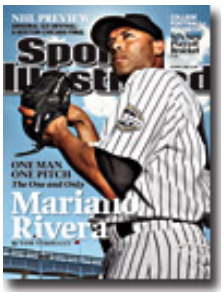

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Mariano Saves

As the gates swing open upon another October, baseball will once again attempt to divine one of the game's great mysteries: how a man, closing fast on 40 and armed with but a single pitch, continues to dominate in the clutch like no other player

TOM VERDUCCI

GOD TOUCHED MARIANO RIVERA ONE JUNE AFTERNOON IN 1997, AND RIVERA SHRUGGED.

Just three months into his new role as the closer for a budding Yankees dynasty, Rivera was suddenly unable to throw his signature four-seam fastball straight, not even during his daily toss with pitcher Ramiro Mendoza. Every catch a struggle, Mendoza told Rivera to knock it off, to quit making the ball dip and dart. Rivera assured his friend that he wasn't doing it intentionally. He was gripping the ball the same way he always had, releasing it the same way he always had. The wicked movement just ... happened.

And continued to happen while Rivera warmed up one late-June night in the bullpen at Tiger Stadium. The baseball, as if defaced, would not fly straight. New York bullpen catcher Mike Borzello had never seen Rivera throw like this before, and it made him nervous. "In the old Detroit stadium the bullpen was on the field," says Borzello, now the Dodgers' bullpen catcher. "So if you missed the ball, they would have to stop the game. And there's nothing more embarrassing than that. He started throwing these cutters. Immediately I checked the ball. Is the ball scuffed? What is going on here?

"When a guy is throwing 95 and the ball is cutting the last few feet before it gets to you, believe me, you never forget something like that. I was like, What are you doing?"

Rivera didn't have an explanation, and though he says he "didn't have any idea where the ball was going," his results did not suffer. He got the save in that game, then in the next three. Still, for a month, he worked with Borzello and pitching coach Mel Stottlemyre to eliminate the cutting action. "We were trying to make the pitch stay straighter, [as it had] in '95 and '96," Rivera says, referring to his first two seasons in the big leagues, "but it didn't work. Then I said, 'I'm tired of working at this. Let's let it happen.' And since that day we didn't try to straighten it out anymore."

He smiles. "And the rest is history."

Another night, another city (this time Baltimore), another game, another batting practice, and Rivera, three months shy of 40th birthday, 13 years into closing games for the Yankees—which, given the intensity of the job and the demands of the franchise, is the game's equivalent of spending 13 years sweeping minefields—smiled at the very familiarity of it all.

"Nothing changes," he says, not as a complaint but rather in joyful praise of this familiar baseball life. "This? Batting practice? I love it. I get a chance to shag."

Sameness has defined Rivera's career. The same dancer's body, loose-limbed, angular and trim. The same regal face with the high prominent

cheekbones, the wide brown eyes and the row of pearl-white teeth, as aligned and polished as midshipmen at morning inspection. The same perfect delivery, in which simplicity begets beauty.

And, of course, the same pitch. Over and over and over.

Rivera now has an explanation for what happened to him in 1997. The cut fastball was a gift from God. The surest thing in baseball is sure of this. "Ohhhhh, yeah," he says, nodding atop the steps of the visitors' dugout at Camden Yards. "A thousand percent. A thousand percent sure. Just a gift from the Lord."

The blessed right arm has become the Hammer of God, largely on the strength of that one pitch, its impact most resoundingly felt in October. In 1171/3 career postseason innings Rivera has allowed but 10 earned runs; his 0.77 ERA is the lowest among all pitchers with at least 30 innings. He is the only man in history to get the last out of the World Series three times. No one is close to his record 34 postseason saves. And while most closers are three-out specialists, Rivera even does his own setup work. Since 1998 he has 26 postseason saves of at least four outs. The rest of baseball combined has 33 such saves during that period, and no pitcher has more than four.

"Without Mo, I don't think we win four world championships," Yankees catcher Jorge Posada says, referring to the 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2000 titles under manager Joe Torre. "Maybe we run into two; 2000, I know we don't win that one. You've got a guy you can use for two innings, having days off, not knowing what's going to happen tomorrow. Throw him in the eighth, and he'll get you six outs."

Says Torre, "Let's face it. The regular season for Mo is great, but that's the cupcakes and the ice cream. What separates him from everybody else is what he's done in the postseason."

