

WASHINGTON STATE:

Bart Waldman's Safeco Connection



by Jeff McGaw
Photos by Ben VanHouten

Bart Waldman finally made it to the big leagues—as a lawyer. Waldman plays in the Puget Sound MSBL, and pitches in tournaments for the New Mexico-based Paladin 55's, but his full-time gig is as Chief Counsel for the Seattle Mariners.

Though it may never be known as the “house that Bart built,” Safeco Field, a shining jewel among American League parks, is there in large part because of his efforts.

“The best part of the job is walking into the ballpark every morning knowing that I had a lot to do with getting it built,” Waldman said.

In 1992, Waldman was a partner in Perkins Coie, Seattle's largest law firm when one of the partners was asked to help organize a group to buy the Mariners in 1992. “I helped with that, and became the guy on the ground after the acquisition took place. My practice area had been labor and employment law, but everyone in the law firm knew that I was a baseball geek. I've played all my life and studied every aspect of the game, from its history to all of the statistical metrics,” Waldman said.

So for 13 years Waldman was the primary outside counsel for the Mariners. In 2006 he joined the Mariners staff and since has added governmental relations to his list of duties. He spends most of his time writing, reviewing and editing contracts, overseeing litigation and answering questions on how to get things done properly. He also negotiates and drafts player contracts, leases, TV and radio contracts, sponsorship agreements, suite licenses, ticketing contracts, and other key business documents.

Bart Waldman (above) at Safeco and (right) with former Mariners skipper John McClaren.

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East Coast Roots

Waldman was born in Stamford, Connecticut, and moved to Fairfield, Conn., when he was 13. His heroes were Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford. Waldman played Little League, Babe Ruth League, and American Legion. He was the captain of his high school team in Fairfield and played at Harvard.

Between his high school and college years he played all nine positions.

After college Waldman went full speed into the world of competitive softball in Virginia and, later, Seattle. At one point, he was playing on five teams at once and playing over 120 games a year. He returned to hardball when the Puget Sound MSBL formed.

So does the chief counsel for the Mariners get special privileges? Does he get to work out

on Safeco Field? Throw it around with the big boys? Take BP?

Heck no.

“The front office is very careful to stay out of the way and off the field. The clubhouse and field is the exclusive domain of the players and coaches,” Waldman said. “I may occasionally go down on the field to watch batting practice, but I would never take a bat or glove.”

Nonetheless, Safeco might not be there but for Bart Waldman. “Safeco Field represents five years of my life, from the initial planning to working with the legislature on funding, to negotiating the lease. I always make sure I walk in at a location where I can see the field,” he said.

Seattle was divided over the new Stadium. The Mariners, by hundredths of a percentage point, lost a special public vote on a sales tax increase with record turnout at the polls. “The state legislature then created a different funding mechanism, where it is largely paid from tourism taxes (restaurants, rental cars).

The next hurdle was convincing policymakers that a new ballpark—one with fewer seats—would generate better economics for the team and return the organization to firm financial footing. Waldman sold that idea and, ultimately, his predictions about the team's finances came true.

Still very much a fan of the game, Waldman has met and watched many Seattle Mariners over the years, but none sticks out more than former Mariner slugger Edgar Martinez.

“Edgar overcame so much to turn himself into the best right-handed hitter in the game,” he said. “Yet through it all, he stayed one of the nicest and most humble men in the game.”

And while Waldman tries to stay off the field and out of the clubhouse, the organization did ask him to pitch once. “One time only I threw off our mound when we had to calibrate a new radar gun.” □

