

# Daily Clips



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DAILY CLIPS  
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**LA TIMES**

**To Dodgers, Adrian Beltre is the Hall of Famer who got away**

By Andy McCullough

Inside a ballpark 1,400 miles east of Dodger Stadium, Adrian Beltre let a memory wash over him. He has played 21 seasons in the major leagues, but few move him like 2004. As he hearkened back to that summer in Los Angeles, when he threatened to homer with every swing and fans greeted him by chanting “M-V-P,” his voice softened.

“I will never forget that,” Beltre said as he sat by his locker at the Texas Rangers’ Globe Life Park in Arlington. “I will never forget that because when you come to the plate and hear those chants, that is so nice. They were great fans. They were great to me.”

Beltre, the 39-year-old third baseman, thought he might spend the rest of his career in Los Angeles’ embrace. He was wrong. Spurned by the Dodgers as a free agent after the 2004 season, Beltre moved to the American League. His fans in Los Angeles watched from afar as Beltre built a résumé that will deliver him to the Hall of Fame: more than 3,000 hits, four All-Star teams, five Gold Glove awards and a parade of teammates vouching for his joyous spirit and selfless resolve.

Beltre displayed those qualities, in sporadic stints, as a Dodger. The organization plucked him out of the Dominican Republic when he was 15. He made the city his home. When he flared like a supernova in 2004, he laid the foundation for his Cooperstown qualifications.

At 25, Beltre generated the most productive season by a position player in Dodgers history, according to FanGraph’s version of wins above replacement. He hit 48 home runs and drove in 121 runs as he led the team to its first National League West title since 1995. At third base, Beltre was “the best I ever saw,” former manager Jim Tracy said. Beltre finished the year with a 9.7 WAR, ahead of Jackie Robinson in 1949 (9.6) and Mike Piazza in 1997 (9.1).

It was the culmination of a decade of development, and it was also the end. Beltre never played another game as a Dodger. His departure left Tracy “devastated, devastated, absolutely devastated,” he said. The Dodgers cratered in 2005. After a frustrating five years in Seattle, Beltre flourished into stardom in his 30s. He fulfilled all the promise he augured in Los Angeles — except he did it in Boston and Texas.

Beltre had a slightly different take. “I think it was more the GM than anything,” he said. Beltre blamed himself for telegraphing that he didn’t want to leave. “It was a mistake on my part to show it too much, that I wanted to stay back then,” he said. “They wanted to use that against me in the negotiation.”

The Dodgers discovered Beltre in 1994, when he was working out at their Campo Las Palmas complex in the Dominican Republic. His talent was impossible to ignore. During his first two full seasons in the minors — when he was 17 and 18 years old — he hit 52 home runs. He started 1998 in double-A San Antonio.

A freakish occurrence accelerated Beltre's arrival in the majors. Tommy Lasorda had recently taken over the Dodgers player-personnel decisions. In June 1998, when doctors removed a benign polyp from outfielder Bobby Bonilla's large intestine, Lasorda advocated for promoting Beltre.

In his first at-bat as a Dodger, on June 24 against the Angels at Dodger Stadium, Beltre clubbed a run-scoring double off Chuck Finley. "This kid's got talent, and he's got everything he needs to be here," Lasorda said that day.

Beltre hit only .215 as a rookie but he never went back to the minor leagues. He was 19. Two decades later, he credited Lasorda for stumping for his promotion and protecting him when he struggled.

Beltre endured the fate of the precocious, developing at the game's highest level. He established himself as the starting third baseman in 1999 and hit 20 homers in 2000. He could not make progress in a straight line; from 2001 to 2003, Beltre was a below-average hitter. He flung errant throws in the field and hacked with abandon at the plate.

"His first few years, he learned an awful lot about being a man and being a leader," Tracy said. "Believe me."

The failure ate at Beltre. After one tough outing, Boras sat with Beltre in the Dodger Stadium parking lot until 4 a.m. trying to boost his client's confidence. In the winter after 2003, as Beltre approached his free-agent season, Boras said he heard a series of criticisms from Dodgers management about Beltre. Boras filtered them back to his client: Beltre was a "5 o'clock hitter," incapable of translating batting-practice power into games. He allowed emotion to overwhelm him. "They also thought I was going to get fat," Beltre said, chuckling at his locker.

"Those comments made me realize, OK, I need to prove these people wrong," Beltre said. "Even though I don't need any more motivation to play baseball, if that's what they're thinking of me, then I'm going to show them that they're wrong."

As the 2004 season approached, the Dodgers underwent a franchise-wide upheaval. McCourt purchased the team from News Corp. in January. A couple weeks later, he installed DePodesta as the general manager. DePodesta came from the Oakland Athletics, where he played a supporting role alongside Billy Beane in baseball's sabermetric revolution.

