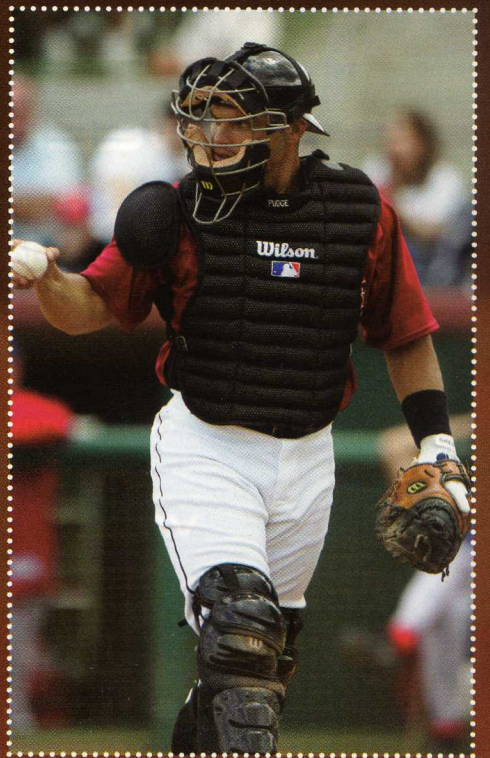
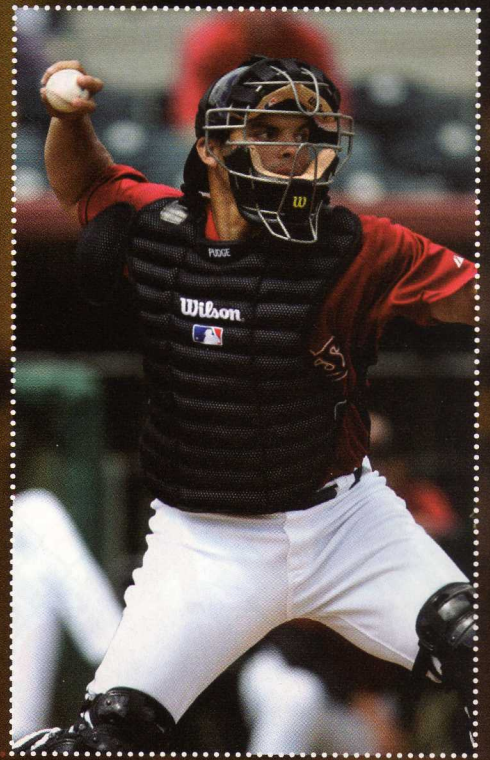


The Power Factor

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By Chris Gigley



Ivan Rodriguez could have gone home to play ball this year, back to the place where he lives in the offseason and where he won his one and only World Series title. But for the veteran catcher, home isn't necessarily where the heart is. It's where he has the best chance of winning and returning to the World Series. Home is in Houston.

"This team reminds me a lot of the Marlins and Tigers teams I played on," he said. "We have a nice group of guys here who play the game hard. All we have to do is stay healthy and do what we need to do to win ballgames."

That and the opportunity to play everyday com-

elled Rodriguez to sign with the Astros instead of the Florida Marlins this spring. The Marlins had practical and sentimental interest in the catcher, but only as a backup to incumbent backstop John Baker. Rodriguez thinks he has too much good baseball left in him to be a part timer. He not only wants to win, he wants to play a big part in it.

When Houston gave him that chance, he wasted no time working to gain the respect and confidence of his teammates at Spring Training. Rodriguez was a tough guy to track down in Kissimmee. He arrived in camp on March 20, unpacked his gear from the World Baseball Classic and promptly began studying

his pitching staff. He was a fixture in the bullpen area behind the clubhouse, where he either caught a session or two or watched pitchers work to learn their tendencies.

Rodriguez clearly had no reason to be worried about his conditioning. He had already played well for Team Puerto Rico in the WBC, collecting 10 hits in 20 at-bats and leading that club into the second round of the tournament. He was ready to go physically but had a lot of relationship-building to do.

"I had to constantly communicate with the pitchers and make them feel comfortable with me behind the plate," he said. "Whenever I join a new team, I try to find out what the pitchers like to do and what pitches they like to throw. It's all about making them feel comfortable. To be honest with you, I don't try to do too much. I just want them to have confidence in me when I'm behind the plate."

