

Tyler Clippard cherishes memory of striking out Derek Jeter

Seth Livingstone - newsday.com

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VIERA, Fla. - Washington Nationals reliever Tyler Clippard has a longtime relationship and personal appreciation for Derek Jeter as a caring teammate, an offseason workout partner and a gentleman away from the ballpark.

He also carries a special memory of his only time on the mound facing Jeter, the time he struck out the future Hall of Famer and didn't even know it.

"I remember the at-bat from pitch to pitch," said Clippard, who began his career with the Yankees before establishing himself as a Nationals setup ace.

The day was June 16, 2012. It was the ninth inning of a 3-3 game at Nationals Park. Jeter, already 0-for-4 with three line-drive outs, was at the plate with the go-ahead run at second base and one out.

"I fell behind him 2-0 and threw a changeup," recalled Clippard, a ninth-round pick of the Yankees in 2003. "I thought the umpire called it a ball, but he called it a strike. In my mind, it was 3-0 and the catcher [Jesus Flores] called for a changeup. I'm like, 'OK. It's Jeter. Why not?'"

"So I throw [what I think is] a 3-0 changeup for a called strike, then a fastball a little up in the zone. He swung and missed and started walking back to the dugout. I'm like, 'What the heck happened there?'"

Maybe the lesson is not to think too much."

Clippard, 29, who has struck out 466 batters in 420 2/3 big-league innings and recently signed a \$5.875-million contract for 2014, says it's highly unusual for him to remember every pitch of a particular at-bat.

"There are only a handful of times I can remember, pitch to pitch, how an at-bat went, and that one is because it was him," he said. "I wanted to be able to talk smack to him. I did end up talking to him about the at-bat during the offseason and I don't think he even remembered it. That's how significant it was to him."

Jeter actually got the last laugh, although he finished 1-for-7 and committed an error in that 2012 game. His 14th-inning single helped set up Mark Teixeira's two-run double in a 5-3 Yankees victory.

That came as no surprise to Clippard, who has trained alongside Jeter with sports performance coach Jason Riley at the Saddlebrook Resort (Wesley Chapel, Fla.) and, more recently, The Performance Compound in Tampa since his minor-league days with the Yankees.

"His retirement will be sort of a sad day for baseball. He's been such a great player," said Clippard, whose appreciation for Jeter extends to the way he treats acquaintances on and off the diamond. "For a guy who is as famous and as big a name as he is, to be as down to earth and humble and receiving of all types of people is cool to watch."

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Clippard said he realized that from the first time he and Jeter crossed paths.

“I was in the Yankees’ organization -- rookie ball -- when I first met him at the complex. He was walking by and we made eye contact. He was like, ‘Hey, nice to meet you. I’m Derek.’ He talked to me for maybe 30 seconds, but it seemed like 10 minutes because I was in awe of him. From my perspective, I wondered: Why would he take time out of his day to say hi to me?”

“It’s a formula that has worked for him and he’s stuck to it. That’s how he is with everyone, but it’s something I’ll never forget. I don’t know if he does it on purpose or not, but it’s a beautiful thing. He’s just a good dude.”