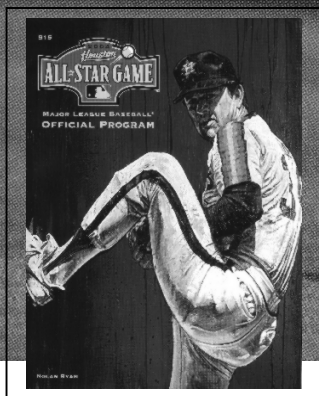
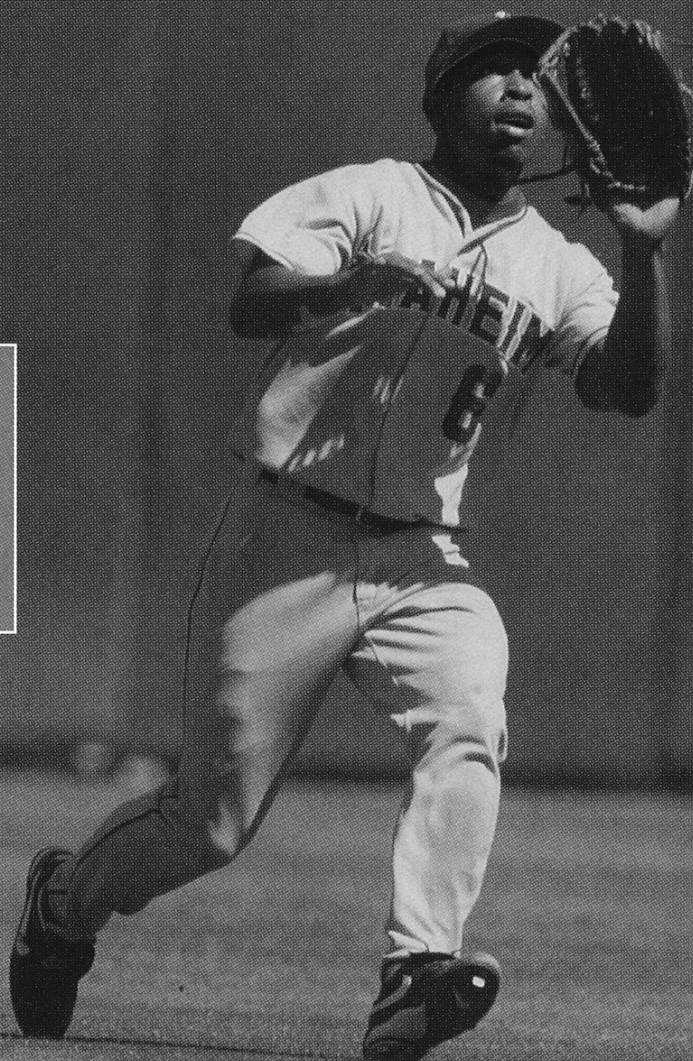
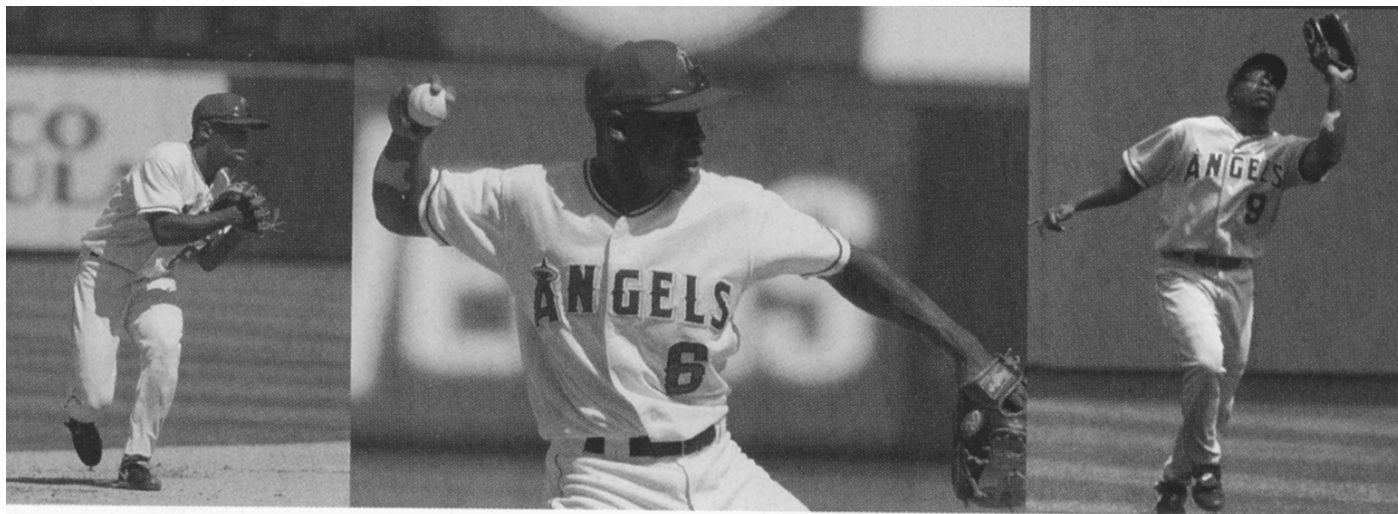


