



“Don’t rush. Set your mind to pitch. Keep it simple and stay calm pitch-by-pitch.”

—Díaz, on his pitching approach



SUGAR ON TOP

Edwin Díaz may have a sweet nickname, but he's leaving opposing hitters bitter as he rises to the top among Major League closers.

By Mike Gastineau

Edwin Díaz walked into his home in Naguabo, Puerto Rico, feeling a mixture of anger and dejection combined with the resolve you have when you're 15 years old and think you're the only one who has the world figured out.

Earlier that afternoon, his baseball coach Alexis Cruz had given him news that devastated him. He would no longer be an everyday player, but would instead concentrate on pitching. Cruz told Díaz that his arm was so good that it might be able to get him a long way in the game of baseball. But Díaz was having none of it.

"I was a pretty good defensive player and a good hitter," said Díaz. "I wanted to play the outfield, hit and be in the lineup every day. I didn't like the decision."

So, on his way home he made a decision.

"I'm going to quit playing baseball," Díaz announced to his Mom and Dad when he walked in the door. He laughed recently as he admitted that maybe he didn't quite have everything figured out yet.

His father, Edwin, and mother, Beatrice, counseled him to be patient. "Let's try it first and see how

things go," he remembered his father saying. "They weren't going to let me quit baseball."

Growing into the Role

It was a wise decision. Less than a decade later Díaz is the Mariners closer and one of baseball's bright young stars. Given his youth and talent, he is a good bet to eventually pass former Mariners closer Kazuhiro Sasaki as the team's all-time leader in saves. He's already more than halfway there and is still doing plenty of things to make himself better.

One of those things is allowing his inner competitive fire to continue to flourish, while at the same time reigning in his youthful emotion on the mound. (He says the animated side of his personality comes from his mother and insists that he can hear her yelling at him from the stands when she comes to games.)

"In the past, the games sometimes got too fast for him," said pitching coach Mel Stottlemyre. "Things would slowly escalate and he didn't have the ability to slow them down. Now, you'll see him step off the mound, collect

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his thoughts, and get back to making pitches and understanding what he needs to do.”

Díaz credits his teammates, particularly Félix Hernández, Nelson Cruz and Robinson Canó, for spending time working with him and teaching him “positive things so I can be a better guy.” He’s also studying the game’s master craftsman in terms of closers.

“Robbie [Canó] gave me a book about Mariano Rivera,” said Díaz, referring to Rivera’s baseball memoir, *The Closer*. “And I’ve watched some videos on how he did his work on the mound. He stayed calm regardless of the situation and I’m trying to do the same thing.”

Stottlemire appreciates how Díaz is getting better at walking baseball’s delicate fire-and-ice tightrope.

“It’s something we spent a lot of time during the offseason talking about,” said Stottlemire. “We want him to be that violent go-get-’em Eddie. He needs to have that adrenaline, but it needs to be controlled.”

Mike Zunino, who is usually behind the plate when Díaz is making ninth inning life miserable for opposing hitters, has benefitted from the progress by Díaz in his approach to the game.

“I get excited when I see him making these great strides,” Zunino said. “He’s often able now to make an adjustment without anyone telling him, which is something that a catcher appreciates. Being in the closer role for a

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—Pitching coach Mel Stottlemire



while now has allowed him to trust in himself and his mechanics, to settle in and not be all over the place when he gets in a game. It definitely allows me to relax and see what he’s doing.”

Díaz doesn’t over-analyze his new in-game demeanor. In an extension of how he tries to approach pitching he prefers to keep his description basic.

“Don’t rush. Set your mind to pitch. Keep it simple and stay calm pitch-by-pitch even if I do something bad.”

Handling All Situations

Díaz also has become better at moving on after a bad performance. To be effective over a long period a closer must be able to deal with setbacks and failures that occur from time-to-time with the game on the line. Díaz’s education in that reality began the night he blew his first save.

He assumed the closer role for Seattle in August 2016 and promptly converted his first 11 save opportunities. On his 12th try, he gave up a two-run, game-losing home run to Rougned Odor. After the game, Díaz

says manager Scott Servais delivered a short but effective message.

“He told me I had to flush that performance and be ready the very next day because he was going to give me the ball again. I started working on that right away.”

Easier said than done, according to Stottlemire.