Rivera is both the sine qua non of New York's dynasty and the franchise's hope to return to glory. Next week, the Hammer of God returns to October for the 14th time. After failing to reach the playoffs last year for the first time since 1993, the Yankees have the best record in baseball, the most home runs, the highest-scoring lineup, and the highest-paid catcher, first baseman, shortstop, third baseman, starting pitcher and, yes, reliever. Amid such riches Rivera may be the most valuable asset of all: an unbreakable closer who is as reliable as ever.

"To me October is what we do in spring training; October is what we do in February," Rivera says. "We don't do all that preparation and all that teamwork and all that running for the season. I don't just think regular season. I think playoffs. World Series. That's how I think."

Rivera enters October at the top of his game. At 28, he was undefeated in 54 games. A year later, he had more saves than hits allowed and went unscored upon over his final 36 games, eight of them in the postseason. At 34, he had a career-high 53 saves. At 38, he set career bests for WHIP and strikeout-to-walk rate, missing his season best for ERA by .02 of a run. This year, at 39, he set a personal record with 36 consecutive converted save chances and, at week's end, had allowed three earned runs since June 16, a 38-game span in which hitters have batted .153 against him. He has been successful in 83 of 86 save opportunities at ages 38 and 39.

"The numbers make it seem like I'm having my best years late in my career," Rivera says. "But I don't feel that. I feel good; don't get me wrong. I know my fastball isn't what it was 15 years ago. But it's still good. It would be hard for me to say that I'm having my best years now. I know what the numbers say, but as a pitcher I don't believe it."

Rivera is on track for a second sub-2.00 ERA season since turning 38. Among pitchers who have thrown at least 70 innings, only Cy Young and Hoyt Wilhelm have pulled off such a trick. This would be Rivera's ninth sub-2.00 season. Such prosperity would be remarkable under any circumstance, but it is especially extraordinary because it has been built on a single pitch. The one that Rivera—well, his coaches, really—initially resisted has become the signature pitch of his generation, much like Hubbell's screwball, Koufax's curve, Ryan's fastball and Sutter's splitter. Even in that elite company Rivera's cutter stands out. Those pitches were enhanced by secondary weapons in the pitcher's arsenal, something with different spin and velocity. Rivera works without such a complement. He throws his cutter 92% of the

time; otherwise, he uses the pitch's fraternal twin, a two-seam fastball, which he throws with the same velocity (usually 91 or 92 mph, down several ticks from his prime).

Think about that. Deception, accomplished through the power of choice, is a pillar of pitching. Rivera's approach is so elemental that Posada often doesn't even bother giving him a sign. "I'll just go like this," Posada says, waving both hands toward his body, "like, Let's go. Bring it on."

"You know what's coming," former Kansas City Royals first baseman Mike Sweeney once said, "but you know what's coming in horror movies too. It still gets you."

Every Rivera pitch unspools the same way: with a flat wrist, his hand behind the ball and his fingers on top of it. Rivera has pitched so well over so many years without turning his wrist to impart spin. "Since I came to the big leagues? No, never," he says of turning his wrist, something pitchers must do for sliders, breaking balls and changeups. "I never want to do that. That's when I get around the ball [by mistake]. I correct it right away."

And this too remains constant: the demeanor. The son of a Panamanian fisherman, the father of three, Rivera has the countenance of a benevolent king; baseball royalty without the arrogance. Clean-shaven, soft-spoken, unhurried, understated and humble, he is an organic closer, free of the add-ons and posing and histrionics that so many others have needed or manufactured to deal with the stress of the job. "And he's even so darn handsome, with those teeth and that smile," says Red Sox closer Jonathan Papelbon. "Really, we all look up to him, and the way he keeps going, he's making it hard on me to break his records. I have tremendous respect for what he has done for this long, especially because doing it under the daily pressure in New York or Boston is like nothing else in baseball."

"I have respect for Mariano like I have for my father," says Boston designated hitter David Ortiz. "Why? He's just different. If you talk to him at an All-Star Game, it's like talking to somebody who just got called up. To him, everybody else is good. I don't get it. To him everybody else is the best. It's unbelievable. And he is the greatest.

"You know what? Sometimes in those times when he struggles, like when I watch him on TV, I feel bad for him. I seriously do. Good people, you want to do well."

Told of this respect from his peers, especially from within the enemy clubhouse in Boston, Rivera is grateful, if slightly uncomfortable. "I don't wait for people to give me respect," Rivera says. "I always give them respect. Any player. Even a rookie, an old player, a veteran. I never try to show up anybody. I go to my business. I always take time for somebody who wants to talk to me. That's my thing.

"It comes from back home. Family. My father was strict and always taught me no matter who it is, everybody is an uncle. To me, everybody was someone I respect like family. I grew up with that."

