

Michael Saunders savouring September stretch after many trying years with Mariners

ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/michael-saunders-savouring-september-stretch-after-many-trying-years-with-mariners-18505

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9/16/2014



SEATTLE – Major-league life hasn't always been easy for Seattle Mariners outfielder [Michael Saunders](#). Injuries kept him off the field and losses piled up on it, but right now those thoughts are a distant memory. The promise of a finer future has a special way of easing the pain of the past.

Many pegged 2014 to be a breakout year for the 27-year-old from Victoria, B.C. There were times when he looked the part, but before he could establish himself as a consistent performer for the Mariners, he went down with an oblique strain in early July and missed the next two months. He should have been back with the team sooner, but after recovering from his injury he contracted a viral infection from his newborn daughter that delayed his return for a couple weeks.

"It's kind of been a frustrating year injury-wise and then when I'm ready to come back, I end up getting sick and that couldn't have come at a worse time," said Saunders, who came off the DL on Sept. 8 and was immediately inserted into the lineup. "Bottom line is I'm back now and I'm ready to help contribute."

The rough and tumble ride is all behind him now. He couldn't be back at a better time. The Mariners are in the thick of the playoff race, they're currently two games back of Kansas City for the second wild-card in the American League, and adding Saunders' versatility in the outfield and left-handed bat gives Seattle a boost.

Saunders is one of the team's longest-tenured players, having made his debut with the Mariners in 2009. He's gone through many highs and lows in Seattle over that time, enduring all of the team's frustrations on the field, while personally battling a number of nagging injuries. Those experiences make this stretch run that much sweeter, regardless of how this season has unfolded.

"It's my first opportunity to play meaningful September games. We went through our ups-and-downs and a few hardships over the last couple years," said Saunders. "I've grown up with a lot of players in this clubhouse and it's really fun to be doing it together, putting in all the hard work we have to get to this point and get this opportunity. At this point I couldn't be happier. It's a lot of fun coming to the ballpark."

The Mariners have been in a rebuilding stage every year that Saunders has been in Seattle. This year has been different.

Young players who came through the minor-league system, like Kyle Seager and Dustin Ackley (especially in the second half), have stepped up their game. Led by AL Cy Young favourite Felix Hernandez, the pitching staff has been brilliant all season, and Saunders credits the big offseason signing of second baseman Robinson Cano and the trade-deadline acquisition of outfielder Austin Jackson as the perfect additions to a team he felt was already heading in the right direction.

"We're all getting a little bit older and little bit more experienced. I feel like everyone in the clubhouse kind of understands their role and we've had some guys come over that have had some playoff experience. The main one obviously being Cano and now Austin's come over, those are guys that know what it takes to get there," said Saunders. "This is the most unselfish clubhouse I've ever been a part of and we've put ourselves in a great position to take the next step and start playing in October."

It's a position he's been working to get to since he was a kid growing up playing baseball in British Columbia and [going to](#) Mariners games at the Kingdome. He played hockey too, but a magical run to the Little League World Series as a 12-year-old with his childhood friends, who all [idolized](#) Ken Griffey Jr., convinced Saunders that baseball was the game for him.

"I went there in 1999 with Gordon Head [Little League] and represented Canada. I think playing in an international competition [at that age] and then getting a chance to play with the national team and travel the world really made me fall in love with the game," said Saunders.

15 years later the mindset hasn't changed, just the final destination. At an early age Saunders saw where baseball could take him. Now he and this team are pushing to reach the only place he and the game have yet to go: the postseason in the big leagues.

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