

**BY ERIC BARROW**

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

**T**he swing has a signature.

It's head down all the way through contact, because you can't hit what you can't see, he would say. It's a weight shift from the back leg to the front, because you need to get leverage. It's a top-hand release of the bat, because you need your lead arm extended to swing through the ball, maintain your bat speed and keep the bat plane level. It's a level swing, finishing high, because that creates backspin and backspin gives you loft and distance.

It's the signature of Charley Lau, and now, more than 23 years after his death, his handwriting is everywhere.

It's in Alex Rodriguez and Manny Ramirez. It's in Frank Thomas and Albert Pujols. They are the fruit of a hitting revolution, a new religion that started in the early 1970s when a light-hitting backup catcher with a lifetime .255 batting average turned the baseball world upside down and exposed a generation gap in the process. When the Charley Lau Swing was introduced nearly

# STROKE OF GENIUS

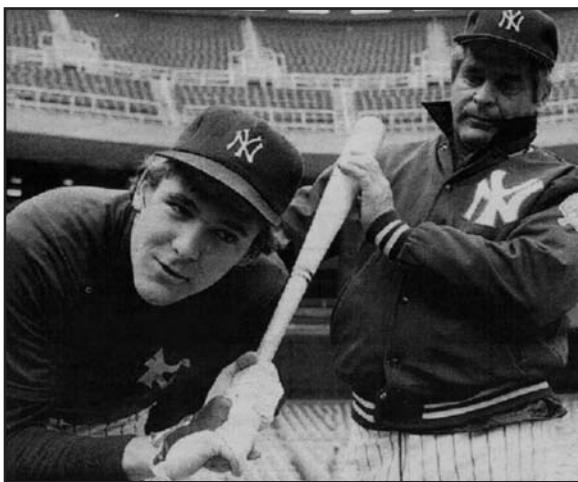
23 years after his death,  
Lau's swing lives on

30 years ago, it challenged decades of beliefs on how to hit a baseball, and it will be on display again this All-Star week in San Francisco.

"All these guys that are being successful now, and all that success that's bringing them fame and fortune, don't know that they should attribute it, in a very large part, to Charley," says St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa. "To me, the two most significant men of the last 40 years I've been in uniform are Marvin Miller and Charley Lau, in that their actions caused revolutionary changes in the game."

Miller, the architect of the Major League Baseball Players Association, was the man who got players their fortune; Lau's swing brought them fame.

But as players today struggle to recall any of baseball's history and others credit someone else for their achievements, Lau's contribution to baseball has gone largely



Charley Lau (r.) could even teach former Yankee reliever Dave Righetti about the 10 Absolutes of Hitting. Photos by Daily News

unnoticed since his death in 1984.



As the 1967 season came to a close, so did Charley Lau's modest big-league career. He finished as an Oriole, and after a short stint managing in the minors, returned

to Baltimore as a first-base coach. But in his work with another light-hitting Oriole, a promising shortstop named Mark Belanger, Lau found something. He

had always been a calming influence and excelled at communicating the game, so in the summer of 1969 he was charged with turning the shortstop around. "Hitters hit" was the prevailing theory on hitting at the time, and Mark Belanger couldn't hit, struggling to just a .208 average the previous season. A dream at shortstop,

he was a lost cause at the plate, until Lau broke down the significance of situational hitting to Belanger, showing him the value of taking the ball the other way and of using the entire field, principles foreign to the dead-pull era. For Belanger, something clicked. His batting average soared to .287 that season and his on-base percentage took a leap too, climbing 79 points to .351. Lau knew he was on to something—he'd seen how a struggling hitter could adjust his approach and reshape his production. His success with Belanger didn't go unnoticed. Royals owner Ewing Kauffman, having just brought baseball back to Kansas City, was open to experiment, open to what Charley Lau could do with his young expansion team. Kauffman brought Lau to Kansas City in 1971, carving out the position of hitting instructor and gave him the tool that would change everything — a video camera.

It was a clumsy, bulky piece of equipment the size of an old-fashioned portable TV that Lau would roll onto the ballfield on wheels. He could record and stop and play back his hitters, archaic to-day, innovative in the early '70s.

