



WILL *and* PEACE

Rookie phenom Corey Seager is all calm on the outside — and all drive on the inside

BY JON WEISMAN

Corey Seager has a baby face, as baseball faces go.

He's young — 22 years old and barely that. He's soft-spoken. In a seven-minute interview, teammate and housemate Trayce Thompson described Seager with the word "mellow" seven times.

It's only natural, when a baseball player works his way up the "Survivor"-style talent show that is the minor leagues, to wonder if he'll wilt once he reaches the Majors. Baseball at the big-league level is an intimidating game, a merciless game, a game that dares you to think you can master it, just so that it can cut you down to your knees.

Corey Seager, baby-faced, young, mellow — he'd be vulnerable, right?

Except Seager is something else. A man. A mature man. A big man: 6-foot-4, 215 pounds. And a baseball machine, driven, however quietly, to excel.

Tell baseball to bring its worst, and Seager will stand tall. The butterflies that should have smothered Seager when he was making his Dodger debut last Sep-

tember? They fluttered away in a moment.

"The first day, for sure," Seager said. "Once the first groundball got hit, it was back down to reality. You still had all the adrenaline and all that other stuff, but the nerves went away."

Put Seager on the vast postseason stage, batting third at age 21 against the New York Mets in his first career playoff game, and his only concern about stepping up ... will literally be about stepping up.

"I was more nervous about the pregame stuff than I was the game," he recalled. "That stuff's hard for me to kind of cope and keep the nerves down — I was worried about tripping up the stairs and stuff like that. ... Once the game started, it was back to reality."

What's arrived in place of those nerves and instead of intimidation has been thrilling:

- In his first month as a big-leaguer, Seager had a .425 on-base percentage and .561 slugging percentage.
- In his second month, he became the youngest Dodger position player to start a game in postseason history.



Corey Seager came into this season as the No. 1 prospect in baseball — and hasn't disappointed.

- In his third month, he became the youngest Opening Day shortstop for the Dodgers in 72 years.
- In his fourth month, he matched a Los Angeles Dodgers record for most home runs in a month by a shortstop, of any age.
- In his fifth month, he became the first Dodger rookie to hit three homers in a game and the youngest player to do so in 53 years.

By the start of June, in a crowded field of productive National League shortstops, Seager led them all in wins above replacement, his precocious offense (.807 OPS) blending with a level of defense that countered skeptics, who doubted someone his size could handle baseball's most demanding position.

All at 22.

Seager's talent is prodigious, and readily apparent. His movements are fluid, his swing and pitch awareness so advanced that unlike many players in this age (or any age), he has defied platooning. Batting from the left side, his numbers are actually higher against same-sided pitchers than against righties.

But there have been slumps here and there, and it's his Kiplingesque ability to keep his head when all about him are losing theirs that should sustain him for a long career.

"I don't get in my head that much," Seager said about what happens after a bad at-bat. "I'll kind of be upset with myself — and then you're out for defense, and it's gone."

Seager's manager, Dave Roberts, can't help but notice how Seager has adapted and how advanced he is for his age.

"As a 22-year-old, physically he's different — the body's different, the strength, the skill set," Roberts said. "(Plus) his pulse, his head. He doesn't scare off. He's confident, but not overly naive that he doesn't need to take in information and learn and get better. So there's that fine balance. He kind of is right in the sweet spot."

Seager's frustration-management training came thanks to two older brothers — Kyle, the 28-year-old Seattle third baseman who was an All-Star in 2014, and Justin, a 24-year-old minor-leaguer in the Mariners organization.

"Anytime you showed any emotion —

The Big Story



anger, anything — they knew they got to you,” Seager said. “I’ve kind of been bred to try to not show emotion.”

That doesn’t mean there’s no fire burning inside Seager.

“He’s a great guy, one of the most mellow guys you’re gonna meet in this clubhouse,” Thompson said. “But when it comes time for game time, he’s a cold-blooded killer.”

GRADUATE SCHOOL

With his passionate work ethic and preternatural calm, Seager has been free to focus on studying and adapting to the Majors.

More than any external pressure, it’s the rigor of big-league life that has compelled Seager to grow up from his days in the minors.

“Seven days down there is different than seven days up here on your body,” he said. “It’s a different beast, I guess you could say. It’s harder — it’s more mentally, more physically taxing. It’s one of those things that you don’t really know how to handle it until you do it. It’s a learning curve every day.

“Not that you weren’t focused down there, but everybody’s so good here, you don’t want to be that guy who messes up. So you’re always on your toes.”

Seager said “pretty much everybody” in the organization has helped him, but particularly Adrian Gonzalez, Howie Kendrick, A.J. Ellis and Seager’s 2016 double-play partner and locker neighbor, Chase Utley. For Seager’s Ph. D. in MLB, they’re guiding him and setting examples.

“I like to watch and see how people work,” Seager said. “It’s amazing how much time and preparation goes into one night. ... It’s a constant routine all through the day —there’s not a whole lot of downtime.”

“He’s a great guy, one of the most mellow guys you’re gonna meet in this clubhouse. But when it comes time for game time, he’s a cold-blooded killer.” — TRAYCE THOMPSON

TheBigStory

Joc Pederson and Seager combined to hit 20 homers in the Dodgers' first 56 games this season.

Seager is also putting in time learning all the Major League pitchers, with one twist. He doesn't like to watch video of a pitcher before he's seen that pitcher first-hand.

"He could look one way in film and be completely different in person," Seager said. "So I normally watch film on guys that I've already faced before. ... You really only need to see a guy once to kind of know what his ball does."

Seager's coursework not only includes the quirks of all the different Major League ballparks, but also his own pitching teammates and the opposing hitters they face, "trying to figure out people's swings, trying to figure out how our pitchers that you've never played behind throw."

Dodger bench coach Bob Geren got his first view of Seager from the opposing dugout during last year's National League Division Series, and was immediately impressed from a distance. With the chance to see him on a daily basis in 2016, Geren has been appreciative of Seager's attention to detail.

"I think he's just really fine-tuning his game," Geren said. "He's really taken to positioning and moving around pitch to pitch and learning the hitters — where to

be ahead in the count, behind in the count, two strikes — taking that to a really high level. His at-bats have been pretty consistent, and he's playing great shortstop.

"I've never seen him waver. Seems like he's been very confident from the beginning to me. I know that each day he performs to his level, it's going to go up."

While Seager has met initial expectations, those figure only to grow alongside his importance to the Dodgers, and he will need to keep developing. But by now, it should be clear that Seager's calm determination will cure the method of its madness.

"I don't think he feels any sort of pressure," Thompson said. "He just wants to play baseball and have fun and be a good teammate, and I think he's done a pretty good job of that so far."

It's not that Seager is blind to what could go wrong. It's that he is grown up enough to face it.

"I don't know," he said, pondering how to explain it. "People have fears, and you never want to fail, so you kind of have that fear of failure, and that kind of drives me personally from not wanting to fail at anything. So it kind of makes you work that much harder."