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BYLINE: Stephen Cannella

Ace In The Hole Mariners righthander Freddy Garcia is quickly developing into a No. 1 starter

Mariners general manager Pat Gillick raised some eyebrows last month when he said that he was in the market for a top-of-the-rotation pitcher. At the time, Seattle had the best record in the majors, its starters' ERA (4.32) was fourth best in the American League and its top three pitchers, righthanders Freddy Garcia and Aaron Sele and lefthander Jamie Moyer, were a combined 22-1. Wouldn't adding another ace be like sprinkling sugar on a fudge sundae? "At some point Freddy Garcia might become a Number 1 starter," Gillick said, "[but] Freddy's 24 years old."

The G.M.'s assessment sent Garcia scurrying for advice. "He came to me two or three days later and asked what he needed to do to become a Number 1 guy," says Seattle pitching coach Bryan Price. "I told him he needed innings, to maintain consistency and not to let his emotions get in his way. It's just experience."

As the Mariners continued to pile up wins at an astounding rate--through Sunday they'd won the first three of a four-game series with the AL Central Division-leading Twins and were 19 games in front of the equally red-hot A's in the AL West--augmenting the rotation became less of a concern for Gillick, who has been concentrating his efforts on acquiring another hitter. Since July 1, Seattle starters were 9-5 with a 3.62 ERA, and the staff had already tied the franchise record for shutouts in a month, with five. Leading the way was Garcia, who was 5-2 with a 2.65 ERA since Gillick's remark, including back-to-back shutouts, against the Angels and the Dodgers, this month. "Freddy Garcia is a Cy Young Award waiting to happen," says one scout who has followed Seattle this season, "and it might be this year."

Gaudy numbers--overall, he was 11-2 with a 3.46 ERA, ninth best in the league--are nothing new for Garcia, who won 17 games as a rookie in 1999 and went 9-5 last season despite spending 2 1/2 months on the disabled list with a stress fracture in his right leg. What is new is the poise and confidence he has shown on the mound. "Freddy has too much ability not to be successful, as long as there's a thought process," says Price. "He's showing more focus, more maturity and a greater understanding of what it takes to be successful on a consistent basis."

For Garcia, a 6'4", 235-pound native of Caracas who says he grew up idolizing Roger Clemens, that means keeping his emotions in check and attacking hitters with his rare combination of power and finesse. He throws a wicked 95-mph sinking fastball, an above-average curve and a straight changeup. Yet Garcia struck out only 79 batters in his first 135 1/3 innings this season. Instead, he has learned to locate pitches and get hitters to make contact early in counts, producing quick at bats and low pitch counts.

Take his shutout of the Dodgers on July 6. He was nearly untouchable, allowing four hits, striking out five and wrapping up the effort in an economical 97 pitches. "That was as dominating a start as it would have been if he'd had 15 strikeouts," says Price. "Nobody had a comfortable swing against him."

"The more I pitch, the more I learn what I can do in tough situations," says Garcia. "I just try to keep the ball down and to make good pitches, instead of going for strikeouts."

Leery of putting too much pressure on a young starter--and mindful that the 31-year-old Sele is 12-1 with a 3.11 ERA--the Mariners are hesitant to declare Garcia their ace. However, recent progress suggests that he's on the brink of becoming the pitcher Gillick was looking for. In addition to his regular-season success, Garcia won both his starts in last year's American League Championship Series, holding the Yankees to two runs in 11 1/3 innings. Even Garcia's clubhouse nickname, Chief, has postseason connotations. The sobriquet comes from his resemblance to Chief Bromden in the film version of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the character who raises his hand too late in a hospital-ward vote and costs the patients a chance to watch the World Series on TV.

If Garcia continues to pitch the way he has, Seattle won't have to worry about watching the World Series on TV.

Evaluating Umpires The First Pitch Is a Ball

The flare-up over the use of pitch-count averages by the commissioner's office in rating plate umpires' performances was extinguished last week when Major League Baseball executive vice president Sandy Alderson said those counts would not be used to evaluate umps, and the umpires' union dropped its labor grievance over it. The upshot was clear: Baseball needs a fair system to rate its umpires. Before this season the commissioner's office gave the umps detailed instruction on calling the strike zone according to the rule book and on disciplining head-hunting pitchers. However, there was less explanation of how the arbiters would be monitored.

Alderson insists the pitch-count initiative was intended as a teaching tool rather than a rating system, and he says efforts by the commissioner's office to improve the quality and consistency of umpiring will continue. The next step will be the publication of an umpiring manual that a committee of three umps and three representatives from the commissioner's office is putting together. The first three sections of the manual--one outlining umpires' conduct and responsibilities, one offering detailed interpretation and analysis of the rule book, and one explaining on-field mechanics of a four-man crew--are complete. The committee is preparing to hash out the fourth section, which will detail a system under which arbiters will be evaluated and ranked.

"What we're trying to do with the committee is get some form of evaluation that's equitable for everybody," says umpire Joe Brinkman, a 28-year major league veteran and vice president of the umpires' union. "We planned to dig in right after the season and figure it out, but there's a little more pressure now."

"This is something baseball has never had," says MLB vice president of umpiring Ralph Nelson. "It used to be that umpires learned their jobs from their crew chiefs as they went along. If you were a Doug Harvey guy, you might umpire differently than a Bruce Froemming guy. This manual will lay out consistent methods for everyone."

Figuring out how umpires will be fairly evaluated is particularly important, because most of them aren't sold on the reliability of the gadgetry the commissioner's office is now using to monitor ball-and-strike calls. Fenway Park and Shea Stadium are already equipped with QuesTec, Inc.'s Umpire Information System, a refinement of the company's pitch-tracking graphics seen on Fox television broadcasts. (The system will be installed in four more ballparks sometime this season.) Using two cameras mounted in the stands and two at ground level off the first and third base lines, QuesTec's measurement technology creates computer models of pitches as they cross the plate. Within 30 minutes after the game has ended, plate umps are given CDs with cataloged computer and video images of every ball and strike they called.

"It tells umpires if their call agreed with what the computer measured," says Nelson. "It's a way to find areas an umpire might need to work on."

When an evaluation system is eventually adopted, it will more likely include videotape and in-person

observation by umpiring supervisors. Earlier this month the commissioner's office began giving umpers edited videotapes from television broadcasts of games they worked behind the plate, 10-minute highlights of their ball-and-strike calls. Umpires will review the tapes with supervisors individually, searching for patterns of calls that might need to be addressed. "There have been no criteria [for rating umpers]," says Brinkman. "It's been just word of mouth and popularity. Now we're going to agree on something fair."

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