

"...the most utility infielder in history"—Bob Costas

"My Best Efforts"... The Baseball Life of René Gonzales

Karl Lindholm

In the spring of 1984—it doesn't seem that long ago—my friend Jon found himself in Florida with time on his hands. Recently divorced, he was taking the baseball cure and visiting spring training camps. Jon is an extrovert. He has always been able to engage people easily. Before a Dodger game at Vero Beach, he struck up conversations with two young players hoping to stick with their big clubs. He pulled out his newspaper from that day and asked them both to sign it, and he sent the paper with those autographs along to me, his friend, the high school baseball coach and fan.

Both of those players did make it to the majors, the pitcher that year with the Dodgers, and the infielder with his club, the Expos. Both have had remarkable careers in the majors, spanning the last decade or so. The pitcher is Orel Hershiser. He signed his name in a precise script and added the common Biblical citation "John 3:16." The infielder is René Gonzales, whose autograph is more elaborate and robust. Above his signature, he wrote "To Karl, My Best Efforts."

Recently I was going through some baseball stuff and came across the *Miami Herald* sports section from March 4, 1984, with the Hershiser and Gonzales autographs over a story titled "The Boys of Spring." I am moved now to consider the career of René Gonzales. In baseball's troubled post-strike era, I am struck by his pledge of "my best efforts" to me and Jon and other fans like us.

It strikes me also that he has been true to his pledge.

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Just who is René Gonzales?—He is hardly a household name, yet he has spent all or part of the last fourteen years (with the exception of 1985) in major league baseball. In 1996, he was a reserve infielder for the Texas Rangers. Last summer, he spent most of the season with the Colorado Sky Sox, the Rockies' AAA team, before being called up by the big club for a cup of coffee in September. At this writing, he is the starting left fielder and fifth batter in the lineup of the Calgary Cannons, the Chicago White Sox's top minor league affiliate. He earned this spot with a sterling spring training performance, batting .367 in sixteen games (11 hits in 30 at-bats with 10 RBIs.)

Perhaps the most shining moment on the national stage for René Gonzales came on October 2, 1995, in the AL West playoff game in Seattle before 52,000 Mariner diehards and millions of fans across the country (like me) watching on TV. Seattle's unhittable Randy Johnson was mowing down Gonzales' California Angels en route to a 9-1 win. In the eighth, Angel Manager Marcel Lacheman sent up a parade of pinch hitters to flail at Johnson's swift offerings, Gonzales among them.

TV announcer Bob Costas identified Gonzales as a "utility infielder" for the Angels and then he added, "In fact, he is the *most* utility infielder in history. He spent two years as Cal Ripken's backup in Baltimore."

Gonzales then lined a Johnson slider into the gap in left-center for a double.

From a distance here in New England, I have casually followed Gonzales' career over the years. As a consequence of my Rotisserie baseball interest, I know all American League rosters. René had never been

drafted in my league (except once, a mistake: Tony thought he was getting Juan). I had consigned him to an ethnic stereotype: Hispanic utility infielder, the sons of Luis Aparicio, small in stature, quick, Eddie Romero, Alvaro Espinosa, a pepperpot sub.

I finally saw Gonzales in person in a Red Sox-Orioles game in 1989 at the Shrine in Boston during one of my annual pilgrimages with my father. We got there early for infield practice and I saw a man at third taking ground balls whom I didn't recognize. He was lithe and tall, athletic, scooping up grounders with grace and agility, firing hard accurate throws to first. He ran off the field with Ripken, chatting and smiling, and he was nearly the same size as big Cal.

I checked my program—this was Gonzales, this knight, this ideal ballplayer, 6'3", 210 pounds, straight from central casting. That was the last I saw of him that day. Cal, of course, played the entire game.

A career "utility infielder"—How does one sustain a major league career of over a decade as a "utility infielder"? Often an extra infielder is a former starter on the downside of his career, or one who has demonstrated as a regular that he can't hit enough to stay in the starting lineup: Dick Schofield, Spike Owen, Tim Lincecum come to mind. Occasionally, he's a player waiting his turn: the American League's talented young shortstops, Alex Rodriguez (Seattle) and Alex Gonzalez (Toronto) both served brief apprenticeships in backup roles.

However, I suspect Gonzales' career has no precedent and he really is "the *most* utility infielder in baseball history."

He has spent sixteen years in organized baseball. His major league career encompasses 705 games (1,539 at bats, 368 hits for a .239 batting average). In the minors, he has played 839 games (2,731 at bats, 701 hits, .257 average). He has played for seven big league clubs: Montreal, Baltimore, Toronto, California, Cleveland, Texas, and Colorado. The "official" major league baseball website describes him as a "career journeyman."

