

## **Playing to His Potential**

In 2006, the Seattle Mariners boasted two of the best young players in the game: Jose Lopez and Yuniesky Betancourt. Each was practically dripping with talent. They were naturally gifted with lightning speed, quick reflexes, and smooth coordination. As the Mariners began the baseball season with a rising tide of excitement, baseball executives, analysts, and players around the nation were asking the same question: were Lopez and Betancourt going to blossom into stars?

Jose Lopez was a skinny 23-year-old from Venezuela. A shortstop throughout the minor leagues, Lopez had recently converted himself into a smooth-fielding second baseman. Lopez surprised fans and teammates with his polish, readiness for the big leagues, and overall skill. As reporter Larry Larue stated during the season, Lopez “had a hand in most of what [went] right” for the Mariners. He was among the team leaders in RBIs, one of the team’s best defenders, and, as Larue pointed out, “one of the few players Mariners fans [wanted] to see at the plate in key situations.” Lopez was a fun player to watch because of his skill, his enormous potential, and the innocent grin he often wore during games. The young Venezuelan had his flaws—when he was hitting, he tended to be overly aggressive and pull most pitches into left field. Yet he was very advanced for a 23-year-old, and most people assumed that he would fix his flaws on offense as he matured.

Yuniesky Betancourt was the reason that Lopez no longer played shortstop. The 25-year-old shortstop from Cuba was a defensive wizard. He had soft hands, a strong, accurate arm, and, according to one veteran scout, the best range of any shortstop in the game. His manager, Mike Hargrove, compared him glowingly to Omar Vizquel, one of

the finest shortstops of all-time: "I see the same soft hands, the same good feet, the same defensive instincts. I see a much stronger arm." Hargrove reflected on Betancourt's defensive value to the team: "Yuniesky is a very good player. I wouldn't trade him playing shortstop for us for anything."

Not only was Betancourt a defensive standout, he oozed offensive potential. He was stronger than Vizquel was at the age of 25, according to Hargrove, who managed both players. He had gap power and a smooth, graceful swing. The only feature of his offense that limited him from being a good hitter was his approach at the plate—rather than waiting for a good pitch to hit, Betancourt often flailed wildly at pitches out of the strike zone. As Betancourt matured, it seemed, he would become a better hitter, and with his defensive ability, become an elite player. And just like Lopez, Betancourt played with a joy that is rare among professionals. The shortstop always had a smile on his face, Hargrove explained, and he played hard "every day, every inning, every pitch."

The 2006 Mariners fell short of the playoffs, but won 78 games. The team seemed to be poised for future success. A rule of thumb in baseball is that team success starts with good defense up the middle. With Betancourt and Lopez manning the middle infield positions, more wins seemed to be in store.

### Sandy

My running career began in middle school. Like Lopez and Betancourt, I found myself physically talented, relative to my peers. I remember, during my first race in sixth grade, cruising out to an early lead and sprinting once around the track, never looking back until I stood panting at the finish line, waiting for the remainder of the contestants to

finish. I remember the utter joy of realizing that I was naturally gifted at something. I also remember the joy of finishing faster in every successive race I ran, and the greedy delusion that it would always be like that.

For a while, improvement was easy. I dropped five seconds a race in the mile during my sixth grade season, then another ten seconds before my seventh grade season, then another ten seconds during that season. I did not yet know the meaning of training hard, but I did train, and as long as I went out and ran hard each race, I was rewarded with a faster time. The fall of my eighth grade year, I decided to dedicate myself to running, so I tried cross country through Junior Olympics.

For the first time in my life, I trained hard. And the training wore on me. My legs were constantly tired. Running became a chore. I grew sick, yet I continued to run for fear of losing the endurance that I had worked so hard to gain. When the season started, races were fun. Yet during each successive race, I was sicker and my legs were more tired. My times grew slower as the courses grew harder and the other runners became faster. I qualified for regionals, but only through a technicality. Despite running my slowest time of the season, I was among the top twenty runners in the qualifying race. Only nineteen ran.

