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A-Rod a hit with special shoes

Third baseman visits Bronx youth group to lend advice

By Ryan Mink / MLB.com

NEW YORK -- Alex Rodriguez remembers meeting his childhood idol Dan Marino once outside the Dan Marino Show when he was a young boy. Rodriguez was a poor boy growing up in Miami, Fla., with only his mother to care for him. His father left the family when he was just a boy.

So greeting Marino was the ultimate thrill for Rodriguez. Like any other child, the first thing he could think to say was, "Mr. Marino, I'm your biggest fan!"

As Rodriguez recalls, Marino patted him on the back and said Rodriguez would end up better than Marino someday. Two MVP awards and a \$252 million contract later, Rodriguez has rivaled Marino's football success by playing baseball.



Rodriguez and Marino later became friends, and one day Rodriguez asked Marino if the quarterback remembered the day when they first met. After all, Rodriguez never forgot it.

"I don't know if he was lying or trying to make me feel good, but he remembered," Rodriguez said with a laugh.

Rodriguez gave 12 children from the East Bronx that same experience Wednesday. Rodriguez met with the children from the Harlem RBI program at the Nike ID.com development office in Manhattan to talk to them about what he did to overcome his poor background and achieve his goals.

"I was the biggest underdog coming up from a single-parent home," Rodriguez said. "Basically, if I had an opportunity to make it, they definitely can make it. Sometimes that's what kids need. They need to know there's a new life at the end of the tunnel."

The kids returned the favor. Rodriguez remembered a couple of special gifts he received as a poor child. One was a full baseball uniform and the other was a pair of blue suede shoes.

So in conjunction with Nike, the children competed to design a pair of training shoes that A-Rod would choose for him and his teammates. The program aimed to have the children use teamwork to generate a successful presentation. It's something that Harlem RBI stresses.

Harlem RBI is a non-profit, after-school educational program. Boys and girls who are between seven and 18 years old must participate in classes such as SAT or internship preparation courses to play for the baseball or softball teams. With more than 600 children enrolled, there's a waiting list to get in.

"I love baseball," 13-year-old Nelson Miranda said. "At first, it was all about baseball to me. But then as you get older that's when they start teaching you about jobs and stuff, so now it's about being a team."

The children's attention never strayed from the computers they used to design their shoes. That all went out the window when the star strolled in. There were muffled yelps from smitten girls and a dead silence from everybody else. They were all stunned.

"You know when players win championships how they always say, 'It hasn't hit me?'" 17-year-old Jonathon DeLeon said. "Now that I've experience it, it's true. I still can't believe I met A-Rod."

Although he never went to college -- he was drafted straight out of high school -- Rodriguez said he wouldn't have made the money he did without getting a good education. Rodriguez talked about his dedication to staying away from negative influences such as drugs and his obsession with working harder than everybody else.

"I never wanted to look in the mirror and say, 'What if?'" Rodriguez said. "What if I tried harder? What if I didn't try drugs? What if I didn't drink? I never wanted to do that."

Rodriguez was only 17 years old when he signed his first Major League contract for \$1.3 million -- the same age DeLeon is now. DeLeon said he couldn't imagine that much money, but knew he would help his family if he made it, just like Rodriguez did.

DeLeon asked Rodriguez so many questions that the Yankees third baseman had trouble getting a word in. But he didn't have to say much to leave an impact.

"Just his presence is dominant enough in terms of his influence on me that I don't think he even had to say anything," DeLeon said. "I'll never forget his message about hard work and what it takes to be successful in life."

In the end, each team won the shoe designing competition as Rodriguez chose all three. But by that point, it didn't even matter. Even with an autographed ball in one hand and baseball cards in the other, the children valued most the message and memory they'll carry forever.

"I not worried about sneakers right now," Miranda said. "He's telling us what he did and he made it far. So if he did it, that means we could do it."

Ryan Mink is an associate reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.