

THE POWER OF HEALING

After offseason surgery, Yasmani Grandal returns to his hard-hitting ways

BY JON WEISMAN

Yasmani Grandal remembers his steals.

He had three in the big leagues before this season, the first coming on Opening Day for the San Diego Padres in 2014 — against the Dodgers, as it happens.

With the score tied, 1-1, in the bottom of the eighth inning, Grandal walked, scurried to second base on a bunt ... and then took off for third against Dodger catcher A.J. Ellis.

“It was funny,” Grandal recalled, “because it was against A.J., and the next day he was like, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’”

Grandal also remembers his triples. All two of them before 2016.

“I had one in 2012, in Marlins Park,” Grandal said. “I wasn’t able to do it in 2013 because I got hurt, but 2014 I had one in Wrigley Field.”

So you can bet Grandal won’t forget the week he had beginning July 29. That night against the Diamondbacks, he swiped his first base as a Dodger. Six days later, he legged out his first triple for Los Angeles.

If Grandal’s speed week was something for his personal memory banks, it also signaled how free and easy the Dodger catcher was feeling on the field this summer.

In 52 games from May 25 through August 9, Grandal was simply one of the best hitters in baseball, with a .404 on-base percentage and .584 slugging percentage. During that stretch, he slugged 15 home runs, including eight in July — three of those coming in a five-hit game July 8 against the Padres.

Still only 27 years old, Grandal became the first Dodger catcher to hit at least eight homers in a calendar month since Todd Hundley in 2000 and the third ever to hit three round-trippers in a game (after Roy Campanella and Mike Piazza).

Grandal was one of the main reasons the Dodgers had withstood a mountain of injuries, including one that sidelined Clayton Kershaw beginning in late June, to play their best baseball of the season, winning 23 of their first 36 games without their staff ace.

And that’s what mattered most to Grandal.

“The main goal each day when you get here is not how good you did,” he said, “but whether you can come out with a win or not.”

Two explanations for Grandal’s success stood out: his ability to keep the faith when he was injured, and to take advantage when his health rebounded.





SHOULDERING THE BURDEN

After he came in a major offseason trade that sent marquee outfielder Matt Kemp to San Diego in December 2014, Grandal briefly got off to a slow start as a Dodger, with only 10 hits in April 2015 (along with 10 walks).

But as quickly as the calendar turned to May, Grandal's bat flowered. He had two doubles and a single on May 2 and again on May 4, sandwiching a 13th-inning walkoff homer May 3.

Then on May 7 at Milwaukee, Grandal hit two singles and two three-run homers, becoming only the third player in Dodger history with at least eight RBI in a game.

The surge continued past his first NL All-Star Game selection and through the end of July. After hitting his 15th homer of the year in a three-hit game August 1, Grandal had a

.399 on-base percentage and .516 slugging percentage for the season.

However, Grandal slumped severely from that point forward. Though his plate discipline remained strong, he couldn't do anything with balls in the zone. He homered only once more in his final 105 at-bats last season, along with eight singles and a double.

In the 2015 National League Division Series against the Mets, the results were similar: 11 plate appearances, one single, one walk. His skills behind the plate, particularly in pitch-framing, kept him in the lineup, but following the season, no one was surprised to learn he would have arthroscopic surgery to repair the acromioclavicular (AC) joint in his left shoulder.

Grandal doesn't second-guess his decision to toil through the pain.

"An injury is not going to take time away from me playing in the big leagues," Grandal said. "Our careers are so short, especially a catcher, that I want to play as much as I can."

It was believed that Grandal was fully recovered heading into Spring Training this year, and he arrived with no limitations on his preparation for the 2016 season. However, in March he developed a forearm strain that limited him to 17 pre-season plate appearances and forced him to start the year on the disabled list.

Activated from the DL on April 12, Grandal came out firing, with seven hits and seven walks in his first 23 trips to the plate. But he had one more valley to withstand.

If you look at the average exit velocity of batted balls by Grandal, it holds steady above at least 97 mph through April, then dips like a ski slope to below 80 mph over the next four weeks.

In the first 24 days of May, Grandal came to bat 60 times. He had two walks, two singles, two doubles, two homers and 20 strikeouts.

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“Is it health-related?” Grandal asks rhetorically. “It was clear that last year I had to get surgery because I was injured, and I played injured. And I came into the season with another injury. Are they related? Right there, it answers your question.”

In June, it’s as if Grandal rode a chairlift back to the top of mountain.

BODY OF EVIDENCE

Grandal’s exit velocity zoomed back to the 90-100 mph range. Unfortunately for him, you couldn’t tell by the boxscores.



Though batting average has given way to more illuminating statistics in the modern era, it didn’t look good for Grandal that scoreboards were still posting a number below .200 next to his name as late as the first week of July.

But those closest to Grandal, such as Dodger manager Dave Roberts, felt it was only a matter of time before the stats reflected Grandal’s level of execution.

“Even when he was hitting .200 or .190,” Roberts said, “I can go back and recall the confidence I had in him.”

The pivotal night came July 8 at Dodger Stadium against the Padres. In the first inning, and again in the third inning, and again in the seventh inning, Grandal slammed the ball over the outfield fences — none slower off the bat than 106 mph. (He also bunted for a base hit in the fourth — one more moment for his scrapbook of speed.)

In the eighth inning, with a chance to become the first MLB catcher in history to hit four homers in a game, the ball came



off again at 106 mph, but for a line-drive single to center.

“When I lift the ball and hit it hard, it’s got a shot at going out,” Grandal said. “I’m not thinking about it. I’m literally just taking a swing and letting it do what it’s gonna do.”

Grandal settled for becoming the third MLB catcher in history, after Walker Cooper in 1949 and Victor Martinez in 2007, to homer three times in a five-hit game.

“Whoever tells you that they say, ‘I’m going to hit a home run here,’ and they’re thinking about it and they hit it, not too many guys can do that,” Grandal said. “If you think about it, it’s probably not going to happen. My main point throughout the whole season is being able to hit the ball hard, and wherever it goes, it goes.

As meaningful as that night of history is what came next. In the first month after his three-homer game, Grandal had a .456 OBP while slugging .625, for a 1.081 OPS.

You might be excused for thinking that

the way Grandal had been hitting, he was gliding around the clubhouse like after a long, relaxing stay at a spa. But the reality is, once the season begins, a catcher is never completely healthy.

Recent example: On August 8, a night in which Grandal walked, doubled and hit his career-high 17th home run, he took a hard foul ball to the shoulder in the ninth inning.

The next night, he was back in the starting lineup. And he hit another home run.

“I want to say I am pretty good at putting mental blocks and not really thinking about it — giving 100 percent of what I’ve got that day,” Grandal said. “At the end of the day, we’ll think about what we did right and what we did wrong — or what we can perfect — as to getting prepared, if I am injured, to play the next day.

“I feel fine. A catcher’s never going to be 100 percent. I do feel that I’m more agile behind home plate, my arm feels great. At the plate, I feel great too.”

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