

# Rodriguez is the type of catcher other

tell you. It's not something you can put into words. You just have to be there."

When **Rodriguez** signed originally with the Rangers, at 16, he spoke nothing but Spanish, and for a long time afterward was so self-conscious about his ability to express himself in English that he simply avoided the media in the States. Promoted to the bigs at the tender age of 19, he admits that early on in his career he went so far as to hide in the clubhouse showers or bathroom rather than face the possibility of being confronted with a postgame question, which at the time made some in the media think of him as aloof—when he actually was just petrified. But his wife, who lived in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn for 12 years and speaks fluent English free of a Spanish accent, has helped him work on the language daily. "I'm not perfect," he says, "but I'm OK now. I can become myself speaking English now. I'm not afraid to speak anymore, even to the TV cameras."

As for his lifestyle, **Rodriguez** golfs and swims a bit, just completed a three-week crash course in scuba diving, spends a lot of time at the house horsing around with the kids (son Dereck, 5, and daughter Amanda, 2), enjoys putting on Sunday barbecues, listens to salsa music (but rarely goes to clubs), plays video games for hours on end, works out compulsively and is thoroughly addicted to ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

But no matter what he's doing or where he is, say those closest to him, you can bet baseball is always somewhere heavy on his mind. "A total seamhead. 'From the time he was 7, it's been baseball, baseball, baseball,'" says his mother, Eva, who teaches second grade at a Vega Baja elementary school. As a kid, **Ivan** watched every baseball game he could on TV, played every position in Little League and would often go to sleep in his uniform. As an adult, he would mostly go from playing in the States to winter ball in Puerto Rico, with gaps filled by softball games, endless practicing and constant workouts.

I ask **Ivan** about this obsession with the game. He doesn't even break a smile. "It's easy to be lazy," he says. "Because it is a long season. But I get paid a lot of money to play baseball and the fans want me to put on a show. So I'm always working to make myself better, to stay healthy and play every day, and to do things the right way. I want to improve everything in my game. To get better every year."



SCOTT JORDAN LEVY

**50-50 HINDSIGHT:** *Rodriguez threw out better than half—40-of-77—of the baserunners who dared weigh anchor after reaching first in '97.*

**M**ike Piazza, without question, is a better hitter, both for power and average, and Charles Johnson, for sure, is more of a brick wall, and Sandy Alomar Jr. may be a tad more solid overall receiver, but when you put together the whole package—hitting, fielding, durability, speed, desire and pure intimidation—**Rodriguez**, for my money, stands—or crouches—by himself. And the scary thing is: Many insiders I polled feel the six-time All-

Star is still a year or two away from reaching his full potential.

He is the type of catcher other catchers love to watch and talk about. Like his manager, Johnny Oates, a journeyman catcher for 11 big-league seasons. Oates, a baseball lifer not given to hyperbole, is sitting behind a desk in his office and gushing uncontrollably. It borders on absolute awe. "The guy's just unbelievable, unbelievable," he says. "And he does it every day. He does it in the intense heat we've got in

Arlington. He does it in day games after night games. He just plays hard every day. And in the three seasons I've been here, only once has he ever complained about anything—and that was a sore shoulder. If anything, he wants to win so badly he sometimes gets carried away and tries too hard."

Oates remembers in particular a play on opening day '97. The Rangers were leading the Brewers, 4-2, in the top of the fifth with two out. Jose Valentin was the runner on first. **Rodriguez** managed to deftly block a Ken Hill slider in the dirt but somehow couldn't keep the ball in front of him. It ricocheted off his shin guards and skipped 30 feet to his right. Valentin, needless to say, was off and running; against any other catcher, he could've coasted into second standing up. Instead, throwing something in the vicinity of a 100-mph fastball from the on-deck circle, **Rodriguez** nailed him. "I mean, **Ivan** threw a pea right on the money!" Oates says. "Valentin had this look on his face like, 'Something's wrong here. Who threw that ball? Was that a relay? What in God's name was that?'"

Oates says, though, that much of what **Rodriguez** is you can't teach. Oh, sure, you can improve throwing accuracy. You can build arm strength. But teach Rodriguez's footwork and quickness? No way. Gifts from God, he says.

Rodriguez's arm, like Ozzie Smith's glove once and Rickey Henderson's legs, dramatically alters the shape of the game like scant few players can. Better than any catcher in recent memory, he all but shuts down the opposition's running game to the point of putting it into something resembling stop-action motion. Rangers first baseman Will Clark calls it the "Drop Anchor Effect," as in runners get to their base, then drop anchor. "Which is why you

## On the offensive

**Ivan Rodriguez** has been called by some "the Johnny Bench of the '90s," and they are similar defensively in that they alter or altered the face of a game. However, there clearly are differences between the two offensively. After seven seasons (1967 through '73), Bench had established himself as a power source in Cincinnati's "Big Red Machine," leading the majors in homers and RBIs twice with 45/148 in '70 and 40/125 in '72. **Rodriguez**, meanwhile, is a free swinger mostly from the two-hole who hits for a higher average. Comparing the catchers' offensive numbers through seven major league seasons:

	G	Avg.	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	BB	SO
Bench	934	.268	3,444	504	922	179	616	371	553
<b>Rodriguez</b>	880	.290	3,264	445	948	88	417	181	419



TSN ARCHIVES

**JOHNNY ON THE SPOT:** *Bench powered the Reds.*



Rodriguez, it must be noted, has never been much of a communicator. He speaks very little, even among close friends. And when he talks, he does so in harsh, clipped bursts, his words blunt-sounding and released with apparent difficulty. He is not prone to small talk or elaborate explanations or deep insights or emotional outpourings. But he insists that, while introverted, he's not shy, as many perceive him, only, as his mother once put it many years ago, "quiet to the extreme," a trait he says he inherited from his father, who "is even quieter than me." It leads some to view him as cold and standoffish and difficult to get to know.

