



BREAKING BALL

An affair to remember and forget

BY MICHAEL HARDY

Like any long-term relationship, my love affair with the Astros has had its ups and downs over the years, its moments of ecstasy and despair. And, as is often the case in sports, the thrill of victory is only a razor's edge away from the agony of defeat.

October 17, 2005: It's Game 5 of the National League Championship Series, with the Astros just one strike away from earning their first-ever trip to the World Series. My father, my best friend Justin, and I are high up above third base in the nosebleed seats at Minute Maid Park, only a few rows from the back wall. Like everyone else, we've been on our feet since the seventh inning, when Lance Berkman electrified the

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crowd with a three-run homer to put the Astros up 4-2 over their old nemesis, the St. Louis Cardinals. With a two-run lead and two outs in the ninth inning—and the best closer in baseball, Brad Lidge, on the mound—we're practically in the World Series already.

The stadium is physically shaking under my feet, rocked by over 43,000 screaming, stomping, clapping fans, when Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols steps to the plate with two men on base. The roar only grows louder as Lidge throws first one, then two strikes. Every Astros fan knows only too well what happens next: Lidge steps to the mound, leans in to take the signal from the catcher, straightens up, and delivers the pitch—a hard fastball down the center of the plate that Pujols easily smashes into deep left field for a three-run homer. The stadium goes

from deafeningly loud to eerily silent in a nanosecond.

Game 5 of the 2005 NLCS is to Astros fans what Game 6 of the 1986 World Series is to Red Sox fans or Game 6 of the 2003 NLCS is for Cubs fans—a traumatic event that binds us together in collective angst. Even though the Astros went on that year to win Game 6 in St. Louis, finally punching their ticket to the World Series, the season really ended that October night with Pujols's heartbreaker of a home run. No one was very surprised when the Astros lost the World Series to the White Sox in four straight games.

THAT GAME WAS THE HIGH-WATER MARK of my Astros fandom. I've been following the team for almost a quarter-century, ever since my father took me to my first game in 1990, when I was 6. Back then, of course, the Astros still played in the Astrodome, and visiting that vast colossus of a stadium was at least half the fun—picking up our tickets at the bunker-like box office outside the stadium, going through turnstiles past vendors hawking programs, cotton candy, team memorabilia. Whenever I had some pocket change, I stopped at the team store to buy more baseball cards for my rapidly growing collection.

My dad and I always sat with our scorecards and binoculars in the center-field bleachers, so far from home plate that the only players we could see distinctly were the lonely outfielders. Perhaps it wasn't a surprise, then, that my favorite player was center-fielder Steve Finley, a tall, lanky fellow who hit well, stole bases, and made spectacular defensive plays that I could watch, even sans binoculars, from my nearby perch.

My dad, on the other hand, fancied a player named Danny Darwin, a long-forgotten journeyman pitcher whom he seemed to like for the sole reason that he shared a surname with Charles Darwin, one of his personal idols. When my dad was growing up in Spring Branch, his own father, a stockbroker, had taken him to Colt .45 games at Colt Stadium, the Astrodome's uncovered, mosquito-plagued predecessor. Third-baseman Bob Aspromonte was one of my grandfather's clients; for many years my dad kept a yellowed old baseball signed by Aspromonte.

My regular visits to the Astrodome abruptly ended in 1992 when my family moved to Austin, although we returned to town every few months to visit my now-widowed grandmother. On some of these trips we made time for an Astros game, but I could feel my interest beginning to wane. I kept building my baseball card collection, but I also began collecting basketball and football cards (though I proved inept at actually playing any of these sports.) My allegiance to Houston was undiminished—I watched every Oilers game on TV, and when the Rockets won their back-to-back championships in 1994 and 1995, they briefly displaced the Astros in my affections.

It wasn't until I moved back to Houston for college in 2003 that my flagging interest in the Astros began to revive. I couldn't have picked a better time—the team would shortly lure Roger Clemens out of a brief retirement to join his hometown squad, with Clemens bringing along his friend and former Yankees teammate Andy Pettitte. When you added in the team's third ace, Roy Oswalt, suddenly the 'Stros had the best bullpen in baseball. They played in a new stadium now, and although Steve Finley had long since departed, the team was still recognizable from my Astrodome days in the early '90s thanks to the continued, reassuring presence of Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell. As far as I was concerned, the Killer B's were a part of the Astros' DNA. Like many other fans, I couldn't imagine the team without them.

In 2004 the Astros overcame an anemic offense to make it to the NLCS, where they lost to the Cardinals in seven games. The following year, my friends and I had standing-room only tickets for Game 4 of the Divisional Series against the Atlanta Braves, a nearly six-hour slugfest that set the Major League

Baseball postseason record for most innings (18), most players used by a single team (23), most grand slams (2), and longest game time. The following day, baseball writer Rich Lederer dubbed it the greatest game ever played, and many of us who were in attendance are inclined to agree. By the 15th inning, the Astros had used all their pitchers except Roger Clemens, who was forced to come in as a reliever for only the second time in his career. When the Astros' rookie second baseman Chris Burke hit the game-winning home run in the bottom of the 18th inning, sending the Astros to the NLCS for a rematch with the Cards, the crowd—or what was left of it after six hours—gave him a standing ovation that seemed to last forever.

Every Astros fan in the stadium was thinking the same thing: *this is our year*.

THEN CAME ALBERT PUJOLS, and it's all been downhill from there. The following year, the team declined to renew Bagwell's contract, and Clemens and Pettitte filed for free agency. I soon became a free agent myself, leaving Houston to attend grad school on the East Coast. By the time I returned to town in 2013, Biggio and Bagwell had retired, the Astros had a new owner, and the team had switched from the National League to the American. I couldn't even get the games on TV thanks to now-defunct CSN Houston's inabil-

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ity to secure a carriage agreement with DirecTV.

The team certainly *looked* like it did in the '90s—they even returned to their classic orange-and-navy uniforms—but that just seemed to emphasize my estrangement from them.

In long-term relationships that begin to founder, it's customary to ask whether one or both parties has changed. I wonder: have the Astros changed, or have I? Am I just a bandwagon fan? Yes, the team has given me a lifetime of sports heartache, but heartache—always a hallmark of the Astros fan experience—never stopped me from loving them in the old days. Maybe I'm the one who's different. After all, spectator sports have certainly loosened their grip on me. These days, I'd rather sit through a three-hour opera than a three-hour football game. I've even given away most of my once-prized sports card collection.

I guess we'll see what happens when—sooner or later—the Astros start winning again. They're reputed to have the best farm team in the league, which is why *Sports Illustrated* has pegged them to win the World Series—in 2017. My guess is that my interest in the 'Stros will pick back up. I might even go to a few games. But will things between us ever be the same? ❗