

THE ROOKIE AND THE REDHEAD

Today's Rising Astros Star, Brandon Backe
A Blast from the Past, Rusty Staub

By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

THEY BOTH HAVE APRIL BIRTHDAYS, COME FROM CLOSE-KNIT FAMILIES, AND GREW UP WITH A PENCHANT FOR SPORTS. ONE PLAYED MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL FOR 23 SEASONS; THE OTHER JUST NOW IN THE INFANCY OF HIS CAREER.

WHEN RUSTY STAUB PLAYED HIS FINAL GAME ON OCTOBER 6, 1985, BRANDON BACKE WAS JUST SEVEN YEARS OLD. AND ALTHOUGH THEIR PATHS HAVE NEVER CROSSED, THEY HAVE A DEEP RESPECT FOR EACH OTHER, THE GAME OF BASEBALL, AND THE HOUSTON ASTROS.

WITH THE ASTROS SEASON OFFICIALLY OPENING THIS MONTH, BASEBALL EXCITEMENT IS EVERYWHERE, ESPECIALLY WITH LAST YEAR'S WORLD SERIES STILL FRESH ON EVERY FAN'S MIND. BUT, BEFORE YOU READ FURTHER, BE WARNED: THIS IS NOT YOUR TYPICAL SPORTS ARTICLE FULL OF STATS AND SCOREBOARD TRIVIA. INSTEAD, WE WANT TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THE PERSONAL SIDE OF TWO VERY AMAZING PLAYERS WHO CREATED THEIR OWN FIELD OF DREAMS, THEN GREW UP TO LIVE THEM.

Daniel Joseph (Rusty) Staub, now 62, was signed by the Colt 45's (Houston Astros) in 1961 at the age of 17, for a whopping \$132,000. Barely 19 years old when he debuted in the majors, he developed into a tenacious hitter (bats left; throws right). Yet, in 1969, the Astros made a very controversial trade when they let Rusty go to the Montreal Expos. Houston fans were livid. But, Rusty went on to embrace his new team, even learning to speak conversational French and obtaining the nickname "Le Grande Orange" for his brilliant red hair. In 1972, he was traded to the New York Mets; then in 1975 to the Detroit Tigers. Rusty went back to the Expos for a while, then to the Texas Rangers, and finally signed as a Free Agent with the Mets in 1980. He is only one of two players (Ty Cobb is the other) to hit a home run as a teenager and after the age of

forty. He is also the only player to collect 500 hits with four different clubs. And as of today, he is ranked as number eleven in the history of games played in Major League baseball.

Off the diamond, Rusty's culinary skills got him interested in the restaurant business, and he ran two very successful dining establishments in Manhattan for several years. He also found time to announce for the Mets for over a decade. And although the hoopla of stardom was nice, Rusty wanted to give something back to society, and found it by establishing the two non-profits that he runs today. One is the New York Police and Fire Widow's and Children's Benefit Fund; the other is the Rusty Staub Foundation which benefits youth and fights hunger. Both organizations have been in existence for 21 years and are at the core of his heart. Although he still works in an



RUSTY STAUB

ambassadorial capacity for the Mets, he spends the majority of his time raising funds for his foundations. Currently residing in Florida and New York, he still comes to Houston occasionally to see old friends and dine at his favorite restaurants (he won't say which ones, because he has too many friends in the business).

Growing up in New Orleans, Rusty remembers being a very small boy when someone in the family slapped a big piece of parmesan cheese in his hand and told him to grate it for the stuffed artichokes. Thus began his first exposure to the gourmet scene. In his smooth-spoken New Orleans accent, Rusty recalled the incident vividly. "If you grow up in New Orleans," he says, "you are going to be involved in the family cooking sooner or later." And, being the son of a high school football coach, sports were just as important as shrimp etouffee to the four Staub siblings. "Our influence, however, was to study," he says, "and sports was our freedom. We grew up in Holy Trinity Parish, so we were good Catholics with strong family values. Between my dad and mom, and the Maronite nuns and Jesuits, they kicked my ass around pretty good, so I knew what was expected of me."

