

# 'Small-ball' teams enjoying successes



## THE HOME STRETCH

ROBBIE McCALLUM

If there's one thing I hate, it's money buying wins in professional sports.

Last season, I shuddered every time I opened up the sports page to find the major league baseball standings. Big-money teams like Atlanta and the damn Yankees were on top and small-venue teams like Minnesota and Montreal were on the bottom.

There was some consolation in seeing that the high-salary Los Angeles Dodgers were among the league's worst and penny-pinching Pittsburgh, for a brief moment, was in the hunt for a wild card berth.

This year I have hope. The league's best team is Seattle, who over the off-season lost All-Star shortstop Alex Rodriguez to free agency in the biggest deal in sports history. Who's laughing now? The 20-5 Mariners or the 11-14 Rangers and their \$252 million man?

Some say the M's are better off without Rodriguez, and can now play a more effective style of play: small ball.

Instead of relying on Rodriguez, Ken Griffey Jr., Randy Johnson and a thin pitching staff, Seattle now takes advantage of a deep roster where everyone contributes to complement a strong pitching staff.

While Carlos Guillen, Stan Javier and Freddy Garcia seem like poor replacements for A-Rod, the Big Unit and Junior, they are the kind of players that make Seattle tick, and they do a decent job of it.

No team is better at playing small ball than the league's sec-

ond-best club, the Minnesota Twins. With one of the league's smallest venues and payrolls, the Twinkies have been in the AL Central's cellar dweller for a decade. In fact, the last time Minnesota put together a string of wins like they have this season was during their championship year of 1991 when residents of the Twin Cities coined the familiar sounding phrase: "Worst to First."

The struggles of big-money teams like New York and Arizona, who are both trying to stay above the .500 mark, make this season all that much more fun.

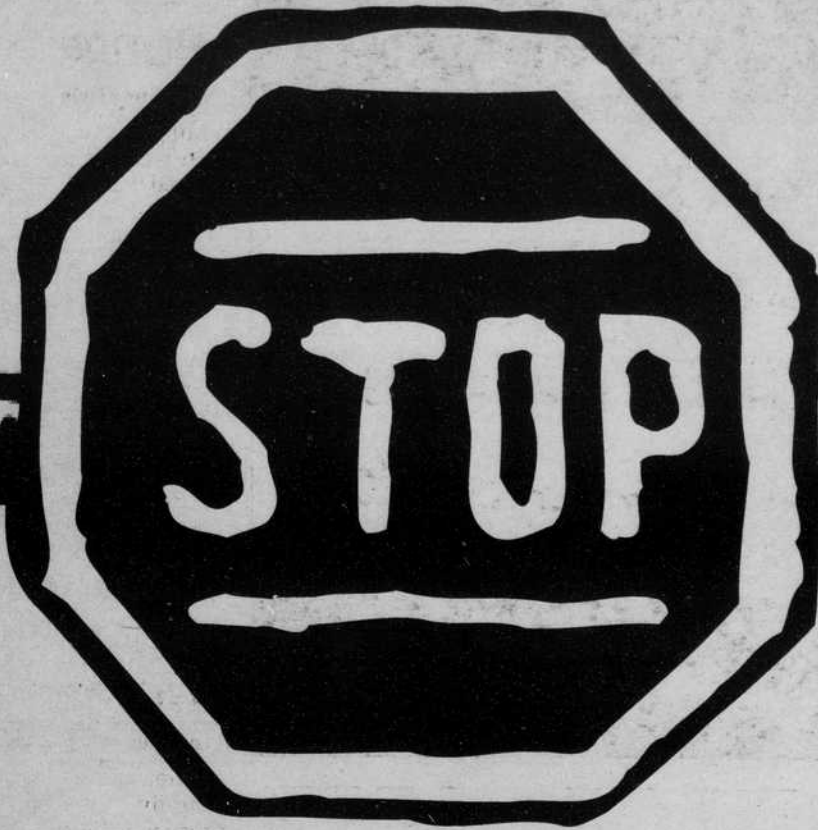
The really fun part about watching Seattle and Minnesota play is learning about the players. Not too many people outside of the Gopher State know much about players like Doug Mientkiewicz and Cristian Guzman. But now, Twins rightfielder Matt Lawton is on the cover of Sports Illustrated and the word is getting out: The Twins are for real.

But is the success of small ball just a fluke? Will the Mariners and Twins be powers in five years? Next year? This September? History says no (to the former two). The Mariners haven't made the playoffs in consecutive years ever, and the Twins have averaged about eight years between each playoff year over the last 25 years.

Alas, the Yankees, Dodgers, Rangers and all of the other mercenary teams in baseball will just buy more free agents and pluck the minor league prospects from the farm systems of small-venue teams like Montreal and Pittsburgh to shore up any weaknesses in their lineups.

But at least for now, we can open up the sports page to find two small-ball teams on top of the league standings.

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