

PROSPECT



Abreu set rookie records for most home runs (10) and RBI (31) in the month of April.

By **PETER C. BJARKMAN**

Long before José Dariel Abreu arrived on the MLB scene as the unanticipated April toast of the baseball world, at least some privileged observers had already taken advanced note of the Cuban superstar looming on the horizon. These insiders were pro bird-dog scouts working international tournament beats, and a few tenacious journalists devoted to a version of the sport played far off North American radar.

One such advanced scout—Grantland.com columnist Jonah Keri—even went out on a limb by labeling Abreu “The Best Hitter You Never Heard Of,” noting that the then-25-year-old anonymous slugger was already “putting up godlike numbers in the closed-off world of Cuban baseball.”

Those eye-popping numbers were produced during a 90-game Cuban National Series campaign in 2011, highlighted by the Cienfuegos slugger’s near-miss run at an

elusive Triple Crown. He posted a .453 batting average, .986 slugging percentage, .597 on-base mark, 33 homers and 93 RBI, all in only 293 at-bats. By the time Keri was penning his warning in February 2012, Abreu was a month away from not only replicating that outrageous stat line, but also actually elevating his base hit, home-run and RBI totals. It all sounded strangely like the fantasy production of some legendary fictional super hero named Joe Hardy or Roy Hobbs.

By the time Cuba’s supreme slugger had abandoned his homeland and arrived on the Chicago baseball scene this past winter—a club-record six-year \$68-million contact safely tucked in his back pocket—media interest was already reaching fever pitch and expectations were already ramped up beyond likely fulfillment.

Yet, the 27-year-old Abreu didn’t waste time silencing all doubters. During the first 30 days of the 2014 season, the

SPOTLIGHT

Cuba's José Abreu is Baseball's Newest Rookie Sensation

Slugging first baseman has proved worthy of the White Sox' hefty investment by producing runs

heavily hyped rookie captured the hearts of Sox boosters with perhaps the fastest big league start of any touted newcomer in the game's long annals. Doubling off the right-field fence on the first big league pitch he saw from Twins starter Ricky Nolasco, Abreu promptly showcased a signature opposite-field slugging style that launched "Abreu Mania" even before dust had a chance to settle on Opening Day 2014.

Abreu is hardly the first headline-grabbing Cuban import to make a recent splash. First there was limber-armed southpaw reliever Aroldis Chapman, launching the new era of high-priced Cuban émigrés in 2010 with a \$30-million deal and a 105-plus-mph radar clocking that made Cincinnati's newfound "Cuban Missile" an immediate National League media darling. Chapman was soon producing back-to-back 38-save seasons, unrivaled in club history.

Two summers later, Yoenis Céspedes—who had sabotaged Abreu's 2011 Triple Crown run—was blasting 23 homers in the middle of the Oakland A's lineup. And in June 2013, Abreu's former Cienfuegos teammate Yasiel Puig burst on the scene in Los Angeles with his own record-pace effort, falling only four hits short of Joe DiMaggio's long-standing 1939 standard (48) for a first-month rookie. In the process, Puig blazed a new trail as the first ever to garner simultaneous MLB Rookie of the Month and Player of the Month honors.

Nonetheless, few might have imaged during all the preseason hype surrounding Abreu's Chicago debut that this latest escapee from Fidel Castro's long-secret baseball plantation would soon be outstripping even Puig in the rookie records department.

But this latest imported phenom is also a Cuban émigré of a different ilk, sporting a very different homeland background. Most recent prospects leaving Cuba in search of promised big league wealth and notoriety have only abandoned the homeland after disappointment or rejection had already sabotaged domestic careers.

Prone to wildness, Chapman pitched himself off the national team in the months immediately before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and then later sputtered during a second trial at the World Baseball Classic in 2009. Puig had been banned from the league for assorted off-field disciplinary infractions before his own two attempted escapes. Céspedes, at the time of his 2011 departure, was fleeing possible criminal prosecution in Havana related to an unresolved vehicular homicide incident.

Orlando "El Duque" Hernández had also been suspended from league and national team action in the aftermath of half-brother Liván's 1997 departure and debut stint with the Florida Marlins. Among earlier top-draw Cuban defectors, only José Contreras was a mid-career league star at the time of his surprise departure, sport-

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JOSÉ ABREU

ing an unblemished 13-0 won-lost record in top-level international play.

Abreu, by stark contrast, was a league poster boy, a model citizen, and one of the true anchors of island baseball at the time he chose to test the big time last fall. A native of Cruces (near Cienfuegos), he went by the sobriquet "Pito" during his decade-long Cuban career.

There is little debate that Abreu is the brightest star so far to abandon the communist baseball system, and therefore also the most devastating loss to his island's national pastime. He was counted on to anchor the middle of the Cuban national team's offense for much of the coming decade. Only Contreras' sudden departure a full decade earlier had created similar shockwaves across a Cuban system trying mightily (and largely unsuccessfully) to salvage a crumbling league structure totally independent of North American organized baseball.

Once securely in the big league camp, Abreu enjoyed an

it over to the big rookie first baseman."

Abreu's impressive MLB debut likely raised a few eyebrows around American League cities. But it has been greeted with little amazement back in Havana, where the talented basher's Cuban League legacy is clearly unrivaled among those who have left the island nation in midstream career. His indelible mark on the Cuban record books is already assured of lengthy survival.

After seeing little action as a 16- and 17-year-old National Series newcomer, Abreu strung together eight monster campaigns that included two league batting titles (plus two runner-up finishes), two home-run titles (plus a third near-miss), and also a pair of second-place finishes in the RBI category. His career batting mark closed at .341, the eight-year slugging percentage was a whopping .622, and he totaled a lifetime 1.078 OPS. His 178 homers left him in easy striking distance of Cuba's top 10 list had he remained home for an additional three or four seasons.