“Especially when you’re young, when the game is on the line and you’ve got the weight of the ballclub on your shoulders and you blow it, it’s really hard to let it go,” he pointed out. “But the great ones understand that you’ll get 40 to 50 chances over 162 games and every now and then you’re going to have a bad one. When you do, if you can let it go, it’s going to be more beneficial to you.”

The words look good. They sound right. But Stottlemire cautions that experience alone dictates whether a guy can handle the pressure role at the end of the game.

Díaz by the Numbers

(through June 7, 2018)

2 – AL Reliever of the Month honors (April 2018, July 2017)

21 – Major League-leading number of saves (in 24 save opportunities)

42.6% – Percent of batters faced (52 of 122) who have struck out against Díaz

52 – Strikeouts of 122 batters faced, most among AL relievers

73 – Career saves, 4th-best all-time among Mariners pitchers

.140 – Batting average of opposing hitters (15-for-107)

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“We can line out a perfect roadmap for him and tell him how you should react to different situations, but you’re never going to really learn it until you get your butt kicked. He needs to learn that part of the game on his own.”

Zunino thinks that has happened.

“Eddie has developed that killer instinct,” he said. “He wants the ball at the end of the game no matter what happened the night before.”

One point Stottlemyre emphasizes with Díaz is to use his fastball to get into good counts against hitters, because when he falls behind he tends to overuse his slider. It sounds simple, but it takes guts to throw a strike with the game on the line. Stottlemyre says it’s an area where Díaz has improved.

“Eddie has great stuff but he’s still going through that transition of becoming a pitcher. There’s good misses and bad misses and I’ve looked at his misses this year and they’re so much more refined. Last year, the game would get fast and he would just throw and spray the ball. He has really learned what he wants to do. He’s starting to understand hitters and what their approach to him is their second and third time seeing him and that’s making him a better pitcher.”

Díaz was part of the Puerto Rican team that reached the World Baseball Classic finals in 2017.



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—Mike Zunino

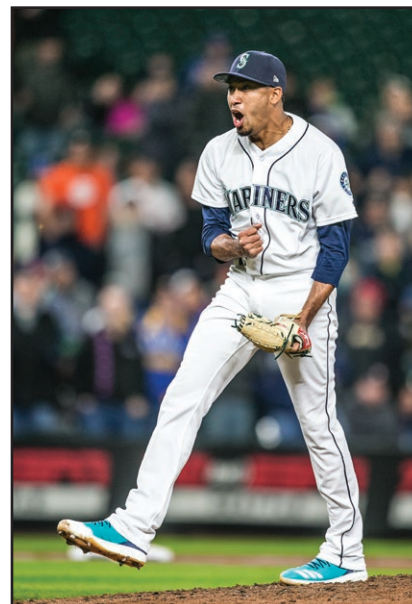
Stottlemyre smiled when told that Díaz is patterning what he does after Rivera. Stottlemyre’s father, Mel Sr., spent a few years with the Yankees coaching Rivera and the younger Stottlemyre remembers his dad always used the same word to describe the game’s all-time saves leader.

“He always described [Rivera] as steady,” said Stottlemyre. “When Mariano Rivera came in, you knew what you were going to get from him every night.”

Keeping Grounded

Díaz remains connected to Puerto Rico despite pitching in a city that is thousands of miles away from his home. He was part of the charismatic Puerto Rican team that reached the World Baseball Classic finals in 2017. The team’s celebratory style, and the fact that they made it to the championship game against the U.S., ignited baseball pride on the island that has produced more than 200 Major Leaguers since 1942.

“Baseball, for us, is everything,” he noted. “When I go home, people are so proud of me. They tell me to keep it up



because I’m representing all of Puerto Rico. They love me and I love them, so I want to do positive things for them.”

He’s also remained close with the coach who spotted his talent and potential, even while dashing his dream of being an everyday player.

“Alexis Cruz is like a father to me.

He put me on the right road. After I signed [with Seattle] I contacted him to say thank you. I told him, ‘You made the right decision with me.’ He came to my [Major League] debut [a one-two-three seventh inning against Cleveland in June 2016] and he comes to see me pitch every year.”

Stottlemyre emphasizes that Díaz is still evolving and working on what it takes to be great. The Mariners want him to throw more strikes. They want him to use different quadrants of the plate and to keep his fire while also maintaining his composure. But in the end, the veteran pitching coach knows he’s working with a one-of-a-kind talent.

“When his electric stuff is in the zone, he’s unhittable,” said Stottlemyre. “His ceiling, his tools and his weapons are all out of this world.”

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.