

Young's Road Back Included A Wheelchair

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ST. PETERSBURG - The first time he batted for the Devil Rays in the major leagues, he was drilled by Chicago pitcher Freddy Garcia. White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen couldn't believe what happened next.

The kid, that nervy kid, not even 21, glared into the dugout at **him**.

Same kid homered his third time up.

In his first game at Tropicana Field, playing right field, he threw out Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki as he tried to go from first to third. Ichiro had never been thrown out like that in the majors.

None of those moments will ever be as famous as that night when Delmon Young tossed his you know what and it hit you know who. And perhaps none of them will matter more than the most important game Young played last season.

He was in a wheelchair.

It was during his suspension for throwing the bat. His community service included a visit to a Rays-sponsored adult wheelchair team.

"I made some friends," Young said. "You take a lot for granted. Then you see how hard these people work. It will open your eyes.

"And they're full contact going into the bases. It was competitive. There was a lot of smack talking. It was so hard. I had no coordination in the chair. Dude, they were picking on me. 'Hey, hit the ball to Delmon, he can't field it.'"

Delmon just smiled.

Just Getting Started

He's still not 21. That's important to remember as Young prepares for his first full season in the majors. His career is only 30 games, three homers and 10 RBIs old.

But he was the Rays' best player the final five weeks of the season. There was no getting around Delmon. At the plate and in the outfield, he opened eyes the way he always thought he would. People shook their heads at his talent instead of in disgust at Bat Night. He has been a model citizen in the bigs. His future, not his past, is the story.

"I think he will tell you that he's going to boggle your mind. And I'm good with that," Rays manager Joe Maddon said.

Young won't make predictions. The first player selected overall in the 2003 draft is content as he approaches what should be his first full season in the majors. There's no talk of what to do with Delmon or about Delmon. He's here and he's now.

"Last year, it was a short taste," Young said. "It makes you want more."

He hit .317 with 40 hits in 30 games. And there was Delmon the team guy, Delmon the worker bee, always running, backing up plays. The kid wanted it, and he wanted it just right.

"What happens in a playoff game if I don't back up?" Young said.

A playoff game?

"This guy has a lot of self-confidence," Maddon said. "I love it. He backs it up. Not just what he does on the field, but this guy's work is impeccable."

Maddon cited cases.

"Jae Seo got hurt last year. He missed a couple of starts. We had a simulated game. Delmon asked to come out to be involved in that simulated game. A) That's unusual, and B) it was to work on his bunting for a hit.

"There was nothing contrived about it. He wasn't trying to impress me. He legitimately wanted to work on his bunting for a hit against game speed. What kid thinks of that? What grown-up thinks about that?"

Delmon smiled.

"It's always about what you can do next year."

He lost it the night he threw the bat. He says he now thinks "once, twice, three times" before doing anything.

Which means his stare at Guillen was as premeditated as the pitch that hit him. "I didn't care who it was," Young said. "I wasn't afraid." His real answer a few innings later carried over the outfield wall.

"A bruise lasts a few days. I want to be here longer."

Delmon smiled.

Bright Future Ahead

It's a wonderful smile. You hope it will last. Young's future without a past chained to it might be a sight to behold.

Rick Vaughn, Rays vice president of media relations, is the man who steered Delmon Young toward the wheelchair team during his suspension. Young had one question after his visit.

"They play tomorrow. Can we go again?"

Young says he has kept tabs on some wheelchair guys. He wants to play in their games again.

"It'll humble you," he said. "You need to have some coordination in that chair. I can hit the ball to the fence, but I can't even get a single, I'm still trying to get to first when they throw me out. Those guys were all over me, just killing me."

Delmon laughed and laughed.

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