

Beyond perfect: Armando Galarraga 10 years after the call

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AUSTIN, Texas — Two outs in the ninth, hard grounder to first base, pitcher rushes over to cover. One foot hits the bag. Split-second pause. Then the dull thud of another foot. The umpire begins to pump his fist. Instead he waves his arms, signals safe. Fans boo and players curse and chaos ensues.

The young pitcher from Venezuela, the one still trying to solidify a spot in the Detroit Tigers’ rotation, looks around in the face of this hysteria, and he does the strangest thing: He smiles. He had a perfect game — the gold standard for a singular pitching performance — and then he lost it on a blown call. He

knows this is unthinkable. But in the moment, he has no way of knowing just how monstrous this all will become, how a decade later he will spend every day in the odd space between a historic moment and a normal life.

Now, standing in the back of an Austin coffee shop, Armando Galarraga blends in with the crowd despite standing 6 feet 3. He is 38 years old, a father, a pitching instructor, a CrossFit addict, a weekend warrior. Two years after he all but officially retired 27 consecutive hitters, Galarraga made his final MLB appearance. Two years after that, his elbow swollen big as a baseball, he chose to retire. Two years after that, he was an ex-ballplayer confronting a classic conundrum: What next?

For years, Galarraga fought to become known for more than one game. Now, on a day in early March, about a week before the coronavirus shut down society, he is reckoning with this moment and its magnitude from a different vantage point.

“I was thinking something,” he finally says. “I had something in mind I will share with you.”



<https://theathletic.com/1722128/2020/05/12/beyond-perfect-armando-galarraga-10-years-after-the-call/cleveland-indians-v-detroit-tigers->

via Getty Images)

Per the modern definition, only 23 men in the history of baseball have thrown perfect games — 27 up, 27 down, no walks, no errors, nothing but outs.

In the frantic aftermath of the blown call (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIDTBDJbNE4>) that kept Galarraga from history, he was a model of sportsmanship. He visited umpire Jim Joyce after the game. He told reporters, “Nobody’s perfect,” and he did not seem to realize the irony.

The next day, Galarraga handed Joyce the lineup card at home plate before first pitch. Fans went from booing to cheering, healing in real time. One man owned up to a mistake. Another man forgave.

At the National Baseball Hall of Fame, the bag from first base on June 2, 2010, at Comerica Park is on display, part of an exhibit on perfect games and no-hitters. Galarraga's name is remembered for the oddity more than the achievement. A reminder of what almost was.

Now that it is all over but rising to the surface again, Galarraga has been thinking. Perfection is fragile, precious, impossible. Something he touched but could not hold.

Ten years later, the realizations are sinking in. He wants to be credited with a perfect game.

"I was like, what can I do to have a better finish to the story?" Galarraga says. "How can Major League Baseball give me the perfect game? Because it was perfect, right?"



(<https://theathletic.com/1722128/2020/05/12/beyond-perfect-armando-galarraga-10-years-after-the-call/031020-cs-0004/>)

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Noon, and we're inside a CrossFit gym near Galarraga's Austin home. He is about 40 pounds lighter than he was as a player, and he does not enjoy sitting still.

When he first started working out at the gym, most people did not realize the "Armando G." written on the gym's whiteboard was a former professional athlete, a man famous to anyone watching ESPN in the summer of 2010.

"I had no idea," says Rob Kahn, the founder of RK512 Fitness.

Watching Galarraga stretch and prepare for a workout is like watching a clear sky turn into a thunderstorm. The competitive engines start firing. Normally, he is relaxed, laid back, funny. The day before I arrived in Austin, I called Galarraga from the Detroit airport.

“Just wanted to check in and figure out the plan for tomorrow,” I said.

“Oh, tomorrow?” Galarraga said. “I won’t be here.”

I almost dropped the phone. Silence. Panic.

“Just kidding!” he said.

His affable nature is a product of his roots. Growing up in Venezuela was not exactly easy, but both of his parents had college degrees. Before Galarraga moved to the capital city of Caracas as a child, he was born in Cumaná. He says living in Cumaná is like living in the country in the United States. Everything is a little slower.

His journey to one moment at the center of the baseball world is a coming-of-age tale. At 16 he signed with the Expos for \$3,000 and came to North America without knowing English. During his first season in the minor leagues, he only ate at Subway, because he could point at what he wanted rather than having to speak.

“The whole year, I was shy,” Galarraga says. “I didn’t want to do anything wrong. You have a lot of questions, but you don’t want to ask.”

He had Tommy John surgery in 2002, spent seven years in the minor leagues. He debuted with the Rangers, then got traded to the Tigers while on his honeymoon. He had a wonderful rookie year in 2008, posting a 3.73 ERA, then struggled in 2009.