After much deliberation, I decided to run in the regionals race that took place in Sandy, Oregon. There was very little sand in the town, but lots of mud. The race took place during a torrential downpour that transformed the race course from a trail into a giant mudslide. As fifty-five nervous runners lined up between two massive cones, gradually sinking in the sludge as the rain picked up, I wedged my way into the pack. The top twenty finishers would go on to nationals. Before the race, I had told my dad to yell

out my placement near the end of the race in case my legs magically did not hurt and I was near the front of the pack.

The gun sounded and I slipped backwards in the mud, then propelled myself forward with legs that lacked the motivation to move. I began the race near the front. But on each hill, my body slowed despite my mind's urging to speed up, and runners passed me. The race consisted of three loops, and by the second loop, I realized that this was the most miserable race in my fourteen years of existence. Yet I kept on running. When I finally sputtered up the last hill on the course, caked in mud and drenched in rain, my dad shouted out my place. "Fiftieth, Dirk," he said, the disappointment in his voice soaking through the falling rain. "Almost there."

I finished the race without walking, and when I did, I promised myself that I would never run a race again that was not fun.

### Improvement and Disappointment

2007 was an exciting season to be a Mariners fan. The team was in position to go to the playoffs for most of the season, but an unfortunate losing streak in August ruined their chances. Yet the team won 88 games—the third straight year they had improved their win total—and fans and players remained optimistic about their chances in 2008. The team still had their young middle-infield tandem in Lopez and Betancourt, who were now just 24 and 26.

Yet in just a year's time, the Mariners' infielders had lost a little bit of their luster. Lopez improved his hitting—slightly. He hit for a slightly higher average in 2007, slightly more power, and walked seven more times. Yet at the same time, he struck out

more times and gained weight, which caused him to lose a step on the base paths and on defense. He was no longer the skinny kid he had been when he first arrived in the majors. And while he had improved his hitting statistics, his approach at the plate was the same: overly aggressive, with a tendency to pull every pitch into left-field—an approach at the plate that can be easily exploited by opposing pitchers with good breaking balls. Pitchers could exploit Lopez's approach by throwing him breaking pitches out of the strike zone, either forcing a swing and a miss or a foul ball. Betancourt gained weight as well, which decreased his value in the field and on the bases. Now instead of being a great defender, he was around average for a shortstop. And his offense remained unchanged—he hit .289 for the second straight year with few walks and only modest power. Lopez and Betancourt still seemed headed for greatness. They were still talented players in their early twenties. Yet 2007, in a way, was a lost year of development.

After the 2007 season, the team added two talented pitchers before the season and returned almost every player from the team that had won 88 games a year earlier. Before the season, fans, players, and baseball analysts were talking about the potential of the team to win over ninety games and make the playoffs. If either Lopez or Betancourt or both took steps forward, the team had the potential to be great.

But the team was a massive disappointment. The Mariners won 61 games and lost 101, becoming the first team in the history of baseball to spend over a million dollars in player salaries and lose over a hundred games. The team's veterans aged quickly, the two offseason pitcher additions suffered from injuries and ineffectiveness, and the young supporting cast, including Lopez and Betancourt, could not stop the losses. Lopez improved slightly from the year before on offense, yet his offense improvement

coincided with another drop in his defense as he again gained weight. Betancourt hit worse than he had the two years prior and fielded worse than he ever had. Their disappointing seasons were masked, however, by the terrible years from practically every player on the team.

### Mental Talent

For years people have been asking what it takes mentally to succeed in sports. In 1898, Norman Triplett founded the field of sports psychology. In his paper “The Dynamogenic Factors in Pacemaking and Competition,” he discussed a strange phenomenon: bikers perform better when biking with a partner than when biking alone, even if they give the same effort in both cases. Triplett’s findings sparked an interest in studies on sports, and through the first half of the twentieth century, psychologists and sociologists set out to discover if professional athletes possessed a unique mental talent that caused them to succeed. The first wave of studies took the form of surveys, yet returned often contradictory and weakly correlated results (*Britannica*). It appeared that athletes were much the same as non-athletes mentally.

