

MAR 31, 2014

WELCOME TO THE CANO SHOW

SIGNING A MEGADEAL WITH A FRANCHISE FIGHTING TO STAY RELEVANT MAKES A SLUGGER'S JOB DESCRIPTION A WHOLE LOT MORE COMPLICATED—ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE THE FIRST CLIENT OF JAY Z'S NEW SPORTS AGENCY. ROBINSON, THE MARINERS ARE NOW YOURS

GREG BISHOP

The Hardest Things to Find

ROBINSON CANO is filming a commercial. It's February, spring training at the Mariners' complex northwest of Phoenix. He is enveloped by new colleagues, but rather than just baseball players, they are producers, directors, handlers, assistants, writers and stylists, enough to cover an infield. At this moment Cano is not thinking about the worthiness of his \$240 million contract, Jay Z's foray into sports management or those who think he should run harder on routine outs. At this moment one concern overrides all others.

The Mariner Moose cannot fist-bump.

Not correctly, anyway. His attempts land too high, or with his "bump" arm too far extended. He receives pointers between takes. Not back by your body. You have to anticipate it. The Moose bends. He stretches. Action! Walk. Approach. Bump. Cut!

"As we expected, you're perfect," the director says to Cano. "We have to work with the Moose a little bit."

"Moose, you're fired!" Cano says.

"Jesus, Moose," he says more softly, smiling.

Such minute details are Cano's concern now, part of a sports experiment officially begun with his winter marriage to the Mariners. This after he dumped agent Scott Boras for Roc Nation Sports (and its partner, Creative Artists Agency Sports) and then chose Seattle over New York, and with it a history of dashed hopes over baseball's grandest tradition. That is his face on the Mariners' pocket schedules and season-ticket brochures; his bobblehead night scheduled for May; his three (three!) lockers tucked into the far corner of the spring clubhouse; his personal assistant nearby and on call.

The question here is what makes a baseball star in 2014. Big contract? Famous friends? Personality? Market size? The Cano-Seattle enterprise will provide an answer, a case study for whether crossover stardom for an elite and consistent player can be manufactured.

Cano is leaving a large media market for a smaller one and a hitter-friendly ballpark for an unfriendly one, and he's playing under the type of enormous contract that teams almost invariably regret. His clubhouse apprenticeship under Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera is over, his status as a complementary star gone. Cano will be paid and handled like a superstar, and because of the time and cash and resources involved, no less than his legacy and the next decade of baseball in Seattle is at stake.

This is Cano's new job description: Hit for average and hit for power, play high-quality defense at second base, mentor younger teammates, lure free agents, lift dwindled attendance, film commercials, make appearances, embrace a new community, restore relevance, win games, make the playoffs, contend for championships. Save baseball in Seattle, more or less.

The contradiction is this: Over nine seasons with the Yankees, Cano became an MVP candidate while making the game look easy. He played as if in slow motion, as if his swing and prowess in the field required little effort. Now effortless production won't be enough. His career has become infinitely more complicated. Everything matters now.

Even the Moose's fist bumps.

ROBINSON CANO is on an airplane—Jay Z's private plane, on a runway near Seattle. It is Dec. 5, 2013. The last of four meetings with the Mariners has just ended, and after dozens of hours of negotiations and hundreds of pages and a birthday cake with chocolate icing, Cano was about to leave town without a deal.

At the same time, the Mariners' front office contingent is heading to dinner, to the Capital Grille downtown. They have made their push. They showed off Safeco Field, where Cano highlights alternated on the big screen with clips from Jay Z concerts. They presented Cano the cake. They seized on his bruised feelings about the Yankees, the team that had found and nurtured him but refused to make an offer longer than seven years. The Mariners had made Cano feel wanted. Now they just had to pay him.

Cano's management team gave three presentations to the Mariners. First, third-party perspectives: headlines and news articles, compliments, awards. That document ran 600 pages. It took six CAA employees to compile. Second, Cano's statistics placed in historical context. That ran 80 pages. Third, something called a "consumer insights report," a survey done by a research group to see how random people viewed Cano and Jay Z and Roc Nation Sports.

The Mariners want more than a baseball player, and Cano's team sold him that way, as a cornerstone for rebuilding the brand. Seattle has lost 374 games over the past four seasons. Its last manager, Eric Wedge, walked away from a contract extension. Its president, Chuck Armstrong, retired. In the 12 years since the Mariners last made the playoffs, attendance has fallen by half.

