

MUY

RÁPIDO

BY LINDSAY BERRA

MLB PLAYOFF PREVIEW

OCTOBER IS A
MAD DASH FOR
THE FINISH LINE.
WITH JOSÉ REYES
ATOP THE
ORDER, THE
METS HAVE A
HEAD START



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAKE CHESSUM



and the bad can't be anything but great."

Eddy Toledo, now a scout for the Devil Rays, says he'll never be this right again. Ask him, and he'll produce his seven-year-old scouting reports, which predict with astonishing accuracy that Reyes will be a .300 hitter with 20 home runs, 20 triples, 70 RBIs and 75 stolen bases.

But what Toledo couldn't have predicted was how Reyes' energy would put the Mets back on the map. Or how the electricity in his game would have New York baseball fans (even some of the pin-striped ones) glued to their TVs. Or how Mets fans would bond with the happy-go-lucky Dominican kid who's not only leading the team into October but could also be the difference-maker who will have them all celebrating in November.

Reyes is often cause for celebration. With the Mets trailing the Cardinals in the bottom of the ninth on a hot August night, a crowd of early-exiters massed on the Long Island Rail Road platform outside Shea. A teenager bounded down the stairs, shouting, "Reyes hit an inside-the-park home run!" The crowd erupted with hugs and high-fives and a chorus of *M-E-T-S! Mets! Mets! Mets!* It was wishful thinking: Reyes (whose first inside-the-park job would come two weeks later) had actually grounded to second. But that's beside the point. He makes fans believe.

And that's something to smile about. ☺

Who's the best shortstop in New York? Go to ESPN.com to cast your vote, or e-mail us at post@espnmag.com.

FAST FAME

BY STEVE HIRDT, *Elias Sports Bureau*

When they count the votes for NL MVP, José Reyes may not even be the highest-ranking Met. But the 23-year-old shortstop has had a season the likes of which has never been seen.

Start with his signature statistical category. With 17 triples in 2005 and the same number through Sept. 23 this year, Reyes became the first major leaguer with consecutive seasons of that many three-baggers since Paul Waner, Earle Combs and Heinie Manush—Hall of Famers all—did it in 1927 and 1928. (Any time you've done something for the first time since someone named Heinie played, you know it's been a while.)

But let's put aside triples for a minute. And let's put aside RBIs, even though Reyes has surpassed Tommie Agee's 36-year-old team record of 75 RBIs from the leadoff spot.

Just consider these four meat-and-potatoes categories: runs scored, hits, home runs and stolen bases. **No player in the history of the major leagues has ever had a season with as many runs, as many hits, as many homers and as many steals as Reyes has produced in 2006.** Through Sept. 23, he had accumulated 120 runs, 188 hits, 19 home runs and 58 stolen bases. Look up all of the contenders you can think of—Rickey Henderson, Lou Brock, César Cedeño, Ryne Sandberg, Tim Lincecum, Robby Alomar, Craig



Biggio and any pre-World War II stars who come to mind. Each combined power with speed, but none had a season in which he reached Reyes' levels in all of those four categories.

And it's not that Reyes just eked by, reaching a previously untapped combination of statistical excellence with a hit or a steal near the end of the season. He clinched his unique standing back on Sept. 9. Factor in that he missed six starts (and the All-Star Game) due to a hand injury in July, and you can appreciate his achievement all the more.

Now Reyes can start working on his postseason stats.

that Reyes can't steal if he doesn't get on base. Rickey preached plate patience and gave him another goal: get on at least twice a game. "I don't care how he does it," Henderson says. "He can walk, hit a single, get hit by a pitch, whatever. If he gets on at least two times a day, he has the chance to steal two bases a day."

