

THE **BEST**

HOUSTON
SPORT

ARGUMENTS

100

THE **100** MOST
CONTROVERSIAL, DEBATABLE
QUESTIONS FOR
DIE-HARD FANS

JOSE DE JESUS ORTIZ

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JOSE DE JESUS ORTIZ



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To Megan, Kathleen Maria, and Maya Shea,
the ladies who own my heart and spirit

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INTRODUCTION

If it weren't for sports arguments and the passion fans feel when they're wronged, the late Dr. John McMullen might not be such a vilified person in the city of Houston almost 20 years after he pushed the legendary Nolan Ryan to Arlington, of all places.

Sports fans love to argue. They love to pick sides. In Houston, you either hate Carlos Beltran or you *really* hate Carlos Beltran. You believe the Dynamo will survive, you just don't care, or you're supportive of the team in public because you have family working for the team.

Even if there isn't a rivalry, fans will make one. They'll ask, Biggio or Bagwell? When the parties really don't like each other it just adds to the spice: Gene Elston or Milo Hamilton, anyone? All just for the sake of arguing.

For as long as sports have pitted one side against the other, folks have been forced to choose sides, to pick a villain and a victim. You wouldn't keep score if you didn't want a winner, and fans take it a step further by using their logic—or lack thereof—to argue years after the fact: father against daughter, brother against brother, sister against sister, mother against father, priest against priest.

Sports writers do it in press boxes all the time, and on

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occasion they'll take their little spats into print or onto the airwaves. If Houstonians didn't love to argue about their sports so much, there wouldn't be three all-sports radio stations on the scene and another that will prominently cater to sports arguments.

The sports section is the one part of the newspaper where fans go to verify what they already saw and think. But it's not that easy. If 40,000 folks saw a game, there are 40,000 versions of what happened, leading to years of sports arguments. Mix in the different sports—baseball, basketball, football, tennis, soccer—and you have the potential for hundreds of great Houston sports arguments.

We've put together a list of the 100 best arguments in Houston, the ones you've had with your father, brother, sister, mother, and best friends. You've been picking sides at home and in your neighborhood all your life. Through these pages you'll find even more chances to tell your buddies at the sports bar why they're stupid, why they don't know nearly as much about sports as you do, and why you're the one who gets it.

In these pages, you'll smile appreciatively and shake your head in disgust. At times, you might even get pissed off at the conclusions. And that's great because sports do that: They make you argue. More than anything, though, you'll be taken down a trip through Houston sports' memory lane. You'll relive the good, the bad, and the ugly that have transpired in Houston sports.

Who's the Best Pitcher in Astros history?

Easy, you say. It's either Nolan Ryan, J.R. Richard, or Roger Clemens. But what if it's not? Would that get your juices flowing and objections flying?

Who Belongs on the Mount Rushmore of Houston Sports?

What if we told you that Earl Campbell didn't make the cut? Campbell was a heck of a runner, but he couldn't run Houston to the Super Bowl title. Heck, he couldn't even lead them to the game. Does that make you mad? Or do you see where we're coming from?

For several months, I have depended on some of the most opinionated sports historians in Houston for guidance. These men and one woman have chronicled the city's most glorious sports moments, from the Battle of the Sexes to the Rockets' titles, from the Luv Ya Blue Oilers to Vince Young's Texans. Oops. They didn't pick Young, did they? Talk about a reason to argue.

Special thanks go out to Daniel Cunningham, John McClain, Brian McTaggart, Fran Blinebury, Megan Ortiz, and Barry Warner. Nobody knows more about the University of Houston and Rice sports than McTaggart, and he's also become one of the best baseball writers in America. Blinebury is Texas's foremost authority in basketball. McClain is one of the premier NFL writers in America, and Megan Ortiz, my lovely wife, has been one of McClain's top protégés as the Texans' beat writer for the *Houston Chronicle*. Nobody argues more than Warner, who has been one of the

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premier sports radio personalities in Houston for almost 40 years. Cunningham, the *Houston Chronicle's* deputy managing editor, has guided the sports coverage for most of the city's great sports moments. He is the reason the *Chronicle's* sports section is so respected nationally.

Special thanks also go out to John Lopez, Dale Robertson, David Barron, Michael Murphy, Jerome Solomon, Steve Schaeffer, Doug Pike, Steve Campbell, Bernardo Fallas, and Richard Justice. All of these folks filled out my countless questionnaires, and some literally carried entire sections with their expertise. Combined, they have spent over 200 years either covering sports in Houston or living in Houston following the city's sports franchises.

I'd also like to thank book editor Shana Drehs, who held my hand and prodded me through this project. This book could not have been finished without Shana's brilliance. My bosses at the *Houston Chronicle*—Fred Faour, Carlton Thompson, and Joe Conway—also have provided guidance throughout the year.