"He's actually a very funny guy once he gets to know you," says Luis Mayoral, the Rangers' director of Spanish broadcasting and Latin American liaison. "He just doesn't trust or open up quickly." His friends and teammates say he's anything but somber, sullen or unfriendly; mostly, they say, he's playful. He's a regular cut-up when he performs caricature batting stances of Rickey Henderson and Jose Canseco and a slew of Rangers as well as the pitching motion of Nolan Ryan. "He makes me laugh all the time," teammate Rusty Greer says. "But if you ask me what he does that's so funny, I can't really



## 18k catchers

After seven seasons, **Ivan Rodriguez** already has won six Rawlings Gold Gloves, tying him for the third-most by a catcher. Interestingly, the Rangers account for 12 Gold Gloves at catcher in the last 22 seasons. Catchers with five or more Gold Gloves:

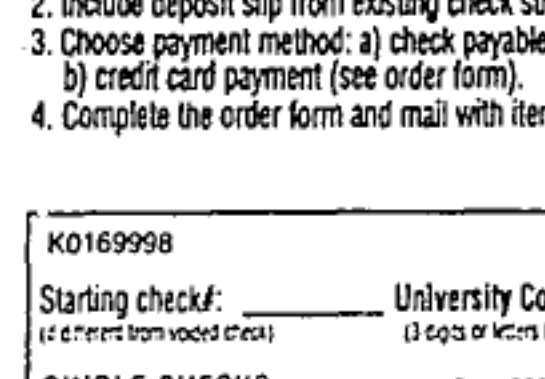
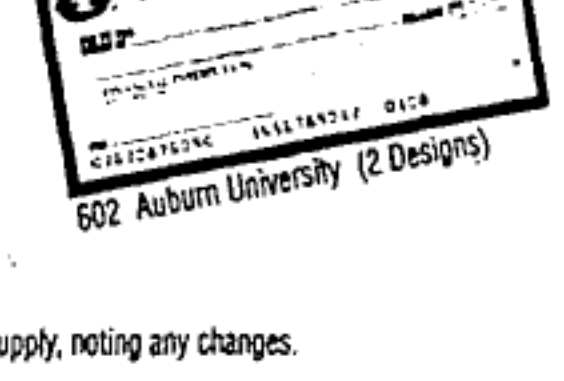
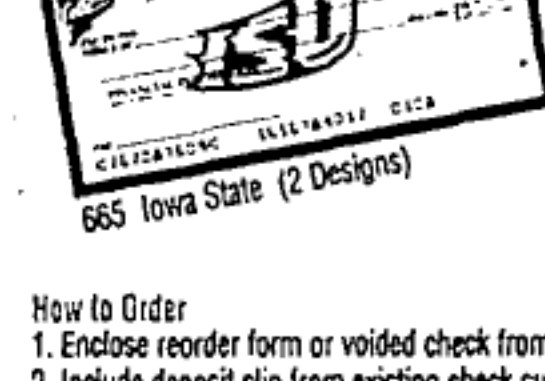
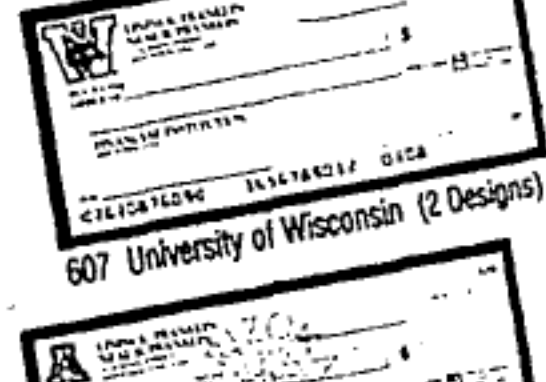
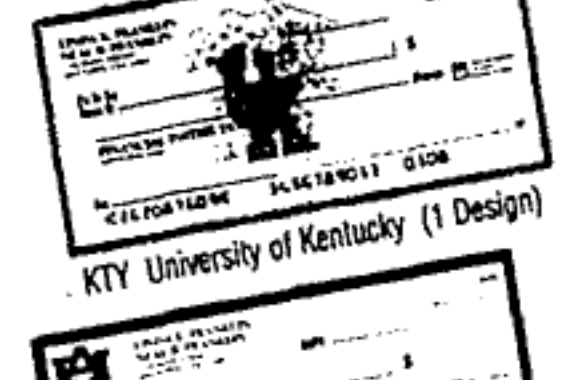
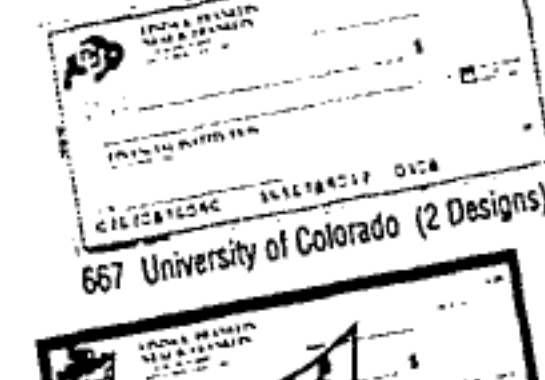
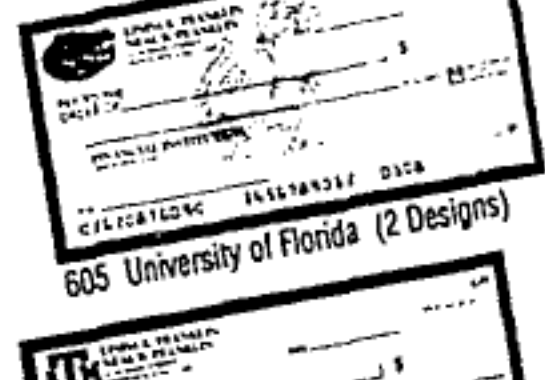
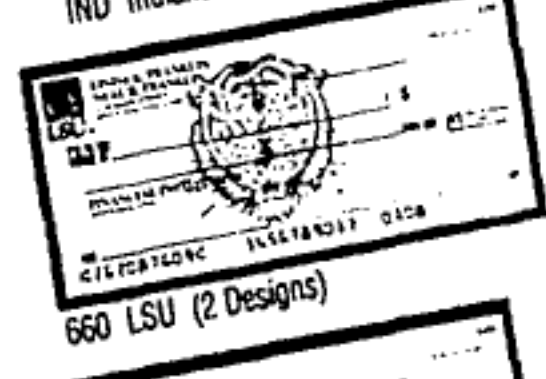
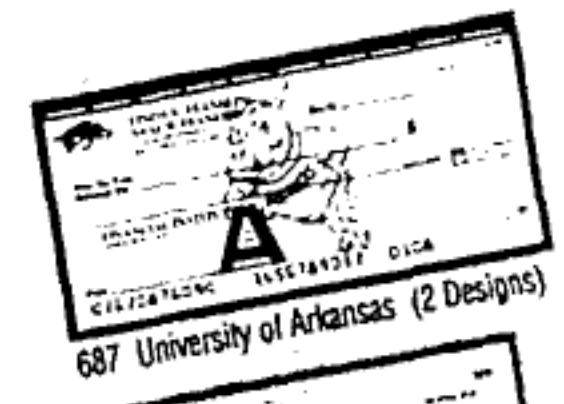
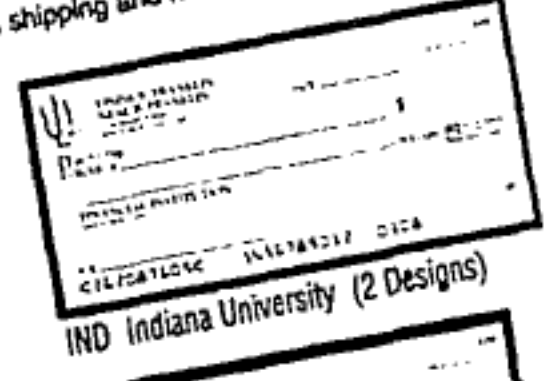
