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GREEN + GOLD = BLUE

Few things in big-league baseball are more beautiful than Oakland A's lefty Barry Zito at the top of his game. Granted, the sight of Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki gliding from first to third on a single to center is certainly impressive. It's like watching someone running on one of those moving airport walkways—only much, much faster and without the wobbling wheeled luggage awkwardly in tow. Similarly freakish and fascinating is the sight of Angels outfielder Vladimir Guerrero unleashing the beast that is his right arm. Let's see . . . 385 feet from the right-field corner to home plate? Not a problem. Here's a laser-guided strike to beat the runner with enough time for the catcher to brace for the blow that typically comes when a runner is so comically beaten. Oh, and do you want it on one hop or a line? Alex Sanchez of the Detroit Tigers can blow you away, too—with a bunt. It matters not that everyone in the park knows he's going to drop one down. He drops it down anyway, and, far more often than not, he drops it where nobody can possibly stop him from turning it into a single.

As memorable as these moments are, though, they come and go in a matter of seconds. They are riveting solos in the middle of a

rock concert, the blurred fingers of Jimmy Page at the end of "Stairway to Heaven." Zito, at his absolute best, is more like the conductor of a symphony. As a starting pitcher, he controls the show's pace, tempo, and rhythm, giving you ample time to soak it all in. And for more than an hour on October 6, 2003, at Oakland's Network Associates Coliseum in game five of the best-of-five American League Division Series (ALDS), Zito was in complete control. Of his stuff, of the game, of the record-breaking Boston Red Sox offense, and, most important as far as the A's were concerned, of the label certain to be affixed to them were they to lose this game.

It's the worst label in sports: CHOKER. And as the media's coverage of sports continues to grow with the explosion of the Internet, the omnipresence of sports-talk radio, and the quick-to-judge nature of television's talking heads, the label has gotten uglier and uglier—and more unfair.

It used to be that only something truly shocking, such as blowing a massive late lead or failing to execute the most fundamental play under crunch-time pressure, warranted the use of the dreaded C word. Think the 1964 Philadelphia Phillies, who gagged away a 6½-game lead in the National League (NL) East by losing 10 games in a row down the stretch. Or the 1975 Pittsburgh Penguins, who won the first three games of a best-of-seven NHL playoff series against the New York Islanders before melting down with four straight losses. Or Jana Novotna, coughing up a 4–1, third-set lead to Steffi Graf in the 1993 Wimbledon women's final, then sobbing on the Duchess of Kent's shoulder. Or Nick Anderson of the Orlando Magic missing four free throws late in game one of the 1995 NBA Finals, when any one of those freebies would have sealed a win. Or poor Jean Van de Velde, needing only a double-bogey 6 at the eighteenth hole on Sunday to win the 1999 British Open, absolutely imploding—mentally and physically—on the way to a 32-ounce-Slurpee-straight-to-the-head brain freeze of a triple-bogey 6.

And, of course, there's the guy who is, and probably always will be, the unfortunate poster boy for sport's least fortunate. That would be Bill Buckner, who proved in game six of the 1986 World Series that it is indeed impossible to field an easy ground ball with both hands wrapped around your own throat. It's ironically delicious that the team equivalent of Buckner is now the 2004 Yankees, who will

be forever infamous for blowing a three-game lead in the American League Championship Series (ALCS) to the rival Red Sox.

These were all classic choke jobs, truly deserving of the Heimlich-themed mockery they've induced over the years. Yet every now and then, one media outlet or another will come up with a list of All-Time Chokers, and the list invariably includes the names of athletes or teams who, upon more thoughtful reflection, appear most undeserving of the infamy.

The Buffalo Bills of Jim Kelly, Thurman Thomas, and Bruce Smith, for instance, are always taken to task because they lost four consecutive Super Bowls in the early 1990s. For the glass-half-empty set, which, unfortunately, encompasses the majority of those in the increasingly cynical society of sport, that's considered choking. If you care to see the glass as half-full, however, you'll see those Bills for what they *really* are: the only team in NFL history to win four consecutive conference championships.

Golf's Phil Mickelson used to take a beating on such lists, too, mainly because his immense talent, until a breakthrough win at the 2004 Masters, wasn't translating to success in the game's four majors championships. Dig a little deeper, though, and you'll find that heading into 2004, he'd won more than twenty times on the PGA Tour. That he was a three-time NCAA Champion and Player of the Year. That he shares, along with Jack Nicklaus and only one other golfer in history, the distinction of having won the U.S. Amateur and an NCAA title in the same year. The other golfer, by the way, is one Tiger Woods. Mickelson has the misfortune of being in his prime at the same general place and time as this mind-blowing majors magnet.

