

DREAM REALIZED

Playing Major League Baseball is the culmination of a long and arduous journey for pitcher Ariel Miranda.

By Mike Gastineau

For Ariel Miranda it was just one more hurdle. The 28-year-old Cuban joined the Mariners at the trade deadline last summer from the Orioles and became a reliable starting pitcher, posting a 5-2 record in 10 starts in August and September. He had every reason to believe he would be a starter for the team in 2017.

But in baseball things seldom stay the same. The off-season additions of pitchers Drew Smyly and Yovani Gallardo, combined with the presence of Felix Hernandez, Hisashi Iwakuma and James Paxton meant Miranda had to have a great spring to crack the team's starting rotation. Instead, he struggled. There was talk of moving him to the bullpen, but eventually the Mariners decided they'd rather have him continue as a starter, so he was sent to Triple-A Tacoma.

"He was really let down and disappointed," said pitching coach Mel Stottlemyre Jr. "He's in his first spring with us and is competing for a job and didn't really do anything wrong. The guys who we thought were going to be in our rotation were healthy so we didn't have a spot for him."

Miranda admits the news frustrated him, but frustration is something he's had to learn to deal with in his circuitous journey to Major League Baseball.

Pursuing a Passion

Born in 1989 in Havana, Cuba, Miranda doesn't remember a time when he wasn't playing baseball. For that matter, neither does his mother.

"As a child Ariel was constantly playing in the pasture with a stick and a ball made of rags," Maria Esther Gil told the website Cubanet.org.

Miranda smiled when he reflects on the baseball filled days of his youth.

"I was always outside with a ball and a stick trying to get a game going with the other neighborhood kids,"



he said, through interpreter Fernando Alcala. “We’d find a stick and then use a machete to whittle it down to make it easier to handle. Then we’d get a rag and roll it up, find something to bind it together and play ball all day.”

Miranda said his mom didn’t mind his constant focus on baseball, but she did tell him that if he was going to play ball he had to be serious about his school work. He complied...up to a point.

“My grades weren’t the worst,” he laughed. “But my best grades were always in physical education.”

By the time he was 10 he was playing in organized little league games. It was then that baseball became more than just a way to pass the long, hot days. “My coaches were very good teachers and they helped me realize I had an aptitude for the game. That’s when I got hooked. I started building on that and began to develop a love for baseball.”

When Miranda was 18 he spent a year of obligatory service in the Cuban

military. Afterward, he began pitching in the Cuban National Series. He pitched in 80 games over seven seasons for Vaqueros de la Habana, Huracanes de Mayabeque, Industriales de la Habana and Toronjeros de Isla de la Juventud. By what would turn out to be his final season in Cuba he was dreaming of more, of playing baseball in America.

Long Journey to the Majors

To realize that dream he would have to enter the murky world of shadowy figures and secretive discussions that populate and characterize the journey between Cuba and the U.S. Some of these people are well-intentioned; many are not.

Miranda is understandably reserved about the details of his journey. His first attempt to leave Cuba was thwarted when word of the plan somehow got out.

“There was a group of about 15 of us, [and] three of us were ballplayers,” he recalled. “We met at a discotheque

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—Pitching coach Mel Stottlemire Jr.

and then got in a car and were driving about 20 minutes before we were stopped by authorities. They said they had proof we were leaving the country. They pinpointed two of the guys who were in charge and told them they were going to be prosecuted.”

As it turned out, the authorities had no proof and no one was prosecuted. But Miranda was told that because he was trying to leave he would no longer be allowed to play baseball in the CNS. You’d think this news might have been devastating, but Miranda said it brought more clearly into focus what he needed to do.

“I wasn’t upset,” he pointed out. “It was actually quite the opposite.

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I talked to my mom about my goals and what I wanted out of life. Getting caught and not being allowed to play in Cuba solidified my belief that leaving was the right thing to do for my family. I wanted to do better for my wife, Taymi, and my [two] kids and I really wanted to go out and prove myself internationally.”

Since he had been caught making an attempt to leave Cuba the word was out and he soon found himself with no shortage of people trying to help him mount a second effort.

“There is no set way of doing things,” he said. “It’s just people you meet. First a guy comes to your house.

After a long journey, Miranda is now living his dream of pitching in the Major Leagues.



“We’d get a rag and roll it up, find something to bind it together and play ball all day.”

—Ariel Miranda, on playing baseball as a kid in Cuba

Then another guy comes to your house and that kind of starts the process. The only thing I did was give a response. Yes or no. I was calm and it was an easy decision.”

Ironically, being banned from the Cuban league for trying to leave illegally made it easier for him to leave Cuba through proper channels. Since he couldn’t play in Cuba, he had to go elsewhere to try to earn a living to support his family. In the confusing world of dictatorial politics, you can’t leave if you want to, but if you try to leave

and get caught it is possible to leave to earn a living and support your family. Miranda couldn’t go directly from Cuba to the U.S., so he sought permission from the government to go to Haiti.

“I did everything by the book,” he said. “It was harder in that there was more paperwork. You had to go to the embassies and deal with all that, so the process was a little longer.”

Opportunity Knocks

Soon after Miranda arrived in Haiti he moved on to the Dominican Republic where he hoped to catch the eye of an MLB team. Eventually, Baltimore signed him. After 22 starts in the Orioles minor league system, and one appearance with the big club, he

was traded to Seattle for Wade Miley last July 31.

As it turned out, this past spring Miranda’s trip to Tacoma barely lasted longer than his first attempt to leave Cuba. The day after Seattle sent him down, Smyly suffered what would be a season-ending injury and Miranda was back with the Mariners and inserted into the rotation. Injuries to several other starting pitchers in the first half of the season had Seattle thanking their stars that they had him.

“He doesn’t take anything for granted,” Stottlemire said. “He always pitches like it’s going to be his last game. He’s always disappointed when we get to the point where we have to take him out of the game.”

That point may come later and later. As Miranda develops more confidence in his pitches and more command on his fastball Stottlemire is noticing a rapid improvement.

“He’s been putting sequences together and pitching out of jams and having more awareness of what’s needed for good game management. He’s a tough kid. You think about what he was willing to risk to come here, what he left behind. He took a huge gamble.”

Miranda has most of his support team here now. Just over a year after he left Cuba his wife and kids came to the U.S. His mom still lives in Cuba and Miranda is hopeful he can see her again someday. But he knows that his decision to leave his native country puts the possibility of that meeting somewhat in the wind. For now, he has to be content with phone conversations.

“We talk once a week, usually on Sunday,” he said. “Whether it’s on the field or off the field she’s the person I always talk to when there’s a problem. She helps me reason through things and always supports me.”

Asked what meal he would have his mom cook for him if he were ever able to sit down in her kitchen again he smiled and said, “Frijoles de arroz y huevos.”

Beans, rice and eggs. A simple meal for a man who first learned the joy of baseball by sharpening a stick with a machete and then hitting a tied up rag around the street in front of his house.

Mike Gastineau is a freelance writer based in Seattle. He spent over 20 years hosting a local radio show, and is the author of two books.