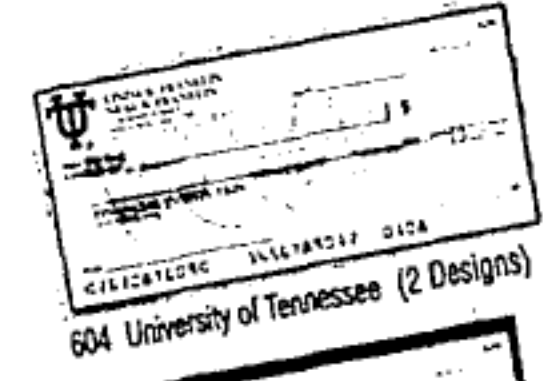
- 10: Johnny Bench, Reds, 1968-77.
- 7: Bob Boone, Phillies, 1978-79; Angels, 1982, '86-88; Royals, 1989.
- 6: **Ivan Rodriguez**, Rangers, 1992-97.
- 6: Jim Sundberg, Rangers, 1976-81.
- 5: Bill Freehan, Tigers, 1965-69.

ternoon, raining on and off all day, but suddenly a bar of sunlight pierces the clouds and illuminates Rodriguez's face. It does nothing to lighten his countenance, however. It is a face forever pinched into a pugish sneer, like an irritated bulldog, made especially severe by his sharply angular eyebrows and intense brown eyes. It is a look so forbidding that, at times, it even fools his wife of seven years, Maribel, who is struck often with the feeling that her husband is stewing over something. "Is anything wrong, **Ivan?**" she'll ask. And even when he says, "Nothing, nothing," she is never wholly convinced.

stomach so flat you'll swear he's merely holding his breath and legs chiseled by daily one-mile runs, sprints and vigorous exercises with a medicine ball. You get the feeling that even his toes have muscles. With 11 percent body fat, his childhood nickname of Pudge, by now, is rendered a silly joke from the past; in deference to Tim Lincecum, "Rock" is more appropriate. It's a muggy, windy, overcast af-