Yet recent research has overturned some of the older findings. According to Psychology Professor Michael Strube, it appears that the best athletes do, in fact, have a higher than average capacity to concentrate (Strube 1). And most importantly, the best athletes are able to perform under immense pressure and respond well to adversity. Sports greatness, of course, involves physical talent, but what separates average players from stars is, often, mentality.

As Professor Mark Anshel explains in his book *Psychology and Sports: From Theory to Practice*, only the most mentally talented individuals have the capacity not only to make it to the professional level, but to improve their game constantly when they are there. “Successful athletes differ from their less successful counterparts,” he explains, “in their faster and proper application of an array of mental skills that allow them to anticipate success, transfer skills and strategies from practice into competition, and overcome adversity, which is inherent in competitive sport” (6). Perhaps Lopez and Betancourt had the talent and put in the effort to make the major leagues, yet lacked the mental talent to improve at the major league level and become stars.

### Training Hard

Ever since my race in Sandy, Oregon, I have had a reputation as a “lazy” runner. While most runners on the track team ran year round, I took most of the year off, playing tennis in the fall, basketball in the winter, and once in a while showing up for a winter or summer training event. I did work hard. During the season, I trained hard for two and a half months, running grueling workouts with the team in order to improve my endurance for races. Yet while in middle-school I would naturally improve five seconds with each race, now the increments were smaller. I was working hard to take a few seconds off my time.

I improved each year in high school, yet only slightly. Other runners who trained year round passed me. Now, instead of being one of the fastest runners on the team, I was merely an average runner on a good team. But just like Lopez and Betancourt, I had fun. My teammates urged me every year to train during the summer and winter. Yet after

track season, I always felt completely exhausted—both physically and mentally—the way professional athletes must feel after a season, and I lacked the will to continue.

I remember my track coach—and one of my teachers—talking to me in class one day before my senior track season. “Dirk, you have the talent,” he said. “Watching you, I can see you taking off twenty seconds one race and running in the 4:20s instead of the 4:40s for a mile. If you start training in the winter, you’re going to break out.” I trained that winter—but only sporadically—and that track season, I proved my coach wrong. I did not break out. In fact, I ran no better than the year before.

Had my coach misread me? Did I actually lack the physical talent to run faster? Or was I simply lazy? I believe both of these assessments are wrong. Yes, I probably lack the physical talent to be a great runner. But I am unusual in that I am relatively fast naturally, yet training does not help me as much as other runners. While many coaches have attributed my difficulties to laziness, I can attest to the fact that I invested myself in track. I trained as hard as I could on any given day, only taking an easy day when I was exhausted.

I believe, instead, that the reason I had trouble training effectively can be explained using sports psychology. I had the physical talent to train hard, yet lacked the mental strength to bounce back after an intense day of training and train hard again the next day. I could give it my all in one race, yet lacked the mental strength to train even when I was sore, or sick, or tired. I had less ability to concentrate on running than most runners, and for this reason, I had trouble improving my times.

In *Sports Psychology in Action*, Professor R. J. Butler analyzes the situation I faced. Athletic success, he finds, involves immense mental concentration. Those athletes

who can concentrate every day on their sport find the most athletic success (6). He breaks mental strength into four major “psychological constructs”: character, strategy, confidence, and concentration. Without these constructs, he contends, athletes will never reach their full potential.

### Potential

In 2009, Yuniesky Betancourt had the worst season of his career. His batting average dropped, his defense slipped again, and his approach at the plate remained unchanged—he was still the violent hacker he had been when he first arrived in the majors. At one point during the season, his manager, Don Wakamatsu, asked the question in an interview with Larry Stone, "The biggest thing is, is he playing to his potential?" It was a valid question. Wakamatsu proceeded to bench Betancourt, explaining that “to move forward where we want to go, he's got to raise his level of game both offensively and defensively." It never happened. Betancourt was demoted to the minor leagues soon afterwards, where he committed a base-running error when he lost track of the number of outs. The next day, he was traded to Kansas City for two players who never made an impact in the major leagues. At the age of 27, Betancourt’s career had reached its nadir.

