

TSN's PLAYER OF THE YEAR

A new standard

ALEX RODRIGUEZ has the ability to shatter the achievements of past shortstops

BY ROB RAINS

Before the season, Mariners manager Lou Piniella established what he thought were reasonable goals for shortstop Alex Rodriguez's first full season in the majors: hit .275 to .280, with 15 homers and 70 to 75 RBIs. But others thought those goals were unrealistic for a young, developing player. A spring prediction he would hit .250 so upset Rodriguez that he put the article in a folder and saved it as a reminder throughout the season.

What transpired instead was a season even Rodriguez couldn't have expected in his wildest dreams, a season that will go down in history as one of the best—by any player. Forget the fact he didn't celebrate his 21st birthday until the year was half over. Forget the fact the 6-3, 195-pound Rodriguez is a shortstop, a position where offensive production sometimes is an afterthought. Forget the fact that in addition to his tremendous talent, this is a young man with respect for the game and an appreciation of the veterans who play with and against him.

Consider the results of what he did on the field, and it's easy to understand why Rodriguez was an overwhelming choice by fellow major leaguers as THE SPORTING NEWS Player of the Year, the youngest player to be selected for that honor. He received 260% of 391 votes—67 percent of the total—and was followed by Ellis Burks (25), Juan Gonzalez (23), Ken Caminiti (16), Albert Belle (12%) and John Smoltz (10).

Rodriguez also won a Hillerich & Bradsby Silver Slugger award, finished second in Rawlings Gold Glove voting and is one of the favorites to be named American League Most Valuable Player.

The list of Rodriguez's accomplishments is long and impressive, including:

- Hit .358 to win the A.L. batting title, becoming the youngest player to do so since Al Kaline hit .340 as a 20-year-old in 1955.

- Became the first shortstop to lead the American League in hitting since Lou Boudreau in 1944.

- Hit 36 home runs and drove in 123 runs. His 54 doubles were the most in the league and most ever by a shortstop.

- His 379 total bases tied the record for a shortstop, established by Ernie Banks in 1958.

- Led the league in runs scored with 141 and was second in hits with 215. His slugging percentage of .631 was the fourth best in the league.

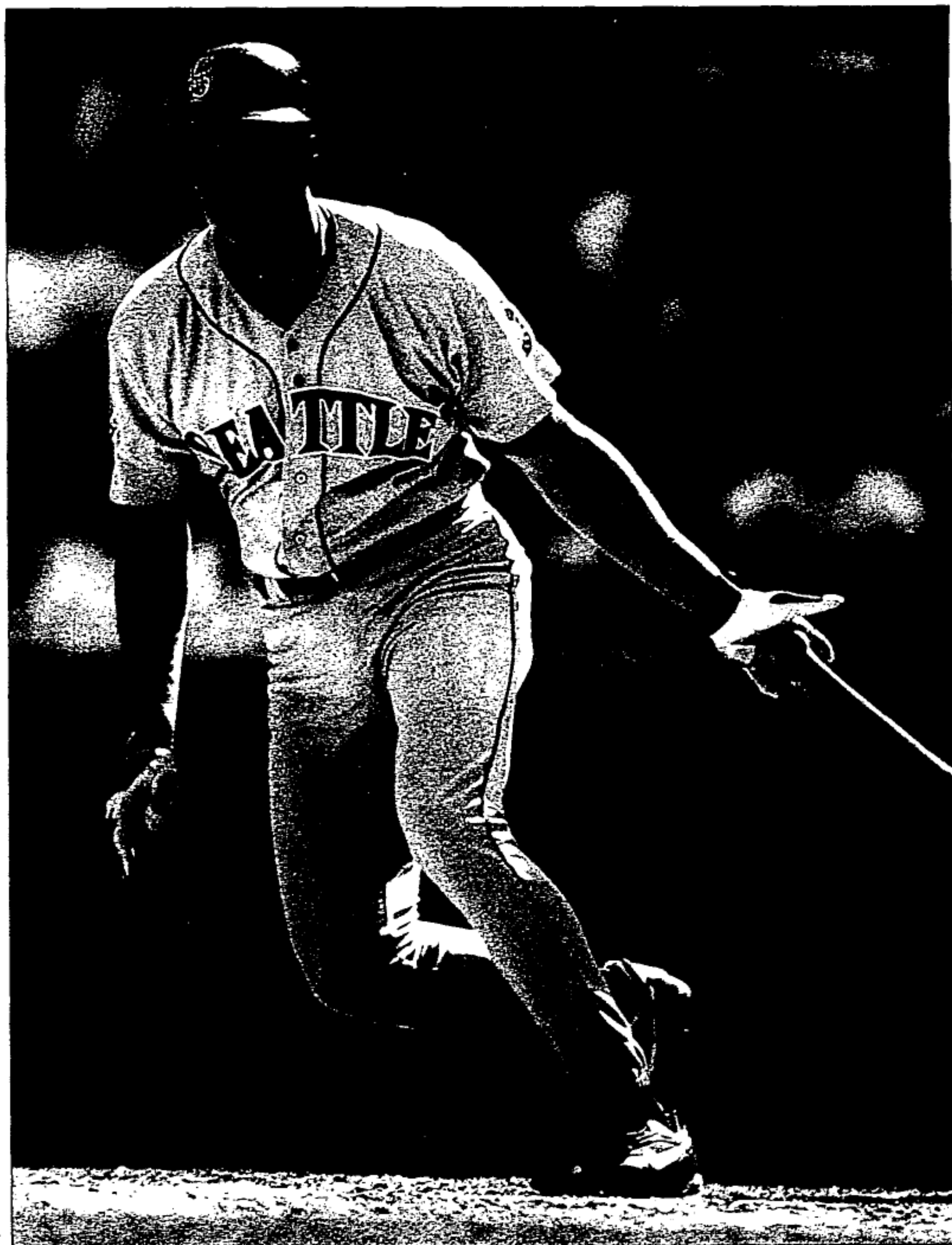
"I'm excited... but I'm not really surprised," Rodriguez says. "I have a lot of confidence in my ability."

