Journey of a Star
Ivan Nova Looks to 2012

In Latin, the term “nova” means “new” and while the rise of New York Yankee pitching sensation, Ivan Nova, appears sudden and almost overnight, his journey to the top has been and continues to be nothing short of hard work, endurance, perseverance, and humility. At only 25 years of age, Nova’s voyage as an athlete, husband, and father should serve as a model and inspiration to Latinos, especially Latino athletes, everywhere.

Nova was born in 1987 in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic, a small city located near the southern coast of the island, about a half-hour from the capital of Santo Domingo. With a population of roughly 220,000 residents, San Cristobal is best known as the birthplace of former Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, who by all accounts, was a huge baseball fan. Other notable major leaguers from San Cristobal include Minnesota Twins pitcher, Francisco Liriano and Anaheim Angels starter, Erwin Santana. Indeed, San Cristobal’s mayor is former Los Angeles Dodger, Raul Mondesi.

The Yankees first signed Nova at age 17 as an undrafted free agent back in 2004. The 6’4” right-handed pitcher labored at Class A minor league baseball for about five years in places such as Tampa, Florida, Charleston, South Carolina, Trenton, New Jersey, and Scranton, Pennsylvania - all places with vastly different cultures and significantly colder climates than San Cristobal. It was not until the 2009 and 2010 seasons that he pitched well enough to be shuttled back and forth from the minors to the majors by the Yankee organization and he took full advantage of his opportunity. Displaying tenacity and a keen ability to handle the pressure of playing baseball in New York, whether as a replacement starter or in short relief, his performance earned him a spot on the 2011 Yankee rotation. And so, at the tender age of 24, Nova’s hard work allowed him to achieve his dream with an added dimension - playing in the Big Show for one of the most successful sports franchises in the capital of the world.

As we all know, nothing is ever easy and midway through the 2011 campaign, in early July,

despite having posted a 4-1 record (tied for second on the team with wins) and a 3.35 earned run average, the Yankees unexpectedly sent Nova back to the minor leagues to make room for pitcher, Phil Hughes, who was coming off the disabled list. Being sent back to the minors after exceeding expectations was difficult to swallow and while a predictable reaction may have included throwing a chair or punching a wall, approaches we might have all taken and later regretted, he maintained his composure.

Although he admits that after manager, Joe Girardi, told him the team had decided to send him back down to the minors “his mind went blank,” Nova displayed maturity beyond his years viewing the demotion as simply a slight bump in the road rather than a full-blown detour.

His reaction did not go unnoticed and when commenting on the situation, the Yankee skipper observed that Nova handled it like a man and a professional. To say that he used the demotion as motivation is an understatement. So much so that when the Yankees called him back to the majors at the end of July, relishing his second chance as if it were his last, Nova mustered another 12 victories to finish the season with 16 wins, the most by a Yankee rookie since 1968, with only 4 losses. He totaled 98 strikeouts with a 3.70 earned run average, pitched and won Game 1 of the divisional series against the Detroit Tigers and started the deciding Game 5 against the Tigers. Game 5’s start was, unfortunately, cut short after pitching only 2 innings because of weakness in his right forearm. An MRI later revealed that he had, in fact, suffered a Grade 1 flexor strain. All this led Nova, who still recalls the first time he struck out Tiger slugger, Miguel Cabrera, to finish fourth in the voting for the 2011 American League Rookie of the Year award.

With one solid year under his belt, Nova has not let his success and celebrity-status interfere with his family life and his roots. At a baseball signing held on a cold December day at the Roosevelt Field Mall in Long Island, New York, he explained that during the season he stays in the Bronx, close to Yankee Stadium, which he calls his favorite place to pitch and in the off-season, he goes back to the Dominican Republic. He still listens to merengue and bachata and is a fan of Dominican and Dominican-American music stars like Hector (El Torito) Acosta, Omega El Fuerte, and the now dis-banded Aventura. Rather than celebrate wins by enjoying the New York City night-life, Nova prefers to go home and enjoy time with his wife and kids, almost as if to thank them for his success.

There is, however, little question that Nova has arrived. In a recent interview on the YES network, he described when he and his family arrived at the airport in the Dominican Republic following the 2011 season, there were 4 or 5 bus loads of people waiting for the Dominican-born major leaguers. While he embraced the moment with fans, he did not forget his family, mentioning that he told his family not to be scared. Judging from this example, Nova has his feet firmly planted - something he will no doubt need in 2012.

Last year's headlines on Nova's stellar pitching ranged from "A Champagne Super Nova?" to "What Went Right: Ivan Nova." His success, of course, has brought far more expectations and 2012 is already shaping up to be vastly different than 2011. Nova comes to spring training having secured a spot on the Yankee rotation and appears set to take the mound right behind Yankee ace, CC Sabathia – clearly a result of his hard work in 2011. The strained right forearm injury he suffered in Game 5 of the Tiger series is completely healed and he worked hard in the off-season to improve his pitching.

While Nova still creates a buzz, the attention that may have otherwise been focused on him this year appears to have been diverted to questions about the Yankees' off-season pitching acquisitions. Specifically, fellow Dominican, Michael Pineda, whom the Yankees obtained from the Seattle Mariners, for catching prospect, Jesus Montero, and relief pitcher, Hector Noesi, both of whom he played with in the minors and considers friends, and the former Dodger pitcher, Hiroki Kuroda. With Nova's 2011 success and the fact that he is no stranger to adversity, Pineda and Kuroda may benefit from asking him for advice on what it takes to pitch to New York because right now Nova's journey to stardom continues in the right direction.

Words by Cesar A. Perez