

# 500!

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# Griffey: Baseball milestone

From 1A

though. Let the camera linger.

Two weeks ago today, as Griffey sat two homers shy of the milestone, his family joined him on the road in Oakland, Calif. Mom, dad, wife, kids — they were all there, and have been to every game since. As each day passed, his three children grew more restless, wanting dad to get it over with so they could get on with important stuff like summer camp. But Griffey began to soak it all in, on the field and off.

Family connections are deeply important to Griffey, who calls his father his hero. This traveling reunion allowed them to spend time with one another — allowed them to be a family — like they never had before during baseball season, the only calendar in Griffey households past and present.

As Griffey's fortunes turned sour not long after his arrival in Cincinnati for the 2000 season, he would regularly point out that the only fans he played for were the ones who stuck by him the entire time. And that cross-section, at its most basic level, was in his mind limited to his family and a close circle of friends.

The louder the rest of the sporting public grew in its disdain for his eight-figure salary and its frustration with his ever-expanding medical history, the more tightly Griffey circled the wagons. By the time he got to this spring, he was sufficiently guarded that the path from himself to the average fan was all but impassable.

Then he started to play like himself again. He was in the starting lineup every day for more than a month, hitting homers and driving in runs. Slowly, the smile that had launched a hundred endorsements a decade ago crept back to his face with regularity.

Everything came to a head

last week, when more than 100,000 fans turned out for a three-game series against the Texas Rangers at Great American Ball Park, nearly all of them there simply to watch No. 30 stride to the plate four times. Sure, they wanted to bear witness to history, but even when it didn't come to pass, they celebrated him, and Griffey was profoundly affected by what he felt. Adam Dunn, one of his closest friends on the team, used the word "humbled."

The reconnection between Griffey and the fans culminated Sunday, even if his old hierarchy remained intact to a certain extent. When he hit the ball and knew it was gone, family was the first thing that sprang to mind.

Just before Griffey departed the hotel in the morning, his mother, Birdie, had told him Sunday would be the day. It was Father's Day, she said, and he had always done something special on days earmarked for his dad. Four times in his career, Griffey had homered on April 10, his father's birthday. Before Sunday, he had three home runs on Father's Day.

"When I hit it," said Griffey, "the first reaction was, 'My mom is always right.'"

With that, he started around the bases, a journey in itself.

"I started smiling rounding second," he said. "When I hit second, I looked up and saw my dad."

As he headed toward home plate, his teammates swarmed out of the dugout — a sight almost never seen in mid-game. Griffey navigated that joyful mob and headed straight to the far end of the Reds' dugout, where he and his dad shared an embrace.

"Happy Father's Day," recounted Ken Griffey Sr. "That's exactly what he said."

From there, the Father's Day

roles reversed as son Trey and daughter Taryn gave him quick hugs. Last came kisses from wife Melissa and their youngest, son Tevin, before Griffey gathered himself and turned back to the field.

Only then did he seem to soak in perhaps the most remarkable part of the scene, the 45,620 fans standing and cheering as if he was Mark McGwire. This is St. Louis, where they respect and appreciate baseball like few, if any, other municipalities, but Griffey was overwhelmed by the reception. It was something from his past, his days as one of the game's transcendent stars. He hadn't heard those cheers in a long, long time.

"It's the first time in my life I've seen him kind of take all of it in," said Dunn. "It means a lot to him."

Added first baseman Sean Casey, "He was touched, there's no doubt about it. It was neat to see him, you could see on his face when he hugged his dad and then came in the dugout, he had a genuine sigh of relief and a genuine appreciation for what he just did."

Griffey doffed his batting helmet and held it aloft, but the crowd wasn't done. When the inning was over, Griffey came out of the dugout and nonchalantly handed Wily Mo Pena his cap and glove, then trotted toward center

field as the fans stood and applauded again. This ovation wasn't the full-throated roar of before, but rather a respectful coronation. Thanks for including us, Junior.

As he made his way to his turf in center, Griffey stopped to greet the half-dozen or so teammates who had spilled out of the bullpen to congratulate him, then continued to his spot, where he once again took off his cap in deference to the crowd.

"The ovation was something that I never dreamed of, never thought I'd ever get," he said. "But they did it for me."

They did it, in large part, because he has come back to them.

It was just one home run Griffey hit Sunday, albeit one that essentially sealed his place in baseball's Hall of Fame whenever he retires. But Griffey is only 34 years old, and it seems foolish and shortsighted to even mention retirement at the moment. He certainly hasn't given it any thought lately.

And why would he? Finally, after three solid years of pain and misery in the city he so desperately wanted to love and be loved by, Ken Griffey Jr. reclaimed his place atop the Cincinnati sports world Sunday with one swing of the bat.

"I appreciate everything," he said. "More than you guys know."

## Inside

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► A college student returned the famous ball to Junior. Page 5B.

► For a look at Junior's home run milestones and the pitchers he victimized, see Page 6B.

ST. LOUIS — As Ken Griffey Jr. watched the 500th home run of his career arc into the right-field stands at Busch Stadium on a perfect summer Sunday afternoon, everything fell away for a few moments.

The injuries, the insults, the frustrations and the disappointments he had endured since coming home four years ago vanished in the wake of the baseball that bounded down the concrete tunnel underneath the Section 218 sign.

"All the aches and pains that I had this year were gone for like two minutes while I rounded the bases," Griffey, still awestruck, said a couple of hours later.

Becoming the 20th player in more than a century of professional baseball to reach 500 home runs was something Griffey readily admitted he never expected to do. But there was so much more behind that sweet, unmistakable swing of his than numbers and nostalgia.

The split-second his bat connected with a fastball from St. Louis Cardinals right-hander Matt Morris in the sixth inning Sunday was merely the snapshot, a moment in time. Pull back and take the long view,

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