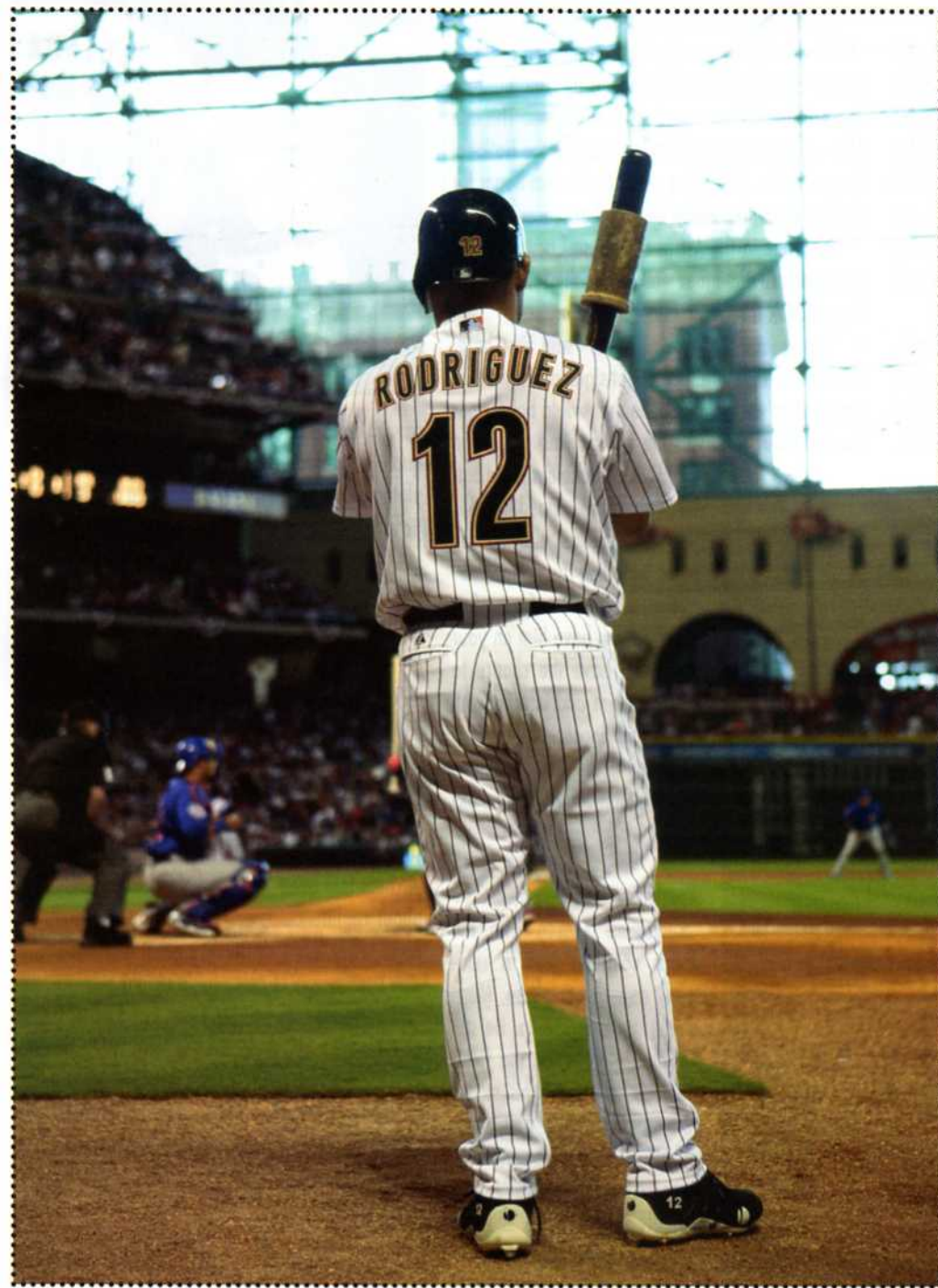
Ask any of the Astros pitchers, and they'll tell you Rodriguez didn't have to do much to prove himself. His reputation preceded him. After his first Spring Training start with Rodriguez, Houston ace Roy Oswalt said he liked throwing to a catcher of Rodriguez' caliber and gave the catcher a vote of confidence in his usual understated way.

