

## NOT LONG AGO,

Ian Kinsler was a wide-eyed prospect in his first big league Spring Training camp with the Rangers, hanging his jersey in one of those temporary lockers the team wheels away once rosters are reduced to 25 players. Now, the second baseman is at the very core of that roster.

Last season, Kinsler did just about everything for the offense. He was a run producer with 20 homers and 61 RBI. He was also a run scorer, with a team-leading 23 stolen bases and a .355 on-base percentage. Kinsler was one of only six American League hitters last year to have at least 20 home runs and 20 stolen bases, only the seventh Ranger to reach the 20-20 plateau.

This season, Kinsler owns a locker beside

Kinsler. "He's been through contract negotiations twice with this ball club. He kept me grounded and kept me focused on what was going on. He helped me not get too emotional with it."

Kinsler had a hard time not being emotional. After all, here was a player who had once been lost in the shuffle in Arizona State's talent-laden baseball program. Here was a player who had absolutely no buzz when the Rangers selected him in the 17th round of the 2003 amateur draft.

"My dream had always been just to get to the big leagues," he said. "It wasn't to sign a huge contract or anything like that. To be a great player in the big leagues is more my dream."

But Kinsler knew that the contract also represented a reward for his resiliency and hard

cumstances bother him, either. He forced his way into the Rangers' long-term plans with one of the best seasons a Rangers minor league player has ever had. In 2004, he hit .345 with 20 home runs and 94 RBI between Low-A Clinton and Double-A Frisco.

Then there was the challenge that faced him in the big leagues. Fans know Kinsler had a solid rookie season at the plate, hitting .286 with 27 doubles, 14 homers and 55 RBI in 2006. But few recall his struggles on the field. With Young entrenched at shortstop, Kinsler had to shift to second base.

"I actually started playing second in 2005 at Triple-A," said Kinsler. "I had people teaching me a little bit about the position here and there, but it was never for an extended period of time where I could work on my technique."

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the one occupied by Mr. Ranger himself, shortstop Michael Young. And like Young, he has a long-term vote of confidence from the organization. On Feb. 19, the Rangers and Kinsler agreed to a contract that will keep the infielder in Texas until at least 2012.

The deal was a long time coming, and Kinsler said he was glad it was finalized before it could be a distraction this year.

"It's something that probably took around a year to do, and it took a lot of patience on both sides," said Kinsler. "So just to get something done is a good feeling. I definitely like the chemistry we have on this club. I like the city. I'm definitely happy I'm going to be here for a while."

He also likes the message his deal sends to the fans.

"It was important to show them the Rangers are committed to what's going on here, and that I'm committed to what's going on here," he said. "I think both sides felt like it was good for the organization to put it out there as early as possible."

Kinsler admits there were times during the negotiations when he thought a deal might never be worked out, and he leaned on Young, his mentor, to help get him through it.

"Mike helped me out tremendously," said

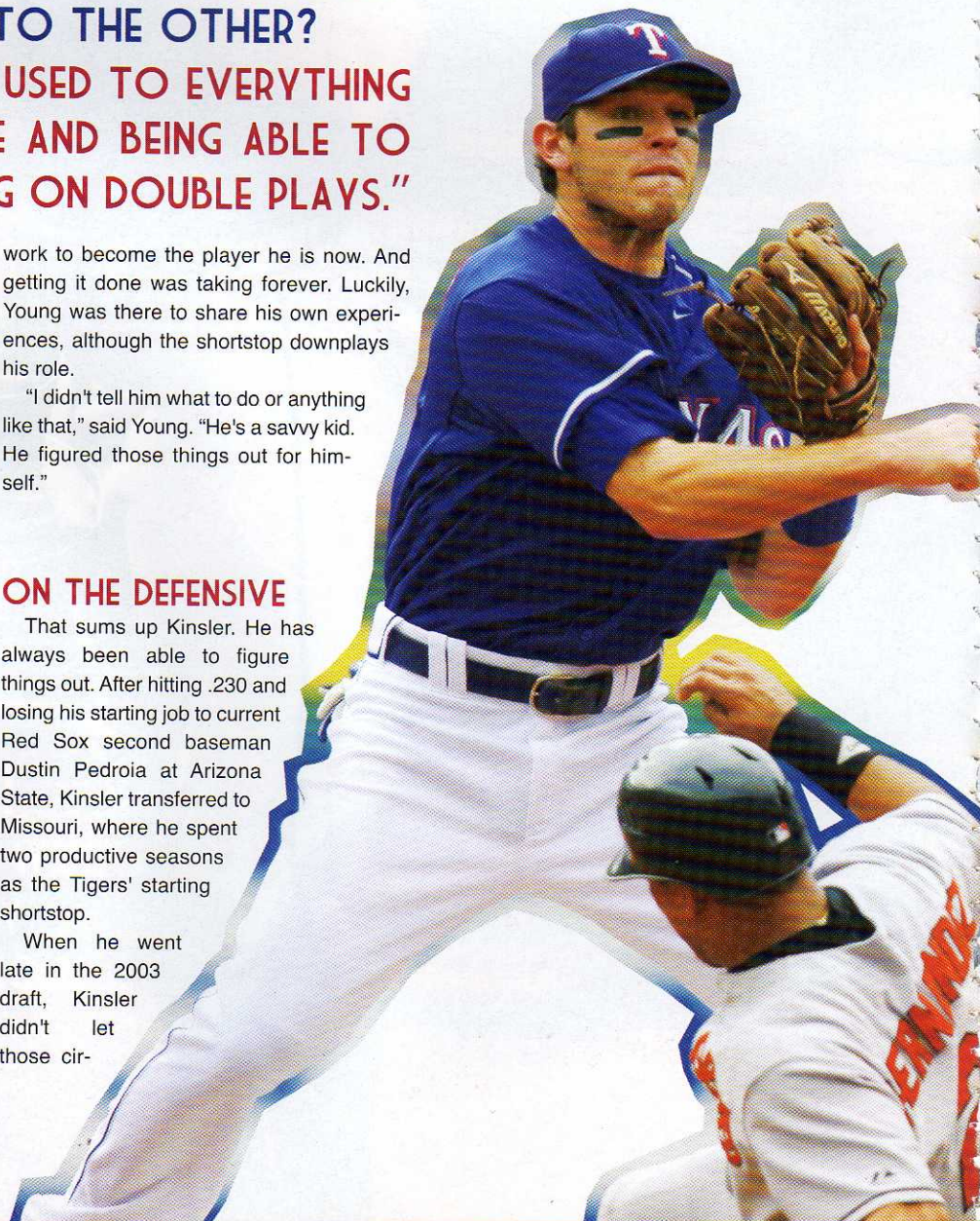
work to become the player he is now. And getting it done was taking forever. Luckily, Young was there to share his own experiences, although the shortstop downplays his role.

