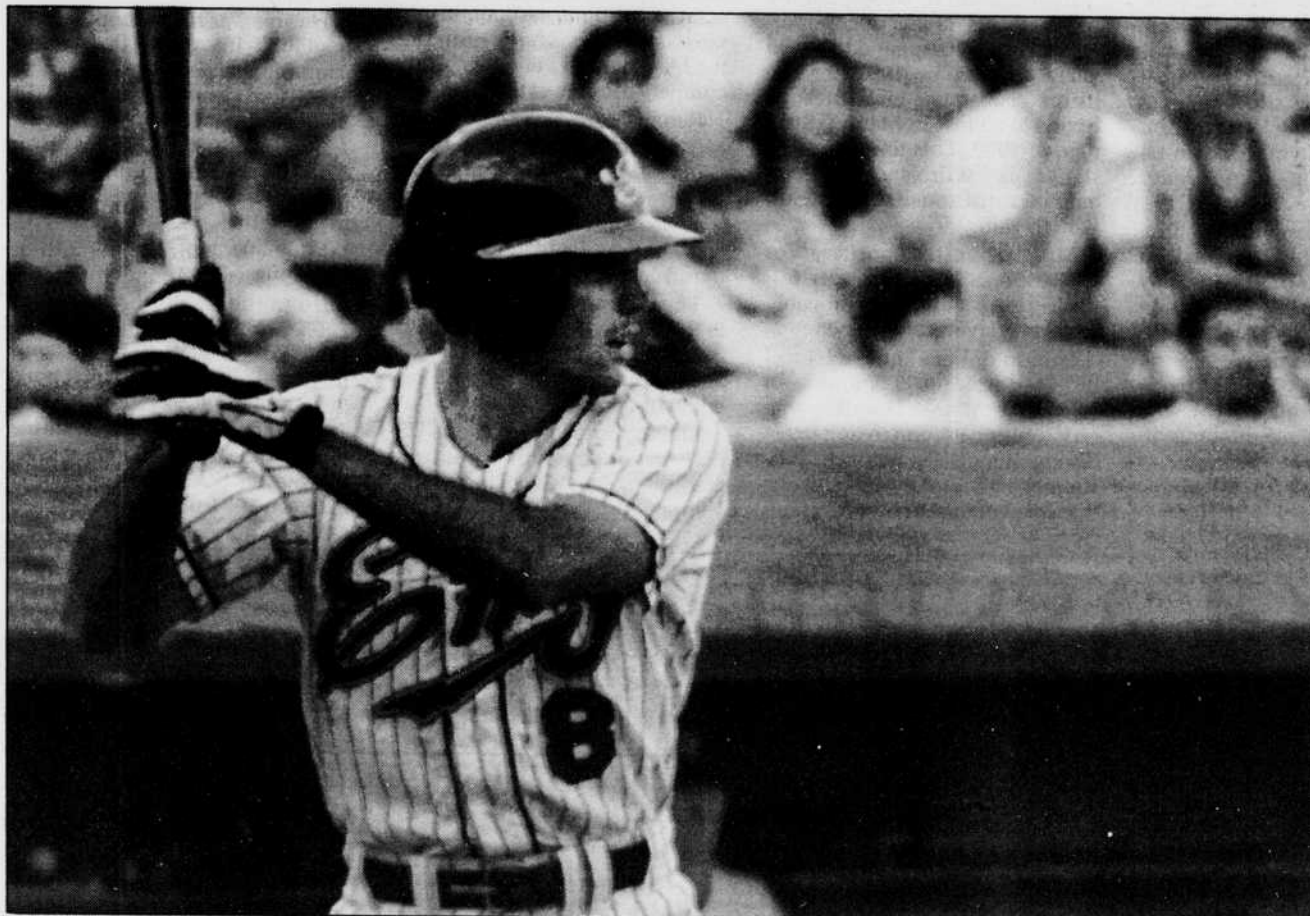




EUGENE EMERALDS



CHAD PATTESON/Emerald

Eugene outfielder Brian Cox digs in against an Everett pitcher during the Ems' 4-3 victory at Civic Stadium on June 29.

The Life of Brian

By Matt O'Neill
Freelance Reporter

It has been a season of adjustment for Eugene Emeralds center fielder Brian Cox.

Coming off of a season where he hit .393 with 18 home runs and 87 RBIs, led the team with 27 doubles and 112 hits, and ended with a 25-game hitting streak and a College World Series appearance at Florida State, Cox has had to adjust to the new surroundings of Civic Stadium and the Northwest League.

Drafted in the 26th round of the 1998 amateur draft by the Atlanta Braves, the biggest change for the Tallahassee native, who is hitting just .231 with 2 home runs and 8 RBIs through Sunday's Emeralds 10-3 loss to Yakima, was hitting without the aluminum bat. Cox attributed most of his hitting woes to the fact that he had to learn to use a wooden bat.

"[It took] just a few minor adjustments, and I was trying to make major adjustments," Cox said. "Next thing I know, I was going downhill."

