

NONE

Second baseman Alfonso Soriano of the New York Yankees has quickly become baseball's most exciting young star

By Alan Schwarz

Six years ago, Alfonso Soriano was an undrafted 18-year-old who went to Japan just for the chance to play pro baseball. Now he's making major league history.

On August 17, Alfonso hit his 30th homer of the season. He is now the first second baseman to join the 30-30 club (at least 30 homers and 30 stolen bases in one season). He also has a shot at joining the 40-40 club. The only members are Jose Canseco (1988), Barry Bonds (1996), and Alex Rodriguez (1998).

"He's starting to do a lot of things really well," says Alex. "You can see him becoming a great player."

Flair for the Dramatic

Batting leadoff, Alfonso, age 24, uses power and speed to spark the New York Yankees' offense. As of August 21, he was batting .302, with 30 homers and 34 steals, and was on pace to drive in 101 runs.

"He just dares the pitcher to get him out," says Yankee manager Joe Torre. "There's lightning in his hands."

That lightning began to strike last season. Alfonso's dramatic two-run homer sank the Seattle Mariners in the bottom of the ninth inning of Game 4 of the American League Championship Series. The blast made him the first rookie to hit a game-ending homer in the post-season. In Game 5 of the World Series, his

RBI single in the bottom of the 12th inning beat the Arizona Diamondbacks.

"Everyone who sees me play, they say I make it look easy," says Alfonso. "It's *not* easy for me."

Winding Road

Alfonso's road from his childhood home in the Dominican Republic to the majors wasn't a smooth one. In high school, he was a skinny shortstop who could hit well, but he wasn't fast and his fielding was average. He attracted little attention from American pro scouts.

At age 16, Alfonso began attending a baseball academy near his home that was run by the Hiroshima Carp of Japan's major leagues. He later



went to Japan to play shortstop for Hiroshima's minor league team. Non-Japanese players rarely begin U.S. big-league careers in Japan, but Alfonso hoped to attract interest from major league scouts.

In Japan, team practices lasted all day. Alfonso's palms were covered with blisters from swinging a bat during four daily batting practices. "I got faster and stronger, and learned about discipline," he says.

Alfonso had only 8 homers and 47 RBIs during two seasons in Japan, but still showed enough promise to make major league scouts aware of him. Yet, no scout imagined that Alfonso's future would be so bright.

After the 1997 season, Alfonso left Japan after getting into a salary dispute with his team. He stayed in shape by playing in an amateur recreational league in California for two months. His agent arranged workouts with seven major league teams. Alfonso wowed them with his powerful bat and throwing arm. The Yankees landed him with a four-year contract worth \$3.1 million. He blossomed in the minors and, in 2001, was called up to the bigs to stay.

The Switch Is On

The Yanks already had a superstar shortstop, Derek Jeter, so they made Alfonso their second baseman during spring training last year. "Going from shortstop to second, everything was backward for him," says Derek, who worked with Alfonso on learning how to turn the double play. "The angles and throws are different at second. But he caught on. It was just a matter of time before he got comfortable there."

Alfonso's fielding is still shaky, but Yankee fans chant "M-V-P!" when he steps to the plate. He could become the first second baseman since 1959 to win the American League MVP award. "I don't know," he says. "The MVP is the best player in the league. It's kind of early for me to be that."

Well, lightning does strike quickly. ●

Breakout Stars of 2002

Alfonso Soriano isn't the only major league player who has had a surprisingly big season. Here are three others you can expect to see in the All-Star Game for seasons to come. Like Alfonso, two of them struggled to find their way for several seasons before bursting to stardom in 2002.

Roy Halladay, pitcher, Toronto Blue Jays

Roy was a first-round draft pick in 1995. He struggled with Toronto in 1999 and 2000, and by the start of last season, the 6' 6" right-hander had sunk all the way down to the Class A level of the minor leagues. Then he changed his delivery and was able to consistently keep hitters off-balance with his mid-90s fastball, late-breaking sinker, and snappy curve. He made a rapid climb back to the bigs. As of August 21, Roy was tied for fourth in the American League in wins (14) and third in ERA (2.98). He also made the All-Star team for the first time.



CHRISTOPHER S. SUTTON/MAGNET

Eric Gagne, pitcher, Los Angeles Dodgers

Eric is a native of Montreal, Quebec, Canada, where French is widely spoken. *Gagne* is a form of the verb "to win" in French, but this hard-throwing right-hander wasn't a winner when spring training began this year. After bouncing back and forth between the Dodgers and the minors for three seasons, Eric had an 11-14 record and 4.61 ERA in the majors, mainly as a starting pitcher. But he had the tools to be an effective closer: a 97-mile-per-hour fastball and a diving change-up. The Dodgers gave him a chance in April, and he ran with it. As of August 21, he had 43 saves and a 1.98 ERA.



Pat Burrell, outfielder, Philadelphia Phillies

A hulk of a slugger at 6' 4" and 222 pounds, "Pat the Bat" starred at the University of Miami and was the first overall pick in the 1998 draft. He showed his potential by hitting 18 homers for the Phillies in 2000 and 27 last season. Pat is now taking his prodigious power to a new level: He had 30 homers and 91 RBIs as of August 21. He was never expected to be a good fielder, but he surprised the Phillies by becoming a force in leftfield. Pat threw out a National League-leading 18 runners last season and had thrown out six as of August 21, tied for sixth-most in the league.



EDDY/MLB

Second To None

1. Alfonso first played pro ball in Canada. T or F

2. After 1997 season Alfonso left Canada and played in Japan. T or F

3. What year was he brought up to the majors?

4. Yankee's switched Alfonso to what position?

5. As of August 21 what was Alfonso's batting average?

6. Roy Halladay was drafted by which major league team?

7. Eric Gagne is a starting pitcher for the Dodgers in 2002. T or F

8. Pat Nurrell was drafted into the major league by the University of Miami. T or F

9. How many homeruns did Pat Burrell hit in 2001?

10. What is Eric Gagne's record as a starter?