Lau began videotaping his hitters, among them Lou Piniella and Hal McRae. He studied film of great hitters — Hank Aaron, Babe Ruth and Roberto Clemente, translating their successes into a teachable doctrine. Lau studied the swing like it had never been studied, swapping perceived truths and traditional ideas about hitting with facts that he called "The Absolutes of Hitting," 10 in all. The top hand didn't roll over on contact but stayed behind the ball. The weight shifted from the back leg, once believed to be the anchor from which to derive power to the front leg, the back leg even coming off the ground at times. Plate coverage allowed a hitter to take outside pitches and drive them to the opposite field.

"Charley was a pioneer of all this," Piniella says of today's hitters. "When you see the mechanics that some of these very successful hitters use you can go back to what Charley was talking about in the 70s and '80s. These are just extensions of that"



It was June 2, 1974, when George Brett hit bottom. He had just gone 0-for-1 in the Royals' 5-2 loss in Cleveland, lowering his



average to .205, and he was desperate. He was 3,121 hits from the Hall of Famer he would become. It was then, says Brett, that Lau, then the Royals' hitting coach, made his move.

"He said, You know I've been watching you for two months," says Brett. "You haven't made any adjustments and you're hitting .200. Now I think you can play up here—I'm one of the few on the coaching staff—and if you are going to play up here you got to make some changes."

Brett was a scared kid then, just 21 years old and many miles from his home in California, but Lau saw something in him. He told the rookie to meet him at the ballpark at 1 o'clock the next day and the two went to work studying film and changing everything Brett knew about hitting.

Already broken, George Brett turned himself over to Lau. They watched film of Joe Rudi, a three-time All-Star Lau had worked with in Oakland, and of McRae, Brett's teammate whom Lau had already helped resurrect a season ago. And they set about re-sculpting the swing.

"He said, You have to do everything that I tell you to do," says Brett. "You have to have confidence in me."

Brett was a dead pull hitter before that day, standing straight up in the batter's box like his childhood hero Carl "Yastrzemski. He had never hit .300 in the minors and was bound to be sent back there if things didn't turn around.

"The next thing you know, I'm crouched down," says Brett. "I got my bat parallel to the ground behind my left shoulder and I tried to hit everything either up the middle or to left-center field. I started getting a lot of hits. I saw a change overnight."

Brett transferred his weight, strode softly with his front foot and tried to swing through the ball with good arm extension. And he kept his head down: 'You can't hit it unless you see it.'

The two men talked after each at-bat for the rest of the season. They talked about what was done right and wrong, and they talked hitting over a few beers after each game. Lau became a father figure. Brett be-

came a son.

"He waited till I was at rock bottom. I was way down. I was as low as you can get," says Brett. "And that's when you can get somebody and change them and impact his life. And that's what he did. He could've made that change the first day I got to the big leagues, but he wanted me to get down. He wanted me to fail, he wanted me to give him my soul and that's what I basically did. I entrusted him with everything I did on the baseball field when it came to swinging the bat."

George Brett became Lau's prized pupil. They set goals that year, Brett's first full season in the bigs. The first was to finish the year at .250, a mark Brett eclipsed in just 17 days. Then it was .260, reached just two days later. Brett finished the year batting .282, hitting .298 after his communion with Lau.

"I don't think I could have been a Hall of Famer without Charley Lau," says Brett. "I don't think I'd have made it five years in the big leagues."

Brett was inducted into Cooperstown in 1999 and is now a hitting consultant for the Royals.

"Releasing the top hand and the weight shift was foreign to me," he says. "I think it was foreign to a lot of people. But if you watch Major League Baseball now, he's had a tremendous influence on stars of the game today. They do a lot of things that Charley taught me."

"He had a rap that he couldn't help power hitters. I watch these guys that aren't big and strong have a little rhythm, get extension, take the top hand off and get a good weight shift. And if you do those four things you can hit, in my opinion. You watch Alex Rodriguez, he does it, Albert Pujols, he does it. Mark McGwire, he did it. Just look at A-Rod, he's Charley Lau to a T."

Alex Rodriguez knows about Charley Lau — one of the few in to-day's game who does — having worked with his son, Charley Jr., at Miami's Westminster Christian High School. Junior was hired as a hitting instructor — he still teaches his

father's theories in South Florida — and while he claims he taught Rodriguez his swing and the importance of releasing the top hand, A-Rod says he was born with his stroke. Whoever is right, the results are undeniable.