Beltre soon absorbed something more debilitating. After a prodigious April in which he homered seven times and moved up in the batting order, Beltre started hobbling with bone

spurs in his left ankle. He pushed off surgery until after the season. The trainers numbed the joint with cortisone.

The ankle hurt when Beltre made abrupt stops on the bases and it was agony when he whiffed on a pitch. Years later, his former teammates credited the injury for transforming Beltre as a player. He had always been a free swinger, but now his focus winnowed.

“I knew if I swung and missed, it was going to hurt,” Beltre said. “Somehow, I was more concentrated on getting a good pitch to hit and not missing it.”

As he studied how pitchers attacked him, Beltre noticed a pattern. He saw a slew of elevated fastballs mixed with sliders down and away. He chased the breaking balls, even though he knew he could not punish those pitches. When he decided to concentrate on pummeling fastballs, his strikeout rate shrank and his slugging percentage rose.

“All you have to do is touch it,” he said. “Put a good swing on it and touch it, and the ball is going to go somewhere.”

The baseball soared for Beltre all season. He hit 19 homers in the first three months of the season. He bashed 10 in July and 13 more in August. He slowed, somewhat, in September, going deep six times but still producing a .937 on-base plus slugging percentage for the month.

Beltre fell into an easy rhythm. During batting practice, he engaged in home-run derbies with veteran teammate Shawn Green. They rewarded points for distance and location, trying to crush baseballs to the opposite field. Afterward they retired to the clubhouse, where Beltre teamed with Jose Lima against Green and Paul Lo Duca in games of cards. The sides talked trash against each other — when Beltre and Lima weren’t arguing in Spanish over strategy.

Both Green and Roberts recalled Beltre as a crucial part of the clubhouse’s connective tissue. He hung with American players and Latino players alike. His energy was contagious.

“I can't think of a teammate I enjoyed playing with more than him,” Green said. “He was like the perfect teammate.”

As the trade deadline approached that summer, the Dodgers held a small lead in the division. DePodesta made a series of moves. Roberts was shipped to Boston. Lo Duca and Guillermo Mota went to Florida in a deal which brought Hee-Sop Choi and Brad Penny. Steve Finley arrived from Arizona, but the shakeup rocked the clubhouse.

“We had a worse team after the trade deadline,” Green said. “I would say a significantly worse team.”

Yet the Dodgers captured the division. Beltre led the way. He was quiet during a first-round loss to St. Louis, but he finished second in the National League MVP voting that October to Barry

Bonds. His manager did not view his season as a fluke. "You've got more than a cornerstone," Tracy said. "You've developed the side of a building."

When the offseason began, Beltre had modest goals. He figured he compared well with Oakland Athletics third baseman Eric Chavez, who had signed an extension which paid him \$8.5 million in 2005. Beltre hoped for a contract that lasted three or four seasons worth \$8 million a year. He wanted to sign early and remain a Dodger. Early in the winter, Beltre recalled, he and Boras met with DePodesta and McCourt.

"The conversation went well," Beltre said. "The owner said, 'Make sure you sign him.' That was early November, I think, and after that I didn't hear from them until late December. I think the GM tried to use the knowledge that he had against me."

Reached via email, DePodesta cited a contractual provision which prevents him from "speaking publicly about anything during my time with the Dodgers" and declined comment.

Beltre felt the Dodgers placed him on the back burner. As negotiations with Seattle intensified, Boras recalled trying to contact DePodesta and McCourt. Neither man picked up when Boras called, because they were dining with free-agent pitcher Matt Clement.

The Mariners offered Beltre a five-year, \$64-million contract. The Dodgers eventually countered with a six-year, \$60-million deal, The Times reported. Boras pegged the package at closer to \$50 million in value. Beltre recalled an even lower figure: "The offer was half the years and very much half the money," he said. "As much as I liked L.A., as much as I wanted to stay there, I couldn't do that."

Boras declined to place responsibility on DePodesta. They maintained a productive relationship. Later that offseason, the Dodgers signed outfielder J.D. Drew to a five-year, \$55-million contract and pitcher Derek Lowe to a four-year, \$60-million contract. Both were Boras clients.

"We had great success with Paul," Boras said. "It wasn't really about him. I just think ownership wanted to spend their money elsewhere."

Beltre never hid his disappointment. He carried it with him to the Pacific Northwest. Back in Los Angeles, Tracy grieved over losing one of his favorite players. "What the hell are we doing?" he wondered.

In January, Green waived his no-trade clause to let the team send him to Arizona. "Had they kept Adrian," Green said, "I think I would have rejected a trade."

