

"... All that matters is we win the game. And we play the right way."

Mark Teixeira

Teixeira living up to the hype

By William S. Paxton
STAFF WRITER

NEW YORK — He was supposed to be the solution to the Yankees' problem at first base when they signed him to a hefty multiyear and multimillion-dollar contract.

But Jason Giambi's seven-year tenure with the Bronx Bombers was filled with nothing but disappointments before his escape from New York.

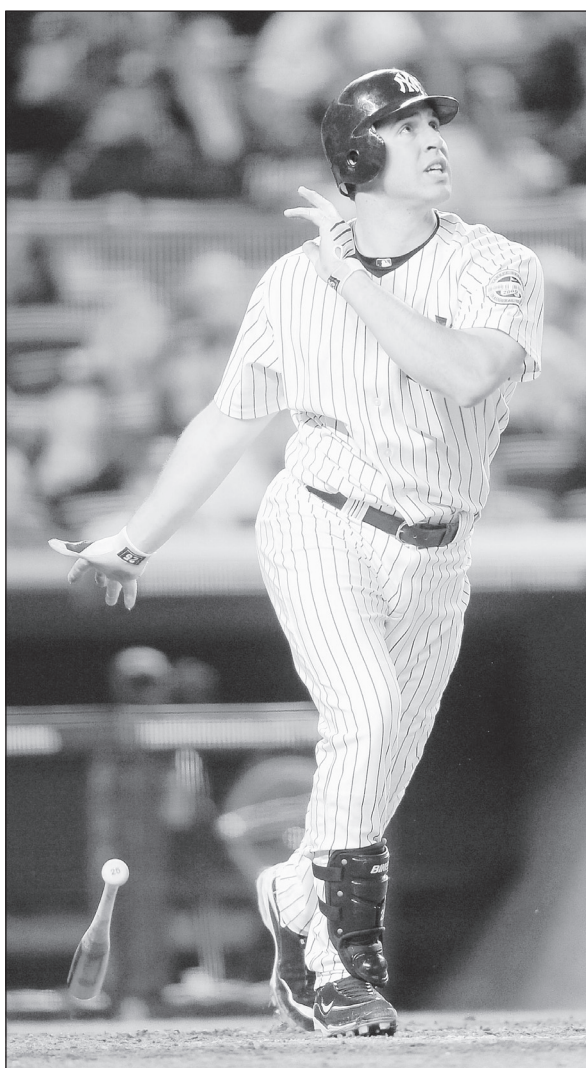
Even though pitching was at the top of the Yankees' shopping list this winter, Mark Teixeira — who joined CC Sabathia and A.J. Burnett on the team's \$423 million spending spree just might be everything the Yanks had hoped to get when they signed Giambi and more.

The Yankees already knew Teixeira had an edge on Giambi with his gold glove at first base. Teixeira, who owns a lifetime .996 fielding percentage at first and is a two-time Gold Glove winner, has been perfect there this season and is a main reason why New York set an MLB record with 18 straight errorless games.

On more than one occasion since donning pinstripes, Teixeira's glove work has caused Yankee announcer John Sterling to exclaim in glee over the airwaves on what a fine fielder the team has at first base. Not even Sterling could make Giambi's defense sound graceful.

Teixeira's bat has been as good as advertised, too, at least since Alex Rodriguez returned from a hip injury to the clean-up spot. After Saturday's game against Tampa Bay, Teixeira had a .286 average, 17 home runs and 50 RBIs in 51 games. Since A-Rod joined the lineup May 8, Teixeira's batting average (.198 at the time) has shot up almost 100 points, along with 12 homers and a major league-high 35 RBIs.

"I'm not surprised because he's been everything I heard about," Yankees manager Joe Girardi said. "But it is enjoyable to watch. Mark Teixeira is a baseball player and he does so many things right, whether it's on the bases, defensively, offensively — just the way he plays the game."



Mark Teixeira started the season slowly, but his errorless play at first base and his slugging at the plate are two reasons why the Yankees have risen to the top of the AL East. He has 50 RBIs in 51 games.