Rodriguez made his major league debut 13 years ago today at 18 and is just seven home runs shy of 500. He is on pace to shatter Hank Aaron's all-time home-run record, and he's doing it with a .300 average. And he's been doing it with Lau's swing.

"The swing allows you to hit for power in all directions," says Rodriguez, who later fine-tuned his approach with Piniella early in his career in Seattle. "It gives you a certain amount of freedom through your swing. It allows you to do a lot of things with a lot of different pitches. Inside, outside, up, down, waiting on curveballs. That's why the weight transfer is so important"



Lau made bad hitters good and good hitters great and he made Ted Williams sick doing it. As successful as Brett, McRae and the Royals were — winning three straight AL West titles just seven years after the franchise's inception — Lau had plenty of detractors.

Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg was quoted as saying, "Lau screwed up more hitters than anyone."

But the most damaging hacks came from Williams, the last man to hit .400 and arguably the greatest hitter the game has seen. Williams believed you had to rotate the body to get the head of the bat out in front, a snapping motion to open the hips to keep an inside pitch fair and pull it with power. He famously said Lau's theories set hitting back 25 years.

Walt Hriniak steams just thinking about it.

Hriniak met Lau in 1968 in Shreveport, La., and fell in love with both man and message. He was another scared kid, 25, and Lau took him in, this time fostering a hitting coach, not a hitter. Hriniak was Lau's first teaching disciple and would eventually take The Word to the Red Sox in 1977.

and later to the White Sox.

"I took offense to what Ted said, It (ticked) me off," says Hriniak in his home in North Andover, Mass., his voice rising. "I think there was jealousy because (Lau) had all the hitters listening to him. They knocked him because he was a .250 hitter, but his failures as a hitter made him a better teacher and more compassionate instructor. What did Ted Williams know about failure? Lau could understand failure, great hitters like Ted Williams can't understand failure.

"Look around the league. I watch games every day and nearly 25 years after his death his swing is still here. Alex Rodriguez, Albert Pujols, Ken Griffey Jr., Frank Thomas. I don't like saying this because he's not with us anymore, but Ted was wrong."

A religious man who punctuates each sentence with swear words, Hriniak strains to turn the other cheek when Lau's "Absolutes" get slapped.

"It's you and me against the world," Lau would say to him. "It's you and me against the world."

Hriniak is 64 years old, hair light and thinning, his glasses dangling from his neck. His face is worn from countless summers in the sun but the look he wears today is that of a giddy 12-year-old with the right answer bouncing on the tip of his tongue. He bounds across the room and grabs a bat; he has many from his years in the big's—Wade Boggs' is there right next to Frank Thomas'—both men Hriniak worked with. He takes a few cuts just inches above the coffee table. Walt Hriniak found his calling passing on Lau's methods and he's doing it again, this time in his living room. He's been waiting more than a decade to talk about Charley Lau.

"I told Charley, whether you leave us tomorrow or not, your swing will live on after you," says Hriniak. "I'll make it my mission to do that. That's why when people called me a disciple of his, I was proud to hear that, I got into a lot of trouble because I would take offense to people attacking Charley and his theories."

Hriniak wasn't just a believer in Lau's

teachings, he was a zealot. Where Lau tailored his methods to fit the player with soft-spoken encouragement, Hriniak tailored the player, balking profanity-laced adjustments from outside the batting cage. "Keep your f—ing head down," he'd yell at Thomas. Thomas credits Hriniak for defining his swing, one that has cut a path to 501 home runs and a sure visit to the Hall of Fame. When Thomas hit No. 500 last week, he called Hriniak to thank him.

Dogmatic in his approach, Hriniak annoyed many; pushing away some, turning around others.

"Everybody on the White Sox hit like Hriniak and you can't do that," says former Met Keith Hernandez. "I did not subscribe to that style of hitting. I did not like it, but it had its success. It was a radical change. I bet they ruined more players than they helped. It looked like a monkey f—ing a football."

Reggie Smith isn't a fan, either. Smith spent the first half of his career with the Red Sox working with Williams and he has his own hitting academy, where he has worked with players such as former Met Mike Piazza and former Dodger Rookie of the Year Eric Karros.

