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MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Hanley Ramirez is feeling healthy, and he hopes to stay that way

Hanley Ramirez wants to be 'a Dodger for life,' but to get a long-term contract extension he will need to stay healthier than he was last season, when injuries greatly limited his playing time.



After an injury-plagued 2013 season, Dodgers shortstop Hanley Ramirez will look to regain the form that has made him a lifetime .302 hitter and three-time All-Star. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times / August 22, 2013)



Dodgers close in on Cuban shortstop

By Dylan Hernandez
February 12, 2014 | 8:06 p.m.

PHOENIX — Hanley Ramirez reported to spring training Wednesday without a new contract. But if Ramirez was bothered by his inability to secure a multiyear extension over the winter, he didn't show it.

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He reiterated how much likes playing in Los Angeles and how he wants to remain there beyond the one season that remains on his present deal.

"I want to be a Dodger for life," Ramirez said.

He offered a simple solution to make that happen.

"We just have to win," Ramirez said, "and that will take care of itself."

The infielder otherwise declined to discuss his long-term future, refusing to say whether he and the Dodgers were actively talking about a new deal.

"I have to go eat," he said with a mischievous smile.

The Dodgers signed Clayton Kershaw to a seven-year, \$215-million contract over the winter. Determining the value of Ramirez is presumably a greater challenge, considering the questions regarding his health.

Ramirez played in only 86 regular-season games last year. He missed the first month of the season because of a broken thumb he suffered in the World Baseball Classic. He returned to the field earlier than expected but landed on the disabled list again four days later because of a strained left hamstring. He was sidelined for another month.

His hamstring problems persisted and were later determined to be the result of a chronic back issue. He also required constant treatment on his surgically repaired shoulder.

Then came the cracked ribs.

Ramirez acknowledged he remained haunted by memories of the National League Championship Series, which the Dodgers lost to the St. Louis Cardinals in six games. Two ribs were fractured when he was struck by a pitch in Game 1. Ramirez could barely swing the bat for the remainder of the series.

"He's healthy all the way, it definitely changes everything," Adrian Gonzalez said. "That was a big key to us losing that series."

Ramirez's ribs healed in a few weeks.

The Dodgers' medical staff knew nothing could be done to prevent freak injuries such as cracked ribs or a broken thumb

in the future, so the team focused on Ramirez's back and consulted with orthopedic spine surgeon Robert Watkins Jr., who advised Ramirez to start a core-back stabilization program.

The theory was that if Ramirez could strengthen his back muscles, his vertebrae would move less and not pinch on the nerves in his back. That, in turn, would eliminate the discomfort in his hamstrings.

"I felt the difference right away," Ramirez said. "Now it's perfect. No pain. I have to stay on top of it, keep doing my exercises and I'll be fine."

Stan Conte, the Dodgers' director of medical services, was encouraged by what he observed Wednesday when testing Ramirez.

"The key for Hanley was to do that on a regular basis so that his core was strong and he could withstand all the rotation and all the stuff he has to do," Conte said. "He did that."

Conte praised Ramirez's diligence.



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"We mark out programs all the time for every player," Conte said. "The ones that work are the ones the players actually do. When it's all said and done, there's more said than done, usually. But Hanley did the work. That's what has to happen. Based on what we've seen, what we've heard and how we evaluated him today, it looks like he accomplished that. Now, we have to see how it plays out."

Manager Don Mattingly said he will do his part by periodically taking Ramirez out of the lineup.

"We're going to try to get him regular rest," Mattingly said. "He's not ancient, but he's not 20 anymore."

Mattingly said he will look for signs of fatigue in Ramirez's swing and body language.

Asked if he has an idea of how many games he would like for Ramirez to play this season, Mattingly replied, "We haven't really targeted anything. With Hanley, it's going to be how he feels daily. We want to be careful."

Ramirez was also uncertain how many games he will play.

"You have to ask that question to God," Ramirez said. "I can't control that. All I can control is staying in shape and doing the best I can to stay on the field."

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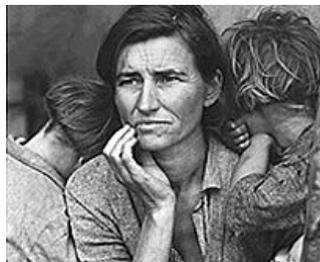
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