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# PLAY

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MLB

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# A DREAM DEFERRED



**ALEXI OGANDO HAS BEEN LIGHTS OUT FOR THE RANGERS. MAYBE BECAUSE HE'S ALREADY GOTTEN OUT OF THE BIGGEST JAM OF HIS LIFE.**

*By Shaun Assael*

**THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC IS FILLED WITH** young boys who dream of playing in the major leagues. Growing up in San Pedro de Macoris, Alexi Ogando was one of them. He threw balled-up socks when he couldn't find baseballs, and as an 18-year-old with a rocket arm he signed with the A's in 2002 for a modest \$15,000 bonus.

How he got from those dusty Dominican streets to Rangers Ballpark might be the most improbable path any major leaguer has taken.

Given his growing local fame as a

teen prospect in San Pedro—little kids followed him to ask for autographs when he left his house—Ogando didn't find it odd when a well-spoken stranger approached him in late 2004 with a proposition. After all, he was told, dozens of other players had made money from the same deal. All Ogando had to do was marry a woman and take her to spring training when he got his work visa. "You'll have no problem with this," said the man.

Ogando agreed to the plan, and a few days later he showed up at a small beachside office. He was introduced to a Dominican woman wearing a plain cotton dress. There were no flowers or family. Not even a priest. The ceremony took 15 minutes, after which Ogando had a wife he would never see again and, as he would soon learn, a problem with the U.S. government.

He learned the full scale of his predicament several weeks later, in January 2005, when he arrived at the U.S. embassy in Santo Domingo to get his visa so he could report to spring training. He was denied the visa, an official told him, because he was one of more than two-dozen players flagged in a human trafficking ring. "They told me I had committed a big crime and could not come into the United States," says Ogando. The stated reason for the visa denial was marriage fraud, but the State Department has long been suspicious that such sham marriages are tied to prostitution. Either way, Ogando's big league dream all but died that day.

Ogando languished for five years, mostly in the lowly Dominican Summer League, before the State Department reversed course this past January, setting the stage for his rookie debut with the Rangers. The 26-year-old has a 1.25 ERA in 19 relief appearances as of Aug. 5 for the AL West leaders. Teammates call him El Mago—the Magician—in part because the 6'4" righty throws with a corkscrew delivery, hiding the ball from batters as it leaves his hand. But the real magic was worked



by a hungry agent who believed she could make a difference, a team that refused to give up on his talent and a canny lobbyist with ties to former president and Rangers owner George W. Bush.

After Ogando left the U.S. embassy that fateful day, he lingered outside his family's wood-frame house in San Pedro, wondering how to tell his mother what he'd done for the promise of \$3,000 (which he never received). When he finally built up the courage to confess, she erupted: "Why didn't you tell me

With Espinosa-Dash (left) on his side, Ogando was able to navigate a difficult road to the majors.

before you did this?" The toll on his family was brutal. His mother suffered through months of depression, and his father, a truck driver, stopped dreaming of early retirement. Those kids who once trailed Ogando through the neighborhood abandoned him.

The Rangers learned of the Dominican husband-for-hire ring when one of the club's star pitching

**THE WORLD ACCORDING TO US**  
By expanding video replay usage, the Little League World Series is once again ahead of the curve. The LLWS pioneered mandatory batting helmets (1967) and replay for home runs (2008), both later adopted by MLB (1971, 2008).

prospects, Omar Beltre, was denied a visa after being caught in the same roundup that snared Ogando. Assuming the U.S. would soften its stance on the players, Texas decided to take a chance on Ogando, who had been signed as an outfielder by the A's. The Rangers selected him in the 2005 Rule 5 draft, which allows teams to draft prospects who have been in another club's system for up to five years without cracking the 40-man roster. When Ogando arrived at the Rangers' Dominican academy, Texas moved him from the outfield to the mound, where he flashed an arm that produced radar gun readings close to 100 mph. But even though Beltre and Ogando continued to show contrition and humility, they were denied visas in 2006 and 2007. "The years come and the years go, and nothing," Ogando says. "I had no hope."

MLB, the players association and a parade of lawyers failed to find a way to help the players. The club even hired a former federal investigator to find the mastermind of the visa ring, hoping that Ogando and Beltre might be brought into the U.S. under special waivers given to witnesses. "I turned up some good leads," says the consultant, Hipolito Acosta. "And the [government] agents whom I got to interview Alexi and Omar seemed interested. But it never turned into a priority for them." After a fifth visa denial in January 2009, Ogando had been through enough. He asked if his rights could be sold to a Japanese or Mexican team—anything to escape his *Groundhog Day* nightmare.

So when a new face heard the player's story and offered to help, in March 2009, Ogando was wary. But Charisse Espinosa-Dash was different from the others. In addition to being a lawyer, the mother of five is the only female agent in MLB to own an agency. And having spent time in the Dominican, she realized that

## HIS MOTHER SUFFERED THROUGH DEPRESSION, AND HIS FATHER STOPPED DREAMING OF EARLY RETIREMENT.

she had a unique opportunity to make the baseball interests of the Rangers dovetail with the policy aims of the State Department, which recently listed the Dominican Republic among countries that fail to "fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking."