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Like Ivan's 50-year-old father, Jose, who has rejected all his son's offers for a better way of life somewhere else on the island, who continues to live here in a cinder-block house, and who tonight, despite his advanced age and beer belly, will play first base for one of the teams, *La Familia*, "The Family," which consists almost entirely of blood relatives and in-laws. Ivan will play center field for this team (actually short left-center because of the hole); Ivan's 28-year-old brother, Jose Jr., nicknamed Tito, once a big-league shortstop prospect but now a nose guard-shaped factory worker for Playtex, will play third; and together they hit in the meat of the order. Their opponents: *El Mango*, a team sponsored by a local bakery, with most of its players sporting flabby bellies oozing over belts worn painfully low. By contrast, Ivan looks like everybody's personal trainer.

It was just-minutes ago that Rodriguez made his grand entrance, zipping through the gate in his steel-gray Porsche and parking it in deep center so as not to be touched by fans or struck by a ball. His arrival, of course, set off an immediate buzz among the players and the small cadre of spectators, and as he walked in from the outfield with his blocky, puffed-chest swagger, his T-shirt reading "Shut Up and Play," his brother, dressed in a red Rangers uniform and windbreaker, says to me in a heavily accented English: "You watch Ivan, he won't take it easy in this game. You're going to see. He'll try to do crazy things. Like last week, he hit a bloop single to right field and he stretched it into a triple."

Indeed, among all, this game is serious business. Someone keeps a running scorebook of the games. The stands frequently fill. And down the right-field line, a food and beverage stand is run out of a small stone building, where a man sells canned Budweisers and Pepsis as well as *pollo frito* (fried chicken) and *alcapurrias* (fried dumplings made of ground plantains stuffed with

**THE GAME IS IN HIS BLOOD: It's no stretch to say that whether he's working out to get ready to play (above) or actually playing, much of Rodriguez's life has been dedicated to baseball, baseball, baseball.**

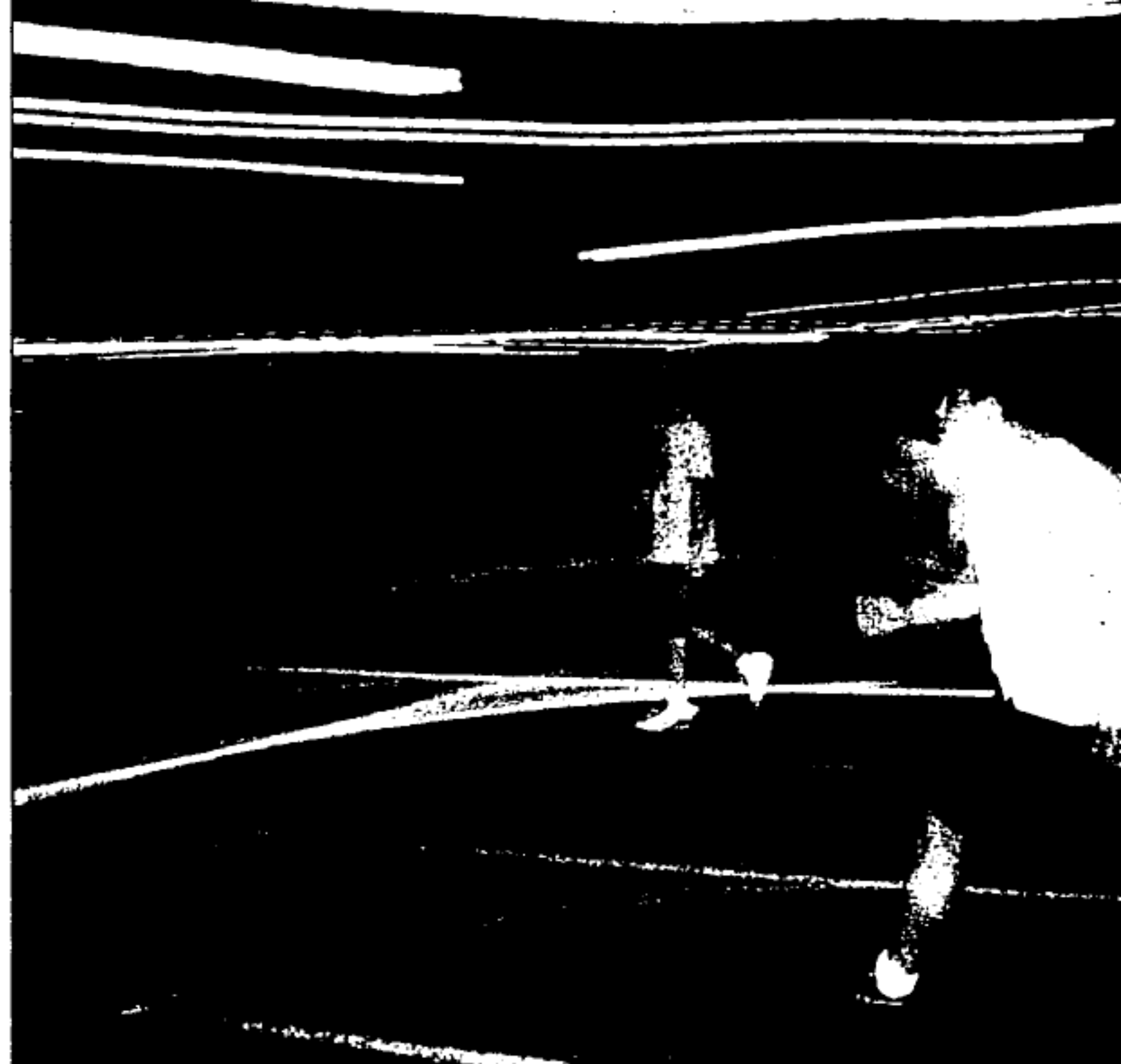


pork) and *bacalaitos* (fried codfish fritters).