Those adjustments contributed to an early season slump during which Cox's batting average plummeted to a season low of .063 after five games and just .178 after 13 games.

But with the help of Emeralds manager Jim Saul and positions coach Dan Norman, Cox began to find his swing again and slowly raise his batting average to .246 after 20 games.

"His mechanics are getting a lot better," Norman said. "We talked about closing

Emeralds center fielder Brian Cox is making the difficult adjustment from college to pro baseball

his front side off too much before the pitch gets there. If he does that, he can't get his hips through."

Once Cox began to change his mechanics, his coaches felt he was beginning to swing the bat better. Norman said he feels that it is just a matter of time before more of Cox's balls begin to fall in for base hits.

"He's been swinging the bat pretty good," Norman said. "He just hasn't had any hits. Now if he's hitting .280 or .290, some of those hits would be falling in."

Along with picking up the wooden bat, Cox thinks the caliber of pitching in the Northwest League has helped prolong his early season slump.

"They're a lot smarter. They throw a lot harder," Cox said. "Every day you're getting every college team's number-one pitcher, not the number-three or number-four you were in college."

While Cox is beginning to show signs of his hitting stroke from Florida State, the Ems coaching staff has been impressed with his defensive skills.

Saul spoke glowingly about his starting center fielder.

"He's done a good job in center field," Saul said. "He goes after the ball well. He's got a good arm, and runners are not going to take extra bases on him because

he's a very accurate thrower."

"He's got the strongest arm out there," Norman said, "and probably the most accurate."

He also feels that the years of experience and coaching at Florida State gave Cox a head start over players who jump right from high school to the professional ranks.

"Most of the guys I've been working with are right out of high school, so he's a little ahead of those right out of high school," Norman said. "He's facing better pitching, guys who are throwing a little harder than guys in high school. He's seeing more quality pitchers at Florida State."

After a few months of professional baseball and seeing the same teams for two or three times, Cox has begun to show signs of adjusting to the higher level competition.

"After ten games you should know what a guy can do," Norman said. "He's been doing a pretty good job."

The coaching staff would like to see him continue to raise his game to another level, as would Cox.

"I've been seeing the ball a little better, but I'm still not hitting the ball the way I want to," he said. "I need to start hitting a few more hard balls."

If Cox continues to show signs of improvement and begins to find the old prowess from his college days, he will have to make another summer adjustment — to the major leagues.

Rodriguez is the greatest shortstop ever

It appeared casually in Saturday's Register-Guard — a quote from Hall-of-Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt that helped validate an argument I've been making for the last three years.

In a brief labeled "Lighter Side," Schmidt was quoted as saying in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, "I just like to turn on ESPN and watch the highlights because there are plays that are made with regularity nowadays that we never made when I was playing, let alone the generation before me."

Schmidt played in the '70s and '80s, meaning the players just 10 years ago were better than luminaries like Mantle, Aaron and Gibson. And meaning that today's stars are better than names like Jackson, Brett and Ryan.

"They make plays that guys never dreamed of making when I played," Schmidt continued.

"Nothing against Ozzie Smith, but there are probably six shortstops in the big leagues who are making plays that he brought into the game."

Of course those contemporary shortstops

Schmidt was referring to include Cleveland's Omar Vizquel and the Mets' Rey Ordonez, for sure. But I would also include in that group a player whose case I've been arguing since he came into the league.

That player is Mariners shortstop Alex Rodriguez, and the argument is for him being the greatest shortstop to ever play the game.

Take a moment to let that soak in. I know that includes placing him above guys like Smith and Cal Ripken, Hall-of-Fame inductees like Ernie Banks, and hallowed names like Honus Wagner.

But I believe that, given his current pace, if Rodriguez can maintain the level of play he has enjoyed for the past three years for another eight to 10, he will be remembered as the greatest of all time.

Monday was A-Rod's 23rd birthday. During his three-plus years in the big leagues, Rodriguez has hit .312 with 95 home runs and 79 stolen bases. Considering that most ballplayers reach their primes around the age of 27 or 28, and maintain that level of play for five to six years, A-Rod is surely on pace to compile the most spectacular offensive numbers ever posted by a shortstop.

The only shortstop to compare with Rodriguez offensively is former Cub Ernie Banks. Banks retired after 19 seasons with 512 homers, including five years with at least 40 bombs.

A-Rod has already hit 31 this season and is on pace to approach 50. At his current pace of 36 home runs a year over the last three seasons (including a projected 48 this year), Rodriguez will finish his career with somewhere around 650 dingers, should he play 19 seasons as Banks did. And Banks finished his career with a .274 batting average; A-Rod is hitting .310 in his admittedly brief career, including his magical season of 1996, when he hit .358 with 36 bombs and 123 ribbies in probably the greatest offensive season ever for a shortstop.

Historically, A-Rod compares favorably as well. Wagner hit .300 or better for 17 consecutive seasons, including eight batting titles. A-Rod would be hard-pressed to match those marks, considering the quality of talent today. But Wagner hit just

OPINION

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