The lesson here, apparently, is that in this day and age, to win on a regular basis is to create your own candidacy for a seat on the council of Choke City. Winning's great and all, but if, heaven forbid, you fail to win the proverbial big one once in a while, you're a choker.

This, in a sense, is the weight Barry Zito bore on his back as he took the mound for game five at Oakland in 2003. The A's, a wildly successful team by most reasonable measures, were in danger of failing to advance out of the first round of the playoffs for a fourth consecutive season.

The A's surprised the baseball world in 2000 by winning their division on the last day of the regular season—Tim Hudson beat the Rangers, 3–0, for his twentieth win of the year—before pushing the defending world champion New York Yankees to the limit in the ALDS. But because they'd needed to pull out all the stops just to get *into* the playoffs, they had to send journeyman Gil Heredia out for a game five at home that was all but over by the second inning. In 2001, while they were still seen as the Cute Little Team That Could, the A's pulled off an even bigger surprise as a wild card team, beating the again-defending champion Yankees twice at Yankee Stadium to open the ALDS. But the now-famous play in Oakland by New York shortstop Derek Jeter—*Slide, Jeremy, Slide!*—rendered meaningless a brilliant night by Zito, who allowed a run on two hits over eight innings, and started a downward spiral that led to three straight losses and another early exit.

In 2002 the A's finally got to see what it felt like to be a favorite in the ALDS, but that didn't work out so well, either. They were up two games to one on the Minnesota Twins but lost game four at the Metrodome and game five at home. And here, in 2003, they'd beaten the Red Sox in Oakland in the first two games, only to drop both games in Boston to send everyone back across the country for yet another game five one day later.

Eight times over four years, the A's had worked themselves to within a single victory from clinching their first ALCS since 1992. Eight times they'd lost. "It's not something we think about a lot," Hudson said before the 2003 playoffs started. "But when it's brought up, you're kind of like, 'Man, that is pretty bad, isn't it? We need to get that fixed.'"

Hudson was the starting pitcher in clinch game number eight, which the A's lost 5–4. Zito had the ball for number nine.

Part of what makes Zito's act so entertaining is that it's difficult to define in traditional pitching terms. Most pitchers generally fall into one of two major categories: power or finesse. Power pitchers—Randy Johnson and Roger Clemens are two contemporary prototypes—win on the strength of a dominant fastball. They've got exceptional setup pitches, of course. Not even Nolan Ryan lived

by fastball alone; his curveball was devastating. But power pitchers instill fear, command respect, and make big money by blowing balls past guys at between 95 and 100 miles per hour. At the other end of the spectrum are the finesse pitchers—see Jamie Moyer or Greg Maddux—who often don't throw any harder than a good high school hurler. What allows them to thrive is pinpoint accuracy and an ability to adeptly change speeds with four to six different pitches. They keep hitters frustrated and off balance.

Between those two extremes is a very small subset of "gimmick pitchers," such as Boston's own Tim Wakefield, whose knuckleball appears to stagger like a teenager after his first encounter with Jack Daniels. Throw ageless lefty Jesse Orosco into that lot as well, if for no other reason than, as the only pitcher in modern big-league history to possess a glove autographed by Moses, he seems to have accomplished what Ponce de Leon could not.

And then there is Zito, a free-spirited southpaw who is in something of a category all his own. He definitely isn't a power pitcher; his fastball barely tops 90 mph. He isn't a finesse pitcher, either; his control is good but not pinpoint. And while his curveball is so good that it's something most people can throw only with the help of a PlayStation joystick, it's no gimmick. It's a classic over-the-top, noon-to-six bender that generally starts at the hitter's eye level and drops—two-thirds of the way to the plate—below the knees. But because of that big curveball, which many baseball people consider the best in the game, Zito at his best is a power pitcher and a finesse pitcher at the same time. He doesn't always throw the big breaker for strikes, but he does so often enough that hitters have to be on the lookout for it. And when they're looking for a 72-mph curveball and get an 89-mph fastball instead, even the best hitters can look hapless. "That's when it looks like he's throwing about 120," said Yankees first baseman Jason Giambi, who played with Zito in Oakland during the 2000 and 2001 seasons. "But if you're looking for the fastball, that's when he freezes you by dropping that cartoon hammer on you for strike three. That's when he makes you look like an idiot."