The game starts off badly for *La Familia*. By the end of the first inning, they are down 7-0. "It reminds me of the Rangers," says Ivan with a chuckle upon his return to the dugout, before adding quickly: "But you're going to see. I'll hit the ball over the left-field fence." And in the sixth inning, he finally does, a shot of approximately 400 feet, prompting all, even the opposition, to bow with outstretched arms and break into uproarious laughter. Still, by the time the game is over, Ivan's team loses by more than a touchdown, 22-11.

Rodriguez's victory is only moral: He finishes, for yet another week, without killing himself.

**A**s soon as the baseball season ends, Rodriguez immediately returns here to Puerto Rico, living in an exclusive suburb five miles south of San Juan and a half-hour's drive from Vega Baja, in a \$1.8 million home within a heavily secured, gated community. It is a house he has owned for two years, painted on



**With 11 percent body fat, his childhood nickname of PUDGE, by now, is rendered a silly joke from the past; in deference to Tim Lincecum, 'ROCK' is more appropriate.**

the interior ecru white trimmed with gold and decorated with Greek columns, white marble floors and crystal chandeliers.

In one of the smaller rooms, Rodriguez has created a private office, which mostly serves as a storage place for trophies and tons of autographed memorabilia from athletes in all sports. "It's my untouchable place," he says. There's a mahogany desk and a leatherback chair; a fax machine; an opened Bible (he says he reads at least a page a day); an oil painting of his wife and him against the back wall; three framed pictures of Roberto Clemente; four of his Gold Gloves; two of his Silver Slugger bats; and, hanging from the ceiling by wires, a large mural of an airplane-like view of a baseball field.

"This field is the first thing I see when I fly here," he says. "It is something that makes me feel good."

At this moment, Rodriguez and I are sitting on his patio, alongside a swimming pool with a huge sliding pond and, behind that, a sloping, grassy hill that Rodriguez says he eventually will turn into a multicolored garden with a baseball-shaped flower-bed centerpiece.

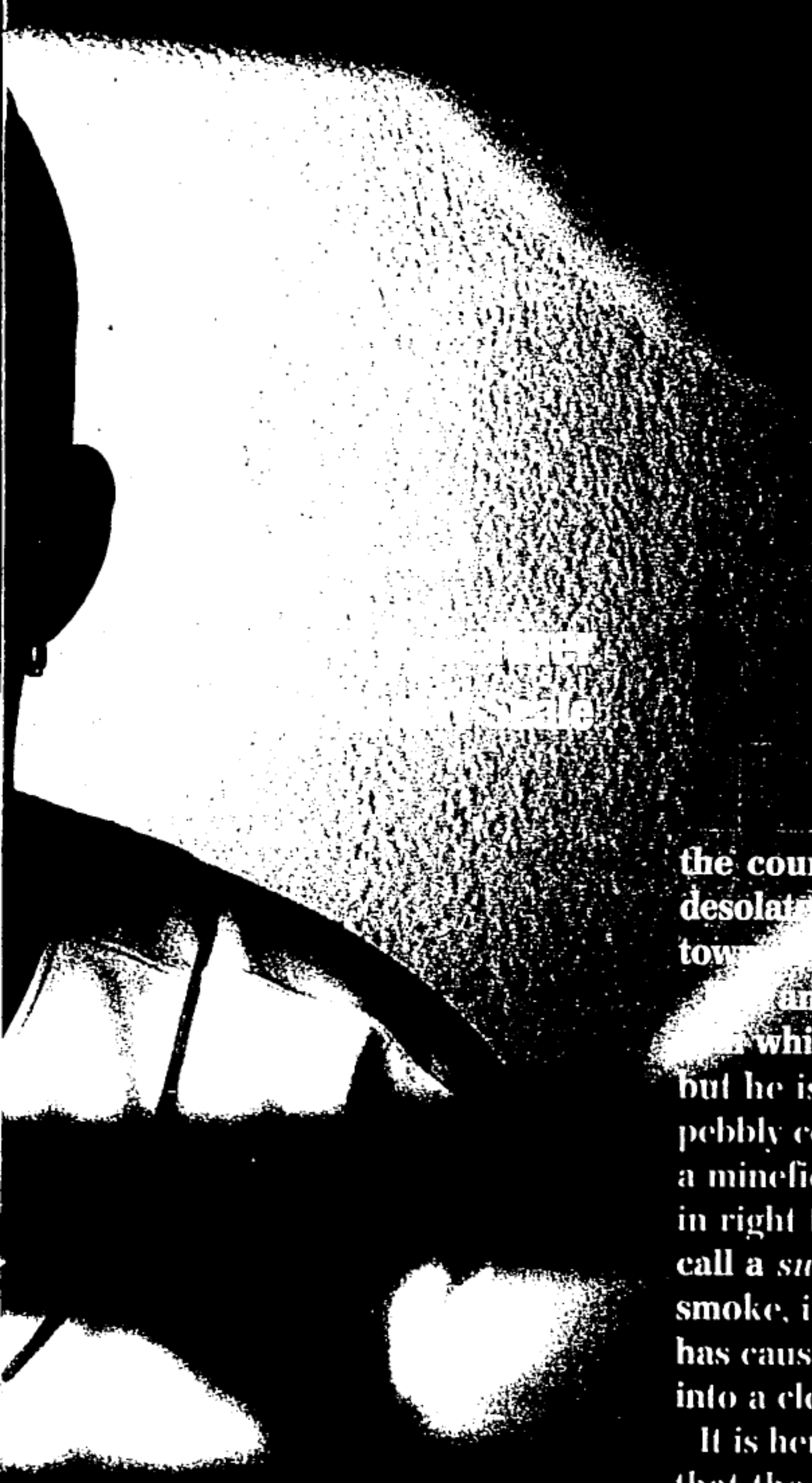
He's wearing a black and white gym suit—his wardrobe seems to consist only of various colored gym suits, white and gray T-shirts and black spandex shorts—a diamond stud and gold earring in his left ear, and a black Nike baseball cap he keeps turning nervously backward and forward. He's sunk into a couch like a little kid watching TV and sipping water from a tall glass.

