



THE CURSE OF GENE GARBER

Closers don't last long in Atlanta,
it's all because of Gene

by Mac Thomason

Gene Garber was the Braves closer, off and on, from 1978 to 1986. "Off and on" because they kept trying to take the job away from him and give it to someone more impressive, only to see that pitcher to somehow lose the job, inevitably, to Garber. He held the franchise single-season save record until 1996, the career save record until 2004, and is still second on the latter list. Garber clearly accomplished this by cursing the Braves closer role so that horrible things would happen to anyone who dared approach his records.

Or maybe the Braves closer job was *always* cursed. Consider Cecil Upshaw, who held the position in 1968 and 1969, saving 27 games (second in the league) the second year. Upshaw, a strapping 6'6", decided that offseason to demonstrate to some friends of his how to dunk a basketball, without benefit of a hoop or a ball. He caught the ring finger of his pitching hand on a restaurant awning, severing nerves

and blood vessels. He needed two surgeries plus rehab, missed the entire 1970 season, was never again as effective, and was out of the majors five years later.

Over the next few years, until the Garber Era (or the Let's See How We Can Screw Garber Era, as the case may be) began in 1978, the Braves never really settled on a relief ace, using several different pitchers in the save role every season. Garber's 47 saves over his first two seasons as a Brave made him third on the franchise list. So the team had to replace him with converted starter Rick Camp, who had a couple of good years in the role, started getting bombed in 1982, and moved back into the rotation. To be replaced by Garber.

Garber saved 30 games in 1983 to set the franchise career and season records, which required that he be replaced in 1984 by Steve Bedrosian, who did a pretty good job in the role. So the Braves moved Bedrock into the rotation, then



Bruce Sutter took Gene Garber's closer job, only to be replaced by Garber a year later.

traded him for Ozzie Virgil and watched him save 40 games and win the Cy Young Award in 1987. They could do this because they had signed... Bruce Sutter.

The reasoning, if any, behind the infamous Sutter free agent signing has been lost in the fog of time. Why a .500 team with a below-average offense thought that the acquisition of a closer was worth breaking the bank is beyond most fans, but that sort of thing happened a lot in the '80s. Anyway, Sutter was at what turned out to be the tail end of a Hall of Fame Career; already 32, he signed a contract that would carry him to the age of 37. He saved 23 games (with a high ERA) in 1985, missed most of 1986 and all of 1987, pitched briefly in 1988, and then retired with two years to go on his deal. An annuity meant that he was, however, still getting checks and may still be to this day.

The Braves turned back to Garber, of course, and he held the job in 1986, only to fall out of it during the 1987 season. Not wanting to be embarrassed by their next closer getting replaced by Garber, the team sent him to the Royals at the trade deadline. Garber's reign in Atlanta was finally over, but that doesn't mean the closer role would be solidified. The Curse of Gene Garber still hangs over the franchise, and relievers have shuffled in and out of the role ever since.

Jim Acker held the job for the rest of that season. In 1988, the nadir of the Braves' Dark Ages, Sutter led the team with 14 saves. Joe Boever was the closer for 1989 and most of

1990 before giving way to Kent Mercker. The Braves weren't sure if Mercker was a starter or a reliever—actually, they went nearly 10 years and never did decide—but new leadership was coming, *professional* leadership, which would see the closer role get screwy in entirely new ways.

John Schuerholz signed veteran setup man Juan Berenguer to a two-year contract to close, and for the first half of the 1991 season Berenguer was key to keeping the Braves in the race, saving 17 games with a 2.24 ERA. But he broke down, and pitched for the last time on August 12. Two weeks later (weeks where nobody really took control of the role but the Braves continued to win anyway) Schuerholz traded for another veteran setup man, Alejandro Pena. A week after that, Pena saved his first game as a Brave. Pena's September run for the Braves is starting to fade from memory, but it deserves to be legend. Pena saved 11 games in 11 opportunities, allowed just three runs in 19.1 innings, and as much as anyone, led the team to the division crown down the stretch. He was perfect in four outings against the Pirates in the NLCS, saving three games and allowing just one hit.

And in 1992, he was awful, finally getting shut down in May with a 7.36 ERA. The lefties, Mercker and Mike Stanton, traded the job, with some attempts by the embryonic Mark Wohlers. Pena came back for another spectacular run in July, but the injuries caught up with him again and he didn't even make the postseason roster. To take his place, the Braves traded for... Jeff Reardon.



