

Manager Jack McKeon is leading the Marlins toward their first season above .500 since 1997 and making them a serious—albeit surprise—contender in the wild-card race.

And he's not worried about a rookie being crucial to their success.

Granted, that rookie is something special, showing no signs of being intimidated by being thrust into a playoff race. Sure, we're all caught up in Dontrelle Willis-mania. But this is the rookie in the Marlins' outfield.

It's **Miguel Cabrera**, the N.L. rookie of the month for July. He was called up on June 20 and later that day hit a 2-run walk-off homer in the 11th inning against the Devil Rays. **Cabrera**, a shortstop-turned-third baseman-turned-left fielder, had a less than spectacular June but his July got him noticed. He hit .318 with five home runs, eight doubles and 21 RBIs.

There were rumors the Marlins would trade **Cabrera** for a veteran outfielder, but McKeon stood firm, backing his rookie all the way.

"All the rumors were made up by the media, not by us," McKeon says. "We had no intention of looking for anybody."

Cabrera doesn't play like a rookie. He has

years of wisdom on most 20-year-olds, and the Marlins hope he has the maturity to carry his July numbers into the postseason.

"This guy's got the potential to be a superstar," teammate Juan Pierre says.

But he's not one yet. **Cabrera** still finds himself playing second fiddle to the Marlins' other rookie phenom, but getting left out of the spotlight glaring Willis suits him just fine. "He deserves the attention," **Cabrera** says through an interpreter. "And I don't feel left behind."

Cabrera is successful because he's aggressive at the plate—he's a .526 first-pitch hitter. Because he only has been in the majors two months, teams don't know exactly how to pitch him yet. According to Cardinals pitcher Danny Haren, knowing how to pitch **Cabrera** might not help.

"You're going to make good pitches, and he's going to hit them," Haren said after **Cabrera** got a big hit last week against Woody Williams in St. Louis. "He hit a low slider, bases loaded, and scored two runs. That tells you right there that he's going to hit any pitch."

For now, **Cabrera** is content in D-train's shadow. But this rookie is too good to hide forever. —Corrie Anderson

From trash to treasure

Check the list of players who began the week hitting .300 for the season, and you'll find numerous surprises. Milton Bradley, Bill Mueller, Melvin Mora, Jose Guillen and Marcus Giles certainly are among those who have created their share of double-takes from those of us who pore over the league leaders at the breakfast table.

None of the above, however, has caused more spilled coffee on the morning sports pages than Scott Podsednik, a fleet-footed center fielder for the Brewers. Surely you gulped the first time you saw "S. Podsednik, Mil.," among the batting leaders.

And why not? Entering the season, Podsednik never had hit better than .290 in nine minor league seasons. In two brief stints in the majors, both with the Mariners, he hit .192—and that includes a bases-loaded triple in his first at-bat in 2001. Even after he had a solid season at Class AAA Tacoma last year, the Mariners decided not to keep him on their 40-man roster.

The Brewers claimed him and brought him to spring training figuring he was a long shot to make the club. Podsednik impressed first-year manager Ned Yost with his speed and aggressiveness and started the season as a platoon outfielder. When center fielder Alex Sanchez was benched in mid-May, Podsednik seized the opportunity.

After an 0-fer in his first start, Podsednik went on an eight-game hitting streak and ignited an offense that often relies too much on home runs. Before long, Sanchez

was traded and the Brewers had a new everyday center fielder. Podsednik had a spectacular June, hitting .373 with a .453 on-base percentage and 24 runs scored. He slowed some in July but still began the week with a .300 average, best among all rookies who had enough at-bats to qualify for the batting leaders.

Is anyone surprised?

"I'd have to say yes," Mariners general manager Pat Gillick says. "When we saw him in spring training, he didn't appear to be doing anything differently."

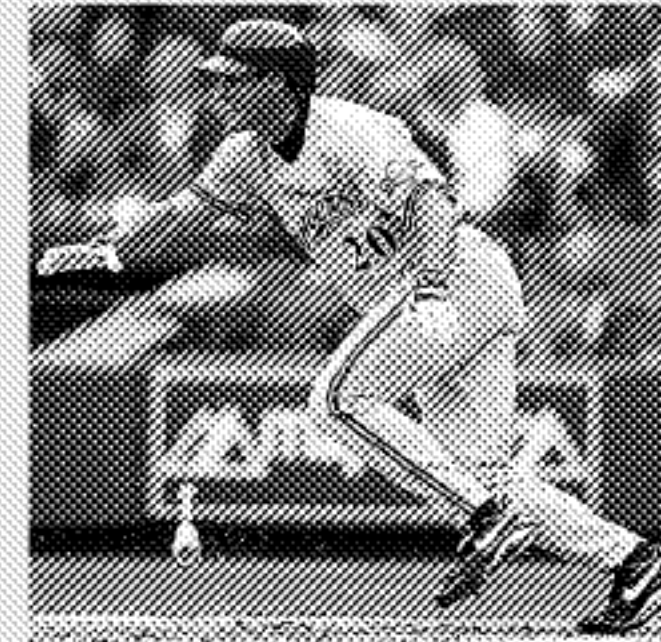
Podsednik says his success has been a carry-over from last year, when he enjoyed a rare healthy season. His speed makes him an ideal leadoff or No. 2 hitter, though the Brewers tried him in the third spot last week. Make no mistake, though, he is a hitter who, at 6-0, 170, relies on speed, not power.