Up close and out of uniform, while appearing somewhat condensed because of his short neck, Rodriguez, at 5-9, 205 pounds, looks decidedly less squat than he appears on the field and TV. He's built strong, streamlined, from top to bottom: a square jaw, boxy chest, a



# *the* HEART

BASEBALL



He is, arguably, baseball's best all-around catcher, a player not yet out of his 20s but whom the experts have tabbed the Johnny Bench of the '90s, and incredibly, as if part of some weird publicity stunt, he is here tonight. Here deep into the countryside of his Puerto Rican homeland, on the desolate west edge of a desperately poor barrio in the tiny town of his birth, Vega Baja.

It is an ugly November night, thick with a warm, misty air whipping back and forth with sudden gusts of wind, but he is here. Yes, here. Here, of all places, at a lumpy, pebbly community baseball field—a field not of dreams but a minefield of perils: with a horse grazing unconcernedly in right field; a 500-foot natural hole, or what the locals call a *sumidero*, which sometimes emits an ashy volcanic smoke, in center; and a huge pit around home plate that has caused dozens of runners trying to score to disappear into a cloud of dirt before re-emerging with broken legs.

It is here, every Tuesday night during the fall and winter, that the Rangers' Ivan Rodriguez, 26, the newly minted \$42 million man, comes to play a six-inning softball game with a group of pathetically out-of-shape locals. People he swears that no matter how much money he makes he'll never outgrow. People he has known since childhood. And people so attached to this postage-stamp of a town that they will leave only by way of their deaths.



# catchers love to watch and talk about.

have to get more hits to beat Texas than other clubs," says fellow catcher Joe Girardi. Instilled with a healthy paranoia about Rodriguez, runners tend to stay one to two steps closer to the bag than they would against other catchers, resulting in the Rangers having more double-play chances and allowing fewer runners to go from first to third or scoring from second on singles.

But when runners occasionally lose their way, if not their senses, and defy Rodriguez by straying too far off the bag, he is ready to pounce. Considering it no less than a challenge to his manhood, a personal affront, a public show of disrespect, he will fire to any base at any time whether he thinks he can get the runner or not.

"He loves putting fear and trepidation in the minds of opposing players," says Dave Valle, once Rodriguez's backup.

A territorial power trip? Rodriguez shakes his head. "No, no, I just want them to know that I'm there," he says with a straight face.

"On the air, I refer to Ivan as *El Guerrero*, or 'The Warrior,'" says Mayoral, who broadcasts Rangers games on the radio. "I can't help but see him as someone out of ancient times, like a great warrior carrying a lance and shield."

"You're definitely always aware of him," Yankees outfielder Bernie Williams says. To which outfielder Tony Phillips adds: "You'd better be. Because if you fall asleep for a second out there, you'll be walking back to the dugout in a hurry."

There is an old axiom among baserunners: You steal on the pitcher, not the catcher. "Ivan kind of changes that," Williams says. Call it "The Rodriguez Factor." Because no matter who has been on the mound for the Rangers, Rodriguez has thrown out runners trying to steal at a 44 percent clip or higher for five of his seven seasons, including last year when, for the first time in his big league career, he made trying to steal against him a less than even-money percentage play. He cut down 40-of-77 runners for 52 percent. He also won his sixth straight Gold Glove; only Bench, with 10, and Bob Boone, with seven, has more at the position.

At the plate, hitting mostly in the second slot, Rodriguez is a notorious free swinger, never walking more than 38 times in a season and conceding freely that, "I swing at anything close to me." Still, there



**A GOD-GIVEN GIFT:** Rodriguez has reason to thank Little League coach Julio Pabon, but honestly there's no coaching much of what he does.

has been a progression in his offensive numbers. From 1992, his first full season, to the present, his average has gone from .260 to .313 and his homers from eight to 20. In 1996, he set a record for catchers with 47 doubles; his 116 runs scored that season were two shy of Mickey Cochrane's record that has stood since 1932. And last year, on September 11 against the Twins, he hit three homers in a game for the first time.