Few remember that Kent Mercker was actually the Braves closer at times.

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Reardon did not actually pitch that badly for the Braves in the regular season. He saved only three games, but that team really didn't need a lot of saves, and his ERA was 1.15. He then threw three scoreless, hitless innings in the NLCS. But then came the World Series, which would make "Jeff Reardon" a profanity in the minds of Braves fans forevermore. Reardon blew a save and took a loss in Game 2, gave up a game-ending single in Game 3, and sat out the rest of the series as Bobby Cox lost confidence in him.

Mike Stanton, who had been picking up saves off and on for the previous few years, inherited the closer job to start the 1993 season. He saved 27 games, but fell apart in August and yielded the job to Greg McMichael, a minor league lifer who had caught lightning in a bottle in spring training, made the team, and suddenly was in the glamour role for the two-time NL champs. McMichael saved 19 games and finished second in the Rookie of the Year balloting, and started 1994 as the closer. He actually managed to make it through the interrupted season, but quickly lost the job after the strike.

Enter Mark Wohlers. From 1995 to 1997, Wohlers accomplished something no other Atlanta Braves reliever had up to that point: He led the team in saves in three consecutive seasons. Unfortunately, they were seasons of diminishing returns. Wohlers was dominant in 1995, saving 25 games in the shortened season with a 2.09 ERA and saving five games in the postseason, including the World Series clincher. The next year he set a franchise record with 39 saves, but his ERA went up nearly a run to 3.03, and he allowed the infamous game-tying home run to Jim (expletive) Leyritz in Game 4 of the World Series that turned the entire decade around. In 1997, he saved 33 more games but his ERA went up again to 3.50, while his walk rate started to rise. In 1998, *something* happened to Wohlers, nobody knows for sure whether it was mental or physical. They call it Steve Blass Disease—when a pitcher completely loses the ability to throw strikes. In 27 games, many in which he didn't record an out, Wohlers' ERA went to 10.18. He was never again an effective pitcher.

The next closer may have been the most unlikely of all, Kerry Ligtenberg, a former replacement player acquired (together with one of the most magnificent sets of sideburns seen since the 1890s) from his Independent League team for equipment. Ligtenberg had been called up the previous season to bolster a reeling middle relief corps and suddenly was the man on the spot. He saved 30 games in impressive fashion and had the job locked down when he blew out his elbow in the spring.

The job next went to John Rocker. A flame-throwing, somewhat wild lefthander, Rocker had pitched well in a setup role the previous year, and pitched at a top level in 1999, saving 38 games and striking out 104 men in 72.1 innings. The future seemed bright... and then he had to open his



There's no greater proof of the Curse of Gene Garber than the fall from grace of Mark Wohlers.

mouth. Rocker basically went crazy in an interview with *Sports Illustrated* that offseason, mocking various minorities, calling an unnamed teammate a "fat monkey," and denigrating New York. (Some have suspected that if he had left New York out of it the whole thing would have blown over.) Rocker was suspended for a time, sent to the minors for threatening a reporter, and just wasn't as effective as he'd been the previous season, though he still managed 24 saves, with Ligtenberg and Mark Remlinger filling in when Rocker was unavailable. In 2001, he saved 19 games before the Braves blessedly traded him to the Indians for Steve Karsay and Steve Reed. Karsay filled in for awhile while the new closer got ready for the role.

That would be John Smoltz. After a series of arm problems that caused him to miss all of 2000 and most of 2001, the veteran starter moved to the pen in the belief that short stints, more often, would put less stress on his arm. It wasn't necessarily the case, but Smoltz has one thing going for him: He is the only man to hold down the Braves closer job for any period of time and come out nearly unscathed. For three years, he was one of the dominant closers in the game, saving a team-record 55 games in 2002, 45 (with a 1.12 ERA) in 2003, and 44 in 2004. But Smoltz's elbow kept giving him trouble. He blew an attempt at a two-inning save in Game 3 of the Division Series against the Cubs that year, only to get the win, then picked up a valiant save in Game 4. He would have been unavailable in the fifth game, if the Braves had

gotten a lead. The closer experiment hadn't taken the load off his arm after all, so the Braves started to plan to get him back into the rotation.

