

Howard's huge year nets him NL MVP

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By Ken Mandel / MLB.com

PHILADELPHIA -- The sheer force of Ryan Howard's gargantuan home runs cannot accurately be measured in speed or total distance, only by the gasps from those who witnessed such a spectacle.

The Baseball Writers Association of America collectively gasped on Monday when they selected the Phillies first baseman as the National League's Most Valuable Player.

"I tried to treat this like any other day," said Howard, who turned 27 on Sunday. "I wasn't consumed by it, because it was out of my hands. But to finally get to this point ... to get the call ... it's definitely a relief. It is a good birthday present and an honor to be named NL MVP."

Howard joked that he almost didn't take the call from the BBWAA, as his cell phone registered a "blocked call." Ignoring the urge, Howard picked up and learned the three letters for which he had been waiting.

M-V-P.

With 20 first-place votes and 12 seconds, Howard defeated last year's NL MVP, the Cardinals' Albert Pujols, by a total of 388 to 347 -- and may have indirectly divided St. Louis, as Howard lives there, but Pujols plays there.

Houston's Lance Berkman (230) and New York's Carlos Beltran (211) finished third and fourth, respectively. Second baseman Chase Utley (98) finished eighth, and shortstop Jimmy Rollins received a ninth-place vote.

"It definitely means something special," Howard said. "[Pujols is] a great player, and to be able to get in that company, that's a feat in itself. It's an honor because of what he's done for his team and the game of baseball itself."

Howard becomes the second player in Major League Baseball history to win the Rookie of the Year and MVP Awards in consecutive seasons, following Cal Ripken in 1982 and 1983. Fred Lynn (1975) and Ichiro Suzuki (2001) have the sweeter distinction of winning both awards in their first seasons.

Still, Howard had a calendar year that he'll never forget. It started in January, when Howard was officially presented with his Rookie of the Year Award at the Baseball Writers dinner in New York City. His first full season included his first All-Star appearance, where he slammed his way to a victory in the CENTURY 21 Home Run Derby.

He added 30 more homers in the second half of the season, shattering Mike Schmidt's franchise record of 48 along the way. In September, Schmidt marveled, "I've never seen anyone in the Major Leagues who is treating the game almost like an oversized kid in the Little League World Series. All he's got to do is get a ball out over the plate and it's a home run."

Now, Howard is the first Phillies player to be named MVP since Schmidt won the last of his three awards in 1986. Jim Konstanty (1950) and Chuck Klein (1932) were the only other Phillies to be named MVP.

The Phillies went all out to congratulate Howard, unfurling a 57-foot high by 35-foot-wide banner outside of Citizens Bank Park on Monday afternoon, and running up their electric bill by congratulating Howard on the scoreboard.

Hall-of-Fame broadcaster Harry Kalas handled the introductions on Monday afternoon, and video highlights were shown of Howard's season. Philadelphia sports celebrities Donovan McNabb, Schmidt, Allen Iverson and Mike Knuble, as well as Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell offered congratulations.

Rollins also offered congratulations, but also jokingly asked that his former tenant pay his outstanding back rent money now that he's a star.

It's anybody's guess how bright Howard's star is going to burn. He arguably might own a town long dominated by McNabb, and Howard is just getting started. He likely would've become the sixth player to reach 60 homers in a season, except pitchers refused to throw him strikes in September, resulting in just two homers in his final 23 games.

The fear Howard evoked in opposing managers is best illustrated in an Aug. 11 game against Cincinnati, when the slugger was walked three times in extra innings. The final time came in the bottom of the 14th -- to load the bases with no outs.

You read that correctly. Reds manager Jerry Narron would rather have the winning run 90 feet away with no outs than dare challenge Howard.

"When he comes to the plate, he's already in scoring position," Narron remarked.



