

KEN GRIFFEY JR. MAKES ME SAD

BY TOBY ROSEWATER



There is no yellow brick road to success in The Emerald City (Seattle, that is), no obvious starting point, and no clear end. That is unless you're Ken Griffey Jr. Everyone knows you become a bonafide badass when you're identified by just one name. Ken Griffey Jr. didn't need all five syllables; he needed just two, Jun·ior. If you could write the perfect storyline for a future star, that story would probably be his.

Who is this guy?

In the land of laptops and grunge rock, there had *literally* never been a successful baseball team. In the late 1980s, that was about to change. Seattle would soon be gifted its first baseball rockstar and future export: a 17-year-old kid with the perfect combination of style, technique, and charisma; an anomaly of a swag machine that also happened to be lightning-fast and really good at hitting baseballs. Ken Griffey Jr. was the son of a star major-leaguer, was gifted with an unbelievable amount of raw talent, and also popularized the backward hat. He was an inspiration to many, and for those who still doubted, was a symbol of how good a Black ballplayer could be. He's my favorite player, and he should be yours too, but man, does he make me sad.

Ken Griffey Jr. didn't do conventional. Conventionally speaking, Seattle is not good at baseball. Conventionally speaking, teenagers don't reach the majors. Conventionally speaking, a father and son don't play on the same professional baseball team *simultaneously*. In the summer of '89, the city of Seattle was about to learn too just how cool doing the unconventional could be. That season, Junior made his debut as one of the most hyped prospects in baseball history. He would show signs of his promise throughout his first season, but nothing would compare to the transformation that would take place in the coming ten.

"It seemed like everyone was yelling at me in baseball, then I came home and everyone was yelling at me there...I got depressed. I got angry. I didn't want to live¹."

I didn't want to live...

It was 277 aspirin pills by his own count, more than enough to kill a man. The pressure put on a then 17-year-old Ken Griffey Jr., who had just signed with the Mariners, almost prevented the person many dubbed "The Kid" from becoming The Man. Junior had a way of

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-16-sp-2859-story.html>

making things look easy, but that was an illusion; with the spotlight on you and the weight of the world on your shoulders, nothing comes easy.

Ken Griffey Jr. played with his dad. That's actually pretty significant. Out of the roughly 20,000 players to have graced the league², only two, Ken Griffey Jr. and Tim Raines³, have ever played with their old man. When the Seattle Mariners signed Ken Griffey Sr. in 1990 (who we'll call Senior for simplicity purposes), he was already 40 years old, in the twilight of his career, and had his best playing days behind him. Beyond the novelty of creating the first [father-son outfield](#) in league history, the Mariners's move was also possibly aimed at steadying their vulnerable young phenom. Throughout the 1990 MLB season, Junior and his father became the first father-son duo to hit [back-to-back home runs](#), start in the same outfield, and . . . do it all with a losing record. The Ken Griffey Sr. experiment ended at the beginning of the '91 season; it cannot be labeled a failure; it never had expectations.

On July 28th, 1993, the tension in Seattle was palpable. Griffey had hit a home run in each of the previous seven games; one more, and he would have tied the major league record for consecutive games with a home run. On a high drive to right field, he did just that. The pitch was high and away, but Griffey didn't care; he produced a swing and silhouette that can only be described as [baseball perfection](#). The streak ended days later. In '93, Griffey finished with an epic 45 homers⁴, a sign of things to come.

Roger Maris was preternatural. In 1962, a seemingly random Maris, who previously had hit no more than 40 homers in a season, would do something that neither he nor anyone else thought Roger Maris would do. He smacked a record-setting 61 home runs, dismantling Babe Ruth's record of 60.⁵ Maris would go on to hold the record for decades. That was until '98, when an electric home run race was brewing. Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa would battle for the crown all year. It was clear that one of them would break Maris's record. When the dust settled, McGwire found himself on top with a whopping 70 long balls⁶. McGwire and Sosa's race that year made them international celebrities and elevated the game of baseball back to its long-forgotten heights. As for Maris, he and his record were forgotten, relegated to a minor footnote on the long timeline of baseball history.