One day this summer Chad Gaudin, a Yankees pitcher working for his sixth organization, took a seat next to Rivera in the bullpen. The scene wasn't too different from one of those *New Yorker* cartoon drawings in which a man, having climbed some great peak, asks a serene guru a metaphysical question. *How, at a time when most pitchers fail, are you able to continually succeed in clutch situations?*

Rivera's answer: The secret is not so much confidence as focus. "Nothing derails him," Gaudin says. "No emotions get in the way. Ever. He is able to take all that energy of the moment and channel it into everything he has to do. Why doesn't everybody do that? Not everybody has the power or self-discipline."

Says Borzello, "He never speeds up his routine. If the [bullpen] phone rings, he goes through his routine at a very relaxed pace. There is no panic. In bullpens you see a lot of guys sprint to the mound, start firing pitches immediately, they can't breathe.... Mo, from Day One was never like that. His thinking always was, I'll control it."

During the 2001 ALCS, Lou Piniella, then the Mariners' manager, accused Rivera of enjoying a different set of rules, of being allowed to throw three extra pitches in the bullpen after Torre summoned him. Rivera was merely sticking to his routine, controlling the moment. He gets to the bullpen in

the sixth inning, begins stretching in the seventh of close games, loosens his shoulder in the eighth by making circles with his right arm while holding a weighted ball, then begins throwing in earnest after three tosses with the bullpen catcher, making sure the mechanics of his delivery are tuned just right. "I make sure everything is perfect, because I don't have time to do that here," he says, pointing to the mound on the field. "It's not time here to do that work. No. That's why you have the bullpen. Because here? It's time to get it done."

When Rivera is ready, and only when he is ready, the bullpen door swings open for what, at Yankee Stadium, remains one of the great entrances in sports: the first chords of Metallica's *Enter Sandman* are, for an opponent, the sound of impending doom as Rivera, glove in his right hand, head bowed, jogs toward the mound in that slightly pigeon-toed gait. At that moment, even when it comes amid the urgency of October, Rivera is all cold blood.

"My mental approach is simple: Get three outs. As quick as possible," he says. "If I can throw three, four pitches, the better it is. I don't care how I get you out. As long as I get you out. The quicker, the better. And that's the only thing I have in mind."

Rivera has one key checkpoint in his delivery, which he calls "waiting for my arm." He is referring to the moment that arrives naturally after a series of smooth, kinetic movements: the rhythmic rise of his left knee, the removal of the ball from his glove just after his left knee reaches its apex slightly north of his belt buckle, the alignment of his left shoulder toward his target for as long as possible, the leading with the front hip and the spinning forward of the back hip. Only then, after the left foot lands and his hips have rotated does his arm come around. Always, he is the unhurried man.

"He has great balance," says Yankees pitching coach Dave Eiland. "His timing is just about perfect, the way his lower body works with his upper body. You never see him drift."

Rivera's ability to repeat his delivery helps explain his extraordinary command. His physiological advantages help explain the velocity and movement. Rivera has such a supple wrist and such long fingers that he can bend them back nearly to his wrist. The long fingers impart tremendous spin rates on the baseball, and his loose wrist snaps downward like a whip upon release. That snap, coupled with full forward extension of the arm, yields what hitters call "late life."

The biomechanical efficiency of Rivera continues even after the ball leaves his hand. His arm and hand remain so loose that they dangle on the follow-through by his left side, like a pocket watch on a chain. Pitchers prone to injury tend to bring their arms to an abrupt halt, like drivers slamming the brakes on a speeding car. Rivera, though, does not brake. He lets his arm dangle gently to a stop.

"Again, blessings," Rivera says when asked about his durability. "But one thing you have to understand, and this is in life too. If you don't take care of yourself, sooner or later it's going to catch up to you. Late nights, we have enough late nights just playing games and traveling. That puts a lot of stress on your body. But if you don't take care of yourself—clubs and drinking and all of that stuff—well, it's going to be hard. And I don't do those things."

Facing Mariano Rivera is like facing the IRS, players will tell you. The confrontation will keep you up at night, and you're likely to come away the poorer for it.

"You know when you come to New York, you're going to get Mariano," Rays outfielder Gabe Gross was saying before a game last month. "It's not just before the game. I start thinking about him on the plane ride up. I know he's there waiting, and he'll be out there, and I will have to see him with the game on the line. So I start getting ready for him. I start thinking, What am I going to do to try to hit Mariano?"

On this night, the last plate appearance of the game for Gross plays out the same way as hundreds of other at bats against Rivera have played out all these years: a cutter on the hands, a broken bat and a feeble pop-up to third base. Rivera alone is responsible for a small forest of destroyed wood, so much so that hitters have been known to use their batting practice bats against him rather than risking their gamers.

