

DAVE RIGHETTI
(b. 1958)

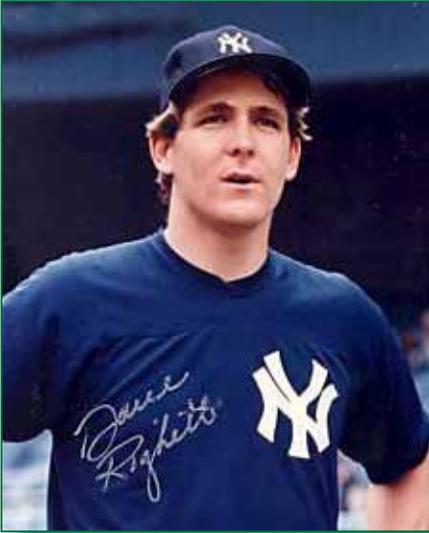
When I was growing up during the '50s in Seattle, my favorite team in all of baseball was the Seattle Rainiers. The Rainiers played in the Pacific Coast League against, among others, the San Francisco Seals, Oakland Oaks, and Sacramento Solons. All these opponents were deeply hated by my friends and me, true loyal Rainiers fans that we were. We often would take public transportation (via two buses) to Sicks' Seattle Stadium in Rainier Valley (a famous Italian section of Seattle) to watch the Rainiers crush their opponents (or so we hoped). It was a long bus trip taking over an hour, but we enjoyed talking baseball both to and from the game. (There were no smartphones, apps, or video games to play with, just boyish conversation about players, batting averages, and various other statistical information that one or several of us would present to the awe of our comrades).



Leo Righetti, 1957

One of the star players for Seattle during part of that time was a tall, lanky, Italian-American shortstop named Leo Righetti. We used to refer to him (of course) as “Leo Spaghetti” and we were always relating his on-field and batting exploits in grand debate with each other. It was always a lot of fun, kept us busy and out of trouble on the way to and from the games.

During the years of college, graduate school, and a college teaching career, I heard about a very excellent pitcher for the NY Yankees and other teams, including the Giants, named Dave Righetti. I didn't put him together with “Leo Spaghetti”; I just thought it was another player with an Italian name. In 2000, Dave Righetti was added to the Giants roster as pitching coach. I thought that was interesting and could serve as the Giants Italian counterpoint to Tommy Lasorda of the Dodgers. I didn't think anything more about relationships until I attended the fine exhibit entitled “Italian Americans at Bat: From Sand Lots to the Major Leagues” at the Museo ItaloAmericano in 2012, and saw the pictures of the two Righettis on the wall. They were described as father and son! What a revelation!! I felt my childhood memories coming back decades later and I became a serious admirer of Dave Righetti, just as I had been an admirer of his dad back in the 1950s. I thought it would be fun to do the Alla Corrente on Dave Righetti this month for several reasons. First, the Giants (when this is being written in mid-October) are in the thick of the playoff race; second, Dave Righetti will turn 56 in November, when this essay will be published in Il Cenacolo's bulletin; and finally, much of the success of the Giants over the past decade has been the result of the fine coaching of the pitchers that Righetti has accomplished.



Dave Righetti

DAVID ALLAN “RAGS” RIGHETTI was born on November 28, 1958 in San Jose, California. His brother, Steve, is thirteen months older than Dave. Their father, Leo, trained his sons to become baseball players, and both Dave and Steve starred for their Little League team, with Dave playing in the outfield and Steve playing shortstop.

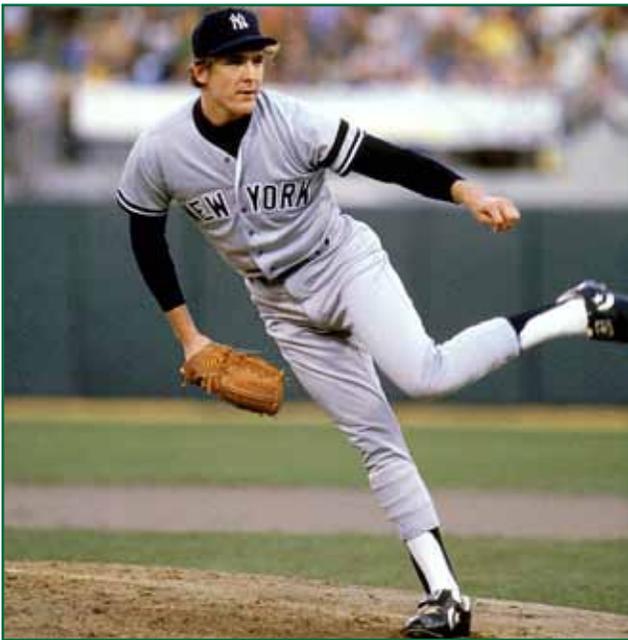
Dave attended Pioneer High School in San Jose, where Paddy Cottrell, a scout for the Texas Rangers, noticed him and suggested that he become a pitcher because of his throwing motion. As a senior, he was named to the All-League team; following graduation, he enrolled in San Jose City College. Here he continued his development as a pitcher on the school’s baseball team, and subsequently was named the Junior College Player of the Year, beating out his teammate Dave Stieb. (Not a bad pitching duo for the Jaguars!)