In a game in which players, owners, umpires—and everybody else involved—seem to do everything possible to alienate fans, it's refreshing for players such as Rodriguez to come onto the scene, showing there is some hope for the next generation. Among the older players who watched in admiration were two retiring shortstops, Ozzie Smith and Alan Trammell.

"Let's be honest," Trammell says, "the year he had could be the best year a shortstop has ever had."

Smith has earned his share of accolades in a Hall of Fame career with the Cardinals, but he can only marvel at what Rodriguez was able to accomplish offensively. Smith points out that in producing such a spectacular season at 21, Rodriguez will quickly encounter the pressure of high expectations.

"When people do great things, greater things are expected," Smith



Gold-plated: Rodriguez, who in '96 posted some staggering numbers, soon may take aim at two more: .400 and 60 homers.

Silver Slugger awards

Gold Glove awards

American League

C	Ivan Rodriguez	Rangers
1B	Mark McGwire	A's
2B	Roberto Alomar	Orioles
3B	Jim Thome	Indians
SS	Alex Rodriguez	Mariners
OF	Ken Griffey	Mariners
OF	Albert Belle	Indians
OF	Juan Gonzalez	Rangers
DH	Paul Molitor	Twins

C	Ivan Rodriguez	Rangers
1B	J.T. Snow	Angels
2B	Roberto Alomar	Orioles
3B	Robin Ventura	White Sox
SS	Omar Vizquel	Indians
OF	Jay Buhner	Mariners
OF	Ken Griffey	Mariners
OF	Kenny Lofton	Indians
P	Mike Mussina	Orioles

National League

C	Mike Piazza	Dodgers
1B	Andres Galarraga	Rockies
2B	Eric Young	Rockies
3B	Ken Caminiti	Padres
SS	Barry Larkin	Reds
OF	Ellis Burks	Rockies
OF	Barry Bonds	Giants
OF	Gary Sheffield	Marlins
P	Tom Glavine	Braves

C	Charles Johnson	Marlins
1B	Mark Grace	Cubs
2B	Craig Biggio	Astros
3B	Ken Caminiti	Padres
SS	Barry Larkin	Reds
OF	Barry Bonds	Giants
OF	Steve Finley	Padres
OF	Marquis Grissom	Braves
P	Greg Maddux	Braves

Voting for Silver Slugger and Gold Glove awards, conducted by TSN, is done by major league coaches and managers, who cannot vote for players on their own teams.

says. "The only way he can go is down. Where else is there to go?"

