

# How Aaron Sanchez persevered for opportunity to send Jays to ALCS

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TORONTO – The most resistance Aaron Sanchez faced as a pitcher this season may have come from his own team, a testament to his brilliance on the mound and the constantly changing circumstances surrounding it.

Sanchez, who will take the mound for the [Toronto Blue Jays](#) in Game 3 of the ALDS on Sunday night at Rogers Centre against the [Texas Rangers](#), has been preparing for this moment since the second last season ended. And after a year of will-he-or-won't-he for Sanchez, this start brings on a different type of will-he-or-won't-he: a win and the Blue Jays advance to the ALCS.

This is what baseball players dream of, and Sanchez had worked too hard, buoyed by personal successes piling up start after start, that he had to speak up when it looked like it wasn't going to happen at all.

The 24-year-old right-hander arrived to spring training back in February intent on being a starter this season. Sanchez, along with teammate and friend [Marcus Stroman](#), had [trained tirelessly in the offseason](#) to make that so. The mantra they repeated to each other every day during those two-a-day workouts was “nine every five,” as in nine innings every five days.

The Blue Jays believed in Sanchez's talent and admired his drive, but they weren't prepared to put him in the rotation right away. With four starting spots locked down heading into camp, Sanchez would have to compete for the fifth starter's job.

Spring training results don't often mean much in the grand scheme of a season, but in this case Sanchez's [dominance was such](#) that they had little choice but to have him in the rotation on opening day.

By midseason, he was the team's unofficial ace, and a deserving All-Star. And even then Sanchez's potential inclusion in a playoff rotation was no guarantee.

He wasn't \*this\* when he started for the Blue Jays in the first two months of the 2015 season – too many walks, not enough innings – and when he returned from a back injury that sidelined him for close to two months, he went to the bullpen, where he had excelled down the stretch as a rookie in 2014.

Regardless of how well Sanchez pitched, that's where he was going to end up this season, too. The organization wanted to be careful with how many innings he pitched, and manager John Gibbons saw Sanchez's eventual return to a relief role as a positive for the team.

“I think we were all set that he was going to eventually end up in the bullpen. That was the plan in spring training. And to be honest, the last two years I saw how good he was down there, and that's a luxury for a manager and a coach, for sure. He would look awful good down there right at the moment, too, to tell you the truth, but that's not happening,” said Gibbons. “When it got to the point where he was just so good, we all thought it was going to be crazy to take him out of that role. He was thriving.”



Just how good was he? It seemed like every start Sanchez was going seven or eight innings and giving up no more than two runs. Those command issues? Non-existent. The discussion wasn't whether or not he was among the Blue Jays' best options to start, that much was obvious, but where he ranked among the best in baseball.

For a team with World Series aspirations, voluntarily not using Sanchez as a starter was not going to go over well. Remember what happened when the Nationals shut down [Stephen Strasburg](#) in 2012? No, the Blue Jays didn't want that.

So Gibbons, president Mark Shapiro and general manager Ross Atkins ran through a litany of scenarios that would keep Sanchez in the rotation. Sanchez had a say in the matter, too, and he made it known how much he appreciated that they let him have his voice heard.

"I've told these guys from the beginning: Nobody knows their selves like your own self. And for them to allow me to give input on the situation and them actually taking it in and processing it, it was huge," said Sanchez.

"I've talked about them bringing the situation up and having me talk is a good thing, because if they didn't they wouldn't care. So just even to have the talks and have me be involved was first class of this organization for that."

It was just after the trade deadline that the decision was finalized: Sanchez got his wish, but it would take some work. Toronto used a six-man rotation for parts of the last two months of the season, and they even sent Sanchez down to the minors for 10 days in August as a means to get him some more rest.

If it meant he would continue as a starter, Sanchez was happy to do it. And while perhaps unconventional in nature, it's difficult to argue with the outcome.

Sanchez pitched the regular season finale in Boston, allowing one run over seven innings in a win that gave Toronto home field advantage in the AL wild-card game. He finished the year with a 15-2 record and a 3.00 ERA, which led

the AL, and his performance left little doubt that he still has more to offer in the playoffs.

“As far as I’m feeling, I’ve bounced back tremendously almost after every start this entire year. So that’s been really good,” said Sanchez. “As far as innings in the postseason, I have no idea. That’s not up to me. Like I said, I’ve done everything that I’ve been told to do all year. I’ve kept my body in shape to be able to do those things in case my name is called upon. And wherever this postseason takes us, whatever they have in mind, I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

That’s how Sanchez got here. It wasn’t the most straightforward route, but he’ll be pitching in a playoff game with the Blue Jays up 2-0 in the series on the Rangers and with the opportunity to send Toronto to the ALCS for a second straight season.

“I knew what type of team we had. And going back to the trade deadline, when there was speculation about me going to the ‘pen, that’s why I was so adamant about wanting to stay in the rotation,” said Sanchez.

“I knew we had something special with this club, and I wanted to be a part of it in the way that I’ve come up through the minor leagues, what I’ve done for the first four and a half months of this season. I’m just happy that we’re in this position to do that.”

It’s a position he might not have found himself in if he wasn’t willing to speak up and show out. That speaks volumes about Sanchez, the person and the pitcher, and the Blue Jays will tell you they’re absolutely better for it. And after Sunday’s game, perhaps off to the ALCS because of it.

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