

Brenly leads Diamondbacks with hands-off coaching style

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Reporter

Randy Johnson, Curt Schilling, Matt Williams and Luis Gonzalez are all names synonymous with the Arizona Diamondbacks. These players are all seen as the keys to the team's success this season, a success that has placed them in the World Series as the National League's representative. But what these names really do is mask who truly deserves the credit for putting the D-Backs where they are now.

Former major league catcher Bob Brenly left the broadcast booth this season to manage the Diamondbacks following the firing of Buck Showalter. His moves (or lack thereof) have been sheer genius this year, and they helped his team to a 92-70 record and first place in the NL West.

What may be most impressive about the job Brenly has done is that he is only the fourth manager in baseball history to take his team to the World Series in his first year as skipper. On top of that, the Diamondbacks are the fastest expansion team to reach the World Series in history. The team was formed just four years ago.

Before Brenly stepped in, the organization piecemealed together a baseball team from scratch. Via trades and off-season signings, the D-Backs added first-rate pitchers such as Schilling and Johnson to their rotation. They also received outfielder Gonzalez through a trade with the Detroit Tigers. They swept up Tony Womack from the Pirates to be their leadoff hitter. When the Giants passed on an aging Williams, the Diamondbacks had no problem throwing him into the middle of their lineup. Other additions along the way such as Mark Grace, Matt Anderson and David Delucci only solidified their position. It also seemed they had the perfect manager in Showalter. He put together a 100-win season in 1999 before dropping off to 88-77 the next year after the addition of Schilling.

Brenly took a different approach in his coaching style of the veteran squad. Instead of coming in fiery, forcing his way of baseball on play-

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ers with many years of experience, Brenly sat back and watched this playoff-caliber team function. He and his coaching staff made themselves the “servants” of their players, and it was the single most important decision made all year. This was exactly what owner Jerry Colangelo was looking for in Brenly. He hired Brenly because of his player-friendly demeanor. It served as the perfect antithesis to Showalter's no-nonsense style, a style that had worn thin with the veteran ballclub.

“It's nothing I'm doing,” Brenly said in a recent press conference. “It's the way they are going about their business and taking over situations when I call upon them.” He says he takes no credit for what has occurred this season; instead, he turns the focus back to his players. “I refuse to take any credit for what's happened with this ballclub this year,” Brenly said. “They've done it all themselves. They put their egos on the back burner and decided as a unit we were going to try to go out and do something special this year. I just kind of sat back and watched them.”

Regardless of the truthfulness of this statement, it is Brenly who put his players in these positions. Had

he not, would the Diamondbacks be in this year's World Series?

It didn't take Mark Grace very long to make the move to Arizona. “He's a big reason why I'm here,” Grace said. “After talking to Bob and Mr. Colangelo, it took me about only five minutes to know that I wanted to be here, and we've all been rewarded. He's a hell of a manager. He manages with a lot of emotion.” This is very true about Brenly, who is the first off the bench screaming and cheering, pumping his fist Arsenio Hall-style after a great play as he greets the player coming back to the dugout. Behind this emotion, though, is not necessarily an ingenious baseball mind, but rather an intelligent gut.

Managers like Earl Weaver loved statistics. Weaver matched up pitchers and hitters based on career numbers against each other. He was one of the first managers to use stats for his in-game decisions. Brenly is one of the few managers who shies away from the use of stats. He goes with what feels right — a gut decision. These decisions were no more evident than during the National League Championship Series.

Before the season, Brenly decided Craig Counsell would be his

starting second baseman. Counsell, a previous World Series winner with the Marlins, had racked up only 300 at-bats in his two previous seasons. This move came through in spades for Brenly, as Counsell has gotten big hit after big hit in the postseason. He was named the MVP of the NLCS for his work against the Braves. And in game one of the World Series, he jump-started the D-Backs offense with a solo shot off Yankees' pitcher Mike Mussina.

Game five of the NLCS saw the insertion of Danny Bautista into the lineup against Braves' lefty Tom Glavine. This move defies traditional baseball decisions in that regular D-Backs centerfielder Steve Finley was hitting .375 during postseason play and .306 off Glavine, opposed to Bautista's paltry .154 average against the southpaw.

Brenly defended his move. “Danny likes the ball out over the plate where he can extend his arms,” he said. “Tom Glavine lives on the outside corner.” There was no need to justify this move. Bautista only went 1 for 4, but he drove in the D-Backs first run of the game to get them on the board.

Perhaps the most puzzling move of game five came later, as Erubiel Durazo pinch hit for left-handed first baseman Grace in just the fifth inning to face left-handed Glavine. All Durazo did was send a home run over the right field fence to put the Diamondbacks up 3-2, a lead they would not relinquish.

Game three of the World Series

pits future Hall-of-Famer Roger Clemens against the Diamondbacks Matt Anderson, who hasn't started a game in quite some time. Will Brenly's move to start Anderson pay off for this team? Or is he doomed to fail at some point? It's unclear now, but with the way things have been going, I would put my money on Brenly coming through once again.

It's true Brenly took over a team full of all-star talent. It's true he has become the beneficiary of Colangelo's, and to some extent, Showalter's largesse. But his golden touch has continued. Coach Midas, as he should be dubbed, looks to have the World Series within his grasp. The Diamondbacks have the better chance of winning this series. Brenly appears to have taken the magic away from an aging Yankees ballclub, which finally is on its last legs as it begins its descent into mediocrity. The D-Backs, while also an old club (18 players over the age of 29), seem rejuvenated and vibrant after the injection of Brenly.

Perhaps this can best sum up Brenly. During his first address to his players, Brenly held up the Diamondbacks' rulebook from last season. “These are last year's rules,” he said releasing the book and letting it drop to the table. He then reached for a cocktail napkin and raised it for his ballplayers to see. “Here are this year's rules,” he said. “Be on time and play hard.” Seems like a pedestrian strategy? Try telling that to Brenly and his Diamondbacks.

Athlete of the Week



Name: Ryan Loucks
Year: Junior
Sport: Golf

Recent athletic accomplishments: Shot a team-low two over 74 at the Old Dominion/Seascape Collegiate

Successes in the classroom: 3.35 GPA

Favorite class: Accounting
Hardest class: Economics
Favorite professor: Professor Cox

Plans after graduation: “I would like to pursue golfing

and maybe join mini tour.”

Favorite music group: Blink 182

Favorite movie: Rad

Favorite TV show: Dawson's Creek

Favorite book: Where the Red Fern Grows

Hobbies: Working out and eating

Favorite sports team: New Orleans Saints

Dream vacation destina-

tion: Fiji

Most prized possession: “My putter because my golf game relies on my putter.”

Person You'd Most Like to Meet: Tiger Woods

Pre-game rituals: “We usually have a two-minute talk. We call it the two-minute circle, where we all just get together and get calmed down and ready to play.”