

The Boston Herald

July 6, 2012 Friday

Big Papi's power trip still going strong; Slimmer Sox slugger finds recipe for success

BY: SCOTT LAUBER

SECTION: SPORTS; Baseball-Red Sox; Pg. 52 Vol. 30 No. 188

Even now, after all these years, the home runs still come with roughly the same frequency, one every 14 at-bats or so. Yet the suspicions never fade, the whispers seldom abate.

Why isn't he slowing down? ... How does he remain so productive? ... It's unnatural.

At the center of it all, as always, is David Ortiz.

What, you expected someone else?

The Red Sox' longest-tenured player and the last man standing from the Curse-busting 'Idiots' of 2004, Ortiz became only the 49th player to reach 400 career home runs when he went deep in the fourth inning Wednesday in Oakland. He has eclipsed the 20-homer mark in each of his 10 seasons with the Sox, and this year, at age 36, he is on pace to finish with 44, which would be his highest total since 2006.

On Tuesday night, Ortiz will be the Red Sox' lone representative at the All-Star Game in Kansas City, a fitting distinction given everything he has meant to the team this season. Amid the chaos of 19 players taking turns on the disabled list and a clubhouse that has struggled to adapt to the ways of new manager Bobby Valentine, he has been the only constant.

The Red Sox shudder at the thought of where they might be without Ortiz, something he surely will remind them of after the season when he reaches the free agent market obsessed with securing the multi-year contract that eluded him last winter.

He still is every bit as big as Big Papi gets, and he is a lot of things - gregarious and generous, outspoken and overly emotional, respected by peers and adored by fans. But he isn't an overnight sensation. As he quickly reminds anyone who marvels at his unrelenting power, 'This ain't my first time that I'm doing what I'm doing.'

It isn't enough, though, that Ortiz is crushing the ball like he's still 29 years old. He also must account for how he's managing to do it.

'In the steroid era that we're living in, now when you see a guy doing well, right away it comes to people's mind that this guy's using this and that,' Ortiz said this week in a

wide-ranging interview with the Herald. 'And to be honest with you, I understand that. If you have a guy that never has done anything and is coming out of nowhere, yeah, there's going to be questions. But it's not new for me. It's not like I just got here today.'

Of course, Ortiz has brought much of the skepticism upon himself. In 2003, Major League Baseball and the players' union agreed to conduct anonymous 'survey tests' as a precursor to the current drug policy. In 2009, after Ortiz didn't homer until mid-May, The New York Times named him among 104 players whose survey samples were positive for performance-enhancing drugs.

Since baseball implemented its current drug policy, which Ortiz calls 'the best in sports,' he hasn't tested positive. And although he also hasn't duplicated his franchise-record 54-homer season of 2006, he still averaged 29 homers, 101 RBI and a .921 on-base plus slugging percentage (OPS) from 2007 through last year, numbers he's on pace to beat this season.

So what fuels Ortiz? What keeps him going?

Start here: He's in the best shape of his career, having shed 30 pounds since the end of last season. And then, there is his contract and what he perceives as the insult of not being able to land a two-year deal from the Red Sox - or any other team, for that matter - after last season.

'I know there's certain things that I can't do like I used to, no question about it,' Ortiz said. 'When I was in my late 20s, early 30s, things were easier than now. But there's two things that God gave you - the ability to play the game, or no ability to play the game. I'm using my God-given talent and my experience more than ever right now.'

A strict diet

Picture this: A billboard, maybe somewhere along the Mass Pike, that features Ortiz holding a fist full of broccoli and flashing his megawatt smile.

That has been Tara Mardigan's vision.

Mardigan is a Boston-based nutritionist who works with the Red Sox, and for years, she tried to convince Ortiz to lose weight by eating healthier. But he always has been too fond of food, especially sweets, to get serious about his diet.

Everything changed in November. A visit to the doctor revealed an elevated cholesterol level that exceeded 300, alarmingly high for anyone and especially someone with a family history of high cholesterol. Ortiz wanted to avoid going on medication, and so, at last, he decided to change his lifestyle.

At the suggestion of agent Fern Cuza, he took a test designed to measure his body's sensitivity to certain foods. From those results, he worked with Mardigan to devise a

high-protein diet that reduced his intake of carbohydrates. He also stopped drinking alcohol.

The result: A sleeker, svelter slugger.

'I think the message is that all too often we look at someone who is David's age and think there's got to be some quick fix or that he's taking supplements or whatnot. And he's certainly had a history of that,' Mardigan said. 'But it's good old-fashioned working your tail off and making better choices, health-wise, that have led to this result. Young kids coming up can look at David and say, 'This is the way this guy did it, and this is how he's going to extend his career.'"

Ortiz admits that dropping the weight was more about improving his overall health than impacting his on-field performance. And while it's impossible to quantify how much a leaner body has helped Ortiz maintain his production at the plate, there isn't any denying that he has more energy.

His peers have taken notice. Several opposing players have remarked that Ortiz is running faster, and unlike past years, he was able to start consecutive games at first base during interleague play without feeling sore or rundown.

'When you get older, you have to work harder, and that's what he's doing right now,' said Hall of Fame slugger Tony Perez, now a special assistant with the Miami Marlins. 'He looks really good. He's in better shape, and he's having a good year. When I retired, I was 44, and he's not even close to that. It looks like he's got a lot more years ahead of him.'

Said Ortiz, 'I think that's the hardest thing, just being honest with yourself. It's like, OK, I'm going out, but I ain't having a drink. I'll have tonic water. Or you go out for dinner and see everybody killing dessert, and you just look at it. That's the hardest part.

'But I did it for myself. Of course, it has helped me out a lot with baseball, but I didn't do it for baseball. I'm one of those guys that thinks there's life after baseball. One day I'm going to be done with baseball and life continues, and I want to be ready for that second life.'

Maybe that billboard will be a reality, after all.

Let's make a deal

Ortiz is making \$14.575 million this season, yet his perception that he was snubbed by not being offered a multi-year contract has left a baseball-sized chip on his shoulder.

Upon becoming a free agent last November, he sought a two-year deal, preferably from the Red Sox. But the club wasn't willing to go that far at an annual salary comparable to

the \$12.5 million he made in 2011, and because the market for a full-time DH was depressed, his options were limited.

So, Ortiz accepted arbitration, received a \$2.075 million raise and set out to maximize his earning power for when he reaches the open market again this winter.

Entering tonight's series opener against the Yankees at Fenway Park, he's batting .301 with a .989 OPS that ranks second in the American League behind only Texas' Josh Hamilton (1.037). He's crushing left-handed pitchers (.307, nine homers, .964 OPS), and barring injury or a calamitous second half, he's almost certain to become only the 22nd player to hit at least 30 homers at age 36, the first since Carlos Delgado and Manny Ramirez in 2008.

'I'm sure age has played a big part,' said Orioles slugger Jim Thome, who at age 41 has 609 career homers. 'He's always been one of the elite hitters in the game. But now, he's faced all the tough lefties coming in late in the game. He's made those adjustments. To watch his career progress and still be where he's at, it's pretty awesome.'

And this time around, Ortiz expects his market will be more robust.

'I would like to stay (with the Red Sox). It's just, it's not on me,' Ortiz said. 'I have let them know plenty of times what my feelings are, but I don't know what their point is. I don't know what's going to happen the next couple years. Hopefully I can stick around and keep doing my thing here. But we'll see.'

Meanwhile, Ortiz plans to keep doing what he does best, age be damned.

'Age is a state of mind,' he said. 'I really believe that if you take care of yourself and do the right things, age isn't going to matter. You're going to put up numbers.'