

COMMENTARY

# Ron Berler: Living with regret and former Cubs pitcher Oscar Zamora's glove

By Ron Berler  
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Oscar Zamora, a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs in the mid-1970s, gave Ron Berler this glove in May 1975. (Ron Berler)

How do you thank someone who has passed?

Oscar Zamora was a relief pitcher for the Chicago Cubs in the mid-1970s. He wasn't very good, to put it kindly. During his Wrigley Field tenure, Cubs fans would serenade him as he exited the game, often in mid-inning after having surrendered a blizzard of runs. Here is a sample verse, sung to the tune of the long-ago Dean Martin hit "That's Amore."

*When the pitch is so fat  
That the ball hits the bat,  
That's Zamora!*

From the press box where I sometimes sat, he seemed to accept the razzing with equanimity, as if he agreed it was deserved. I was a young reporter at the time, and after games, I'd pass him in the clubhouse as he was dressing quietly at his locker, while I sought out one or another of his more prominent teammates. Zamora pitched for the Cubs for parts of three seasons, and I can't remember ever interviewing him for a story or even stopping to chat. He was one in that category — an interchangeable part, a minor actor who wouldn't last long in the game.

Zamora was 31, in his second big-league season, on the day in May 1975 when we came closest to sharing a real conversation. My target that afternoon, as I strode past his locker, was one of his teammates — a star infielder I knew slightly who would win the league batting title that year. I had a favor to ask.

Like Zamora and his Cubs teammates, I played the game, though not credibly enough to have made my high school team. Still, baseball was my passion. I played shortstop for a bar-league softball team, and my bucket-list dream was a new glove. Not just any glove — a major league-quality one, made of a grade of leather and stitching so fine, it was manufactured exclusively for professional ballplayers.

No problem, the infielder said. He named a price, and I handed him the money. A week later, I returned to the clubhouse, and the infielder waved me over. I thought he was joking at first. It was a Wilson A2000 — a popular model readily available in any decent sporting goods shop. Not a pro-quality glove. Not at all what I'd asked for, or desired. I stood there silent, head dipped, feeling taken, staring at this unwanted object.

Word spread round the clubhouse about what had transpired. One of the infielder's teammates, center fielder Rick Monday, eyed the Wilson A2000 and shook his head. "If you wanted a glove, why didn't you ask me?" he said, shooting a look at the infielder before returning to his locker.

I was still staring at the retail store glove when Zamora, the pitcher to whom I'd never spoken, approached. "Here," he said. "Take this." In his hand was a

Rawlings Heart of the Hide professional-model glove. “It’s my backup,” he said, meaning the one he used during pregame drills.



Chicago Cubs pitcher Oscar Zamora from 1975. (Chicago Tribune Archive)

I was too stunned at first to speak. I took his gift and turned it gingerly in my hands, as if I were examining a piece of fine jewelry. “I don’t know how to thank you,” I finally managed and kept repeating. The glove was the stuff of my dreams.

You’d think after such unprompted kindness that I would have sought him out regularly in the clubhouse, sat with him at his locker and gotten to know him as a treasured acquaintance, if not as a friend. I certainly had the time and opportunity. But I was 25, self-absorbed, oblivious. To my shame, I never did. By the time I realized my error, my loss, he had left the game. I never saw him again.

Zamora's glove, though — that was a different story. I would take the field wearing his gift for the next 45 years, until I turned 70, till suddenly ground balls I had once readily handled seemed to come at me like sniper fire. It was time to retire.

Time for the glove to retire too. Over the years, it had taken a battering, its leather worn raw and thin, like a faded house stripped of its paint.

I'm 73 now and haven't played catch since hanging up my cleats. But every so often, I slip on Zamora's glove and flex it till the pocket brushes my palm, till it feels as it did on the ball field, like a second skin. And I think, too, of the man who'd once worn it and of his selfless generosity.

Last December, I sought to contact Zamora, to tell him about the glove and what it still means to me. But mostly, I hoped to get to know him. A Major League Baseball Players Association representative, wanting to help, mailed a letter to his last known address but received no response. Later, I learned he had opened a Miami shoe store after retiring, and I located Cosme de la Torriente, the attorney who had handled his business affairs.

I was too late, de la Torriente told me over the phone. Zamora died four years ago. He was 75.

The attorney and I spoke for almost an hour. Zamora had been not only a client but also his friend. He told me Zamora had emigrated from Cuba to Miami as a child and had returned to Miami after retiring from the game. The two had played local ball together and sometimes had gone nightclubbing.

"Oscar knew everybody, and everybody knew him. He loved people," de la Torriente said. "What he did for you, that was his character. You would have liked him."

I wish I'd made the effort.

*Ron Berler is the author of "Raising the Curve: A Year Inside One of America's 45,000 Failing Public Schools."*