Espinosa-Dash contacted Stephen Payne, president of the lobbying firm Worldwide Strategic Partners and a former member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council under

President Bush. As part of a public-image makeover, Payne arranged educational talks between Ogando, Beltre and government experts, who explained the toll that human trafficking takes on women. Next, Espinosa-Dash had the Women's Committee for the Defense of Human Rights promote speeches by the players at baseball academies. "Look at me," Ogando said to a group of 40 players at the Angels' Dominican academy last summer. "Look at how I let my family down."



Aided by a funky delivery, Ogando has stranded 92.6% of runners, tops on the Rangers.

Rangers president Nolan Ryan penned a letter to both Texas senators on the players' behalf, and Senator John Cornyn made an official inquiry. The result? Beltre and Ogando went back to the embassy this past November and their visas were approved in January. Ogando picked up his passport with the visa inside on

Feb. 12, and he ran home to his family. "Here is the biggest gift I can give you," he told them.

The Rangers expected the 28-year-old Beltre to have a more immediate impact. But after two shaky starts, the righty is back at Triple-A Oklahoma City. Ogando began the season at Double-A Frisco

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and was called up to the majors in June after fanning 42 batters in 30% minor league innings. He didn't allow a run in his first eight outings for Texas and has been an integral part of the Rangers bullpen. "I want to show everyone in Texas who supported me that they were right," he says, his coal-color eyes watering up. "And I have a lot more to show."

After six years, he's finally casting off the last vestige of the crime that stained him, filing to have his marriage ended with a divorce. He shrugs his shoulders when asked where his "wife" is today, saying in a whisper, "I no know." Nor does he know what became of the smooth-talker who introduced them. He's told what he knows to authorities, but as the State Department's "Trafficking in Persons Report" notes, "The [Dominican] government has not convicted any trafficking offenders, including officials possibly complicit in trafficking, since 2007."

But with Ogando and Beltre talking about their ordeal, that could change. "Anything else the embassy needs," Ogando says, "it can count on me."

Apparently, so can the Rangers. ☐

**THE LIST**

**MOST EXTRA INNINGS PLAYED IN ONE SEASON**

**WOW, AND WE THINK GAMES ARE TOO LONG NOW.**

- 82 EXTRA INNINGS (23 GAMES): 1918 Senators
- 76 (19 GAMES): 1969 Twins
- 73 (31 GAMES): 1943 Red Sox
- 73 (27 GAMES): 1943 Indians
- 71 (24 GAMES): 1945 Athletics
- 71 (26 GAMES): 1920 Cardinals
- 70 (17 GAMES): 1980 Cubs
- 70 (25 GAMES): 1967 Indians



**SNAPPY COMEBACKS**

**CARL PAVANO AND DELMON YOUNG  
MAKE WITH THE FUNNY – AND KEEP THE TWINS  
A SERIOUS THREAT.**

*By Buster Olney*

Walk into the Twins' clubhouse for the first time, and it would appear that Carl Pavano is a little too hard on Delmon Young. Unless you know this: Pavano is a friend of Delmon's older brother (and former big leaguer) Dmitri, and he feels he has license to give Delmon a hard time. Not that Young just takes it: When asked why he lost 30 pounds this off-season, Young said it's because he knew he would spend the summer chasing line drives hit off the aging Pavano. Fun times, but it's no joke to say that these two sparring partners have the Twins primed for the AL Central race.

Pavano became a punch line in New York after signing a four-year, \$39.95 million contract in 2004 and making just 26 total starts for the Yankees. And Young was a problematic and punchless leftfielder who failed to live up to his rep, slugging just .413 in his first two seasons with the Twins after they acquired him from the Rays in a 2007 trade. But in the months after Young's mother passed away, in May 2009, teammates saw a change in the way he prepared and played.

The transformation continued during the off-season, when Young dropped all that weight. "You have to commit yourself during the off-season and season," says manager Ron Gardenhire, "and I think he's really turned the corner."

Young, just 24, has become the hitter he was supposed to be when Tampa Bay drafted him No. 1 overall in 2003. He's hitting .331 with a team-leading 83 RBIs. "This is my fourth year," says Young. "I know all the pitchers now and have a sense of how they're going to attack me."

Pavano, meanwhile, has become Minnesota's workhorse. Acquired in a trade with Cleveland last August, he has a 3.32 ERA and is tied for second in the AL with five complete games, a shocking number for a 34-year-old whose toughness was questioned by his Yankees teammates after a steady stream of injuries. "I always felt like I had the ability to do it," the righthander says. "It's just my body failed me for a while."

But these days, Pavano and Young look pretty good, even if they sound downright ugly. ☐