

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."

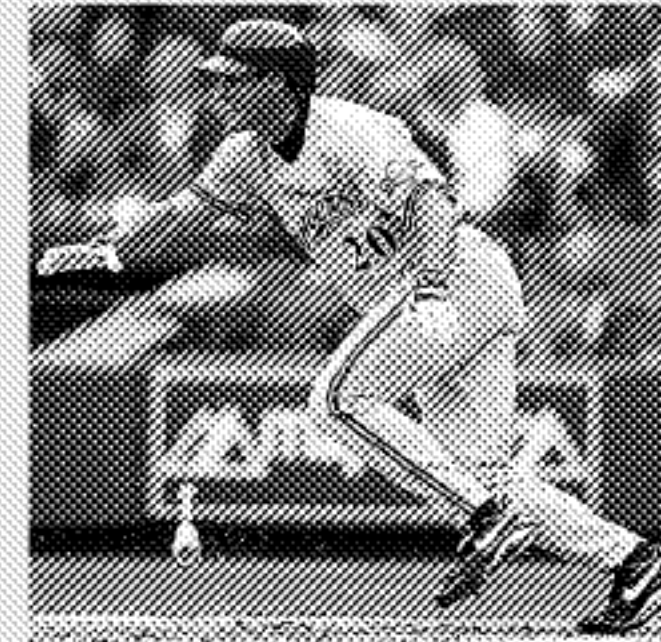
Podsednik says his success has been a carry-over from last year, when he enjoyed a rare healthy season. His speed makes him an ideal leadoff or No. 2 hitter, though the Brewers tried him in the third spot last week. Make no mistake, though, he is a hitter who, at 6-0, 170, relies on speed, not power.

"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