

Mets' Vientos playing 'with no pressure' and applying lesson from Phillies' Harper

By WILL SAMMON

The Associated Press

Washington » When New York Mets third baseman Mark Vientos reached first base last year against the Philadelphia Phillies, one of the game's best hitters offered some advice that has stuck with the 24-year-old.

Phillies first baseman Bryce Harper told him "Hey, you got a lot of power. You don't need to swing as hard as you do."

That's one of a few simple lessons Vientos has learned to apply this season during his first sustained opportunity in the majors. Things have gone well so far. The Mets recalled Vientos on May 15 and gave him the runway at third base two weeks later. Through 70 plate appearances, Vientos has slashed .329/.400/.645 with five home runs.

For the last year and a half, Mets officials and rival evaluators figured that if Vientos received 500 to 600 at-bats, he'd hit 30 home runs, but they harbored concerns about other numbers. Would he get on base enough? Would he hit sliders the other way? Answering those questions will continue to be part of Vientos' journey. Vientos' results during this initial hot stretch, however, point to growth.

"He looks comfortable and confident," Mets vice-hitting coach Eric Chavez said.

Vientos' conversation with Harper wasn't the first time Vientos heard a message about over-swinging. Throughout last season, Mets officials talked to him about his strength and told him he didn't have to apply maximum effort; he just had to get the barrel to the baseball.

Vientos said it doesn't get much better than receiving advice from someone like Harper. After all, from Vientos' perspective, it's insight from a future Hall of Famer. But the key, Vientos said, is tailoring those words to fit his game. It's one thing to listen. It's another thing to apply. Saturday, for



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New York Mets third baseman Mark Vientos (27) celebrates with teammates in the dugout after hitting a home run during the fifth inning of a game against the Arizona Diamondbacks on June 1 in New York.

example, Vientos' 440-foot home run was the longest by a Mets player at Citi Field this season. It was the product of a level swing on a hanging slider.

"It's a fine balance between him really wanting to hit the ball too hard but then being under control to make good decisions and to not just swing too hard and foul a ball off," Chavez said.

Among the improvements Vientos has made, his pitch recognition stands out the most to evaluators. Vientos has struck out considerably less (he entered Tuesday's game with a 19.7% strikeout rate, after striking out in 30.5% of his 233 plate appearances last year) and fared much better on non-fastballs. Monday, Vientos walked twice in a game for the first time—it was his 99th career game in the

majors.

In a game against the Miami Marlins a couple of weeks ago, Vientos sat on an off-speed pitch from Braxton Garrett on a 2-0 count; it was the product of completing some homework before the at-bat. He drilled the pitch to center field for a run-scoring single. Vientos said that wouldn't have happened last year.

"I'd be almost, like, second-guessing it," Vientos said. "It would have been, 'Should I do it? Should I do it? Should I do it?' Then I'd be in the box, get the pitch I was looking for and be like, 'Man, I should have done it.' The only way that happens is by failing and figuring it out. It's OK to fail, it's OK to lose an at-bat as long as you did it your way and not second-guessing."

Later that same week in Cleveland, when Vientos, a right-handed batter, drew starts against right-handers over Brett Baty, a left-handed batter, coaches emphasized the idea that he'd continue to see non-fastballs. At one point, Vientos asked Chavez, "Is this a guy you think I can sit slider on?" Chavez was pleased just to hear the question.

Just the fact that his mind is already starting to turn like that, he's absorbing things," Chavez said. "He just looks really, really comfortable."

For Vientos, a lot of the success in this small sample stems from a simple belief in trusting his abilities. That goes for his defense, too. Vientos—with a strong arm some scouts have appreciated dating to his days as a second-round

draft pick out of American Heritage High in South Florida—has made all the plays, looking more comfortable at third base than he has in the past.

"If I make a mistake, I want to make a mistake being aggressive. I don't want to make a mistake being passive," Vientos said. "Just saying that to myself and being locked in during the game, anticipating every play, has helped."

The Mets entered the season needing to glean more information about young players like Vientos. So far, they've learned he's confident and resilient. After all, the club added J.D. Martinez late in spring training, left Vientos off the Opening Day roster and initially gave the third-base job to Baty, who has since been sent to Triple A. All of that after Vientos saw limited opportunities last year in the majors. To his credit, Vientos just keeps producing.

In time, the Mets will learn how sustainable some of the results are, what's real and what's just a good stretch. And they'll have time, too—this time, it doesn't seem like he's going anywhere anytime soon.

"When I was 10 years old, there were already coaches putting the pressure on me, saying, 'You could become this, you could become that,'" Vientos said. "I've had pressure on myself for a long time. And I feel like now, it's just, this is fun. I am here. I am living my dream. Everything else was pressure. Getting drafted was pressure. Playing in the minor leagues, performing every year, was pressure. I feel like I am at this age, and I asked myself, 'I've been doing this for so long, why am I going to keep putting pressure on myself? This is fun. Let me have fun, and let's see what happens. What's the worst that can happen? That's the way I view it."

"I am not saying this is a joke to me. Obviously, I take this very seriously. But this is just, like, I am trying my hardest to see what I can do for the team with no pressure."

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