Rodriguez thinks he can do better than he did this season, and so do other observers. Red Sox general manager Dan Duquette envisions Rodriguez one day making a run at 400 or 60 home runs. Banks expects the same thing.

"Alex Rodriguez is going to do things I never came close to doing," Banks says. "I don't want to put pressure on him, but he's going to set a new standard for shortstops."

That kind of talk worries Mariners teammate Ken Griffey Jr., who has become trapped in his own success, where people expect him to put up the same monstrous numbers every season.

"I just hope people don't expect him to put up those same numbers every year," Griffey says. "I hope that they're not going to say he's had a bad year if he hits .330 with 25 homers and 90 RBIs. I don't want him feeling he has to do this every year or he's come up short."

Rodriguez is careful not to let his confidence come off as arrogant or cocky. His understanding of the game, gained from years of watching players like Dale Murphy and Cal Ripken Jr., as a youngster growing up in Miami, and his value system keep him from saying he is the best and will be for years to come.

"I really feel like I've been given this gift, that I've been blessed," Rodriguez says. "I thank the Lord for that, but I have to remember that it can be taken away, too. I had a

great year, but I realize it would take about 15 of them to do what Paul Molitor did (collect 3,000 hits)."

He already has moved into that 200-hit class, and one of the players who quickly has gained great respect for Rodriguez is Molitor, another of the game's classiest players.

"His numbers are staggering, for any player, at any stage of his career," Molitor says. "Alex has a lot of respect for the game, for the players who have gone before him. Compared to many young players, I look at him as a breath of fresh air. He doesn't take for granted his accomplishments of this season."

Rodriguez gives much of the credit for his success to Griffey, who has helped him on the field as well as dealing with the pressure that comes from sudden stardom. Rodriguez was hitting .279 on May 7, pretty much where Piniella expected him to be, when Piniella decided to move Rodriguez from the ninth spot in the order to second, ahead of Griffey.

Rodriguez proceeded to hit .393 in May, .324 in June, .383 in July and .435 in August.

"The most obvious thing Junior does for me is get me better pitches," Rodriguez says. "I wouldn't have anywhere close to these numbers if I wasn't hitting in front of him."

One of Rodriguez's biggest boosters is Rich Hofman, his coach at Westminster Christian High School in Miami, who still talks with him frequently. It's hard for Hofman to realize it was only three years ago Rodriguez was on his team as a high school senior.

"My level of expectations for him has always been pretty high," Hofman says. "He's kind of a perfectionist, too, and I think there are areas, he would say, where there still is room for improvement."

What impressed Hofman about Rodriguez as a high school player was his maturity.

"I may be 21, but I've never felt like a phenom and I hate the word, 'potential,'" Rodriguez says. "I want to be known as a player, period, and I went to spring training believing this was my year."

It was. He made the first of what will undoubtedly be numerous All-Star appearances. He was a guest on *Late Show with David Letterman*, and *The Tonight Show* wants to schedule him for an appearance in the offseason. He receives about 500 pieces of mail a week, and was the subject of numerous posters and marriage proposals in the Kingdom.

He has taken it all in stride, and those who know him best say they don't believe the success—and attention and money that has come with it—will change Rodriguez.

"He's grown up a lot, and life's never going to be the same for him," Hofman says. "He's a public figure, and he's going to have to learn to say no sometimes."

Rodriguez will be smothered by requests for appearances during the winter, but he has one goal—to learn how to cook, so he won't have to go out to eat virtually every night. Hofman says the best thing Rodriguez can make now is soup, but he isn't betting against him. He never has, and he never will.

Neither will Ripken, who began his consecutive games streak when Rodriguez was 6 and had a poster of Ripken hanging above his bed.

"All that Alex seems to need is experience to become the shortstop everyone else will be watching in our league," Ripken says. "I'm still having a good time out there, just playing. But the future belongs to Alex Rodriguez."

Maybe the present does, too. ♦

Rob Rains is a free-lance writer from St. Louis. This story contains material from the *Los Angeles Times*, *Miami Herald*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *Seattle Times*.

WHO SAYS CRASHING INTO WALLS, DIVING IN THE DIRT AND TAKING A FEW OFF THE CHIN DOESN'T HAVE ITS REWARDS?

