



# FRANCISCO MEJÍA –#27– C

## New Padre Mejia catching his breath with Chihuahuas

- Chris Jenkins, SDUT / July 26, 2018

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. - For reasons both obvious and understandable, Francisco Mejia needed time to catch his breath.

“I tried,” said the celebrated prospect with the El Paso Chihuahuas. Touching a hand to his chest and inhaling deeply, the personable, 22-year-old Dominican opened his eyes wide and said. “But here, breathing is *very difficult*.”

If you're destined to play in the National League West — as Mejia certainly would seem to be, and soon, based on his minor league feats and quality of major league pitchers the Padres traded for him last week — Security Service Field indeed is a perfect place to get a crash course.

Given a full weekend off in El Paso to adjust to his new and vastly different circumstances, Mejia watched from the bullpen as the the PCL division-leading Chihuahuas played a three-game home series. Then Mejia literally spent the last couple of days getting acclimated to 6,500-plus feet of altitude in his first playing time in the San Diego organization.

The rare switch-hitting catcher, whose historic 50-game hitting streak in A-ball is evidence enough of his talent for making contact from both sides, Mejia batted third in the Chihuahuas' order against Colorado Springs. At 5-feet-10, he looked more like a muscular leadoff hitter in beating out an infield single from the left-handed side Tuesday night.

Catching curveballs that don't curve and fastballs that stay flat, Mejia was behind the plate for all 20 Sky Sox hits in a 13-1 loss, then recorded two assists and his first RBI for El Paso on a sacrifice fly in a 9-1 win Wednesday.

Mejia's offense — his career minor league numbers of .291/.345/.444 include a .321 average and .871 OPS as a righty with the Triple-A Columbus Clippers this season — explains why he remains the No. 1 catching prospect in all of minor league baseball.

Also why the Padres demanded him in the deal that sent All-Star closer Brad Hand and rookie reliever Adam Cimber to the championship-contending Cleveland Indians, desperate for bullpen help.

“I was cooking my breakfast in Columbus when the phone rang,” said Mejia, who also is ranked the 15th-best minor leaguer overall by MiLB.com. “I said, ‘I don't believe it.’ I was like, all morning, very quiet. All I could think was ‘wow.’”

“The next morning I am on a plane to El Paso. I did not know where El Paso was. I did not look where it was. I just go.”

Immediately, the wonder was where Mejia figured into the Padres' plans, even as the “impact” player he's expected to be.

The fact the Indians had played Mejia at third base and in the outfield to maximize the use of his bat and strong arm — not to mention the defensive prowess that the Padres already have in catcher Austin Hedges — led to speculation that the Padres often would also be equipping him with fielders' gloves.

Not so, apparently. Not yet, anyway.

“The plan is that he'll be a catcher with us,” said Chihuahuas manager Rod Barajas, himself a major league catcher from 1999 to 2012. “Yes, he's done third base and the outfield with Cleveland, but we want him to be a top-of-the-line catcher, and we think he will be one.”

Glad to hear it, said Mejia.

“It’s important for me to be a catcher,” he said.

“It’s a position I have played since I was 5 years old. I like catching, like being behind the plate. But in the end, I will play whatever position they want me to play. I will play third base. I will play outfield. I will play wherever.”

By happenstance, Mejia got to show the real strongsuit of his defensive game when throwing out the Sky Sox’s Rymer Liriano on an attempted steal of second in Wednesday’s game. Yes, the one and the same Rymer Liriano.

Also from the Dominican Republic, Liriano certainly serves as a cautionary tale of how unsure sure things can get in in professional baseball in general — and Padrehood in particular. Once a can’t-miss product of the San Diego system, Liriano is still continuing his decade-long odyssey through the minor leagues.

Like Liriano, Mejia has had a taste of the majors with an 11-game call-up in 2017 and a one-game, two-walk appearance against the New York Yankees on July 14. The latter kept Mejia from taking part in the Futures Game, a minor league All-Star Game in which he’d already played in 2016, the year it was held at Petco Park.

“I love the ballpark, but also the city of San Diego,” said Mejia. “When I wasn’t at (Petco), I was walking. I walked everywhere, everywhere, and loved everything I saw. It felt good.”

That also was the season that Mejia got all of baseball’s attention. Not since 1963 had a minor-leaguer hit safely in 50 consecutive games, an accomplishment that Mejia spanned over four calendar months and two teams, Single-A Lake County and High-A Lynchburg.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t even know when I was at 25, 30, 35, 40 games in a row,” said Mejia, whose wife also gave birth to their son in 2016. “All I thought was, ‘Just get a pitch to hit. Put the ball in play.’”