No one benefited from the dissolution. The Dodgers brought in veteran infielder Jose Valentin to replace Beltre; Valentin hit .170 and played in 56 games as the organization engaged in a yearly exercise in trying to find a regular third baseman. The team skidded to a 71-91 record, its worst since 1992. Tracy was fired after the season. DePodesta joined him on the

unemployment line a few weeks later; he now works for the Cleveland Browns. When his finances unraveled, McCourt fell into bankruptcy and sold the Dodgers to Guggenheim Partners in 2012.

Hired too late to reshape the Dodgers during the winter, DePodesta made a splash in the spring. Just before the season began, he acquired outfielder Milton Bradley. The trade meant Beltre would no longer hit in the middle of the lineup. On opening day, Tracy called Beltre into his office and held up a lineup card. Beltre would bat seventh, Tracy explained, but there would be 161 games after that.

“You want to hit third or fourth on this ballclub?” Tracy told Beltre. “You make me do it.”

“It’s one of those things where you wish he could have been a Dodger for his entire career,” former teammate and current Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. “The way the economics worked out, he wasn’t. But he’s always considered L.A. home.”

When Beltre visits Los Angeles on Tuesday with the Rangers, it will mark his first game at Dodger Stadium since 2009. His return will resurrect a question that has puzzled fans for 14 years: Why did the Dodgers, under the leadership of owner Frank McCourt and general manager Paul DePodesta, let Beltre leave?

“I just don’t think Frank and their ownership appreciated who Adrian was going to grow into,” said Scott Boras, Beltre’s agent.

By then, Beltre had bounced from Seattle to Boston to Texas. In his first year as a Mariner, he felt engulfed by the pressure of his contract. He hit only 19 home runs because “I was trying to do too much,” he said. He remained a valuable hitter, even as the unforgiving environment at Safeco Field suppressed his power.

His renaissance began when he hit 28 homers and 49 doubles on a one-year deal with Boston in 2009. The performance convinced Texas to sign him to a six-year, \$96-million contract. As the Rangers became an annual playoff contender, Beltre soaked up the spotlight. He played third base without a protective cup, he hated it when teammates tried to touch his head and he competed with shortstop Elvis Andrus to psych each other out on pop-ups. He was beloved for his persona and his performance.

“He had no weakness as a player,” Green said. “And even now, at 40 years old, he’s still an incredible player.”

Beltre became the face of the Rangers’ franchise. In 2013, the organization named him team captain. One day last weekend, the Make-A-Wish Foundation brought a young Rangers fan to Globe Life Park. Beltre took the boy on a tour of the clubhouse, then brought him into the team’s first group for batting practice.

As Beltre sat with a reporter later in the afternoon, the boy came over to say goodbye. Beltre hopped out of his chair to shake hands. “Max, you leaving?” Beltre said. “Hey, it was nice having you, brother. You come back anytime, OK?”

It was the sort of role Beltre could have played for the Dodgers. It was the role he wanted to play for the Dodgers.

No longer does Beltre wonder about alternative history, how his career might have gone had the Dodgers tried harder to keep him. He has already lost too much time pondering the question, he admitted. He still lives outside Los Angeles. He sounded eager to take in Dodger Stadium this week. The pain of his departure has faded.

"I wanted to stay there forever," Beltre said. "But it didn't happen. But I don't regret any move that I've made my career. Everything happened for a reason."

## OC REGISTER

### **Sorry, mom – Ross Stripling has been the unexpected lifesaver in Dodgers' rotation**

By Bill Plunkett

LOS ANGELES — Stop saying you're surprised by how good Ross Stripling has been – his mom is getting tired of it.

"She is," the son said.

"She's just like, 'Why are they so surprised every time you do well?' Just being a supportive mom. ... She knows, man. She reads it all."

Mom must be happy with what she's reading. Her son has been the unexpected Texan leading the Dodgers' rotation, pitching at an elite level since stepping into that rotation as injuries started to unravel it.

In seven starts since early May, Stripling has a 1.33 ERA and 0.89 WHIP. He has held opposing batters to a .212 batting average and .524 OPS. Though he hasn't logged enough innings yet to show up on the leaderboard, Stripling's 1.65 ERA for the season is better than more heralded starters such as multiple Cy Young Award winners Max Scherzer and Corey Kluber.

Sorry, mom – that's kind of surprising. Even Stripling himself had to admit he didn't know he had this in him.

"Well, I don't know if you could say I knew it," Stripling said. "I just always wanted the opportunity. I felt like when I was a rookie in '16, you're just trying to stay afloat, keep your head above water. You're learning on the run. You don't know what your strengths are until you figure it out. They're throwing all this information at you and you don't know what to take in and when to rely on what got you here, kind of thing.