AMERICAN LEAGUE

J.T. Snow, California Angels, 1B
Years Awarded: 1995

Roberto Alomar, Baltimore Orioles, 2B
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991

Robin Ventura, Chicago White Sox, 3B
Years Awarded: 1995, 1992, 1991

Omar Vizquel, Cleveland Indians, SS
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993

Ken Griffey, Jr., Seattle Mariners, OF
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990

Kenny Lofton, Cleveland Indians, OF
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993

Jay Buhner, Seattle Mariners, OF
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990

Ivan Rodriguez, Texas Rangers, C
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992

Mike Mussina, Baltimore Orioles, P
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Mark Grace, Chicago Cubs, 1B
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993

Craig Biggio, Houston Astros, 2B
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994

Ken Caminiti, San Diego Padres, 3B
Years Awarded: 1995

Barry Larkin, Cincinnati Reds, SS
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994

Marquis Grissom, Atlanta Braves, OF
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993

Barry Bonds, San Francisco Giants, OF
Years Awarded: 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990

Steve Finley, San Diego Padres, OF
Years Awarded: 1995

Charles Johnson, Florida Marlins, C
Years Awarded: 1995

Greg Maddux, Atlanta Braves, P
Years Awarded: 1995, 1994, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1990

Well, here they are, the 1996 Rawlings Gold Glove Award winners. The eighteen finest in the field. And what a coincidence, almost half the winners use Rawlings gloves. Now, we know what you're thinking, but remember, the major league coaches and managers chose these guys, not us.

So congratulations to all the winners. Guess all those bruises, strawberries and rug burns don't hurt as much now, do they?

Rawlings

"The Finest in the Field."

DEEP in the HEART of the STANDINGS

The Rangers, like many teams, face a deficit as big as Texas, but **ALEX RODRIGUEZ** still sets the standard for playing well and playing hard

BY KEN ROSENTHAL PHOTOS BY ROBERT SEALE

So this is life at the bottom, a place from which not even Alex Rodriguez, baseball's \$252 million man, can escape. Top of the ninth inning, the last-place Rangers lead the last-place Devil Rays, 5-3. A crowd of 30,762 stirs at the Ballpark in Arlington, anticipating postgame fireworks. But the Rangers are so inept, it appears that the sky—and the franchise—will remain permanently dark.

A popup drops at the feet of center fielder Carl Everett for a leadoff double. Closer Hideki Irabu walks the No. 9 hitter, then allows the tying run to score with two outs. Reliever John Rocker issues two more walks to load the bases, and in between catcher Ivan Rodriguez is charged with a passed ball.

"Oh, man," A-Rod says later, "I was dying."


Rodriguez is the game's highest-paid player, but for the next 10 weeks, he will be in the same position

as the lowliest Devil Ray and half the players in baseball. His team is out of contention, with virtually no hope of playing in the World Series. Yet, he continues to display the same effort and professionalism he showed while playing for postseason teams with the Mariners in 1995, '97 and 2000.

The Rangers end up winning; Rocker escaped his bases-loaded jam, and Ivan Rodriguez hit a walkoff homer. But they entered the All-Star break 39-47, 15 games behind the division-leading Mariners. A year ago, A-Rod's first season in Texas, they finished 73-89, 43 games in back of the team he left behind.

From empty stands to unsettled rosters to increased selfishness among players, the game is different for teams buried at the break.

"I was on a playoff team one time," says Devil Rays catcher John Flaherty, who spent the last half of the '96 season with the N.L. West champion Padres.



"It was the easiest three months of my baseball career. You know you're playing for something. Everybody is on the same page. The focus is on the team, not on yourself.

"The reverse of that is when you go out there and you're on a losing club. You really get your professionalism tested."

Watching Rodriguez, Mariners bench coach John McLaren says he detects "a lot of frustration" in his former player. The strain is unnoticeable. In a three-game sweep of the Devil Rays, Rodriguez plays hard from the first pitch to the last, getting thrown out at the plate after running through a stop sign in the series opener, helping the Rangers rally from a 6-0 deficit with a home run in the finale. He applauds his teammates, makes difficult plays at shortstop, delivers clutch hits.

At the All-Star break, the Rangers' attendance was down 18.8 percent from a comparable number of home dates last season, the biggest decline in the majors. But Rodriguez, who turns 27 on July 27, entered the break leading the American League with 27 homers and 73 RBIs.

