

# A FRESH START

Catcher Mike Zunino returned to the Mariners from the minors after wiping the slate clean to rediscover his offensive prowess.

By Mike Gastineau

Last month, catcher Mike Zunino stepped up to the plate to lead off the eighth inning of a game against Boston and pitcher David Price. Up to that point, Price had been overwhelming and Zunino had fanned twice, once swinging and once looking. But in his third at-bat Zunino drove Price's first pitch over the left field wall, the opening salvo in a five-run inning that fueled a comeback win.

Zunino starting a big comeback is appropriate since he is in the middle of one of his own.

"I don't think I have that at-bat last year," he said the next day in the Mariners clubhouse. "If I didn't get a hit in my first at-bat last year I was like 'Oh, boy. Here we go again.' But a rough at-bat isn't going to affect me this year the way it did last year."

Indeed, last year ended on a sour note for Zunino. After a 7-for-54 slump in August left him with a .174 batting average on the season, and a .193 career average, he was sent down to Tacoma. The move was thought, both by Seattle and Zunino, to be temporary – a brief 10 days in the minors and then right back to Seattle.

But when Tacoma's season ended the Mariners told Zunino they wanted him to work on rebuilding his swing, his approach and his confidence. So, instead

of coming back to Seattle to rejoin the team, he spent September at the club's facility in Peoria, Arizona. Zunino was disappointed but not surprised.

"There was frustration, but I knew. The season is going on and I'm not blind to it. I knew I had to get to work, shut out all the stuff from the past three years and focus on moving forward. I didn't want to take September off, but it gave me time to mentally prepare for the work I had to do coming into this season."

## Getting Back to Basics

The jump to the Majors came quick for Zunino – the Mariners first-round pick in the 2012 June Draft made his Big League debut the following June. And while his defensive skills were Major League ready, his bat stayed behind. As his struggles continued he got lots of advice from well-intentioned teammates and coaches. The cumulative effect of all that advice was information overload.

*“He looks much better....He's trusting his swing more. You can see it in almost every at-bat.”*

—Hitting coach Edgar Martinez

"Everybody wanted to have some sort of input," Zunino said. "Everyone just wants to help. But when you take it all into consideration you get flooded with stuff and try to start pleasing and hitting for other people. You lose track of what you want to do."

Hitting coach Edgar Martinez put it in simpler terms. "Everyone wanted to help, but sometimes too much information," he paused and laughed, "is too much information." Martinez was part of the effort to help Zunino simplify things and regain his confidence. He says he didn't doubt that Zunino's work would pay off.

"When you have the ability everything tends to end up working out."

It all started with Zunino treating his trip to Arizona as an opportunity rather than a setback.

"I really wanted to focus on the foundation," said the 25-year-old Florida native. "Wipe everything clean and give it a fresh start. Get to a spot where I felt comfortable in my stance and go from there."

Zunino also spent a week during this past offseason working with Kyle Seager and former Mariners coach Mike Brumley, furthering his understanding of approach and mechanics.

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And he met with new manager Scott Servais to begin the other half of the equation, the more important one according to the skipper.

“The mechanical stuff ... all secondary,” said Servais. “You have to get the player right mentally first. That’s more important than any of the physical changes. He needed to gain some success along the way and gain confidence back, and he was able to do that working in the offseason.”

Servais told Zunino that he and GM Jerry Dipoto thought it best that he get everyday playing time at Tacoma during the 2016 season. Again Zunino was disappointed but not surprised.

“They had great communication with me and I wasn’t dumb,” he said. “[The club] made some moves and brought some guys in and I knew I had stuff to prove with a new front office and a new manager. Servais told me to be myself and have fun. That allowed me to not chase results or worry about what I was doing in Spring, and to focus on the process of having good at-bats, finding where I wanted to be.”

## Having a Good Plan

Part of the plan was to convince him to trust his ability and his swing and to approach workouts like he had in college and the minors.

“Less was always more for me,” said Zunino. “I’ve gotten back to that. I’m not driving myself crazy trying

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Zunino is back in the Big Leagues after successfully rebuilding his swing, his approach and his confidence at the plate.



to make changes in the cage. When I wasn’t getting results I’d spend so much time thinking about, ‘What am I not doing? What do I need to change?’ You focus on something new every day and you’re hitting in the cage for an hour. You’ve still got BP, and a game you have to catch and you’re mentally driving yourself crazy.”

Zunino got off to a blazing start in Tacoma, hitting .447 with six home runs in his first nine games. He eventually leveled off and posted solid numbers across the board in 79 games. The consistency of his numbers and an injury to backup catcher Steve Clevenger led the Mariners to alter their original plan of keeping Zunino in Triple A this year. Zunino’s reaction to that news reflected his newly regained confidence. He was excited, but more than that he was ready.

“There was a sense of ease when I got called up. I had confidence in myself that I can have a quality at-bat more times than not. It’s a night-and-day difference in terms of confidence in the box.”

Martinez agreed. “He looks much better. He has a lot of skills and he

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Zunino is doused by teammates after getting the game-winning hit in the fifteenth inning to beat the Detroit Tigers on August 9.

knows it. He’s trusting his swing more. You can see it in almost every at-bat. He’s seeing more pitches, laying off the tough pitches and getting in good hitting counts.”

One reason the team has been working with Zunino offensively is that his defense is so good. He stayed steady behind the dish even during his toughest offensive struggles and used his defense to his mental advantage.

“Having those responsibilities gave me something positive to think about,” he pointed out. “It’s easy to separate because you have to go help your pitcher get through the game. You put the gear on and you get out there and you just have to get rid of the last at-bat. You have to have a very short memory.”

So what happens when the next offensive slump arrives? Zunino said he’ll continue to think in a big picture way rather than worrying about how to “fix” something that’s not broken.

“I trust my swing, my approach, my mechanics and my eyes,” he said. “So it becomes a series of small adjustments instead of huge adjustments. There’s only so much you can do in the batting cage at four o’clock. You stand very little chance if you’re trying to find something and then put it into a game three hours later.”

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