

---

## A RAINY CHAMPIONSHIP

by

Frank Stehno

---

Anne was a baseball fan when I met her. Being from Tucson, she followed the Houston Astros' farm team, appropriately named the Toros. Because of her interest, we attended several games each year, and in 1991 the Toros played in the Pacific Coast League championship series against the Calgary Cannons.

The first two games of that best out of five series were played in Calgary, where the Cannons took a commanding 2-0 lead. Somewhat discouraged, we bought tickets to the first game when the teams traveled down to Tucson. With only one game left to win it looked as though the Cannons might sweep. But the Toros pulled it together in front of their home crowd, and the series went to 2-1, still in favor of the Cannons.

Excited by a marvelous comeback, and the prospect of evening the series, we bought two more tickets and attended game four. Of course there was that nagging, unspoken feeling that it might also be the last game of the season. Yet once again the Toros toughed it out and came away with a 2-2 tie in the series.

The next night, a Monday, would be the deciding game. After sitting through two nail biters there was no way we would miss the chance to see the Toros pull out another victory, even though it seemed unlikely they could beat Calgary three nights in a row. It was a emotional winner-take-all situation.

Of course, to add to the building tension, the weather turned nasty. It rained on and off all day. It was so miserable that we debated whether or not to just skip it. There was also the chance the officials would postpone the game anyway, so we waited as long as we could, and then decided to take a chance. Not owning any real rain gear (remember, we lived in the Sonoran desert) we grabbed our waterproof Space Blankets and headed out to Hi Corbett Field.

Early in the game the weather held, so we used our blankets as cushions on the hard metal bleachers. The game went well for the Toros. One of the local heros, Kenny Lofton, a former and popular University of Arizona basketball star, was playing center field and doing quite well. After this final game Kenny would go on to join the Astros during the conclusion of their season. I don't want to bore you with lots of statistics and facts, but we were fortunate to get to see Kenny play at the Triple-A level, since he went on to play for numerous major league teams. He won numerous awards for batting, hitting triples, stealing bases, and playing center field. He had a .299 career batting average, had been to six All Star games, and had 599 stolen bases, which

---

---

made him tops when he was an active player, and 17<sup>th</sup> all time. He played in 84 post season games, including several World Series appearances, and was on the roster of twelve different teams, completing over 16 seasons as a professional. Amazing.

Although he's played in several World Series contests, Anne and I remember him mostly for what he did in his final game with the Toros. He ended his carrier as the PCL Championship Series MVP.

And indeed, it was an exciting night. The capacity crowd was really into the game. There was electricity in the air, and not just from the approaching thunderstorm. We fans no longer doubted; we could just feel that the Toros were on track to win. And then the thunder cracked and rumbled across the sky. Lightning flashed along the horizon. In the Sonoran desert one does not take lightning lightly. When the rain poured across the field the officials called a halt to the game to allow the storm to pass.

Out came the umbrellas and rain gear. We true fans sat it out in the bleachers or took shelter under the stands, while those that came just to be close to a winner headed for home. Anne and I, of course, wrapped ourselves in our red Space Blankets, made ourselves a nice dry, warm, cocoon, and waited it out. The rain pattered off crisp plastic, sometimes so noisy we couldn't hear each other speak.

The storm thundered and poured for maybe thirty minutes; long enough for the officials to consider calling the game. But someone with some power and authority empathized with the loyal fans still hunkered down in the stands. "Wait. Let's see." And sure enough the worst part of the storm passed.

As the players tromped out onto the soggy field the air remained damp, with occasional sprinkles or light drizzle, and an occasional flash of lightning over the distant Santa Rita mountains. I don't remember the scoring, but it was fairly close. Calgary gave a brave effort, having as much a chance to win as Tucson. Late in the game a Calgary batter hit a hard shallow fly out to center field. The runners on second and first took off on their way to score, which would put Calgary in the lead, with only two outs. It was one of those moments that seems to freeze in time. Light rain sparkled in the dazzling lights against a black sky, a steamy fog lifted from the green field, and the white ball cut through illuminated night like a cannon shot.

It looked as though it was gone, breaking past the Toro's outfielders, even as another streak of white flashed from right to left. Kenny Lofton made a valiant effort, looking a step too late, until he dove, laying himself out, flying through the air with his arms outstretched like Superman, then sliding on his stomach across the wet grass. Somehow he got his glove under the ball just before it hit the ground. He slid to a stop, rolled to his side, and raised his glove into the blazing stadium lights, a glint of white clearly visible between dark leather fingers.

Of course the crowd went wild, and that play had to be the true beginning of the end for the Cannons. Again, I don't remember how the last couple of innings played out, it was all a blur of cheering and shouting. I think the Toros won it something like 4 to 2.

Even after the last out the crowd continued its hooting for what seemed like forever. Anne and I, caught up in the emotion and excitement, went just as wild as the other fans. And by that point we had shed our Space Blankets, not caring if we got wet. The Toros had won an amazing

---

---

comeback to secure the PCL Championship. We knew we had witnessed one of the great performances by a center fielder at any level of baseball, and we just knew ... we just felt ... that Lofton would go on to be a star player. We weren't wrong.

Although I've never been a huge baseball fan, the tug of emotions after a hard fought victory, in no matter which sport, is something one never forgets. And without those two Space Blankets, we would probably have abandoned the game and missed one of life's special moments.

Created: December 11, 2006

Revised: January 21, 2011

Copyright © 2007 by Frank P. Stehno

All Rights Reserved

1,208 Words