"I admit I've thought about it," Gross says. "It's like when you have a long carry over water in golf. Do you drop that old ball in your bag or do you go ahead and hit the brand-new Titleist?"

If batters know the cutter is coming, why can't they hit it? First, Rivera throws enough variations of the cutter to keep hitters honest. He can throw the classic cutter on the hands of a lefty or he can start it off the plate and cut it back to the outside corner, known as the backdoor cutter. Further, by varying the pressure from his fingertips, he can vary how much the ball cuts. And finally, he almost never misses his intended spot.

"A lot of lefthanded hitters like the ball down and in," says Gross, who bats lefty, "and if the pitch is down there, you can just drop the head of the bat on it and square it up. But he makes sure to keep that cutter up just enough where you can't get to it. I've faced him, like, nine times. I may have two jam shots that eked over the infield for hits. I've come back to the dugout with only a piece of the bat left in my hands probably three times. I've struck out two or three times. I hit one ball well. One."

The most dastardly aspect of the pitch is that, like a teenager, the cutter starts misbehaving just when it gets out of sight. A hitter cannot track a delivery out of a pitcher's hand all the way to the point of contact; his eyes just can't maintain their focus on something moving that fast toward him. A hitter swings for the point where he judges the ball will be, not where he last saw it. Rivera's cutter doesn't move until those last five feet when the hitter is no longer tracking it.

"His ball, the last time you see it, that's when it starts doing this—*wffft!*" Ortiz says, indicating the late movement. "You don't see it just when it starts to cut. You can make up your mind, O.K., when he starts to throw it inside, I've got to take it because it's going to finish in off the plate. But there are times when he throws me pitches inside and I take them and the umpire calls it a strike because that one didn't have the big cut. That's when he's really sharp, when he can control how much it cuts."

Lefthanders have actually fared worse against Rivera (.206 batting average) than righthanders (.218) in his career. He has given up just one opposite-field home run to a lefty in his career, and that was 14 years ago, in his precutter days. He has not allowed a home run on 2 and 0, a count normally heavily advantageous to hitters sitting on fastballs. And control? Until last week, when the Angels' Kendry Morales drew a free pass to begin the bottom of the ninth, Rivera hadn't walked the leadoff man in the ninth with a one-run lead since 2005. He has thrown three balls, never mind four, to only 14% of the hitters he has faced.

"I've actually had a couple of guys tell me the approach they take against Mariano is not to swing at all," Gross said. "They think more than 50 percent of his pitches are never in the strike zone. Those are the ones guys swing at and can't hit. So some guys have told me they won't swing because they think he's not going to throw you three pitches that are in the strike zone.

"Think about that. If the game is on the line and you need a hit, do you stick with that approach? I don't know if I could. But against Mariano, some guys swear you're better off not swinging at all."

Rivera's success with the cutter has influenced an entire generation of pitchers, much as Sutter did with his split-finger in the 1980s. The cutter has become wildly popular, with pitchers such as Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, Danny Haren and Scott Feldman among the many who have added one in recent years. Rivera, in fact, showed Halladay how to deliver it when they were teammates at the 2003 All-Star Game.

"Everybody wants to throw it now, thanks to Mariano Rivera," Posada says. "Roy Halladay has his cutter now. Every time we have to face him, we go, 'Thanks, Mariano!'"

In the secretive world of baseball, where information has become increasingly proprietary, Rivera will gladly explain to anybody who asks him how to throw the cutter. "I always do," he says. "I don't try to hide anything from anybody. It's not a secret. I have talked to a lot of players, National League and American League."

Rivera tells them he holds the cutter just like a four-seam fastball. The ball is positioned with the seams forming a horseshoe shape with the

closed end of the horseshoe facing to the right, or "outside" of the ball in the released position. The index and middle fingers are held perpendicular to the horizontal seams of the horseshoe, with the thumb underneath the ball.

"To me," Rivera says, "it's really a four-seam fastball with pressure on the middle finger. I don't move my fingers. But at the end, it comes off [the middle] finger. I try to keep it on my finger as long as I can."

"But he throws his four-seamer with two fingers together," Borzello adds. "There is almost no space between his fingers. Nobody else I know throws a baseball that way."

One night in September, after throwing a shutout inning to get the win in a walk-off Yankees victory, Rivera showered, changed into blue jeans and a T-shirt that read sanctify across the back, and left the clubhouse with his teenage son, Mariano Jr., without a reporter even bothering to talk to him. (They did descend on his clubhouse neighbor, Gaudin, the starter who had a no-decision.) Another night, 10 days later, after yielding a walk-off home run to Ichiro Suzuki for his first blown save since April 24, Rivera left the clubhouse happily licking a chocolate ice cream cone. Win or lose, Rivera is the same.

