



CATCHING UP WITH ... **RYAN ROWLAND-SMITH**

By Mike Gastineau

From New South Wales, Australia, to Peoria, and then to Appleton, Everett, San Antonio, San Bernardino and Tacoma, few players logged more miles on their journey to the Majors than former pitcher Ryan Rowland-Smith, who played for the Mariners from 2007 through 2010. Throw in a trip to Athens, Greece, where he helped Australia win a silver medal in the 2004 Olympics and you've got a guy who literally went around the world in pursuit of a gig in the Big Leagues.

Like many Aussies who live near water, Rowland-Smith grew up surfing. But when he watched the 1993 World Series between Toronto and

Philadelphia on a videocassette tape, he became enthralled with baseball, and after high school was good enough to get an offer from the Mariners that he accepted.

"I remember thinking, 'Are you kidding? Of course, I'm taking that. I'm outta here!'" he recalled. "But, I really didn't realize what I was getting into."

His journey began at age 18 with Peoria in the Arizona League in 2001. He was shy and so homesick he kept a calendar marking the days until he got to go home.

The next spring he was sent to Appleton, Wisconsin, to play for the Timber Rattlers in the Midwest League.

After a lifetime spent on warm, sunny beaches in Australia, and a season in similar conditions in Phoenix, he was in for a rude awakening.

"Our first games were snowed out," he said. "It was freezing cold. Just trying to keep warm was really difficult and that hindered my performance. I started thinking, 'Is this for me? Is this really what I want to do?' The Major Leagues seemed really far away."

But the weather eventually got warmer and Rowland-Smith began building camaraderie with his teammates. He rented an apartment with

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two other guys. The trio bought a beat-up Oldsmobile for \$500 to get them around town. “It reeked of cigarettes and the wheels barely stayed on,” Rowland-Smith remembered, adding, “...and technically, I didn’t have a driver’s license.”

Technicalities aside, the car was primarily used to get from their apartment to the baseball field. The group also got a new TV, a purchase that allowed his experienced teammates to show Rowland-Smith one of the tricks to living on a low minor leaguer’s salary.

They bought the TV from a national retailer that had a 90-day return policy. After 89 days, they took it back and told Rowland-Smith he was going to have to do the talking at the return desk.

“I was really nervous,” he said. “I’ve got a whole speech prepared about how we bought the TV, but now we have to return it. It was a gift and the people didn’t need it and this and that.”

Instead, one of his teammates grabbed the TV out of Rowland-Smith’s hands and said they wanted to return it. The clerk asked if there was something wrong with the TV.

“No, we’re just returning it,” his teammate responded. Rowland-Smith remembers being so nervous that he was shaking. But, true to store policy, they were refunded their purchase price. The next day they returned to buy a new TV.

Rowland-Smith, who this season will regularly appear once again as an analyst on Mariners radio and TV broadcasts, experienced his share of memorable moments as a pro.

One night the Timber Rattlers booster club took the team out to dinner at a new restaurant called Outback Steakhouse. The local servers all spoke in fake Australian accents, and when Rowland-Smith ordered they were all flabbergasted by his accent.

“I think they thought I was trying to get a job at the restaurant,” he laughed. “I might as well have been from another planet. They’d never seen an Australian in Appleton, let alone have one walk into the Outback Steakhouse.”

Rowland-Smith learned to take it all in stride and, despite spending



Ryan Rowland-Smith helped Australia win a silver medal in the 2004 Olympics in Athens Greece.

nearly seven seasons and almost 200 games in the minors before his MLB debut, he doesn’t regret the trip.

“I needed to start there and learn to pitch my way out of that level. That first stage is really tough. I’d go out and give up a three-spot and think, ‘I’m going to be here for the rest of my life.’ You see a lot of guys bailing out in the first couple years.”

He enjoyed his trips home to Australia between seasons, even if it did lead to awkward moments from well-meaning friends.

“They’d say to me, ‘We see a lot of baseball on TV. How come we haven’t seen you on TV yet?’”

When he tried to explain how the minors worked and how he was living, the response was unanimous: “Jeez, why are you doing that?”

Rowland-Smith’s call to the Majors finally came on June 22, 2007, in the sixth inning of a game in which Seattle

trailed Cincinnati, 16-1. The first batter he faced was Ken Griffey Jr., and he struck out the future Hall of Famer in a memorable debut.

Overall, Rowland-Smith played in 121 MLB games, and wishes he had the opportunity to play more. But he looks back on his long journey with a fondness built on an unwavering love for the game.

“As bad as the living and travel could sometimes be, I loved watching Major League Baseball and I knew I wanted to play in the Big Leagues. I worked hard, I was passionate about it, and eventually I made it.”

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.