

SPORTS

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Tampa Bay's Young learns valuable lesson

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ST. PETERSBURG — The famous kid who threw his infamous bat at the umpire during one inglorious moment of anger in a minor league game a few weeks earlier was on his way to a softball tournament, and Ron Richardson was waiting.

There was something Richardson wanted to tell Delmon Young, at the time the top prospect in the Tampa Bay Devil Rays' organization, and also a petulant one.

Richardson plays first base for the Devil Rays Wheelchair Softball Team.

He became a single amputee in 1993 when a forklift fell and crushed the lower part of his right leg.

Richardson kept an eye out that morning for Young, who was headed to the wheelchair softball tournament last May as part of the community service that went with his 50-game suspension for hitting a home plate umpire in the chest with a bat.

RAYS TO 8D



PHOTO PROVIDED

Delmon Young made a number of friends working with the Rays' Wheelchair Softball Team, including Ron Richardson.

RAYS FROM 1D

"YOU!" Richardson yelled when Young arrived. "You're the gum boy."

And that's how Young became a member of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays-sponsored Devil Rays Wheelchair Softball Team, by walking up and down the dugout and handing sticks of gum to the players.

"It was hilarious," Richardson said.

"I had a lot of fun," Young said. "There are a lot of good people out there."

The Devil Rays' rookie right fielder was sent to the tournament to learn, perhaps, a little humility. Spending a day with athletes confined to wheelchairs should make Young realize just how lucky he has it as the first pick in the 2003 draft. This is a young man who received millions to sign and has all the tools to make him one of the best players in the majors.

But Young said he already knew he was fortunate.

His mom used to teach autistic children, and Young, who often joined his mother and her class on school outings, learned that lesson a long time ago.

What Young found was a group of athletes who didn't prejudice him based on one act.

"It was good to go out there and have people accept you and not just read one person's opinion in the paper and say, 'Oh, this guy. We don't want him out here,'" Young said. "It's an on-field issue. It's not like the Cincinnati Bengals. I did stuff on the field. All players have some on-field issues. They accepted me, gave me a clean slate, and I was very appreciative of that."

They also let him coach first base. Young, in turn, became the first one to greet a player after he scored.

"I became a Delmon Young fan," said Doyle Mann, the shortstop and manager of the team. "I guess you get a different impression when you're next to him. I have a lot of respect for the way he was in

the dugout."

Later, Richardson told Young to sit in a wheelchair so he could get the full effect of what he just saw.

"I said, 'All right, you think you can play? Let's get you in a chair,'" Richardson said.

They showed Young the proper balance to swing while sitting. They showed him how to use his hands to move the chair. Young burned his hands on the wheels and realized he wasn't as agile playing right field while sitting as he is while standing.

"It was too difficult for me," he said.

Young's punishment required he attend only the first day of the two-day tournament. But Young showed up the next day and again the following Wednesday, when the team held its weekly practice in the parking lot of a Tampa church.

He and Richardson became friends. They e-mail and text message each other.

"We're both Rays," Richardson said.

The action is fast in wheelchair softball. Collisions are part of the game.

The trick is the ability to maneuver the chair, to move left and right, to spin the wheel while fielding the oversized 16-inch ball with one hand.

Young couldn't do that. "I was praying the ball wouldn't come to me, and when it did, I would be ready to field, and next thing you know, bam, it's off my hands and rolls somewhere else," Young said. "You see the base runners advancing, you feel helpless."

Soon, Richardson was yelling to everyone to hit the ball to the new guy.

"I took Delmon to task," Richardson said. "I had no pity that he was new. I knew he'd catch up."

Young did. At the plate. It took only 10 swings before Young began hitting home runs.

It was easy, Young said. "Throw your hips, open up, and let your hands do the rest of it," he said. "I really got into that first one."