

# Jose Fernandez distinguished himself in quest for freedom, baseball stardom

By Craig Davis, Sun Sentinel on 09.29.16

Word Count **812**



Pitcher Jose Fernandez of the Miami Marlins in action against the New York Mets during a game at Citi Field in New York City, August 29, 2016. Photo: Photo by Rich Schultz/Getty Images

MIAMI — The death of Jose Fernandez was much more than the loss of one of the brightest young stars in baseball.

Perhaps no athlete has ever been more representative of the South Florida experience than the Marlins' star pitcher who made four attempts to defect from Cuba before successfully reaching the United States by boat along with his mother when he was 15.

The first three times Fernandez was turned back and jailed on the charge of being a traitor to Fidel Castro. On the fourth attempt he jumped into the water during the night to save someone who had fallen overboard, unaware that it was his mother that he was saving.

"He represented freedom in a way that most no one here can understand," Marlins president David Samson said Sunday. "He always would tell me that: 'You were born into freedom, you don't understand freedom really.'

"For all those fans, what Jose would want, in my opinion, is for everybody who loved him to just make sure you always remember him and remember what he stood for [and] to tell the stories to your kids and your grandkids about what it is to fight for freedom."

Fernandez's story in baseball is dramatic enough; how he came to the Marlins as a first-round draft choice in 2011 and made the jump from Class A as a 20-year-old.

Fernandez went on to win the NL Rookie of the Year Award and finished third in Cy Young Award balloting in 2013. He posted a 12-6 record with a 2.19 ERA on a Marlins team that lost 100 games that season.

But while his achievements in baseball were impressive, his proudest moment may have been in April 2015 when he attained his U.S. citizenship.

"It was a dream. It was really important to me and my family. I appreciate this amazing country and I respect it," Fernandez said that day. "I think it's an honor to be an American citizen."

Beyond the impressive numbers he would compile in his brief career, Fernandez brought excitement to the Marlins' new ballpark that opened in 2012 in Little Havana where the ballclub has struggled to rebuild a fan base after years of controversy and disappointment.

Fernandez made the ballpark his own, and when he pitched it was special. It was Jose Day.

He set a major league record by winning his first 17 decisions in his home park. He was a different pitcher on the mound at Marlins Park, where he was 29-2 with a 1.49 ERA in 49 starts there, while going 9-15 everywhere else.

"He gave you a reason to come to the ballpark," Felipe Zwanzger, 18, of Doral, Fla., said Sunday. "For me personally, he's what made me follow baseball. I played soccer my whole life. Watching this guy pitch is when I really started falling in love with the Marlins. I bought season tickets to watch this guy pitch."

Fernandez's path in baseball wasn't all smooth, as he faced adversity early in his second season when he tore the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow, requiring Tommy John surgery in May 2014.

Fernandez returned after 14 months and was 6-1 with a 2.92 ERA and 1.16 WHIP in 11 starts in 2015. Then in early 2016 he tied a Marlins record with wins in eight consecutive starts.

This season he was 16-8 with a 2.86 ERA and was posting strikeouts at a near-record pace. But the numbers were overshadowed by his approach to the game.

"I see such a little boy in him, the way he played," Marlins manager Don Mattingly said Sunday. "He just seemed like a little kid that you see when you watch kids play Little League. That's the joy that Jose played with and the passion he felt about playing."

The comeback, which saw him pitching better than before the injury, was achieved with the same determination and single-minded focus that Fernandez needed to escape his native Cuba as a teenager.

This obstacle just took time and patience. He stuck to a precise rehab regimen without looking back or expressing regret about the time lost.

He offered insight into how he processed the experience before a start this past May at Tampa Bay, near where he starred for Tampa's Braulio Alonso High School.

"I don't really think about it anymore. I see it; it's right there," Fernandez said, pointing to the scar on his elbow. "It was something that marked my life, and in a very good way. It taught me so much and I'm very lucky.

"I didn't want this to happen, but I'm glad that it did, let's put it that way. I'm very glad, because of the pitcher that I have become after the surgery, the way that I prepare myself, everything that I learned. I think it's going to be very important for the future."

## Quiz

- 1 Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?
- (A) Fernandez's contact with his fans
  - (B) Fernandez's pitching statistics
  - (C) Fernandez's reaction to his elbow injury
  - (D) Fernandez's struggles to leave Cuba
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article suggests that experiences in Fernandez's youth helped shape his attitude as an adult?
- (A) Perhaps no athlete has ever been more representative of the South Florida experience than the Marlins' star pitcher, who made four attempts to defect from Cuba before successfully reaching the United States by boat along with his mother when he was 15.
  - (B) On the fourth attempt he jumped into the water during the night to save someone who had fallen overboard, unaware that it was his mother that he was saving.
  - (C) The comeback, which saw him pitching better than before the injury, was achieved with the same determination and single-minded focus that Fernandez needed to escape his native Cuba as a teenager.
  - (D) He offered insight into how he processed the experience before a start this past May at Tampa Bay, near where he starred for Tampa's Braulio Alonso High School.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

*Fernandez's story in baseball is dramatic enough; how he came to the Marlins as a first-round draft choice in 2011 and made the jump from Class A as a 20-year-old.*

What does the adjective "dramatic" convey in the sentence?

- (A) a sense that playing baseball was effortless for Fernandez
- (B) a sense that it was exciting to watch Fernandez play baseball early on
- (C) a sense that Fernandez achieved remarkable things as a young player
- (D) a sense that Fernandez was a passionate and emotional baseball player

- 4 Which of the following is the BEST replacement for the phrase "stuck to a precise rehab regimen" as used in the following sentence?

*He stuck to a precise rehab regimen without looking back or expressing regret about the time lost.*

- (A) pledged to forget about his elbow injury
- (B) tolerated physical discomfort after surgery
- (C) extended a specific training schedule
- (D) committed to a systematic plan for recovery