Reyes has reached base at least twice in 77 games this year; he has multiple swipes in nine games. He works on laying off the junk, which ensures that he'll see the fastball—and he loves to hit the fastball. As a result, his batting average is close to .300, his on-base percentage is up from .300 to .352, and, thanks to his 19 homers, his slugging percentage has soared from .386 to .494. After a three-dinger game by Reyes on Aug. 15 in Philadelphia, Phillies manager Charlie Manuel looked on the bright side: "At least we kept him off the bases." Reyes is on pace for twice as many walks as he had last season, and he leads the league again with 17 triples. "When the ball is in the gap," he says, "I always think three."

And now, for the first time in six years, the Mets are in the postseason, looking over the wide gulf that separates them from the rest of the

same. He sleeps until 1 p.m. (unless there's a day game), often with little Katerine in the crook of his arm. Once awake, he's as fidgety in the house as he is in the dugout. "Oh boy," he says, "I still make my mama crazy." He lunches on rice and beans and fried chicken or whatever *comida* Rosa cooks up. Then he plays with the girls for an hour before making the eight-minute drive to the ballpark. After games, José finds it tough to wind down. Fast-twitch until the end, he's often awake until 3 a.m., watching *SportsCenter*, singing along to Daddy Yankee or playing his PSP.

Ask him how good he thinks he can be, and Reyes answers, "We'll see. *Vamos a ver.*" (Only with his Northern Dominican lilt, it comes out as *Vam-oh a ve-i*. They do that—turn their r's into i's—in José's hometown of Villa González, on the top



After burning up the NL, Reyes and Wright (top right) got soaked.

National League, with a legitimate shot to win their first World Series since 1986. Not that a championship would change life all that much for Reyes. In early August, he signed a four-year contract extension worth \$23.25 million, but he plans on keeping the same living arrangement he's had while earning \$401,500 this season. He shares a three-bedroom apartment in Bayside, Queens, not far from Shea Stadium, with his father, mother Rosa, girlfriend of three years Katerine, and the couple's two daughters, 20-month-old Katerine and 2-month-old Ashley. And when José's sister, Miosoti, and their Uncle Wilfredo visit from the Dominican, there's room for them, too.

For Reyes, nearly every day of a homestand is

side of the island). But ask others how good Reyes can be, and they don't hesitate. Randolph, not one for hyperbole, says Reyes is faster than Willie Wilson, Bake McBride and Bo Jackson, and that he could be more complete than Derek Jeter. Former Mets pitcher-turned-announcer Ron Darling says Reyes will be better than Henderson. And Rickey himself believes José still has more speed—and just plain more—to give. "He has fun just doing what he's doing," Henderson says. "Any ballplayer who can wear that big ol' smile in the good times

FAST FACTS

From Willie Mays chasing down Vic Wertz's drive in the '54 Series, to Rickey Henderson stealing eight bases for the A's and rattling the entire Blue Jays pitching staff in the '89 ALCS, the difference between good teams often comes down to speed. And we're not just talking foot speed. It can be bat speed, like the kind Troy Glaus used to turn around

a Robb Nen fastball in the epic Game 6 of the '02 Series. It can be fast-twitch reaction, which was Graig Nettles' specialty in the '77 and '78 Series. How many times have you heard *It's a game of inches?* With that in mind, here's a subjective ranking of this



year's playoff contenders, based on speed.

1. **METS** The scouts' buzzword these days is "athleticism," and the model is the guy on the cover of this magazine. With José Reyes, Carlos Beltrán and David Wright, the Mets are the most athletic team alive. They lead the postseason field in steals and are tied with the Yankees in doubles. Their speed makes them fun to watch, and tough to beat.

2. **YANKEES** The additions of Johnny Damon and Bobby Abreu will look ever better come October. They both hit a lot of doubles—Abreu had 16 in his first 50 games as a Yankee—and along with Derek Jeter, A-Rod and Robinson Canó, they have the wheels to take an extra base.

3. **TWINS** Torii Hunter's quicks mean the most in center, and Luis Castillo proved with the '03 Marlins that bunts, bloop and stolen bags add up.

4. **PHILLIES** If they get in, they're dangerous. Jimmy Rollins is as good a two-base guy as there is in baseball. Shane Victorino is also an aggressive runner. Ryan Howard? Bat speed, baby.