"You're seeing the greatest closer of all time," Posada says. "I don't care about eras. There's nobody better. No one can even compare. His body doesn't change. He doesn't change. He's the same Mariano as he was as a setup man, as a closer, as a friend."

Posada has known Rivera since they attended the Yankees' Instructional League camp in Tampa in 1991. Two springs later, Rivera, recuperating from right-elbow surgery, took part in conditioning work, including sprints, with the fastest prospects in the system. Rivera ran stride for stride with them. "You've seen him shagging in centerfield?" Posada asks. "He's the best centerfielder we have. An unbelievable athlete. He's probably gained four or five pounds since 1991. He has a little less hair. But he's the same person. It's unbelievable."

Out of camera range Rivera is gregarious. He has become a mentor to Phil Hughes, the latest of many pitchers to serve as his eighth-inning liege. And he regularly needles his teammates before games. If Derek Jeter is slumping, for instance, Rivera will walk by his locker, offer a look of disdain and say, "Jeet, are you going to get any hits today?" Then he'll walk away before Jeter can respond. He will tell a slumping Posada, "You haven't hit a ball hard in two weeks." And he will tweak Alex Rodriguez, saying, "Are you going to hit the ball hard? We pay you all this money."

"You don't know the side of Mariano we see [in the clubhouse]," Posada says. "He gets on people. He probably gets on me and Jeter the most because he's more comfortable with us."

Only once, says Posada, a much more demonstrative personality known to challenge his pitchers through a game, did the catcher challenge Rivera and his famous on-field stoicism. It was during a game in 2003 when Posada thought Rivera was flustered and had lost his focus. Posada walked out to the mound and began lecturing Rivera. Suddenly Rivera started laughing.

"Wait. Are you getting on me?" Rivera asked Posada. "Are you being serious?"

Posada, laughing behind his mask, turned around and headed back behind the plate. He has not challenged Rivera since.

"I love everything about pitching," Rivera says. "Just being on the mound. Being on the mound and competing. There is nobody to come and save you. You have to get it done. There is no time to play around. It's time to get it done and go home.

"I mean, this is what I do. This is what I was picked to do. There is no hitting. There is no running. When I'm here, on the mound ... ahh, this is my world."

Rivera has thrown the equivalent of an additional season and a quarter in the playoffs, and with so many chances—76 games—even the Hammer of God has failed spectacularly. There was the home run he surrendered to Indians catcher Sandy Alomar with a chance to close out

the 1997 Division Series, the blown save (facilitated by his throwing error) against the Diamondbacks in Game 7 of the 2001 World Series, and the blown save (set up by a rare leadoff walk) with a chance to end the 2004 ALCS in Boston.

"I saw him down in 2001," Posada says. "He was a long time in front of his locker after the game was lost. We all went by. The bunt, if he throws the guy out at second base, we win the game. He bobbled it a little bit. And the ball got away. Do you remember that it rained a little bit? The ball was wet. He threw it, and it slipped out of his hand. Things you don't remember. They were trying to close the roof."

"I have bad games," Rivera says. "But my confidence doesn't change. Right after the game I will ask, 'What happened?' I go through the game. After that, it doesn't hurt me at all."

The margin is razor-thin for a closer. A freak shower in the desert during a game with a retractable roof open. A bunt. A baseball slickened from rolling through the wet grass. Ultimately, a game-ending bloop single, produced by another broken bat, no less.

Upon this tightrope Rivera has walked for 13 seasons, 12 of them with the added intensity and legacy-shaping consequences of the playoffs. He keeps his balance, gallantly, with one divine pitch everybody knows is coming. Next week Rivera and October are reunited. He is not sure how many more times it will happen. He is signed through next year. "After that," he says, "only God knows."

There is only this day, this October, given to Rivera for now. It has been nine years since he leaped off the mound—performing his own graceful sissonne in spikes—after the last out of a World Series, back in 2000 at a stadium, Shea in New York, that no longer exists.

"I would love to win another World Series," he says. "It seems like, yes, that was a long time ago. I don't want to second-guess myself when I retire. I want to know that I did everything that I could possibly do for my teammates to give us a chance to win. If it didn't happen, I don't want it to be because I didn't give it my best.

"Every time I have a chance to pitch in the playoffs, it's great to me. Because I know that one day, I won't be able to do it. And so I want to take advantage of everything."

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