He says he could be a 30-home run man if he wanted but says, "I don't look for power, just to hit the ball hard somewhere." The scouting reports say he sprays the ball and needs only a few pitches in the count to belt one hard. "Ivan also stays inside on the ball like few hitters can," Oates says. "A lefthanded pitcher can run a cut fastball inside to him, and he can still get the bat out and hit it to right field—and I don't mean a flair but something on the line." Says Girardi: "He's a tough out. If he gets behind in the count, he's good enough to keep fouling off pitch after pitch until he gets something he can really drive."

He just has one wish. Something he has wanted to do for years. What Rodriguez dreams about is switch-hitting, to bat lefthanded in 1998 for the first time in his major league career. He says he hits lefthanded in B.P. all the time and is convinced he can pull it off. In fact, he thought about finally doing it during the last game of last season—but couldn't pull the trigger. "I have more power lefthanded, and I pull everything," he says. "But I don't know if they'll let me do it. It may be too late for me. I don't know. We'll see."

It is a story that will forever endear him to Rangers fans and likely for decades to come make the players association and

agents everywhere cringe.

It was 9 o'clock, the morning of Thursday, July 31, a mere 14 hours before the trading deadline. Rangers G.M. Doug Melvin and club president and general partner Tom Schieffer were huddling in Melvin's office, talking about sending Rodriguez, a potential free agent after the season, to the Yankees, who the night before came up with a formidable

## Armed and dangerous

Just how dominant defensively was Ivan Rodriguez in 1997? He made the stolen base a less than 50-50 proposition. By comparison, no other catcher threw out more than 45 percent. The leaders in caught stealing for '97:

Player	Team	CS	Att.	Pct.
Ivan Rodriguez	Rangers	40	77	51.9
Brad Ausmus	Astros	38	85	44.7
Charles Johnson	Marlins	50	112	44.6
Jim Leyritz	Rangers	30	78	38.5
Dan Wilson	Mariners	46	120	38.3
Benito Santiago	Blue Jays	26	74	35.1
Jason Kendall	Pirates	51	146	34.9
Mike Matheny	Brewers	34	103	33.0

trade proposal. "We'd given up hope at that point of getting anything done with Ivan," Schieffer says now. "We were just trying to figure out the right time to call the press conference."

But suddenly, there was an urgent call to Melvin's office. It was Schieffer's executive assistant, Marguerite, who told her boss that Rodriguez wanted to talk as soon as possible.

# online

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# TSN Free Agents Basketball

who can be claimed after 2 PM on Monday, Jan. 5th, and before 9 PM on Sunday, Jan. 11th, and be on your team for games beginning Monday, Jan. 12th.

PQ ID	PLAYER / TEAM	SALARY
G 132	Isaiah Rider, Portland	\$2,430,000
G 190	Khalid Reeves, Dallas	\$1,150,000
F 326	Antonio McDyess, Phoenix	\$2,540,000
F 381	Johnny Newman, Denver	\$1,380,000
C 534	Luc Longley, Chicago	\$1,170,000

# Hockey

who can be claimed after 9 AM on Friday, Jan. 2nd, and before 9 PM on Thursday, Jan. 8th, and be on your team for games beginning Friday, Jan. 9th.

PQ ID	PLAYER / TEAM	SALARY
G 13	Ed Belfour, Dallas	\$1,830,000
C 104	Mark Messier, Vancouver	\$2,560,000
W 418	Adam Deadmarsh, Colorado	\$1,920,000
W 432	Rick Tocchet, Phoenix	\$1,650,000
D 811	Eric Desjardins, Philadelphia	\$1,360,000
D 895	Fredrik Olausson, Pittsburgh	\$610,000

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1	Wycoff / Astor	Madison Heights, MI
2	Dan Manning	Indianola, IA
3	Gary Kreutz	Edmonton, ALB
4	Wycoff / Astor	Madison Heights, MI
5	Keith Schoose	Long Beach, CA
6	Darryl Anderson	Plainfield, CT
7	Jon Berenson	Providence, RI
8	S / K Carter	Memphis, TN
9	Tom Dudman	Van Nuys, CA
10	Ivan Friedman	Austin, TX

## \$10,000 HOCKEY CASH GRAND PRIZE THRU 12/18

1	Faltin / Schneiker	Moersfelden, GER
2	Anthony Cascio	Ridgewood, NY
3	M / K Sebastian	Victoria, BC
4	Francis Gagnon	Lachine, QUE
5	David Beckman	Battleford, SAS
6	Chris Reardon	Encinitas, CA
7	David Beckman	Battleford, SAS
8	Mark Desmarais	Montreal, QUE
9	Krajnz / Steinman	Port Huron, MI
10	Mehmet Onder	Oakton, VA

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4	Ron Ugarte	Warren, NJ	Wire 2 Wire	\$4,100
5	Rob Martin	Barnhart, MO	Tanner's Tikes	\$2,600
6	Chris Marchese	Brooklyn, NY	Big Blue Wrecking Crew	\$2,100
7	Mark Jehle	Wesley Chapel, FL	Tampa's Revenge	\$2,100
8	Stephen Kleffner	Spalding, NE	Dirt Dawgs	\$2,100
9	Jeff Schwartz	Greenfield, WI	It Had To Be Moo	\$2,100
10	Renny Pierangeli	Broomall, PA	Pier 523	\$1,600

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**'I'm really worried about this,' Rodriguez told Schieffer. 'I don't want to be traded. I love playing here, and I want to stay here. I want to work out a deal.'**

It was a visit unannounced—and unexpected by Schieffer.

