PRODUCER RUSSELL GABAY ’79
AND HOUSTON ASTRO
JEFF BAGWELL ’85 CROSS PATHS
AT THE 2005 WORLD SERIES

BY DANA BENSON

Lights... Cameras... Batter Up!

One worked feverishly behind the scenes while the other stepped coolly to the plate. Many miles from their alma mater, two University of Hartford alumni found themselves breathing the rarified air of baseball’s October classic.

While Russell Gabay ’79, executive producer for Major League Baseball International, oversaw the cameras, wires, and mobile television trailers required to televise the 2005 World Series to millions of viewers worldwide, Houston Astro first baseman Jeff Bagwell ’85 stood sixth in the lineup for a game that it had taken him 15 seasons to reach.

Bagwell, who was a third baseman for the University of Hartford, was drafted by the Red Sox in 1989 and traded to the Astros in 1990. He is arguably the franchise’s all-time best player. Named the National League’s Most Valuable Player in 1994, he is the franchise leader with 449 home runs and 1,529 RBIs. He is second, behind longtime teammate and friend Craig Biggio, in all-time batting average, runs, hits, and doubles.

Despite all the records and accolades, there still was one thing missing from his career: a World Series. “Obviously, it’s very special,” says Bagwell. “We’d gotten to the playoffs so many times without making it to the World Series, and to finally be playing in the Series was very exciting,” he adds. “A lot of players don’t get this chance in their careers.”

Gabay began his career at then-fledgling ESPN, after majoring in communication at the University of Hartford. The university, he says, put him in the right place at the right time. “There were some production and editing skills I learned at the University of Hartford that I drew on at ESPN, and I still draw on those skills.”

He went on to work for HBO, where he was responsible for live sports, music, and comedy productions. In 1992 Gabay joined NBC as senior operations manager for the Barcelona Olympics.

Both alumni look back over their 20-odd-year careers with a seasoned perspective that allows them to appreciate the ground they’ve covered as they look ahead to what awaits. Younger players look to Bagwell, one of the club veterans, for leadership—a role in which he thrives, particularly when it comes to keeping postseason nerves in check. “The veterans make fun of each other,
and we make fun of the kids so they can say to themselves that this is no different than a regular-season game, even though it really is,” he explains.

Bagwell started taking on a leadership role in his college career when he hit better than .400 in each of his three seasons and had a .413 career batting average. The two-time Eastern College Athletic Conference Player of the Year was inducted into the University of Hartford Alumni Athletic Hall of Fame in 1997.

Bagwell is not certain what the future holds. Bothered by a shoulder injury, he opted for surgery at the start of the 2005 season. He doesn’t know yet what he’ll do in 2006, a year when the Astros hope to return to the World Series after getting swept by the Chicago White Sox in 2005.

Gabay’s future is a little more certain. He’s taking a short break between the World Series and the inaugural World Baseball Classic in March 2006. The contest will spotlight teams competing from 39 countries, with the finals to be held in San Diego.

But it’s the All-Star Game, the League Championship Series, and the World Series that are considered the “jewel events” in Gabay’s profession. This year was Gabay’s eighth World Series.

He was responsible for broadcasting the Series to more than 230 countries—an effort that required two 53-foot television mobile trailers in Chicago, two more in Houston, and a permanent crew of 27 people that traveled from city to city, with 50 more workers hired in each location. There were at least eight cameras posted throughout each stadium, as well as tape machines, electronic graphics, and enough wires, it seemed, to stretch from Houston to Chicago.

Gabay still finds the work exhilarating, even after 20 years in broadcasting. Producing the World Series, in particular, is exciting, he says. “It’s live television, and you have to be ready for anything to happen.” Each day is “mentally exhausting,” he notes, “and then you have to get up and do it all again the next day. And in between, you dream about it.”

For all his success, Gabay cautions that new communication graduates shouldn’t expect to work in a major market right out of school. “So what if you work in the 80th-largest market; you’re only 21. You’ve got to start somewhere, put your time in, and hone your skills.”

Bagwell would probably agree.