NO-LAND'S ★ MEN ★

IF IT'S TUESDAY, THEN IT
MUST BE CENTER FIELD
FOR CHONE FIGGINS,
WHO PLAYS EVERY DAY
FOR THE ANGELS BUT
DOES NOT HAVE A
REGULAR POSITION.



Appeared in 2004 MLB All-Star Game Official Program



On May 3, Chone Figgins had a productive day at bat, going 1 for 2 from the third spot in the lineup with two walks, a sacrifice bunt and a run scored in Anaheim's 11-9, come-from-behind victory over the Tigers. Yet his most significant contribution may have come in the field, where he started in center, moved to third base in the seventh inning and then returned to center in the ninth. Unusual? Yes, but not for Figgins, a rare breed of player whose frequent position switches have scrambled score-cards and made him a favorite with the fantasy set. And on this particular day, his versatility allowed Manager Mike Scioscia to pinch-hit for light-hitting third baseman Shane Halter when the Angels were behind and then set up a superior defense once they had gained the lead.



It's enough to make any utilityman proud: In his first full season in the Big Leagues, Figgins, 26, has played center field, left field, shortstop and third, regularly shifting mid-game. The only hitch is that he's not really a utilityman, that staple of every team whose ability to fill in at multiple positions justifies a roster spot. Figgins is an everyday starter and is showing potential for stardom. Since he joined Anaheim's lineup April 22, often slotted in the top third of the order, he has returned a glow to the Angels. An injury-riddled team that stumbled to a 7-8 start, Anaheim improved to 28-15 and first in the AL West within a month's time.

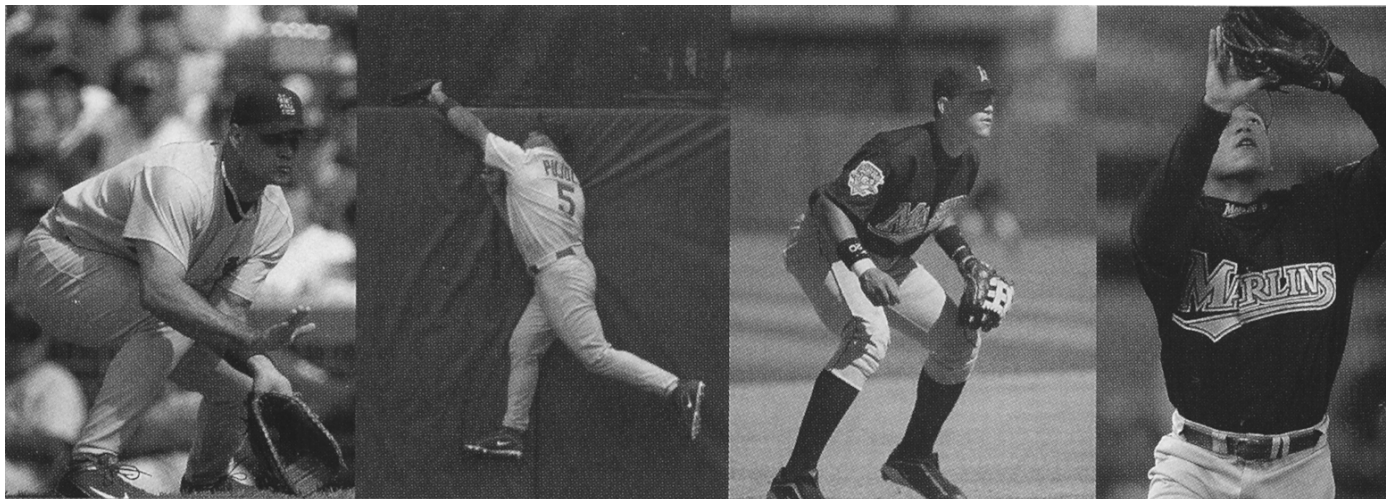
"It's a bit more fun because I never know where I'm going to be, both playing defense and hitting in the lineup," Figgins says. "It's exciting to go up there and check out the lineup. I would rather be at one position, but for right now, it helps the team win."