Cuban-Born Players With 30-Homer Seasons (Through 2013)

PLAYER	SEASON HIGH
Jose Canseco	46 (1998)
Kendrys Morales	34 (2009)
Tony Oliva	32 (1964)
Rafael Palmeiro	47 (1999, 2001)
Tony Perez	40 (1970)

unparalleled April debut. He reprised Puig with dual first-month top rookie and outstanding player honors, the first ever to do so in the junior circuit. He also trumped Puig by overhauling the record books in some of baseball's most noteworthy categories.

Abreu established new rookie milestones with 10 homers, 32 RBI, 19 extra-base hits, and 71 total bases through the end of April. He became the first player in MLB history with four 4-plus RBI outings in his first 29 career contests. He ended his first 30 days of big league tenure on a torrid pace that, if continued, would lead to franchise records of 56 homers and 179 RBI.

There was much more to the April breakout than mere record numbers. Abreu has already become a clubhouse and field leader on a White Sox club promising to rebound from a disastrous 99-loss campaign in 2013.

Abreu has played a major role in revamping an offense-poor lineup that was one of the lamest in the circuit only a year earlier—the only club to produce less than 600 runs. When skipper Robin Ventura was recently prompted by reporters that his club's drastically improved first-month play might launch a movement for Manager of the Year honors, he was quick to respond: "If I do win it, I will hand

Pro scouts (with whom this writer regularly compares notes at international tournament venues) long viewed Abreu as ranking among the trio of most highly coveted potential Cuban recruits.

Perhaps only Freddie Cepeda, recently inked by the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants on loan from the Cuban Federation, drew more plaudits for his switch-hitting clutch performances. Rival slugger Alfredo Despaigne, on loan the past two summers to the Mexican League Campeche Pirates and also a two-time batting champ, seemed a near-Abreu clone in the power department. Despaigne's bat speed was a shade quicker, his swing more compact, and his consistent ability to make contact on a near par.

Abreu was the top all-around performer of the three, however, especially on the defensive side of the game. With remarkably soft hands and adept foot movement around the bag, Pito was the better fielder and thus the more versatile and valuable lineup commodity.

Power is the biggest part of Abreu's game. His home-run percentage (homer/at-bat ratio of 1/14.56) in Cuba was certainly impressive, although not quite as eye-popping as the 1/11.8 ratio of his first 40 big league games. Equally remarkable was his percentage of extra-base hits: one in every



During his career in Cuba, Abreu played 772 games and recorded 178 home runs, 583 RBI, a .341 batting average, .456 OBP and .622 slugging mark.

seven trips to the plate.

It is power of a special kind since Abreu hits to all fields with stinging authority. He slugged the longest homer this writer ever witnessed—a 550-foot fly that landed atop a passing bus behind the center-field wall of Havana’s Changa Mederos Park. That he is not a traditional pull-hitting slugger was demonstrated during his first month in the big leagues; he stroked three homers to left, four to center, two to right-center, and one opposite-field shot to right.

On two separate occasions the big first baseman barely missed a unique Triple Crown performance, a feat never witnessed in 53 seasons since Cuba “closed.” In 2011, he headed into the final weekend with a slim lead in the batting race and also deadlocked with Céspedes for homers and RBI. Abreu would then sit the final three games after a dispute with his manager that he now declines to discuss. A year later he cruised to a second batting title, but this time down the stretch it was Despaigne who nipped him in both longballs and runs knocked home.

That Abreu was truly for real and not merely some minor league wonder living off subpar pitching became apparent during 2013 World Baseball Classic action in Japan. His numbers against some top hurlers (including Japanese Pacific League ace Kenjo Otonari and future prized big leaguer Masahiro Tanaka) were stellar. He batted .360, slugged .760 and wacked three homers, including an early game-tying clout in Cuba’s disappointing elimination loss to Holland.

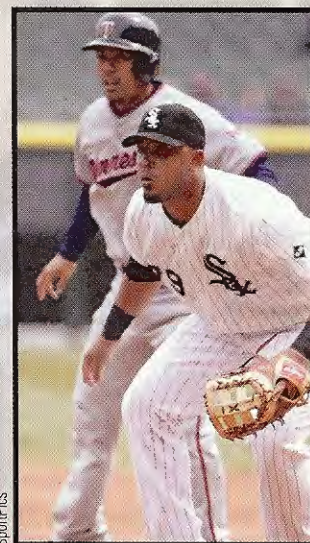
Abreu’s international career also began with a rather loud bang. As a raw 22-year-old, he emerged as a surprise MVP selection during Italian Baseball Week warmup action preceding the 2009 Europe-based IBAF World Cup event.

Five years later, only a mid-May ankle injury could sidetrack Abreu’s remarkable start in the majors. If there was a downside, it could only be his .260 average at the time he was sidelined, which was markedly below his Cuban League norm. But Chicago brought Abreu on board to be a run producer, and he immediately began paying huge dividends.

A final word of caution regarding this early chapter of the Abreu saga, which is a warning aimed at naysayers concerned with the subpar batting average and focused on that old adage about fast-starting rookies inevitably coming up against the savvy adjustments of big league pitching. Pito is a warm-weather hitter who has enjoyed his previous successes in the steamy Caribbean.

Yet, despite Chicago’s icy April weather, Abreu demonstrated an early talent for making adjustments of his own on the heels of a 1-for-25 sag in the season’s third week. He rebounded to bat .368 and stroke six homers in his next nine games.

“Just wait until the dog days of July and August” might well be the clarion call for this new super talent, who is already well on his way to almost-certain big league stardom. **BD**



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