

The Jacoby Factor

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The question isn't whether he's ready for the Red Sox, it's whether they're ready for him.

By Neil Swidey | March 30, 2008

As a Native American warrior, your ultimate triumph in battle was not to kill your enemy. It was to use your speed and your smarts and your wiles to get close enough to touch him, and then to slip away. The message was irrefutable: There was still breath in his chest only because you allowed it. Talk about power. Talk about speed. Talk about pride. Native Americans had a term for their definition of victory. They called it counting coup. When Billy Mills was 8, his mother died. His father, a member of the Lakota nation in South Dakota, stroked the boy's arms and told him, "You have broken wings." He used a stick to draw a circle in the dirt. "Step inside your soul," he said. "It is the pursuit of the dream that will heal you."

He encouraged his son to find his dream in sports, which were providing the Indian with a new way to compete against the white man after centuries of slaughter and treacherous treaties. Native Americans could play by the white man's rules, but leverage the quickness, endurance, and cunning that had always been central to their ancestors' hunter-gatherer ways.

In the grueling 10,000-meter race during the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, 26-year-old Billy Mills, with his dark complexion and crew cut, was near the head of the pack. He was a virtual unknown, but he managed to stay neck-and-neck with the world record-holder from Australia. After the last lap bell, the Australian made his move, nudging Mills's elbow so he could break ahead. Caught off guard, Mills staggered and drifted to an outer lane.

Spotting an eagle on the jersey of another runner, he heard his deceased father's voice, "You will have the wings of an eagle." In the final stretch, the race for the gold was down to the Australian and a top-ranked Tunisian. Then, out of nowhere, Mills came charging with the long, easy strides of a sprinter. The television announcer could hardly believe what he was seeing. "Look at Mills!" he cried. "Look at Mills!" As the American crossed the finish line first, the announcer, witness to one of the greatest upsets in Olympic history, just screamed in a wordless spasm of shock and glee, "Aaahhh!"

After the race, Mills realized that the eagle he had seen on the jersey hadn't actually been there at all. But the idea of it had been enough to propel him. He became the first American to win the gold in the 10,000-meter race. No one from the Western Hemisphere has done that since.

The Lakota leaders told Mills he had lifted indigenous people across America. They had a term for what he had done. He had counted coup.

On June 30 of last year, a call went from Boston to Pawtucket, and Jacoby Ellsbury became the first person of Navajo descent to play Major League Baseball. A few days later, in only his third big league game, he hit a single in the bottom of the fourth. When he stole second, that energized the fans who had heard about this kid from the minors with lightning in his feet. But he was just getting warmed up. With Dustin Pedroia at the plate, and two outs, Texas Rangers reliever Willie Eyre hurled a pitch that hit the dirt, bounced off the catcher, and shot toward the visitor's dugout. Ellsbury had taken his normal jump for third, but when he saw the ball bounce, he thought to himself, "Oh, I might have a shot at this." He flew to third and kept going, not even looking at the third base coach for instructions but instead relying on the instinct inside him that told him to keep charging home.

"Ellsbury to third," NESN play-by-play announcer Don Orsillo said, his voice rising. "He's going to try *two* bases, and SCORE!"

With two outs, Ellsbury's brash base running could have easily ended the inning. And that prospect - probability even - would have been reason enough for most big leaguers to put the brakes on, never mind a guy who could claim exactly two games of Major League experience more than the kids hawking overpriced hot dogs to fans in the stands. After getting called up, most rookies approach their early games with the baseball equivalent of that famous medical maxim foremost in mind: *First, do no harm*. Don't risk anything that might prompt a quick return to the minors. To Ellsbury, that cautious approach couldn't be more wrong. "When you're telling yourself, 'Don't screw up,' " he says, "what do you do? Screw up."

His boldness electrified the Fenway crowd - even manager Terry Francona remembers watching Ellsbury round for home and marveling, "It's like he has another gear" - and it reverberated far beyond Kenmore Square. "When Jacoby does well," says Billy Mills, who met him as boy at an invitational race on the Oregon reservation where Ellsbury spent the first six years of his life, "he counts coup for the Navajo nation and all the indigenous nations."

SO IT WAS HERE, IN THE BOTTOM OF THE fourth on July 2, 2007 - long before the World Series heroics, before the silly taco marketing blitz, before the marriage-proposal placards lining the parade route - when the most important indigenous nation around here, the Fenway faithful, first grasped the notion: In Jacoby Ellsbury's fresh face with the angular features, we may well be glimpsing the future of the franchise.

That hunch was only strengthened during the post-season, when the fan campaign for Ellsbury to replace Coco Crisp in the starting lineup grew deafening. Then the kid turned out to be clutch down the stretch, flying around the bases, making a dazzling catch in the outfield, and becoming the first rookie in 60 years to have four hits in a World Series game.

