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By Gene Collier

Squiggy knows his Pirates

David Lander was chewing an omelette the other day around some fairly serious Pirates talk, the kind he has enjoyed to wildly varying degrees for lo these -- what? -- 40, 50 years.

Pirates talk is not like omelettes. It's rare you get a bad omelette, especially in an elegant metropolitan hotel, but Pirates talk has been mostly lukewarm and runny and generally unpalatable for a long time.

"When I talk about them, I always end up talking so negatively," Lander said with the kind of weary concern that only comes with decades of near-parental devotion. "People tell me that Jason Bay is a good player, and I say, 'Yes he is; he's so good, in fact, that I now expect they won't be able to afford him in two years instead of four.' "

Just as he was at New York's famous High School for the Performing Arts, just as he was as a drama student at CMU, where he could walk from campus upon hearing the national anthem and be in the Forbes Field bleachers for the first pitch, just as he was as the rhetorically spastic "Squiggy" in that 1970s camp classic "Laverne & Shirley", Lander is never more than a mental stride or two from a joke. And, although for a while after he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the mid-'80s the jokes seemed to be spaced a lot less favorably, Lander never has to be alerted to life's amazing ironies.

An associate scout for the Seattle Mariners, Lander was putting his predictions for the baseball season in progress on his Web site the day that he was in the hospital to receive his regular infusion of MS-fighting steroids, which he took through an IV while watching the Congressional steroids hearings on TV.



Vin Catania, Biogen via AP
David Landers looks over a model of the inteferon beta-1a molecule, which is contained in medication that combats Multiple Sclerosis. Lander foud out more than 15 years ago he had MS.

"I remember writing that if all my picks turned out to be right, I think they shouldn't count because they were probably induced by performance-enhancing drugs," he said.

For the record, he picked the Pirates to finish fifth, and regards the game's white-hot steroid issue as far too complicated for easy asterisking.

"It's not as simple as when Ford Frick was deciding to protect Ruth's reputation," Lander said. "Now we're basing things on what Barry Bonds' girlfriend said? A lot of these things can't be proven, and it's all going to lead to this protracted argument, and I'd just as soon leave it that way. Baseball has always been reflective of the era that it's in."

In the era when Lander had the kind of pop-culture celebrity that somehow allows inexplicable access to athletes, he came to see baseball from the inside out, regularly traveling with the Pirates and, for a time, the Philadelphia Phillies, when the urge hit.

"The first time I met Pete Rose, he said, 'Hey Squiggy, got any greenies?' " Lander remembered. "I thought, 'How can he be so casual about that? He doesn't know I'm not going to say anything.' But that's what he asked me. I remember thinking, 'If I was a baseball player, I'd probably be taking valium, that's how nervous I'd be.' I could have used valium just watching the Pirates."

It is none other than Lander, as the baseball fates would have it, who coaxed from Dock Ellis the admission that he pitched his 1970 no-hitter while on LSD.

"He'd gotten work as a drug counselor and in his book he said he was high on gin while pitching that game," Lander said. "I told him that if he was going to counsel drug addicts, he had to be honest. I remember driving down from L.A. to that game, the first of a two-night doubleheader at San Diego. It was a very strange no-hitter. He walked eight guys, hit a batter. He walked the bases loaded once.

"I scored that game in my book, and, years later when he was with Texas, I was showing him the book and said, 'Look at this game. See how in the first five innings, you're real sharp and then later you're all over the place?' He and the guy who'd given him the LSD thought it was an off day. The guy was looking at the paper and said to him, 'Not only is this not an off day, but you're pitching the first game of the doubleheader!' One of the different stages of LSD is that, for a time, you see things a lot clearer, and that was the first five innings. He wanted to come out of the game after five, and Dave Cash said, 'Dock, you can't come out now, you have a no-hitter going.' Dock looked at the scoreboard and said, 'Holy mackerel.' "

Lander still takes his scorebook wherever he goes. He was headed to PNC Park Friday night, intent on checking out the handicapped accessibility but planning to bolt to the press box if it rained. He was in town to talk with MS victims, which he has done tirelessly and with profound effect.

"It's been very rewarding," said Lander, who figures he has talked with more than 25,000 patients, caregivers and families since going public with his own condition five years ago. "We're all in this together, and they're totally my audience. They get

the jokes. Some come up to me and say, 'I've not laughed since I got the disease,' but, if you had a sense of humor when you got it, you should still have it."

He must figure the same to be true of Pirates fans.

"When I watch Jack Wilson play, I know he's not a homegrown Pirate," he said. "He's too fundamentally sound."

Uh-huh. He was here all weekend.