At Cottrell’s urging, the Texas Rangers selected Righetti on January 11, 1977, in the first round (10th overall pick) of the amateur draft. The Rangers selected Steve in the sixth round, and told Dave that they would only sign Steve if he signed. Both Righetti brothers signed with the Rangers. Dave made his professional debut that year in the minors with the Asheville Tourists of the Class A Western Carolinas League, where he pitched to 11–3 win–loss record.

In 1978, Righetti pitched for the Tulsa Drillers of the Class AA Texas League. In a July game against the Midland Rockhounds, he recorded a league-record 21 strikeouts. Jerry Walker, a scout for the New York Yankees, was present in the stands. Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, while negotiating a trade with Rangers owner Brad Corbett that offseason, specifically waited until late in their negotiations to ask that Righetti be added to the trade. On November 10, 1978, the Yankees acquired Righetti, along with Juan Beníquez, Mike Griffin, Greg Jemison, and Paul Mirabella, while the Rangers acquired Sparky Lyle, Domingo Ramos, Mike Heath, Larry McCall, Dave Rajsich, and cash. The Yankees introduced Righetti as “the next Ron Guidry.” Dave was almost traded to the Minnesota Twins in January 1979; however, the Twins and Yankees were unable to complete a deal in which Righetti, Chris Chambliss, Juan Beníquez, and Dámaso García would have moved to Minnesota in exchange for Rod Carew.

Righetti made his major league debut with the Yankees on September 16, 1979. In this game against the Detroit Tigers, he pitched five innings, striking out three and allowing three hits,

six walks, and three earned runs. After he made his second start, Yankees' manager Billy Martin predicted that Righetti "will win 20 games next season." However, he struggled with his control, and spent the 1980 season with the Columbus Clippers of the Class AAA International League, where he had a 6–10 win-loss record and 4.63 earned run average (ERA) with 101 walks and 139 strikeouts in 142 innings.



In 1981 spring training, he pitched well. However, the Yankees did not have room on the roster for him, so he began the season with Columbus. After he pitched to a 5–0 record with a 1.00 ERA and with 50 strikeouts in 45 innings, the Yankees recalled him from Columbus in May. He was assigned uniform number 19. (The Yankees reserved numbers ending in 9 for pitchers they viewed as having promise: Dick Tidrow had worn 19 for the Yankees, while Catfish Hunter wore 29, Ron Davis wore 39, and Ron Guidry wore 49.) Righetti pitched strongly as a starter for the Yankees; he posted 8–4 win-loss record in the 15 games that he started. Overall, during the 1981 season he had a 2.06 ERA with 89 strikeouts in 105 innings pitched.

He won the American League's Rookie of the Year award, beating Rich Gedman and Bob Ojeda. During the playoffs in 1981, Righetti defeated the Milwaukee Brewers twice in the American League Division Series. The Yankees reached the World Series that year; however, Righetti was replaced early in game three of the World Series; eventually, the Series was won by the Los Angeles Dodgers.

In 1982, Righetti pitched an 8.53 ERA during spring training. Steinbrenner considered demoting him to the minor leagues, but said he "got outvoted then." Through June 1982, he pitched to a 5–5 win-loss record with a 4.23 ERA. Though his 77 strikeouts were fourth-best in the American League, his 62 walks were considered a problem. The Yankees then demoted him to the minor leagues, for what Steinbrenner described as a "2½-week intensive brushing up." Sammy Ellis, Righetti's pitching coach with Columbus, said that Righetti had been rushing his pitching motion, which was likely caused by anxiety. Working with Ellis, he made four starts for the Clippers, recording 33 strikeouts in 26 innings, before he was recalled to New York. He finished the 1982 season with 11 wins in 27 starts, achieving a 3.79 ERA with 162 strikeouts and 108 walks. His strikeouts were third-best in the American League, while his walks led the league.