Top offensive months by a Yankee

Mickey Mantle May 1956 414 average/16 homers/35 RBIs
Roger Maris June 1960331/14/34
Alex Rodriguez April 2007355/14/34
Mark Teixeira May 2009330/13/34

Mark Teixeira started the season slowly, but his errorless play at first base and his slugging at the plate are two reasons why the Yankees have risen to the top of the AL East. He has 50 RBIs in 51 games.

Nobody ever questioned Teixeira's ability at the plate or in the field. He has averaged 37 home runs and 123 RBIs with a .289 average since breaking into the majors at the age of 23 with the Texas Rangers.

But the little things that don't show up in the box scores each night

or in the overall numbers are what have earned him respect and admiration in the Yankee clubhouse — even when he was off to a slow start at the plate.

One of those little moments came Tuesday night against the Rangers, when Teixeira slid into second base to break up a potential inning-ending double play that allowed Derek Jeter to score from third and give the Yankees a 4-3 lead. Teixeira drew high fives and pats on the rear when he returned to the dugout. The Yankees would go on to score five more times in the inning to blow open a close game and went on to win 12-3.

"I didn't know him a lot playing against him, but he wants to win so much," said Burnett, who earned his fourth win of the season that night. "I think a guy who comes to the field and doesn't care about his performance is the kind of guy you want around here. That's Tex. He can go 0 for 3, but he's all smiles when guys hit home runs and pitchers do their job."

"He's a total team player and he's a professional — that's what you want."

The Severna Park, Md., native said that there's only one thing that matters when he takes the field — his team departs with a victory.

"That's all that matters is we win the game," Teixeira said. "And we play the right way."

The Yankees have been playing the right way of late, which is why they have been able to climb into first place in the American League East. Teixeira's play has been a big part of that success.

"We are playing good baseball," he said. "We are pitching great, playing solid defense, and our offense, we are going to put up runs."

"It's been great for us all year and hopefully we can keep it going."

The Yankees could say the same thing about their new first baseman. Teixeira has been great so far, and they hope it keeps on going.



CHRISTIAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bridgeport Bluefish pitcher Jon Plefka, at 6-foot-9 and 240 pounds, has the physique of a pro basketball player as well as the experience of playing under Bobby Knight at Texas Tech. But he hopes his future is elsewhere. "My dream was always to get drafted, not in basketball, in baseball," the 25-year-old said. "That was always my first love."

Plefka still dreaming of hardball, not hoops

By Rich Elliott
STAFF WRITER

BRIDGEPORT — Change is a part of life that often gives people great anxiety. Some do their best to avoid it and continue along a path that is straight and narrow.

Bridgeport Bluefish reliever Jon Plefka is hardly one of these people. He's seen plenty of change since he graduated from New Britain High School in 2002. He attended four colleges in five years. Each stop was part of a journey that led to Plefka, who stands 6-foot-9 and weighs 240 pounds, deciding to pursue professional baseball rather than basketball.

It was a decision that was supported by his parents, Denise and Mark, when Plefka passed up an opportunity to play basketball in Germany to sign with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim in 2006.

"My dream was always to get drafted, not in basketball, in baseball," Plefka said. "That was always my first love. I just felt like I'd have a lot more fun, a lot more opportunity to play baseball. It's just one of those things where I decided I'm going to try this out and see what can come out of it."

As he walks about Harbor Yard this season, there is no sign that Plefka isn't content with his decision. There was money to be made playing in a second-tier basketball league in Germany after playing two seasons for Bobby Knight at Texas Tech. The salary did not approach seven figures, but the likelihood was that he would have only had to pay for gas and meals.

Plefka could have followed in the footsteps of his father, who played at Fairfield from 1974-78 and then professionally in Sweden and Brazil. But the lure of playing baseball was too great. He wanted to discover how far he could ascend in a sport after he logged a total of 62½ innings on the mound at Vermont (2004), Sante Fe Community College (2005) and Texas Tech (2006).

"I got drafted my junior year of college and I just figured I can play basketball overseas any time I want to," Plefka said. "That's what everyone was saying to my agent. So with baseball, I figure my timeline is very thin. I thought about it for about a week and I just decided to play baseball."

In baseball, for most players, all it takes is for one scout to become enamored with their skills. Tom Kotchman, a scout and minor league manager in the Angels organization, was that one individual for Plefka.

