Cover Story - Issue 95

ROBINSON CANO WAS AN UNKNOWN LEFT-HANDED HITTER WHEN THE NEW YORK YANKEES RECRUITED HIM OUT OF SAN PEDRO, DR. BUT WITH A STELLAR 2010 CAMPAIGN, BASEBALL HAS WITNESSED THE IMPORTED SECOND BASEMAN TRANSFORM INTO LEAGUE MVP.

Words By Dave Gil de Rubio, Photography by Josh Dehonney

It's the morning of an afternoon game against the Detroit Tigers, a team the New York Yankees has taken two-of-three matchups from during this mid-August, four-game home-stand at Yankee Stadium. All-Star Robinson Cano is seated at his locker, pulling on warm-up gear and laughingly chatting in Spanish with teammate Sergio Mitre. He stops long enough to autograph a box of baseballs a locker room attendant brings by before grabbing his glove to head out to the diamond for an intense, twenty-minute session of fielding groundballs. It’s a routine that started under prior fielding coach Larry Bowa and has continued under successor Mick Kelleher. So it's no surprise that the 27-year-old second baseman only has three errors to his name through 142-games and is a strong contender to win his first Gold Glove. But unlike second basemen of the past, better known for stellar defense but weak hitting, Cano is a new breed of middle infielder whose bat is as feared as his glove.

In the prior night's 9-5 Yankees victory, hitting in the cleanup spot for an injured third baseman Alex Rodriguez, Cano went back-to-back with teammate Mark Teixeira, hitting his 23rd homerun of the season and finishing the game 1-for-3 with two walks. Already the owner of a 2006 Silver Slugger -an award given to the player with the highest batting average at his position- the Dominican native is also very much in the conversation for the American League’s Most Valuable Player award this season alongside Detroit's Miguel Cabrera and Josh Hamilton of the Texas Rangers.
With a roster overflowing with superstars including Derek Jeter, A-Rod, Teixeira and C.C. Sabathia, it's easy to overlook Cano as not only a game-changer for his team, but as a potential 2010 MVP.

For Hall of Fame second baseman Joe Morgan, a two-time National League MVP himself, Cano is having the kind of season that merits winning the coveted prize. "He's been the most consistent player on that team, which helps when you talk about MVP voting," Morgan explains. "He's been consistent from Opening Day, but now that other guys are getting hot and having a good month, people are saying this guy or that guy is in the race. The race to me goes from the first game of the season to the end."

Yankees hitting coach Kevin Long echoes Morgan’s sentiment. "If [voters] put everything into play, he should have a legitimate shot. When you think about Alex [Rodriguez] being out and [Robinson] in the four-spot, what he did there and what he's done on defense, he has to have a legitimate shot I would think," Long says with a grin. "And our team is in first place, we have the best record and he plays every day. I know Josh Hamilton is having a good year but he hasn't played every day. He doesn't do what Robbie does day-in and day-out. And Miguel Cabrera is on a Tigers team that's not very good. So I would say [Robbie] has got a pretty good shot."

A-Rod also pledged support for his teammate during an interview with NBC Sports, earlier in the year. "Robinson Cano is a fantastic player. He has to be in the MVP talks for me,” Rodriguez revealed. “It's unfortunate that some of [the media] aren't in New York and you don't get to see how great this kid is. What most people talk about is his hitting skill, his power. But his work ethic is off the charts. He is an incredible defensive player. Most people don't know that. He's as good as it gets."

The son of former major league pitcher Jose Cano, Robinson Cano was born on October 22, 1982, on the Dominican Republic, in the small city of San Pedro de Macoris. San Pedro is ironically known as the "Cradle of Shortstops" thanks to the fact that an inordinate amount of current and past major league players were born here, including Sammy Sosa, Alfonso Soriano and Tony Fernandez. Even though his father had played in the majors (including six-games with the 1989 Astros), playing baseball wasn't something expected of Cano. Although, his father named him after the late-great Jackie Robinson¬, Robbie doesn't remember feeling any pressure to get into the family business. What he does have are fond memories of his dad's playing days. "I always loved playing the game. My father taught me a lot about baseball and I would spend time with him during the summer when I didn't have school," Cano recalls. "He

would let me ride the buses and the pitcher would be allowed to sleep on a little bed in the back. I used to love spending those times with him."

Baseball was a constant in the young Cano's life. It’s a game he can't remember not ever playing and while legendary second baseman Roberto Alomar was the one infielder he looked up, the young left-handed slugger idolized Bernie Williams. "He was my favorite player growing up, so you can imagine how excited I was when I finally got to play on the same team with him," admits Cano with laughter. And while he ended up seeing his dreams come true when he was signed by the Bronx Bombers as an amateur free agent on January 5, 2001, Cano could have easily ended up on another team.

If it wasn’t for Jose Cano’s unwavering faith in son’s ability, Robinson’s dream of becoming a Yankee would have been deferred. Among the suitors kicking the tires on the young prospect were the Houston Astros, Boston Red Sox and the Yankees NYC subway rivals the Mets. But rather than jump at the first offer, the elder Cano held out for six figures, something other teams balked at, but the Yankees sealed the deal when they inked his son to a $150,000 dollar contract.

