going to try to make a good throw. I mean, I'm not going to go out there and ask these guys to sacrifice what they're trying to do to a hitter just to shut down a two-out steal or an insignificant run. I just want them to make their pitches. We've just got to try to incorporate holding runners on a little bit better than we have, and not make it a big thing where they're becoming obsessed with it."

As a rookie in 1993, Piazza caught a set of starters that included Orel Hershiser and Kevin Gross. Overall, that staff was much more proficient at holding runners and economizing on deliveries. In '93, Piazza threw out 35 percent of would-be stealers, leading the majors by nailing 58 runners. No one raised a critical eyebrow over his defense back then.

It isn't as if the Dodgers have many alternatives, anyway. Piazza can play first, but Los Angeles already has Eric Karros and his 30-plus home runs and 100-plus RBIs per year there. Karros, who isn't particularly well-suited for any other position, is as much a must in the batting order as Piazza. Nor is there a prospect in the organization any closer than two or three years away from the majors who could replace Piazza behind the plate, if he did move to first. Paul LoDuca seems to have a nice mix of defensive ability and a productive bat, but he has spent most of his four pro seasons in Class A ball.

Mike Scioscia, Piazza's predecessor as the Dodgers' catcher, is on Bill Russell's major league staff this season to help Piazza's development. Scioscia, who caught Dodgers pitching for 13 seasons, was a defensive specialist who sees improvement in his protegee with each passing season. He offers an *amicus curiae* deposition on Piazza's behalf:

PIAZZA is well on his way to putting up better offensive numbers overall than any other catcher in the game's history. And yet people inside baseball think he's playing out of position.

"It's easy for someone to sit back and say the wear and tear that a catcher has to endure has to affect his offense, and has to affect the length of his career. It's a valid question. Down the road, if you projected Mike catching another eight or nine years, what would that do to his offense at the end of his career?"

"But right now, I don't know how productive it would be to move him out just for the sake of moving him out. His arm is strong. His release is becoming more consistent. I expect him to be a very consistent thrower this year. When you're trying to win championships and you have a guy who is doing the job behind the plate—and he is—and contributes as much offensively as he does, then what more can you ask?"

But isn't it true, our shady prosecutors might ask, that the wear and tear is responsible for the degeneration in Piazza's offensive production down the stretch of a season? Last year, it was a hyper-flexed knee that wasn't given proper rehabilitation time. In 1995, it was a torn ligament in his left thumb that banished him to the disabled list in mid-summer, from which he returned too early.

And here, the physical demands of catching may be placed in evidence and given serious consideration. But only if it's understood that none of Piazza's past injury problems are related to catching. He hurt his

knee last year sliding into second on a double. He tore his thumb ligament two years ago when he fell rounding first. Maybe the Dodgers should keep him off the basepaths before they keep him from catching.

"You could tell he wasn't as quick at the end of last season," Russell says. "The bat speed wasn't there. He was getting mentally tired. I think as he matures and gets a little older, he'll pace himself a little better. He'll learn that as the season goes on, he's going to lose some weight, which he does behind the plate. He's not going to be as strong, obviously, as he was early."

"He's got to pace himself as much as possible back there, but that's up to him. I'm not going to do this and that. It's just up to him to figure it out. He knows he's going to play every day. And when the season gets hot and we get to the end, he has to figure out his body. He has to figure out what kind of rest he needs to be strong each night. Maybe he doesn't take batting practice every day. Little things like that."

A little thing like moving him out from behind the plate?

"He's still a good catcher," Russell says. "There's no reason to play him anywhere else. That time will come, but that time is not here yet."

But, he concedes, it might not be out of the

question for Piazza to be the Dodgers' designated hitter during some of the team's inter-league games this season.

Piazza is about to begin his fifth year as a regular in the majors. He has a career batting average of .326, and he has hit more than 30 home runs in each season in which a full schedule has been played. No one in baseball hits the ball harder than he does, and no righthanded hitter hits the ball with more authority to right and right-center than he does. He is well on his way to putting up better offensive numbers overall than any other catcher in the game's history.

And yet people inside baseball think he's playing out of position.

"Then those people should say so publicly, because they're not the Los Angeles Dodgers," says executive vice president Fred Claire, bristling a bit on the witness stand. "They're not in our staff meetings. They may want to tell us how to do our business, but we think we have a pretty good idea of how to do our own business."

"There has never even been a meeting with the staff to talk about Mike making a move. I don't know where all this starts. It doesn't start with Mike, and it doesn't start with the Dodger organization."

It most assuredly does not start with Piazza.

"I love to catch," he says. "I love to block balls. I love collisions at the plate, especially when I get the ball first so I don't have to catch it with a guy running into me."

No. It doesn't start with Piazza. But maybe it will end here. ♦

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