Kotchman took notice during the spring of 2005 when Plefka posted a 3.66 ERA and had 41 strikeouts and an opponents' batting average of .209 in 39½ innings for the Saints. The Angels wanted to sign him that year, but Plefka was up front

about his intentions to play basketball at Texas Tech. They initially selected him in the 47th round (1,414th overall) of the 2006 draft.

Plefka elected to remain at Texas Tech to complete his eligibility and earn a degree in human development and family studies. The Angels would sign him again in 2007, this time to a free-agent contract. Plefka made his professional debut with one perfect inning against the Padres in the Arizona League on Aug. 20. It was one of just three appearances that season before he placed his entire focus on baseball for the first time last season with the Orem (Utah) Owlz, a rookie-league team.

"I've been playing baseball, but I've never really focused on it," Plefka said. "So this is my second full year focusing on it and I feel like I'm making strides regardless of my age. I'm 25, but I feel like I'm more of a 19-year-old kid with my arm strength."

Plefka was 2-2 with a 7.81 ERA in 18 appearances (27 ⅓ innings) with Orem in the Pioneer League last season. He was released by the Angels three weeks into spring training this year after making four appearances at their minor league camp and logging only 30 innings the past two seasons.

This season with the Bluefish, Plefka, who throws between 87 and 91 miles an hour, has found success in his first nine relief appearances. He had a 2.45 ERA with eight strikeouts, 10 walks and an opponents' batting average of .170 in 14 ⅓ innings through Friday.

"I like Plefka," Bluefish general manager Todd Marlin said. "Velocity-wise, if he's ever going to move on, I think he probably still needs to get a couple extra miles an hour. But I like him. I think he's got a lot of potential."

This season is extremely significant for Plefka since he already finds himself competing in an independent league in his third professional season. He realizes that he must make himself attractive to major league organizations, and that every outing could make a difference depending on whether or not a scout is in the seats. While he won't rule out playing basketball in the off-season at some point should he be approached, right now, baseball is his top priority. And his main goal is to move on.

"Coming from rookie league last year, I felt like I was on the upswing even though I struggled throughout the year," Plefka said. "I was looking on the bright side of things. And, of course, I was released but luckily picked up by the Bluefish."

"It's been a great situation so far. But it definitely is a huge year for me. I've just got to keep proving myself every time I get out there."

Strasburg brings excitement to draft

WASHINGTON (AP) — The team is terrible. The crowds are pitiful, especially for a new stadium. The public image is awful.

The Washington Nationals are like many last-place teams that have come before them, regardless of the sport. And, like most of those teams, they own the coveted prize that comes with being bad. That would be the No. 1 draft pick — Stephen Strasburg.

"This year, I guess there's a young man who's got a once-in-a-lifetime arm, as far as we've

seen, and you don't see that every day," said Nationals reliever Ron Villone.

The amateur baseball draft, which takes place Tuesday, usually lacks the excitement of the annual affairs in the NFL, NBA and NHL. Strasburg makes this year an exception. The 20-year-old — who played for Torrington in the New England Collegiate Baseball League in Connecticut — has a high-90s fastball, and his wicked slider is, to use a popular phrase of the moment, shovel-ready for the big time.



RIVALRY UPDATE

Red Sox lead series 5-0



NEXT UP — Tuesday, 7:10 (Ch. 9, 59, NESN); Wednesday, 7:10 (YES, NESN); Thursday, 8:10 (YES, NESN)

TENTATIVE PITCHING MATCHUPS — Tuesday, A.J. Burnett (4-2, 4.69 ERA) vs. Josh Beckett (6-2, 4.09); Wednesday, Chien-Ming Wang (0-3, 14.46) vs. Tim Lincecum (7-3, 4.50); Thursday, CC Sabathia (5-3, 3.46) vs. Brad Penny (5-2, 5.85)

NEW YORK YANKEES

32-23..... **Record** 32-23 through Friday
19-10..... **Record since last meeting** 15-13 through Friday
3-1 to finish May, 3-1 to start June **Streaks** Swept Tigers Tuesday-Thursday
Burnett allowed 3 ER in last 13 IP; most of team hitting well; **Who's hot** Beckett allowed 1 ER last 22 2/3 innings;
Derek Jeter had 7 straight multi-hit games through Tuesday
Jose Veras' ERA approaching 7; no sure answer in middle bullpen..... **Who's not** David Ortiz has 1 HR; Penny yielded 7 runs last 11 2/3 innings
Batters hitting .271 vs. Mariano Rivera this season, .214 career **Unlikely fact** J.D. Drew has 7 walks last 3 games through Friday

