

Slade Gorton Threw Life Raft to Mariners... Three Times

Totem Report April 4, 2018

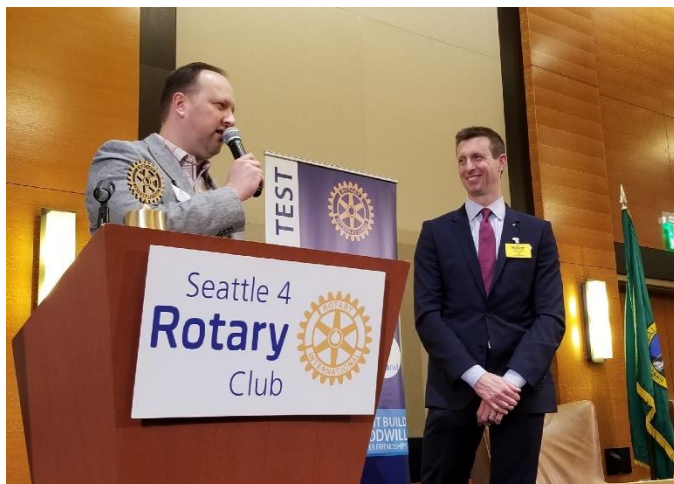
By Mike Colbrese

President Mark Wright gaveled the meeting open and provided a brief tribute to 38 year club member **Herb Bridge**, who passed away on April 2. “Herb was a leader in the military, a leader in business, and a leader in our community, and we will miss him dearly.” Mark reported that services will be held on April 17 and the Club will honor Herb during its April 18 meeting.

He then welcomed **Tom Mesaros**, who provided the inspiration of the day by reminding us that spring brings hope-- hope for May flowers and hope for a successful Mariners season.

Following the invocation, **Howard Crabtree**, accompanied by **Burr Stewart**, led the attendees in singing all of the verses of *My Country Tis of Thee*.

President Mark welcomed all guests and then asked **Kim Moore** to introduce the club’s prospective members. **Charley Dickey** introduced us to the club’s newest member, **Jesse Thomas**, a journalism graduate from the University of Oregon, who after practicing his craft, is now the manager for Waddell & Reed. In a week he will be marrying a UW graduate, both facts that Charley enjoyed telling.



Mark brought club members **Robert Stadler** and **Ben Wicks** to the stage to inform the club about upcoming events for the Rotary Boys and Girls Club. Robert reminded the attendees that the Boys and Girls Club was started by Seattle 4 in 1954 and is a thriving opportunity for youth in the Seattle area to this day. He explained that the annual maintenance day will be held April 28 from 9-11:30 AM at the club, which is located at 19th and East Spruce.

Ben Wicks, the chair of Seattle 4's Fellowship Committee invited the attendees to Buffalo Wild Wings in downtown Seattle on April 18 for a night of fellowship and fundraising. Buffalo Wild Wings will donate 10% of the profits that evening to the Rotary Boys and Girls Club. In order to stimulate interest and increase the donation, Ben threw down a committee challenge stating that the club committee that eats the most wings will win a significant prize.

President Mark brought Art Thiel, long time Seattle sports reporter and icon, and Slade Gorton, one of the state's longest-serving political figures, to the podium. Art, the author of *Out of Left Field*, led the discussion with Slade on a history lesson journey telling the tale of saving the Mariners in Seattle three different times.

Gorton, who recently turned 90, explained the process he and others used through political, legal, and relationship-building acumen to bring a team to Seattle when the Pilots were moved to Milwaukee in 1972. Governor Dan Evans, King County Executive John Spellman, and Gorton in his role as the state's attorney general, decided to sue the American League and hired Bill Dwyer, a well-respected trial lawyer. "The League asked for a change of venue and the trial was moved to Everett," Gorton explained, and "A's owner Charlie Finley, during his testimony, hanged himself and the other owners." As the trial was about to finish, the American League surveyed the situation and decided to put a team in Seattle and Toronto. "Seattle is the only city to get a team because of a lawsuit."

