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Playing with passion

Vinny Pezzimenti

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Take a quick glimpse at the bare chest of Adalberto Santos and you are granted access into his heart and soul.



CDT photo/Craig Houtz

The Spikes' Adalberto Santos, a New York-Penn League All-Star Game selection, is among the league leaders in runs, hits, triples and stolen bases. The outfielder owns many tattoos, several of which help convey his passion for the game of baseball and life.

View larger

His chest is a canvas, covered in ink, none of it wasted, all of it meaningful.

There is an image of praying hands holding rosary beads, there to remind Santos of his fallen father.

There are the words, "Go hard, or go home," his mother's favorite saying.

And there, spelled out in Chinese letters, is another motto — "Never give up."

On this occasion, as Santos glances intently at his many tattoos, his eyes turn glassy and his voice quivers with emotion. There is a story, a struggle, a moment or more of perseverance behind every one of them.

Soon enough, you discover why the State College Spikes outfielder plays the game of baseball the way he does — with such passion, ferocity and pure emotion.

It is evident in the way he quickly leaps to his feet and furiously claps his hands after stealing a base. In the way he relentlessly dashes through the outfield. And in the way he crashes into padded walls.

"I don't feel that there's a day that goes by that he doesn't strap on his cleats with the intent that this could be his last day ever playing baseball," teammate Tyler Waldron says.

To completely understand Santos, you must start near the beginning, back to the day when he was a 4-year old, toting his new green Ninja Turtles baseball glove to a ballpark in the Bronx with his father. Santos still has the glove — "Donatello's face is in the middle," he says — and it has been with him through every step of his baseball odyssey, which means it has a lot of miles.

Santos grew up playing in New York City's hispanic leagues, with Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, with music, dancing and energy serving as the backdrop.

He evolved into an All-American high schooler who owned numerous college scholarship offers.

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He played junior college ball in North Carolina and in New Mexico before landing at Pac-10 power Oregon State. Along the way, he was selected twice in the major league draft, passed on pro ball twice, and nearly quit on the game altogether.

That Santos is in a major league farm system and a New York-Penn League all-star isn't a major surprise given his talent. But given the circumstances of Santos' life, he has defied at least a few odds.

"I thank God every single day before I get on that field that I'm still here," he says.

That feeling of fortune radiates from Santos on and off the field. It was obvious in the way he shook manager Gary Robinson's hand and looked into his eyes the moment Santos arrived in State College in late June.

"The day he walked in I knew he was special," Robinson says. "I didn't know if he could play or not, but I knew he was going to bring a level of passion and intensity to the club that every team wants."

Robinson immediately plugged Santos into the middle of the Spikes' lineup, and the player hasn't disappointed. Santos was batting .299 through Friday and ranked among New York-Penn League leaders with 38 runs scored (second), 59 hits (eighth), six triples (fifth) and 13 stolen bases (sixth) while topping the Spikes with 29 RBIs. His mother, Mary, isn't surprised.

"He's made every all-star game since he's been playing ball," she says.

Mary has closely witnessed Adalberto's baseball progression, proudly declaring that she never missed one of her son's games until he began his trek around the country. She had to be both mother and father because her husband, also named Adalberto, died when the younger Adalberto was just 11.

The elder Adalberto, a native of Puerto Rico, suffered through a heart condition for more than 10 years. He prepared his son for his death, but that didn't make it any easier.

"It was very traumatic for him," Mary says. "He took it very hard."

The ink praying hands and rosary beads eventually graced Santos. Other tattoos soon followed.

Santos is particularly fond of the Chinese letters. They remind him of his mother and what she told him three years ago when he was on the verge of giving up baseball for good.

That was after Santos enjoyed a prosperous year at New Mexico Junior College, which led to him being selected in the 17th round of the 2007 draft by the Toronto Blue Jays. Santos opted not to sign with the Blue Jays because of an arm injury. He also doubted if baseball was his true calling.

"Obviously," Santos says now, "it would've been the wrong decision."

But he needed a pep talk from his mother to understand that.

"He was ready to give up," Mary says. "I told him you never give up."

That led to the tattoo, then a two-year stint at Oregon State and a 35th-round selection by the San Diego Padres in the 2009 draft. Santos, who also played the infield in college, passed again, aiming to finish school and with the hopes of helping the Beavers to the College World Series.

Oregon State's season ended in the Gainesville Regional of the NCAA tournament this past spring and soon after, Santos, who was selected in the 22nd round by the Pittsburgh Pirates in June, started in State College.

"Third time's a charm," he says. "Great organization, great opportunity to play. This is where I'm supposed to be."

Home, though, is never far away, evidenced by the many other tattoos Santos wears that represent family.

Mary, a Brooklyn native, lives in Wilmington, N.C., now, with her five daughters nearby. Adalberto, 22, is the baby of the family, 25 years younger than his oldest sister.

Still, Santos possesses a unique level of maturity, which Mary sees as a result of being around older people for much of his life.

Robinson doesn't worry about Santos making unwise decisions on the road, and the manager knows without any doubt that Santos will be where he's supposed to be when he's supposed to be there.

"You just have to like having him on your club," Robinson says. "I don't think that he'll ever play for someone who is not going to want him on his club."

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To Waldron, Santos carries himself with an unusual and undeniable “swagger.”

“It’s hard to explain,” says Waldron, who was also Santos’ teammate at Oregon State. “It’s like this light shines through him. It’s like, ‘Oh (expletive), here comes Santos.’” It’s the same way on the field.

The solidly built Santos — he’s 5-foot-10 and close to 200 pounds — plowed into the Medlar Field at Lubrano Park wall in right-center field trying to make an acrobatic catch during a recent Spikes’ victory. The attempt was unsuccessful and Santos jammed his neck on the play, but the circumstances only further highlighted his baseball zeal.

“Just the love of the game,” he says. “I’ve been playing this for a long time. I don’t want to do it for nothing. Like my mom always told me, ‘You can go hard or go home.’ You’re going to play hard and get something out of it, or you’re gonna come home and wash dishes.”

It’s a slogan Santos has unceasingly played under, even before the ink on his chest told us so.

“He has always played baseball from his heart,” Mary says. “He loves baseball. Don’t tell his team, but he will play for free. That’s just the way he is.”



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