The highlight of Righetti's efforts as a starting pitcher occurred on July 4, 1983, when he threw a 4–0 no-hitter against the Boston Red Sox at Yankee Stadium. This was especially memorable because it came on the anniversary of Lou Gehrig's farewell speech. It was the first Yankee no-hitter since Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series, and the first by a Yankee left-hander since 1917. It was also the first time ever that a no-hitter occurred during a Yankees-Red Sox rivalry game. Righetti recorded



a swinging strikeout against Wade Boggs to end that game. Twenty-five years later, Righetti reminisced about the game: “My biggest worry, because I had a tendency to fall toward third base, was him [Boggs] tapping a ball between me and Mattingly and me trying to get to first base...I threw a lot of fastballs during the at bat, but the last slider I ended up throwing, he happened to miss it. Thank goodness.”

In 1984, he was moved to the Yankees' bullpen due to an excess of starters, and replaced Goose Gossage as the team's closer. Despite the excess of starters, many people criticized the move, arguing that Righetti was more valuable pitching as a starter, where he would accrue more innings.

Entering his first game as a relief pitcher with the bases loaded, he did not allow a runner to score, ultimately retiring the final seven batters of the game. He proved even more effective in relief than as a starter, averaging 32 saves per season over the next seven years with the Yankees, and being named an All-Star in 1986 and 1987. As a closer, he was twice named the American League Rolands Relief Man of the Year. He was also the first player in history both to pitch a no-hitter and also lead the league in saves in his career. Dennis Eckersley later duplicated the feat, as did Derek Lowe

On October 4, 1986, he saved both games of a doubleheader against the Boston Red Sox, finishing the season with 46 saves, and breaking the major league record shared by Dan Quisenberry and Bruce Sutter. The record stood until Bobby Thigpen saved 57 games for the Chicago White Sox in 1990. Righetti retained the single-season major league record for left-handers until 1993, when Randy Myers saved 53 games for the Chicago Cubs. Righetti still owns the American League record for left-handers.

He became a free agent after the 1987 season. Amid rumors that he would sign a three-year contract worth \$20 million with the Tokyo Giants of Nippon Professional Baseball, Righetti's



agent acknowledged that the Japanese team did make Righetti an offer, but stated that the value was considerably less than what was reported. (It was later estimated to be \$10 million). He also stated that Righetti would continue to pitch in Major League Baseball. Righetti chose to re-sign with the Yankees, signing a three-year contract worth \$4.5 million.

He struggled with the Yankees early in the 1988 season, blowing four consecutive save opportunities, resulting in boos from the Yankee Stadium crowds. He then recorded five saves in consecutive opportunities during that season. However, he became concerned with the direction the Yankees were taking, since they had traded away Rickey Henderson, Jack Clark, and Dave Winfield.

After the 1990 season, he became a free agent, leaving the Yankees after he had set, and still holds, the Yankee All-Time Games Pitched record of 522. He subsequently signed with the San Francisco Giants, receiving a four-year contract worth \$10 million. While with the Giants in 1991, he broke Sparky Lyle's major league record for left-handers of 238 career saves. Righetti's record of 252 would stand until 1994, when John Franco surpassed it. With the Giants, he also pitched his 1,000th career strikeout on April 29, 1991, striking out St. Louis' Felix Jose.

He saved only 24 games during the 1991 season. The Giants felt his career as a closer had finished; the following two years saw him ineffective in middle relief roles as well. (He did make a start on June 10, 1992; this was his first start since September 1983).

When the Giants released him after the 1993 season, he crossed the Bay and signed as a free agent with the Oakland Athletics. After starting the 1994 season with the Athletics, he was released, and subsequently signed as a free agent with the Toronto Blue Jays in May 1994. He played the rest of the 1994 season for the Jays, having a 0–1 win-loss record and 6.75 ERA.

After that season, he was released by the Blue Jays, and in spring 1995 he signed as a free agent with the Chicago White Sox. On November 9, 1995, he was again granted free agency; but no team signed him, and Righetti retired to end his 16-year career, finishing with 252 saves, a 3.46 ERA, and a win-loss record of 82–79 in 718 games.

Since 2000, he has been the pitching coach for the San Francisco Giants. Despite uncertainty if he would return to the Giants for the 2007 season due to a managerial change, Righetti announced in early November 2007 that he would remain with the Giants in his present role. He was the pitching coach for the pitching staff that included Matt Cain,



Madison Bumgarner, Tim Lincecum, Jonathan Sánchez, and Brian Wilson that won the 2010, 2012 (and now, 2014!) World Series. The success of the Giants pitching over the past several years can be attributed to Dave Righetti's ability to get the most from the pitchers and to develop further their skills.

PERSONAL LIFE

He has been married to Kandice Owen Righetti since February 11, 1989. They have triplets: Nicolette, Natalee and Wesley who were born on July 19, 1991.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from IDMb.com; Wikipedia; BaseballLibrary.com; and Baseball-reference.com