In his first three years under the Yanks minor league system, Cano was a fairly non-descript player, only hitting .261 during that time. Team execs thought so little of the rookie’s prospect that he almost ended up being a trade piece in three separate deals in early 2004. He was showcased as a third baseman and packaged together with catcher Dioner Navarro in the hopes of getting Kansas City Royals centerfielder Carlos Beltran. Cano was also offered as part of the Yankees' initial overtures to get pitcher Randy Jackson from the Arizona Diamondbacks. The opening salvo was when Robinson was one of five prospects, on a list of players, to be named later in a trade that sent Alfonso Soriano to the Texas Rangers for Alex Rodriguez.

It's something Ray Negron, the Yankees’ community advisor, remembers well as he was working for the Rangers at the time. "That spring, the Texas Rangers sent me and our head scout, Tom Giordano, to look at these five players," he recollects. "I went because I'd been with the Yankees for a long time, so I knew their system and I had always maintained my relationship with the organization. I got to know Robbie Cano, hanging out with him at night and all that kind of stuff. He knew why I was there and the one thing that he practically did was beg me not to take him because he always wanted to be a Yankee. To me, this kid was supposed to be a Yankee."

The Rangers ended up taking shortstop Joaquin Arias, who has played less than 100 career games for Texas up through the present day. The following year, Cano was brought up to play second base and replace expensive free agent flop Tony Womack on May 3, 2005.

While Cano finished the season hitting .297 and won the 2006 Silver Slugger with a .342 mark, there were definite growing pains. The upstart struggled in his transition from the minors to the majors, ranging from getting benched by then-manager Joe Torre for not hustling after a ball to seeing his average descend during the 2007 season to bottom out at .271 in 2008. That same season, Yankees current Manager Joe Girardi also benched Robinson for multiple games after he failed to move towards a ground ball during an August game against the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. For a young player whose hitting had drawn comparisons to Hall of Famers Rod Carew and George Brett, from Torre and Bowa respectively, it was time for Cano to build on the natural talents that got him to the MLB. This meant tapping into an omnipresent and diligent work ethic often overlooked by critics who felt his fluid grace on the field was more a product of showboating than raw ability."He was so advanced as a player from the standpoint of his confidence of himself that the perception was that he was a hotdog or maybe lazy. And nothing could have been further from the truth," explains Negron. "That was just how he plays because he still has that style now, but now he's considered a Golden Glove candidate."

Kelleher has seen Cano's focus grow keener over the years. He first started working with Robinson when he was still an 18-year-old newbie trying to get to the next level and later returned to coach him last season. "Robinson is a worker that goes at it all the time and wants to get better," Kelleher proudly declares. "He's been given all this natural ability but you have to develop those skills from within. You have to want to do that and he wants to be better, so he's constantly working. We're seeing the fruits of it. He's the best in the league. [And] I don't have to toot his horn but if anything, he's going to get better."

It's an assessment that Long shares with his coaching counterpart. "He's not content and that's the thing that really stands out about Robbie," he explains. "Every year, there seems to be

something he can get better at and he takes that to heart. I remember in 2008, the year he was miserable, and had a very down [season], there were a lot of people down on him. But he took it upon himself to do everything that he could do in his power to get himself in shape, work on his swing, get it where it needed to be and he came in and had a great 2009.

"The knock in ‘09 was that he couldn't drive in runs,” Long continues, “Well, he took that heart. What's it going to be next year? We'll have to sit down and talk about it. Meanwhile, there's not a day that goes by that he doesn't come to the ballpark and he's usually one of the first ones to the cage. He's very diligent in his work and never misses a day. He's probably taken 150-to-200 swings a day. So it's a big workload and he's playing every day."
For Cano, it's a mindset that's always been part of he’s DNA as a professional athlete. Practice is what he needs to do to perform at a premier level day in and day out. "I try to work very hard each off season and I am sure that each year I'll learn more [and] how best to do that,” Robinson says. “I work out hard, hit a lot, eat well and get my rest, which is important."

On a beautiful sun-filled Sunday afternoon in August, Robinson Cano arrived at the luxurious Westin New York, in the heart of Times Square, a little under the weather. Despite battling stomach flu-like symptoms, the All-Star’s on-field single-minded focus continued to carry over off the field, as he prepped for this cover shoot.

Just the day before, in the middle of a crucial four-game series against their storied rivals the Boston Red Sox, a fatigued Cano was asked to step into the cleanup position of the [batting] line-up, after regular number-four hitter Alex Rodriguez was felled by -that very day- an errant ball during pre-game batting practice. The second baseman responded without missing a beat, going 2-for-3 with a walk and a run batted in.