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Howard's season of 58 homers -- surpassing his preset goals of "40 to 50" -- and 149 RBIs is made more impressive by his .313 batting average. The award also signals that the player's team doesn't have to make the playoffs in order to be considered the Most Valuable Player. The Phillies had a better record than the World Series champion Cardinals but finished second in the NL East to the Mets and three games back of the Dodgers in the NL Wild Card race.

Howard followed up his rookie season with an even more brilliant sophomore campaign. He tied for the 10th best single-season mark for homers, and his 58 were the most by a second-year player. His 149 RBIs were the second most for a sophomore, behind Hall of Famer Joe DiMaggio.

Howard's legend began well before becoming a fifth-round pick in the 2001 First-Year Player Draft out of Southwest Missouri State. People in the St. Louis suburb where he grew up still remember the 400-foot home run he smacked as a 12-year-old -- and the Red Lobster across the parking lot likely still has the dent to prove it.

"We always encouraged Ryan to go out and do the best that he can," Howard's father, Ron, said, "and if at the end of the day, he can look in the mirror and say, 'I did everything I could,' that's a reward in itself."

The irony of Howard's victory is that it almost came with another team. Blocked by Jim Thome in 2005, Howard's agent, Larry Reynolds, faxed then-general manager Ed Wade a trade request. Later that season, Wade refused to trade him to Pittsburgh for Kris Benson.

When Pat Gillick took over in November of that season, he faced a similar quandary. The organization made the correct choice and stuck with the Rookie of the Year. The job belonged to Howard and he made the most of it.

Now, Howard is just being unfair to the rest of the league, and the MVP is his crowning individual achievement.

On what he'll do for an encore in 2007, Howard said, "I have no clue. If I'd been told all this would happen, and so fast, it would've been kind of hard to swallow. Only thing I can do is keep working hard, get ready for next season and help my team make another run at the championship."

According to older brother Chris, Howard's next conquest is the annual family bowling tournament.

"He thinks he's going to do well," Chris Howard said. "We'll see."

Another sterling performance came on June 20 against the Yankees, when he hit three long balls and drove in seven runs in a loss. One of those drives christened the upper deck at Citizens Bank Park and clanged off a seat that now bears a white "H" to mark the spot. It is the only ball hit up there in the park's three-year history.

"I think back to that Yankee game and the ball I hit into the third deck and I went [in the stands] and got to see it and didn't think it was humanly possible to do that. The first thing that came to my mind was, 'Did this really just happen?' Did I really just hit 58 home runs and have the season I just had?"

If there are, more awards will likely follow.

2006 NL MVP Award

Voting results ~											
Player, Club	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	Points
Ryan Howard, PHI	20	12									388
Albert Pujols, STL	12	19	1								347
Lance Berkman, HOU			21	4	3	2	1		1		230
Carlos Beltran, NYM		1	5	15	6	2	2	1			211
Miguel Cabrera, FLA			2	6	10	5	5	1	2		170
Alfonso Soriano, WAS			1	2	4	6	1	7	2	1	106
Jose Reyes, NYM			1	1	5	5	3	4	1	2	98
Chase Utley, PHI				1		6	7	10	1	1	98
David Wright, NYM			1	1	2	2	5	2	3	1	70
Trevor Hoffman, SD				2	1	1	1	2	2	7	46
Andruw Jones, ATL						1	2	1	5	3	29
Carlos Delgado, NYM					1	1	1		2	4	23
Nomar Garciaparra, LAD							2		3	4	18
Rafael Furcal, LAD							1		3	1	11

Garrett Atkins, COL	1	1	2	10
Matt Holliday, COL		1	2	10
Aramis Ramirez, CHC		1	1	5
Freddy Sanchez, PIT			2	5
Chris Carpenter, STL	1			4
Chipper Jones, ATL		1		3
Mike Cameron, SD			1	2
Jimmy Rollins, PHI			1	2
Bronson Arroyo, CIN			1	1
Jason Bay, PIT			1	1
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