



# CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

After 10 years in the Majors,  
Howie Kendrick reinvents himself

BY JON WEISMAN

**T**he man on the microphone says “It’s time for Dodger baseball,” the crowd cheers, the game is christened, and the second baseman jogs out to left field.

Howie Kendrick isn’t lost. He’s never lost on a baseball field, where he’s gone to work every spring and summer and fall since he was an 18-year-old draftee in 2002.

But in his first 14 professional seasons, from the minors to the Majors, Kendrick played 1,442 games at second base, and 127 games at every other position combined. He never played an inning of outfield in the minors, and only in 2011 had he ever started a game out on that wide expanse of grass.

In 2016, that would change. This year, the salesman who sold washing machines at the department store year after year, who had mastered the whole pitch from soak to spin, would be asked to go out and peddle vacuum cleaners door to door.

And so Kendrick grabbed his kit and headed into the great unknown.

“I learned a long time ago you have to

put your ego and your pride on the backburner and just go out and play,” Kendrick said. “Because all that matters is, is your team going to win the game? What can you do to help your team win that day?”

“I think that’s the biggest thing you have to focus on: Is there a reason they’re asking me to do it, and can I do it? Yes. And then just go out and play.”

## OFFSEASON OF CHANGE

Kendrick had little time to prepare. Certainly, he didn’t end the 2015 season thinking he would be leaving the infield. After batting .295 with a .336 on-base percentage in the regular season for the Dodgers, Kendrick played every inning of the National League Division Series at second base.

As the Dodgers and Mets split the first four games, Kendrick went 6 for 17 (.353) with a double and a home run — a .941 OPS. He came up to bat as the leadoff hitter in the first inning of the winner-take-all Game 5, and as is so often his way, drilled a shot to the opposite field — but right into the glove of first baseman Lucas Duda.



In his 10 MLB seasons before 2016, Howie Kendrick had started one game at third base and 20 in left field. This year by the All-Star Break, he had made 41 starts at the two positions combined.

The Dodgers went on to score two runs off Mets wunderkind Jacob deGrom in that inning, but that was all they would tally that night, and Kendrick's line drive remains one of 2015's "What might have been" moments.

"Once the season's over with, you have to either live or die by what happened," Kendrick said. "It can either make you better or worse, and I look at it as just trying to get better from it."

That might have taken place with any of MLB's 30 teams. Kendrick was a free agent, and his uncertain path back to the Dodgers was further clouded by the team's offseason re-signing of second baseman Chase Utley, who was originally acquired in August 2015, 10 days after Kendrick went on the disabled list for a month with a strained left hamstring.

But free agency is a slight misnomer. Because any team signing Kendrick was required to forfeit a precious draft pick, Dodger rivals shied away from him. The Dodgers, meanwhile, never felt as if they could count on the 37-year-old Utley playing 162 games.

They needed Kendrick, but they needed him as a hybrid of his former self.

"They said, 'Would you be open to moving around a little bit?'" Kendrick explained. "And I said 'yeah,' I agreed to that. ... I played other positions before this year, a lot of first base when I first came up as a rookie, some left field, one game at third."

Going mobile wasn't Kendrick's first choice. But it was his best choice, and he would make the best of it.

### FINDING THE COMFORT ZONE

It wasn't easy. Kendrick signed in February, three weeks before Spring Training began. And instead of allowing him to ease into the transition, the preseason only complicated matters for Kendrick.

He battled a left calf strain most of March, managing to play in only eight games: four at second base, two at third base, two as a designated hitter. None in the outfield.

While he was recovering, Andre Ethier — projected to start in left field — fractured his right tibia. That meant as soon



as Kendrick was ready, he would be needed in the outfield.

Kendrick was activated from the disabled list April 12. In the ninth inning that evening, he played his first inning of left field since June 4, 2013. (The first out, of course, went to him.)

The next night, Kendrick started in left. The next night, at third. The next night, at second.

At the plate, he went exactly 1 for 4 for each of the first four games. For the rest of the month, cycling around the three positions and coming off the bench, he went 4 for 37. He finished April with two walks and no extra-base hits.

"I got off to a little slower start," Kendrick said. "I don't try to make excuses about anything, but I did miss some time, didn't really get the reps in spring. Things happen. You just have to move forward and continue to get better."

Kendrick is the last person to call attention to himself, on the field or in the clubhouse, but Dodger manager Dave Roberts didn't confuse Kendrick's stoicism for ease.

"I think it's definitely been more difficult than he's let on," Roberts said. "And, I don't

know how much it translates into his offense as far as production or lack thereof. ... It definitely has to take a toll on you mentally, learning a new position.

"But Howie's a pro, and he's going to play wherever we ask him or hit wherever we ask him in the lineup, and be as productive as he can."

After that first month, it's almost as if Kendrick did begin to relax and begin to find that comfort zone. From May 1 through the All-Star Break, Kendrick's OBP was .342 with a .414 slugging percentage — both surpassing his 2015 levels.

"I've been feeling good at the plate, especially as of late," he said. "Just seeing the ball really well. I just think the biggest thing is trying to put together good at-bats. If I can have quality at-bats, everything else will just happen."

He also acclimated himself to left field. According to Fangraphs' defensive rankings, admittedly based on a small sample size, Kendrick was fourth out of 18 NL left fielders with at least 200 innings at the position this year. In UZR/150 (the number of runs above or below average a fielder is per 150 defensive games), Kendrick's 23.1 was the best.



Kendrick, here turning a double play during the 2015 National League Division Series, still considers himself a second baseman at heart.

“I think it’s just getting reps out there, getting in the game, playing and continually having opportunities to make plays,” Kendrick said. “Even some of the plays that I can’t make, I’m going to do my best to make ’em.”

## WHAT LIES AHEAD

By the All-Star Break, Kendrick had played more left field than anyone on the Dodgers this year. From June 7 through the season’s intermission, he appeared 28 times in left, compared with six times at second base and twice at third.

As tumultuous as the year has been, as much as he has adapted and reinvented himself, Kendrick hadn’t forgotten his core identity.

“For me, I still view myself as an infielder,” he said. “I came up as an infielder, I’ve been 10 years (in the Majors) as an infielder. But learning to play other positions, it’s fun. You’ve got to look at it as another challenge, and hopefully you can go out and, no matter where you’re playing, make good decisions and just try to fit in and look normal.”

But normal is always changing. Though

Kendrick was back on track by the second half of the season, looming was the possibility that the track could shift direction again.

Heading into the final two months of the 2016 campaign, Ethier’s return from his broken leg was imminent. At the same time, Utley will likely need more rest, and spot starts at third base for Justin Turner or first base for Adrián González might be required. And that’s all without knowing how the trade winds might be blowing.

“I remember when I first came up in 2006 (with the Angels),” Kendrick said. “I had a little bit of a rough go in my first callup, and they sent me down and I came back and I was fine, but it was an adjustment. You’ve got to constantly make adjustments over the years, from at-bat to at-bat or team to team. That’s just how the game is.”

You might sum Kendrick’s approach as glass half-full. Roberts put a different twist on that cliché.

“I think he’s more, if there’s water in there, he’s gonna drink it,” Roberts said. “I don’t think that he overthinks things, whether half-full, half-empty — it’s kind of it is what it is. He shows up to play.”