“My mom called me when she sees what I am doing on social media. She said, ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ I said, ‘I am just playing the game.’ When I got to 48, yeah, I started thinking about it. I’d go up thinking, ‘I gotta get a hit, I gotta get a hit and keep the streak going.’ And it ended a couple games later.”

## **Chihuahuas top prospect Francisco Mejia more comfortable in El Paso**

- *Bill Knight, El Paso Times / July 24, 2018*

You are just 22, barely out of those troublesome teen years. You are in a different country, speaking a different language. And you are the pride and joy of the Cleveland Indians, one of the most promising young prospects in the wide world of baseball.

And then you are traded, then you are in a new organization, a new city and you move quickly, leaving your wife and one-year-old son behind.

It is an old story in the world of baseball, an almost-every-day happening. But when you are 22 and soaring and it happens to you, it is a shock to the system.

"I was surprised," Francisco Mejia said quietly.

### **Best catcher in minor league baseball**

Francisco Mejía is one of the most recent additions to the El Paso Chihuahuas after a trade between the San Diego Padres and Cleveland Indians. He is one of MLB's top prospects. (Photo: Ivan Pierre Aguirre/El Paso Chihuahuas)

Mejia is ranked as the No. 1 catching prospect in baseball and the No. 15 prospect overall by MLB.com. He was ranked as the top minor league prospect in the Cleveland Indian organization.

One day he was playing in Triple-A Columbus and had made a few quick visits to the grand show with the Indians. Boom. The next day he is traveling to El Paso.

Cleveland is running away with the American League Central division but the Indians needed bullpen help. They traded their prize prospect to the San Diego Padres for relievers Adam Cimber and Brad Hand.

### **Inspired by Texas Rangers legend Ivan Rodriguez**

And so here is the 22-year-old, born in the Dominican Republic and raised in the shadows of a ball park with visions of Hall of Famer Ivan Rodriguez dancing in his young head.

Chihuahua manager Rod Barajas and his staff are giving Mejia a few days to get adjusted, to get past the sudden shift in his career path. He joined the team Friday but is not expected to see his first action with the Chihuahuas until Tuesday in Colorado Springs. In the end, though, Mejia is right where he left off — just one phone call away from the grand stage.

"I was surprised, but I like it here," he said. "I like the team, the staff, the coaches."

There is something else the 5-foot-10, 185-pound young man likes.

Francisco Mejía is one of the most recent additions to the El Paso Chihuahuas after a trade between the San Diego Padres and Cleveland Indians. He is one of MLB's top prospects. (Photo: Ivan Pierre Aguirre/El Paso Chihuahuas)

"I want to play more catcher," he said. "They (the Indians) tried to play me at third base and in the outfield. I love it behind the plate."

He has always loved catching.

"I lived near a ball park (in Bani, Dominican Republic)," he said. "I just liked to catch the ball. Everyone was always talking about Ivan Rodriguez and he was my inspiration. I just always liked that position."

### **Francisco Mejia statistics**

Francisco Mejía is one of the most recent additions to the El Paso Chihuahuas after a trade between the San Diego Padres and Cleveland Indians. He is one of MLB's top prospects. (Photo: Ivan Pierre Aguirre/El Paso Chihuahuas)

Mejia signed as an 18-year-old in 2013 and since that moment he has been known as a good hitter with a strong throwing arm. He has soared through the Indian organization and it is almost certain he was expecting to be their next catcher.

Last year, in the Double-A Eastern League, he hit .297 with 21 doubles, 14 home runs. He also caught everyone in baseball's attention by hitting safely in 50 straight games — the longest such streak in minor league baseball since 1963.

Smiling, he said, "I really didn't think about it until I got to 40 games. Then my mom called me and said everyone was talking about it on social media. My agent called and told me to just keep doing what I was doing."

He did.

Throughout his minor league career, Mejia is hitting .291 with 111 doubles, 12 triples and 47 home runs and he is obviously still growing into his power.

### **'Comfortable in El Paso'**

Francisco Mejía is one of the most recent additions to the El Paso Chihuahuas after a trade between the San Diego Padres and Cleveland Indians. He is one of MLB's top prospects. (Photo: Ivan Pierre Aguirre/El Paso Chihuahuas)

Chris Antonetti, president of Cleveland's baseball operations, told MLB.com at the end of last season, "He did an extraordinary job at continuing his development. Offensively and especially defensively, the way he led the staff, some of the nuances of catching."

Mejia just wants to continue that development — now in El Paso.

"I just want to bring a great defensive presence behind the plate," he said softly. "It gave me a little more confidence to play a few games in the Major Leagues with Cleveland. But now I'm here and I'm looking forward to it. I know some of the guys ... (Luis) Urias, (Franmil) Reyes, Franchy Cordero.