It also enters Figgins into a select collection of regulars, All-Stars and Hall of Famers who have been nomads of the diamond, drifting around the field during their careers and even individual seasons. Many of these "no-land's men" are legitimate, strike-fear-in-opponents'-hearts superstars — Craig Biggio, Chipper Jones, Paul Molitor, Jackie Robinson, Pete Rose. Of late, some of the game's most promising players — Albert Pujols, Miguel Cabrera, Melvin Mora — have also joined their ranks.

How a player becomes a no-land's man varies, but whether due to personnel moves or injuries (his own or another player's), the *why* of it ultimately boils down to value to the team. It's "invaluable to a manager to be able to put him anywhere on the field," Orioles coach Sam Perlozzo says of Mora, with whom he has worked extensively on infield defense.

FOR SOME PLAYERS, SECURING A SPOT ON THE ALL-STAR TEAM IS EASIER THAN NAILING DOWN A POSITION ON THE DIAMOND.

BY NATHAN HALE



IT HARDLY SEEMS TO MATTER WHERE THE MANAGER PUTS ST. LOUIS'S ALBERT PUJOLS (LEFT 2) OR FLORIDA'S MIGUEL CABRERA. TWO OF THE BRIGHTEST YOUNG STARS IN THE GAME TODAY, BOTH HAVE DEMONSTRATED AN INCREDIBLE ABILITY TO PUT UP MONSTROUS OFFENSIVE NUMBERS WHILE ALSO HANDLING A WIDE VARIETY OF RESPONSIBILITIES WITH THE GLOVE.

But versatility also comes, in part, through personal sacrifice. A player must possess mental fortitude in addition to physical ability to maintain a high level of performance while coping with circumstances often out of his control.

"I think, in general, people want to feel that they have a place that they're going and a spot in the lineup that they're going to hit in," says Todd Zeile, a veteran long removed from his arrival in the Majors as a catcher 10 teams and 16 seasons ago. "There's some mental comfort to being in a routine."

With Pujols, Cabrera and Figgins just starting their careers, Pete Rose remains the ultimate no-land's man. During his 24 seasons, he became the only player with at least 500 games played at five different positions: first (939 games), second (628), third (634), left (671) and right field (594). An All-Star at all five positions — another record — Rose was Rookie of the Year in 1963 as a second baseman, NL MVP in '73 as an outfielder and World Series MVP in '75 as a third baseman. He started at first base the night he broke Ty Cobb's career hits record in 1985. And as a career National Leaguer, he never served as a designated hitter.

Rose played in six World Series, winning three. Although he was surrounded by superstars in Cincinnati, his ability and willingness to switch positions kept the Big Red Machine running smoothly.

Incentive exists for both the rookie looking to get his first shot and the veteran hoping to prolong his playing days. "Coming up as a kid, I didn't really pay attention to where I played," recalls Bobby Bonilla, who saw time at first, third and outfield during his 16-year career. "I just wanted to make sure I got four at-bats."

Ironically, an injury to Bonilla led Cardinals Manager Tony LaRussa to bring Pujols north with the Big League club in 2001. Stardom was not predicted for the then-little-known 21-year-old who had played just one season at Single-A. As Cardinals Bench Coach Joe Pettini recalls: "That first year, Albert's ability to play different positions was the reason he made the club. Tony used him that year [at numerous positions]. That opportunity showed he could hit, and showed he could hit anywhere in the lineup."