"It's kind of overwhelming then I found myself in the bullpen, hoping for this opportunity again."

As a rookie, Stripling memorably took a no-hitter into the eighth inning of his major-league debut. But over 14 starts, he was 3-6 with a 4.52 ERA and 1.32 WHIP. Two years later, Stripling has served more of an apprenticeship than most pitchers are asked to do these days when roles seem to be assigned early on.



“Well, he did come up and throw seven no-hit innings in his first start,” Dodgers pitching coach Rick Honeycutt said of the surprise factor with Stripling’s run of success this season.

“What you’re seeing this year is him maturing into what I think is a complete pitcher. There’s a lot of different aspects of it. When you’re in the bullpen, you kind of get locked into a couple pitches. Now what you’re seeing as Ross gets the freedom of being in a starting role, it’s allowed him to use his changeup some and now all of a sudden he’s come up with a backdoor cutter. These are all positive things that you don’t know how guys grow. But you hope they grow and you’ve seen him blossom at a really good time for us.”

Stripling has blossomed as a four-pitch pitcher – who actually uses all four pitches with a purpose.

Teammate Tom Koehler reacted to one of Stripling’s starts in early May by posting a picture of a Swiss army knife. A nod to Stripling’s ability to pitch in a variety of roles, it also is an apt metaphor for Stripling’s repertoire.

“When you hand me a scouting report and we prepare – if a guy has a certain hole, I can throw that pitch. More than likely,” Stripling said. “I can basically manipulate a ball most ways except sink it. I can’t sink it. So I’m able to keep guys off balance because they have to think about all four pitches.”

And Stripling has been able to attack the strike zone with all four. His first-strike percentage – approximately 75 percent – is the best among MLB starters. During this seven-start run, his strike-throwing has resulted in a remarkable 53-4 strikeout-to-walk total.

“He’s able to repeat his mechanics very efficiently, over and over again,” said teammate Rich Hill with obvious respect. “You’re seeing the tunnel effect. You’re seeing the same release point for all four pitches ... that he throws for strikes.”

There is no doubt which of those pitches is most important to Stripling – the one about which Hill says he always told Stripling “Throw it more. Throw it more.”

“Huge,” Stripling said of how large the curve looms in his success. “I don’t know the numbers, but I imagine it’s the pitch that has the lowest batting average and that I get the most punchouts with. So it’s certainly something that I’ve relied on and will continue to rely on.”

The numbers back him up. Batters miss 39 percent of the time when they swing at Stripling’s big-breaking knuckle curve and bat just .130 when they manage to put it into play. All of the numbers have improved over Stripling’s three seasons as he learned more about how to maximize his strengths through pitch sequencing and now game-planning as a starting pitcher.

“I’ve always been told that a pitcher is supposed to say his fastball is his best pitch and I’ve never been like that,” he said. “I’ve always thought my curveball was my best pitch – even like in college until now. So I feel confident in it. It’s my best pitch.

“But my other three play well off of it. When I can go high fastball and then curveball in the same spot and it drops. I just feel like I’ve learned to play my curveball around in different counts, different sequences.”

For now, Stripling is not only the Dodgers' best starter – he is also their only healthy one. Four starters are on the DL (five if you count rookie Dennis Santana, who never made it to his first start). Walker Buehler and Alex Wood are still on the active roster while dealing with their own infirmities.

Kenta Maeda and Hill could return this week. Eventually, at some point, the Dodgers will have a full complement of healthy starters. Surely, Stripling can take comfort in knowing he has cemented his place.

“No. I wish,” he said. “I don’t know if you can ever feel like that. I guess obviously Kershaw feels that way. But, no, you gotta think when everybody gets back healthy it’ll be a competition. It’ll be the hot hand.

“One thing that’s good is that I enjoyed and did well in the long-man role. So before they would throw someone else out there it’d probably be me. You try not to think about stuff like that but it comes up. You just have to go out and control what you can control. Take it one game at a time, that classic thing. And when those guys get back healthy, we’ll be pumped and take it from there.”

#### **UP NEXT**

Rangers (RHP Bartolo Colon, 3-3, 4.16 ERA) at Dodgers (TBA), Tuesday, 7:10 p.m., SportsNet LA (where available)

#### **Dodgers gondola gets one step closer to becoming a real thing**

City News Service

LOS ANGELES — A proposed gondola from Union Station to Dodger Stadium has advanced to a second stage of consideration, Metro announced Monday.

The transit agency confirmed that an unsolicited bid it received from Aerial Rapid Transit Technologies has advanced to a phase two, where the proposer is invited to submit a more comprehensive proposal.

