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MLB PLAYOFFS

Fans stay up until early morning 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 Kingdom cry, audible even above the sound of engine jets. "Eddd-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.

He wasn't the only Mariner whose bat went cold in the playoffs. Martinez batted .188, Buhner batted .231 and second baseman Joey Cora batted .176. Catcher Dan Wilson was 0-for-13 with nine strikeouts.

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 Kingdom.

The Mariners also hit 264 home runs this season, breaking the major league record set by Baltimore a year ago. They led the majors with 925 runs scored.

"Even if we lost," Franz said, "they gave it a ride."

Braves: Maddux, Brown struggle through six

Continued from Page 7

sweep of San Francisco last week, also struggled for six innings — he'll need to get sharper because manager Jim Leyland plans to start him two more times in the series, if necessary.

Both starters allowed five hits.

Relievers Dennis Cook, Jay Powell and Robb Nen held the Braves hitless over the last three innings. Nen pitched the ninth for a save.

The Marlins followed an old, familiar formula that opponents often try against Maddux. They swung at the first hittable ball they saw, ran when they got on base and did their best not to

chase pitches out of the strike zone, and it all worked as they dropped the four-time Cy Young winner to 8-6 in 16 career postseason starts.

Edgar Renteria singled with one out in the first inning and stole second. Gary Sheffield walked and, after Bobby Bonilla struck out, Jeff Conine sliced a grounder toward first base that handcuffed McGriff for an error that loaded the bases.

Alou then hit a high, two-hopper down the third-base line. But Chipper, still slowed after fouling a ball off his foot in a Sunday workout, took a tentative first step and did not field the chopper.

The ball rolled near the stands in left field and Klesko appeared to box it around as all three runners scored.

In the third, Sheffield hit a drive to center that deflected off the mitt off Lofton, a four-time Gold Glove winner in the AL, for a three-base error. Bonilla walked, Alou had an RBI grounder and, with two outs, Maddux got sloppy on a two-strike pitch that Charles Johnson lined for a double for a 5-1 lead.

Keith Lockhart doubled and McGriff singled for a run in the Atlanta first. Jones hit his sixth home run in 34 postseason games in the third and Klesko connected off Brown in the sixth.



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