And did he ever: His .329 average, 37 homers, 130 RBI and 112 runs scored landed him in territory reached by only a few rookies, including Ted Williams. "All of a sudden, you see how he can hit, and you see who Albert Pujols is," Pettini says.

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Yet, while immensely talented at the plate — at 24, he has been a batting champ, two-time All-Star and three-time top-five MVP finisher — Pujols has stood out most for his versatility afield. En route to a unanimous selection as Rookie of the Year in 2001, he not only led St. Louis with 161 games played, but also became the only player ever, it is believed, to start more than 30 games at four positions in a single season — third base (52 starts), first (32), left field (37) and right (33). Playing at least 157 games in each of his first three seasons, he has appeared at five positions (shortstop was the other), until apparently settling in at first base this year.

Finding comfort at a new position means overcoming some obstacles. Consider the complexities of switching from catcher to infield, as Zeile, Biggio and Joe Torre accomplished. "I moved from behind the plate, and I had caught my entire life, so there were certainly adjustments to be made," Zeile says. "I had never played infield, and I just didn't want to go out there and throw a glove down. I wanted to try and become a decent infielder."

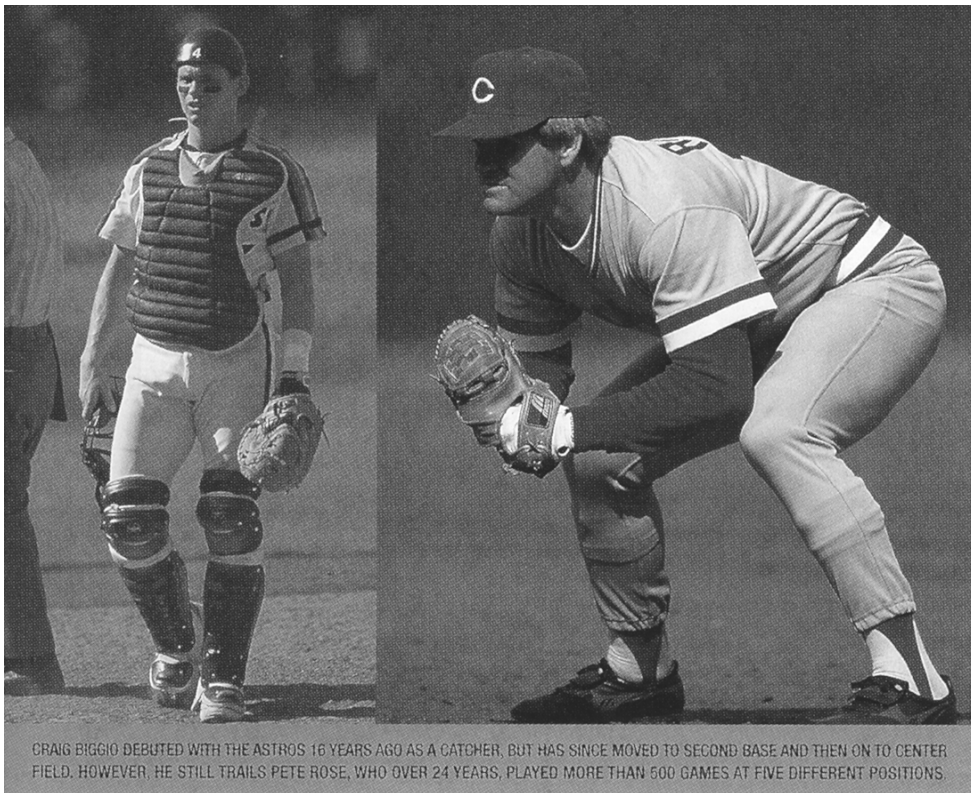
Once started, the no-land's man experience is often difficult to escape. Paul Molitor learned this during a Hall of Fame career that he began as a 21-year-old shortstop and finished 21 years later as a designated hitter, in between playing every position except catcher and pitcher, and enduring numerous injuries.

"The first time I made a move, from shortstop to second base, was when Robin Yount came back from an injury," he recounts. "And then I played second base for a while. Then we had a young kid coming up in Milwaukee who was a second baseman, and our center fielder was slowing down, so they said, 'Hey, let's see if Molitor can go out there, too.' And then Sal Bando retired, and they said, 'Well, we're looking for a third baseman. Okay, let's bring him in to play third.'