"I throw what he calls and we learn each other as we go," Oswalt told reporters with a few weeks to go before the season. "We're not too far off right now, just a few pitches here and there."

Fair or not, Rodriguez has been knocked for being an offense-first catcher who doesn't always work well with his pitchers. The numbers say otherwise. In the Tigers' World Series year of 2006, for instance, Rodriguez guided a staff that posted a Major League-best 4.17 team ERA. He led a relatively young and inexperienced staff in Florida's World Series-winning season, and he coaxed respectability out of his pitching staffs in Texas, where batted balls tend to carry in the wind-tunnel effect of his home ballpark in Arlington.

If nothing else, says Astros manager Cecil Cooper, Rodriguez' 13 Gold Gloves put the Astros hurlers at ease as soon as he joined the team.

"He didn't get all those Gold Gloves and make all those All-Star Games by accident," said Cooper. "This guy is very good. He knows how to handle pitchers. I've had guys



Veteran catcher Ivan Rodriguez has a knack for getting his teams into the postseason.

Can he provide the same boost for the Astros?

tell me he stays four or five pitches ahead of them. When a guy like that is catching, you've got to have confidence that he knows what he's doing back there when he puts down the signs."

The Difference Maker

It's hard to believe a catcher as good as Rodriguez wasn't always behind the plate. When he began playing in youth leagues in Puerto Rico, he was, of all things, a pitcher. He was pretty good at it. Rodriguez threw so hard that he scared other kids out of the batter's box. That encouraged his father, Jose, to suggest moving his son behind the plate instead, and Rodriguez proceeded to terrorize base runners with his powerful arm.

Rodriguez quickly became a good catcher, thanks to the strong work ethic he learned from his parents, who tested their son's fortitude early on. As his father pushed him on the baseball field, Rodriguez' mother,

a schoolteacher, insisted he make good grades if he wanted to keep playing. Fortunately, he did, and the Texas Rangers signed him in 1988 as a non-drafted, 16-year-old free agent. He made his big league debut just three years later.

In addition to his 13 Gold Gloves -- the latest in 2007 with the Tigers -- Rodriguez made 10 consecutive All-Star teams with the Rangers and another four consecutive All-Star teams with the Tigers. The one blip was 2003, when he failed to make the National League roster. Rodriguez easily trades that honor for the World Championship he won that season.

Everyone in the Astros clubhouse knew all these things before Rodriguez walked into the Spring Training complex for the first time in March.

"His resume speaks for itself," said first baseman Lance Berkman. "I thought signing him was the single thing we could've done that would bolster our team. I thought he was the one guy out there who could really make our team better. I'm glad we signed him."

So is everyone else on the team, including the skipper.

"You admire him from afar, and now you have him on your team and have the chance to talk with him and interact with him," said Cooper. "The guy is prepared all the time. He knows what he wants to do and he executes."

That Special Feeling

Rodriguez' season with the Astros coincides with a relatively new career phase. Much about him is the same. He still has the intensity on the field. He'll make one of his signature snap throws to first, yank off his mask and glower at the base runner like he always has. But off the field, he is more calm and self-assured than he



was in Texas and even early on in Detroit. Those are qualities earned from years of hard work behind the plate. At age 37, he isn't looking to do anything drastic with his game.

"At this point in my career, I just need to keep doing what I've always done," he says. "Take one game at a time and go out there and do my best." All Rodriguez really wants to do is win. One World Series ring isn't enough, and he likes his chances with this Astros team of getting another. As a result, he's spent most of the season shrugging off questions about him and discussing the team instead.

"We have a really good pitching staff here," he said. "The key is that the starting pitchers and relief pitchers feel good with me behind the plate. It's all about confidence. They know we have a great defense. They know we have a great offense. If they stay healthy, we're going to do alright."

Rodriguez says he hasn't had that kind of feeling about a team in a while, maybe since 2006, when he and the Tigers surged into the World Series. He likes the feeling. It makes him sure he is right where he should be. At home in Houston.

