

The Jose Lima Experience

Since Drayton McLane lives several miles away from my house, the Houston Astros Winter Caravan stops each year at the Temple Mall. I have had the opportunity on several occasions to attend and get the autographs and pictures of Craig Biggio, Darryl Kile, and Jesse Barfield, among others. I have also learned over the years never to go to one of these things without taking the girls, although two-year old Katie just about got me beat up by a major leaguer when she pointed at Mark McLemore and yelled, "Daddy, that man's wearing an earring. Boys don't wear earrings!"

A year ago, I arrived at dinnertime from an out-of town trip. The next day when I got home from work, my wife greeted me all apologetically and said that she had forgotten to tell me to go to the mall the night before because the Astros were there. I responded that it was not a big deal, as I had met a bunch of them before, and the only one I would really care to see would be Jose Lima. She looked at me all-big-eyed and said, "I'm gonna cry." It turned out that she had been reminded by a big full-page story in the local paper about Lima stopping to talk to the Temple High School baseball team with his very inspiring story, how popular he was at the mall meeting people, and what a great guy he was in general.

When Victoria saw that Lima was coming back with the caravan this year, she made sure that there was no way I was going to miss it. All four of us entered the mall at JC Penney's. We realized that the tables weren't out in front of it as they usually were, though, so we started down towards the center of the mall. As we walked there was a crowd up ahead, and every ten seconds or so we heard this strange, high pitched "BOOOAAJEEYYY!" in the distance. As we got closer, we realized that it was Lima. Now I know he's recorded some songs with a salsa band, but I'm suddenly not eager to hear it. As we got in line, I saw that Tim Bogar was at the next table to Jose, and Lima kept yelling for him until the recently announced starting shortstop would sigh and say, "Yeah Jose, I'm behind you."

If you've ever seen an Astros game where Lima has pitched, you have no doubt noticed that the guy just isn't normal. He's not stomping around or seeming like he's intentionally showing anyone up, but he just has so much enthusiasm that he can't contain it. He pitches like Dick Vitale calls a basketball game. And, we quickly see as we approach, he's like that off the mound, too.

As we funneled through the line, I see that it's the first time in a couple years that Biggio or Bagwell haven't shown up. First was Lance Berkman, who is sort of a longshot to make the team, but seems like a pretty decent guy and he's giving all the usual low-key lines about just hoping to have a chance to play and prove he belongs. Next was Larry Dierker taking all the congratulations about how the team had come from nowhere, then Bogar who smiled and signed pictures in between reassuring Lima that he still had his back.

As I collected my umpteenth “Holy Cow” autographed hall-of-fame card from announcer Milo Hamilton, I see that my wife is smiling and talking with Lima. He then greets Katie, and compliments her bluish sparkly nail polish (hey – some parents reward their kids with candy or toys, we have a six year-old fashion plate that gets hair bows or nail polish). I then get the big tug on my arm as three-year old Lucy drags me over, holds her arm out and says, “Kiss my hand too!” He does, of course, and then shakes my hand and thanks me for coming.

After all is said and done, all the others faded into the background as we talked about nothing but Jose Lima. His personality dominated the entire event just as it’s dominated these paragraphs.

Victoria was impressed that he looked her in the eyes and said, “God Bless You.” Katie was embarrassed that her hand was kissed, and wants to take the fingernail polish off. Lucy was charmed down to the bone and never wants to wash the hand again.

And I have a new favorite player.