Ironically enough, today’s photo shoot is taking place in the same hotel where the opposing Sawx are staying. A number of Bean-town fans are swarming around the Westin’s entrance and lobby, hunting for autographs from random Boston players. If Cano got noticed, he wasn't saying as he entered the Presidential suite accompanied by his cousin and sports agent Dave Maryles. Clad in a pair of designer jeans, Armani t-shirt and sunglasses, Robinson glides into the suite with the same fluid grace he's become known for on the field. He quickly greets and

introduces himself to everyone in the room with a quick grin and a firm handshake. Despite fending off a summer cold (the influenza would eventually take him out of the Yankees lineup for a couple of games down in Texas against the Rangers during the week), and with the third nationally-televised matchup against the Sox’s only a few hours away, Robinson cheerfully endures a two-hour photo session complete with three wardrobe changes and an endless array of poses. As is Cano's way, he was constantly beaming without a hint of complaining, despite how tedious the movements were. Simply put, he's a nice guy—a rarity in this day and age of overpaid professional athletes with entitlement issues.

"He's like a son to me," admits Long. "He's someone I care a great deal about and someone that when he does good- you feel that deep-down satisfaction."

With ties to the Yankees dating back to his days as a teenaged batboy at the height of the Bronx Zoo Era, Negron has a unique perspective about athletes' demeanors and egos. And given the amount of work he does with underprivileged kids, he's especially high on Cano's charitable endeavors. "As soon as we have a young player come up to the big leagues, I ask them if they would go to a school or hospital and spend time with kids," he explains. "The first time I asked Robinson to go to a hospital, he went with Ruben Sierra to Hackensack Medical Center and I saw him talking to these kids and his interaction with them was the inspiration for my New York Times best-selling children's book, The Boy of Steel. That inspiration came from what I witnessed at Hackensack Medical Center and the passion and compassion he had for these kids."

The idea of giving back ranks high for Robinson Cano, even if he's modest about it. "Giving back is just as important, if not more [important] than playing baseball," he says with a shy grin. "I have been given a great opportunity to play baseball for a living and I want to help as many kids as I can." It's a mindset that extends back to a hometown that Cano loved growing up in and gets wistful about when mentioned. "I love my country and my town [of] San Pedro. It's my home and I do everything I can to help the kids from there," he express. "There is a lot of poverty there so if I can impact children's lives, I will."

Part of that positive impact was the creation of the Robinson Cano Foundation, an organization founded in 2006, which Cano holds close to his heart. "There are kids in the DR who need help with medical conditions. There are a lot of kids who can't afford the care they need so hopefully

we can make a difference." And far from just lending his name or making public appearances to raise money for the cause, Cano has dug into his own pockets to address the subpar medical conditions faced by a large part of the population. He started purchasing ambulances a few years ago after a friend of his died waiting to be taken to a hospital for treatment. It's something the young ballplayer has done with no fanfare. In fact, the All-Star's benevolence only came up after his agent mentioned it in passing. "There is a shortage of [ambulances] in the DR, especially in my town, so I try to buy a few each year to make things better down there." Cano, humbly states of his goodwill. "I am sending one down again this year."

It's this kind of altruism that made him a finalist for the 2006 Roberto Clemente Award, which is awarded by Major League Baseball each year "to a player who demonstrates the values Clemente displayed in his commitment to community and understanding the value of helping others." Given how beloved the late Hall of Famer is in the Latino community, it's no wonder the pride Cano has for that nomination. "It was a great honor," he describes. "He was a great man who did amazing things, not just for baseball, but the Latin American community."

It's an example Cano continues to follow. I later discovered from his camp that, the compassionate Robinson, in addition to his many charitable causes, will run a toy drive this Christmas and will pick up the tab to send over $25,000 dollars worth of toys back to his native Dominican Republic during the holiday season.

Several stories below the shoot, the Dominican Day Parade is being held in Manhattan. Throngs of people, sporting their nation's colors of red, white and blue, filled the streets carrying banners and flags—all smiles beaming with pride. It's the same radiant expression baseball fans spot on a regular basis whenever Cano sets up to the left of shortstop Derek Jeter during any given Yankees game. By the end of the two-hour shoot, Cano seems a bit fatigued but his affable demeanor is still intact. Periodically, he cracks some jokes with his cousin in Spanish, autographs a number of items for staff and still finds time to flash his illuminating smile for more photos, of the personal kind. The kind gestures are enough that one 10-years-old die-hard Bronx Bombers fan, vowed he was going to get a jersey with the second baseman's name on it later that week. But for however a world-class individual he may be, the Dominican-born superstar shows that he is, if nothing else, a fierce competitor. Having tasted champagne last October, Cano says his goals fully gibe with the single-minded goal the New York Yankees adhere to year in-and- year out— championship rings.

"I want to keep winning the World Series year-after-year," he reveals. "Of course I'd like to win individual awards, como the MVP or a batting title, but the most important thing is winning the

World Series.”

Back at the ballpark, for New York’s afternoon game against Detroit, the championship dream is alive and well. All of Cano’s pregame warm-ups apparently paid off- as he helped lead the Yanks to an 11-5 victory, driving in three runs and going 3-for-5, while hitting a double and a two-run homerun. It's the kind of output that's expected from an elite player who is entering the prime of his career. With expectations high as ever, Robinson Cano is poised to join his Hall of Fame teammates A-Rod and Jeter, as future Yankee great.

For more information about the Robinson Cano Foundation, please visit www.theagencysports.com