

To Break In Their Gloves, Yankees Dunk, Tenderize and Lather Up

By **BILLY WITZ**, *New York Times*

MARCH 7, 2015

TAMPA, Fla. — When Alex Rodriguez played in Texas, he noticed that as the hot, humid summers dragged on, they would take a toll on the glove he used to play shortstop. It would become heavy and malleable, losing the firm shape that he liked.

So Rodriguez came up with a solution.

After each game, he would place his glove in the freezer in the clubhouse kitchen.

“It would be almost frozen,” Rodriguez said. “I would just grab it the next day, 6:30 before the game, and it would be nice and hard. I would always put it in the perfect form that I wanted. I just felt that it preserved it better through the whole season.”

It may be a peculiar way to care for his glove, but baseball players use all sorts of unconventional methods to break in and maintain their gloves. Some break them in by dunking them in water or placing them in a microwave oven. Some, like Rodriguez, lather them with shaving cream. Others beat them with a mallet, as if tenderizing a steak. Still others stick a baseball or two in their gloves, wrap them with twine and stick them beneath their mattress for a few weeks.

Baseball players can choose what spikes they wear, what batting gloves they use and what bats they swing, but no matter their position, there is nothing more personal, more tailored to their own hand than the glove they take out on the field.

For some, the breaking-in process lasts a matter of days. For many, it can be an entire year before they take the field with a glove that fits, well, like a glove.

“It’s like asking somebody, How do you like to wear a belt?” said Mason Williams, a [Yankees](#) outfielder.

Second baseman Rob Refsnyder, who was seated nearby in the clubhouse, added, “If you polled everybody in here, they’ll all tell you they broke in their gloves differently.”

How players care for their gloves may be of broader interest because Rodriguez, whom the Yankees asked to learn to play first base during spring training, is having trouble breaking in his new first baseman’s glove.

The first day he worked at the position, Rodriguez misplaced the glove, which a clubhouse attendant found in the trainer's room. Since then, when he has worked out at first and at third, Rodriguez has mostly used his infielder's glove rather than a first baseman's glove, which is bigger and designed to scoop balls out of the dirt.

Before Friday night's game against Pittsburgh, Rodriguez said he planned to use his first baseman's glove for the second time while taking infield practice. But as he rummaged around his locker, he could not find it, he said. Later, it was sitting in his locker, along with the brown infielder's glove he uses for practice and the black one he uses to play third base.

"My biggest challenge is, I have a hard time digging in; I can't find the ball," Rodriguez said of the first baseman's glove. "As a shortstop and a third baseman, you know exactly where that ball is going to be. But with a big mitt, I know it's in there; I just miss it the first or second time because the pocket is, like, three times as big."

It is not clear how often Rodriguez will be asked to play first base this season. Mark Teixeira is coming off two injury-plagued seasons, and the Yankees acquired the left-handed-hitting Garrett Jones as his primary backup.

Last season, injuries left the Yankees so short-handed at first base that they had to ask two players who had never played the position to fill in: third baseman Chase Headley and catcher Brian McCann. Neither had time to break in a new first baseman's glove, so Headley borrowed Teixeira's, and Kelly Johnson lent his to McCann.

"I got to where I couldn't get it to be comfortable on my hand quickly enough, so I used Tex's," said Headley, who started six games at first base. "I don't know what a good first baseman's glove feels like. It was a little hard for me to break one in."

McCann, who started 11 games at first base last season, has a first baseman's glove this season but does not expect to use it.

"We've got, like, five first basemen," he said. "I'm not going to play first base this year."

Baseball gloves are designed differently to fit the needs of the position. Outfielders' gloves are long and spacious, better for snagging line drives on the run. Catchers' gloves have the most padding because they take the most abuse. Pitchers' gloves are typically only a little shorter than outfielders' gloves but have a closed pocket so that batters can't get a peek at their grip. Infielders' gloves, especially those for second basemen and shortstops, are small to aid in quick exchanges on double plays.

Didi Gregorius, the Yankees' new shortstop, is using a new glove that he likes because it is firm. He demonstrated by dropping it on the clubhouse floor: When it landed, the glove stayed open, as if it had been molded.

Stephen Drew, his double-play partner, prefers his glove more pliable. He places a new glove in a microwave for one minute — “It will burn your hand if you don't watch it,” Drew said — and uses leather softener to keep it from drying out.

“The guys that put it in water or a microwave, that makes me cringe thinking about it,” said Headley, who prefers to break in his gloves by catching balls from a pitching machine. “If I rush it, it gets too floppy. You want to be able to squeeze it, but it's got to be able to hold its shape.”

Eddy Rodriguez, a Yankees catcher, uses the same model glove that he wore when he became a professional in 2006. He will break it in by playing catch, and then when it gets loose, he will retighten the strings. He repeats the process three times before he is ready to use the glove in a game. Rodriguez keeps three gloves with him: his gamer, the one he is breaking in for next year and the one he used last season. Rodriguez says he wants to catch every pitch in the low end of the pocket, and not just because it's the easiest for him to handle.

“That's where it makes the loudest pop,” he said. “Pitchers feed off that. It gives them a lot of confidence.”

Teixeira said he typically spent a year breaking in his new glove. He keeps the five he has worn during his Gold Glove seasons at home in storage. Others he signs and gives to charity or to his children.

“The pocket is very important to a first baseman's glove because the most important thing is scooping the ball and catching it,” said Teixeira, who came up as a third baseman and was asked early in his career to learn how to play first base. “I try to develop a really deep pocket. I don't like dipping it in water, but I put a little bit of oil in it, not a lot. It takes a whole year. I take it nice and slow.”

Teixeira, being a good teammate, lent his glove willingly to Headley last season. But the glove came back feeling worse for the wear.

“Every time you put on a glove, you want it to feel the way you broke it in,” Teixeira said. “When somebody uses your glove, it changes the way it feels. It's not ideal. I think we actually have a backup first baseman this year, so that's good.”