Metro’s unsolicited proposal policy allows the private sector to submit ideas to the agency. All proposals are subject to a phase one analysis within 60 days of being received and Metro can then choose to advance proposals to a more detailed phase two review. Aerial Rapid Transit Technologies, which is funded by former Dodgers owner Frank McCourt, submitted the initial bid in April.

A gondola and other options for improving access to Dodger Stadium was part of an informational study in 1990 by the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission, a precursor agency to Metro, but the idea was never pursued beyond the study, Metro said.

McCourt sold the team in 2011 but still owns half interest in the 130 acres of parking around the stadium. McCourt’s investment firm would fund a portion of the project’s estimated \$125-million cost and would seek private financing for the remainder, the Los Angeles Times reported.

If Metro approves the phase two proposal, it could be the basis for a competitive procurement, a sole source agreement or another arrangement depending on Metro's role and relationship to the project, the agency said.

## **TRUE BLUE LA**

### **Lux brings home winner in Quakes 8-7 win**

By Craig Minami

All four full-season Dodger affiliates won on Monday, three of those wins were by one run. Also one of the Dominican Summer League teams, DSL Dodgers Robinson also won.

#### **Player of the day**

Six Rancho Cucamonga Quakes were named to the California League All-Star team on Monday. Shortstop Gavin Lux, third-baseman Rylan Bannon, outfielder Logan Landon and catcher Connor Wong will start for the South Division in next week's game at Lancaster. Pitchers Tony Gonsolin and Dean Kremer were also named to the team.

#### **Triple-A Oklahoma City**

The Dodgers survived giving up the tying runs in the ninth as they went on to beat the Fresno Grizzlies (Astros) 5-4 in ten innings. Joe Broussard, who allowed those tying runs in the ninth, struck out three in the tenth to collect the win.

In the top of the tenth, with runners on first and third and no outs, a Alex Verdugo groundout scored Andrew Toles with the go-ahead run.

It was that ninth inning that saw action in both the top and bottom of the inning. The Dodgers broke a 2-2 tie when after two out, Edwin Rios was still on base due to an error. Rob Segedin drove home Rios when he doubled to center. Angelo Mora followed that with a run-scoring single.

The Grizzlies put runners on first and third with one out in the bottom of the ninth. A double scored the first run and then with the bases-loaded, a line drive single tied the game.

A familiar theme for Dodger teams was played out in Fresno as they used six pitchers, none of them longer than two innings. Pat Venditte pitched two innings and struck out four.

#### **Double-A Tulsa**

The Drillers pounded out four home runs in their 6-3 win matinee win over the Springfield Cardinals. Zach Reks, Connor Joe, Tyler Goeddel, and Jacob Scavuzzo were the home run hitters.

Logan Bawcom got the win, he pitched six innings and gave up three runs and seven hits. Dylan Baker got his third save.

Aside from the home runs, Yusniel Diaz had two hits.

### **Class-A Rancho Cucamonga**

The Quakes were facing near first half elimination as they could fall three games back with six to play with a loss to the Lake Elsinore Storm (Padres). But then, trailing by three in the ninth, the Quakes came back to score four runs and they held on to a 8-7 win on Monday at Lake Elsinore.

The Quakes are now one game back with six games left in the first half.

Gavin Lux's fourth hit of the game capped the four-run ninth inning as Lux drove home the go-ahead run. That was the eighteenth hit of the game for the Quakes.

Cody Thomas also had four hits, Omar Estevez and Saige Jenco each had three hits, while Hamlet Marte had two hits and four RBI.

Stetson Allie got the win and Zach Pop recorded his second save.

### **Class-A Great Lakes**

The Loons scored three runs in the eighth to tie the game and then with two out, Jared Walker hit a walk-off homer to win 7-6 over the Lake County Captains (Indians).

In the eighth inning, the Loons tied the game on what is described as a two out bases-loaded single to shortstop by Mitchell Hansen that scored all three runs.

James Carter got the win for pitching a scoreless top of the ninth inning. Walker, Brayan Morales and Romer Cuadrado each had two hits.

### **Transactions**

Triple-A: Oklahoma City placed left-handed pitcher Manny Banuelos on the temporarily inactive list.

Double-A: Right-handed pitcher Andrew Istler assigned to Tulsa from Rancho Cucamonga.

Class-A: Left-handed pitcher Jason Richman assigned to Rancho Cucamonga from Oklahoma City; left-handed pitcher Michael Boyle assigned to Rancho Cucamonga from Tulsa; Rancho Cucamonga activated right-handed pitcher Parker Curry from the temporarily inactive list.

Great Lakes activated right-handed pitcher Riley Ottesen and left-handed pitcher Victor Gonzalez from the 7-day disabled list; Great Lakes placed outfielder Starling Heredia on the temporarily inactive list.

