

SoCal Switch

KENDRY MORALES IS MAKING ANGELS FANS FORGET MARK TEIXEIRA.

By Tim Kurkjian

WHILE AROLDIS CHAPMAN

is the hot new prospect, there's another Cuban defector who's quietly becoming a star in the big leagues. Mention Kendry Morales to teammate Torii Hunter, and the veteran centerfielder's eyes light up. "The first time I saw him was in 2007," Hunter says. "He was going back and forth to Triple-A, and I thought, How is this guy not a star? Now everyone in the world will know who he is."

Back in spring training, as manager Mike Scioscia was analyzing his team, he said of Morales, who was penciled in at first base, "If we're wrong on this guy, then it will be the worst miss we've ever had here." It was a bold statement about a player who'd hit .213 in limited playing time last year, but Scioscia trusted what he saw. And he was right.

In his first full season as a regular, the 26-year-old Morales is the driving force behind the American League's highest-scoring offense and is even getting mentioned in MVP talk. Morales ranks in the top 10 in the AL in homers, RBIs, OBP and slugging. "Since I've been here, we haven't had a more talented player step into the batter's box than Kendry," Scioscia says.

Entering the season, Morales faced the added burden of replacing Mark Teixeira, whom the Angels hoped to re-sign but lost to the Yankees and their \$180 million offer.



MORALES IS PUTTING UP STATS SIMILAR TO TEIXEIRA'S THIS YEAR—FOR NEARLY \$19 MILLION LESS.

Morales tried to downplay the situation. "I don't feel the pressure," he said this spring through an interpreter. But when he defected from Cuba and signed with the Angels, in 2004, some in the organization wondered if Morales could become a complete player. He was so raw, he didn't even know how to take a secondary lead. "I remember in his first year in Class-A, he would be practicing his swing while playing defense," says GM Tony Reagins. "You don't do that." A former outfielder, Morales has put a lot of effort into becoming a solid first baseman, making the transition from the slick-fielding Teixeira that much smoother.

"Kendry saved Arte Moreno a lot of money," reliever Darren Oliver says of the Angels owner. Then, thinking about where Morales' career might be headed, Oliver adds, "Well, maybe for a couple of years."



W2W4
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SHAQ VS. ALBERT
In this episode of *Shaq Vs.*, the new sports reality show on ABC, Shaq takes on Albert Pujols in a home run derby. Before you write him off, Diesel says as a kid his nickname was Shaqqie Robinson.

THE NUMBER

475

When Luis Castillo went deep against the Giants on Aug. 16, it snapped his power drought at 475 at-bats. It was the first home run by a Mets second baseman—the only position (excluding pitcher) on any team that hadn't produced a homer—in 2009. Castillo's dinger was a second-decker that helped the Mets win 3-2, so even though he doesn't hit many, at least he makes every homer count.

K KORNER

BY TIM KURKJIAN

Royals ace **ZACK GREINKE** recently revealed that he slows down his delivery to lure opponents into trying to steal second base against **MIGUEL OLIVO**, who has gunned down 55.6% of runners with Greinke on the mound. But with anyone else pitching, Olivo has thrown out just 20%. Maybe the other KC pitchers should slow down their deliveries too ... The Tigers filled a need for lefty pop by acquiring **AUBREY HUFF** from the Orioles in mid-August. Huff should help an offense that was 11th in the AL in runs scored at the time of the trade; if so, he could make the postseason for the first time in his 10-year career ... The same week that several players criticized a new, more protective Rawlings helmet that's in development, Mets 3B **DAVID WRIGHT** was hit in the head and suffered a concussion that will keep him out indefinitely. Players say the new helmet is bulky and looks silly, but that's a small price to pay for safety ... Speaking of which, Mariners 3B **ADRIÁN BELTRÉ** may miss the rest of the year after a bad-hop grounder bruised his right testicle. He doesn't wear a cup, saying it's uncomfortable. Former Gold Glove shortstop **MARK BELANGER** also took that chance, prompting teammate **MERV RETTENMUND** to say, "Now, that's trusting your hands" ... **ICHIRO** continues to make his case for Cooperstown. With 60 multihit games this season, he has 609 for his career, the most during any nine-year period in the live-ball era. Hall of Famer **ROGERS HORNSBY** (581) is second ... How much do **JOHNNY DAMON** and **MARK TEIXEIRA** like the cozy new Yankee Stadium? Fifteen of Damon's 22 homers have come at home, while Teixeira has hit 19 of his 31 in the Bronx. The duo has belted back-to-back jacks six times this year, more than **BABE RUTH** and **LOU GEHRIG** ever combined to hit in any one season.

A BIG (NO) DEAL

AS J.A. HAPP SITS IN THE visitors' clubhouse at Wrigley Field on Aug. 12, the day after allowing two runs in six innings in a Phillies win, he can't help but smile recalling the 100 or so friends and family members who came to cheer him on. For a guy who grew up 100 miles southwest

of Chicago and attended Northwestern, shutting down the Cubs has special meaning. Just two weeks earlier, it looked like Happ wouldn't be around to make that start. He was rumored to be part of a trade for Blue Jays ace Roy Halladay, but the Phillies reportedly wouldn't

part with the 26-year-old Happ, their third-round pick in 2004. (They instead dealt lesser prospects to Cleveland for Cliff Lee.) "I'm not going to lie," Happ says. "The trade rumors bothered me. I'm really glad to still be here." Since the July 31 deadline, Happ has allowed just three runs in three starts. At 9-2 with a 2.66 ERA (through Aug. 20), the 6'6" lefty with the tricky

fastball-changeup combo is the frontrunner for NL Rookie of the Year. With all his success, it's easy to forget that Happ didn't even make the rotation out of spring training. But when Chan Ho Park struggled, Happ got his chance in late May, and hasn't looked back. "When J.A. got the job, his mindset was, I need to prove to these guys that I can be a starter in the big leagues," says centerfielder

Shane Victorino. "He's done that." Happ has been so good that when the Phils signed Pedro Martínez, they dropped 257-game winner Jamie Moyer from the rotation instead of the rookie. In a matter of months, Happ has gone from fringe big leaguer to front-of-the-rotation starter for the World Series champs. That's enough to make anyone smile. —MATT BEARDMORE