The team's new president, longtime employee Kevin Mather, says GM Jack Zduriencik inherited a "broken" organization in 2008. The Mariners won 116 games in '01 but then tried to rebuild and contend at the same time as their roster aged. "When Jack took over, our minor league system was empty," Mather says.

Cavernous Safeco Field has long been an obstacle for potential free-agent hitters. It didn't matter who came—Adrian Beltre, Richie Sexson, Jose Vidro, Chone Figgins, Mike Cameron—when they arrived, their numbers dropped. Beltre's slugging percentage for the Dodgers in 2004, the year before he came to Seattle, was .629. His final year there, in '09, it had fallen to .379. The year after, playing for the Red Sox, he slugged .553 and has stayed above .500 ever since.

The Mariners allayed the ballpark concern by emphasizing the changes they made to their outfield wall dimensions before the 2013 season. One section, the leftfield power alley, moved in 17 feet. CAA, meanwhile, overlaid each of Cano's 27 home runs last year onto Safeco's dimensions; at least 26 would have gone out. It also presented the top hitters at Safeco with at least 150 plate appearances. Cano ranked third in batting average, behind Ichiro Suzuki and Jeter.

The question, then, was value. Even if Cano could hit at Safeco, in a lineup far less formidable than the one he left, how much was he worth? CAA argued that 10 equal installments of \$24 million represented a bargain. Their presentation suggested that the Mariners would realize \$200 million-plus in value from Cano—including value beyond his production on the field, in advertising and marketing and ticket sales, in luring free agents, in mentoring young players—years before season 10. That's why the Mariners needed the same player—but a different, more demonstrative guy.

On Jay Z's plane, Cano mulls his options. He sees a report that Jay caused a rift in negotiations and team owner Howard Lincoln had stormed out of the room. He laughs. He likes Seattle, and on previous trips there he shopped downtown and walked unrecognized through Pike Place Market. He likes the team's young pitchers. He likes the team's pitch.

Cano's agent, Brodie Van Wagenen, makes the call. "If you can do 10 years and \$240 million, we have a deal," he tells Zduriencik.

Zduriencik is still parked in front of Capital Grille. Every other decision the Mariners will make in free agency is on hold. Dinner too. Cano's stats, his durability, his consistency, the potential to transition into a DH as he ages—it all makes sense. Here is an expensive lifeline, immediate relevance and, for Zduriencik, the best chance to remain employed beyond this season.

The GM walks into the restaurant. "Guys," he says, "we just agreed to terms with Robinson Cano." The place erupts.

The brand has landed.

"I'm hip-hopped," Zduriencik says later at the news conference, his new friend Jay off to the side.

ROBINSON CANO is in the Dominican Republic. There is a band dressed in whites, women in bedazzled high heels and bright red lipstick, a priest to bless the Mariners' new baseball academy and guards at the gate. Two years ago there was a jungle here. Now this.

The academy is nice and all, but the assembled came to see Cano. The opening of the academy doubles as his public debut, after the initial news conference. The Mariners' suits are in attendance, along with Cano's agent, his father, his assistant and the rest of his entourage. Music best described as Ocean Breeze Mix booms over the loudspeakers. "Robbie!" Zduriencik says, in his football-coach khakis and his team-issued polo shirt. Cano comes in for an awkward bro hug.

Three dress shirts await Cano's selection inside the clubhouse. Someone holds his spikes as he walks inside. Someone else carries his bats. As the morning wears on, it becomes clearer that Cano functions as his own ecosystem, more similar to a boxer like Floyd Mayweather Jr. than a baseball star. This is supposed to simplify his life. It is the job of a small army of handlers to see to his obligations, to make sure he shows up, that he has shirts to choose from.

Now he is in a white Jeep idling outside the academy. Cano signals and they pull away, followed by a caravan of cars, down a dirt road, past three children on a horse and compounds lined with barbed-wire fences. Cano grew up in San Pedro de Macoris, the beginnings of the brand. He still hits every morning, Monday through Friday, at the field he built with his father near pastures with cows and horses and miles of sugarcane.