He started 2010 in Triple A until the Tigers parted ways with a declining Dontrelle Willis. Then Galarraga got another chance.

“A guy that had to fight for everything he got,” former manager Jim Leyland says.

Galarraga had flashes of dominance, like June 2 against the Cleveland Indians. He was utterly efficient that day, throwing only 88 pitches, but he finished the year with a 4.49 ERA. It was the last time he ever pitched a full season.

He bounced around for the next two years. Tigers, Diamondbacks, Orioles, Astros, Reds, Rockies. He signed a minor-league deal with the Rangers in January 2014 but knew his major-league career was over. He headed to Taiwan to make a little more money instead.

In Taiwan, he hurt his shoulder, then his back. The ice-heat-Advil routine between games became too familiar.

When he pitched, he says he never got nervous. Just excited. He lived to compete, to bring his best to the mound and challenge opposing hitters. That thrill kept diminishing with each burn and twinge in his right elbow.

“It was like, dumb,” Galarraga says. “I would get so frustrated with that feeling.”

He went to play in Mexico, then got hurt again. His fastball slowed to 87-88 mph. Before he stepped on the mound for his final game, he knew he was finished.

Before that final start, his elbow was burning, swollen, aching. He was waking up each morning with arthritic pain. He called his wife and told her he planned to retire.

“That was not a hard decision,” Galarraga says. “It was actually not that painful. It was actually more like a release.”



(<https://theathletic.com/1722128/2020/05/12/beyond-perfect-armando-galarraga-10-years-after-the-call/031020-cs-0020/>)

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Inside Armando Galarraga's home, there is no memorabilia. A baseball card pinned to a bulletin board is the only evidence of the owner's former life.

The home has hardwood floors, a kitchen island, sparkling countertops, but it is not extravagant. A black Range Rover in the garage is the only hint at the fact Galarraga made \$2.3 million in 2011.

Galarraga settled in Austin because it's where his older sister moved many years ago. His parents live there now, too. His first marriage ended in divorce, but he met his second wife, Ana, in Austin a few years back. She had no idea who he was when they started dating. Her mother, a big baseball fan, first made the connection. A sign hangs above their dining table now, a symbol of domestic stability: *The Galarragas*.

On this afternoon, an English bulldog's feet pitter-patter across the floor. Panzona — “big belly” in Spanish — was a puppy when Galarraga walked her after the almost-perfect game. Now she is a marker of time, all that has changed and some of what has stayed the same.

“Lady,” he tells the dog, “you are old.”

Ana is a multimedia producer at a TV station, and Savannah, his daughter from his first marriage, is at school. Galarraga makes a post-workout protein shake, mangoes in the blender. He laughs about how different everything is now — growing up in Venezuela, he says that if you wanted fruit, you literally had to go find it on a tree.

Savannah is 7 years old and lives with him, and though he tries to teach character and order, he's glad to be able to give her things he never had.

“Being a father, it changes you,” Galarraga says. “Real love. It's beautiful.”

Galarraga again says he was not nervous during the ninth inning on June 2, 2010. It's a funny juxtaposition. Because now, when he watches Savannah's soccer games, he is a complete train wreck.

“It's like, ‘Kick it! No!’” Galarraga says. “I get so excited. All these feelings, it's completely different.”

Savannah dreams of becoming a professional soccer player one day, and Galarraga likes to laugh and dream. He tells her how famous she will become.

One evening over dinner, Savannah looked at him and said: “You used to be famous.”

The biggest moment of his life lives on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab7-AkXFCUQ>), and watching the footage back, Galarraga is still astounded when he sees that two-out play. The ball Indians batter Jason Donald hit between first and second base seems to be moving so fast. Galarraga remembers it in slow motion. He even says the ball was spinning sideways off the bat. Maybe that's why Miguel Cabrera chased it so far toward second base.

The play seems bang-bang in the lens of memory. Really, it's not even that close. Galarraga beat Donald to the bag by almost a full step. Watching it now, he still has that same smile. He says he always smiles when he doesn't know how else to react.

After that game, people left notes, chocolate, wine and stuffed animals outside his door. At restaurants in the suburbs of Royal Oak and Birmingham, people stopped to shake his hand, maybe take a picture. Women wrote him marriage proposals. So did a few fathers on their daughters' behalf. Chevrolet gave him a Corvette, and Justin Verlander convinced him to upgrade the standard model to a pricier ZR1.