"He easily could be the MVP," says A's second baseman Randy Velarde, a teammate last season in Texas. "A lot of people would argue no, because he doesn't play for a winning team, but I'd argue that's even harder—to do what he's doing on a team that's not very good, that's not drawing and in that heat."

Phillies outfielder Ricky Ledee, another member of the 2001 Rangers, recalls that manager Jerry Narron would fill out two lineup cards last September, one with Rodriguez's name, the other without it. Narron would show the cards to Rodriguez, asking him if he wanted to take a day off. Rodriguez always opted to play.

Ledee, also a member of the Yankees' world championship teams in 1998 and '99, calls Rodriguez "the best teammate I've ever had."

"He's full of desire, the way he prepares himself," Ledee says. "Just by watching him, you keep learning all the time."

Rodriguez is relentless with a cause.

"I have incredible motivation to go out and improve every day," he says. "Integrity-wise, I cannot allow whether the team is winning or not to affect me. I'm going to give maximum effort. I have to look at myself every day and judge myself on my work ethic."

For \$252 million, maximum effort is the minimum the Rangers should expect from Rodriguez. As Rangers first baseman Rafael Palmeiro says, giving 100 percent "shouldn't be a hard thing, no matter how bad the team is playing. It's really an obligation."

Of course, it's not that simple. Money spoils players. Losing sours them. One scout cites Roberto Alomar, Frank Thomas and Jim Edmonds as examples of superstars who elevate their performance for winning teams but grow distracted with losing clubs.

"You have to find a way from within to stay focused and make sure that you're battling every pitch, every out, just like you were on a championship team," Flaherty says. "It's easy for a couple of games, but day in, day out, it becomes a grind."

Royals first baseman Mike Sweeney, the A.L.

Rodriguez feels the pain of losing but hasn't given up trying to help the Rangers transform a bad year into a respectable one.

batting leader at the break, says he's better off ignoring his team's poor standing. "I think it's good that I'm not a real big fan of the game," Sweeney says. "I don't even know how many games under .500 we are or how many games back."

Rodriguez is just the opposite, a numbers guy who is all baseball. He admits that he gets beaten down by the Rangers' struggles, but he played for losing teams with the Mariners in 1998 and '99. "People don't understand—I've been through this before," **Rodriguez** says. "Those were two of the toughest seasons of my career." He kept his faith then and he's keeping it now, believing he again will be rewarded.

Rodriguez grew up emulating Cal Ripken, who appeared in only one World Series in 21 seasons with the Orioles. **Rodriguez** absorbed lessons in Seattle from one of the game's biggest stars, Ken Griffey Jr., and one of its most respected professionals, Edgar Martinez. Yet, Martinez scoffs at the notion that he helped **Rodriguez** become more dedicated. "He had



MVP? It may be harder to play for a loser, but Rodriguez won't get recognized by voters.

that from the beginning," Martinez says. "As a young player, he worked really hard all the time."

Rodriguez credits Rich Hofman, his high school coach at Westminster Christian in Miami, with helping him learn to perform under pressure. But Hofman, too, claims no special role in developing the resolve of his former pupil, the No. 1 pick in the 1993 amateur draft.

"He has a unique sense of baseball history and his place in it," Hofman says. "At some level, he realizes that he's a standard-bearer. That's what drives him. He wants people to say that he's the best who ever played, just as they say about Ted Williams, he's the best hitter who ever lived."

Anything less and **Rodriguez** will invite criticism, but he embraces the responsibility that comes with his contract. Many free agents struggle in their first season with new teams. **Rodriguez** batted .318 with a career-high 52 homers and 135 RBIs in his debut with the Rangers.

"Last year was the year I'm most proud of," he says.

One problem: the first half

Fifteen teams already can begin making vacation plans for October, and they soon could be joined by the White Sox.

Devil Rays, 24 games out of a playoff spot: At least they have the commissioner's assurance that they'll be paid. But considering the club is headed for its fifth 90-plus loss season in five years of existence, maybe the players should offer a rebate.

Padres, 17½: Injuries long ago killed the high hopes they entered the season with, but at least they've been able to see a lot of players—45 and counting.

Blue Jays, 17½: The race is on to see what will drop fastest: the payroll, the Jays' magic number or attendance at SkyDome.

Brewers, 17: It's business as usual for the Brewers and Mark Loretta, the club leader in seniority. He's headed for the eighth losing season of his eight-year career, and the Brewers are headed for their 10th straight.