So, he made it to the Colt 45's and with \$132,000 at age 17, what did he do with all that money? "It allowed me to pay off the family home and cars," he says, "but also put me into my first nice vehicle – a Pontiac Grand Prix." Recalling his first two years of instructional ball and spring training in 1963, he was told that he was going to play in San Antonio, but wound

up having such an incredible finish, the Colts kept him. He played 150 games that year. The next few years were phenomenal ones with Houston fans following his every move. Rusty's life was an open book, with many young girls hoping to nab the handsome, young baseball star. Probably a few hearts were broken when the infamous trade took place in 1969. And how did Rusty did feel about that trade?

He reflects: "Well, you know, I got traded. The people who had taken over the management of the club (referring to Judge Roy Hofheinz) were worried about an empire. Spec Richardson not only got rid of me, but a few others who went on to do amazing things with their careers.

"Those three years with the Montreal Expos were spectacular for me. I was starting to understand other things about life, and when I got traded to the New York Mets, it was about the only time in my career that they surprised me – I wasn't ready for it. Every other time I got moved in my career, I expected it and knew it was going to happen, so when I went to the Mets, it was the first opportunity I really had to be in a club that could win a championship and we almost did in 1973 (Mets lost to the Oakland A's after seven games in the World Series). I had no idea that New York would become such a massive part of my life at that point, but it certainly has.

"But after baseball and the restaurants, it just seemed like it was time for me to do something else in my life, and so I started the foundations. Obviously, when 9/11 took place, the widows

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BRANDON BACKE



Rusty Staub (far right) still finds time to catch a Mets game.

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and kids foundation pretty much became a dominant part of our lives for nine or ten months. The year after 9/11, that foundation raised 117 million dollars, and over the years we have raised over 140 million for the Rusty Staub Foundation. I get a tremendous amount of help and have a board of wonderful people.” The biggest project currently going on with one of Rusty’s foundations involves emergency food pantries. They provide about 650,000 meals a year in collaboration with Catholic Charities and it takes up a lot of his time.

Rusty Staub has been inducted into three Halls of Fame: Astros, Expos and Mets. The Expos honored him greatly when they retired his jersey number – the first number ever retired by the Expos.

He still sees former Astros and other teammates and keeps up with the Astros of today. Regarding the game then and now, he pauses, then says: “It is an incredible thing to be able to sign some of the contracts they do nowadays. You just hope the players are going to handle the money correctly so they won’t have to worry about anything the rest of their lives. The biggest salary I ever got is about what the minimum is right now, but they truly earn it. Besides, the money doesn’t have anything to do with it, because you are living your dream.”

Rusty Staub has no regrets, except maybe that he never had time to marry and have children. “Every time I was ‘in like’ with somebody, I got traded,” he laughs. “But, I’m Uncle Rusty to about ten families, so I don’t lack in that area.”

He studied the techniques of Ted Williams and really admired Mickey Mantle. Other than that, no heroes. “I have a lot of respect for my family, the nuns and Jesuits who taught me discipline and direction,” he says.

“I want to leave something more with people other than just ‘boy, that guy could hit,’ or ‘he was a hulluva chef.’ Life is more about giving than receiving – there is nothing better.”

Brandon Allen Backe is about to turn 28. He is a rising star with the Houston Astros (position: pitcher), grew up in Galveston, and currently makes his home in League City. He was drafted by the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in 1998 and traded to the Astros in 2003. He bats right; throws right, is 6 ft. tall with boyish good looks, and sorry, ladies, he does have a girlfriend. He literally lived his dream last season when he played in the World Series last year. Current salary: \$350,000.

Brandon credits his success to a solid, well-rounded background and his early years in Galveston where he and his brother attended Ball High. “I went to public schools my whole life,” he says, “My high school years were some of the most important ones of my life. I had a great time growing up with the same friends that I have now. Many of them were on the football and baseball team – it was great. We had a blast. We had off-campus lunch and everyone would get together and speed off to fast food restaurants where we’d meet our friends. I think it’s little things like that I remember most. Obviously, the sports were there, but hanging out, being able to go out at night for a little while – all that was special.” He is going to try really hard to make his ten-year reunion coming up soon.