And when Zito freezes someone in that situation with two out in an inning, it's a priceless bit of theater. Why? Because often he's already taken a few steps off the mound toward the A's dugout by

the time the umpire lets the hitter know he's been had. So sure is Zito of the pitch he's just released that he doesn't even bother to check out the aftermath. He just *knows*. "I don't mean to show anyone up when I do that," Zito insists. "And I don't do it on purpose at all; I didn't even really know I did that. But when you know, you know. You know?" Yankees catcher Jorge Posada knew, during a playoff game in which Zito froze him for a called third strike to end an inning, and he didn't take even the slightest umbrage when Zito prematurely pimped off the mound without so much as a glance back at the plate. Instead, Posada, shaking his head in amazement, actually burst out laughing. "That's ridiculous," he could be seen saying to nobody in particular, and he wasn't talking about Zito's confident walk off the hill. He was talking about the manner in which he'd just been tooled by a master craftsman.

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Here was Zito again, on October 6, 2003, tooling the powerful Red Sox for five shutout innings. Boston set a slew of big-league records during the regular season, breaking the slugging percentage record set by the fabled 1927 Bronx Bombers along the way, but they weren't doing any slugging on this day. Zito was perfect through the first three frames, quickly dispatching the first nine batters he faced, and through five innings he'd allowed two hits. One was an infield single by speedy Johnny Damon, who had left the low-budget A's as a free agent the previous off-season, and the other was a clean single to center by Kevin Millar, who was thrown out by center fielder Chris Singleton trying to stretch it into a double. The first two times Most Valuable Player (MVP) candidate Manny Ramirez came to the plate, Zito sat him down on strikes. "He was dominating us," Millar would say later. "Again."

"Again" was a reference to game two of the series, in which Zito, the 2002 AL Cy Young Award winner, earned himself a measure of redemption for a substandard—by *his* standards, anyway—regular season. A day after lead-footed catcher Ramon Hernandez had given the A's a victory in the series opener by way of a gorgeously stunning bases-loaded bunt single with two out in the bottom of the twelfth inning, Zito led the A's to within a game of the

ALCS—again—by striking out nine, including five in a row at one point. He scattered five hits over seven innings, and Oakland's 5–1 win upped his career postseason record to 3–1, while lowering his career postseason ERA to 2.03. "All you can say when Barry's on like that is, 'Wow!'" Hernandez said after the game. "I'm just glad I don't have to face him when he's like that."

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The starting pitcher for day games after night games is often allowed to leave the night game early to get extra rest, and on the night of game one, it ended up being a particularly good idea. Hernandez's heroics ended the longest playoff game in Oakland history—four hours, thirty-seven minutes—just before midnight, and by then, Zito was already in bed at his spartan San Francisco flat. But he wasn't asleep. He was listening to the game on the radio, and when he arrived at the ballpark the next day, he couldn't help himself. He sneaked into the tiny Oakland video room to take a quick peek at what he'd missed. "Just from listening, I think I pictured [game one] pretty well," Zito said. "But I still came into the clubhouse and watched the tape of the last couple of guys, just to make it real and get me fired up for my start." He needed no such devices to get the juices flowing for game five. It was what first-year A's manager Ken Macha called an "everything game," and everything about it reeked of drama.

For one thing, Zito was working on short rest for the first time in his brief-but-brilliant career. A slave to the carefully choreographed between-starts routine crafted by then–pitching coach Rick Peterson, whose attention to detail borders on maniacal, Zito had made every one of his previous 123 starts since reaching the big leagues in 2000 on at least four days of rest. Now, in the biggest start of his life, he was going on three days. That means the routine had changed, and instead of his standard two sessions in the bullpen between starts, he got one. "It's going to be interesting if we go to game five," Zito said before the series started. "You want to think that your mind can will your body to do whatever you want it to do, but until you're out there, you just don't know."

Making Zito's task all the more daunting was that opposite him

on the mound for Boston was one of the most feared big-game pitchers of his time. Red Sox righty Pedro Martinez was the runaway winner when, in an informal poll conducted by MLB.com late in the 2003 season, ninety-five big leaguers were asked which pitcher they'd most like on their side with the season on the line. "Pedro's the toughest pitcher out there," said shortstop David Eckstein of the 2002 world champion Anaheim Angels. "He throws from so many angles and can do so much with the baseball. He can make it cut, he can back it up, he throws the slider, then the changeup. He has so many different pitches that he can rely on at any time." What's more, Martinez would be taking the mound with a bit of a chip on his shoulder. He was knocked out of his only regular-season start of 2003 in Oakland after just five innings, thoroughly outpitched by Hudson in the process, and despite pitching well in game one of the ALDS, he was long gone by the time Hernandez's bunt won it in the twelfth.