Ever since, every precinct in Red Sox nation has been swooning over Ellsbury, as a tour through the rabid chat rooms and fan blogs will attest. Older male fans love the ferocious old-school work ethic he applies to improving on his God-given gifts. Older female fans love the earnestness that comes across in interviews, as though he's standing on their front porch holding a wrist corsage for their daughter and yes-ma'am-ing himself through pleasantries about the weather. Middle-aged parents love the story of what he did with his million-dollar signing bonus, promptly buying his mom a new house and going down to the bank to surprise his dad by paying off the mortgage on his place. Little kids love the lefty's willingness to sign autograph after autograph, without complaint. Teeny-bopper girls, women of all ages,

and gay men love his looks, a mix of boyish cute and rugged ethnic. Advertisers love the early signs that he'll be willing to use those looks and charm to move product, this young guy - whose grandmother had been famous for the mouth-watering authentic Navajo fry bread she made at her Indian taco stand - gamely smiling before a gaggle of TV cameras, swallowing a processed Taco Bell taco and pumping his fist in the air in delight.

And anyone who enjoys a little excitement with their baseball - a sometimes intoxicatingly good pastime but, let's face it, on balance still the earth's slowest-paced sport that doesn't involve caddies and Banlon shirts - can't help but love Ellsbury for the electricity he brings to his field.

For him and the swollen ranks of his fans, last season was Cinderella perfect. It won't be repeated. It can't be repeated. During this new season, Ellsbury's first full one in the bigs, he will be tested. He may commit a few costly errors or go cold at the plate for a spell. Still, he'll always have his speed, and as the old guys with the wads of chew under their lips like to say, speed doesn't slump.

And this, too, should be said: Ellsbury's presence on the squad this season will test more than just him. With his game-changing speed and aggressive style of play, the Sox finally have a weapon that has long been absent from their arsenal. That is, if they are prepared to use it.

IF YOU CATCH A DRAGONFLY and rub its little legs against your bare feet - without hurting the insect - you'll gain the ability to run faster. Margie McCabe Ellsbury's father shared that piece of Native American folklore with her when she was a girl. And when her oldest son, Jacoby, was an 8-year-old boy, she shared it with him. So there Jacoby and his younger brothers were, sitting on the porch in central Oregon, socks off, rubbing dragonflies they had caught against the pads of their feet.

In Navajo culture, running at dawn was believed to be a spiritual act, a way to clear your head for the day in front of you and draw strength from nature. According to family lore, Margie's great-grandfather was called "Antelope Feet" for his unusual speed. In the Navajo language, that name was "Jaadibikeh." At the point when Native Americans were required to take a last name, the family decided that Jaadibikeh sounded pretty close to McCabe. So that became the family surname. It also happens to be Jacoby's middle name, leading more than a few Boston fans to delight in the mistaken belief that the kid must have some Irish in him. As for Jacoby's distinctive first name, that can be traced back to a farm machinery business in Poston, Arizona. As a teenager, Margie saw the sign on the storefront and filed it away, retrieving it while preparing for the arrival of her firstborn on September 11, 1983.

Jacoby's parents met in 1980. Jim, who grew up in Seattle, was working as a forester for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the reservation in Warm Springs, Oregon. Margie, who grew up as part of the Navajo contingent on the Colorado River Indian Tribes reservation in Parker, Arizona, had come to the Northwest for a change of scenery. The couple were full of contrasts - Margie, easygoing, with dark features and a coffee complexion, Jim, hard-charging, with blue eyes, blond hair, and a tendency to burn easily.

When Jacoby was 3, his father took one of those tubes you use to transport posters and he duct-taped it to a spigot in the backyard to make his boy a batting tee. Every day, Jacoby would stand, bat in hand, waiting for his father to come home. Even at that young age, Jim was intent on teaching his son the proper form and helping him get better each time. And Jacoby was intent on hitting it over the fence.

"He'd hit and hit," Jim recalls. "Margie would hold off dinner until we couldn't see anymore."

That combination - a father pushing his son to achieve great things, and a son matching his intensity every step of the way - would continue throughout Jacoby's youth. (The family had moved off the Warm Springs reservation to the nearby town of Madras when Jacoby was in kindergarten.) Jim, who helped coach his oldest son through his Little League years, is a soft-spoken, hardworking, fair-minded guy off the field. But in the heat of a game, he says, "my voice carries pretty well." He once rode an umpire so hard from behind the backstop that the ump finally ripped off his gear and yelled, "That's it! You umpire!" So he did. "I called a great game," Jim says, chuckling. But he admits now, "I was too hands-on at that age." Jacoby was 9.

He taught Jacoby that as an outfielder, he must never let a ball get by him. "You take a ball off the chest, that's going to hurt a lot less than the ball getting behind you," he told him. "Don't let your teammates down."

