

## ON BASEBALL

# The Sinker Is Going to Be My Ticket'

Clay Holmes knew what made him special as a pitcher. It took some time — and a trade to the Yankees — for that vision to become reality.



By Tyler Kepner

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BOSTON — Clay Holmes threw a sinker from the first time he ever played catch. He was seven years old, he guessed, and his fingers felt comfortable along the seams, not across them. In time, the two-seam grip would give his pitches downward, tailing action, and give him a professional career — if only he could keep it.

Holmes, the breakout star of this blissful Yankees season, took seven years to reach the majors with the Pittsburgh Pirates, who drafted him from an Alabama high school in 2011. Holmes struggled in the majors but resisted the temptation to change. He already had his separator.

“I had a lot of people saying to go with a short-arm action, to make so many big mechanical changes,” Holmes said at Fenway Park on Thursday, before stifling the Boston Red Sox to save another Yankees victory. “Ultimately I went against it, because I knew there was maybe a risk of losing my sinker. That’s when I really was like: ‘The sinker is going to be my ticket. I need to really figure out how to make it as good as it can be.’”

The pitch has been so dominant that Holmes will surely be named to his first All-Star team on Sunday, when Major League Baseball announces the pitchers and reserves. Through Friday, Holmes had a 0.47 earned run average and 16 saves in 17 chances. He has faced 142 batters and allowed no home runs.

The All-Star Game, on July 19 at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, will cap Holmes’s extraordinary first year with the Yankees, who sent infielders Diego Castillo and Hoy Park to the Pirates for him last July. The Yankees sensed the same thing that Holmes always did: That the best version of his sinker, if used often enough, could make him a star.

“We love anybody who has exceptional characteristics on a specific pitch,” General Manager Brian Cashman said. “That’s one way the industry has changed, is the recognition that, instead of trying to get all these different parts of your repertoire working and judging people that way — singularly, do they do anything exceptionally well with one pitch? And if they do, gravitate to that.”



Clay Holmes has been terrific for the Yankees since he was acquired in a trade with the Pittsburgh Pirates on July 26, 2021. Seth Wenig/Associated Press

Holmes is the only pitcher in baseball (minimum 30 innings) who throws his fastball at least 80 percent of the time — and by fastball, of course, he means the sinking two-seamer. Even when he throws a four-seamer, which should stay straight, Holmes still sinks the ball.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just can’t get a ball to stay on a line.”

Holmes started studying the movement of his sinker before his trade to the Yankees, making sure that a TrackMan device collected data from every bullpen session. He learned that he did not have to be so fine with the pitch; he could confidently throw it over the plate and still get outs.

Now that he has all but perfected the sinker, Holmes no longer needs to practice it while playing catch. That is good news for teammates.

“I originally hated playing catch with him, and I wouldn’t do it when he first came over here because all he was doing was ripping sinkers,” reliever Michael King said. “And now that I feel like he’s gotten more comfortable with it, he’s not working on it as much. He’s just getting loose, so that’s easy to catch.”



It took Holmes seven years to reach the majors, and he often struggled for the Pittsburgh Pirates, with a 5.57 E.R.A. in 91 appearances. His confidence in his sinker never wavered. John Minchillo/Associated Press

For generations the sinking fastball was the pitch for those who valued efficiency and soft contact — think of Tommy John, Orel Hershiser and Derek Lowe, or the submarining relievers Kent Tekulve and Dan Quisenberry.

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Holmes, though, is more like Kevin Brown, a tall, right-handed intimidator with a sinker that seemed heavy, even mean. Brown, who starred for several teams from 1986 to 2005, stood out in his era for the ferocity of his sinker. Tom Prince, a former major league catcher who coached for Pittsburgh, told Holmes that his pitch acted similarly.

Holmes releases the pitch so high, King said, that he tricks hitters who rarely, if ever, see a pitch drop that much from that angle.

“If you’re a sinkerballer, you never want the hitter to see the bottom of the ball, because if the ball’s sinking into you, you want to get underneath it to hit it up,” King said. “You never see the bottom of the ball from him, because out of his hand it’s just coming straight down. You can only see the top of the ball, and if you make contact, it’s going to be a ground ball. That’s why you get so many ugly swings from elite hitters.”



The sinker has been out of vogue in recent years, partly because the strike zone is tighter on the edges but mostly because hitters adapted to it. The launch angle craze — essentially swinging up on the low pitch to hit more home runs — caused many pitchers to emphasize high fastballs and curves. The Yankees' bullpen does the opposite.

"They always have a great bullpen, but they've got different types of arms now — sinkerballers and sliders," Red Sox Manager Alex Cora said. "It's not the vertical attack anymore. They're going East-West, and that's a lot different than in previous years."



Holmes is part of a large group of sinkerballers that the Yankees have cultivated. He has a 0.47 E.R.A. so far this season. Paul Rutherford/USA Today Sports, via Reuters

That is an intentional decision by the Yankees, who have targeted and cultivated sinkerballers to stay ahead of hitters' next major adjustment. Besides Holmes, they have acquired King, Wandy Peralta, Miguel Castro, Albert Abreu and the injured Zack Britton and Jonathan Loáisiga from outside the organization.

All throw hard sinkers, and when hitters drive that pitch into the ground, the Yankees' improved infield defense usually takes care of the rest.

"I do think that we've just kind of found ways to maybe adjust where we're throwing relative to what the league's looking for," said the pitching coach Matt Blake. "At the time when it was being popularized at the top of the zone, teams weren't really training their hitters how to handle it, so it was kind of like free strikes — free swing-and-miss — up there. Now a lot more teams are optimized to handle that pitch more, and you're maybe seeing a changing of the guard a little bit."

Several teammates should join Holmes at the All-Star Game, fitting for a Yankees team with the majors' best record — 61-23 through Friday, nearly on pace for the best mark in club history. If the season ends the way the Yankees hope, it will likely be Holmes on the mound at the end, a tribute to unwavering belief in a lifelong gift.

Tyler Kepner has been national baseball writer since 2010. He joined The Times in 2000 and covered the Mets for two seasons, then covered the Yankees from 2002 to 2009. @TylerKepner

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