

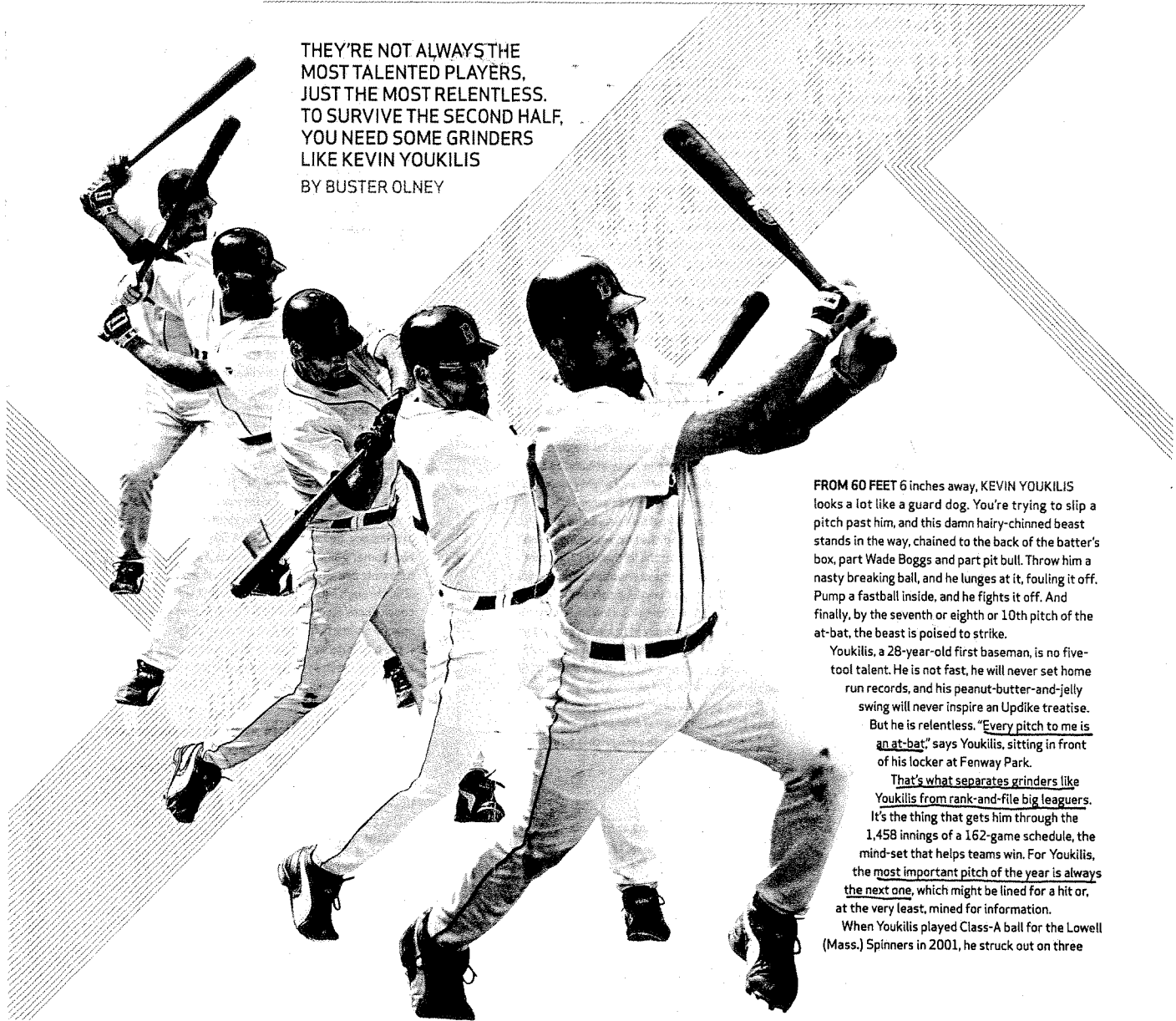


MIDSEASON REPORT

NO SURRENDER

THEY'RE NOT ALWAYS THE MOST TALENTED PLAYERS, JUST THE MOST RELENTLESS. TO SURVIVE THE SECOND HALF, YOU NEED SOME GRINDERS LIKE KEVIN YOUKILIS

BY BUSTER OLNEY



FROM 60 FEET 6 inches away, KEVIN YOUKILIS looks a lot like a guard dog. You're trying to slip a pitch past him, and this damn hairy-chinned beast stands in the way, chained to the back of the batter's box, part Wade Boggs and part pit bull. Throw him a nasty breaking ball, and he lunges at it, fouling it off. Pump a fastball inside, and he fights it off. And finally, by the seventh or eighth or 10th pitch of the at-bat, the beast is poised to strike.