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/2021/05/15/leading-off-major-league-baseball-nears-20000-players/116239612/>

³ <https://baseballrelatives.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/hofer-tim-raines-once-played-in-same-mlb-game-as-his-son/>

⁴ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/g/griffke02.shtml>

⁵ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/m/mariso01.shtml>

⁶ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/m/mcgwima01.shtml>

The thing is, McGwire and Sosa were cheaters. McGwire has admitted that he used steroids⁷, and Sosa has been credibly accused of taking PEDs throughout his playing career and long after⁸. The demigods of baseball were shams. The race of '98 was a lie . . . for the most part. A third slugger was competing that year, forgotten and unnoted: Ken Griffey Jr. In arguably his best season, Griffey found himself overshadowed by two elephant-sized cheaters. Griffey was (for the most part) in the thick of the race, and around the All-Star break, he was [tied](#)⁹ for the league lead in home runs. The fact that Junior was able to stay in the race is, in my opinion, the greatest achievement of his career. Much like Maris, Griffey's achievement was erased from history, pushed to the side, and forgotten.

Griffey left the Mariners in 2000; he departed with 398 homers and was the greatest Mariner of all time. He was only 29 when he left. He would go on to play in the majors for another 13 years until finally retiring in 2010. In those remaining thirteen years, injuries and pressure conspired to render Griffey a shell of his former self. Junior had 14 career All-Star appearances; only *three* were in the final 13 years of his career¹⁰. The All-Star game is a fan and media vote. Favorites like Jeter would go on to make the All-Star game throughout their entire careers, even when they had no business being there.

So why did people forget about Ken Griffey Jr.?

While Griffey's peers were thriving off a variety of PEDs, Griffey simply faded into the background. His body failed him; he stopped making history and became just another face in the league. In five out of thirteen of Griffey's remaining 162 game seasons, he would fail to reach the 100 game milestone¹¹. Griffey struggled with injuries; the result is a lost era defined by what was and not what is. Nobody remembers 2000s Griffey. He became a tangible creature. Fans don't want tangible. Fans want ethereal: that's what young Griffey was, genre-defining and unbelievable.

So why did Griffey keep playing?

I think it's quite simple. For Junior, baseball was an escape. It didn't matter that he lived in his own shadow; he was able to play the game he loved, the right way, for a long time. As Maris said,

⁷ <http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/news/mitchell/players.jsp>

⁸ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105497586>

⁹ <https://archivedinnings.com/2015/09/08/infographic-1998-home-run-chase/>

¹⁰ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/g/griffke02.shtml>

¹¹ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/g/griffke02.shtml>

“I think the most privacy I had was when the game was going on¹².”

I think that was the case for Griffey as well.

In Griffey’s 20-year career, he experienced virtually no playoff success, having tallied a grand total of three career playoff appearances¹³. That begs the question: is Griffey a success? Is success something defined by memorable moments, or just how much you won? Is it defined by staying power or an unbelievable peak? Does it matter how you get there, or is it just important that you succeed? I don’t know the answer to these questions; however, I do know that Griffey did everything the right way. If Griffey is not a success, then how can I be a success? How can anyone be? If Griffey can be forgotten, then how can I ever be remembered?

There’s something sad about watching an athlete be forgotten and glossed over. It’s like losing a friend; you knew them for years, pulled for them, and identified with them, and then one day you can’t even speak to each other anymore. We will never know how great Griffey could have been if his body didn’t fail him or if everyone around him had simply played by the rules. *I wish* we could have gotten to see the complete Ken Griffey Jr., but not everything works out the way you want it to, and that makes me sad.

¹² <https://books.google.com/books?id=N5nZKz23XfQCHe51BYYQ6AF6BAgLEAM>

¹³ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/g/griffke02.shtml>