Enter... Dan Kolb. Kolb, one of the men who should tithe to the makers of the radar gun—he throws hard, but with no movement, meaning he doesn't strike anyone out, putting the lie to the "power pitcher" label—quickly became one of the few players to get consistently booed by the usually laidback Turner Field crowds. Part of a bullpen that was in flux all season long, Kolb saved 11 games, had a 5.93 ERA, fell out of the closer role in June, and bitched about it to the press. Setup man Chris Reitsma, held onto the job for awhile, then the Braves picked up Kyle Farnsworth from the Cubs. Farnsworth pitched well in the regular season, saving 10 games with a 1.98 ERA, but blew a five-run lead in Game 4 of the Division Series against the Astros, ultimately finishing off the Braves (after 18 innings of that game). The Braves wanted to bring him back to close, but he took more money to setup for the Yankees.

Reitsma inherited the closer job to start 2006, but it was evident to all that he really wasn't suited for the role, being better in long relief. He pitched poorly—so poorly that in one incident a man drove past Reitsma standing outside his house and yelled, "Reitsma, you suck!"—and fell out of the job, replaced by no one in particular in a cobbled-together bullpen. In July, the Braves traded catching prospect Max

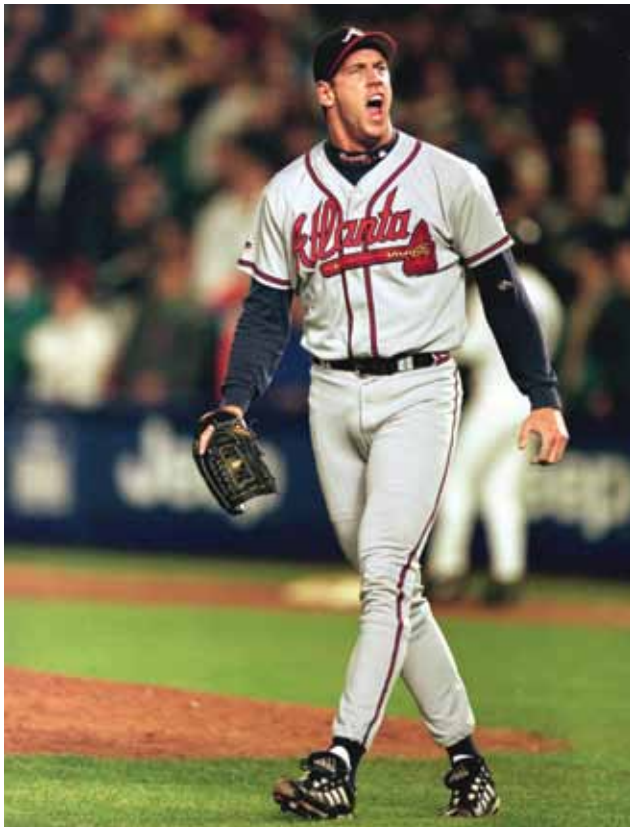


There were a lot of long nights for Chris Reitsma as he attempted to break the Curse.

Ramirez to the Indians for veteran Bob Wickman, who saved 18 games down the stretch to lead the team. But the savior of 2006 was the problem of 2007, as Wickman, on his way out of the majors, saved 20 games but with a 3.92 ERA, and was released in September. Rafael Soriano inherited the job.

Either Soriano or Mike Gonzalez (acquired for Adam LaRoche) was supposed to close in 2008, but nobody really ever established themselves, Gonzalez leading the team with 14 saves while Soriano had recurring elbow problems, which the Braves decided were all in his head until surgery revealed a transposed nerve. A healthy Soriano saved 27 games in 2009, occasionally alternating with Gonzalez (who saved 10) as the bullpen for the first time in years was a strength. Both Soriano and Gonzalez were free agents, however, with Gonzalez leaving and Soriano being traded after accepting arbitration. He led the American League with 45 saves in 2010, but surely something will happen to him soon.

Billy Wagner, one of the best closers of all time, took over for the 2010 season and was excellent, picking up 37 saves and striking out well over a man an inning, as usual. Wagner announced in the middle of the season that he would retire, and while the Braves tried to talk him into coming back, he was intent on giving up baseball and spending time with his family in Virginia. That Billy Wagner, he knows what's good for him. **MSP**



John Rocker found a whole new way to channel the Curse.

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