BOSTON RED SOX

32-23..... **Record** 32-23 through Friday
19-10..... **Record since last meeting** 15-13 through Friday
3-1 to finish May, 3-1 to start June **Streaks** Swept Tigers Tuesday-Thursday
Burnett allowed 3 ER in last 13 IP; most of team hitting well; **Who's hot** Beckett allowed 1 ER last 22 2/3 innings;
Derek Jeter had 7 straight multi-hit games through Tuesday
Jose Veras' ERA approaching 7; no sure answer in middle bullpen..... **Who's not** David Ortiz has 1 HR; Penny yielded 7 runs last 11 2/3 innings
Batters hitting .271 vs. Mariano Rivera this season, .214 career **Unlikely fact** J.D. Drew has 7 walks last 3 games through Friday

— DAVID E. WELLS

Keys for Red Sox success

- 1 Get into the bullpen** — The one glaring weakness of the Yankees is their pen, especially the setup crew before Mo Rivera.
- 2 Pitch to A-Rod, not Teixeira** — The Yankees' newest millionaire comes through in the clutch more often than baseball's highest paid player.
- 3 Get Papi going** — He might not hit home runs, but just getting a key hit or two from David Ortiz would give the whole team a lift.

Keys for Yankees success

- 1 Going the distance** — The starters might not be able to go nine innings, but they need to provide quality outings.
- 2 Stay away from Bay** — The Sox left fielder seems to already have a knack for big hits against the Yankees.
- 3 Jump on Beckett early** — If the Sox ace has a weakness, it's getting in trouble early in games. A win in Game 1 of the series could help set the tempo for the next two nights.

— WILLIAM S. PAXTON

CATCHING UP WITH THE BLUEFISH

major league organizations and another to a broken hand in just over two weeks.

The week ahead

At Somerset, today — Through Thursday, the Patriots had won seven straight games and 22 of 27 to take control of the Freedom Division.

Vs. Lancaster, Tuesday through Thursday — Through Thursday, the Barnstormers had lost five straight games in the wake of a season-high seven-game winning streak. They swept the Bluefish at home May 22-24.

Vs. Southern Maryland, Friday and Saturday — This is the final time the two teams will meet in the first half. The Bluefish swept the Blue Crabs on the road May 29-31. They will likely have to do the same at home this time to get back in Liberty Division race.

PITCHING MATCHUPS (statistics through Thursday) — Today doubleheader at Somerset, 1:35 p.m.; Game 1 — RHP Kyle Jackson (4-3, 4.21) at RHP Josh Miller (5-2, 2.72); Game 2 — LHP Corey Lee (1-3, 3.59) at RHP Jim Magrane (5-0, 2.60); Tuesday vs. Lancaster, 7:05 p.m., RHP Ricardo Gomez (0-0, 13.50) at RHP Esteban Yan (3-1, 2.68); Wednesday vs. Lancaster, 7:05

p.m., LHP Eric Ackerman (2-2, 3.24) at RHP Gary Knotts (1-3, 4.00); Thursday vs. Lancaster, 7:05 p.m., RHP Ben Fritz (1-1, 4.39) at RHP Dan Reichert (4-4, 5.74); Friday vs. Southern Maryland, 7:05 p.m., RHP Ryan Bicondo (3-1, 4.15) at Jackson; Saturday vs. Southern Maryland, 6:05 p.m., LHP John Halama (7-1, 2.17) at Lee.

Around the league

Travis Garcia of the Southern Maryland Blue Crabs hit .636 (14-for-22) with one double, three home runs, nine RBIs and eight runs scored in six games to earn *Connecticut Post* Player of the Week honors May 31-June 4. ... Lancaster Barnstormers left-hander Tom Cochran (3-2, 4.67) was signed by the Cincinnati Reds organization Monday. He reported to Carolina in the Class AA Southern League. ... Camden Riversharks shortstop Kyle Haines (.253, 7 RBIs) was signed by the Cleveland Indians organization Wednesday. He reported to Akron in the Class AA Eastern League

— RICH ELLIOTT