From 1988 to 1993 he played exclusively in the majors, never being sent down, for the Orioles, Blue Jays, and Angels. Primarily a shortstop and third baseman, he has played every infield position and the outfield—and in a 1993 blowout he pitched a hitless, scoreless inning for the Angels. He played short and third, and pinch-ran, but didn't bat in two games for Toronto in the ALCS in 1991.

In the seasons in which he played most in the majors, he played well. For California in 1992 and 1993, he played in over 100 games each season, mostly at third base, and had over 300 at bats. He batted .277 in '92 and .251 in '93, with 17 doubles each year. As expected, he played solid defense with just 21 errors in over 800 chances in that two-year period.

He was the Angels' regular third sacker in 1992 until he went on the disabled list in early August, and he started at third on Opening Day in 1993. Despite these best efforts for the Angels, he opened 1994 with Charlotte, the Indians' top minor league team.

Gonzales was born in Austin, Texas, and prepared for his career at Rosemead (CA) High School, Glendale (CA) College and Cal State Los Angeles. Two years after being selected by Montreal in the fifth round of the free-agent draft in 1982, he was in the majors, appearing in 29 games for Montreal in 1984. In 1986 he was traded from Montreal to Baltimore, the "player to be named later" in the Dennis Martinez deal.

In the winter of 1996, he was signed as a free agent with the Rangers, but failed to make the big club despite a good spring training and was sent to Oklahoma City, their AAA farm club. He was batting .266 in late May (with three doubles in one game) when he was called up. He stuck with the Rangers for the rest of the summer, batting only .216, alas.

In 1997 he started out with the Las Vegas Stars, the Padres' affiliate in the PCL. After batting .186 in 13 games, he was released. Nine days after he was cut, he was picked up by the Colorado Rockies and assigned to their AAA affiliate in Colorado Springs. Here he remained for the rest of their season, playing all the infield positions (22 games at first, 34 at second, 9 at third, and 10 at shortstop), batting .283, and leading the Sky Sox into the playoffs, emerging as a team leader when injuries on the Rockies claimed the Sky Sox's best prospects. In his brief stint with the Rockies in September, he got up twice and had one hit, knocking in a run.

A valuable man—Why hasn't René Gonzales been a starter, the regular at third or short over a sustained period for some team? The short answer is probably he doesn't hit, run, or field well enough. He's good at all three important skills, but spectacular in none. He doesn't hit homers in bunches like third baseman Matt Williams. He's not peerless with the glove like shortstop Ozzie Smith (nor again does he clout like Ripken). He can't create havoc on the bases like second baseman Robbie Alomar.

Gonzales is steady and dependable. His gift is his versatility. His role is to play many roles. A manager can send him up there to pinch hit in the ninth, or insert him as a defensive replacement, and know he will get Gonzales' best effort, a competent major league performance. He can give a star (other than Ripken) a day off when he's tired or hurt. Gonzales is a roster saver—he can do the jobs of two or three specialists. A manager with Gonzales can add a pitcher to the roster during the dog days of summer and not sacrifice strategic opportunities.

Skills don't tell the whole story. I figure he also must

be a good fella. You don't spend a dozen years, off and on, in the majors if you're a pain in the neck, a whiner, a clubhouse lawyer. Teams seem to like to have René Gonzales in their dugout.

Gonzales was 36 in September. Surely his days as a player are numbered. It will be interesting to see where he ends up. Clearly, the White Sox have signed him as "insurance:" their middle infielders are young and relatively untested. If one of them goes down with an injury during the pennant race, or even in the postseason, they could then call on René Gonzales, professional infielder, and not some jittery kid.

In his professional career spanning the past sixteen years and well over a dozen teams, I suspect he has been richly rewarded in experience and friendship. I bet he has some stories of places seen and people met. He has made a good living too, though not on the lav-

ish scale of the game's stars. (In 1993, the *New York Times* reported his salary as \$600,000. The Padres reportedly signed him for \$225,000 in the spring of 1997.

I have seen him in person only that one time at Fenway, but I enjoy following his career in baseball publications or the occasional item in the newspaper. Last year I looked up the Colorado Springs Sky Sox box scores on the Web. Now he is back in Canada, and I will check his progress through the '98 season on the Calgary Cannons site.

Like Cal Ripken, his more gifted and famous former teammate, Gonzales has shown up every day at the job site for a long time, and given his "best efforts." By doing so, he inspires me. He inspires me to persevere out of the limelight, to love my work, to be a good teammate, to give the "games" I play every day my best efforts as well.