"He can fly down to first base," says Lewis Shaw, a scout who analyzes players for TSN. "He's growing into an excellent drag bunter and an excellent situational hitter who can work the hit-and-run."

Though at 27 he's no longer a youngster, Podsednik still makes youthful mistakes such as chasing bad pitches, especially when he's behind in the count. Teammate Eric Young has worked with him on plate discipline and approach, and it's paying off.

"Given his bat control and increasing knowledge of his own strike zone, the holes in his swing are decreasing," Shaw says. "He is getting his mechanics to a consistent repetitive place where he will not have to think about them but just see the ball and stay on it."

If that happens, seeing "S. Podsednik, Mil.," with the other .300 hitters no longer will be cause for surprise. —Stan McNeal



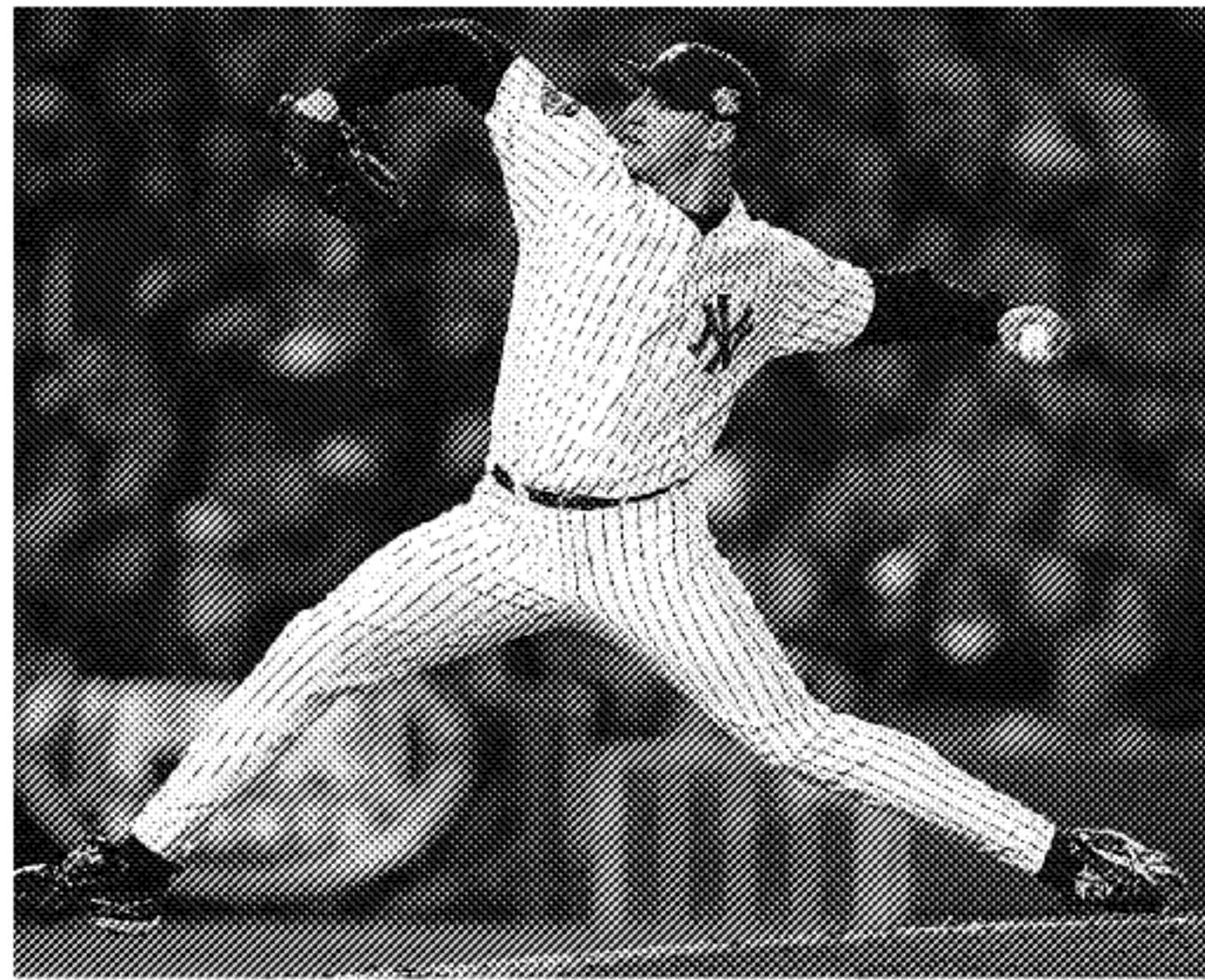
Podsednik

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you to use a slide step or alter your delivery a bit.”