5. **PADRES** Dave Roberts remains an effective thief (42-for-48) even when everyone knows he's going.

6. **DODGERS** When Rafael Furcal stays disciplined at the plate, he sets the table nicely for Nomar and the kids.

7. **TIGERS** At 34, catcher Pudge Rodriguez still slams the brakes on an opponent's running game.

8. **A'S** They're last in the field in doubles and next-to-last in steals, and they don't risk outs often. But Jason Kendall and Milton Bradley can surprise you.

9. **CARDINALS** They last won with Whitey Ball in '82. Different world now. Outfielder So Taguchi leads the team with 11 steals. Over and out. -J.B.

A smile is a simple thing. And powerful, too. It can open doors, build trust and lift heavy hearts. The wider and toothier and brighter the grin, the more infectious it becomes. At close range, a smile can recharge batteries. From far away, it can renew faith. And from the top of the lineup or deep in the hole, it can change the flow of a baseball game. At least it can when it's the *gran sonrisa* of José Bernabé Reyes.



Thanks to a push from the original Man of Steal, Reyes is making strides.

His smile is the outward sign, visible everywhere from the field box behind home plate to the last row in leftfield, of the potential and kinetic and transferable energy that pours out of Reyes and sizzles through the lineup of the New York Mets. It is energy generated when the sheer joy of throwing a baseball combines with the freedom afforded by speed. And it is measurable in the myriad ways Reyes can single-handedly shift the momentum of a game—with a gap-busting triple, or a ground ball beat out in a blue-and-orange blur; with a headlong, dust-churning dive when the gravitational pull of first isn't strong enough to overcome the draw of second, or a brilliant defensive play made possible by the quickest of feet and the strongest of arms. Willie Randolph

calls Reyes his igniter. And because of Reyes, the Mets have been on fire all season long.

Seven years ago, it was the smile that earned Reyes a job. Eddy Toledo, a Mets scout at the time, first saw him in August 1999 at a tryout camp in Santiago, the second-largest city in the Dominican Republic. The boy was just 16 years old, but scouts from four other major league clubs had already checked him out, and all four had passed. He was nothing special across the board, they thought: a below-average hitter and fielder with below-average speed and a below-average arm. But Toledo was taken in by the grin. "There was something special in his face and eyes," he says. "He was so exciting to me." Toledo looked a little harder at the body the other scouts had dismissed as weak. Yes, it was devoid of bulk, but it was springy and elastic and loaded with potential.

Toledo's boss back then, assistant GM Omar Minaya, valued raw athleticism. The Mets weren't hurting for cash, and Minaya, inherently aggressive, rarely shied away from risk. So when Toledo called and told him of the unremarkable skill set of the kid he thought could maybe, one day, be remarkable, Minaya gave him the green light. The scout invited José and his dad, a plumber named José Manuel, to lunch at the big Gran Almirante Hotel in Santiago. When the teen arrived with his arm slung over the shoulders of his *papi*, Toledo saw something special in the ease of his gait and the pride in his posture: "He had a halo over his head." A few hours and \$13,000 later, Reyes was a Met.

Sure enough, he grew into his body, now 6'1" and a sinewy 195 pounds. He might look skinny from afar, but his frame is densely packed with muscle. His movement is fluid and stretchy, almost too liquid for a baseball player. In street clothes, Reyes could easily pass for a point guard or a wide receiver or an Olympic hurdler. The strength he gained from better nutrition and a weight-training program (he lifts three times a week in season, six times a week in the winter) helped to develop his legs and his arm and his bat. He became comfortable hitting from the left side of the plate (he didn't start switch-hitting until he was 15), moving himself a precious 10th of a second closer to first.

