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## Swan songs?

**Cheers, key hits warm Pudge in season finale**

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**ARLINGTON** - If Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez never again suits up in a Rangers uniform, at least he scripted a perfect final day.

As Pudge stepped to the plate to lead off the seventh inning Sunday in the Rangers' season finale, he received his third standing ovation of the day, one for each at-bat. Then he earned the crowd's applause, as he has for the past dozen years. Exhaling deeply and shaking off his emotions, Rodriguez hoisted his bat and sent the first pitch catapulting over the right-field wall.

"It's something I'll remember myself for the rest of my career," Rodriguez said.

It was career home run No. 215 for Rodriguez, who trotted around the bases before 34,529 standing fans at The Ballpark in Arlington during the Rangers' 8-7 loss to Oakland. After crossing the plate, Rodriguez was greeted with high-fives and hugs from his teammates, and as the fans' cheering roared on, he stepped out of the dugout for a wave and a bow to his adoring audience.

Pudge could have called it a season after his homer but stayed in the game for one more plate appearance in the eighth inning. He made that one count, too, doubling into right-center field and driving home teammate Alex Rodriguez. Todd Greene then pinch ran for Ivan Rodriguez, who left the game to yet another ovation.

"The fans do a great job for me, and I appreciate the fans," Rodriguez said. "It was a very special moment."

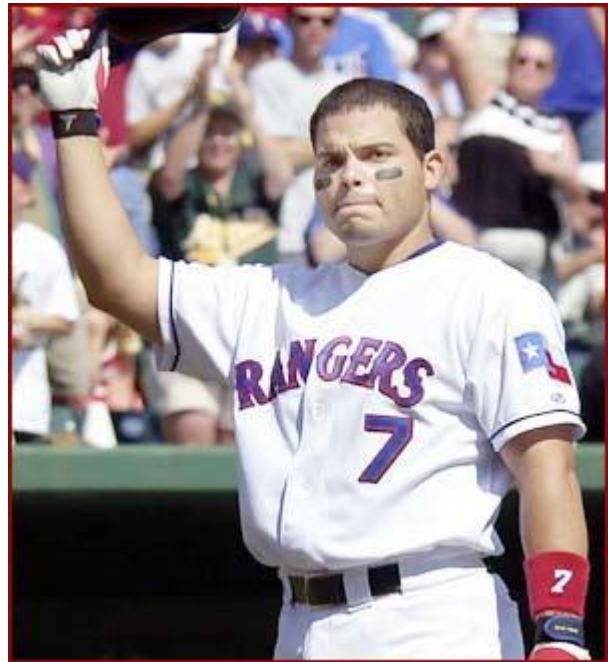
Had Rodriguez not left the game early, he would have had the chance to orchestrate one last magic moment. With two outs and two men on in the ninth inning and Texas trailing 8-7, Greene came to the plate in Rodriguez's place and popped out to end the season.

"Unbelievable," Rangers manager Jerry Narron said, "but he deserved that. He definitely deserved that."

Rangers fans want to see Rodriguez back to earn more acclaim.

"We hoped it was not his last game, but we wanted to see it if it was," said Crawford Long of Waco, who wore Rodriguez's No. 7 jersey to the game.

Since Rodriguez made his major-league debut with the Rangers in June 1991 as a 19-year-old prodigy, the catcher from Puerto Rico has called Arlington home during baseball season. Pudge quickly became



AP Photo By LM Otero

Texas Rangers' Ivan Rodriguez (7) acknowledges a standing ovation before batting in the first inning, in Arlington, Texas, Sunday.

the darling of Rangers fans, and grew up before their eyes, rising to become a 10-time All-Star and Gold Glove Award winner, and capturing the American League Most Valuable Player Award in 1999.

But Rodriguez's five-year, \$42.5 million contract is up, and he would like a sizable long-term contract. Rangers owner Tom Hicks wants to lower payroll, however, and Rodriguez might have to find a new summer home next season.

"I can't think about that," Rodriguez said. "I know I'm going to be a free agent, but I'm not saying that I won't be back. It's going to be an interesting off-season for me."

To Evelyn Sparks, a 12-year-old from Burleson, letting Rodriguez leave would be a big mistake. Evelyn carried a homemade placard that read "Sign Pudge," as she posed for a picture with the catcher before the game.

"I just want Tom Hicks to see it," Evelyn said of her sign.

Mike Stanley of Snyder agreed: "What I don't like is the lack of effort in trying to re-sign Pudge. I'd like to see more effort. In the short term, you might save a little money, but I also think you're going to see a lot of empty seats out there."

Pudge was a main attraction on Fan Appreciation Day, with throngs crowding around him for photos and handshakes. Children chased after Rodriguez like the ice cream truck as he returned to the clubhouse for pregame preparation, calling his name and yelling, "Pudge, I hope you come back." One knowing boy of about 13 told his friend as they watched Rodriguez walk off, "This is like his last day ever in Texas."

Texas first baseman Rafael Palmeiro, whose locker is next to Pudge's, hopes not.

"It is a way to go out, but I have faith that something's going to get done," Palmeiro said. "He's a great player, and I think he's a big part of our future -- I hope."

Injuries -- a fractured right thumb in 2000, knee surgery in 2001 and a herniated disk this season -- have caused Rodriguez to miss 176 games over the past three seasons. But Pudge is only 30 years old, and he believes he has six or seven more years of catching in him. He has batted .300 or better every season since 1995 and finished this season with a team-leading .314 average. Before the finale, he was named the Rangers' Player of the Month for September.

John "Zonk" Lanzillo of Richardson, who attended every Texas home game this season, wore a "Re-Sign Pudge Now" shirt Sunday and said the Rangers should bring back their All-Star catcher.

"I think they ought to find the money somewhere," said Lanzillo. "They can charge me an extra dollar for my ticket if they want to."

If not, one of the Rangers' most beloved players of the past decade might become their best-loved opponent in 2003.

## Pudge's career numbers

Pudge Rodriguez is a 10-time All-Star with the Rangers. A look at his 12-year career with the team:

Year	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB	CS	OBP	SLG	AVG
1991	88	280	24	74	16	0	3	27	5	42	0	1	0.28	0.35	0.26
1992	123	420	39	109	16	1	8	37	24	73	0	0	0.3	0.36	0.26
1993	137	473	56	129	28	4	10	66	29	70	8	7	0.32	0.41	0.27
1994	99	363	56	108	19	1	16	57	31	42	6	3	0.36	0.49	0.3
1995	130	492	56	149	32	2	12	67	16	48	0	2	0.33	0.45	0.3
1996	153	639	116	192	47	3	19	86	38	55	5	0	0.34	0.47	0.3
1997	150	597	98	187	34	4	20	77	38	89	7	3	0.36	0.48	0.31
1998	145	579	88	186	40	4	21	91	32	88	9	0	0.36	0.51	0.32
1999	144	600	116	199	29	1	35	113	24	64	25	12	0.36	0.56	0.33
2000	91	363	66	126	27	4	27	83	19	48	5	5	0.38	0.67	0.35
2001	111	442	70	136	24	2	25	65	23	73	10	3	0.35	0.54	0.31
2002	108	408	67	128	32	2	19	60	25	71	5	4	0.35	0.54	0.31
TOTALS	1,479	5,656	852	1,723	344	28	215	829	304	763	80	40	0.34	0.49	0.31

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