Maybe the adjustment causes the pitcher to elevate the ball or miss a location. Maybe an outfielder plays shallow, guarding against a fast runner taking an extra base, and a line drive gets past him. Maybe an infielder cheats, trying to get a better break toward second, and a routine grounder skips through the vacated hole.

None of these subtleties is quantifiable by conventional measures. But, as Torre notes, the Marlins are a more dangerous baserunning team than the 2002 world champion Angels. The difference, Torre says, is that the Angels were more aggressive than fast. The Marlins are both, a portrait of disruption. **TSN**



Pettitte, who has one of the best pickoff moves in the majors, slowed the Marlins' merry-go-round to a crawl in Game 2.

JOHN DUNN FOR TSN

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Cabrera is following the family plan

Some kids grow up hoping to be firefighters or policemen or cowboys. But **Miguel Cabrera** got the idea very early growing up in Maracay, Venezuela, that his parents wanted to push him in another direction.

Like when they bought the house with a baseball diamond in the back yard. Or when his mother, a shortstop on the Venezuelan national softball team, took him to her practices. Or when gloves and bats kept popping up at Christmas time.

Turns out father—and mother—knew best. **Cabrera** signed a Venezuelan record \$1.8 million bonus as a 16-year-old. Now a 20-year-old rookie, he still isn't old enough to drink champagne legally, but he's a big reason the Marlins have sprayed the bubbly around their clubhouse three times in the last three weeks. Don't be surprised if he plays a key role in deciding who uncorks the stuff following the World Series as well.

Cabrera is evoking memories of a young Andruw Jones and Mickey Mantle with his postseason heroics. His play in October has enhanced his standing as one of the game's top young hitters. **Cabrera** was inserted into the cleanup spot during the National League Championship Series and responded by driving in four runs in the decisive Game 7. Despite starting the World Series 0-for-7, he had a postseason batting average of .275 with three homers and nine RBIs.

"I've never seen a 20-year-old kid that they couldn't get a fastball by (until **Cabrera**)," a veteran scout says. "With young hitters, the first thing they do is test you with the fastball. He answers it all the time."

Infield play is in Cabrera's genes, but the rookie has made a smooth transition to the outfield.

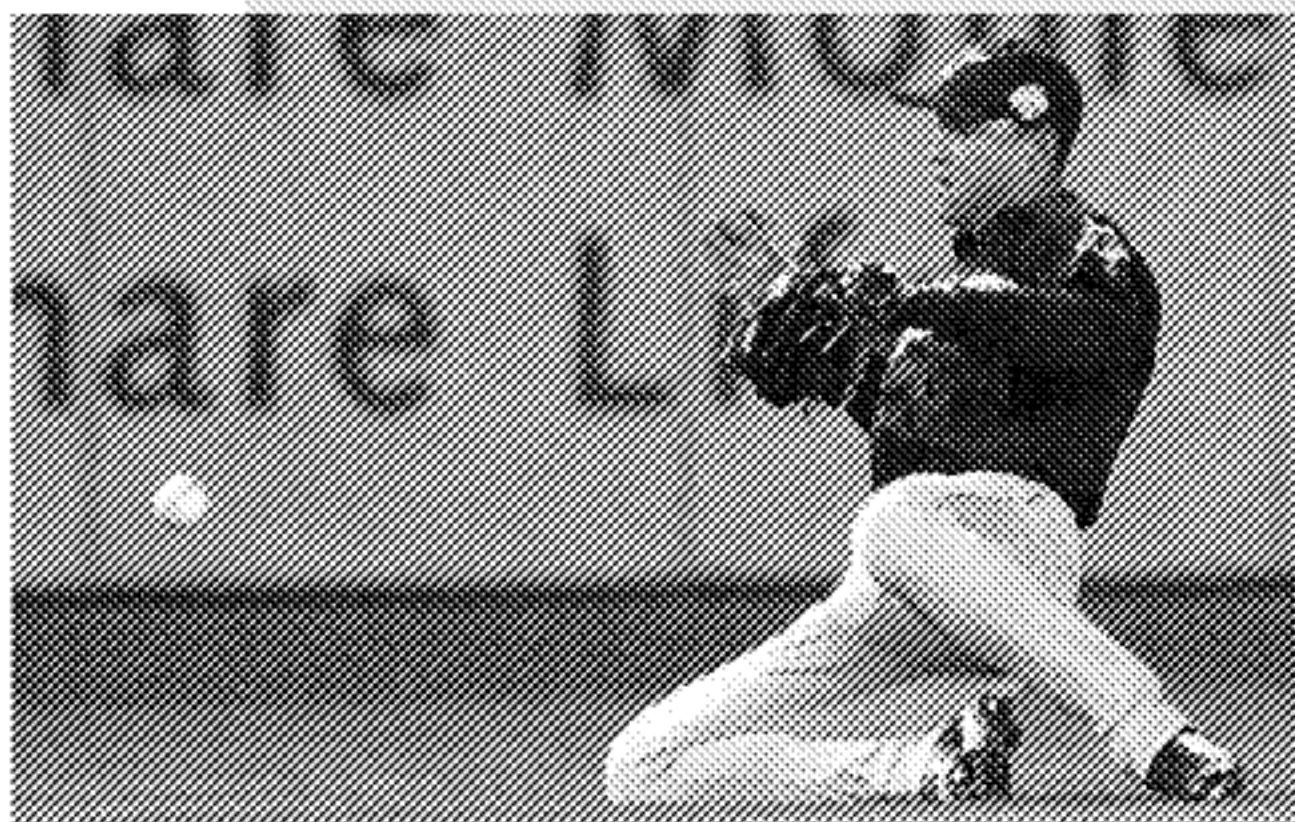
Cabrera has hit so well the Marlins have moved him all over the field to keep him in the lineup. He grew up playing shortstop, but because he's 6-2, 185, third base is considered his natural position. That's where he played when Mike Lowell was out with a broken hand. **Cabrera** started the World Series in left field after playing right for the first time since Little League in the NLCS.