Jose Lopez had a successful age-25 season in 2009, yet in 2010, his production dropped, just as Betancourt’s had a year earlier. After gaining weight and losing agility and quickness, Lopez was moved to third base, typically less demanding than second. His batting average dropped to .239, a far cry from the .282 he had hit in 2006 as a 22-year-old. Lopez committed an ugly base running mistake late in the season and was cut by the

Mariners when the season ended. The Lopez and Betancourt era in Mariners history was over.

Both players stuck around for a while, moving from team to team, yet neither was able to revive his career. Betancourt was cut from the Royals on August 6, 2012. Fittingly, Lopez was cut from the Cleveland Indians just one day later. Lopez is still only 28 years old, and Betancourt is 30. Both players are out of baseball. They ended their careers with almost identical, and equally disappointing, batting lines.

According to statisticians Jahn Hakes and Carl Turner in *Pay, Productivity and Aging in Major League Baseball*, baseball players tend to be most productive when they are 26, 27, and 28 years old (21). Defense peaks in a player's early twenties and overall strength peaks when an athlete is 25, but players become more skilled as they gain experience, which offsets any decline in physical talent. Hake's model illustrates why many people thought Lopez and Betancourt would become stars. In actuality, Lopez and Betancourt both had their worst seasons when they should, according to historical trends, have performed the best.

Why did Lopez and Betancourt decline so early in their careers? It appears that their problems were twofold: they lost the athleticism they had in their early twenties and they did not improve their offensive approaches. Their loss in athleticism caused their defensive games to worsen, their base running to deteriorate, and their ability to reach base to decline. Yet while most players would refine their approaches to hitting as they matured to make up for their loss in athleticism, Lopez and Betancourt failed to do so.

Many sports fans and analysts have accused the duo of being "lazy." I have always had a hard time believing this assessment. It is more of an accusation than a

rational explanation. How did Lopez and Betancourt reach the majors if they were lazy? Did they really not try to be the stars everyone expected them to be? I believe they tried—just as I tried in running—yet lacked the mental talent necessary for success.

### Eyes

Tony Lucadello, a scout who uncovered and signed 52 Major Leaguers, including Hall of Famers Ferguson Jenkins and Mike Schmidt, once said that he could see talent in a young boy's eyes—not physical talent, but the mental talent that he would need to reach the majors. “In the batter's box, or signing his first contract,” Lucadello explained in an interview with Ron Grossman, “the eyes tell you a lot about a kid.” He believed there were four kinds of scouts: poor scouts, who were disorganized; picker scouts, who spent too much time analyzing a player's weaknesses; performance scouts, who put too much stock in one game; and projector scouts. Lucadello was the last type. It was not important how good a player was now; it was important how good he was going to be in ten years. And Lucadello believed he could tell much of that from a player's innate mental strength.

Lopez and Betancourt, I believe, had all the physical tools necessary to become stars, yet lacked this innate mental strength that Lucadello could detect. The duo lacked the mental strength to make small changes in their approaches on the go, amidst intense scrutiny, against pitches that traveled ninety-five miles per hour. Instead of blaming Lopez and Betancourt for being lazy, we should recognize that maybe they simply did not have the mental talent to succeed. At the same time, we should marvel at those players who possess the mentality to thrive at the major-league level. Mental talent is the

key ingredient in the world of sports. All athletes must have natural speed, strength, and instincts, but the athletes who also have great mental talent will rise above the rest.

Today, the Mariners team bears resemblance to the 2006 team. It's young, exciting, and on the rise. As I follow the team, I find myself wondering who will be the future stars of the team and who will fail. Baseball, like every sport, relies upon a constant search for the answer of the basic sports psychology question: how do we tell who has the mental strength to succeed in sports? Few have found the answer that Lucadello seemed to have mastered so many years ago.

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