Rodriguez, who solicited advice on his protracted contract negotiations from dozens of people over the previous couple of weeks, oddly, but tellingly, showed up without his agent, Jeff Moorad, who was en route from California. There were several reports that the players association was pressuring Moorad to push Rodriguez toward free agency, so as to hike the pay scale for catchers. Moorad swears this never happened; the players association never returned calls on the matter.

Says one of Rodriguez's friends, who requested anonymity: "I just told Ivan that he should always remember that the agent works for him, not the other way around."

Rodriguez came quickly to the point. (He would later admit that he was "scared" and "nervous" about the whole thing.) "I can't sleep," he told Schieffer. "I'm really worried about this. I don't want to be traded. I love playing here, and I want to stay here. I want to work out a deal."

Schieffer remembers: "He was very sincere. It was obvious to me that it really meant something to him to be a Texas Ranger."

So for an hour they spoke, until Schieffer finally wrote a dollar figure on a slip of paper, saying, "If you can live with this ..." Rodriguez read the scribbled-down number and nodded but said he would still need to go over it with Moorad; Schieffer agreed.

Later that day, Moorad, from Rodriguez's house, negotiated with Schieffer for another hour by phone. By as quickly as 2 that afternoon, the deal was done: \$42 million over five years.

"We went further on the money than we really wanted to," says Schieffer. Yet there are those who feel that had Rodriguez left as a free agent he could've commanded as much as \$12 million a year.

"Yes, I think I could've gotten more money," Rodriguez says, "but I don't think I would've been happy. The Rangers are my family."

Two weeks earlier, the Rangers had, in fact, offered \$38.2 million over five years, which Moorad rejected; then the Rangers rejected Moorad's five-year proposal of \$45 million. Schieffer, at the time, was mostly concerned about one player taking up too much of the payroll, while Melvin was worried about the wear and



**IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF:** When mom Eva takes time out from her second-graders to plant a kiss on Ivan, she gets an A-plus smile.

tear of the position, that Rodriguez's offensive production would decline as he continued to catch more and more games.

As the thing dragged on, Rodriguez slowly was going out of his mind. In the week before his signing, he sunk into in a 4-for-20 slump that included striking out three times July 28. "He wasn't playing like himself," Greer says. Concedes Rodriguez: "It did bother me. The more I tried not to think about it, the more I thought about it. I wanted the whole thing to just be over with. I wanted to relax again."

Rodriguez, not being a man of words, decides to show rather than tell me now. So he takes me to where it all started for him, to his Little League field in the barrio of Algaborro in Vega Baja. Where he played from 7 to 15 and where

he'd often pitch against Juan Gonzalez, from the neighboring barrio of Alto de Cuba, and where the Rangers scouts first saw him.

He walks through a hole in the rusty fence and sits on the cement Visitante bench painted yellow and green and chipping all over. For several moments, he says nothing, looking out onto the field, which has large patches of grass missing in the outfield. Then, quietly, he says: "It has always looked like this."

He says he won many championships here and threw a lot of no-hitters. "Four no-hitters in one year," he says with pride. He says he was 8. And he remembers, too, that the stands would fill for big games, but that his parents would never sit up there. Instead, they would bring small chairs from home and sit just behind the back-

stop fence. For the most part, his mother watched silently, unless she was arguing with the umpires, but his father, who rarely talked at home, never stopped chattering at the ball-field. A highly touted, power-hitting left fielder in his day, Jose Sr. would chide his son all game long and shout endless reminders like "Think" and "Be aggressive" and "Play hard" and "Don't get lazy." And he would repeat these over and over. Yet, for reasons Ivan doesn't understand to this day, he somehow would never get upset at his father, nor would he ever ignore the constant instructions. "Why would I?" he says, his angry bulldog face stiffening suddenly. "It made me what I am." **TSN**

# The total package

The Marlins' Charles Johnson was better defensively, going the entire regular season without an error; but he didn't hit as well. The Dodgers' Mike Piazza had one of the best offensive seasons a catcher has ever had but committed an eye-popping 16 errors and allowed more than a 75 percent success rate by attempted basestealers. The Indians' Sandy Alomar Jr. had comparable offensive numbers but committed a league-leading 12 errors and allowed seven of 10 base stealers to succeed. Taken as the total package, then, **Ivan Rodriguez** was the best all-around catcher in the 1997 regular season:

	Avg.	RBIs	HR	Pct.	Fielding Pct.	CS Pct.	E
Alomar	.324	83	21	.985	28.2	12*	
Johnson	.250	63	19	1.000*	44.6	0	
Piazza	.362	124	40	.986	23.3	16*	
Rodriguez	.313	77	20	.992	51.9*	7	

\*Led league

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