"Charley liked a lot of head movement where the body moves forward and I know for a fact that the more your head moves the less you see the ball" says Smith.

Smith believes in the stationary stance and turning around on your back leg, reducing the number of variables that can go wrong. He learned efficiency from Williams as well as the importance of maintaining balance, techniques he says he quantified in the Centinela Biomechanics lab in Inglewood, Calif.

"I don't know if Lau set hitting back 25 years," says Smith. "But you're trying to provide resistance. Guys are teaming to get away with lunging, but in the true power hitters, I see that back leg is planted. Even though Frank Thomas is successful he's not as efficient as he should be."



Tony La Russa rests his arms on the back side of the batting cage at St. Louis' new Busch Stadium and points at Albert Pujols

in the cage. Pujols, arguably the best hitter in the NL, smokes one to the opposite field as his top hand flies off the bat and the ball bangs off the right-field wall. The crack of the bat rattles around the empty stadium.

"Check that out. When Albert is right, he's so close to perfect," La Russa says with a smile. "Isn't it amazing that a majority of the top hitters in baseball let go of the top hand and are weight shifting? It happened somewhere, and Charley started it."

La Russa keeps a list of Lau's "Absolutes of Hitting" on the coffee table in his office. It might as well be on his night stand — the manager always keeps it nearby. Baseball may have moved on, but he hasn't.

"The game's forgotten him," La Russa says. "People turn the page. There's so much enjoyment of his product by fans. The guys who are hitting .300 with a lot of power production are doing it with Charley's swing."

There was a time when Charley Lau was everywhere. He was both heretic and guru, beloved and reviled. He advanced the game, he set it back decades. His theories polarized baseball, bisecting generations.

"Now hitting coaches are teaching what Charley was about. They just don't acknowledge him," says White Sox hitting coach Greg Walker, a former student of Lau's. "Maybe they don't know. They never had to fight the battle Charley had to fight."

Lau wrote books on hitting, including "The Art of Hitting .300", made videos and even appeared in movies, giving batting lessons to a young Matthew Broderick in "Max Dugan Returns." He came to the Bronx in 1979 and worked with the Yankees for three seasons, Piniella having convinced George Steinbrenner to hire him. He even helped Reggie Jackson — baseball's all-time strikeout king — bat .300 in 1980, without diminishing his power: his 41 home runs that season were the most he had hit in 11 years.

"I believe in what he taught," says Jackson. "He had a good understanding of the functions of the body, but you don't make hitters. A-Rod got here cause he's A-Rod. Pujols got where he got because he's Pujols."

Jackson's opinions aren't unique.

"Old-timers didn't understand the swing and said how it was ruining baseball," says Walker. "How can you hit a ball with one hand?" they would say. But when people started to finally have success with it and everybody adopted it, the last thing they were going to do was give Charley credit and admit they were wrong."



Tony La Russa was only 35 when he took the helm of the White Sox in 1979. And by the time Jerry Reinsdorf bought the team two years later, the young manager was



regularly booed by the fans and trashed by the team's own broadcasters. La Russa pleaded with his new owner to hire Lau. "We'll win the pennant" he said.

Reinsdorf, the lifelong baseball fan from Brooklyn, was new to the game but had read Lau's "The Art of Hitting .300" and knew about Brett and McRae. He also knew he had to help his fledgling manager. So before the '82 season, Reinsdorf took out his checkbook and signed Lau to a six-year contract worth \$600,000, a landmark deal for a hitting coach. The White Sox even held a press conference to announce their new acquisition.

"It's like signing three players," La Russa said that day.

Many of the Sox, including Carlton Fisk and Greg Luzinski, quickly became believers.

In just two seasons, the White Sox turned things around, winning 99 games and the AL West in 1983.

Lau coached 14 years in the big leagues and in half of those seasons reached the postseason.

"I let Charley know how responsible he was for the division championship," says Vance Law, a third baseman on that team, and is now BYU's head baseball coach.

"Coaches today don't know where the swing comes from," says Law. "But all of my guys know Charley Lau."



Lau suffered from the attacks his theories received. "The resistance was pretty unfair," says La Russa.

He rarely communicated his frustration with the criticism; he suffocated it in an excess of alcohol, cigarettes and a bad diet.

