

Speedy Gordon off to fast start for Marlins



Speedy Dee Gordon has proved to be an exciting catalyst for an otherwise struggling Marlins offense.


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 Speedy second baseman Dee Gordon off to fast start for Marlins.

 Gordon rare Marlins meeting expectations, but must avoid late-season decline.

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The virtual one-man rally Dee Gordon staged Saturday against the Mets illustrated why the Marlins were willing to trade their No. 1 prospect and others to get the speedy second baseman.

Gordon went 5-for-5, including a double, and drove in three runs to spark a comeback from a five-run deficit that came up a run short, through no fault of his.

The other time he had five hits in a game may have been a factor in the Marlins' eagerness to make the deal. It came at their expense last May 3 when Gordon was playing for the Dodgers. He was unstoppable in that three-game series at Marlins Park, going 9-for-15 with four runs and four stolen bases.

He has been similarly impressive so far as the Marlins' leadoff hitter, the only regular on an underachieving team who is off to a fast start.

Through Sunday, Gordon was fourth in the National League with a .389 batting average and second in stolen bases with six. Despite in a prime table-setting spot in the lineup, he was second on the team with nine runs batted in.

"He's done everything we could ever ask of him, and playing great defense too," Marlins manager Mike Redmond said. "This is why we got this guy, to be the catalyst for our offense. He's surely been that."

Gordon, 26, was an All-Star last season for the Dodgers and led the major leagues with 12 triples and 64 stolen bases. But when the Marlins dealt Andrew Heaney, the top left-handed pitching prospect in baseball and others to get him, critics were quick to point out the flaws in his stellar season.

He got off to such a fast start, hitting .344 in April, that it helped mask a decline in production late in the season. His on-base percentage dipped to .326 as he walked only four times after the All-Star break. He ended the season with 107 strikeouts, a high number for a leadoff hitter.

"Remember, he's only played one full year in the big leagues, 148 games last year," Marlins third-base coach Brett Butler pointed out, "so there's so much upside to him."

Butler is a natural mentor for Gordon, a similar player who relied on speed and guile during a 17-year career. He is finding a willing student, particularly on the finer points of base-stealing and bunting.

"This kid wants to learn, wants to get better. He sought me out in spring training about wanting to bunt more. His on-base percentage last year was somewhere in the .320s, obviously we're trying to get .350 or better," Butler said. "He takes all the knowledge, all the wisdom, and he applies it to his game. [Saturday] night was a perfect example."

An encouraging sign is Gordon has been making consistent contact, striking out only five times in 58 plate appearances. He has just two walks but his on-base percentage is a lofty .404.

The question is whether Gordon's performance will hold up to the grind of the long season or mirror last year's fade after a fast start.

That is a discussion Gordon wants no part of, nor will he reveal whether he feels motivated to prove that his All-Star selection was no fluke. Likewise, he shies away from any talk about his recent success, particularly in light of the team's 3-10 start.

"I'm more focused on winning than anything. We need to win," he said. "I just want to play every day and help us win."

The Central Florida native (Avon Park High) has also put his focus on aiding a charitable cause with his play. Every base he steals in April is generating funds for research into a cure for Parkinson's Disease through an initiative of the Miami-based Blechman Foundation (#DeeFeetPD on Twitter). Visit BlechmanFoundation.org for details about joining Gordon's stolen-base challenge.

"It's going all right. It could be better," said Gordon, who has been caught on four of 10 attempts, including the past three.

Butler expects that Gordon, with arguably the best speed in baseball, will improve his success rate as he gains a better understanding of when to run and how to get a better jump.

The same goes for bunting as he masters the nuances of the art to the level former Marlin Juan Pierre attained.

Gordon has one bunt single in four attempts. That doesn't include a sacrifice bunt in the ninth inning Sunday to move a runner into scoring position with the Marlins trailing by a run. Gordon's speed just missed turning the sacrifice into a hit.

"That's all a process that he is learning how to be a quality leadoff guy," Butler said. "The thing about it is he is only going to get better. This is an exciting young man who is going to be around for a long time."

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