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Godzilla Goes Deep

Matsui shines in Yanks' opener, but Contreras struggles

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By Ken Davidoff
Staff Correspondent

February 28, 2003

Tampa, Fla. -- The pregame military fly-over didn't happen because of an "emergency" that was never explained. Sterling Hitchcock didn't exceed 84 mph on the radar gun and Jose Contreras looked more like a Titan of Cubic Zirconium than The Titan of Bronze. And then the rain arrived, drowning Legends Field in wet misery.

Leave it to Godzilla to spread some sunshine through the Yankees' universe.

Hideki Matsui, living up to his hype, salvaged his new team's exhibition opener with a two-run home in the third inning in the Yankees' 9-3 loss to Cincinnati. For the day, he went 1-for-3 and fielded no fly balls in leftfield.

"I feel pretty good that I got one out of the way," Matsui said through his interpreter, Roger Kahlon.

"I was very impressed," manager Joe Torre said. "Very impressed with his first day."

A full house of 10,169 attended the game, televised live in Japan, and many fans chanted "Mat-su-I!" during his three plate appearances. A new Japanese food stand in the concession area offered five different types of sushi: California rolls, tuna rolls, Philly rolls and vegetarian rolls for \$7, and the "#55 home-run roll" that cost \$9.

Torre and the Yankees enjoyed more than just the home run their new No. 55 provided, although that in itself stood out -- a bullet pulled over the rightfield fence off Reds lefthander Jimmy Anderson. It came on the ninth pitch of his second at-bat after he fell behind 1-and-2. All of this, Torre noted, in the rain. "There's a lot of things you could say: 禅 he hell with this, it's spring training," Torre said. "But he was locked in."

Matsui worked Ryan Dempster for six pitches in his first at-bat, a slow bouncer to third baseman Brandon Larson in the second inning that exposed his lack of speed. In his last at-bat, he looked at two balls from Anderson and then lined out to second.

This Matsui, Jason Giambi said, looked far different from the Matsui he saw in November during the exhibition series between Japan and United States all-stars. "He was trying to hit home runs there," Giambi said. "He was pressing. Today, [he looked like he did] four years earlier, when I played there."

"I was a little bit lucky to be able to hit the home run today," Matsui said. "It wasn't the pitch that the pitcher wanted to throw," although he said he wasn't sure if it was a fastball or a sinker.

The debut of Contreras, the Yankees' other high-priced international free agent, went far less smoothly. He relieved Hitchcock, who allowed two runs in his two innings, and gave up five runs, three hits and two walks in the third inning, including a grand slam by Adam Dunn. He followed that with a 1-2-3 fourth.

"I don't think that my psychological preparation was what it needed to be," Contreras said through his interpreter, Leo Astacio. "It never happened to me in my 10 years of pitching. Five runs in one inning, a grand slam, it never happened to me. I know it's baseball, but I have to work a little harder and prepare a little better."

"He looked like he was trying to pitch the seventh game of the World Series," Yankees pitching coach Mel Stottlemyre said. "He's like everyone else here who tried to impress."

Contreras needed 35 pitches to get through his first inning of work -- "Incredible," he said -- and the grand slam came after consecutive walks to Ken Griffey Jr. and Austin Kearns. Three times Jorge Posada left his post behind the plate to chat with the Cuban righthander. In his second inning, Stottlemyre said, Contreras stopped trying to rush, and he struck out two batters.

Several times in a post-appearance interview, Contreras expressed disappointment with his performance. "It was my first inning, my first game here, and I wanted to leave a good impression," he said. "I didn't. I know that a lot of people were anxious to see me perform, but I wasn't able to give them the results."

Hitchcock, on the trading block, began the game by surrendering back-to-back triples to Felipe Lopez and Aaron Boone. His fastball, which needs to be in the high '80s to set up his off-speed pitches, topped out at about 84 mph, surely not impressing scouts from Texas, San Francisco, Atlanta, Montreal, Florida and Minnesota, among others.

Jeff Weaver, who is the favorite to win the fifth starter's job over Contreras, allowed a run and four hits in two innings.

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