Now, at home, he leans back on his off-white couch, as a photographer snaps. Cano yawns. He yawns again. He is obliging if not charming, kind if not charismatic. He does not reveal much, and that casts doubt on the viability of this experiment: Cano may welcome added responsibility, but is he suited to it? He must connect with the hard-core baseball folks (an easy sell) and the casual sports fans (more difficult). He yawns once more.

This face-of-the-franchise stuff is exhausting.

SAN PEDRO is known as the Cradle of Shortstops. Yet it was here that the Yankees found a second baseman named after Jackie Robinson. Longtime scout Gordon Blakeley was among the first to notice: the easy swing, the soft hands, the natural hand-eye coordination. "He did the game easy," Blakeley says.

The Yankees offered Cano low six figures to sign. Cano's father, Jose, wanted more. They settled on \$150,000, or roughly what Cano will make per game under his new deal. Cano has missed just 14 games since 2007. He has smacked 204 career home runs and displayed great range at second base. He finished fifth last season in the American League MVP voting.

Cano left for Seattle and a contract three years longer and \$65 million richer than his old team offered. Early in spring training Kevin Long, the Yankees' hitting coach and a mentor to Cano, told the New York Daily News that Cano sometimes failed to hustle to first base on routine outs (a fact that anyone watching the team already knew). The critique qualified as big news early in spring training, even if it is "garbage" in the eyes of Blakeley, who adds, "O.K., so he didn't run out a ball or two. We're going to miss him. Those players are not replaceable."

The most famous Yankees, like Jeter, like Rivera, tend to embody the team's ethos. Cano thrived in those environs. He deferred. He seemed to prefer deferring. And yet "so many stars," Jose Cano says of the Yankees. "They have too many star players.

"Now," with the Mariners, "it's [just] him."

ROBINSON CANO is at a doctor's appointment in Phoenix. His driver idles in one SUV with his assistant, two friends idle in another. While everyone waits, an armored truck pulls up. Alas, it is not filled with Cano's cash.

"Big change" and "way better" is Cano's description of how his partnership with Roc Nation Sports and CAA Sports has materialized. Why he feels that way is not exactly clear. He alludes vaguely to his previous representation but does not mention Boras by name the way Jay Z did. "Scott Boras, you over baby/Robinson Cano, you coming with me," Jay rapped recently. Boras fired back, telling ESPN that Steven Spielberg could not walk into a hospital and perform neurosurgery.

Boras was diplomatic when reached by phone: "He's one of the game's greatest hitters. [Cano is] one of the most extraordinary players of the upcoming decade." He declined further comment.

Cano sees the sports partnership between Roc Nation and CAA as the future of management for brandworthy athletes. He says "everything" is better, but when pressed to clarify, he returns to two concepts: CAA's familiarity with handling celebrities and the way they handle them. He mentions the selective process, the low number of sports clients: Cano and CC Sabathia in baseball; Kevin Durant in the NBA; Hakeem Nicks, Victor Cruz and Geno Smith in the NFL; Skylar Diggins of the WNBA.

Cano's agents and their underlings handle his marketing, publicity, schedule, travel arrangements, even dinner reservations. He is shepherded from event to event. Yet the day-to-day operations of Roc Nation Sports remain shrouded in purposeful mystery. Employees sign confidentiality agreements and rarely grant interviews. This much we do know: A sports concern seems like a logical addition to Jay Z's empire. He has long been a visible presence at sporting events. He helped bring the Nets to Brooklyn, even held a small ownership stake. He befriended star players and dropped references to athletes in songs.

Jay Z is accessible and at least somewhat involved. Cano and Van Wagenen address him as Jay. He sits in on major negotiations, although those who've been there say he rarely speaks. Then there's Jay Z's burgeoning friendship with Zduriencik, the older, bald executive from Pennsylvania whose new joke is that he was the original JZ. They dined together during negotiations. Zduriencik watched Dreamgirls recently, which stars Beyoncé, Jay Z's wife. (Review: "Loved it.")

Back from the doctor and outside his rental home, Cano says he does not want to expand his crew beyond its current sizable scope. No new friends, he says. He is asked what he hopes to gain from the CAA partnership, if he sees acting in his future, or music, the various pursuits of a young, marketable celebrity. No, he says. What, then? Your brand as a baseball player? Endorsements? That kind of stuff?

He nods. "That's what I'm focused on right now. That's what I am."

So you feel like a company? A corporate creation? Robinson Cano Enterprises? He laughs. "No, no, no. I'm just me."