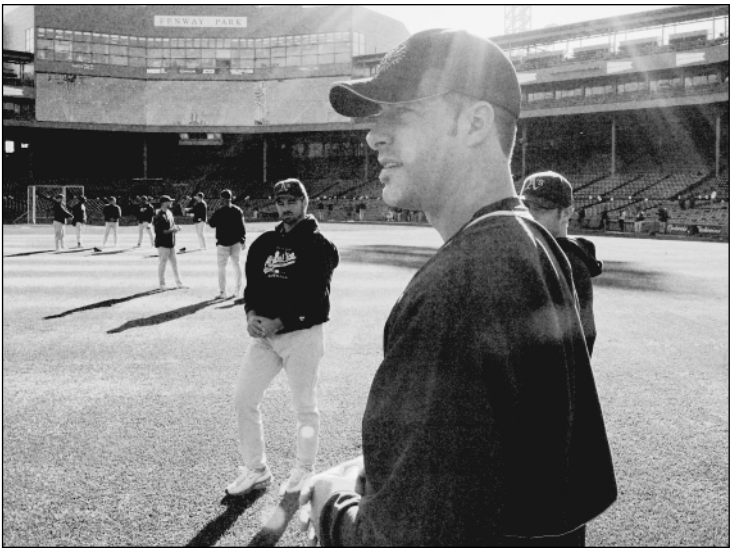
There was this little subplot, too: Martinez, who won the NL Cy Young Award in 1997 and the AL Cy Young in 1999 and 2000, privately fumed when Zito edged him for the 2002 AL award, suggesting that race and image were factors in the vote. A rumor swirled that he had derisively called Zito, a handsome budding musician whose acquaintances include singer/songwriters Dave Matthews, Ben Folds, John Mayer, and Ari Hest, a "cute little white boy with a guitar." Zito tried to take the high road, but he was surprised and disappointed by the alleged swipe. "I didn't hear him say it myself, so I'm not going to worry about it," he said. "But if he did say that, that's pretty weak. That's punk shit right there." Now Zito and Martinez were facing each other in game five, marking the first time in baseball history that two former Cy Young winners were to square off in a series-deciding game. An "everything game."

When, exactly, everything started to unravel for the 2003 A's is open to interpretation. A great many people point to game three at Boston's Fenway Park, where Oakland tied a playoff record by making four errors—three came in one inning, including two by third baseman Eric Chavez, a four-time Gold Glove winner—and cost

themselves two runs with base-running blunders. On one play, Eric Byrnes failed to touch home plate with what would have been the game-tying run and was tagged out on his way to the A's dugout. Not long after that, Boston shortstop Nomar Garciaparra mishandled a ground ball that allowed the A's to tie the game at 1–1, but Oakland's former MVP shortstop, Miguel Tejada, bumped into Boston third baseman Bill Mueller while running from second to third, then stopped between third and home, thinking that umpire Bill Welke had called interference and ruled the play dead. Tejada thought wrong, and after he, too, was tagged out, Boston went on to win 3–1 on Trot Nixon's eleventh-inning homer to keep the series alive.

It was in the morgue of Oakland's postgame clubhouse that Chavez, whose brutal, often-unsolicited honesty is equal parts refreshing and disarming, verbalized the doubt that had to be setting up camp in the minds of many A's. "If we don't win tomorrow, we're gonna lose this thing," Chavez blurted. "Because they've got Pedro ready for game five, and I just don't see Boston losing two games that he starts in a row." Two days after the mental mistakes of Byrnes and Tejada, Chavez was proven prophetic. And that's why there are others who look at the night *before* game three, when Zito and Hudson made the mental mistake of showing their faces in a downtown Boston bar, as the beginning of the end for Oakland.

Considering Beantown's well-documented passion for the Red Sox and the fact that the A's held a 2–0 series lead when Zito and Hudson popped into a popular nightspot, the result was fairly predictable. Hudson got into a dust-up with a fan that, depending on whose version you believe, was either mostly verbal or intensely physical. Either way, it was ugly, and when Hudson had to leave game four with a strained oblique (side/hip) muscle after throwing just nine pitches, it opened the door to all kinds of speculation—addressed in detail later—as to whether he'd been injured in that bar. "Y'all got me made out to be a bare-knuckle champion," Hudson said before game five. "It was just a small verbal altercation that resulted in a little bit of finger-pointin' and a couple of shoves. . . . But the fact that it happened to Tim Hudson blew it up to a scale where everybody thinks I was bear-rasslin' the bouncers and handling eight men."



