From Start, Rodriguez Worked to Be the Best

By TYLER KEPNER

TAMPA, Fla. — Bobby Meacham was a shortstop who had been a first-round draft choice, so he kept an eye out for players of the same pedigree. One such player crossed his path in Zebulon, N.C., in 1994.

Meacham was the manager of the Carolina Mudcats, and he told his wife that when the Jacksonville Suns came to town, he would pay close attention to their teenage phenom. It was Alex Rodriguez, who was just passing through Class AA ball on his quick ascent to stardom. For three days, Meacham watched his every move.

“I said, ‘This guy goes about his business not like he wants to get to the big leagues, but like he wants to be the best,’ ” Meacham said.

“He knows he’s going to be good, but he wants to be great. There was just a method to it.”

In fielding practice, Meacham remembered, Rodriguez would ask for grounders to his right and to his left, and he would ask for fielders at second for a double play and at first for throws across the diamond. In batting practice, he would focus on specific disciplines — grounders the other way, liners to the gaps, and so on.

“At 18 or 19 years old, he already had a plan,” Meacham said. “It was pretty awesome to watch.”
As the Yankees’ new third-base coach, Meacham is the one hitting grounders to Rodriguez now. Fourteen years later, nothing has changed. Rodriguez, who returned to third base Monday against Cincinnati after resting a sore muscle for five days, prepares with a single-minded intensity that new teammates watch closely.

Rodriguez is one of those rare players who capture the imagination of peers. They envy his paycheck, marvel at his skills, or shake their heads at the soap operas he creates. When they become a teammate, they notice the preparation first, and the mental game behind it.

“Having a conversation with him about hitting, you can see he thinks about the game a lot,” said the veteran Jason Lane, a nonroster outfielder.

When Lane asked Rodriguez about his approach to hitting, Rodriguez mentioned three touchstones he tries to remember: stay above the ball; keep good posture in the batter’s box; and do not swing too hard.

By staying above the ball, Lane explained, Rodriguez was referring to batting practice. If you swing under the ball and hit lazy flies, the theory goes, you will swing and miss in the game, when the pitches are harder.

When Rodriguez gives instruction, of course, he is coming from the perspective of a supremely talented player. The Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson once had a succinct explanation for why Rodriguez enjoys working: “A lot of things are fun when you’re great.”

Fellow players recognize the talent gap between themselves and Rodriguez, a three-time most valuable player with 518 career home runs. But parts of his example can resonate.

“It’s very hard to try and emulate what he does,” said Cody Ransom, a non roster infielder. “When I was with San Francisco, Barry Bonds was similar to that, because they’re just different. There’s not a lot of people like that, so to try to do what they do — the way they do it — is probably not a good way to go about it.

“But then you watch their swings and the way they do things, and they do a lot of things right, obviously. There are certain things you can still pick up.”