ROBINSON CANO is at spring training, on the first day of team workouts, nary a pinstripe in sight. Autograph hounds gather near the exits. Felix Hernandez, Seattle's ace, is among the first to say hello.

A year ago Hernandez signed his own megadeal: seven years and \$175 million, which he accepted despite a roster of teammates almost unrecognizable to the casual sports fan. Now, Cano. They share the same barber, based in the Bronx, and the same task of ending the Mariners' 12-year playoff drought. No longer must Hernandez carry the franchise alone. Cano will "take a few interviews and a few autographs," he says, "and that is good."

The Mariners added outfielders Logan Morrison and Corey Hart this off-season. They boast an enviable core of young arms. Zduriencik was asked if Cano's signing served as an answer to critics who have pressed for a big move. "Robinson Cano is a good answer to anything," he says.

The ideal: Cano plays like a perennial MVP candidate, Hernandez pitches like one, both enter the Hall of Fame as Mariners, and a franchise defined by mediocrity for a generation of fans imitates their downtown neighbors, the Super Bowl champion Seahawks. Hernandez says he has visualized a Mariners parade. He says he would imitate Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch, who rode on the hood of a float and took a slug from a bottle of Fireball whiskey someone handed him.

Cano can be the quarterback, Russell Wilson.

ROBINSON CANO is filming a commercial. He is inside the bathroom of the Mariners' minor league clubhouse, surrounded by 20 or so production types, a camera zoomed in close, shaving cream lathered on his face.

He will soon lace a single on the first pitch of his new life. He will have some dental work done and miss a handful of exhibition games. He will tell CBS Sports that the Mariners need to acquire another bat.

"We should just roll the camera and let Robbie shave," the director says.

He turns to Cano. "Just forget about us and shave, O.K.? We'll see how this all works out."

The Mariners need Cano to be the same player he was in New York—only more demonstrative.

BOOM TIME

Maybe Robinson Cano can flourish at SAFECO FIELD after all. The Mariners made their outfield dimensions more hitter-friendly before last season, and the place isn't the offensive graveyard it once was. In 2012, Safeco ranked last among AL ballparks in home runs (116). Last year it was fifth (170)—and as this plot shows, all but one of Cano's 27 home runs in 2013 would have left the Safeco yard.

Where Cano's 2013 home runs would have landed at Safeco Field.

[The following text appears within a chart. Please see hardcopy or PDF for actual chart.]

500'

450'

400'

350'

300'

DATA FROM HITTRACKERONLINE.COM

PHOTO

Photograph by ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

EMERALD STATE OF MIND Cano won't really tend the Safeco infield, but the Mariners are counting on him to raise their profile—and to continue to rake at the plate.

PHOTO

JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE (CANO AND JAY Z)

THE MARINER AND THE MOGUL Rookie agent Jay Z (with Cano) took a hands-on approach in negotiating for his first baseball client.

PHOTO

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CANO ACTION)

[See caption above]

PHOTO

TONY GUTIERREZ/AP

FLUID AND DYNAMIC Cano's smooth style strikes some critics as lackadaisical, but the Mariners believe he'll inspire teammates and attract other free agents.

PHOTO

ROD MAR; HOME RUN GRAPHIC BY LYNNE CARTY

CHART

JUN 5, 2006

ROBINSON CANÓ

YANKEES SECOND BASEMAN

LUIS FERNANDO LLOSA

On his idealpastime at home in San Pedro de Macorís, D.R.
Chilling with my buddies at the corner store. We pull up a bench and hang outall afternoon, into the night. We cook on a carbon stove and make chercha.Chercha is laughing, joking and talking about everything.

On his idealpastime in New York
Hanging out in my barbershop with my Dominican friends. It's two minutes fromYankee Stadium. I sit there with the guys and talk and listen to music. It'svery nice there.

On the impact ofhis father, José
I didn't see him often because he was playing baseball. But when I had vacationfrom school, he'd take me with him. He took me to Mexico, where he was in thesummer league every year for five years. He taught me that without disciplineyou can't get anywhere.

On the impact ofhis mother, Claribel Mercedes
We never talk about baseball. Nada, nunca. She was always concerned that Irespect my elders and become someone. She taught me to study hard. My parentswere on top of me. Even though my dad was overseas, he'd call and ask where Iwas, what I was doing, who I was with.