"I feel comfortable in El Paso," he said with a small smile. "It is like I am in the Dominican. Everyone speaks Spanish. Good weather, too."

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Mejia said his wife Sorivel and his young son, Francisco Miguel, will join him soon.

Of course, this is baseball and baseball requires a lot of movement. Mejia could be moving again.

When he was obtained, San Diego general manager A.J. Preller tweeted, "He had two brief stints in the Majors and we'll take the next two weeks at the Triple-A level to evaluate him and see where we're at at the big league level. He's the guy that's right on the doorstep of the big leagues."

And so the wondrous journey of Francisco Mejia continues ... with a detour through El Paso.

The baseball world makes moves every day. But, if you are one of those who just got moved for the first time, just a 22-year-old who thought he would be with Cleveland forever, it is a bit of a shock.

But, in the end, it is still just baseball, just the game Mejia grew up with, there in the shadows of a ball park in the Dominican Republic.

And he is ready to play.

And, as he was in Columbus, he remains just one phone call away from that grandest of baseball stages.

## **Padres land prized prospect Mejia for Hand**

### ***San Diego also sends reliever Cimber to Cleveland as part of trade***

*- AJ Cassavell, MLB.com / July 19, 2018*

The Padres' most coveted trade chip in recent memory is no longer a trade chip. **Brad Hand** is headed to Cleveland. So is **Adam Cimber**. The return: baseball's top-ranked catching prospect.

On Thursday morning, the Padres finalized a trade sending relievers Hand and Cimber to the Indians for MLB Pipeline's **No. 15 prospect Francisco Mejia**. Add Mejia to the treasure trove of youngsters in San Diego's top-ranked farm system. He gives the club 10 prospects in **MLB Pipeline's Top 100**.

A 22-year-old catcher, Mejia has posted a .279/.328/.426 slash line with Triple-A Columbus this season. He will report to Triple-A El Paso, but Padres general manager A.J. Preller noted that he's "on the doorstep of the big leagues."

"You're losing two quality relievers, but ultimately getting a 22-year-old switch-hitting catcher who ... has a huge arm, has got some hitting accolades, can swing the bat," Preller said. "We continue to build -- getting that type of asset vs. a couple of 'pen pieces on a team that's struggled in the standings in the first half of the season. We just felt like that was quality value to go ahead and unlock one of the better prospects in the game."

Mejia, whose receiving skills have been questioned, is viewed by some as an outfielder in the long term. But he's expressed a reluctance to switch positions, and the Padres plan to continue to develop him behind the plate.

That, of course, leaves questions regarding **Austin Hedges'** standing. Hedges has been the club's presumed catcher of the future for the past half-decade, and he's been outstanding defensively. But his bat has lagged well behind, with a .232/.289/.376 slash line this season.

It's easy to envision both having an impact in the long term. The Padres certainly do. Mejia could still ultimately move to the outfield. For now, he brings serious high-level catching depth.

"To have two of the most talented and best catchers 25-and-under in your organization, it's a really good position to be in," Preller said. "[Catcher] is also a position where the traditional 130-, 140-game guy, you don't see as much anymore. We've talked about what this means for us down the road. At least in the short-term, we have two of the top catching talents in the game in the organization."

It's quite the trade haul considering the way Hand and Cimber blossomed from out of nowhere into top-tier relief pitchers with San Diego. Hand was a waiver claim from Miami at the start of the 2016 season. The left-hander became one of the best relievers in baseball, largely due to the implementation of a slider that ranks among the nastiest pitches in the sport. In 41 appearances this season, Hand owns a 3.05 ERA and 13.2 strikeouts per nine innings.

"Probably the best part of the job the last few years has been watching Brad come in and work in all different roles, different situations, growing from a guy that was a talent as a waiver claim that we took a shot with, to a two-time All-Star," Preller said.

Hand has been rumored as a trade piece for the better part of the past two seasons. But the Padres held firm that they wouldn't move him unless they were blown away by the return. During the offseason, Hand signed a team-friendly three-year extension through 2021. That seemingly made him even more attractive as trade bait.

Still, the Padres wouldn't have landed Mejia unless they included Cimber in the package. A surprise addition to the roster out of Spring Training, Cimber has been one of the Majors' top rookie relievers this season.

The sidearming right-hander owns a 3.17 ERA and a 2.32 FIP in 48 1/3 innings.

"Francisco's going to be a really good player," said Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti. "But in order to be able to get back what we view are really high-leverage, high-impact relievers, we knew we were going to have to give up a lot of value."

In the absence of Hand, it's likeliest that **Kirby Yates** will slot into the Padres' closer role. San Diego has yet to announce any corresponding roster moves, but it's expected to add bullpen help before opening the second half on Friday in Philadelphia.