### **Monday's scores**

Oklahoma City 5, Fresno 4 (10)

Tulsa 6, Springfield 3

Rancho Cucamonga 8, Lake Elsinore 7

Great Lakes 7, Lake County 6

DSL Dodgers Robinson 11, DSL RoyalsOne 6

DSL RaysTwo 13, DSL Dodgers Guerrero 10

### **Tuesday's schedule**

4:05 p.m. PT: Great Lakes (TBD) at West Michigan [Tigers] (Elvin Rodriguez)

4:30 p.m. PT: Tulsa (Mitchell White) at Springfield (Connor Jones)

6:00 p.m.: Rancho Cucamonga (Dean Kremer) at Lake Elsinore (Chris Paddack)

## **THE ATHLETIC**

### **'A nice little day': How Andrew Shaps, once all but out of baseball, became the Dodgers' 31st-round pick**

By Fabian Ardaya

Andrew Shaps couldn't bring himself to turn on the television last week. After all, he knew that if he turned it to the MLB Network, he wouldn't hear his name. A year ago, his baseball career had been all but over. The scouts that had remained in touch with him hadn't been heard from for days. He'd almost resigned himself to this fate.

He eventually gave in, opening his computer and finding his way to the website tracking each of the selections made in the Major League Baseball amateur draft. He didn't expect to see his own name, but searched just to make sure it was even a listed option.

One day passed, with his name not called through two rounds. The same was true through 10 rounds. Shaps awoke Wednesday morning unsure of whether he'd hear anything. Around 11 a.m., he saw a familiar name flash across his phone screen. It was Tom Kunis, an area scout for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Hang tight, Kunis told him. The Dodgers were going to pick him, Kunis reassured Shaps. Kunis just wasn't sure when, or in what round. Some three hours later, his name flashed on the screen again.

"How are you feeling?" Kunis said.

"Well, I guess I feel fine, why?"

Shaps still had the draft tracker up on his computer. So did his father, Bob, in the other room. But it was his mother, Mimi, who saw and heard it first on her own computer. A second later, all three saw it.

Andrew Shaps had been drafted in the 31st round by the Los Angeles Dodgers. The draft tracker spelled out his name, but it wasn't until Kunis delivered the words himself that their value finally sunk in.

He didn't remember much else. His mom let out a yell in the other room. His dad leaped up to hug him. Texts and tweets from current and former teammates buzzed his phone. As Kunis asked him some opening questions, Shaps could hardly make out the words.

"I'm pretty sure whatever I said made zero sense whatsoever," Shaps said. "It was just chaotic."

A year ago — heck, six months ago, Shaps was done with baseball. Thursday, he became a Dodger.

The meeting was short. As Shaps sat in Arizona State head coach Tracy Smith's office at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, he sat and processed the words that came out of Smith's mouth before walking out.

He'd been dismissed from the program. There would be a mass exodus of talent that spring from the Sun Devils team, including some who elected to depart with Shaps. Months earlier, Shaps had been lauded as a potential team leader, with scouts constantly in his ear. Entering his junior season, he had everything in front of him. He viewed himself as a future draft pick, meeting with representatives from several teams after a short stint in the Cape Cod League the previous summer.

"I knew I was in a good situation," Shaps said. "People always talk about, 'You can't think about that kind of stuff,' but it's impossible. I mean, this is the biggest part of my life, and anyone's life to that point. You can say what you want, but you're always going to think about the draft and you're always going to think about whether you're helping yourself or hurting yourself."

Sports has always been in the cards for Andrew Shaps. His father was a former 17th-round pick of the Indians. His mother played field hockey in college. Now, he was playing baseball at his dream school, though that wasn't always the case. It took a meeting with then-recruiting coordinator Ken Knutson to sell him on the program, getting Shaps to stay home in Arizona.

He'd originally committed to the Sun Devils under then-head coach Tim Esmay, though Esmay would resign before Shaps even arrived on campus. He initially got along OK with Smith — the two had butted heads at times, but there was a level of mutual respect entering Shaps' junior season.

The relationship deteriorated quickly. Shaps said he failed a pair of drug tests — the second one triggering a suspension that caused him to miss the beginning of the season.

"I just was being a dumb kid," Shaps said, declining to discuss details of the suspensions. "That's really all I have to say about it. I made some bad decisions."

Shaps, along with others with the program, had verbal and online spats with Smith's adult son, Ty, including a reported near-altercation between the two before the season when Shaps failed a conditioning test and Ty criticized him for it. Shaps also accused his coach of manipulating the underclassmen in an effort to get them to mistrust older players such as himself. Shaps said his role as team leader meant he put the team, and protecting that team, above all else.