On Derek Jeter'simpact
My first experience was when I did [a TV] interview with my shades on. Jetertold me, "Next time don't do that. People will think you're cocky."This year he told me to remember that no one is secure in this game. He said,"I have to keep working too. Nothing is certain."

On hisnicknames
They call me Ray Charles because they say I've got a big smile like him. AndJeter doesn't call me Canó; he calls me Canoe.

On his first bigleague slump
Oh! When I first got here, I went 2 for 23. Joe Torre helped. We were playingSeattle, and I hit a ground ball my first at bat. He said, "Keep swinging.You are swinging very well." After that I hit a single. Then a double.That's what motivated me. Having the support of the jefe.

On his livingarrangements
I live in New Jersey with my mom. She cooks and everything. I get home and Iforget about what happened in the game. We chat; I might go to the movies.

On immigrants
Immigrants do the work nobody else wants to do. In the Dominican Republic,Haitians do jobs like chopping sugarcane. Immigrants who work hard to make abetter life for themselves should be given a chance.

On his favoriteballplayer of all time
Bernie Williams. I've been a Yankees fan since I was a kid. [Williams] alwaysgets the job done. And he's always humble.

--As told to LuisFernando Llosa, who translated this interview from Spanish

A BIG LEAGUESOPHOMORE, CANO, 23, WAS BATTING .303 WITH 19 RBIS FOR THE YANKS.

PHOTO

Photograph by Michael J. Lebrecht II/1Deuce3 Photography

PHOTO

JOHN IACONO (CANO PLAYING)

JUN 28, 2010

SECOND TO NONE

TOM VERDUCCI

Unwanted by many in baseball—even his own Yankees—Robinson Cano has become one of the best hitters in the game

Yankees hitting coach Kevin Long rolls a protective screen to home plate, placing it so that it acts as a wall running along the third base side of the plate, and flips baseballs from 20 feet away to Robinson Cano, the Yankees' lefthanded-hitting second baseman. Long's drill is the equivalent of batting in a phone booth. Cano is blocked from hitting the ball to the opposite field, and he must eliminate the stride or "drift" into the pitch, the exaggerated swaying of his hips.

What happens next is, in the expert opinion of Long, "amazing." It is not just that Cano, given the constraints of the drill and the little stored energy from a baseball flipped from 20 feet, launches a ball into the rightfield seats at Yankee Stadium. It is that he does it repeatedly and with ease. "The number of times he hits it out, over and over again, and to hit it that far. ... There aren't many guys who can do that," Long says.

Devastation never looked so pretty as it does when Robinson Cano swings a bat. Cano's pass at the baseball is as smooth as the Glimmerglass of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales. Rarely in the history of second basemen has a swing been this magical.

At age 27, Cano has become one of the best players in the game and one of the greatest slugging second basemen since Hall of Fame legend Rogers Hornsby more than 80 years ago. Through Sunday, Cano led the major leagues by far in batting average (.367; nobody was within 27 points of him), led the American League in hits (97) and total bases (164) and ranked behind Miguel Cabrera and Justin Morneau in slugging (.614). Only Fred Dunlap (in 1884), Nap Lajoie (1901) and Hornsby (seven times in the '20s) slugged .600 as second basemen.

They're the kind of stats that call to mind not just Cooper's Glimmerglass but also the eponymous hometown of the author's family. "I just said to [Yankees scout] Vic Mata when Robbie's name came up, 'Maybe one day we'll be in Cooperstown,'" says Yankees special assistant Gordon Blakeley, who, with Mata, signed Cano out of the Dominican cradle of ballplayers, San Pedro de Macoris, in 2001.

The one element about Cano that is even more inspirational than his stroke is his story. Cano is a baseball anomaly: the elite player nobody saw coming, not even his own team and especially not the teams that turned him down in trades or chose not to sign him—even one team with a scout who was his next-door neighbor.

Cano was a slow-footed, free-swinging .278 hitter in the minor leagues. In the majors he is a career .312 hitter, one of 18 active .300 hitters with at least 3,000 plate appearances, but a rare one who is far better as a big leaguer than a minor leaguer. Of those 18 active .300 hitters, all of them had minor league averages within 25 points of their big league average except for three outliers: Magglio Ordoñez (43 points better as a major leaguer), Matt Holliday (plus-40) and Cano (plus-34).