"So, different circumstances created some of the moves, and I was more than willing to try everything."

While Molitor's position changes were also often related to his injuries, he remained a superb athlete when the Brewers, hoping to keep him off the DL, decided to make him a DH.

When it comes to no-land's men, athletic ability invariably seems to be mentioned by coaches and managers. "Anytime you get a good athlete, you don't worry," says Marlins Manager Jack McKeon, who exploited rookie Miguel Cabrera's multifaceted talents to splendid effect during Florida's 2003 championship run.



CRAIG BIGGIO DEBUTED WITH THE ASTROS 16 YEARS AGO AS A CATCHER, BUT HAS SINCE MOVED TO SECOND BASE AND THEN ON TO CENTER FIELD. HOWEVER, HE STILL TRAILS PETE ROSE, WHO OVER 24 YEARS, PLAYED MORE THAN 600 GAMES AT FIVE DIFFERENT POSITIONS.

Jackie Robinson became the first UCLA athlete to letter in four sports (baseball, football, basketball, and track and field) during one school year before a Big League career in which he played more than 160 games each at first, second, third and in the outfield (plus one at shortstop). Molitor was an All-State baseball and basketball player in high school, and also lettered in soccer.

"In some ways, if you're a good athlete who can play a lot of positions, it can hinder you — the fact that you'll never get settled at one," Molitor says. "If someone retires, or moves or gets hurt, they're comfortable in having you make that transition."

McKeon says he brought Cabrera to the Majors for his bat, not his versatility. But the 21-year-old, who played shortstop while growing up in Venezuela, drew comparisons to Pujols for his no-land's man skill set. A third baseman at Double-A, Cabrera was called up to be Florida's left fielder. He later filled in at third when All-Star Mike Lowell broke his hand. Then in the postseason, Cabrera saw time at shortstop and in right, not to mention batting cleanup throughout the World Series.

While these talented players may make the changes look simple, the behind-the-scenes effort is considerable. "I work hard," says Cabrera, noting that he takes a lot of groundballs and also practices every day in the outfield.

Such extra work can take its toll on other parts of a player's game. There may be no better proof of the widely held belief that a player hits better when focusing on only one position than Torre's 1971 season. Although he placed second for the Rookie of the Year Award, won a Gold Glove at catcher, and earned nine trips to the All-Star Game, he bounced between catcher, first and third throughout his 18 years in the Majors. Except for 1971. Playing exclusively at third base (a league-leading 161 games), he won the NL MVP Award after topping the Senior Circuit with 230 hits, 352 total bases, a .363 batting average and 137 RBI.

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in Houston obviously mattered more than staying at second.

As difficult as it is to imagine Biggio in any other uniform, it is just about impossible to picture his uniform without dirt on it. A list of no-land's men reads like a list of the league's grittiest gamers. It's Jackie Robinson stealing home and propelling the Dodgers to six pennants during his 10-year career. It's what got Molitor the nickname "The Ignitor." It's Rose — "Charlie Hustle" — barreling into catcher Ray Fosse in the All-Star Game.

Whether this drive comes from being a no-land's man or is the reason for their success in this unusual role, one thing is certain:

They play hard. No one's goal is to become a no-land's man, but the attributes acquired by these players serve them well throughout their careers. Perhaps no player has shown greater perseverance in recent years than Melvin Mora. Despite starring in the 1999 playoffs for the Mets, they slated him for utility duty. And even after being traded and used virtually every day in Baltimore, he was still constantly shuffled between outfield, second and shortstop. During one stretch in 2003, he started 11 straight games at five different positions; yet, he still managed to lead the AL in batting for much of the first half and emerged as the Orioles' lone All-Star.

At last in 2004, like Pujols finally being handed the first base job in St. Louis and the Marlins sending Cabrera to right field every day, the Orioles slotted Mora at a single position — and where else but third base, a position he had never played for them before. But there he was again, leading the league in hitting.

"He's a special kind of guy," says Perlozzo, "He not only played all those positions, but he played them well. Not many people can do that.

"You have to have a certain mindset, that no matter where it is on the field you're playing him, he can do the job." ♦

Nathan Hale is a project editorial assistant for Major League Baseball.

SCHOOLABLE PHOTOS (BIGGIO); PELLINGUALI PHOTOS (ROSE)