"I don't know if you'd ever have a player who criticized the way he played and protected and took care of and loved the players that he played with," said Shaps' father, Bob. "He protected. He was the captain of the team."

The program suffered arguably its worst season to date, with Smith leading a group he admitted was "dysfunctional." Shaps didn't make it through the season, nor did several other members of that class. Still, four former members of the Sun Devils program, including Shaps, heard their names called in the draft.

"It's like you taking a job and you show up for your job and it's a different boss," Mimi said of Shaps' relationship with Smith. "Are you really meant to be together? And it did work for a while, and neither

side is blameless, but we just looked forward. He loved playing there. He loved being an ASU student. He loved those boys. it just didn't work out."

Smith has stated publicly that he will not address the Shaps situation. The two have yet to speak since Shaps left Smith's office that day, just a little more than 13 months before he was drafted by the Dodgers. Shaps hasn't spoken with Ty, either.

"I mean, we've both moved on," Shaps said of himself and Smith. "Hopefully that's just put to rest."

Scouting directors would prove to not have such a short memory. Shaps wouldn't hear his name called in that year's draft. He didn't have a place to play.

"When he was at Arizona State, he just met with [scouts], met with them, met with them," Mimi Shaps said. "Then, he gets dismissed from the team, and we don't hear from anybody. Crickets."

His career seemed to be over. If he were to play again, he thought, maybe it would be in independent baseball.

Mimi Shaps has a saying in her family, which she's always impressed upon her children.

"It will be OK — we just don't know what OK is."

In the immediate aftermath of the dismissal, she relayed that message to Andrew, as did Bob.

"It was almost a family tragedy," Bob Shaps said. "It was his, but we're all part of that. My wife and I really come from the school of thought that negative thoughts, and not moving forward with the appropriate strategy, that doesn't work. You can't change history. You can't change what happened."

If Andrew's career were to continue, he'd have to keep playing somewhere. Bob tried to get Andrew back in the Cape Cod League, but there were no spots available. He had no leads on independent league teams, either. Shaps found his way onto a summer college baseball roster playing for the Victoria HarbourCats of the West Coast League, under former big-leaguer Brian McRae. He played center field and even pitched a little, his first action on the mound since moonlighting as a reliever in his freshman year at Arizona State. His pitching career had been cut short due to a dead arm period, but as he took the mound he found his fastball touching 93 mph and sitting around 90, to pair with his curveball and a changeup he'd learned on the fly.

"Pretty much everything bad that could've happened in terms of my baseball career, happened," Shaps said of the months between his dismissal and return to the game. "The first thing I did was go to summer ball. I didn't just stay home and let it drag on. I just kind of tried to move on as fast as possible.

"I wasn't going to play this year at all."

Even then, when he changed his mind, he struggled to find a place to play. He tried some of his old buddies, looking to tag along and get a job playing independent baseball. He found nothing. Then he got a text from a Red Sox scout who had followed him for years, extending him a life raft.

The scout told Shaps to reach out to Kyle McKinley, the new head coach at William Jessup University, an NAIA program in Rocklin, California. The school had never produced a single draft pick.

"If you go to an NAIA game, you might just have a scout at a William Jessup game because they got lost on their way somewhere else," Bob Shaps said.

But Andrew had no other options. So, a week after classes had already begun for the spring semester, there he was on campus. He'd called McKinley, who asked one thing of his new player: Tell me everything, and be honest. If he could trust Shaps, he could coach him.

McKinley came away impressed by Shaps' openness and his apparent maturity about what had ended his time at Arizona State. He felt that Shaps would do well on his team, even with the history of disciplinary issues that had led him to butt heads with Tracy Smith.

"I was never worried about his baggage," McKinley said. "I think everyone has baggage. Some people sneak it onto the plane, but he was actually very transparent with me."

It didn't take long for McKinley to take note of Shaps' ability. It was apparent from the moment Shaps first stepped into the school's batting cage.

"I just thought his bat speed was world-class," McKinley said. "He's just a supreme athlete. My first impressions of him as a player was just like, 'Man, this guy's really good and I'm glad we're not playing against him.'"

Bob Shaps never doubted his son's ability, either. He'd seen his son grow firsthand from the thousands of grounders and fly balls he'd hit him over the years.

"I think he's as good as any of the kids out there, from a defensive standpoint," Bob said. "He gets great jumps on the ball. He's got a gun for an arm. ... He's got a really fast bat, and a really good eye."

It took a while for Shaps to get settled in his new surroundings. For one, when he first arrived on campus, he found himself living in an extended-stay motel some few miles off of campus, one of the few places Bob could find on short notice. Each day, he tried to fit in, working out and spending time with his teammates, but at the end of the day he went back, alone, to live in an unfamiliar place.