"I didn't tell him what to do or anything like that," said Young. "He's a savvy kid. He figured those things out for himself."

## ON THE DEFENSIVE

That sums up Kinsler. He has always been able to figure things out. After hitting .230 and losing his starting job to current Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia at Arizona State, Kinsler transferred to Missouri, where he spent two productive seasons as the Tigers' starting shortstop.

When he went late in the 2003 draft, Kinsler didn't let those cir-





ond base, it's a little awkward at first. Everything is kind of shifted more to the left. On double plays, you can't see the runner coming at you, and you have to really concentrate on the throw coming at you. That was probably the toughest step for me."

The numbers showed how much trouble he had. His .973 fielding percentage was the worst among full-time Major League second basemen in 2006. He was still trying to figure out the position last season, which was shaping up to be just as bad until he went on the disabled list for a month with a foot injury. It may have been the best thing that could've happened to him.

"I guess the silver lining to that freak injury last year was that Ian got the chance to work one-on-one with [manager Ron Washington] and [bench coach Art Howe]," said Rangers General Manager Jon Daniels.

Kinsler had time to learn the finer points of the position from two of the game's best defensive teachers.

"He developed a feel for playing second base last year, and he's held onto everything we taught him," said Washington. "He's a great ballplayer. He's only a young kid. He's got a lot of learning still left to do, but he's a quality guy. He's going to be a leader one day."

## FOLLOWING THE LEADER

Kinsler's leadership ability was a factor in the Rangers' contract negotiations. Since last year's draft and the Mark Teixeira deal in July, the organization has gotten plenty of attention for its wealth of top prospects. But Daniels said player development efforts extend to the big leagues.

"Arguably more important is the development of those young big league players who are trying to take that step from big league player to productive core player," said Daniels. "That's where Ian is now. He's got the maturity and the work ethic to do it."

In Young, Kinsler is learning from one of the game's best clubhouse captains when it comes to leading by example. Young is renowned within baseball circles for being the consummate professional, working hard at his craft and fostering a cohesive clubhouse. Kinsler is beginning to exude that same quiet confidence for which Young is known.

"Michael Young is the obvious leader on this team, and I think everyone here knows that," said Kinsler. "I just want to be his sidekick. I think we can work off each other really well. If we can both be leaders at the same time, that'll help us win more games."

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He is already following a Young principle — putting winning above all else. Kinsler may have the big contract, but he isn't above moving anywhere in the lineup if it means more victories for the team. Washington likes Kinsler in the leadoff spot, and the infielder is all for it.

"I would love to hit leadoff for this club, especially with all the bats we brought in this off-season," said Kinsler. "I can get on base, steal some bases and score some runs. I know [Washington] is also thinking about [outfielder Frank] Catalanotto against right-handers, and he's great against right-hand-

ers. He's an on-base guy who works the count. Either way we go, I think we're going to be a solid club, but I would love to hit leadoff every day."

If he does become the team's everyday leadoff man, Kinsler will do what he's always done. He'll figure it out. In fact, that process is well underway.

"Leading off does change your approach a little bit," he said. "You have to take some more pitches. You have to realize who's behind you and let those guys see the pitcher work a little bit. You need to let them see what kind of pitches he's throwing that day and



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Kinsler seems to have figured out just about everything. He calls his new contract "a blessing that comes along with playing the game." His family has security. He loves Dallas and the teammates and coaches he goes to work with every day. And maybe more than anything else, he loves knowing he has more work to do to become a better ballplayer. His mentor couldn't be happier to hear that.

"Ian has done a great job in the first two years of his career," said Young. "But I think the good thing about him is he's never completely satisfied. He's going to keep pressing until he reaches a point in his career where he is satisfied."

Kinsler said that point will be when he helps the Rangers become a championship team again.

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