"Where we're at in the standings, the second part of the year will be [about] looking at improvement from our club, looking at improvement from individuals and giving opportunities to guys that have some talent," Preller said. "We'll see if we can find the next Brad Hand or the next Adam Cimber."

The Padres might not be done dealing either. MLB.com's Mark Feinsand reported that Yates and, to a lesser extent, starter Tyson Ross have drawn serious trade interest.

For now, Hand and Cimber are difficult pieces to replace. But the Indians saw both as useful long-term additions to their bullpen. As a result, they were willing to part with their best prospect.

San Diego isn't going to rush Mejia. In two separate Major League stints, he's notched two hits in 15 at-bats, but he's going to get further seasoning in the Minors before he dons a Padres uniform.

"We'll take the next few weeks at the Triple-A level to evaluate, see where things are with him, see where things are with our big league club," Preller said. "We'll make a call from there. ... He's a guy that's right there on the doorstep of the big leagues."

## Mejia has a mentor of sorts in Ramirez

*Tribe's top prospect, third baseman hail from same town in DR*

- Jordan Bastian, MLB.com / February 28, 2018

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Francisco Mejia estimated that it was about a decade ago that he first encountered Jose Ramirez. It was during one of Mejia's weekend games in Bani, their shared hometown in the Dominican Republic. Ramirez was out at shortstop when a young Mejia stepped up to the plate.

"He was always a good player," said Mejia, who went 2-for-4 with a run scored in Wednesday's 15-3 win over the Angels in Tempe. "They love him in Bani."

Now, Ramirez acts like a big brother around Mejia in Cleveland's clubhouse. The rookie catcher's locker inside the Indians' spring complex is the first stall by the room's entrance. That gives Ramirez the chance to mess around with Mejia when he is coming and going. On a recent morning, Ramirez wrapped an arm around the catcher and pulled him out of his chair and told him to go watch video with him.

On Wednesday morning, when Mejia began to answer a reporter's questions, Ramirez leaned against the white cinder-block wall next to the catcher's locker. Ramirez had his arms folded across his chest and wore a serious expression as he awaited the rookie's responses. Cleveland's third baseman was jokingly asked whether he was supervising the interview.

"No cualquier supervisor," Ramirez fired back.

*Not just any supervisor.*

No, Ramirez is becoming more than that for Mejia.

Ramirez, who finished third in voting for the American League Most Valuable Player Award last season, has become a mentor for Mejia. The Bani Brothers spend time together away from the complex -- Ramirez said he does the driving -- and often get their daily work done side by side. Ramirez will swing by Mejia's locker and tell him to join him in the batting cage or video room.

"He's always around here," Mejia said with a smile. "I go do whatever he wants to do."

The rookie has appreciated that veteran players like Ramirez and Edwin Encarnacion have made him feel welcome around the Major Leaguers. It could be because they know the catcher should be knocking on the big league door soon. There is a lot of hype surrounding the 22-year-old Mejia, who is the Indians' No. 1 prospect and the top catching prospect in baseball, per MLB Pipeline.

Ramirez's description of Mejia as a hitter hardly needed translating.

"*Tremendo* bateador," said Ramirez, who doubled and drew a walk in Wednesday's 4-2 win over the Mariners at Goodyear Ballpark.

Ramirez continued on.

"Obviously, he's still a young guy," he said via a translator. "And he has a lot of maturing to do and he has some adjustments that he needs to make. But, from what I've seen, I really think he's going to be one of the best."

Mejia found himself on the national radar two years ago, when the switch-hitter pieced together a 50-game hitting streak between Class A Lake County and Class A Advanced Lynchburg. He finished that season hitting .342 with an .896 OPS in 102 games overall. Last year, Mejia moved up to Double-A Akron and turned in a .297/.346/.490 slash line with 14 homers, 21 doubles and 52 RBIs in 92 games before being promoted to Cleveland.

The Indians think so highly of Mejia as a hitter that the team had him try his hand at third base during the Arizona Fall League in an effort to introduce some position versatility. They believe he can be a good big league catcher, but Mejia

is blocked at the moment by Roberto Perez and Yan Gomes. If there is a way to expedite Mejia's path to the Majors, the Indians want to explore it.

"He's so advanced," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "That's kind of why we've talked about positional changes with him. It's not an indictment on his catching. It's just the fact that, if something happened in April or May or June, he's probably our best Minor League hitter."

Ramirez said his advice for Mejia this spring has been simple.

"I don't think he's going to have an opportunity to make the team when we break camp," Ramirez said. "So the advice I gave him is: No matter what, keep your head up, keep working hard no matter [where you're playing]. You don't know what could happen and what opportunities might come up."