

# Only Manny can create a whammy with his hammy

Jogging down the first base line.

Hanging out with a member of the Evil Empire while claiming to be too ill to play.

Sitting out games to avoid having to face the likes of hard throwers Joba Chamberlain, Felix Hernandez, or Justin Verlander.

Asking often to be traded.

Threatening to not show up for spring training.

And the Red Sox had to swallow all that from a single player for more than seven years, while having to fork over \$20 million each of those seasons.

All those issues, though, couldn't come close to the avalanche that Manny Ramirez created throughout much of the 2008 season.

Now in a Los Angeles Dodgers uniform, though, one wonders if it will soon become a situation of: different city, same frustrations.

After being shipped out of Boston at the trading deadline last season, though, Ramirez magically became the symbol of health with a snap of the fingers.

In a span of practically half the games with the Sox (17 home runs and 53 RBIs in 53 games in Los Angeles to 20 home runs and 68 RBIs in 100 games with the Sox), he almost equaled his production in both cities in 2008.

For anyone who thought that Ramirez had turned himself around in "Mannywood," though, his drawn out re-signing, just a few months after agent Scott Boras talked of a deal in the \$100 million range for four years as a starting point to sign the outfielder, might prove problematic down the road.

Ramirez, like practically every other ballplayer, felt the "tightening" of the wallets — I have to use quotes here, as it is very relative (a \$45 million contract) compared to how most everyone else has felt the recent economic downturn — as no other suitors came forward, other than the Dodgers. After months of starts and stops during those negotiations, Ramirez was handed a \$25 million, one-year deal, with a \$20 million player option for a second.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



ANDRES CAAMANO

For anyone doubting that Ramirez aimed to shoot his way out of Boston to get one last big payday, even one of his best buddies, David Ortiz, was resigned in admitting that. "He was trying to get to be out, everybody knows, it's not news," he said. "It was something that was getting worse and worse and worse every year."

With his new deal, Ramirez is only on tap to earn an additional \$5 million from what he'd likely have earned in Boston, but after having to pay his share to Boras, and even where it's rumored that his former agents might look to stick their hand into the till as well, one wonders how much Manny gained for all the

drama in the end.

And while the Dodgers were negotiating against themselves, threats of lowering their offer never came to be. While other star players signed reduced or one-year deals this offseason, the Dodgers didn't want to "go there," with Manny, fearing that they'd learn of the player that Jonathan Papelbon referred to as a "cancer" recently in an interview with Esquire magazine.

Papelbon, though, had plenty more to say about the team's issues with the former Sox slugger.

"It just takes one guy to bring an entire team down, and that's exactly what was happening," the Sox closer said. "Once we saw that, we weren't afraid to get rid of him."

For Papelbon, the return for what the Sox got in the trade was a boost to the team.

"And after, you could feel it in the air in the clubhouse," he said. "We got Jason Bay — Johnny Ballgame, plays the game right, plays through broken knees, runs out every ground ball — and it was like a breath of fresh air, man!"

Unfortunately, despite their best efforts, Ramirez might be choosing to slack back like in his final days with the Sox, instead of the way he opened so many eyes in the way he busted his tail when first coming to California — even stealing bases.

After finally agreeing to his new deal last week, Ramirez was on tap to begin spring training Thursday.

Manny instead was seen spinning around on a three-wheel bike in front of the Dodgers' executive office. Shortly after that joyride, Ramirez, penciled in as designated hitter, was scratched for tightness in his left hamstring.

"I was going second to home and it just felt kind of tight," he said. "I only felt it today."

Maybe the tricycle move had something to do with it, eh, Manny?

While manager Joe Torre explained that it was more a precautionary measure, and that he could have played, the practice of playing with kid gloves has already been tried in Boston, and failed in the long run there. So don't expect different results, Joe.

With 19 games left in spring training, Ramirez talked of needing only 40 to 50 at-bats heading into opening day, along with admitting that at 37, he might not be the spring chicken he was a few years ago. "Maybe age is catching up with me," he said.

For the Dodgers, they hope that his slow start this season isn't a window into his repeating what he did with the Sox last season.

First there was the incident when Ramirez whacked first baseman Kevin Youkilis, then Sox traveling secretary Jack McCormack.

The final straws, though, happened late last July. That's when Manny, after having been slated to have a day off, was asked by manager Terry Francona to pinch hit against Yankees closer Mariano Rivera. From there, in the eyes of many Sox fans, the vision of Ramirez resting his bat on his shoulder, watching three identical pitches without even a flinch by Manny, was unacceptable. In a situation where the winning run was 90 feet away, with two outs in the bottom of the ninth — against the Yankees no less — it made many think the slugger had mailed in an important at-bat.

Even Rivera was stunned by what transpired that night.

"Definitely, I was surprised he didn't take the bat off his shoulder," the soon-to-be Hall of Fame closer said.

Before the furor of that at-bat could even quiet down, though, Manny sat out a game with a sore knee. To most, that didn't cause much of a stir, as it was against the lowly Mariners.

The next game, though, would start a crucial series against the Yanks — again — and most fans expected to see Manny on the field. To Francona's surprise, Ramirez asked out just minutes before the first game.

When Ramirez refused to play even in the second, in which the Sox lost 1-0, citing pain in his right knee again, Sox management demanded that Ramirez have an MRI done on that knee. Sources claimed that Ramirez voiced needing three weeks to recover from the extreme pain in the knee.

On the way to that exam, though, Ramirez couldn't remember which knee had the pain, so the Sox then covered their bases by having it done on both.

With the MRIs coming up clean, Ramirez was shipped six days later in a three-team deal to the Dodgers in return for Jason Bay.

What Ramirez will do with his newly signed contract is anyone's guess, but he certainly has some options — no pun intended — available to him.

If Ramirez chose to continue his two-month-plus run of last season with the Dodgers, and showed that it could be parlayed out into a 40-home-run-or-more year, with 110

RBIs or more, he could rip up the player option, especially if the economy shows some signs of rebounding, and head to the next suitor willing to write a big paycheck.

The next possibility is that Manny takes it easy for much of the beginning of the season, a-la Boston 2008, and then repeat his torrid performance of the tail end of last season, and tease teams with the option of another big deal as well.

What the Dodgers definitely want to avoid is the possibility that Ramirez mail in all of 2009, and put up Andrew Jones numbers. Things were so bad for Jones that the Dodgers cut him before this year, and had to foot the remainder of his \$22 million owed the former Gold Glover, after Jones suckered Dodgers owner Frank McCourt into a two-year, \$36 million deal in December 2007.

In a city where fans are known to arrive by the second inning at the earliest, and leave by the seventh, they couldn't take watching a player who arrived to spring training overweight, only played in 75 games, hitting just .158, three home runs and 14 RBIs. Those fans even found the time to roundly boo a player they had hoped would be more like the stellar hitter who stood out for so many years in Atlanta. At 31, you couldn't even use the excuse of old age having caught up with Jones.

At least Jones didn't goof around on a tricycle in his first spring training with the team, though, only to have to sit out because of a tweaked hammy. Only Manny.

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