Said Blakeley, "If you asked people if they thought Robbie Cano was going to be an All-Star and maybe the best second baseman in the game, nobody would have told you that, including myself."

Jose Cano, Robinson's father, did not underestimate his son's potential, not even from birth, when the elder Cano named him after Jackie Robinson. Jose, who pitched professionally for more than a decade, including six games with the 1989 Astros, was so convinced of his son's talent that when Robinson was a teenager Jose scared off most major league teams, including Houston, with signing bonus demands in the low six figures. Julio Linares, an Astros scout, was the Canos' next-door neighbor in the Dominican Republic. "He said, 'Man, we don't give that kind of money here,'" Robinson recalls.

The Red Sox arranged a tryout for Cano, but scheduled it for the same day he happened to be taking a final exam in school. He missed the tryout. The Mets did give Cano a tryout and wanted to sign him, but their scout, Eddy Toledo, told Jose that the club could not meet his asking price. "I talked to his father and told him, 'Your son is going to be a good player in the major leagues, but I don't have that \$250,000 you're asking for,'" recalls Toledo, now a Rays scout.

The Yankees, in the early years of their modern-day oligarchy, didn't blink. They had just won the 2000 World Series, their third straight world championship and fourth in five years, and were about to launch their own groundbreaking regional television network. Their attendance had jumped by about a million in the championship run, with another million still to come.

Damon Oppenheimer, the Yankees' director of scouting, was in the Dominican Republic that winter when Blakeley called him and said, "I've got a guy who's going to be at the field today who I think can really hit. He doesn't run well, so a lot of teams may not be on him."

Cano ran 60 yards in about 7.3 seconds; most teams prefer a middle infielder cover the distance in under seven seconds. "I wasn't going to pay attention to [the time]," Oppenheimer says. "Gordon was right—he could really hit. Gordon said, 'It's going to take some money, but I'd do it.' I said, 'Yeah, we need to sign him.'"

On Jan. 2, 2001, the Astros signed 35-year-old third baseman Charlie Hayes for \$500,000; Hayes would hit .200 with no home runs in what was his last year in baseball. Three days later, the Mets signed 25-year-old utility infielder Jorge Velandia, a career .143 hitter, for \$200,000; Velandia would go hitless that season and bat .149 in his 47-game career with the Mets. And on the same day, the Yankees signed 18-year-old Robinson Cano for \$150,000. "My dad stayed up from seven until two in the morning just to do my contract," Cano recalls. "Teams just wanted to give me like 20 [thousand dollars], and my dad was like, 'Come on.' That was the one thing about my dad. He would say, 'I know your talent. I know you. I've been in this game a long time. I'm not going to give you away for free.'"

Cano made such little impact, however, over his first three years in the Yankees' minor league system, hitting .261, that he was nearly traded three times in three months in 2004. First, the Yankees offered him to the Rangers in April as the player to be named later in the trade that sent Alfonso Soriano to Texas and brought Alex Rodriguez to New York. Texas said, "No thanks," to Cano and instead took shortstop Joaquin Arias, who has played 72 career games with Texas.

In June, while he was in Double A, the Yankees moved Cano to third base to display him there for a possible trade with Kansas City. The Yankees offered Cano and catcher Dioner Navarro for centerfielder Carlos Beltran. The Royals declined and instead traded Beltran to Houston for third baseman Mark Teahen, catcher John Buck and pitcher Mike Wood.

One month after that, New York offered Cano to the Diamondbacks in an attempt to get Randy Johnson. The Diamondbacks passed. Six months later Arizona did trade Johnson to the Yankees, but instead of taking Cano the D-Backs took veteran pitcher Javier Vazquez, pitcher Brad Halsey and Navarro. Meanwhile, the Yankees, not sold on Cano themselves, signed Tony Womack to a two-year contract to play second base.

Womack promptly flopped. One month into the 2005 season the Yankees decided to give Cano a shot as their second baseman. After his first 23 at bats he had two hits and no walks. "[Manager] Joe Torre called me into his office," Cano recalls. "I thought I got sent down. He said, 'Robbie, don't worry. Keep swinging. The hits are going to fall for you one day.' The next game I had two hits, and a week later I was hitting over .300."

