

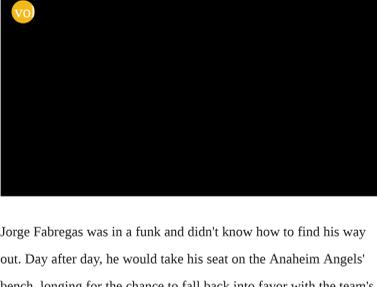


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NEWS

ODD MAN OUT IS NOW THE MAN

By Scott MacGregor and Tribune Staff Writer
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Jorge Fabregas was in a funk and didn't know how to find his way out. Day after day, he would take his seat on the Anaheim Angels' bench, longing for the chance to fall back into favor with the team's decision-makers. Each day the frustration grew.

When he did get a shot to earn back his starting catcher's job, usually once a week or so, his head was too clouded and his bat too rusty to be effective. Hence, his batting average had slumped to a sickly .079 on May 18, the day his career got a desperately needed jump-start.

"I had no confidence at all," said Fabregas. "It seemed like every time I went to the plate, I was 0 for 4. I was just digging myself into a deeper hole."

But the White Sox threw a ladder down the hole, and he scrambled up with the urgency that comes with a second chance. He had gotten his break; the Angels, whose catching situation had become crowded, had traded him to Chicago.

Fresh life, new opportunity; he has made the most of it.

"When I first heard about it, I was shocked," said the 27-year-old from Miami. "But now I see this was the best thing for me."

Indeed. Since the trade, Fabregas has become one of the key players on a team contending for a playoff spot, surprising just about everyone in the process. He's hitting .289 with four home runs since joining the Sox, raising his overall average to .244. He also has been solid defensively, throwing out 12 of 32 runners (37.5 percent) who have tried to steal on him.

"I've gone out every day and worked my butt off," said Fabregas in Minnesota earlier this week. "But I'm not done yet. I still have some unfinished business. The first thing is making sure this team makes the playoffs."

The trade was such a good thing for Fabregas because he finally has gotten the chance to play every day again. He thought he had earned the starting job in Anaheim on the strength of his .287 average in 90 games last season and his .319 mark in spring training. But the Angels had paid big bucks to World Series hero Jim Leyritz, and he began getting the bulk of the playing time.

"I was the odd man out. I needed to get out of Anaheim. They always said I was the catcher of the future, but the future was now. As a player, the only thing you can ask for is an opportunity."

And he got it when the Sox traded Tony Phillips and catcher Chad Kreuter to the Angels for Fabregas and pitcher Chuck McElroy. At the time, Fabregas was considered little more than a backup, but he started to get more at-bats as Ron Karkovice struggled.

"I didn't think (the starting spot) would be handed to me. I knew I had to earn it," Fabregas said.

He also knew he had to restore his confidence, which was about as low as his batting average. So Fabregas started working with Sox hitting coach Bill Buckner--a man who knows a little something about rebounding from disappointment--and soon he had regained the swagger and the stroke that had made him a hot prospect in college at the University of Miami.

"I've worked hard with Billy," Fabregas said. "He just told me, 'Before you know it, you're going to be where you want to be.' Sure enough, once I started playing, I went out and got the hits."

The big boost was a 4-for-4, five-RBI day Fabregas posted in Cincinnati in mid-June. That gave him the confidence, he said, to do it on a regular basis.

"What I like about this team is that you're given the opportunity to perform," he said. "They treat me with respect here. In Anaheim, they treated me like a rookie sometimes. But I've been in this league three-plus years, and I know what to do."

Not that he knows everything. He said he asks veterans Karkovice and Tony Pena for advice and that Pena, who lives in his building, "is my father on the team." As for the man Fabregas replaced, Karkovice has nothing but praise.

"Jorge has been great," Karkovice said. "Even when he was with the Angels, I always said he was going to be a good catcher when he got some experience. He's a good hitter, has a great arm and knows how to handle the pitchers."

Learning the pitching staff, Fabregas said, was the second toughest adjustment to coming over in midseason, next to getting used to the cold Mays in Chicago.

"He has been a tremendous addition to the club," said pitching coach Mike Pazik.

"The first couple starts, we weren't on the same page," said veteran Sox pitcher Danny Darwin. "But since then, we've really worked well together. He calls a good game. All the pitchers feel confident with him behind the plate. He's a quiet guy, and he works hard."

Fans who don't know much about him might be interested to discover Fabregas was voted most popular player by the fans during his sophomore season at Miami.

"I'm a blue-collar-type of guy," he said. "I don't have too many flashy skills, but I go out and do my job. I always work hard, because I believe in that."

During the off-season, Fabregas likes to relax on his beach-front home in Miami with wife Marlene, whom he met during his junior year in college.

"I love the water. It really relaxes me," he said, describing himself as a laid-back "beach-type" of guy. "When you're on the water, you can just go reflect on the season, on life. This whole life just gets so stressful, sometimes it just feels great to hear the ocean. The waves crashing against the shore, with a nice breeze, is one of the most relaxing things I've ever felt in my life."

Quite poetic. But, after all, Fabregas was a good student in college, and he says he loves to learn. "I'm very curious," he said.

He would like to see the museums in Chicago if he ever gets any free time, but he and Marlene have spent their off-days unpacking and getting used to the city and its traffic patterns.

Fabregas said he likes Chicago and how the city is so passionate about its sports teams. He also likes that the Sox's clubhouse has more than a few guys with whom he can speak Spanish (he was born in Miami and is bilingual). Most of all, he loves the talent around him.

"The opportunity I've gotten is tremendous," he said. "Making the playoffs is my only goal. We were close in '95 with the Angels, and it's such a great feeling. I get that feeling here. You know you're on a winning club and you're in contention. That's really what you want."

The Angels also are contending this year, Fabregas is much happier with the Sox. And it shows in everything from his pregame smile to his gametime intensity.

"There's no question this was the best situation for me," he said. "I thank God every day for this chance. But I have to keep working hard, because that's what got me here."

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