Youkilis, a 28-year-old first baseman, is no five-tool talent. He is not fast, he will never set home run records, and his peanut-butter-and-jelly swing will never inspire an Updike treatise.

But he is relentless. "Every pitch to me is an at-bat," says Youkilis, sitting in front of his locker at Fenway Park.

That's what separates grinders like Youkilis from rank-and-file big leaguers. It's the thing that gets him through the 1,458 innings of a 162-game schedule, the mind-set that helps teams win. For Youkilis, the most important pitch of the year is always the next one, which might be lined for a hit or, at the very least, mined for information.

When Youkilis played Class-A ball for the Lowell (Mass.) Spinners in 2001, he struck out on three

first at-bat of a game—fastball, changeup, slider, anything but a change ball—without taking the bat out of his hands. “Did he get mad?” asked Arnie Beyeler, the Phillies’ hitting coach. Well, obviously, Youkilis explained. In preparation, he had just taken a few practice swings. “But you saw all his swings,” he said. “He’s shown you everything you can go to work.”

Youkilis played with Youkilis, who already knew the strike zone. He drew 73 walks during his first summer in pro baseball, the attention of A’s GM Billy Beane and manager Art Howe, who immortalized Youkilis in the Greek God of Walks. (Actually, Youkilis is Greek at all; he’s a Jewish kid from Boston with an on-base percentage frequently cited as his way to the majors. This year, he ranks among the American League’s top 10 in batting average and OBP.

And, like the righthanded Youkilis, he stands with his feet at the very back of the batter’s box, looking at the catcher, and as far from the pitcher as possible. To say that his right foot is planted like a climber on a ledge by one finger is on the same order of magnitude as some tiny particle of his instep is on the back line of the box but not the front line. This provides him milliseconds more to react to a breaking ball from a fastball.

On his at-bats looking for a heater, he’ll wait until two strikes, if he doesn’t get a pitch in the place he wants it, he doesn’t swing. As simple as that. And he wants to see as many pitches as possible. “First at-bat, first pitch, swing,” Youkilis is trying to get a feel for the delivery, his velocity, how much light is in the park, the lighting in the park,

Overall this season, he’s taken the first pitch in 91.3% of his at-bats. Whether it’s a ball or a strike, Youkilis will continue to look for fastballs, continue to bear down and discipline himself to swing only at pitches that are in his hitting zone. Advance scouts say that he is exceptional at making adjustments, at understanding how pitchers are trying to get him out. But Youkilis doesn’t try to think along with the pitcher during an at-bat. “Some guys are good at guessing what’s coming,” he says. “Kevin Millar, he could say, ‘Hey, with a 1-0 count, this guy is going to try to throw me a backdoor slider.’ I can’t do that.”

Instead, Youkilis looks for a fastball until he’s in a hole. “Then I use my hands a little more,” he says. *2K approach* “I shorten up my swing a little bit.” This gives him even more time to react. Through June, Youkilis was hitting .305 on two-strike counts, more than 100 points better than the league average. Says an AL general manager: “Some hitters panic when the count reaches two strikes, because they don’t feel equipped to deal with the pitcher’s out-pitch, whether it’s a good breaking ball or a changeup. But Youkilis is not afraid to hit with two strikes.”

So his at-bats tend to drag on, as he takes pitches and fouls them off in bunches. He averages more than 4:1 pitches per plate appearance, among the league leaders. He knows his long ABs will frustrate the guy on the mound, because he has listened to Red Sox pitchers come back to the dugout griping after opposing hitters have done the same thing. “There is nothing better than when you have a 10-pitch at-bat and then get a hit,” he says.

Some hitters will admit they drift mentally at times and give away at-bats, but when Youkilis is asked about this, he scrunches his massive brow. “I wouldn’t say that I give away at-bats,” he says. “I would say that sometimes, I might give in and swing at a pitch I don’t want to swing at.”

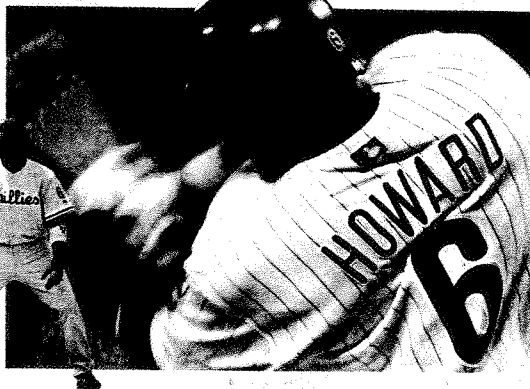
Two hours later, Youkilis faces Barry Zito. He’s poised at the back of the box, squeezing the bat handle, staring out at the lefthander. The count reaches 2-1, and in these situations, Youkilis does not want to swing at anything soft and on the fringes of the strike zone. Zito spins a lollipop curve, down and away. Youkilis chops at it, hits an easy roller to short. After he crosses first base, he rips off his batting gloves and angrily sticks them into his helmet. He gave in, and he knows it.