Although sidelined with a leg injury during the 2003 ALDS against Boston, Mark Mulder traveled with the team to Fenway Park to continue rehabbing in hopes of making his return for the ALCS.

Still another theory on the origins of Oakland's latest playoff demise centered on August 19. That's the day lefty Mark Mulder, who was among the league leaders in wins (15) and ERAs (3.13) at the time, had to leave a start—in Boston, no less—after three innings with what was later determined to be a stress fracture in his right femur, just below the hip. Mulder did not pitch again in 2003, and his absence is what forced the A's to send Hudson and Zito out for games four and five on short rest. "It couldn't have been worse timing," Mulder moped, upon hearing his prognosis. "It's different from any other injury, and nobody knows what caused it. I was surprised. It really caught me off guard." As did the sixth inning of game five, when Boston finally broke through against Zito and started pounding the final nails in Oakland's newest October coffin.

The trouble actually started in the fifth inning. Zito, nursing a 1–0 lead, got out of it without allowing a run, but early in the frame there were telltale signs of the doom to come. He fell behind to

David Ortiz, three balls and a strike, before getting him to ground out to second base on what probably would have been ball four. Then he made a mistake on a two-strike pitch to Millar, who drilled it into center field before getting thrown out at second. Then, after getting ahead of Mueller, the AL batting champ, 1-and-2, he walked him with three balls in a row. Ortiz's lack of plate discipline, Millar's poor judgment, and an inning-ending ground out by Nixon allowed Zito to get away with the unsteady inning, but his aura of invincibility was gone. He was bouncing pitches in the dirt. He was missing his spots. He was laboring. From the time he had joined the professional ranks, his body had been conditioned to respond and perform every fifth day. This was day four, and Zito looked like he was running out of gas. "I didn't *feel* like I was," he said later. "But maybe I was. I don't know. I felt fine."

Jason Varitek led off the sixth, and Zito started him with three balls. Two pitches later the count was full, and a pitch after that, the game was tied. Varitek's homer to left opened the floodgates. Zito walked Damon, and with one out, he hit Todd Walker with a pitch. That's when Ramirez exacted revenge for his two strikeouts—one looking, one swinging—by guessing right that he'd be seeing one of those 89-mph fastballs and bashing it into the seats for a 4–1 lead. The A's cut into the lead with a run in the bottom of the sixth and chased Martinez with a run in the eighth, but Boston's bullpen survived a dicey bottom of the ninth to earn an ALCS date with the rival Yankees. Clinch game number nine was over for Oakland, and the result was more painful than the previous eight.

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For Mulder, who'd also missed the 2000 playoffs, with a back injury, it was especially painful because he'd been working like hell to get back into shape. As trainers put him through drills during late September and early October, the A's downplayed the notion that Mulder was trying to get ready for the ALCS, but a month after the 2003 playoffs ended, he came clean. "I was definitely going to pitch against the Yankees," Mulder said. "There was no other reason to be working out."

For Hudson, one of Oakland's most intense and respected players, there was the pain of letting his teammates down. Dating back to the 2002 series against the Twins, he was winless in his last four playoff starts. "It's getting old now," he said, as he packed his things up for the winter the day after game five. "It's a team game, but when you don't get your own job done, it makes it tougher on everyone else."

And for Zito, who prides himself on being every bit the big-game pitcher that Martinez is, there was the pain of knowing he'd failed to come through when the stakes were as high as they'd ever been for this young core of A's. "It leaves a really bad taste in my mouth, because I was the one that could have put an end to all that talk about us being chokers," he said. "I don't buy into that, anyway, because getting to the playoffs four years in a row is pretty hard to do, but that's what people are going to say."

And they did. Winning a ton of games every year doesn't mean much, remember? Even if you're a low-payroll team who loses marquee free agents every winter the way trees lose leaves. Just getting to the postseason isn't good enough. Unless you do something once you're there, you might as well have not gone at all. You get *that label*. So until the 2004 playoffs at the earliest, Hudson, Mulder, and Zito knew they'd have to live with the fact that in addition to being the anchors of one of the best young teams in baseball, they were members of what the glass-half-empty set was now calling the *Chokeland* A's.