Once Reyes reaches first base, the pitcher's name is irrelevant, his anxiety universal. If the guy is blessed with a good pickoff move, lucky him, though it will likely just serve to keep Reyes close, not get him out. If the pitcher's move is merely average, watch out. "He has that fourth

FAST FORWARD

BY JEFF BRADLEY

The White Sox were two outs away from their first World Series championship in 88 years, nursing a 1-0 lead in Game 4. With the tying run on second, Houston's Chris Burke hit a foul pop behind third that looked like it was going out of play. But shortstop **Juan Uribe** refused to give up. Crashing into the seats, he gloved the ball, then disappeared. When he emerged, the Sox were one out away. "Everything was going fast," Uribe remembers, and as he searches for the right English words, he pats his heart rapidly, runs his fingers over the hair on his arms and shivers.

After Burke, Orlando Palmeiro hit a chopper that looked like an infield hit until Uribe raced across the grass, gloved the ball on the run and, in three swift steps, made the exchange and the throw to Paul Konerko, nipping Palmeiro to end the game. Two plays in four minutes—two perfect examples of how speed can decide the postseason. "Speed changes a lot of things," says Yankees manager Joe Torre. "It affects the way you play defense. And when you're in the field, it can frustrate the opponent."

Imagine how history might look if the A's had had a better runner than Jeremy Giambi trying to score from first on what would become the signature play of Derek Jeter's career, the out-of-nowhere flip to Jorge Posada in 2001. The Red Sox might still be cursed if Dave Roberts hadn't pinch-run for Kevin Millar in Game 4 of the 2004 ALCS. Instead, with the Sox down 3-0 in the series and 4-3 in the game, Roberts stole second and scored the tying run on Bill Mueller's single. The rest is legend.

On the following pages, we revisit some key speed plays from recent postseasons and offer a quick assessment of this year's contenders.

It's October, so pay attention—it goes by fast.



PREVIOUS PAGE, GROOMING BY MAKI RYOME; THIS PAGE FROM TOP: CHRISTOPHER PASATIERRI; RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY

RICH PILLING/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

FAST FIVE

1995 ALDS, Mariners over Yankees

You may remember 25-year-old Ken Griffey Jr. racing from first to score the winner in Game 5. But the two-run rally in the 11th never happens without a leadoff drag bunt by Joey Cora, who slides into first, avoiding a sweeping tag from Don Mattingly. "He was playing in," Cora recalls. "But when the count went to 2-1, he took a couple of steps back and I figured I'd try it. When the games are so tight, every baserunner is huge. I barely made it."

1999 NLDS, Braves over Astros

Chipper Jones calls it "the single greatest play I've ever seen." In the 10th inning of Game 3 at the Astrodome, the series tied, the bases loaded, Tony Eusebio smashes a would-be game-winner up the middle. But shortstop Walt Weiss dives full-extension and somehow throws out Ken Caminiti at the plate. The Braves win the game in the 12th and the NLDS the next day. "I did not think I had any chance at that ball," Weiss says. "But in that situation, you know you've got to be as quick as you possibly can be. So I just laid out like a soccer goalie, and even though the ball was past me, it somehow hit my glove. It was all reaction."

2002 ALDS, Angels over Yankees

In Game 3, with the series tied, the Yankees bolt to a 6-1 lead. Adam Kennedy singles to lead off the third and promptly steals second, sparking a two-run rally and a come-from-behind win for the Angels, who ultimately win the World Series. "If you have team speed, you have to utilize it," Mike Scioscia says. "That's the style that defined our team."

2003 World Series, Marlins over Yankees

With Yankee Stadium rocking for the start of Game 1, Juan Pierre steps into the box and drops a perfect bunt. Then he goes first-to-third on a bloop by Luis Castillo and scores on a sac fly. "I wanted to put that thought, that I might bunt every time up, into the Yankees' heads," Pierre says. "We knew we had to play aggressive ball if we were going to have a chance. It was a key to that series."

2005 NLCS, Astros over Cardinals

John Mabry's ninth-inning dribbler to second with runners at the corners looks like it's going to tie Game 4. But second baseman Eric Bruntlett charges and fires to shortstop Adam Everett, whose impossibly fast release gets Mabry by a hair. Double play. Game over. "It seemed like it didn't even touch Brunt's glove," Everett says. "Probably one of the greatest double plays ever turned." The Astros go up 3-1 and, two games later, advance to their first World Series.

gear," says Marlins lefty Dontrelle Willis, who's avoided being victimized by Reyes the past two seasons. "And he gets from one to four real quick."