Cano alternately astounded and confounded the Yankees. In 2006, for instance, he hit .342, won a Silver Slugger as the league's top-hitting second baseman and was named an All-Star. But over the next two years his batting average dropped to .306 and then .271. In '08, the same year New York signed him to a four-year, \$30 million contract, manager Joe Girardi benched Cano for failing to hustle after a groundball that bounced off the glove of Jason Giambi. The episode confirmed the long-held suspicion of some critics that Cano's smooth style of play lacked proper effort.

"I talk to Derek Jeter all the time," Cano says. "Three or four years ago, in Anaheim during batting practice, he told me, 'Listen, I know you work hard because I know you. And you come to play every day. But you know what? Don't let these people label you as a lazy guy. Because I know you're not lazy. But if you let them put that label on you, you can work hard but you'll still have that label.'"

"Man, you know what? I wish people could see how I work."

Still, Cano knew that his disappointing 2008 season, in which he mostly batted seventh, called for change. Long flew to the Dominican Republic that December to work with him on his hitting mechanics—pulling the ball, pitch selection and cutting down his trademark glide in the box—and conditioning. "He was kind of soft, kind of big—not lean," Long says. "At that time the kid was a little down and out and not feeling good about himself. And there was a concern among baseball people, you know, 'This guy's got to turn the corner.'"

Cano bounced back in 2009 with a .320 season that included a career-best 25 home runs, 13 of which he pulled, though he hit just .207 with runners in scoring position. "This year's focus is keeping everything we had and now adding to the package: driving in runs," Long says. "We need him more than ever. If anybody is important to our lineup this year, it's Robinson Cano. He's Number 1. We lost Johnny [Damon] and Hideki [Matsui]. We brought in some new pieces, but we had a very big chess piece we could now put in the checkmate position: Cano."

The Yankees moved Cano into the fifth spot in the order, behind Rodriguez. He has hit .386 with runners in scoring position.

"I talked to A-Rod, and I listened," Cano says. "He said, 'Don't go up there and change your mind-set just because there are men in scoring position. If you try just to get any hit, you might get lazy, and you'll see what it does to your swing. Just go up there the same as if you had no one on base: Wait for a pitch you can drive.'"

"You know what? It works. If they don't want to pitch to you, just go to first base. You keep your average up, your OBP goes up, everything is going to be better."

On June 8, for instance, Cano batted against Kevin Millwood of Baltimore with a runner at second and one out in the fifth inning of a game the Yankees led 6--2. Millwood threw him four straight changeups. Cano took them all for balls. "That's the kind of thing where I said, 'Wow, A-Rod was right,'" Cano says. "They were going to pitch to [Jorge] Posada after me."

Says Millwood, "The toughest part about Cano is that he hits the ball in, he hits the ball out, he hits the ball up, he hits the ball down. There's nowhere to go with him. He has no holes. You have to pitch to the guys in front of him—and that's [Mark] Teixeira and A-Rod. He's always been a good hitter. He's just gotten better."

After Cano hit .400 in April, he told Long, "April was no fluke." After he hit .336 in May, he told him, "May was no fluke." He is hitting .377 in June. He is delivering the message month by month, hit by hit, drill by drill, beautiful swing by beautiful swing, not just to his coach, but also to himself: This Robinson Cano is far better than the one who often went unwanted, and yet not as good as the one yet to come.

"I don't want people to say, 'Oh, Robbie Cano. He made it to the big leagues,'" he says. "I want to be a great player. I want to follow these guys. A-Rod is already a Hall of Famer, and he works hard. Jeter's already a Hall of Famer, and he works hard. Teixeira has seven great years. Posada puts up great numbers as a catcher.

"So I don't want to be just another guy who played with Teixeira, A-Rod, Jeter. No, I play with them, and because of them I work hard to be like them—or even better than them."

Now on SI.com

Find out where Cano ranks in the MVP race in Cliff Corcoran's awards watch at SI.com/mlb

Cano is a rare hitter who is far better as a big leaguer than a minor leaguer.

"If anybody is important to our lineup this year," Long says, "it's Robinson Cano."

PHOTO

Photograph by RAY STUBBLEBINE/REUTERS

YANKEE RIPPER Cano leads the AL in average, hits and total bases, and at age 27, he has numbers comparable with Hornsby's.

PHOTO

ERICK W. RASCO

NO TAKERS The Yankees tried to unload Cano, then a minor leaguer, to the Rangers, Royals and D-Backs with no success.

PHOTO

WINSLOW TOWNSON