But his guard is down only for a few seconds. The last pitch doesn’t matter anymore. What’s important is the next one, because each pitch is an at-bat, and each at-bat is the season.

SWING AWAY

WHEN HE WAS slogging along at .198 in early May, RYAN HOWARD, reigning National League MVP and noted perfectionist, was sure of one thing: His batting average was precisely .802 short of where he thought it should be. “The thing that separates Ryan from a lot of players is that he doesn’t think he’s supposed to make an out,” says Phillies hitting coach Milt Thompson.

But a strained left quadriceps, defensive shifts—a tactic that messed with his head—and glitches in his



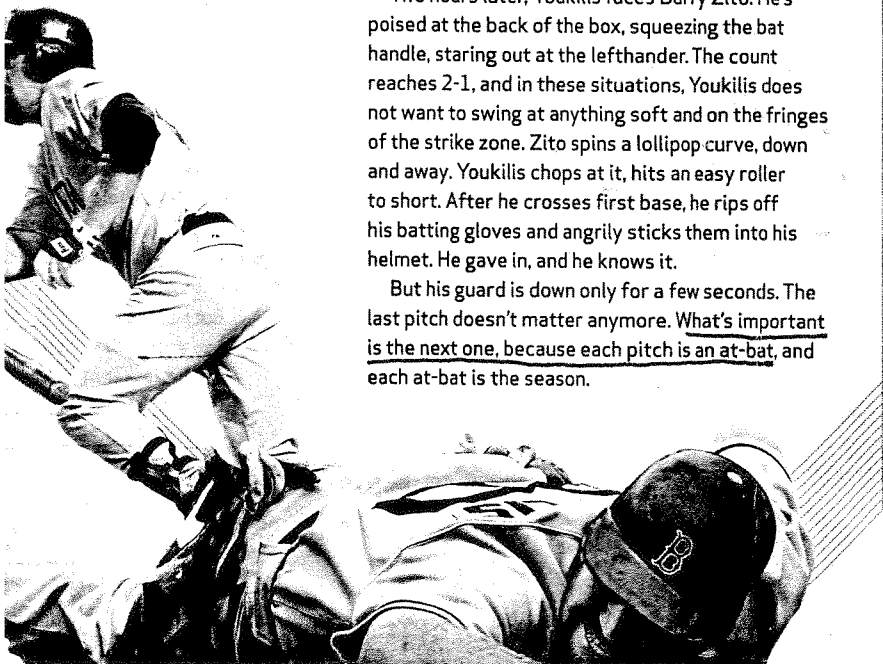
swing had Howard pulling off of pitches and looking out of sync at the plate. The injury sapped his power, turning the home run king into the biggest name in a group of sluggers who limped out of the gate (see chart).

The only thing Howard dislikes more than striking out is sitting out, but he eventually concluded that time off was the best antidote. “If you’re competitive, you want to play every day,” he says. “But you’ve got to do the right thing, and the right thing is getting healthy.” He spent two weeks on the DL in mid-May, made a cameo with the Class-A Lakewood (N.J.) BlueClaws, and—presto!—emerged looking a lot more like his ‘06 self.

While Howard is still whiffing with Adam Dunn-like proficiency, he has raised his BA 50 points since a two-homer game May 27 in Atlanta. Yes, he’s well below his pre-2007 career average of .304 (hitting .250 through June), but Thompson isn’t worried. The coach likens Howard to Mike Piazza in that each has a special ability to let the ball get deep before cranking it the opposite way. “When you look at players like that,” Thompson says, “it’s just a matter of time before they get into their groove.” —JERRY CRASNICK

12 ANGRY MEN

	2007 BA*	CAREER BA (PRE-2007)	DIFFERENCE
J.D. DREW	.259	.286	-27
PAUL KONERKO	.250	.283	-33
TRAVIS HAFNER	.257	.296	-39
VERNON WELLS	.247	.288	-41
JERMAINE DYE	.230	.277	-47
ADAM LAROCHE	.223	.274	-51
GARRETT ATKINS	.250	.302	-52
BOBBY ABREU	.249	.302	-53
RYAN HOWARD	.250	.304	-54
CARLOS DELGADO	.227	.282	-55



LEFT: GREG M. COOPER/US PRESSWIRE; MIDDLE: DENNIS WIERZBICKI/WIREIMAGE.COM; RIGHT: TOM DIPACE; GREG M. COOPER/US PRESSWIRE; FROM LEFT: ROBERT BENSON/US PRESSWIRE; NICK LATHAM/GETTY IMAGES; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES; HOWARD SMITH/US PRESSWIRE