So what's a pitcher to do? He can slide-step to the plate, speeding up his delivery and increasing the risk of a bad pitch. Or he can hold the ball to make Reyes pause, preventing him from getting a good jump from a walking lead. The pitcher will count *one, one-thousand* under his breath before tossing to first or throwing a pitch. He'll count *one, one-thousand ... two, one-thousand* the second time. Or he'll hold the ball indefinitely—*one, one-thousand ... two, one-thousand ... three, one-thousand ... four, one-thousand*—until the batter calls time. Anything to be unpredictable, to keep Reyes on his heels, to freeze him in his runner's shimmy when his weight is on the left foot, making a crossover step and a takeoff for second nearly impossible; he might as well be stapled to the bag. "That pisses me off right there," Reyes says. "Because I want to go so bad."

And because if there's one thing he learned from Man of Steal Rickey Henderson, who was brought into spring training last March to tutor Reyes in the subtle art of thievery, it's how to read a pitcher—how to be patient and hold back when every fiber of his being says, *¡Vaya! ¡Vaya! ¡Vaya!* and every fan in the stands yells, *Go! Go! Go!*

"Sometimes I have to wait a couple pitches," Reyes says. "Sometimes I say, maybe I'm not going to go. Maybe I'll stay here. But if the pitcher does something wrong, if I see he's going to home plate, I'm going on his first move. And if I get a jump, forget it." Though Henderson will chide Reyes for falling short of his goal of 75 steals (he's on pace for 63), José's faster-than-the-ball attitude has Rickey convinced he'll swipe 100 next year. Come spring, Henderson will teach his protégé to be even more explosive by driving from his back leg to eliminate the crossover step, allowing him to reach top speed faster. Even now, Reyes has nearly an 80% success rate stealing second this season. Stealing third, he's 8-for-10. So pardon the smile that spreads across his face as he dusts off his uniform and spits the dirt from his teeth. Reyes doesn't mean to gloat—he just loves to run.

The immediate beneficiary of his two-step with the pitcher is Paul Lo Duca, the contact-hitting catcher who bats second. If Lo Duca sprays a base hit because the preoccupied pitcher misses his spot, Reyes has won, stolen base or not. Or if the jittery man on the mound decides to help

his catcher by firing fastballs—it would take a minor miracle to throw out Reyes on a breaking ball—that's fine too, because Lo Duca feasts on the hard stuff. And behind him, Carlos Beltrán, Carlos Delgado and David Wright all have more than 110 RBIs.

Once Reyes puts the ball in play, the anxiety shifts from pitcher to fielders. Reyes, legs churning, makes them rush, especially when he's flying around second or third. That leads to mistakes, and errors become compounded. "Speed forces the game," says Minaya, in his second year as Mets GM. "It forces the other team to play quicker." Booted balls, bad throws and mental lapses all lead to more runs and more victories for the Mets, who, with less than two weeks left in the regular season, had the best record in baseball.



Reyes always has the green light, as pitchers are painfully aware.

Last season was Reyes' first as a full-time shortstop, the first year he was free of the hamstring and leg injuries that plagued him in 2003 and '04 and spooked the Mets into tinkering with his head and his stride. And though he hit .273 in 2005, with 17 triples and 60 steals, Reyes, like his team, was a work in progress, aggressive to a fault. "He was just swinging, swinging, swinging," Randolph says. "We got him to understand what it means to take his foot off the throttle a bit and let the game come to him. He just needed to calm down." That meant no more diving into first base, no more running the Mets out of innings, no more jumping all over the first pitch because he was just dying to get on base.

Physically, Reyes is faster than ever, but with experience, the pace of the game has slowed for him. Henderson hammered home the obvious—