Saying how he loved any kind of sport involving a ball, he played both football and baseball and loved them equally. Did he know he’d grow up to be a professional ball player? “No,” he says, “but I thought about it a lot. I figured if I thought about it enough and gave it enough effort, I’d have a great chance of making it, so with the help of my family and friends, it happened. Basically, many of them are great athletes and role models, those older friends of mine that I could watch and lean on – I learned a lot from them, as well as from my father. We have a big clan down there in Galveston, a big range and group of friends who were all athletes at one time.”

Brandon says he lives a pretty simple life off the field and enjoys fishing and hunting when not playing baseball. He plays a little golf here and there, but for the most part, just enjoys hanging out with buddies and drinking a beer.

Brandonite tidbits just for the ladies: Okay, gals, he owns a Lincoln Navigator and a Ford F250; wears Chrome cologne, but does not wear it as a rule unless he is going to a special occasion. His favorite team

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growing up: Astros, of course.

And what will he do when his baseball career winds down? There is no telling. "I'm not really worried about that right now. My life has just started to change where I can be thinking about what I might be doing with the money I'm making or what would I do if I were to get injured, but I've not really given it much thought. Most of my thoughts are pretty much involved around baseball," he says.

Brandon does not really mind all the media exposure, saying it only gets annoying when the same questions are asked over and over. "It's like after games when there are five different groups, and each different group needs five minutes each, and they all ask the same questions," he says. "Then it gets a little monotonous." (He did say that we, at *CHANGE*, asked the coolest questions he's been asked so far in his career.)

Most fans know that when Brandon is in the dugout and one of his teammates gets a hit, he pretty much goes crazy. We see the mouth moving and the arms waving, but what's he saying? "It's kind of baseball lingo," he smiles. "Usually I'm saying, 'Atta baby' – just whatever comes out at the time." Known for his animation and bringing great energy to the team, Brandon says, hey, he's a huge Astro fan too – what do you expect?

"Basically, I'm just out there enjoying the game and enjoying my environment because not only did I make it to the Major Leagues, which I'm so proud of, but somehow in a roundabout way, I've made it here in my hometown. Not only am I playing for my hometown team, I grew up watching my idols play, as well as Bagwell and Biggio who are now my teammates. I've not only been able to cheer them on when they do well, but even get mad at them when they do bad. We are either patting each other on the back when we do well or showing frustration when we don't."

Does he ever step out of his life, look at it, and get blown away because of where he is today? "I haven't yet," he says. "I'm accepting my role; accepting that I'm an Astro, plus I still feel that I have a lot to prove to satisfy myself."

The thing nearest and dearest to his heart: He is the spokesperson for Grand Slam for Youth Baseball, a tandem program between Minute Maid Park and the Astros. Basically, they refurbish parks each year for communities in need, providing them a decent field to play on, so that kids can get involved in the game of

baseball. "It is a great way to get kids off the streets," he says. "It means a lot to me to give back to the community. I think that sports for youth are really good, because it shows them how to get along with others, be a part of a team and it develops leadership." (The Bobby Beach Baseball Stadium in LaMarque got a facelift last year.)

As far as heroes, Brandon says he has looked up to many sports figures. He stays grounded by surrounding himself with family and friends. "My life has changed so much in the last two years. I've basically gone from a nobody baseball player trying to do what he can do to where I am now. I was given a chance to show what I can do in some very big games because of my teammates, and our team was good enough for me to get there, so I took advantage of that and did what I was capable of doing."

Words he lives by: "Don't stop; never quit."

As you go forward to create your own field of dreams in life, think about these two ball players, their drive, their competitive nature, their accomplishments. Although 34 years apart in age, they are kindred spirits who both had the same dream. One of them lived it; the other one has just begun.



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