To this day, any time there is a blown call in an MLB game, people text him or tag him on Instagram. In 2013, Jim Joyce umpired Game 3 of the World Series. Joyce was working third base when he made a controversial obstruction call that gave the Cardinals the winning run over the Red Sox. Galarraga says he woke up the next morning to 70 notifications on his phone.

"I was like, 'What happened? Did someone die?'"

For Joyce, the aftermath of the Galarraga game was different. Galarraga still talks about the umpire with respect and empathy.

"He got the bad side of it," Galarraga says.

The whole thing is delicate, because Galarraga does not mean this as disrespect to Joyce. But the 10-year anniversary of that game is almost here. Galarraga originally planned a trip to Detroit, and he hoped to throw out the first pitch before a Tigers game.

He wonders, now that baseball has replay, now that it is all in the past, if MLB would consider changing the record, taking a hit away from Jason Donald, acting as if Trevor Crowe's ensuing at-bat never happened, and giving him a perfect game. It was something commissioner Bud Selig and Major League Baseball actually considered at the time. The Michigan statehouse even issued a proclamation: *I, Jennifer M. Granholm, governor of the state of Michigan, do hereby declare Armando Galarraga to have pitched a perfect game ...*



(<https://theathletic.com/1722128/2020/05/12/beyond-perfect-armando-galarraga-10-years-after-the-call/dsc04410/>)

Armando Galarraga's near-perfect game is at the bottom right corner of a display at Cooperstown. (National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum)

Galarraga knows there's no real precedent for changing the record in a sport haunted by and obsessed with its history. The closest example might be a reversal of fate: In 1959, Pirates pitcher Harvey Haddix threw 12 perfect innings against the Milwaukee Braves. In the 13th, an error, a bunt, a walk and

a double cost Haddix the game. For years, Haddix was still credited with a perfect game, maybe the best ever pitched, because he was perfect for nine-plus innings.

In 1991, MLB changed the official definition: A pitcher must complete the game for a performance to be considered perfect.

“It’s OK,” Haddix said after learning the news. “I know what I did.”

Such a decision now could open up a Pandora’s box. Another incorrect ruling in Game 6 of the 1985 World Series tilted the championship from the Cardinals to the Royals. A million other little events might have been different had a close call gone the other way.

But there’s something stirring inside Galarraga now. A feeling he can’t quite place.

“Why not?” Galarraga says. “Why wait for so long? I don’t want to die, and then they’ll be like, ‘You know what, he threw a perfect game.’”



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Photos via Getty Images)

The phone rings. The screen lights up. An Oregon number.

“Hello,” the voice on the other end says. It sounds upbeat.

“This is Jim Joyce. Sorry for calling so late. ... I don’t usually check my phone until the afternoon.”

These days, Joyce explains, there is simply not much going on.

Joyce retired from umpiring after the 2016 season and lives a quiet life with his wife, Kay, in Washington County, outside Portland. In normal times, before the coronavirus outbreak, they would spend nearly 10 days each month along the Oregon coast, driving an RV bought with a career’s worth of savings.

Joyce’s daughter is a nurse, and his son is a football coach. Both live nearby, and now Joyce has a 2-year-old granddaughter. He is enjoying the small moments, the ones he never got to experience in almost 40 years umpiring baseball games. Today, he hung two new ceiling fans and loved every second of it.

“My wife and I laugh every single day,” Joyce, 64, says. “I missed that, being on the road. You laugh over the phone. It’s not nearly as much fun as laughing together.”

He has attended exactly three major-league games since retiring, all Mariners games in Seattle. Last time, he walked over to the umpires’ locker room and felt like he was going to work. Then he sat in the stands, and it was strange. He barely knows who the players are anymore. Many of the umpires have changed, too. He says he still loves the game. He misses the camaraderie. But he does not miss the stress.

“I know what Bill Buckner feels like,” he says. Somehow, his voice is still upbeat.

During his career, Joyce was considered one of the better umpires in baseball. Shortly after the blown call, he was named the game’s best in an ESPN player poll.

“I think if you were saying, ‘OK, here’s 40 umpires, who would be the most likely one to miss this call,’ Jim Joyce would have probably been last on the list,” Jim Leyland says.

Joyce’s name, though, is most famous for what happened in the ninth inning of that game in 2010. That’s the way it works for umpires. People only know who you are if you make a mistake.

Joyce has never really been able to explain why he called Jason Donald safe that day. He was in the right position. He just made the wrong call. Leyland believes Joyce saw the play as an out, but some biomechanical misfire caused him to signal safe. “I believe that to this day,” Leyland says.

After the game, Joyce sat in the umpires’ room and told reporters: “I missed it. This isn’t a call. This is a history call, and I kicked the shit out of it.”