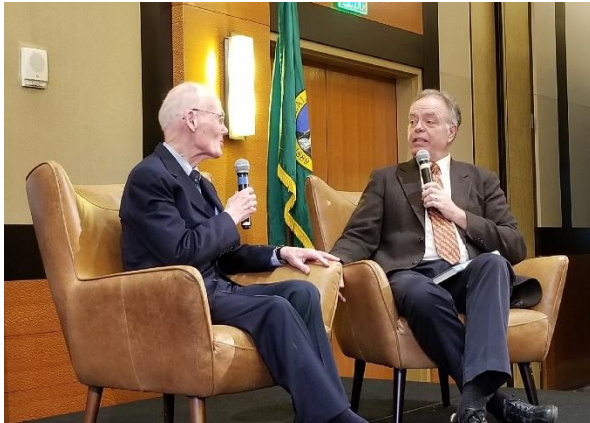


At the time, the Kingdome was the home of the original Sounders, Seahawks, Sonics, and Mariners. Art explained that while there was concern from the community, "Seattle at that time wasn't a bad baseball city, we just had bad baseball." Therefore, there was a fear that because of the team's performance, the owner, Jeff Smulyan, would move it to Tampa Bay. "You have to realize that at that time," Gorton reminded us, "there really wasn't anyone in Seattle who had the money to buy a team as a toy." Yet Smulyan's "sweet" contract with the Kingdome, also had a clause that if he chose to move the team, he had to allow a 90 day period before he could do so. Enter Gorton, act two.

Gorton, by that time a US Senator, had a secretary making blind calls to area companies and individuals trying to find potential owners. By luck she called Nintendo of America, who explained that they had no interest in baseball but would honor the Senator if he wanted to visit. After a two-and-a-half hour meeting, Gorton felt somewhat confident that he had made some progress; however, it wasn't until December 23 that Gorton

learned that Nintendo of America was willing to provide \$100 million dollars to buy the team, saying “Seattle has been good to us; we wish to be good to Seattle.” Through that work, Gorton connected Japanese billionaire Hiroshi Yamauchi with a group of Seattle-area tech-business leaders to buy the franchise to keep it in town. Problem solved.

Well, not quite. “Major League Baseball (MLB) was not comfortable selling the team to a Japanese owner, so we decided to out-flank them with a media campaign ,” explained Gorton. His campaign to keep the team in Seattle led to meetings with several team owners, one who just happened to be in the White House, George Bush, the owner of the Texas Rangers. Bush agreed to vote in favor of the purchase. A three-pronged ownership comprised of Microsoft, Nintendo of America, and McCaw was formed, a Seattleite became the CEO, a national campaign was successful in supporting the efforts, and the team was saved for Seattle one more time.



Act three. By all accounts, the Kingdome was not a friendly confine for Mariners baseball. Something needed to be done to build a baseball-only facility. The Mariners had hired Lou Pinella, drafted Ken Griffey, Jr., obtained other talented players, and the Mariners made an incredible run in 1995, which culminated with their beating the Yankees in the first round of playoffs. The chant to build a new home for the now successful team became louder.

In 1996 the legislature provided \$380 million for a new stadium; however, a conflict between team management, the Public Utilities District, and King County became so heated that John Ellis stated publicly that the team would be sold. Gorton once again stepped in. After a day long meeting, differences were settled and King County along with the Public Utilities District stepped up with additional funding. Thiel commented, “That was Slade Gorton at his bare knuckle best.”

Mic handlers **Laurel James** and **John Steckler** provided an opportunity for the attendees to ask questions during which the group learned that Mr. Gorton believes that the right decision was made to rebuild the arena at Seattle Center to house a hockey team and potentially a NBA team.

As Art and Slade left the stage, the club members gave them a standing ovation.

President Mark thanked the Gold and Bronze Media Sponsors. He also extended his appreciation to each of the program’s participants. He reminded the club that the April 11 meeting will be at the Westin with Paul Ishii’s program entitled *Islam for Dummies, Like Me*.