

Fans stay up late to welcome Mariners home

Martinez gets a special welcome from fans who fear that he may never play for Seattle again

By James Burke
The Associated Press

SEATTLE — The Seattle Mariners returned home early Monday to fans who were in the mood to celebrate.

None of the 300 well-wishers who waited at Boeing Field spoke of hitting slumps, poor pitching or falling into an early two-game hole against the Baltimore Orioles.

Instead they screamed their thanks for a season to remember.

The Mariners lost their best-of-five American League division series with the Orioles in four games after losing 3-1 Sunday at Camden Yards. They didn't return to Seattle on a chartered flight until 1:45 a.m., but that didn't stop fans from staying up late to see their heroes.

"It feels good to be home," Mariners Manager Lou Piniella said. "We were hoping to come back to keep playing, but what are you gonna do?"

The fans paid special tribute to Edgar Martinez even before the Mariners' plane fully stopped on the runway at King County International Airport.

"Eddd-garr!" they screamed in the familiar Kingdome cry, audible even above the sound of engine jets. "Eddddd-garrrrrrrr!"

"It's real nice to see the fans come out and do this," Martinez said before boarding a waiting bus.

Martinez, the team's designated hitter, faces an uncertain future as the Mariners contemplate a move to the National League, which doesn't allow the designated hitter position. Several fans specially came to welcome Martinez home after what could be his last season as a Mariner.

"When (radio announcer) Dave

Niehaus said during the game today that we could be looking at the last at-bat for Edgar Martinez, I knew we had to be here," said Shelly Wasson, 32, of Port Orchard. "Losing was hard, but not as hard as hearing that."

Wasson and her 6-year-old son Aaron brought homemade signs with them on the ferry to Seattle. It was clear who their favorite players were. Mom's sign read, "Save My Edgar: PLEASE Don't Break My Heart." Aaron preferred shortstop Alex Rodriguez, and his sign read, "I love you, A-Rod."

"We may not be going to school tomorrow, but it's worth it," Wasson said. "He wanted to see his hero, and Mama wanted to see hers."

Amy Franz, of Algona, clearly was on hand to cheer for right-fielder Jay "Bone" Buhner. She brought along an inflatable bone, a "Bad to the Bone" sign — and a Mariners hat that made it look as if

she had a bone through her head. "They call me the Bone Lady," said Franz, 26. "He's just a great guy. I like his attitude — he's got a big heart. And I play right field when I play softball, so there's a common bond."

Many fans waited for hours behind a barrier near the runway. Teenage girls huddled in blankets to stay warm. Children in pajamas grew restless, ran away and were called back to their parents' sides. Video camcorders were checked numerous times.

Then someone said, "There's a plane in the sky," and the screams began.

People surged forward while television crews captured their enthusiasm on film. The fans screamed for Martinez and shook their signs: "We STILL love you guys" and "Welcome Home — God Bless Our Champs."

Ace Randy Johnson fell on Sunday to Baltimore's Mike Mussina,

who outpitched him for the second time in five days. Mussina shut down Seattle by giving up just one run on two hits in seven innings.

It was a hard loss for Seattle after the season's high hopes. The Mariners won 90 games in a season for the first time, and many fans thought they were the team to beat going into the playoffs.

But the Orioles' pitching proved too much for even Seattle's best hitters. Ken Griffey Junior averaged .304 during the regular season and hit 56 home runs, just five fewer than the all-time record set by Roger Maris in 1961. Against Baltimore, Griffey went 2-for-15 without a homer.

But the fans chose to focus on the season's highlights: Griffey's race for the home-run record. Johnson's win at home that made him the first Mariner to win 20 games. Three million fans streaming into the Kingdome.

Pitching will be the key to Atlanta-Florida matchup

The Braves and the Marlins, two pitching powerhouses, square off tonight in the NL Championships

By Paul Newberry
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — Hitters need not apply.

Clearly, the NL championship series between Atlanta and Florida will be decided on that tiny hump of dirt in the middle of the infield. The Braves may have the best pitching staff in baseball, but the Marlins are one of the few teams that can match them strike for strike, scoreless inning for scoreless inning.

Take the opener of the best-of-7 series Tuesday night at Turner Field. While Atlanta is starting four-time Cy Young Award winner Greg Maddux (19-4, 2.20 ERA), the Marlins are able to counter with one of the few pitchers who can be just as dominating, Kevin Brown (16-8, 2.69)

"This series obviously points toward a lot of 2-1 and 3-2 type of games," said John Smoltz, scheduled to start Game 3 in the

best-of-7 series.

In fact, the Marlins were able to win eight of 12 games against the Braves during the regular season largely because their pitching was superior to Atlanta's head-to-head.

The Braves hit only .210 against Florida and scored just 34 runs, an average of 2.8 per game. The Marlins, on the other hand, hit .253 and scored 50 runs, though it must be noted that half were scored against pitchers who didn't make Atlanta's postseason roster.

"Everybody knows that the only way you've got a chance to beat the Braves is to keep the run production down," Florida manager Jim Leyland said. "They're going to be stingy."

Atlanta, making its sixth appearance in the NL championship series since 1991, has never faced a pitching staff that mirrored its own this closely. Much has been made of 20-game winner Denny Neagle going nearly two weeks between starts because of the Braves' pitching depth, but the Marlins shifted rookie sensation Livan Hernandez (9-3, 3.18 ERA) to the bullpen because he's

not needed as a starter.

"Not taking anything away from the teams we've faced before, but any time you can throw Kevin Brown, Al Leiter, Alex Fernandez and you've got to put a guy like Livan Hernandez in the bullpen, that's as good as it gets," Smoltz said.

Leyland announced Monday that he'll use four different starters against the Braves in an unorthodox rotation that calls for Brown to pitch Games 1, 4 and 7 should the series go the distance.

"He's had seven days rest and he's ready to go," Leyland said. "Our guys have all the confidence in the world in Kevin."

Fernandez (16-10) is scheduled for Games 2 and 6, while Braves killer Tony Saunders (4-6) was Leyland's surprise choice in Game 3, when the series shifts to Miami for the middle three games. Saunders was 3-0 with a 1.65 ERA against the Braves, 1-6 with a 5.57 ERA against the rest of the NL.

"Saunders had some success against them this year," Leyland said. "He was kind of an unknown quantity."

Leiter (16-12) was bumped back to Game

5 for his only scheduled start in the series. He'll work out of the bullpen if needed in the first two games.

The Braves rotation goes this way: Maddux, Tom Glavine (14-7), Smoltz (15-12) and Neagle (20-5). Because Neagle is scheduled to make only one start in the series, he'll work out of the bullpen in the first two games and, if necessary, the last two.

Neagle could help negate the Marlins' apparent edge in the bullpen. Robb Nen (35 saves, 1.95 ERA) was more effective than Atlanta closer Mark Wohlers (33 saves, 3.50 ERA), and Florida's relievers go six deep with Nen complimented by righties Hernandez and Jay Powell and lefties Ed Vosberg, Dennis Cook and Felix Heredia.

Neagle said he's ready to pitch in a key situation out of the bullpen if needed.

"Sure. Definitely. I've done it before," said Neagle, who had three saves for the Pirates in 1992 and '93. "If that's the situation, I think I can handle it with no problem."

But Wohlers thinks the bullpen regulars — including three rookies and only one lefty — can handle the job just fine.

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