Jim also coached his younger sons Matt and Tyler (though not the youngest, Spencer). Matt says he struggled with his father's exacting standards and resisted the post-game critiques, but Jacoby never did. "We didn't necessarily enjoy the rides home with Dad. We preferred to take the bus," Matt says. "But Jacoby was always mentally tough."

Jim recognizes that he sometimes let his perfectionist streak get the best of him, but it's no mystery to him where it comes from. As a boy, Jim was brimming with athletic ability but never made the most of it, for reasons of circumstance (he had to help shoulder a big load at home, because his own parents had split up when he was young and his mother was in a wheelchair because of polio) and adolescent embarrassment (he needed glasses but didn't want to wear them on the field). He was determined that his sons take full advantage of their gifts.

"I wouldn't say my approach was the best," he says, "but it seemed to work with Jacoby. He can roll better than most. His greatest attribute, besides pure athleticism and speed, is his ability to adjust."

Margie puts it this way: "He accepts criticism and uses it to his advantage."

In that way, his family says, he's a real blend. He has his father's discipline and drive to be the best, his mother's intuition and ability to make the best of situations.

Jacoby says he understood his father's approach for what it was - the product of a man who loves his sons and wants the best for them and who is allergic to being average in any pursuit. "He's a good athlete," Jacoby says. "Too bad he didn't get a chance to show it on the high school field."

Jacoby's seriousness about self-improvement was evident from his earliest years, whether he was methodically willing himself to improve his vertical leap by jumping to touch the beam across the ceiling of the family sunroom, or having his mother videotape all of his baseball and basketball games, so he could review his swings and his shots immediately after getting home.

He wouldn't even suspend the seriousness when he was playing with his three brothers at home. It

didn't matter if it was a game of horse or ping-pong or Tetris. The important part for Jacoby was "You have a winner and a loser" - and that he always end up as the winner. "I don't like 'Oh, we're playing for fun,' " he says, laughing. "There's no such thing as playing for fun." It's not that he won every time. It's just that he refused to stop playing until he had won. "You beat me 15 straight times? We're staying here until I beat you."

Matt says that with Jacoby, whom he and his brothers call Coby, "Basically, it's not over until he wins."

Nothing personal. Except it is.

That trait was blindingly obvious when it came to running races. "I was always the fastest kid. But I really worked on it. I didn't want to just be the fastest," Jacoby says. "I wanted to be *by far* the fastest." All through his school years, he never lost a race.

He also always knew how to use sports to deal with stress in other parts of his life. When he was in middle school, his parents hit a rough patch and needed some time apart. Margie moved with the four boys to Parker, Arizona, the reservation land where she had grown up. Jacoby lived in Parker for parts of his sixth- and eighth-grade years. "It wasn't an easy time," Margie says. "I worked for minimum wage. We stayed in low-income housing." Hanging out with one of his cousins, Jacoby competed in sports against older kids, an experience that helped toughen him.

Up close, he and his brothers saw the poverty, high dropout rates, and other social problems that have weighed down reservation life for generations. But they also experienced the benefits. "They were very family-oriented," Jacoby says. "People getting together for big barbecues and powwows." At the community dances, Jacoby and Matt sensed an entrepreneurial opportunity, setting up a concession to sell corn dogs and candy and make a few bucks.

It was during this period, when the boys, who are all enrolled members of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, began to understand more about their Native American roots. Even for Margie, it was a good chance to reconnect with her Parker past. Her parents had moved the family off the Navajo reservation and onto the Colorado River land in 1949, taking advantage of a tribal program offering farmland to Native Americans in hopes of stimulating the local economy. Her family initially lived in a home that had been part of a Japanese internment camp during World War II. But after they joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Margie spent most of her childhood boarding at Mormon schools in Utah. Jacoby and his brothers were raised in the Mormon Church, though they stopped regularly attending services by the time Jacoby was a teen.

So much has been made of Jacoby's Navajo roots, but how much does he know about his father's heritage? "Not much," he admits. "I know he's mixed - a little German, a little Italian, I think." As close as Jacoby is to his father, his dad's heritage was never a big topic of conversation. In fact, Jim is German and English.

Both sides of his family take credit for Jacoby's speed. Jacoby says he gets his straight-line speed from his dad's side of the family, and his quickness - lateral movement, short bursts - as well as his endurance from his mom's side.

By the time Jacoby hit his high school years, the family was back together, living in Madras. (His parents separated again when he was in college, and remain so.) As an athlete at Madras High School, he was always working to compensate for his lack of height. When he finally hit a growth spurt - he's now 6-foot-1 - he kept working as though he were still short. He used his speed, skills, and drive to dominate just about every sport he tried: football, basketball, baseball, cross-country, soccer. Yet it would turn out to be the slowest of all his sports that produced his college scholarship, to Oregon State University (where he met his future girlfriend, Kelsey Hawkins), and allowed him to leverage his speed into a future as a pro athlete.