Within these pages, you'll see that even the so-called experts disagreed. We expect you to do the same. Now you don't have to visit a sports bar to argue. Just sit with this book and let yourself go. Smile and join the debate. This is your city, and these are your arguments. Whack away.

—Jose de Jesus Ortiz

August 1, 2007, Kingwood, Texas

AROUND TOWN

IS HOUSTON A FOOTBALL TOWN OR A BASEBALL TOWN?

1

Heading into the 2007 season, the Astros had drawn over 3 million fans in two of their previous three seasons, building a buzz for baseball in the city unlike anything Houston had felt since the Rockets won their two championships in the mid-1990s. They created all the energy thanks to Roy Oswalt, Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte, and Lance Berkman leading the organization to its first postseason series victory in 2004 and its first World Series appearance the next season.

By comparison, the Texans have hardly won on the field. They have even drawn the ire of their fans by blowing the first overall pick in the 2006 draft—at least in the court of public opinion. Yet, despite all the losing, Reliant Stadium has been completely sold out since the first day of the Texans' inaugural 2002 season.

Football is king in Texas, and it appears football—even losing football—has been a treat for a city that is undoubtedly grateful Texans owner Bob McNair brought the NFL back with his hefty wallet.

“Houston currently is a baseball town because the Astros have been on a roll with winning seasons, big-name

stars, and a World Series,” said Daniel Cunningham, *Houston Chronicle* deputy managing editor. “But Houston would be a football town if it ever had a football team worth getting excited about.”

The Astros lost a bit of traction with a mediocre 2006 season and then the departure of national names like Roger Clemens and Andy Pettitte, but Craig Biggio’s march to 3,000 hits kept the fans interested in 2007. Wayne Graham’s powerful Rice Owls also have kept baseball in the limelight in Houston.

But it became clear by watching the University of Houston win the 2006 Conference USA championship that the city is much more impressed by football titles.

Advantage, gridiron. Come on, it’s Texas.

BEST PLACE TO WATCH A GAME IN HOUSTON?

2

When you have three state-of-the-art stadiums in Houston, there are plenty of great seats to watch professional sports. The Astros’ Minute Maid Park, which opened downtown as Enron Field in 2000, is the oldest of the three. Reliant Stadium came along right next door to the old Astrodome in 2002, and in 2003 the Rockets opened Toyota Center downtown, not far from Minute Maid Park.

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Toyota Center isn't bad, but it's almost embarrassingly overloaded with Toyota merchandise. It's not a basketball arena as much as it is a giant showroom. The seats are decent, although many folks in the luxury boxes hardly appear to be watching the games.

On the other end of the spectrum, Rice's Reckling Park is a quaint college baseball field that coach Wayne Graham has turned into one of the most popular destinations to watch college baseball. In that park, there's no denying that every seat provides a great view.

But it's not the best place in town. Minute Maid Park and Reliant Stadium battle it out for that honor.

Minute Maid and Reliant both have retractable roofs. The latter was actually the first retractable roof, air-conditioned, natural grass football stadium in the country. And just because they can open the roof doesn't mean they'll leave it open.

The Texans have set a policy so that their fans won't have an uncomfortable experience if it gets too hot in Houston. The team learned its lesson in September 2005 when it left the roof open on a relatively oppressive Sunday afternoon. They heard about it that day and for most of the week, prompting the club to draft a standard policy on when to close the roof:

"Beginning with the 2006 season, we will open the roof when the game time temperature is projected to be between 50 and 80 degrees," the Texans informed their

fans on their website. “Our goal for implementing the ‘50–80 Rule’ is to provide the most comfortable environment possible to enjoy Houston Texans games. Please note that the threat of rain will influence this decision, and when there is a good chance of rain during a game, the roof will be closed. Also, our parameters for late afternoon and evening games may shift slightly because of the absence of direct sunlight. However, we plan to use the general parameters established with your input to make the roof position decision for each game. Our research clearly demonstrated that we cannot please everyone, every time with our roof position decision. However, we are hopeful that this note helps to point out that our approach is thoughtful, deliberate and focused on creating the best environment possible for the majority of our fans to enjoy games at Reliant Stadium.”

After consulting with weather experts, the Texans found that “direct sunlight adds 15 degrees to the heat index and the high temperature,” and then planned accordingly. Although the Texans have sold out every seat to every one of their games, team owner Bob McNair didn’t take the fans for granted. He listened to their input and made changes right away.

You can rest easy at Reliant Stadium knowing that Bob McNair’s folks won’t let you suffer through the heat. The same cannot be said at Minute Maid Park. Even in light of complaints, the Astros still didn’t set a policy. This is why