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## Reading Article G2

### **Article #12: DO NICE GUYS FINISH LAST?**

*by Nathan Aaseng*

Fiery baseball manager Leo Durocher has been credited, or blamed, for one of sports' most notorious battle cries. "Nice guys finish last," Durocher snarled during his days at the helm of the New York–San Francisco Giants. Durocher never would have made that statement had he enjoyed the privilege of managing one of the most overpowering pitchers in the history of baseball. Firsthand contact with Nolan Ryan would have changed his theory to something like "Nice guys throw harder," which would not have been as memorable. As one neighbor

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When Nolan was growing up in the small town of Alvin, Texas, he used to get up at 1 a.m. to roll newspapers. Then he would travel with his dad down the dusty back roads delivering papers until 4. After catching a couple of hours of sleep, he went off to school. Hardly a pleasant life for a schoolboy, but it taught Ryan a sense of responsibility. "You had the feeling people were counting on you. If you didn't get up, they weren't going to get their papers."

That sense of responsibility to others has traveled with him through his entire career. Ryan's incredible late-career success prompted a phone call from President George H.W. Bush inviting him to spend an evening at the White House. Ryan checked his schedule and found that on the day of the proposed White House visit, he was scheduled to speak free of charge to a group of cattlemen as part of a scholarship fund-raising effort. Ryan turned down the White House invitation. He had given his word to the cattlemen, and that's all there was to it.

Ryan first reached the major leagues in 1966, armed with a wicked fastball that he could not control. Watching Ryan pitch was like watching a hockey player whistle slap shots at a goalie. The catcher didn't know where the ball was going and was jumping all over to block the thing. Batters either struck out or walked. They so seldom hit a pitch that Ryan's fielders lapsed into a stupor waiting for some action.

Ryan showed flashes of promise for the New York Mets. He pitched well in the Mets' World Series win in 1969. But it was not until he was traded to the California Angels that he began to take command of the mound. Detroit Tiger first baseman Norm Cash summed up the feeling of batters throughout the league. After striking out against Ryan, Cash met a teammate waiting in the on-deck circle. The teammate wanted to know how Ryan was throwing. Cash looked him in the eye and said, "Don't go up there!"

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Ryan was the first baseball player to sign a million-dollar-a-year contract. But the main reason he chose the Houston Astros' offer was not the money but the chance to be nearer his home and family. Ryan had always included his family whenever he could and avoided committing himself to anything in the off-season that would cause him to be away from them. Even during the season, "we never talk baseball, it's always his kids and how they're doing at school," according to one of Ryan's teammates.

Ryan was forty-one when he signed on with the Texas Rangers in 1988, well past the age when most power pitchers retire. He was expected to wind down his career and draw a few fans with his reputation. Ryan, though, was not about to disappoint the fans. "Anytime people take away from their normal routine, you don't want to disappoint them."

Ryan did not disappoint. In June 1990, Ryan came off a brief stint on the disabled list to pitch

a no-hitter against the champion Oakland A's. That gave him six career no-hitters, two more than anyone else in history. Ryan celebrated by ordering a pizza with his family.

On May 1, 1991, Nolan Ryan was feeling the effects of his forty-four years of age. His back hurt, his head ached. "I feel old today," he said in the clubhouse before the game against the Toronto Blue Jays. But this was Fan Appreciation Night, and Ryan did not want to disappoint the 33,000 fans who had come to Arlington Stadium. He trudged out to the mound and went to work.

Once again Ryan turned back the clock. The middle-aged man fired the ball past strong young players half his age. Ryan fanned sixteen Blue Jays and walked only two. When All-Star Roberto Alomar came up to bat with two outs in the ninth inning, Toronto had yet to get a hit. With the count two balls and two strikes, Ryan launched another rocket to the plate.

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