As Mimi Shaps sat and watched her son play in an early-season game, she overheard a conversation from some nearby parents about a room opening. Ernie Hook, a doctor in the area, and his wife, Robbie, had a passion for the game, and were huge fans of William Jessup baseball, where their son, Josh, was a right-handed pitcher. They'd made a habit of housing players from out of town as a way to help them feel more at home. So Mimi brought up the idea to Andrew, an idea he followed up on. He'd stay with Dr. Hook and his family the rest of the season.

"These families embraced these young men," Mimi Shaps said. "Andrew lived with perfect strangers that just said, 'He's welcome.'"

Shaps quickly found himself at home on the diamond again, starting in center field and hitting .453 over his first 15 games. One bad swing in February against Arizona Western left Shaps feeling a twinge of pain in his right hand, all but ending his final season. He still found ways onto the field, however, volunteering to pinch run whenever McKinley needed him. He also returned to the mound, posting a 5.65 ERA in 14 1/3 innings.



For Mimi Shaps, it harkened back to the days when Andrew was younger, playing every position imaginable to find a way into a game. The left-handed younger Shaps even played shortstop, leading other parents to ask why “he did that funny spin thing” every time he threw the ball.

Andrew Shaps won’t be a complete stranger in the Dodgers’ system. In fact, he has enough connections to the team to wonder if fate played a role in their 31st-round pick.

Growing up in the Phoenix area, Shaps spent some of his youth playing on the travel ball circuit, including time as teammates on a club called the “Nitro” with the likes of Alex Verdugo. Verdugo, who Mimi Shaps affectionately called a “wild child,” made his major-league debut with the Dodgers last season.

And in the summer of Shaps’ sophomore year of high school, he appeared in a showcase event at the Peoria Sports Complex after being selected to the Arizona Diamondbacks’ elite scout team along with future first-round pick Cole Tucker, second-rounder Ryan Castellani — and future Dodger Cody Bellinger.

One of those hot afternoons, Shaps was on the mound. Mimi Shaps was seated near home plate, watching her son pitch even through the heat. While she sat, her husband Bob stood, pacing back and forth with nerves.

A familiar face pulled up on a golf cart, accompanied by a series of scouts watching the event. The man noticed the empty chair, and asked Mimi if he could sit next to her. It was Tommy Lasorda.

“You really know how to do this,” Lasorda said to Mimi, noticing her chair had a canopy over it for shade, and pointing out the cooler at her feet that contained cool beverages and snacks.

So there Mimi Shaps and Tommy Lasorda sat, watching Mimi’s son pitch while Bob stood some feet away. As several of the Dodgers’ area scouts looked to move to the next field, Lasorda told them to go on without him. After all, he had to see her son pitch, calling Andrew “the little lefty.”

In the week leading up to the draft, Shaps was invited to a workout at Dodger Stadium on June 1, one last opportunity to impress scouts. As he left for the workout, Mimi looked at a photo on her desk.

It was a picture of Andrew and Lasorda from that unbearably hot afternoon. When the draft began, Mimi looked to the photo again, as if to ask it for help in getting her son selected.

“For it to be the Dodgers, it’s extra special,” Mimi Shaps said. “He came through.”

Andrew Shaps went from what he thought was the launching pad of his career to nothing, then to the back roads of NAIA baseball, changing positions not once, but twice — he will play the outfield to begin with, he said, as opposed to pitching, the position he was announced for.

“I think about it all the time,” Shaps said. “Now that it’s actually happened, and I got drafted, it just makes it even more amazing. If I could go back, I would obviously not choose this road, but I somehow did it. I’m not done yet. My goal is to be a major league baseball player, but you’ve got to go one step at a time. I’m not done growing up, not done working hard, but this sure is a nice little day.”

For McKinley, who saw Shaps reinvent himself on the fly, it was a moment he said he feared wouldn’t come. He had the talent to be the first player ever drafted from William Jessup, but maybe the

backstory would send people away. The same could be said for his parents, who never doubted the ability but at times questioned if the journey would just be too much.

“Obviously, teams have really long memories,” Bob Shaps said. “But we’re thrilled. We’re happy. All we wanted was the chance for Andrew to have that opportunity to play.”

Andrew received several messages of support in the immediate moments after being drafted by the Dodgers. Several teammates, including plenty from his time at Arizona State, reached out with messages of congratulations. But one text stood out to Mimi. A former umpire who had worked with Bob and umpired several of Andrew’s games sent her a message.

“This is an amazing story.”

“I think everybody just thought, that’s it,” Mimi Shaps said. “It’s over. Throw the kid away. But it was him. He wasn’t finished, and he still isn’t finished. He’s just starting.”