"Sometimes drinking would help him cope," says his second wife Evelyn. "It never affected his work or his home life but I would have preferred he didn't drink so much. ... I don't think he took good care of himself as well as he should have."

Charley Lau was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1983, during the season that saw his White Sox reach the postseason for the first time in 24 years. Doctors told him he had up to five years to live but he lasted just nine months, says Evelyn, who was with him

to the end. The cancer metastasized to the liver. There was nothing they could do.

Lau lost a lot of weight those last months, becoming frail and bedridden, and the cancer's turn was vicious toward the end. Several players went down to Marathon, Fla., to say goodbye. Brett and McRae chartered a flight together. La Russa and several members of the White Sox made the trip as well.

And, of course, so did Hriniak. His tears are unavoidable, and his voice cracks as he goes back to that bedroom in Marathon.

"I leaned over him and said, 'Charley, I'm saying this to you not because you're my friend, but because it's true ... You were right, Charley... you were right.'"

Charley Lau died on March 18, 1984, at 50. A plaque on the wall at the White Sox's spring training facility in Tucson, Ariz., pays tribute to him and his success in the big leagues. The inscription includes each team he coached and its record.

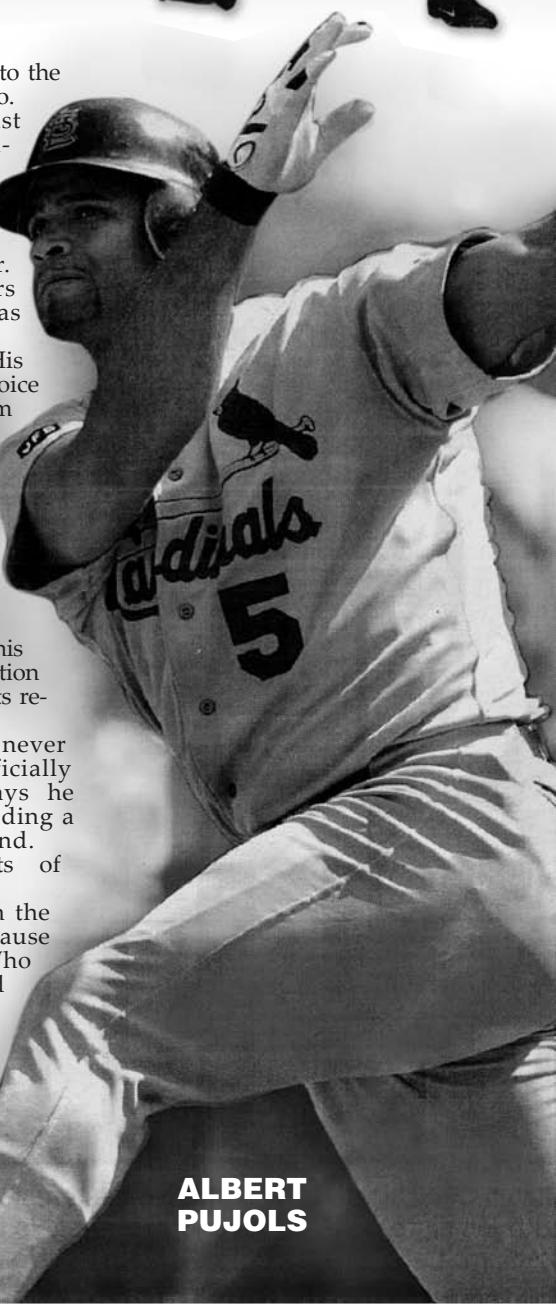
The No. 6 White Sox jersey has never been worn since his death, unofficially retired, something Reinsdorf says he may make official, along with holding a Charley Lau Day to honor his friend.

And then there are thoughts of Cooperstown.

"He definitely deserves to be in the Hall of Fame," says Hal McRae. "Because when you go back and say, 'Who changed the game, revolutionized the game and changed the game for the better?' — he definitely fits in that category."



The Lau magic continues to significantly influence hitting, at all levels of the game, as Charley Lau Jr. advances his father's pioneering work. To become part of the Lau Legend, visit [www.lauhitting.com](http://www.lauhitting.com).



**ALBERT PUJOLS**