Tigers, 16½: When you trade your 25-year-old ace before the All-Star break, you know the rebuilding process is going slower than expected, and the Tigers already are going on their ninth consecutive losing season.

Royals, 16: Since 1995, the Royals have not been closer than 12½ games of first place in September. Pity Mike Sweeney, who has been there for nearly all of the misery.

Rangers, 13½: Look at the bright side: They can fall 25 more games in the standings and still not finish as far back (43 games) as last year.

Phillies, 12: Perhaps now they'll admit they should have traded Scott Rolen a long time ago. His value would have been higher, and he wouldn't have been such a distraction for those who are stuck in Philadelphia.

Rockies, 12: One of seven teams to change managers so far, the Rockies are the only one to show a noticeable improvement. Still, the only interesting race left at Coors Field is Larry Walker vs. Todd Helton for the batting title.

Cubs, 11½: They're in the running with the Mets and Blue Jays for the season's most under-achieving team.

Orioles, 11: Mike Hargrove should be manager of the year if he can finish within a sniff of .500 with this band of castoffs and middling prospects.

Indians, 10½: Let's see, a team that planned to rebuild with pitching trades away its 29-year-old ace. No wonder the Jacobs Field faithful are yearning for the good-ol' days of Albert Belle.

Mets, 9½: Even though they're hovering around .500, there's a sure sign they're not planning on a run at the Braves: They are sellers, not buyers, in the trade market.

Pirates, 8½: They're not that far out, but they've got five teams to climb over. And Kevin Young's streak of playing for losers is headed for 10 seasons, making it the longest among active players.

Marlins, 8½: Their record suggests they're still in the wild-card race. Trading away their best player and their opening day starter say ownership has decided to wait 'til next year. —Stan McNeal *As of July 13

"To take the high road and really play well with all the expectations ... to keep your level of play at a high level is much tougher when the team is struggling."

It's the Rangers' version of CNN's *Crossfire*. Teammates gather around **Rodriguez's** locker, debating baseball topics. When **Rodriguez** isn't moderating, he's engaging reporters in conversations about trades, All-Star selections, anything that sparks his curiosity. "He likes to talk the game more than anybody I've ever met," says Rangers pitcher Anthony Telford, who debuted in the majors in 1990.

Rodriguez is bound to the Rangers through 2007, and he can exercise options to remain with the team through 2010. Leadership seems to come to him naturally, but it's also in his best interests, for his stature is tied to the team's success. His spectacular '01 campaign earned him only sixth place in the A.L. MVP balloting. And the only way he will return to the postseason is with help from his teammates.

Telford, formerly with the Orioles, and Narron, once an Orioles coach, note that **Rodriguez** is more vocal than Ripken was, particularly with younger teammates. "He's shortened my learning curve big-time," says Rangers second baseman Mike Young, a second-year player. "Our nonverbal communication on the field is at a point now where we just know what each one is thinking."

When the Mets declined to pursue **Rodriguez** as a free agent after the 2000 season, general manager Steve Phillips cited the potentially disruptive effect of a "24-plus-one" environment. Phillips was talking about off-field perks, but considering **Rodriguez's** continuing evolution, it appears that the G.M. misread the player.

"As one of the leaders of the team, you take every step the team takes along the way, stretching, being on time, taking groundballs, taking batting practice," **Rodriguez** says. "You also do extra things. That way, everybody follows suit. If you take the shortcuts because you're capable of it or you feel a sense of entitlement, that would send the wrong message, and people would follow suit as well. You have to keep the bar very high."

Velarde recalls **Rodriguez** arriving at 1:30 p.m. for night games to watch video and work on his swing. **Rodriguez** rattles off a to-do list of things he can improve, saying he can walk more, strike out less, make fewer errors. "He takes it to heart," A's third baseman Eric Chavez says. "He wakes up and wants to hit two home runs and drive in six runs every day."

Few players are capable of such feats, but when your team is buried, your approach is what counts. Perhaps only 5,000 of the announced crowd of 20,295 are in the ballpark for the start of the Rangers' series opener against the Devil Rays. During the exchange of lineup cards, **Rodriguez** and Young are the only players on the field, playing catch, loosening their arms, preparing for Game No. 81.

"Alex comes here every day with a utility player-type mentality," says Narron. "It's not phony. It's not made up. It's real." **TSN**

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