Leyland entered the room, only a few minutes removed from confronting Joyce on the field, and brought him a beer and a cigarette, put a hand on his shoulder.

Joyce asked to speak with Galarraga, who found Joyce sitting with his head in his hands, red as a tomato. “*Lo siento*,” Joyce told Galarraga that day. “I’m sorry.”

Joyce called his wife, and instead of saying, “Hello,” she asked, “Are you OK?”

He got death threats, some of which Kay saved in a scrapbook. People blew up his children’s Facebook pages. He stayed up the night after the game smoking Winston Lights and drinking coffee at his mother’s home in Toledo, where he always stayed when calling games in Detroit.

It wasn’t until the next day, when Leyland had Galarraga deliver the lineup card, that Joyce finally felt some sense of relief. He shook Galarraga’s hand. He started crying at home plate. People eventually sent him warm notes. Workers at the Detroit airport scribbled messages on his luggage tags: *We are all human* and *God bless*.

Galarraga and Joyce later worked together on a book, titled “Nobody’s Perfect.” They presented an award together on stage at the ESPYs. And then they didn’t really talk until last summer, when Galarraga’s agent called Joyce, telling him Fox was working on a mini-documentary about the game.

Joyce and Galarraga spoke on the phone, and they exchanged pleasantries once more. Their lives are separate, though their stories are forever intertwined. Two men whose fates aligned on a baseball diamond.

Both were from humble beginnings, Galarraga from Venezuela, Joyce the son of a Toledo Jeep factory worker. They both took the long road to the majors, seven years in the minors for Galarraga, 11 years for Joyce. Even the end of their baseball lives share an eerie parallel.

By the end of the 2016 season, Joyce’s knees were shot. He could barely run. He started cutting corners when getting in position for calls. He asked his wife about retirement.

“I wish you would have done that five years ago,” she said.

So on the final day of the 2016 season, Joyce was behind the plate calling a 3-2 A’s win against the Mariners. He knew it would be his final game. He saved the ball from the last out and a handful of dirt from home plate. Then there was no plane to catch, no hotel to crash in. He and Kay took a familiar drive down Interstate 5, home to a comfortable bed, a preview of the life to come.

“I don’t miss (baseball) as much as I thought I would,” Joyce says now.

Still, more than three years into retirement, he thinks about the Galarraga game often. The good and the bad. “Let’s be honest,” he says. “It’s a great baseball story.”

In a different sense, a few summers away from baseball have come with perspective. When a call sends 18,000 people into a frenzy, is one hand motion really what defines you?

“I was thinking about that the other day,” he says. “The things that have happened in baseball that people are known for: In the baseball world, it’s the most important thing. In the outside, real world, it’s really not that important. ... You’d be surprised how many people have no clue about that. None. They have no idea what happened.”

In the days just after the game, Joyce was among the first to ask the commissioner’s office about overturning the call and awarding Galarraga a perfect game. The effort did not get very far. Even today, Leyland says it would not be the right move. Too many worms would come wiggling out of the can. The same player poll that named Joyce the game’s best umpire indicated only 13 percent (<https://www.espn.com/mlb/news/story?id=5281467>) of players thought the call should have been overturned.

But 10 years later, now that Galarraga wants the record to reflect he threw a perfect game, perhaps no one agrees more than the umpire who missed the call.

“I agree with him,” Joyce says. “I agree. Because he did it.”



(<https://theathletic.com/1722128/2020/05/12/beyond-perfect-armando-galarraga-10-years-after-the-call/031020-cs-0092/>)

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Early spring. Birds are chirping. The sun is high overhead, and baseballs are smacking into leather mitts.

Three young pitchers are throwing off mounds. Armando Galarraga is working with one, balancing mid-delivery. Another kid, maybe 12 years old, keeps trying to throw his curveball.

“No, forget about that,” Galarraga says gently. “Four-seam. That’s the pitch I want you to develop.”

Off in the shade, adjacent to the varsity field at Austin Westlake High School, a couple of fathers are talking. One is loud and boisterous, wearing a Lone Star beer T-shirt. His eldest son plays for Westlake.

“We have four or five kids all throwing 90 (mph),” he says. “I tell you what — that’s because of Armando.”

Another dad is bringing his kid to lessons for the first time. He knows Galarraga used to pitch in the majors. He doesn’t know much else. The other dad fills him in.

“About 10 years ago, he had a perfect game going. With two outs in the ninth ...”

After Galarraga’s career ended, he spent one year coaching rookie ball in the Yankees organization. It turned out to be a grind. He had to get up at about 4:30 a.m. every day and have reports typed up by 6:30. He was not comfortable in his writing skills, so player reports became a laborious task.