Cabrera has handled postseason pressure like a veteran after struggling with his emotions earlier in the season. Marlins hitting coach Bill Robinson attributes the change to the leadership of veteran teammates and to **Cabrera's** wife, Rose Angel, who has accompanied the club on road trips.

"When I saw him earlier, he could get anxious and chase breaking balls out of the zone," the scout says. "But in the playoffs, he has quieted down. He's much more relaxed. He looks confident at the plate right now."

Cabrera doesn't know what position he'll play next season. If Lowell is traded, **Cabrera** will move back to third. If Lowell returns, **Cabrera** will stay in the outfield. At this point, he doesn't care a whole lot about where he plays, as long as he plays somewhere. After the Series, **Cabrera** plans to return to Maracay and play winter ball—as he has done every winter since he can remember.

"I want to get better," he says. "Getting to the big leagues, I've accomplished part of my goal." —Kevin Baxter



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

WORLD SERIES DISH

BY KEN ROSENTHAL

Dick Williams and **Whitey Herzog** should sit by their phones: One general manager says, only half-jokingly, that the successes of **Jack McKeon** and **Felipe Alou** might prompt a run on senior-citizen managers. "I'd be looking down the list of 70-year-olds to see who was available," the G.M. says. "I wouldn't be surprised if some of these guys get a little itch. Heck, there's no pressure on 'em." ... One executive thinks Marlins third base coach **Ozzie Guillen** could be an even better manager than the Royals' **Tony Pena**. Guillen, the executive says, not only is street-smart, but he also would run a game shrewdly and energize a team with his take-charge, old-school personality. The White Sox will interview Guillen, their former shortstop, after the World Series is over. ... Several G.M.s are disgusted by the Mets' treatment of interim G.M. **Jim Duquette**. The Mets denied Duquette permission to interview with the Mariners, apparently telling him that he could pursue that job only if they decided not to name him permanent G.M. Duquette might prefer Seattle to possible co-G.M. responsibilities with **Omar Minaya** in New York. But the Mariners could fill their job before the Mets make a decision. ... The Marlins remained in Chicago to await the outcome of Game 7 between the Red Sox and Yankees. They boarded a bus to Midway Airport with the game in progress and listened to the play-by-play on the radio. **Aaron Boone** hit his series-clinching homer in the 11th inning just as the bus was passing through a security gate on its way to the team charter. ... RHP **Mike Mussina's** stellar 3-inning relief performance in Game 7 of the ALCS rebutted any notion that he is not a big-game pitcher. Mussina's biggest problem in his two starts against the Red Sox was that lefthanded hitters went 9-for-24 with four homers against him. He has made increased use of a split-fingered fastball, and a scout says it might be having a detrimental effect on his curve, a big pitch for him against lefty batters. ... The Red Sox probably won't re-sign potential free-agent 2B **Todd Walker**, even though he hit .349 in the postseason with five home runs in 43 at-bats. The team is expected to invest heavily in pitching and figures to keep Walker only if he is willing to sign a one-year deal at a club-friendly price. Walker's lefthanded bat could appeal to the White Sox if they fail to re-sign 2B **Roberto Alomar**.