HOW LITTLE HAS SPEED HISTORICALLY been a hallmark of Red Sox play? This statistic will tell you all you need to know. In the years since the 1920s, guess which player has the most career stolen bases (168) in a Red Sox uniform. That would be Yaz. The same Carl Yastrzemski who, across 23 seasons, averaged just seven swiped bases a year.

It could have been different. Back in 1945, the unreconstructed racists that ran the Sox bowed to political pressure and reluctantly offered a tryout to three stars from the Negro League, among them Jackie Robinson and the blazingly fast Sam "The Jet" Jethroe. But it was a sham tryout. The Sox didn't deem the players worthy of a follow-up call. It wasn't long before Robinson broke the modern color barrier with the Dodgers, and Jethroe, playing for the Dodgers' affiliate in Montreal, led the International League with 89 stolen bases. In 1950, Jethroe came to Boston, but to play for the Braves, where fans embraced the Jet's electric play and chanted for him to steal every time he got on base.

It's not that the Sox haven't had spurts of speed in their history. It's just with a small park and a big appetite for big hitters, it's never been a sustained priority.

In 1973, Tommy Harper swiped 54 bags, which broke the previous Red Sox single-season record of 52 set in 1912. Harper played just three seasons with the Sox, but his stolen-base record, to his surprise, still stands. "When you think about it," he says, "54's not that many."

Harper got to know Ellsbury through his job working with younger players in the Sox system, and he predicts great things for the center fielder. He puts him in a class with former Montreal Expos outfielder Marquis Grissom, who stole 78 bases in 1992 to lead the National League. "Does Ellsbury have the potential to steal 50 bases?" Harper asks. "Yes. But whether he does, that all depends on the manager."

The question is, after a brief feeling-out period, will Sox management have enough confidence in Ellsbury to give him the green light to run when his instincts tell him to? During his career, Harper played for managers who told him when he could and couldn't run, and managers who left it up to him. Given the narrow margins involved, he says, to be an impact base-stealer, you need that green light. "If you're waiting for the coaches to tell you to go, it's too late."

But in Boston, there are other factors involved, like the Green Monster that has historically made the club focus on the guys who can jack the ball out of the park, like the current inhabitants of the number three and four holes in the lineup.

Now that the Sox are armed with speed, will they be willing to use it? Terry Francona offers one of his patented middle-of-the-road responses. On the one hand: "Being aggressive and using speed -

everybody enjoys it. It brings enthusiasm, energy to the ballpark." On the other: "We don't like to take the bat out of the big guys' hands. We don't like to make a lot of outs on the bases, because we have good hitters. When you're on first base, David Ortiz can drive you in from there."

Translation? Don't expect the green light, at least not yet.

For a squad brimming with talent and guided by statistics, that approach probably makes sense at this point. After all, at the time Francona made those comments, the club had yet to make the decision as to whether Ellsbury, the \$406,000-a-year 24-year-old rookie, or Crisp, the \$4.75 million 28-year-old veteran, would be the starting center fielder. That matter may still be unresolved by the time you're reading this, but there's little doubt that before long, the job will belong to Ellsbury.

Here's a scenario for how things might unfold this season. Ellsbury starts with a short leash. He'll do as he's told, and be nothing but polite about it. But behind the scenes, he'll approach his game the only way he knows how, the same way his father taught him. He'll be relentless in his quest to improve, leaving nothing to chance. Before he stole a base in the World Series, he had studied so much film of Colorado pitchers that he knew exactly what Ubaldo Jimenez was going to do as soon as the 6-4 righty kicked his leg up. Over and over, Ellsbury would watch film until he managed to decode each pitcher's cues for when he throws home and when he throws to first. "Maybe before he goes home, he starts leaning backward," Ellsbury says. "That's huge! Once he starts leaning back, he's going home. He's not coming over. So there you go, you've got yourself a stolen base."

So Ellsbury will be given some chances to steal, and he'll have put in the preparation to ensure that he makes almost all of them. And maybe some of them will turn out to be game-changing plays. And you know what happens next. The fans will start the drumbeat for a longer leash. Francona will say, "I don't make decisions based on how the fans feel," but the pressure will mount, just as it did in the post-season, to let the kid do what he does best. And he and the front-office guys with their laptops will run the numbers and maybe determine that some additional flexibility is warranted. And before long, Ellsbury will see that flashing yellow light turn green.

Though he stresses that he'll do whatever he's told, Ellsbury does say this: "I've been on teams where coaches haven't run before. And then they're like, 'You can run. You know what? You showed us that you can run. We'll give you the green light.'"

Even if the team puts the brakes on him, he's got enough going for his game that he should do fine. But chances are the matter won't be over until he wins.

Nothing personal. Except it is.

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