“I spent hours trying to make sure that what I’m saying, it made sense,” Galarraga says. “Because the whole organization was watching.”

At the end of the season, the Yankees didn’t renew his contract. Galarraga decided maybe a more normal life would be better anyway. He went home to Austin, not sure what to do next.

“When you play so many years in baseball, you don’t know how to do anything else,” Galarraga says. “I cannot write. I didn’t go to school. I signed when I was 16 years old. I signed in 1998, and I finished playing in 2012. After you retire, you have to answer, ‘What am I really gonna do?’”

He had a friend who set him up with one youth player. He started giving the kid pitching lessons. Word spread. Soon he had two clients, then three.

Now, four years in, Galarraga says he has about 76 clients. He’s completely booked, Monday through Friday. His phone is always buzzing. He rents the Austin Westlake bullpens — four mounds, nothing fancy — and works for a few hours every evening. It started as a small enterprise. It has grown into a sustainable way to make a living.

Some of the kids are young, just learning how to pitch. Others are serious high-schoolers trying to get college offers. He has a Rapsodo machine for older pitchers, adapting as technology has changed baseball.

After only about a half-hour of watching Galarraga work with his son, the father remarks: “This is our first time here, but I can tell you, he seems like a good coach. Not like some of these other guys, just trying to milk their name.”

Galarraga has learned a lot from this venture. Still in baseball but using muscles and skills he never needed before. Scheduling, pricing, promoting, dealing with parents. He tried to make a website and had to admit he had no idea what he was doing.

“This is life,” Galarraga says. “Baseball is a bubble. You’re in the big leagues, you’re making good money, you’re doing your thing. But you don’t have to do anything else. You get paid really well to just focus on yourself. And in real life you have to focus on a lot of aspects.”

Ten years is an odd juncture in time. Lives can alter drastically. Wounds can also still be fresh. Throughout his career, during all those bouts with elbow pain, Galarraga often thought about a saying from back in Venezuela: *Perdiendo se gana*. In its most literal translation: Losing wins. More liberally: For every bad thing, a good thing.

“I’m really comfortable with where I am now,” he says.

The inclination to look back 10 years also comes with the urge to think a decade forward. For as much as Galarraga tells his pitchers to embrace the moment, the undying belief in a bright future has always driven him. It’s what he thought about during and after the almost-perfect game, how maybe it would help him stick in the Detroit rotation. It is on his mind now with his business, Galarraga Baseball Academy, which is growing to the point he can’t keep up with the scheduling app on his phone.

He is considering renting or buying his own warehouse, a place where he can give lessons. Maybe hiring a couple of other people to help. He also wants to keep his weekends with his family, when they walk the trails around Austin or go eat downtown. Old dreams and new promises are finally merging into one.

“My mom told me so much about living in the moment,” Galarraga says. “Be present.”



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After lessons end, Galarraga sticks around to watch a couple innings of the Westlake varsity game. A player he has worked with for a few years, Gray Harrison, is pitching. Scouts are here to see him — Kansas State, Texas A&M, the Chicago White Sox.

“If I see any of these guys go to the big leagues, I’ll be like, ‘Wow, amazing,’” Galarraga says.

Tonight, Galarraga thinks Harrison is throwing his breaking ball too much, but he's still proficient on the mound, no hits allowed through two innings. Galarraga is satisfied.

"You ready?" he says.

We turn and head for his Range Rover, snaking through the back way to the parking lot. Galarraga is stepping around muddy patches, ducking tree limbs. As he emerges from the trees, he runs into three men, family of Westlake players. All three are holding tall Yeti cups. They've had a little bit to drink.

"Hey! Armando," one man says.

He grabs Galarraga by the shoulder.

"Mr. No-Hitter," the man says.

There have been only 23 perfect games in MLB history, but strangely, there were almost three in the early summer of 2010. Dallas Braden threw a perfect game on May 9, and A's fans remember it. Roy Halladay threw a perfect game for the Phillies on May 29, and a wider audience of baseball fans remembers that one. Largely, though, perfect games are like anything else: events that come and go. They are recorded in history but can escape the broader public memory.

Funny, then, how legions of baseball fans know what Galarraga did 10 years ago. Doesn't matter what the official box score says. Burn the books, and memories will still survive. Historians and biblical scholars sometimes argue about the way we translate and apply the idea of perfection in English. The Greek word *telos* is more closely associated with the act of completion, of something becoming whole.

The man stops. Corrects himself.

"No! Perfect game."

(Top photo: Cody Stavenhagen / The Athletic)



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